WRITING "HOME" IN RURAL QUEER TEACHER NARRATIVES:
A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to investigate the lives of rural queer teachers in their communities and schools. I explore how notions of 'home' and 'belonging' might keep queer teachers in their rural locations despite an overwhelming discourse that associates the rural with rejection and homophobia. This study is a collaborative autoethnography that employs writing and discussion groups to explore rural queer life through Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical notions of the rhizome, assemblage, and perpetual "becomings" as a result of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. This framework informs the theoretical and methodological components of the study by demonstrating how group members negotiate their multiple identities as queer, educator, and rural community member, while also mapping "becomings" that occur within the collaborative writing group. I also investigate how the theoretical works on utopia by Cvetkovich (2008) and Muñoz (2009) might be utilized as a way to re-imagine the rural queer experience.

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I investigate the lives of rural queer teachers in their communities and schools. I explore how notions of "home" and "belonging" keep queer teachers in their rural locations despite an overwhelming discourse that associates the rural with rejection and homophobia. This study is a collaborative autoethnography that employs writing and discussion groups with four other queer-identified teachers to explore rural queer life through Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical notions of the rhizome, assemblage, and perpetual "becomings" as a result of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. This framework informs the theoretical and methodological components of the study by demonstrating how group members negotiate their multiple identities as queer, educator, and rural community member, while also mapping "becomings" that occur within the collaborative writing group. It also investigates how the theoretical works on utopia by Cvetkovich (2008) and Muñoz (2009) might be utilized as a way to re-imagine the rural queer experience.

Great Aunt Sweet's Afghan

Figure 1. *Aunt Sweet's Afghan*

This afghan was crocheted by my Great Aunt Sweet and gifted to me almost 30 years ago. It now sits on my bed. It is, in many ways, the story of my youth. As the reader will later learn in detail, Great Aunt Sweet offered me (and many others) protection in a small rural community in the 1980's where being a queer boy was not accepted or discussed. She wrapped me up in her afghans (literally) as her house became a refuge, a place to stay, where I could be safe from the homophobia of some peers and family members. Her home became my home; one of many homes that I have found in the rural space since I was a young person. However, as the reader will discover, not all remembrances of quilts, and the *distant* relatives who made them, in the rural space, are as inviting and warm. In thinking of the rural, a quilt can become a metaphor for a space that is both comforting and smothering. This study will examine both of these protective and smothering moments as they continually appear in the lives of rural queer educators.

I am only writing now about Aunt Sweet's afghans as a direct "line of flight" from a vignette that was shared by Rachel, one of the group members of this study. The method for this study utilizes a collaborative writing and discussion group. For one session, Rachel wrote a story about the quilts that her grandmother made which to her represent both warmth and smothering. The inclusion here of both the quilt and the metaphor is significant because this dissertation attempts to achieve two main goals; the first is to present a picture of our rural queer lives — the quilt story is one such snapshot — and the second is to map the rhizomatic "becomings" that occur as a result of each of the focus groups that we had. The material structure of Aunt Sweet's quilt can also serve as an initial introduction to the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophical notion of the rhizome, and how rhizomes "become." The idea of the rhizome can be first understood by examining how an actual rhizome works. *Biology Online* defines a rhizome as a "horizontal

underground stem that sends out both shoots and roots."

(https://www.biologyonline.com/dictionary/rhizome). Pictured in Figure 2 is a ginger stem.

Figure 2. *Ginger Stem*

Source: https://unsplash.com/s/photos/ginger

One can see the nodes whereby the roots and shoots will emerge. The stem creeps along and grows underground while many offshoots of roots and shoots occur, resulting in something that can look like this image in Figure 3, a mangle of roots and shoots.

Figure 3. *A Rhizome*.

Source: https://littleveggiepatchco.com.au/blogs/news/planting-rhizomes-and-tubers
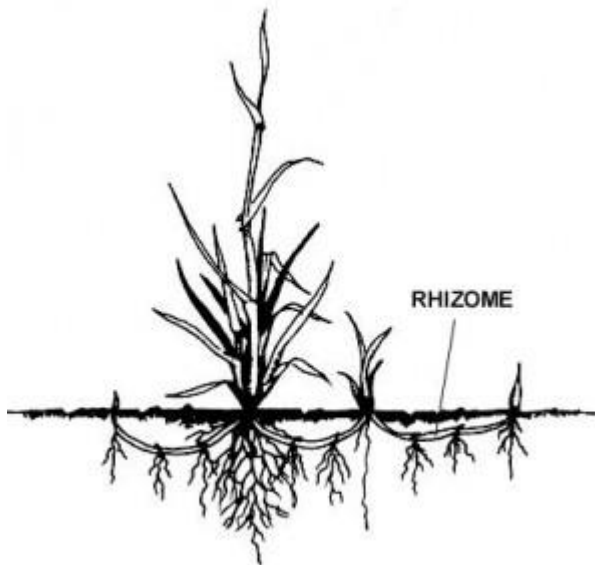
As the stem grows and many new roots and shoots appear there is no clear centre but only many possible ways that the plant might grow. Deleuze and Guattari use this concept to have us think about possibility, and the many ways that something can "become." How are the rhizome and quilt both taken up in this study? I ask the reader to consider how the beginning sections of this dissertation; the introduction, the literature review, the theoretical section, and the methodology and methods, might be like connected rhizomatic stems. They are brought together which create the possibility for the actual study to take place, the nodes exist for many becomings to occur. They are also preceded by all the scholarship that informed each section. Bringing this idea to the quilt, for each of the three squares in Aunt Sweet's afghan there was a starting place, and she was informed by a structure and tools that told her how to construct the object, but the end outcome was likely unknown to her at the beginning. Thus, the first sections of the dissertation can be thought of as the tools, structure, and background information that led to the collaborative writing and discussion group, whereas the second section is the content for analysis that was generated by the stem structures.

Secondly, one can view each group member in the study as a constantly "becoming" rhizome, or through the quilt metaphor, as an individual section of a quilt. They will each bring their unique queer rural experiences to the group, but as we each *intermingle our roots* we become a larger rhizome where each person affects the other. One can then map the ways each group member "becomes" someone different through the group encounters, as well as make connections between our stories of "home" in the rural space.

Finally, I would not have written about Aunt Sweet's afghan without Rachel's story. Analysis of our stories and discussions, like a tangled rhizome, finds it way back to these beginning pages. This led me to conceiving of the entire study as a rhizome, where the quilt

metaphor can become one rhizomatic thread —or maybe a string of yarn— that connects, and circles back upon, all the components of this dissertation.

Part 1. The 'Stems'

Chapter 1: Background

The Problem: The Rural Discourse

This section investigates a common discourse in both popular culture and scholarly writing that suggests queer people struggle to make a "home" in rural communities, and that many, instead, leave to set up "homes" in urban locations. This begs the question, what makes somewhere a "home," and, how does one construct a sense of "home" around a particular place? Scholars write that individuals construct a "home" through a sense of belonging to a familial unit or community, where acceptance is achieved (Baker, 2012; Gray, 2009; Kazyak, 2012; Mezei, 2005). However, scholars like Kelly Baker (2012) suggest that the space that we have constructed as urban is often regarded as the "homeland" (p.30) of queer people, whereas much of the discourse around rural queer life equates rurality with homophobia and the harassment of queer individuals (Crawford, 2008; Detamore, 2013; Halberstam, 2005; Gorman-Murray, Pini & Bryant, 2013). This discourse implies that queer people need to leave the "homophobic" countryside and head to the city to find a "home" and, therefore, acceptance (Baker, 2011, 2012; Schweighofer, 2016; Stone, 2018).

The image of the suffering and silent rural queer often has to do with urban notions of visibility. In fact, scholars *do* suggest that queerness may be less visible in rural areas (Crawford, 2008; Detamore, 2013; Gray, 2009; Johnson, 2013; Kazyak, 2012; Myrhdal, 2016; Stone, 2018). However, queer theorist Jack Halberstam critiques the notion of rural visibility and insists the visibility politics created by urban, white, gay men does not apply to diverse groups and experiences in the queer community (Halberstam, 2005). Indeed, there may not be clubs or

organizations in the rural that one might find in the city, but this does not mean that people are not accepted and supported by rural community members (Marple, 2005).

Gender studies scholars, Kelly Baker (2011), Mary L. Gray (2009) and Katherine Schweighofer (2016) suggest that rather than engaging in visibility politics, such as being "out" and proud, many rural queer people seek to not assert their queer identity. Rather, many regard being queer as only one part of an identity that is very much rooted in being a member of a rural community. For many, rural identity means adhering to notions of loyalty to a rural family unit that depends on one another, and participation in rural customs, values, and ways of life, that solidify a sense of rural sameness (Baker, 2011; Detamore, 2013; Gray, 2009; Schweighofer, 2016). This rural sameness implies a blending into the rural community, which in turn offers acceptance and belonging by the community, but at the same time, does not imply a loss of queer expression, as the notion of "one of us," according to Baker, (2011) does not discount a rural queer identity. For example, historian Colin R. Johnson writes about the "old farmer bachelor or the schoolmarm," (p. 121) in the rural, who, perhaps, never verbally expressed a queer identity but may have been read as queer by their gender presentation or eccentricities. The key here is although queer visibility may present differently in rural areas, this does not mean that community members have not historically been welcoming or accepting.

Jack Halberstam coined the term metronormativity to refer to a normative discourse that suggests that queers can find more acceptance and have better lives in urban locations as opposed to rural ones. As Halberstam explains, the notion of metronormativity serves to "conflate the urban with visibility and sexual enlightenment…" and "…reveals the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 10). In further discussing how visibility and location come together to create this binary, Halberstam continues,

The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative. While the story of the coming-out narrative tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from 'country' to 'town' is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy. Since each narrative bears the same structure, it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from the closet case to the out and proud. (p. 37)

Metronormative scholarship renders rural queer lives as either invisible or silent, and, unfortunately, when rural queer lives *are* studied the focus tends to be on deficit narratives that then reinforce the metronormative narrative. This narrative of rural queer deficit is supported by a more generalized and substantive discourse that equates queer sexuality and gender identity with homophobia, transphobia, and harassment (Payne & Smith, 2012). While the world can still be a hostile place for queer people, particularly queer youth, this is only one story of the queer experience. Turning to our education system, Canadian statistics abound concerning the levels of homophobia, transphobia and queer bullying and harassment that exist in schools (Meyer et al., 2015; Peter et al., 2021). However, this "homophobia discourse" becomes the main way that queer topics are approached in schools; where students must be taught that homophobia is wrong and not to engage in such behavior. Anti-homophobia education is important work, but this reinforces a framing of queer identity primarily around homophobia, harassment, and struggle (Britzman & Gilbert, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2012; Schmidt, 2010). Queer lives are then associated with vulnerability and victimhood and queers are then seen as people who need to be cared for and protected (Fields et al., 2012, 2014; Payne & Smith, 2012). Thus, in this context, to

envision a queer life for oneself (urban or rural) one can only envision a life of struggle. I critique this particular image of rural queer life, offering a more nuanced examination as this familiar narrative forgets, and thus, diminishes, the experiences of rural queer people who stay in and have successful and fulfilling lives in their communities (Baker, 2012; Gray, 2009; Crawford, 2008; Marple, 2005, Schweighofer, 2016).

The Problem: The Discourse of the Queer Teacher

Queer educators are often framed within this same "deficit" discourse, as silenced, marginalized, and isolated (Ferfolja, 2014; Harris & Jones, 2014). This is particularly true for those educators who are constructed as closeted, without discussing the agency they have within their schools and communities. There is much research about whether or not it is beneficial for queer educators to be "out" to their students. Those scholars who advocate for "coming out" suggest this action will contribute to the emotional well being of the educator and other queer students. Those who suggest not "coming out," do so for reasons including: job security, negative responses from students, parents, staff and administration, and to avoid the solidification of only one token queer identity in the minds of students (Chang, 2007; Connell, 2012; Ferfolja, 2014; Iskander, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2014; Jennings, 2015; Khayatt, 2007; Killoran & Pendleton Jiménez, 2007; Mayo, 2020; Meyer, Taylor & Peters, 2015; Rudue, 2014; Russell, 2010; Whitlock, 2007). There is also criticism surrounding the "out" discourse regarding queer educators, as the educator who remains in the closet, can also be positioned as silent and suffering, as not living up to a role model status, and as the delegitimated part of the visible/closet binary (Connell, 2012; Ferfolja, 2014; Gilbert & Gray, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2014; Whitlock, 2007). Returning to Halberstam, it is clear how both the "rural" and the "closet" have been constructed as inferior to notions of the "city" and being "out." Current research on the

experiences of transgender teachers also interrogates if being "out" is even applicable to trans teachers who are visibly trans and who announce their queerness through their presentation. Is it necessary for them to make a declaration when their bodies might announce themselves (Khayatt & Iskander, 2020)?

The group members in this study take up this discussion, examining what it means to be "out," as well as what being "in the closet," might look like in rural schools. In sum, my dissertation seeks to add to scholarship on queer studies of belonging to include rural perspectives that might be distinct from urban notions of metronormativity (rural queers must head to the city) and visibility politics (rural queers are suffering in the closet) to examine the lived experiences of rural queer teachers as they seek to make a "home" in rural communities.

Rationale

Six years ago, I was granted a leave of absence from my teaching job of 15 years to embark on a master's degree. My master's thesis would become an autoethnography about my experiences as a queer child, youth, and eventual educator in three adjacent rural communities in Nova Scotia, one of which was my childhood home. These narratives were about my rural home: about family, relationships, and feelings of belonging and rejection — late night walks down a country road holding my boyfriend's hand, the struggle to come out to my mother and her response of love, a family history of homophobia and eventual acceptance, and episodes of hate, like the derogatory word scraped into the ice of my windshield one wintry morning. They were also about my experiences in education, both as a student, teacher and Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding, and Human Rights (RCH) coordinator in my rural school board. I wrote about how I saw queer topics being approached in schools, how queer students are and are not

supported, and the negotiation of my queer identity and teacher identity in schools and in the community.

My master's work was a direct result of the social justice work that I had facilitated within my school district. When I joined an equity team within the board and took on the role of RCH coordinator, I had the opportunity to network with many educators, board staff, support staff, and students. I facilitated many professional development sessions on homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia, as part of a social justice mandate that brought awareness of the "isms" to staff and students. I am aware that I participated in practices within education that I am now critiquing, as often these presentations focused on LGBTQ+ lives at risk, and I now see the limits of educating only about the negative aspects of queer life. Certainly, I experienced many changes in the ways in which queer topics were received over this time. Generally, educators welcomed learning more about queer issues; some asked for subsequent presentations for their students, and some welcomed queer presenters into their classrooms. I began to find many allies and friends within the board who I knew supported me and also believed in the same social justice mandate as I did. As I brought my social justice mission into the classroom and began to teach about racism, sexism and homophobia in my Language Arts and History classes, I also read many responses from students that heartened me regarding the level of acceptance they held for minoritized subjects. Over the 15 years that I lived and taught in rural communities, I generally felt very supported by a large community of friends, family and professional colleagues.

However, as my literature review will outline, queer teachers who engage in social justice work or are more vocal within their district can face difficult experiences ranging from direct homophobia from staff and administration, policy that prevents such discussion, and parental

backlash; something I also know all to well (Cutler, 2022; Mayo, 2020; Neary, 2017). I also experienced homophobia: homophobic slurs directed at me by students, a homophobic parent who took their child out of my classroom, and a resultant systemic failure to properly address this. As RCH coordinator, I received reports about students engaging in homophobic name-calling and harassment from all grade levels, and I saw the same in the schools that I taught in. I was, therefore, very aware of the challenges that minoritized groups faced within the rural communities I lived and taught in, and I became passionate about trying to address these challenges within the education system.

All of these experiences led me to my PhD research. Wishing to extend beyond my own experiences, I wondered if other queer teachers in rural communities had similar experiences? I also wondered if the teachers had narratives that moved beyond the discourse of the damaged and silent rural queer? And thinking of my own time in the rural, I wondered what keeps rural educators living and teaching in their communities?

My experience as a queer teacher in rural schools has convinced me that the "rural queer victim" story misses the complexity of living and teaching in rural communities. How can we understand the complex lives of being queer in the country: the friendships, desires, hope, and support, that are often eclipsed by a bullying discourse that represents the queer subject as undesirable? To insist that we must recognize the complex lives of rural queer teachers is not to ignore the homophobia and transphobia they face at home and work; instead, I posit that the experiences of harassment cannot undo the friendships, the ties to the land, or the bonds of family that keep rural teachers in the rural space. My own experiences, therefore, brought me to the general research question for this project, which asked how notions of "home," and "belonging," might be used to investigate the lives of rural queer teachers?

Method

My masters autoethnography was the starting point that informed the method for this current study. My work was heavily influenced by queer autoethnography scholars, Tony E. Adams and Stacey Holman Jones, whom, over many publications, explore how autoethnography and queer theory can be utilized together to produce powerful writing that elucidate queer experiences. They define autoethnography as a methodology that explores how personal experiences are informed by culture; and they use queer theory to investigate the ways heterosexuality and cisgender roles have become normalized, while offering avenues to disrupt these norms (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2016). Their methodological vision is to write detailed, evocative, personal vignettes about their queer lives and pair those narratives with queer theoretical discourses. The narratives and theory then work to validate each other and because both story and theory describe a particular phenomenon they both serve as entry points into analysis.

It was through a queer and critical lens that I began to write about my life, situating personal vignettes alongside queer theory. As with this current project, I did not want to tell only stories of lack or suffering, but instead wanted to focus on a more complete version of my queer life; stories which included the *desirableness* of being queer: queer love, intimacy, and belonging; stories of the mundane and ordinary; as well as those involving trauma and despair. The outcome was a powerful one. I learned many things about myself in the process, as the writing became a sort of therapeutic outlet. When I did write about horrible experiences of homophobia and unacceptance as a young person, they became easier to process with the aid of theory which helped me understand that my experience was not a solitary one, that I was not alone. I realized, however, that the stories I found most easy to conjure from memory were the

ones involving struggle and that, perhaps, I had been subconsciously influenced by the narrative of the suffering queer subject. It was not until I challenged myself to recall beautiful moments of queer belonging in the rural space that I began to write about such wonderful queer rural moments that I had forgotten. Additionally, writing stories about joy also helped me to not stay in the place of subjugation.

Aware of the therapeutic nature of queer autoethnographic writing, and the desire to create a community of rural queer teachers, I initially wondered what a collaborative methodology might look like and how a collective of queer teachers might produce stories together and work to analyze these stories as a community. This brought me to studies involving collaborative autoethnography. My method is, thus, a combination of my autoethnographic method as well as various methods from the collaborative studies I read.

My dissertation, therefore, uses a collaborative autoethnographic method with four other queer teachers in two provinces in Canada: Four of us are from Nova Scotia and one is from Manitoba. I first interviewed each participant and then invited them to participate in a seven-week collaborative writing and discussion group that explored the themes of home and belonging in their personal and professional lives. I was an active participant in the focus group, writing and discussing with the group members. We wrote to prompts about home and belonging in our communities and schools, co-constructing some of the prompts together. At each discussion group, participants shared part, or all, of their narrative with the group, and through discussion, members offered feedback based upon their own experiences. At the end of each session, participants wrote a new story based upon any of the themes that resonated with them from the evening, which was then shared with the group at the beginning of our next session. This method produced 55 narrative vignettes and accompanying discussion which, I suggest, work to

question, undo, and in some cases, reinforce, some of the oft-cited discourses previously discussed.

Over the seven weeks we also formed a strong community where we were able to be vulnerable with each other. The stories that we told together were everything that I hoped they would be. They were laden with heartbreak, nostalgia for what was, or for what never was, love, or longing for love, friendship and allyship, beauty, and sometimes terror. Many appeared as "hauntings" from the past that still affected the present and many offered new ways forward for each of us, as we could reflect upon our own personal experiences by listening to the experiences of others. In this way, we were all changed from the beginning of the study to the end, and it was possible for us all to map the many ways that we "became" someone different through the writing and discussion. The ultimate goal of this dissertation, for me, then became two-fold; the first was to convey to the reader the picture that we have created together about our rural queer educator experiences and the second was to show the way our stories and discussion worked to influence — to move and be moved by — each other.

Theoretical Orientation

To move and be moved by others exemplifies this study and is centred in the theoretical orientation which returns us to the concept of the rhizome. In their ground-breaking philosophical tome, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) philosophers Deleuze and Guattari work to undo the subject. They suggest we recharacterize our thinking about solid boundaries and a stable self with rhizomatic thought. For them, a rhizome, in its physical form, represents the symbolic decentering of the subject, as the structure of a rhizome implies multiple connections with no clear centre. Rather, rhizomes are multiplicities, with many possible ways of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). For Deleuze and Guattari the rhizome is continually in a process of

territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The key to understanding these

concepts and the rhizome has to do with "moving and being moved" by others. Rather than

conceptualizing an "individual" as a stable identity, this philosophy posits that the human can be

understood as a rhizome that is always affected by and affecting others, and the material world

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The lives of queer people can, thus, be investigated by examining

interactions with others and the environments in which they have lived. For example, like the

rhizome, people are also multiplicitous. We have multiple identities and many possible ways of

becoming throughout our lives. However, in many cases, queer becomings are often stifled from

a very young age. Deleuze and Guattari would have us notice this as a *territorialization* where

the "line of force," the "becoming" towards queerness, has been prevented. This usually occurs

through hegemonic discourses that are taken up and reproduced by family members, peers,

educators, and the like. For queer people we see this through the enforcement of gender and

sexual norms that restrict individuals. However, Deleuze and Guattari also remind that one can

resist territorialization by engaging in "lines of flight" where the rhizome can become

deterritorialized: an act of becoming something different (p. 21). This can look like engaging in

queer acts/moments that defy the territorialization. Thus, like the rhizome, a blockage might

occur at one juncture, perhaps there are other plant roots occupying space so that it can no longer

grow in one direction, but it can and will then grow in another available direction – and usually

many directions. For example, a parent who tells their child that being queer is wrong creates

such a blockage (a territorialization) but that does not stop the child from expressing their

queerness when the parent is not around, effectively deterritorializing the self in those moments.

However, Deleuze and Guattari write that r*eterritorialization* is always possible and, indeed,

likely, in a normative world. The child's queer moment ends when they are back in the presence

of their parents — effectively silenced, they are reterritorialized. I, thus, use the concepts of

territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization to analyze the narrative

remembrances that we produced in our vignettes.

I am particularly interested in the ways that queer rural community members

deterritorialize the rural space. Scholars argue that although there are many ways queers are

territorialized in the rural, they can also transform (deterritorialize) rural space and

heteronormativity, even momentarily, by injecting queerness into the rural (Crawford, 2008;

Detamore, 2013; Eaves, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Gray, 2009; Pendleton Jiménez, 2016; Stone,

2018). Similarly, I extend the investigation to the school, asking how the queer teacher is

territorialized in and how they deterritorialize the heteronormative classroom and school space. I

question if it is these moments of deterritorializations that enable the rural queer to make a home

in the country, effectively queering the countryside and school in doing so?[1] It may be that these

queer moments of deterritorialization work to counter notions of the rural queer and queer

educator as suffering and silent.

I will search for these moments of deterritorialization by searching for moments of

"utopia." Utopia is a concept that has been both taken up and refused within queer scholarship

(Cvetkovich, 2012; Edelman; 2004; Muñoz, 2009). In discussing utopia, queer theorist José

Esteban Muñoz (2009) writes that we might look to the past for unrecognized queer utopic

moments. He continues, "queer politics, in my understanding, needs a real dose of utopianism.

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[1] It must be noted that the way that I utilize "queer," "queered," and "queering" in this work, and my own life, is characterized succinctly by Harris & Gray (2014) and fits well within a Deleuzo- Guattarian framework. They clarify, "we understand queer to function as an analytical device that illustrates identities-under-construction, a site of permanent becoming." (p. 3) Queer is also frequently understood as "anti-normative," and, thus, a queering of the rural space creates new possibilities for community members that extend beyond compulsory cisheteronormativity.

Utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by…institutionalized state homophobia." (p. 33) If heteronormativity is viewed as territorializing then utopia or utopic moments as "imagining a space outside heteronormativity" can be deterritorializing. Therefore, if, as I suggest, queer deterritorializations are also utopic moments, because they both exceed heteronormativity and homophobia, then a way to combat the deficit discourses that I set forth above is to look for moments of queer utopia in the queered rural and queered classroom.

Women and Gender Studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich (2012) also writes about how a concept like "utopia" can be used to counter depression. She writes that depression has become an "everyday" occurrence in our modern world, and that the standard way to counter depression is through medicalization and medication. However, Cvetkovich writes that because depression is now so "ordinary" that the "cure" might also be found in the ordinary (p. 161). She calls this the "utopia of ordinary/everyday habit" (p.189) and situates such utopia in the everyday utopias that can be found. Particularly, she situates utopia within practices such as craft-making; a craft-making that is also political, that speaks back against systems that contribute to depression. In this way, she is also connecting utopic moments with moments of deterritorialization. The crafting may serve as both a personal and political deterritorialization. For example, returning to Aunt Sweet's afghan, if my remembrances of Aunt Sweet and her crochet work were associated with a childhood in which she was also very homophobic (she was not!) then I could potentially collect old afghans at yard sales and stitch rainbow granny squares around the outside and give them away or sell them. This act effectively queers the traditional quilt and the utopia and deterritorialization, as Muñoz suggests, is found in challenging traditional heteronormativity. It is at once a deterritorializing political statement as well as a personal way to deterritorialize the self

(to heal) from a past where the queer person was not accepted. These ordinary and everyday utopias and the deterritorializations that they create will also be analyzed in group members' narratives to discover what this means for them in the rural space.

Lastly, a Deleuze and Guattari approach will also be applied to how we affect each other within the writing group. Group members construct their storied worlds by remembering and re-creating the affect felt in past encounters. This *construction* is essential to investigate, as any written narrative has the potential to become "fixed," but, like our own multiple and rhizomatic identities, no story is ever fixed or complete. Therefore, this study employs a Deleuze and Guattari-inspired methodology that questions the fixidity of narrative writing by mapping where the stories take each group member. Deleuze and Guattari (1995) call this *cartography*, where "lines of force" or the becomings of the rhizome can be mapped. Deleuze writes,

> We think lines are the basic components of things and events. So everything has its
>
> geography, its cartography, its diagram. What's interesting, even in a person, are the lines
>
> that make them up, or they make up, or take, or create. (p. 33)

For example, a piece of writing produced by one group member at the beginning of our sessions has the power to lead other group members on "lines of force," to new becomings. Through group discussion and analysis, the collective affective encounters within the group offer potential for the undoing of not only the narratives but, perhaps, the subject producing them, where the participants become changed through the process of writing and sharing collaboratively.

Following the lines of flight from above leads me to my general and supplementary research questions. I ask, *How can remembered utopic moments of "home" and "belonging" be used to investigate the lives of rural queer teachers*? To answer this question, I asked the following supplementary research questions:

- *What do the remembered stories of rural queer teachers tell us about queer belonging in rural schools, as both a site of learning for students, and a worksite for queer teachers?*

- *What do their stories tell us about their communities as they seek to make a "home" in the country?*

- *Does the act of writing the self and "writing home," individually and collectively, impact how participants view their lives, schools and communities?*

Envisioning this document as a rhizome of sorts I have divided the dissertation into sections. Part 1 I have named "the stems" which consists of the background to the study, the literature review, the methodology and the method, all of which results in the rhizome of our focus groups and the data that was generated through this process.

In Chapter 1 I begin to discuss the problem of both the rural deficit discourse and the deficit thinking that can be applied to queer teachers. I then provide a brief rationale for the study where I discuss my background and then begin an introduction into the method and theoretical orientation for the study.

In Chapter 2 I provide a literature review beginning with scholarly writing on what "home" and "belonging" looks like within the rural space. I then move on to an investigation into the experiences of queer teachers in both rural and urban settings.

In Chapter 3 I further explore the Deleuzo-Guattarian notions of the rhizome, assemblage, and de/re/territorializations and apply both Muñoz' and Cvetkovich' "utopia" to deterritorializations in the rural.

Chapter 4 explores the methodology and methods of the study, first discussing autoethnographic and collaborative writing methodologies that would inform the method and demonstrating why writing is a strong method to capture our rural stories. Next, literature on new

materialist data analysis is explored and I explain how this literature affected my data analysis decisions.

Parts 2 and 3 make up the *Findings* section where we explore our rhizomatic journey throughout the focus groups. I begin this exploration in Chapter 5 with an introduction of the participants and an analysis of the first pieces of writing we created as a group. This introductory writing was about an object that had special meaning to each group member. These objects were associated with past homes and family and serve as an interesting entryway into the study.

In Chapter 6 we write and discuss about the search for belonging in both our queer and rural communities. In trying to find this belonging we all discuss the ambivalent nature of "home," and particularly our childhood homes. We then explore how it is possible to find "home" in other rural communities outside our childhood ones.

Chapter 7 investigates how "home" can be found through kinship orientations and how queer kinship, in particular, can serve as utopic deterritorializations in the rural space. Vignettes involving the "hauntings" of heteronormativity and homophobia are shared and the work of Avery Gordon and W.E.B Du Bois are brought in to speak to how queer kinship groups can also function as protective factors from such hauntings in the rural space.

Chapter 8 extends the discussion of kinship into how groups of queer friends and family can create "queer worlds" in the rural space, which ultimately work to deterritorialize it.

In Chapter 9 we move from exploring belonging with queer kinship groups to moments of belonging with family and how family can help us deterritorialize both our selves and the rural space. At the same time, we also explore how family members can territorialize us within our "homes" in the rural.

In Chapter 10 I return to an exploration of Cvetkovich's "utopia of everyday habit" to discuss how our deterritorializations within the community is both utopic and political. This ends Part 2 of *Our Community Stories* and serves as an introduction to *Our School Stories* told in Part 3.

Part 3 consists of *Our School Stories.* In Chapter 11, I place Sarah Ahmed's conceptualization of the "brick walls" that are encountered by diversity workers/activists in higher education in conversation with the experiences that we all face as teacher activists within our schools and districts. These "walls" include administration, staff, parents, community members, district staff, and polices that produce reterritorializing forces that *attempt* to prevent us from engaging in queering, and thus, deterritorializing work within our schools.

Chapter 12 sees us reflect upon the lack of and the need for, more straight allies in our schools to assist us in shouldering the burden of pushing against the brick walls. We also discuss the allyship that can be found with other queer-identified and other minoritized teachers and support staff within our schools.

In Chapter 13 we explore how historic ideas about professionalism and queer teachers are also brick walls that re/territorialize us within our schools as we have traditionally been told we must be silent about queer topics and our queer identities. However, we also engage in a lengthy discussion about how professional norms can be deterritorialized through our gender presentations within our schools; for many of us our gender presentation helps announce our queerness even when we are not regularly doing so.

Noting that the last few chapters had many discussions about territorializing walls, Chapter 14 explores narratives that link activism, utopia, and deterritorializations together, as we search for stories that have brought us joy in our schools. The focus groups were happening

during Pride month, so we also reflected upon the Pride activities that were happening in some of our schools, as well as how we felt in the schools where Pride events were and were not occurring.

In Chapter 15, I end with an "agential cut" into my own reflections about the limitations of Pride and "out" discourses — a discussion we also take up within the group.

Part 4 consists of the concluding chapters where in Chapter 16 group members discuss the benefits of being in the writing and discussion groups. Lastly, in Chapter 17 I asked my group members to each compose a final vignette where we explored the main themes generated over our time together, and I conclude with our voices in collaboration.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

In this chapter, I explore the literature concerning how rural queers experience "home." I then use the literature on queer educators to speak to the conditions that queer teachers encounter within schools, in both urban and rural contexts, but with a particular rural focus for the purpose of this study.

The Rural

To begin, how does one define conceptualizations of the rural. A statistical way to define the rural often involves deeming an area as rural based upon a particular population per kilometer of space. For example, Canada's 2021 Census of Population describes rural locations as consisting of "…areas [that] have less than 1000 people and a population density of fewer than 400 persons per square kilometre." (https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-x/2021002/98-200-x2021002-eng.pdf) However, this document also suggests that rurality can be understood in terms of remoteness from urban centres. Eaves (2013) also provides both of these definitions, saying that beyond the quantitative definition, "qualitative and discursive understandings of rurality…represent spatial locations that reinforce psychosocial isolation in conjunction with spatial separation from an urban core." (p. 117) So, the rural is not simply a bureaucratic designation measured by density or distance. According to Eaves, there is a psychosocial element to the rural space. I disagree, however, that the psychosocial element has to do with isolation. This characterization is metronormative as the urban space is defined as "central" and the rural becomes defined as "isolated" from the city. I do think a psychosocial element exists, however, and can be found in Gorman-Murray, Pini and Bryant's (2013) definition which gets closer to my own rendering. They define the rural "as a

broad set of spaces and imaginaries that are non-metropolitan in character and form, and encompass material settings such as country towns, wilderness, agricultural and pastoral lands, mining communities, and provincial centers." (p. 22) For them, the rural is "a set of both material spaces and symbolic imaginaries that converse with each other." (p. 1) For the members of this study, we all live (when I am not in Toronto working on this PhD) in areas that meet the "population per kilometre" requirement, as well as being separated from an urban core. The "non-metropolitan" character of the space, the psychosocial element, will become known to the reader throughout but is likely already known through the discursive construction of the rural as consisting of particular landscapes (the agricultural and pastoral, as Gordan-Murray et al. note), particular rural occupations (farming and fishing), traditional rural ways of being and doing (the historic centrality of family and the community), and domestic and work objects (some of which we write about) that are considered rural in nature.

Visibility and the Rural/Urban Binary

Historically, the city has been viewed as the desired "home" of queer people, in both popular culture and within queer research. Indeed, queer research bears this metronormative bias. Much of the research on queer lives has been conducted in cities. Amy Stone's (2018) study, for example, examines sociological research conducted on LGBTQ people from 1996-2016 and found that 62% of research was conducted in large U.S cities like New York City, San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles. However, scholars have critiqued this "metronormative" focus (Brown & McGlynn, 2013; Eaves, 2013; Halberstam, 2005; Stone, 2018). Metronormativity is connected to urban visibility politics; a brief account of which is worth exploring. Writing about rural queer life, Mary L. Gray outlines a history of queer migration to the city, stating that near the beginning of the 20th Century, young people moved to the city in large numbers for a chance

at greater economic opportunities. This created urban spaces with a large number of queer people, and we see the beginning of the "homophile movement," where queers fought to change the discourse of "homosexuality" from that of pathology into a collective identity (Gray, 2009). Coinciding with discourses from the women's and civil rights movements, a beginning era of visible queer politics would emerge. However, one of the main criticisms of urban visibility politics is that it has been advanced by, and been of most benefit to, gay, white, upper-class and privileged urban men, while ignoring the experiences of racialized, poor, working and middle-class queer people, or people who do not seek integration into State discourses and values (Detamore, 2013; Eaves, 2013; Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2009). Also forgotten in urban queer visibility politics are the experiences of rural queers. Latoya Eaves points out that the most common queer narratives are white and urban, and that even within a rural context, they remain predominantly white (Eaves, 2013). This is, indeed, a limitation of this study as my participants and myself are all white-identified.

Historian Colin R. Johnson succinctly explains the main issue with white metronormativity. He states that it must be investigated how one location/event in an urban area can stand for an entire movement and gives the example of Stonewall. Stonewall was not the first queer protest against police brutality. Susan Stryker has written about the Compton cafeteria protest in San Francisco, three years earlier, that has largely been forgotten (Stryker, 2005). Compton's was frequented by transgender individuals, many of color, many of whom were involved in sex work, and thus, they were not afforded the same cultural capital as the patrons of the Stonewall Inn. Armstrong & Crage (2006) write that activists at the time were "mostly white, middle-class, gender-normative gay men with more social resources than the patrons of Compton's." (p. 733) In the aftermath of the Stonewall riots many of these white gay activists

worked to commemorate it as a pivotal moment in the "gay liberation movement." This continues today as Gray writes that queer urban communities have access to larger communities of people and money, where campaigns of visibility are prioritized (Gray, 2009). So, what happens in this history is a foregrounding of urban gay whiteness in the political fight for equal rights, and a forgetting of queers who do not fall into this category. The visibility politics agenda is still very white, gay, and urban, and the experiences of people of color, transgender experiences, and of course, rural experiences, are often ignored.

There is no rural Stonewall equivalent! I ask what else is being forgotten? In *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (2013), Colin R. Johnson, provides an extensive history about not only the vast heterosexualization of America that occurred over the course of the 20th Century, but also accounts of far-reaching rural queer encounters. Johnson (2013) suggests that rather than engaging in visibility politics, we might engage in queer historicism instead. For Johnson,

> …queer historicist work is far more interested in reminding people of the many forms of gender and sexual difference that had to be given up or bracketed into inconsequentiality to forge asexual epistemology that organizes everything and everybody into one of exactly two [or any!] categories. Queer historicist work might also be said to mourn this particular historical development as a reduction of erotic and political possibility in a way that most social accounts do not… Queer historicism might be said to use evidence of gender and sexual alterity across time to demonstrate that identity, as it is typically understood today, accounts for remarkably little about what people actually do with their bodies and desires in the present or the past. (p. 17)

The above quotation suggests that a queer historicism would have queer scholars investigate those missing stories of queer lives that have not been told or rendered invisible by visibility narratives. This leads me to ask what rural stories might be uncovered that have previously been eclipsed by urban discourses of the rural? The first point to discuss is that queer life in rural locations has never been invisible. Johnson (2013) describes rural queer encounters throughout the 20th Century as being composed of: various sexual encounters between labouring, itinerant, and working-poor men who would often travel and engage in encounters with other men; and gender non-normativity, both in terms of non-masculine men, and women whose working life on the farm blurred notions of masculinity and femininity. These queer moments were certainly not *as* visible to the local rural community, nor would they have been visible in urban centers in the first half of the 20th Century, but they certainly occurred and queer community members did and do live and thrive in rural communities.

Belonging in the Rural

This brings me to the question of what it means to "belong" in the rural? Mary L. Gray's (2009) study found that the priorities in rural communities are on familiarity and solidarity, not on standing out as "different." This familiarity is a central organizing practice in rural communities, and thus, "…one's reputation as a familiar local is valued above all other identity claims…." (p. 31) Indeed, people are considered, first and foremost, as members of particular families. In rural life, there is an impetus to blend in, as the family ensures survival. The family helps one find a job, locate resources such as doctors, and provides some social capital (Gray, 2009). Emily Kazyak (2012) refers to this as "asserting sameness." (p. 827). And yet, despite this focus on sameness, "discernibly queer people" have always been visible in rural areas (Gray, 2009, p. 111). Gray writes, as Johnson does, that, historically, queer people have always lived

and thrived in rural locations, as long as they were productive community and family members (p. 38). However, there has often been a degree of silence, by both the queer individual and other community members. In a metronormative politics of visibility, silence is often constructed as negative. However, rural researchers suggest that rather than look at these community members as "closeted", silence can be "queerly productive." (Howard, 1999) Gray clarifies that silence could be strategically employed, which leaves room for rural queers to explore their queerness, while Johnson expounds that often silence and familiarity worked to, again, categorize rural "eccentrics" who may have been queer into categories such as "old farmer bachelor or the schoolmarm," (p. 121) but that these labels did not mean they were not queer.

Of course, today one is not as surprised to see queer people being "out" and visible in the countryside. However, acknowledging that visibility politics does not always work for rural queer people, Gray (2009) writes how rural queerness can manifest in moments that she names "boundary publics." Gray's central argument is that LGBTQ-identifying youth and their allies use their histories as "familiar locals" to "…rework the boundaries of public recognition and local belonging." (p. 4) Gray refers to these queer landscapes in the country, not always as bound places but "boundary publics" which are, "iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that circulate across the outskirts and through the center(s) of a more recognized and validated public sphere." (p. 93) In other words, these queer boundary publics occur in public places but are sometimes *imperceptible*— seen but not clearly identifiable. Historically this may have looked like the "old bachelor farmer" or the two women who were "roommates" and attended all events together, where the queerness might be observed but was not necessarily public. In her study, Gray names a number of contemporary rural boundary publics created by rural queer youth; public spaces where queerness exists but may not be acknowledged or known to community

members. Some examples she provides are a group of gay youth doing drag in the aisles at the local Walmart where they feel a sense of protection from friends who work there; a Pride group operating in a public library; and a church that hires a youth band to attract other youth. Unbeknownst to the church, the band was known as a queer band which drew in a number of queer youth. In addition, Gray discusses how the media serves as a boundary public. Through use of the Internet, chat rooms and blogs, rural community members can be queer and find other queer people in the area and beyond, where "queerness is both extended outward and brought home." (p. 103) Eaves also cites the idea of boundary publics when she discusses how silence and anonymity enable queerness. In her study of twelve black women in four southern states, participants spoke about maintaining social norms and the need for anonymity and cited the Internet as a space within the rural to meet others (Eaves, 2013). Eaves characterizes this space as a "home away from home" where people can live within dual rural and cyber geographies (p. 117). In this case, the boundary public is the queerness on the public Internet that likely is not visible or of interest to most straight-identified community members. In her discussion of Gray's work, Karleen Pendleton Jiménez adds additional media interactions as boundary publics, such as the reading and viewing of queer celebrities and television (Pendleton Jiménez, 2016). Gray, however, also points out how the media is also very metronormative and rarely depicts rural queer lives.

Geographer Mathias Detamore (2013) also acknowledges rural boundary publics which he names "counterpublics." He discusses many instances of queerness making itself known in rural Kentucky. He wrote about an art/music festival where he discussed being queer with a straight community member and kissing a man at the public event. He then questions how rural queer space is made, and names this as an investigation into "counterpublics." (p. 84) For

Detamore, counterpublics are "…understood to be those queer zones that exist outside of normative representations of sexual otherness [i.e., rural locations] which often exceed the borders and typologies of metropolitan gay sex/life/politics." (p. 84) Thus, like rural boundary publics, counterpublics are at the intersection of where queer and straight worlds meet and exist in locations where it is expected they might not. It is at this intersection of a meeting of worlds that queer space transforms public space, even if briefly (Detamore, 2013). Detamore recounts going on a rural pub crawl with many queer and straight friends and discusses that they all felt safe to be there and be queer as there was a "…sense of rural closeness — a sense of history, kinship, and connection. That my friends are intimately acquainted with many of the people we encountered that night managed how a sense of 'safety' was secured." (p. 88) Again, like Gray's "boundary publics," the space is still considered "straight" but there is a queering that takes place, through the presence of queer folks. Gray describes this tension using Muñoz' concept of "disidentification" — queer youth are "neither rejecting outright nor fully taking on the expectation of dominant ideology" … as they "…recognize the pragmatic need to blend in as familiar rather than stand out as queer." (Gray, 2009, p. 166) And yet, they do stand out, perhaps in "imperceptible" ways. This is "an identity that may strategically remain understated, but nonetheless visible;" (p. 89) a rural imperceptibility.

In sum, in the studies above, the rural space can become queered, or, in a Deleuze and Guattari framework, deterritorialized. In these instances, individuals transform rural public spaces by queering them, while the space remains familiar. However, navigating boundary publics and queerness in rural areas may not look the same for everyone. An intersectional approach must question and interrogate how people of colour, transgender people, and people

belonging to various social and economic classes navigate the rural (Brah, 1996; Eaves, 2013; Gorman-Murray, Pini & Bryant, 2013; Gray, 2009; Kazyak, 2012; Myrdahl, 2014; Stone, 2018). Gray writes that "some genders, classes, and ethnicities are more successful at navigating boundary publics than others." (p. 107) In the US context, she returns to her example about how staff observing white youth doing drag in Walmart might have a very different reaction if the youth were Latinx or Mexican (p. 107). In Eaves' (2013) study with black women in the south she states one must not assume, "that a town with a tight-knit sense of community would unquestionably incorporate all sexual minorities." (p. 156) She writes how the community she studied is still predominantly white and that "local LGBTQ life mirrors LGBTQ life on the national scale in that it is difficult to bring solidarity across difference when major LGBTQ spaces privilege whiteness." (p. 156) Kazyak's study *Midwest or Lesbian? Gender, Rurality, and Sexuality* (2012) suggests that masculinity underpins rural life, and that lesbians and gay men find acceptance in the rural by "doing masculinity." (p. 825) This suggests that feminine gay or trans men may not fare as well in the rural, because many men adhere to a rural compulsory masculinity and femininity does not equate with rurality (Abelson, 2016; Kazyak, 2012). A welcoming community is certainly not the experience of every rural queer. Neither should rural boundary publics be considered solely as emancipatory spaces as they, and rural queers themselves, are always in danger of being policed. However, placing the idea of boundary publics in conversation with my research questions, I ask to what extent boundary publics enable moments of queer utopia in the rural, and do these moments of queer utopia work to transform the rural into "home?"

Queer Educators: Rural and Urban

As a product of rural invisibility, it should not be surprising that scholarship on the experiences of rural queer educators is more difficult to find than urban. It is, therefore, necessary to explore both urban and rural teacher experiences for this literature review. Like my question about belonging in the community, I also ask if queer teachers feel a sense of belonging in their schools? A myriad of factors affects these feelings. These factors include: the individual school culture, the district, the community, whether there are anti-discriminatory district or state/provincial policies, and the protections provided by teachers' unions (Connell, 2012; Iskander, 2021; Jennings, 2015; Meyer, Taylor & Peters, 2015; Neary, 2017).

School Climate and Policies

School culture and climate seem to play the largest role in how queer teachers experience their working conditions. In both rural and urban contexts, sociologist Catherine Connell found that teachers who felt that their specific school site was welcoming and fostered a safe space for them, reported feeling comfortable, despite the presence or absence of district policies on queer inclusion. Conversely, even if policies were present, if the teacher felt the school was homophobic, it became an unsafe work environment (Connell, 2012). In discussing those teachers who desired to be "out" in their school, teachers did not feel safe "coming out" when the school site was felt to be unsafe. This was the case in both urban and rural schools and led Connell to the following conclusion, "It became apparent that school context, much more so than regional context, shaped how teachers made their self-disclosure decisions." (p. 175)

Protective policies that coincide with a positive school climate also inform whether or not teachers will bring LGBTQ+ content into the classroom. Meyer et al. (2015) explain that within a Canadian context, with both national and provincial Human Rights documents, various

protections from unions, school policies, and a changing public opinion, we have seen a changing climate conducive to the inclusion of queer topics in schools (p. 223). In their 2015 Canadian survey of 2400 educators from across the country, Elizabeth J. Meyer, Catherine Taylor & Tracey Peter sought to find out how much support there was from both straight and queer teachers regarding LGBTQ+ inclusive education. They found that there were high levels of support, at 84.9% percent of participants, but that incorporation of LGBTQ+ instruction into their classrooms was much lower at 61.8% (p. 221). Margaret Schneider & Anne Dimito conducted a similar study in 2008 with 132 LGBT and heterosexual-identified teachers in Ontario which sought to uncover participants' comfort level in addressing LGBTQ+ issues. Although dated, most of the results are still relevant. Results suggest that when teachers felt supported by policy, they felt most comfortable and because of this comfort most did address LGBTQ+ issues and topics in their schools. However, in discussing some of the barriers, most said that LGBTQ+ classroom resources were not easy for students to access, that they received little to no discussion about LGBTQ+ topics in their pre-service programs, nor did they receive enough professional development on such topics. I have heard all of these complaints from both current teachers and pre-service teachers. Schneider and Dimito (2008) also found that the most common barriers to responding to LGBTQ+ issues were concerns about parents and fear that they might be harassed by students (Schneider & Dimito, 2008).

This fear of harassment within and outside the workplace is very real. Gilbert and Gray (2020) write that,

研究 research shows that despite enormous advances in the human and civil rights of

LGBTIQ+ communities at large, and for queer and trans youth in particular, LGBTIQ+

teachers continue to face on-going, pervasive, and systematic discrimination and

harassment in the workplace. (p. 1)

For example, in *Differences in Trans Employees' and Students' School Experiences,* Suarez et al.

(2022) looked at the experiences of trans adults in schools. The study had a sample of 296 trans

PK-12 school workers in the US and Canada. The report found that 29% of the trans school

workers experienced discrimination and harassment and one third felt like they were not

supported in their schools (p. 353).

Thus, the existence of LGBTQ+ policies and a more "friendly" social climate does not

guarantee that the queer teacher will not face harassment and discrimination. Particularly in a US

context, the state may not be friendly at all. J B Mayo (2020) talks about the "no homo promo"

laws in some states where educators must not be seen as promoting queerness. He also writes

about the 20 states, at the time, that had "anti-gay curriculum laws," (p. 33) a number that is

currently on the rise after Florida's recent controversial law referred to as, "Don't Say Gay."

This law bars educators from "indoctrinating" students by restricting any discussion of queerness

in the curriculum up until grade 3 and only after can discussions occur when it is "age

appropriate." (https://www.npr.org/2022/04/10/1091543359/15-states-dont-say-gay-anti-

transgender-bills)

Accompanying such an erasure is a mythical historical discourse that has framed the

queer educator as a predator, and a history in which queer educators have been fired for

"immorality," a frequent current and historical charge against queerness (Connell, 2012;

Jennings, 2015; Russell, 2010). Indeed, in Connell's study, (2012) one participant from Texas

relayed how both an unmarried pregnant teacher and "homosexual" were fired on the same

grounds (p.174).

Kevin Jennings, the founder of GLSEN (the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network) has produced three edited collections, beginning in 1994, again in 2005, and the last in 2015, where educators describe their experiences in schools and communities. He writes that there has been much progress since 1994 when most educators were still in the closet and used pseudonyms for his book (Jennings, 2015). This edited collection of queer educator experiences clearly demonstrates the positive changes that have occurred overtime, but also the work there still is to do. These anecdotal narratives expand upon the themes above. One teacher mentions the predator discourse. Attempting to create positive connections with her students, one trans teacher who was a mentor for a gender-questioning student stated that the predator trope was a concern for her as "people outside the relationship tend to sexualize perfectly appropriate mentor-mentee bonding between LGBTQ adults and LGBTQ youth." (p. 19) Another trans teacher in California, who wanted to transition at school, remembers the story of a trans teacher in another community: "She was outed to the press, which widely publicized her transition. People in the community threatened her, spat on her, and called her a pedophile." (p. 152)

There are also stories of being silenced by administration and districts so as not to "promote" queerness. The charge of promoting queerness can even be levied at teachers who are both "out" at their schools and in public. Jennings says the response to this kind of public outness has been mixed, from colleagues offering support, to a teacher who won *Teacher of the Year* and discussed being queer in the media, which resulted in a district attempt to stifle his words unless approved by them. A teacher in Virginia recounts that her school was very liberal with an active GSA, but still the principal "…felt the need to meet with me every year just to be sure we weren't "promoting" homosexuality, a fireable offence, he tells me, for a teacher in Virginia."
 (p. 35)

One teacher describes remaining closeted and how she did struggle with wanting to come out but feared to do so. Some of the perceived dangers she felt might occur were, parents calling to complain, parents removing children from her classroom, and classroom management problems (p. 47). Two partnered teachers discuss both the joys and trials of being visibly out in their schools, "In the years since we stood in front of our classes, countless colleagues have come forward and confided in us about where they are in their coming out journey." (p. 58) They recount how colleagues will also share about their own queer children or seek their advice about how to support queer students. At the same time, they acknowledge they have lost friends, and heard rumours about parents who do not want their children in their classrooms. Teachers also discuss getting negative calls from parents regarding discussions of their sexuality, and some say that they purposefully do not live in the communities in which they teach. Neary (2017) also writes how teachers in rural communities in Ireland worry about parents and students, where study participants reported "anxieties about being perceived as recruiting, being reduced to negative stereotypes and/or their LGBT-Q identity being conflated with paedophilia,"(p. 58) some now familiar worries.

Lastly, a teacher in the Bronx discusses how at his school there are no educators out to students, no LGBTQ+ speakers, no visible posters or recognition of LGBTQ+ people or history, no GSA, and little acceptance of queer people from staff and students (Jennings, 2015). Reflecting on such a climate, Mayo (2020) writes,

> It is unsurprising that queer teachers and queer people who aspire to become teachers have concerns…They do not feel safe sharing information about their same-gender partners at school; they worry about how if/they will come out to students; and some still fear that despite existing legal protections, being openly queer at school might lead to

facing conditions that are so uncomfortable that it is simply easier to walk away and seek employment in a different geographic area or school district. (p. 33)

Professionalism

Worry about "coming out" to students, being openly queer, or discussing queer partners in schools can be placed in conversation with the idea of teacher *professionalism.* Reimers (2020) claims that within professional norms, "heterosexuality becomes desexualized as the *normal* position without acknowledging sexual desires, while it simultaneously makes articulations of homosexuality into solely sexual identity positions." (p. 114) Thus, queer teachers, historically, have been told that they must not allow any non-normative sexuality or gender expression to enter the classroom. Iskander writes that professionalism has historically demanded gender normativity. In interviews with six nonbinary beginning teachers, Iskander (2021) found that, "teachers continue to be haunted by stigma and the threat of professional repercussions for their gender transgressions." (p. 201) Gilbert and Gray (2020) suggest that queerness and professionalism is a "contradictory position." LGBTQ+ teachers are "often pulled in two directions, toward a call to be out and proud about their sexual and gender identities and a demand that they remain professional, and therefore normatively gendered and sexed." (p. 3) Harris & Jones (2009) criticize the degree of professionalism that queer teachers are often held to, where they are expected to be essentially "cyborg pedagogues" whose job it is to deliver the curriculum in a neutral way while not discussing their personal lives (p. 23). Although this also applies to straight teachers to some extent, they often can and do share their personal lives with students. Khayatt and Iskander (2020) cite that research continues to find that "sexuality and the erotic are conceptualized by teachers as hazards in the classroom: gayness threatens to undermine the teachers authority, to elicit controversy, and risks attracting stares, slurs or

disdain." (p. 9) This is what the teachers in Jennings', Mayo's and Iskander's research have

experienced.

"Coming out"

As seen throughout the above stories of struggle, Jennings' book also offers many stories

of queer teachers taking pride in their work with queer youth. In many of these cases, the

teachers are "out." In fact, much of the discourse in the book around teachers affecting change

centres around them being out. There are many stories that speak about teachers coming out to

their students and the positive connections they have been able to make in doing so. This often

coincides with the acknowledgment that their school is a safe and welcoming environment, with

the support of staff and Administration, and LGBTQ+ themes and materials present throughout

the school. There are stories of out teachers: having great discussions with elementary students

about being LGBTQ+; including queer content in the curriculum; discussing staff who honour

pronoun and name changes; supporting queer students; and teachers marching in Pride parades

or giving interviews in newspapers and on television. However, the "out" discourse needs to also

be interrogated. Particularly, as visibility may manifest differently in rural locations, one must

assume that there are going to be educators who feel they cannot or do not want to be out with

their students and community. In my own 15 years with my rural district, I was also not out to

my students, but I was with staff and within the community. During this time, I estimate that I

only encountered a handful of educators who were out. For example, in my own board, which

included three rural communities, I can only think of two other educators who were out to any

degree. I think I knew, perhaps, three more across the province. I also knew colleagues and

friends who came out to me personally, who, as far as I know, were not out at work or in the

community. More recent scholarship reflects upon whether coming out is even necessary and

relevant. For example, *In Reflecting on 'Coming Out' in the Classroom*, Khayatt and Iskander (2020) discuss if the "coming out" discourse still worked when discussing the experiences of transgender teachers in schools. Iskander (2020) writes how "coming out" does not seem to apply to trans teachers as their gender nonconforming presentation announces itself. This is particularly true of the trans teacher who is transitioning while in the classroom and who may or may not speak about their transition with their students (p. 12). Similarly, as Khayatt and Iskander argue, I feel that my non-normative gender presentation does not require me to make a declaration of outness, and my queerness is not rendered invisible to my students, which informs my reasoning for interrogating "outness" and visibility in this study.

Queer Teacher Agency

Whether the teacher is out or not, many scholars discuss the impact that a queer teacher can have in the classroom/school space. Naomi Rudoe (2014) and Tania Ferfolja (2014) both discuss the agency that queer teachers have, such as delivering queer content and consistently addressing homophobia (p. 68). Indeed, Yin-Kun Chang (2007) reiterates that we must investigate what queer teachers do in their classrooms, as "queer teachers' resistances in the classroom have been almost neglected, particularly in queer theory." (p. 125) This resistance is important because it may be that queer teachers are including more content and discussions in their classrooms than their straight-identified peers. Meyer et al. (2015) found there were significant differences between straight teachers and those who identified as LGB (There were not enough trans-identified participants to include in the study) regarding whether they included queer content. 83.6% of LGB teachers were more likely than straight teachers to include queer content in the curriculum, which includes: challenging homophobia and transphobia, bringing in guest speakers, critiquing heterosexual privilege, examining gender norms, and including queer

theory, whereas only 55.2% of straight teachers reported the same (p. 224). Thus, despite the fears that queer teachers have, this study does suggest that a high number do attempt to queer their classroom space. Neary (2017) writes that often in these instances the queer teacher strikes an important balance between professionalism and their queer identity noting that for the participants in her study, "(f)ore-fronting a high-performing professional subjectivity and maintaining distances with students while acting as agents of change (re)produced heteronormativity but simultaneously enabled moments that promised queer, transgressive potential." (p. 56) This quotation is interesting because it reminds me of a boundary public. The school space appears to maintain heteronormativity but through "queer transgressive moments," or deterritorialization, a queer teacher can disrupt that same heteronormativity.

The above provides a sense of what can and cannot be said by queer teachers, as well as the possibilities and problematics associated with speaking or not speaking. The problematics are found within the examples of homophobia and discrimination (or the fear of homophobia and discrimination) from staff, students, administration, the district, parents, and the community, as well as familiar and damaging tropes about the queer as predator. However, the possibilities are also found in the beautiful stories of belonging and deterritorializations that can happen in teachers' schools and communities. Indeed, many of these themes would be found in the school stories told by the members of our writing and discussion group.

Lastly, one of the biggest take-aways for me is that in the above studies and stories, geography has little to do with teachers' sense of belonging in their schools, as the stories originate from both rural and urban areas. Belonging depends more on the specific school site and district, and perhaps even state or country, that they are teaching in, which implies that rural queer teacher experiences are comparable to urban ones.

To conclude, I apply this literature on queer educator experiences to my research questions for this study, arriving at some parallel questions: Whether "out" or not, how do teachers use their agency regarding queer topics in schools and does this agency create moments of belonging in their schools and with their colleagues and students? Do moments of belonging for queer teachers outweigh some of the unpleasant experiences I discussed in this chapter? Do these moments of belonging in schools make their schools feel like an extension of "home," and inform their decisions to live in rural communities? Indeed, these questions would be explored in detail in our collaborative writing and discussion group.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Considerations

This chapter begins with an elaboration on the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy that underpins this dissertation. Next, I explore José Estaban Muñoz' and Ann Cvetkovich's theoretical work on "utopia," and how a concept like utopia can be useful to assist with deterritorialization. I then end the chapter by investigating theories of "home," "kinship," and the materiality of the rural space, placing each in conversation with the philosophical and theoretical framework already discussed.

The Rhizome: Territorializations, Deterritorializations, Imperceptibility: A Deleuzo-Guattarian Framework

In their ground-breaking philosophical volume, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari use this tuberous plant to re-imagine our current conceptualizations of our bodies. They hypothesize that western philosophical thought views the body through the lens of an individual tree with a central trunk which suggests a unified whole, where the branches and roots are separate binary systems that are defined in relation to the trunk (which is the centre, the "normal") (Heckart, 2010, p. 11). Rather than a central trunk or core, firmly rooted, Deleuze and Guattari wonder what happens when the body is viewed as a rhizome. Thus, rather, than viewing people as have a stable unchanging identity, they can be viewed as being multiplicitous. Each rhizome has the potential to become connected to other rhizomes. These multiplicities are always becoming something different as new connections with other multiplicities are made, and through these multiplicities, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, assemblages are created (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8). Each individual, therefore, can be conceptualized as a continually becoming rhizome that exists within multiple assemblages of people, places, events, beliefs and discourses, to name but a few.

To expand, Deleuze & Guattari conceive of assemblages as on a grid. On the horizontal axis you have bodies, actions and passions; "an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another," (p. 88) as well as collective acts and expressions, and on the vertical axis there are territorial sides which create the stability of the assemblage. In other words, on the horizontal axis you have people who interact with other people, spaces, feelings, thoughts, and all that we experience, and on the vertical axis there are norms, laws, and socially mandated ways of being, which limit what an individual can become, and these limitations result in the individual becoming territorialized. Through interacting with others, with norms, and within discourses, an individual can be sent on a "line of force." There are two kinds of "lines of force." The first is a "line of articulation" which results in territorialization. However, a "line of flight" occurs when the territorializing vertical side can be deterritorialized. This means that as we encounter new people, spaces, feelings and so on, we may take new lines of flight, with the potential to deterritorialize or become something different. Alexander Weheliye (2014) continues that it is through these "becomings" that "…previously nonexistent realities, thoughts, bodies, affects, spaces, actions, [and] ideas come into being." (p. 46) Importantly, because the normalizing axis still exists, the rhizome can be easily reterritorialized. Thus, for Deleuze & Guattari, "a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines;" (p. 9) a line of articulation or a line of flight. A line of articulation continues on its old lines and leads to territorialization or reterritorialization, whereas a new line of flight leads to deterritorialization and new becomings.

Brian Massumi's introductory comments in *A Thousand Plateaus* describe how Deleuze and Guattari view identity and visibility politics as part of western philosophical thought. Instead of a solid and unchanging identity they advocate for thinking about identity rhizomatically:

Rather than analyzing the world [and people] into discrete components, reducing their

manyness to the One of identity, and ordering them by rank, it sums up a set of disparate

circumstances in a shattering blow. It synthesizes a multiplicity of elements without

effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging. (p. xii)

Thus, in this framework, identity is not conceived as static and unchanging but a multiplicity of

possible becomings, which speak against proclaiming a fixed identity through identity politics, as

who one proclaims oneself to be, always has potential to change.

Within a Western framework that solidifies identities, categories, and norms, gender and

sexuality have been constructed around particular norms that limit who we can be, norms that

have territorialized us. However, Deleuze & Guattari counter that, "the rhizome on the other

hand, is a liberation of sexuality not only from reproduction but also from genitality. Here in the

West, the tree has implanted itself in our bodies, rigidifying and stratifying even the sexes."

(p.18) Indeed, when one thinks of the standard sex-education curriculum that has historically

been taught in schools, heterosexual reproduction and genital classification matching a

cisgendered body has been the dominant discourse employed. To extend this even further,

through a brief historical analysis, one can investigate how the assemblage of queerness has

become territorialized since colonization. On the horizontal axis you have the bodies of the

Europeans, the weapons and tools used to colonize, statements and acts that made queerness an

other, racist/heterosexist/supremacist discourses, disciplining power and techniques of control,

anti-queer laws, institutionalization, and queerness defined as perverse and disordered, and on

the vertical axis a dominant straight, male, white order that maintains territorialization. On the

horizontal axis, there are also deterritorializing lines of flight that carry away the queer, i.e.,

liberation movements, protests, Pride, queer love, and queer families and kinship groups, to

name but a few. Thus, queer sexualities and queer bodies exist within the territorialized assemblage, and it is through agency and interaction with others that there are many possibilities for new becomings, or deterritorializations, to occur.

Interestingly, Lucas Crawford (2008) applies the work of Deleuze & Guattari to rural trans experiences in order to deterritorialize what the rural transgender subject looks like. He reminds us of that now familiar story — the transgender person leaving the rural to go to the city where they might find more financial means and opportunities to access medical resources to aid in transition. Crawford pushes back though and insists on the importance of "rural gender-fuckers" (p. 130) who wish to remain in the country in the bodies they currently have. Referencing Jay Prosser, Crawford discusses how gender (sexuality) and space are often co-constituted where the "…metaphoric territorializing of gender and literal territorializations of physical space have often gone hand in hand, (Prosser, 1998) where we think of the sad and unhappy queer in the sad and unhappy space…." (p.131) Crawford continues,

> If we can imagine that trans people may remain (or wish to remain) in the country by choice and not by accident or unfortunate circumstances, we could see instead that holding our ground says something about our styles of affect: that each bodily transition (from gender to gender or place to place) may be a matter of spatial ethics as much as sexual ones, of orientation to place as much as to the body, of being moved in certain ways as much as moving. (p. 129)

This disrupts the notion that one must, first, leave the rural, and second, engage in any transition. This in no way suggests that the path of transition is not right for trans people who feel they need to transition, but simply acknowledges that rural trans people may remain in the country and not transition. In fact, there is agency in choosing where to live and what body to inhabit that is often

deterritorializing. For queers in a world of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), choosing how to live, where to live, and who to be (or not) often involve deterritorializations of the self and the space. How does this apply to rural trans (and I would argue queer) life more generally? Crawford argues that many rural trans people find lovers, friends and mentors in small towns where they feel a sense of belonging to the community, but they still "deterritorialize gender rather than settle it," (p. 139) by inserting their sometimes unreadable bodies into rural communities. They also deterritorialize themselves by creating assemblages that may not be heterosexual and cisgendered, and in this way the imposed heterosexual/cisgendered subject becomes undone.

Returning to my own positionality, it is the sometimes "unreadable" trans or queer body that particularly interests me in the rural. I have already argued that queer visibility in the rural may be less overt and that some rural queer community members, as well as their boundary publics, may be *imperceptible* to other rural community members. I have used the word imperceptible purposefully as this is another philosophical tenet of Deleuze & Guattari. For Deleuze and Guattari, imperceptibility is what is created when the self has been fully dismantled: a "body without organs;" (BwO) (p. 151) a body that cannot be named, a body that is not subjectified, a body that cannot be labelled wrong or right, but only "populated by intensities," (p. 153) a body that is completely deterritorialized! The imperceptible body is the ultimate form of freedom for Deleuze and Guattari; unnameable and not subjectified and territorialized. This is a tall order. Indeed, Deleuze & Guattari write about how difficult it is to throw off the strata that territorializes people. They explain,

> You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn; and you have to
> keep small supplies of signifiance and subjectification, if only to turn them against their

own systems when the circumstances demand it, when things, persons, even situations,

force you to; and you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to

enable you to respond to the dominant reality. (p. 160)

They realize here that the dominant order seeks to stratify and that becoming truly imperceptible

is not likely or wise. It might be necessary to stay stratified because to throw off the strata at

once might bring down the full force of the dominant order. Rather, they continue, the best way

to interrupt the strata is to find moments where deterritorializations are possible. Therefore,

viewing imperceptibility as a form of deterritorialization, as actual imperceptibility is probably

out of reach, the rural "imperceptible" becomes not about being "in the closet" or being

"invisible" or about "coming out narratives," but, according to Crawford, this idea of

imperceptibility is when an individual's queerness might register as "different," or they may be

"queer-perceived," or it may not register at all. Thus, some rural queers may not necessarily be

out or visible, or perhaps are to a certain degree, but this does not preclude a queer becoming in

the country where deterritorialization still occurs within the community, the school, and the self.

How then can an imperceptible queer person engage in deterritorializations in the rural?

An answer can be found in the application of the Deleuzo/Guattarian concepts of

territorialization, deterritorialization, reterritorialization and imperceptibility to Gray's rural

boundary publics. To return to the youth in Gray's study who were doing drag in the aisles of

Walmart, they remain territorialized by rural customs and community, and yet they exhibit queer

lines of flight, deterritorializations, where they can become something different, and so can their

communities through their overt or even subtle interjection of queerness. The youth may not be

expressing a queer identity but they are still queering the aisles of Walmart. The same can be

said for the participants in Detamore's study and his "counterpublics." Found within these

boundary publics, which also are often imperceptible, is a queer possibility for deterritorializations.

However, these deterritorializations are not necessarily a liberating practice. Reterritorialization does occur, as the postscript to the boys doing drag in Walmart in Gray's study suggests; this practice stopped when one of the boys was harassed by a local outside of the store. Thus, in discussing the rhizome, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization, Deleuze and Guattari remind, "You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything…. (p. 9)" The reterritorialization that occurred outside Walmart was the successful attempt by dominant heterosexual power to end the extension of queerness into public space.

Let us now return to Aunt Sweet's afghan momentarily (See Figure 4. *Aunt Sweet's Afghan).* I argue that an afghan or quilt can be looked upon as a rhizome or an assemblage of rhizomes. Deleuze and Guattari, themselves, use the patchwork quilt as an example of a rhizome (1987). Lori E Koelsch (2012) further explains that a patchwork quilt is,

> a gathering of disjointed elements. Each patch is a separate and unique element, but patches can be combined to form a whole. Similar to a rhizome, a patchwork quilt has multiple entryways for analysis, no necessary center, and the ability to grow in multiple directions. (p. 823)

Thus, Aunt Sweet's afghan is also a rhizome because there is no obvious starting point and no end point. It appears finished and, thus, territorialized, but it can certainly be deterritorialized. It can be unwoven, changing out old colours (ways of being) for new. It can be added to, sent on a line of flight to new becomings. If I had any crochet talent I could add in my own stitches, creating something in conversation with Aunt Sweet. Maybe I could stich in the colours of the

rainbow and deterritorialize the afghan. However, the future owner of my afghan may dislike my queer additions and remove them, seeking to return to tradition, to reterritorialize my new queer quilt to the way it once was. In considering my research questions, I now ask if repetitive rural moments of territorialization and reterritorialization lead queer people to want to leave the rural space and do those moments of queer deterritorialization produce an affect that fosters a sense of belonging in the rural, opening up a breathing space for them to remain?

Figure 4. *Aunt Sweet's Afghan*

Utopia as Rural Deterritorialization

In *What is Philosophy*? Deleuze and Guattari (1994) posit that when philosophy becomes political and becomes highly critical of the present, one is searching for utopia. They continue, utopia "…stands for *absolute deterritorialization* but always at the critical point at which it is connected with the present relative milieu, and especially with the forces stifled by the milieu." (p. 100) Much like imperceptibility, achieving utopia and *absolute deterritorialization* for Deleuze and Guattari would seem an impossibility. However, I ask what happens when one investigates both the forces that stifle in the current "milieu," but additionally searches for those *moments* of "utopia" that lead to *moments* of deterritorialization? Is it within these many moments of utopia where change for the better becomes possible? This section explores José

Estaban Muñoz' and Ann Cvetkovich's work on utopia, placing the concept in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialization.

   In defining "utopia" Muñoz references the work of Barthes who describes how utopia can be found in the everyday, and that it is "…extra to the everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism…glimpsed in utopian bonds, affiliations, designs and gestures…" (p. 20) In this definition, utopia is found within *glimpses* of moments that exceed heteronormativity. Placing this definition in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari, something is utopic when heteronormativity is exceeded; this is also deterritorialization! Thus, utopia can be found for queers in moments of deterritorialization. For Muñoz, utopia can be found by searching for the "no longer conscious" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 20) of the past to critique the present, which may work towards a future utopian possibility (p. 20). Importantly, this utopia may not be "conscious." This is an important notion for this study where it has already been argued that rural queer utopic moments are often not conscious, ignored or forgotten. Indeed, historian Colin R. Johnson (2013) makes a profound point when discussing how history tends to suffer from amnesia, which is worth citing at length,

> One of the most curious aspects of historical knowledge is the centrally important role
> that forgetting plays in its production. Indeed, if knowledge of the past was never lost by
> individuals or societies, there would be no compelling reason to write history. At the
> very least, whatever qualified as historical knowledge under such conditions would
> undoubtedly look very different from what typically passes for historical knowledge in
> our world, plagued as it is by amnesia. (p. 1)

Indeed, I have outlined up to this point, how much queer scholars and historians have forgotten about rural queer experiences when viewing them through urban and deficit lenses. In popular

culture it also was not until the mid 1990's, arguably with Ellen DeGeneres coming out, that

queer narratives that were not negative made it into the mainstream media.[2] There has been a

long history of forgetting about queerness. To counter this amnesia, Muñoz' vision of utopia is

found in remembering forgotten moments of queer pleasure from the past, which interrupt not

only the way we envision the present but offer a potential utopia in the future. Remembering

utopic moments in the past becomes more than just nostalgia and also more than just a projection

of what the future might be but creates a "utopia in the present." (p. 37) For example, the act of

searching for past utopic rural moments can change conceptualizations of the rural present. One

might hardly view the rural as solely a place of suffering if there is a past (and present) full of

rural queer utopic moments. Thus, for Muñoz, a "queer restaging of the past helps us imagine

new temporalities that interrupt straight time." (p. 171) Straight time is the view that historical

temporal periods are necessarily solely straight, and by searching for historical queer stories we

are interrupting straight time and instead engaging in what Muñoz calls "queer world making."

(p. 37) Thus, for both me and the participants in this study, we will construct queer utopic worlds

in the present, even momentarily, through our remembrances, which will then be available for

future readers in their present, exemplifying Muñoz' project. In this way the deficit lens through

which (rural) queer life is viewed might become deterritorialized, offering future queer

deterritorializations to other queer readers.

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[2] In 2017, Vanity Fair magazine wrote, "It's been two decades since Ellen DeGeneres changed popular culture forever." (https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/04/20th-anniversary-of-ellen-degeneres-coming-out) This sentiment is, indeed, another example of urban, white visibility politics. DeGeneres' "coming out" "changed popular culture" whereas RuPaul had been out and on television prior to Ellen's coming out, but did not receive the same recognition.

Ann Cvetkovich's (2012) "utopia of everyday habit" (p. 157) works nicely with Muñoz'

conceptualization of utopia. For Cvetkovich utopia can be found in everyday, otherwise

ordinary, moments. Cvetkovich's work can be viewed as a response, in part, to the work of

Lauren Berlant. In *Cruel Optimism,* Berlant (2011) characterizes the present as a state of "crisis

ordinariness," (p. 10) in that crises are an ordinary and pervasive part of everyday life.

Cvetkovich's (2012) *Depression: A Public Feeling* uses the work of Berlant and Kathleen

Stewart to examine how depression is an impasse in the "crisis ordinariness" of everyday life. In

investigating ideas of home and domesticity, Stewart writes that people attempt to create homes

"as a sanctuary from the anxieties and terrors produced by economic crisis, war, and cultural

conflict," (as cited in Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 156) but that the home space does undergird a

capitalist, neoliberal state, and the inequities inherent in such a system. For Stewart, the home

provides comfort as a "deceptive structure of feeling," a cruel optimism, that seeks to keep bad

feelings outside of the home (p. 156). However, misfortune, disaster, fear and anxiety are always

knocking on the door, if not already in the house. Because it is an everyday occurrence in the

ordinary, there is a constant,

> low-level buzz of worry and anxiety and forms of daily stress that bog people down to the
>
> point where they are so numb or weary, they can't even really pay attention to anything
>
> other than what's right in front of them. (as cited in Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 157)

Something like depression, then, is like a haunting, even within the home. Cvetkovich goes on to

explore how depression, an ordinary crisis, might be tackled by that same ordinary, in what she

calls the "utopia of ordinary/everyday habit" (p. 157) and suggests an investigation into daily

pleasures and joys. She then explores various forms of crafting and art making within domestic

spaces, which she associates with a spiritual practice that interrupts depression. The art that is

highlighted in her examples utilize "domestic" materials, objects and techniques, but also serve as political statements. This is their utopic power. This art making is able to criticize the present, to deterritorialize, while interrupting crisis ordinariness and depression. This is what my project seeks to do; to write about past, often everyday and ordinary, queer utopic moments within our rural "homes" that create deterritorializing queer moments but also to critique the conditions that make our rural homes inhospitable.

Thus, Muñoz and Cvetkovich remind us that finding moments of utopia is a hopeful endeavor, but the practice does not ignore the terrible things that happen in the world. For Cvetkovich, there is still "room for unhappiness, melancholy, depression, and other bad feelings," (p. 161) as finding utopia is not meant to gloss over these affects. Thus, in addition to sharing utopic moments, participants will also share moments of non-belonging and alienation in their communities. Muñoz also provides a way to interpret these narratives through what he calls "utopian longing." (p.188) Disappointment, loss, rejection, shame, and unhappiness are typically accompanied by a longing for something otherwise. Muñoz says that what we are longing for has been "...denied in straight time's choke hold. We are waiting but left vigilant in our desire for another time that is not yet here." (p. 182) It is in this waiting period where one can articulate a utopic vision for something different.

The Deterritorialized Rural Home as Utopia

What utopic vision might be articulated through the stories and discussions of queer "home" and "belonging" in the rural. Without moving too far ahead into the methods section, it is necessary to explore why is it useful to have participants write about what "home" represents for them. In *Domestic Space and the Idea of Home in Auto/Biographical Practices* (2005), Kathy

Mezei discusses how it is very common for writers of autobiography to frame their stories "of self around 'home.'" (p. 83) She continues,

> The idea of home, which incorporates not only a sense of physical place, but also a web of personal relationships and the weave of experience, memory, and the process of remembering, can thus be thought of as 'an enacted space within which we try and play out roles and relationships of both belonging and foreignness.' (Bammer, ix, as cited in Mezei, 2005)

Ideas of "belonging" and "foreignness" are what I seek to uncover in this project through a rural understanding of "home." If one's self, memory, and experiences are so connected to ideas of "home," it is all the more striking that rural queer perspectives depicting successful country lives are missing from the literature. An inquiry into home and belonging would explore what Mezei calls "domestic spaces" which are "…the personal, private, everyday quality of houses, homes, gardens, and material objects." (p. 81) Thus, the domestic space of the rural queer participant is a lived space where the participant has, for example, associative objects, a backyard, or a secluded hide away, that call up memories of self and place, and, of course, extends beyond the house and private spaces to relationships that occur in and around the space (Mezei, 2005). The remembrances of these spaces can be used to bring a participant into the past to find both moments of utopia and moments of struggle. Detamore references Bordo et al.'s (1998) use of home as a "floating metaphor" which suggests home is an attachment to "objects, feelings and bodies", a home-assemblage in a Deleuze & Guattari sense, as opposed to a specific fixed geographical location (as cited in Detamore, 2013, p. 91). In this way, home becomes a feeling created by an assemblage of people, things, location, friends, affects, and notions of belonging

(Detamore, 2013; Waitt & Johnston; 2013). I explore some possibilities of this home assemblage in the sections that follow.

The Material World of the Rural

Viewing home as an assemblage brings me back to Deleuze and Guattari and the new materialist scholars inspired by them. New Materialism is informed by the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, where the materiality of the world can be analyzed through the material/human assemblage. Fox and Alldred (2019) write that, "the materialities considered in new materialist approaches include human bodies; other animate organisms; material things; spaces, places and the natural and built environment that these contain." (p. 1) Eileen Joy (2015) suggests we might investigate beyond traditional human/humanist spheres (a new materialist endeavor that Deleuze and Guattari would advocate for), as everything is connected to everything else (rhizomatic) and must not be human-centred. She suggests we then might search for, "new forms of love and affection that might be generative of new modes of being, not just for ourselves, but for others who are wayward, lost, abandoned and so forth." (p. 223) For rural queers these "new forms of love" may be in the forgotten rural utopias found in the descriptions of interactions with the rural space itself that offer what Joy calls "queer potential and opportunities for self-transformation." (p. 221) For example, Jocey Quinn's (2013) study *New Learning Worlds: The Significance of Nature in the Lives of Marginalised Young People* explores the relationship between marginalized youth and nature. Quinn defines nature as "encapsulating a range of manifestations of the non-human world: in this case, woods, water, fields, and animals." (p. 717) Quinn observed that a relationship with nature led the marginalized youth in her study to new becomings. She states that this produced feelings in the youth of being free, more confident and happier. Escaping the human world to be with animals, trees, and rivers

was a deterritorialization for marginalized young people from a society intent on maintaining their territorialization. Quinn states that nature offers the possibility for new worlds to be discovered, ones that might result in lines of flight from territorializing forces, but she acknowledges that these lines of flight may only be temporary (p. 716), observing how nature is not open for all young people. She continues, "[c]hildren from ethnic-minorities, children with disabilities and girls are under-represented among young user groups." (p. 717) In addition, depending on one's past, nature may not be regarded as a safe space at all. As MacNaghten and Urry note there are "multiple natures" (as cited in Quinn, p. 728), as we all have had experiences in nature that affect how we perceive it. For example, queer moments of belonging may be connected to particular landscapes in the rural, like my story of walking down the country road one evening and holding my boyfriend's hand while the snow fell softly. The snow and the country road add to the peaceful and utopic feeling associated with that moment. There was no one on the road except us at the time, just the tree-lined road, the falling snow, and two lovers holding hands, recreating a scene that extends beyond straight time. My boyfriend and I inserted our queerness into a public rural space at this moment, deterritorializing both ourselves and the space from heteronormativity. However, for a queer person, the potential solitude and peace of nature might be deterritorializing until there is an encounter with homophobia in the space and then nature becomes a place to fear. My boyfriend and I could easily have been reterritorialized if a car had passed us and we decided to stop holding hands, or insults were hurled at us from the car. The solitude of the rural landscape could then enable homophobic insults or violence. Thus, an investigation into utopic possibilities must consider the human/landscape relationship and how a physical space provides opportunities for both territorializations and deterritorializations to occur. I, therefore, have a number of questions

about how the assemblage of the human and the space of the countryside would manifest in our remembrances. What is the relationship between the participants and the land? Are there affective connections with the land that de-centre human-human relational experiences? Does the land provide emotional sustenance that keeps people in the country, that makes the country a "home"? Is there a utopia that might be found in the "no longer conscious" rural queer remembrances and connections to the land? What dangers exist in the rural landscape for queer-identified/perceived folks?

Belonging, the Heteronormative Family, and Queer Kin

As a great deal of the rural assemblage is about familiarity, blending in, and "asserting sameness,"(Gray, 2009) I also wondered about what kind of "home" participants would be recounting in their narratives? Would a search for belonging be a longing for heteronormative, and therefore homonormative, notions of home? Lisa Duggan (2002) has defined homonormativity as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption." (p. 178) Given this definition, I ask how can a queer person want a home in the country where one might seek to fit in, raise a family, and belong, and yet not be homonormative? How can I name participant memories "queer utopia" if they reinforce a rural heteronormativity? I, therefore, wonder if the answer can be found by examining how rural queers challenge and deterritorialize notions of "home" and "family." Kath Weston's (1997) early work *Families We Choose: Gays, Lesbians, Kinship* offer some suggestions. Her book explores notions of kinship beyond the heterosexual family. These queer kin groups may include: straight and queer friends, work colleagues, other marginalized groups (perhaps in this study

other queer educators), or even the incorporation of a queer partner's family into an existing

kinship group (Weston, 1991); in these instances a diverse group of queer and straight people can

become "kin," or "chosen families." Some participants in Weston's study discuss how their

chosen families did act as a substitute for the heteronormative, biological family that they did not

have when they were young. Novelist Armistead Maupin calls this kinship construction a

"logical family," (Maupin, 2018) rather than a biological one that may not be supportive. It,

therefore, may be that one's queer family and kinship groups are factors that create belonging in

the rural. However, the question still remains as to whether the queer person simply reproduces

the heteronormative "home" that they were brought up in, or are heteronormative structures

challenged in queer households? Weston and I share the same view of "gay kinship ideologies as

historical transformations rather than derivatives of other sorts of kinship relations." (p 106.)

Indeed, the participants in Weston's study countered that queer kinship models need not

reinforce heteronormativity but rather create a "kinship in the *absence* of what they called

'models.'" (p. 116) The transformation, or deterritorialization, occurs as queer kinship groups

insert themselves into rural life, queering the traditional rural homestead and communities.

Queer kinship relationships can also deterritorialize heteronormative family and

friendship groups. Take the example of two queer partners attending a "traditional" (read:

heteronormative) family dinner with the family of one of the partners. Rural norms may limit

whether their queerness will be discussed around the heteronormative rural table. Indeed, as

Gray writes, they may be more likely to blend in. Following the homonormative narrative, this

might be read as the desire to conform to the familiarity of the heterosexual and nuclear familial

dining experience, rather than the deterritorialization that it actually is. Sara Ahmed (2006)

discusses how a queer body at the heteronormative family table produces a queer effect where

"the table might even become wonky," (p. 568) as the familiar "becomes strange." (p. 569) In

moments like this, heteronormativity is interrupted by the inclusion of queerness at the table.

Similarly, while doing research in the small city of Lethbridge, which she says has characteristics

associated with rural communities, gender studies scholar Tiffany Myrdahl (2016) insists that we

must be aware of the dominant norms of a geographical location when considering

homonormativity (p. 43). She provides the example of a participant who interjects her life with

her partner in heteronormative conversations. Myrdahl clarifies that this encounter "…may be

identified as homonormative in its unwillingness to interrogate liberal rights and privileges, but

in Lethbridge, at this particular moment, it also counts as queer activism that disrupts the work of

heteronormativity" (p. 43); with an individual choosing not to remain invisible and silent, an

individual not allowing reterritorialization. I tend to agree with the above authors and read the

usurpation of heterosexual norms as a queering, as a deterritorialization, that enables moments of

queer belonging in the rural space.

The Struggle to Belong and Find "Home"

There is also a critique that needs be applied to the notion of "home." Critical race and

trans studies scholar, Nael Bhanji (2012), discusses how discourses of "home" often involve

nostalgia and sentimentalized notions of a home that is not, nor has ever been, accessible for

everyone. Bhanji's ideas coincide with a critique about both homonationalism and the trans body

seeking a "home." He writes that we tend to seek "normative" meanings of what "home" is. He

writes that the *body as home* in trans narratives often speak of a "nostalgia for the romanticized

ideal of home, the body reconstructed through sex-reassignment surgery… is the desire to get the

body back to what it should have been." (p. 163) Similarly, the search for a queer home and

belonging in the rural is also a homonormative enterprise if one is looking for the traditional ideal heteronormative home. He continues,

> If home is doubly inflected as the task of finding a home in one's body and being able to call the nation home, then concealed…is the urge for normality and the desire to belong without complication to a normative social sphere…a fantasy, moreover, racially and culturally marked as Anglocentric, heteronormative and capitalist. (p. 166)

Lucas Crawford's critique about trans bodies that both remain in the rural and need not transition is relevant here, as these bodies are not seeking "normative" ways of achieving home in both the rural space and in their bodies. In defying gender norms and appearance in the rural, as well as the narrative that they need to transition, they are challenging homonationalist discourses of normative belonging.

Additionally, Latoya Eaves (2013) and Avtar Brah (1996) remind us that autobiographical accounts of both black and white people in "…the same geographical space comes to articulate different histories and meanings, such that "home" can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror." (p. 204) Bhanji writes that for many minoritized people, "home is a location of dislocation and desire..." and using the words of Anne-Marie Fortier, he says that home is "a place of disjunction, of unbelonging, or struggles for assimilation/integration." (p. 204) Thus, notions of home and belonging is problematic for someone who has never felt they belonged in their home, community or even nation. This speaks to why it is important that this project is not just about searching for "moments of utopia" and deterritorializations that make the rural space more hospitable, but it is the very fact that the space is inhospitable and territorializing for marginalized individuals that must also be illustrated.

Thus, rural community members might very well refuse the "home" they have been given. Indeed, Crawford (2008) discusses how refusing "home" can lead to deterritorialization. However, this does not mean that rural community members, in their refusal, leave the rural for the city. There are many ways that a rural subject might refuse a "home" without actually leaving the rural. One might: leave their "home" and find a "home" in another rural location, one might leave and return and find that "home" has become more hospitable (Waitt & Johnston, 2013), one might create their own "home" within their own communities, within their boundary publics, perhaps (Gray, 2009), refusing the "traditional home," and thereby queering the "home" they are in (Weston, 1997). Of course, some rural queers also do leave for the city and find the space more hospitable than the rural. However, Halberstam writes that "many queers from rural or small towns move to the city of necessity, and then yearn to leave the urban area and return to their small towns." (p. 37) Thus, when queers do migrate to cities, this does not mean that it is a one-way trip. Many queers do leave and then return to rural communities. Waitt and Johnston (2016) contrast this rural to urban drift with "…multiple, peripatetic, and ongoing journeys." (p. 147) My own rural-urban journeys are instructive. I left my small rural community in 1995 to attend University in a small city where I lived for 6 years. Then, I returned home to work as a supply teacher. Not knowing if I would find full-time employment, I then moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia for a year. Then, I moved to Toronto for a year to attend school once again. Next, I returned to my rural community where I got a permanent job and stayed for ten years. Back to my small University city for my master's and now in Toronto for my PhD, I shuttle between my mother's home in the rural and my bachelor student residence on campus. Although I have made connections in the sprawling city and enjoy city life, I also enjoy the rural space and most of my social supports — friends and family — are there. Additionally, because my school district

consists of three counties, I also established roots in all three communities over the fifteen years I taught. One of these communities is my childhood community. It was, however, in an adjacent community to my "home" one where I would find my own queer kinship group and second family, creating a sense of home and belonging in this community that is in many ways stronger than in my "home" community.

I must end with an important note for the reader. Within the last two chapters I have elucidated some concepts that I think can and should be used interchangeably for the purpose of this study. We can begin with the notion of becomings, of lines of flight, that lead to deterritorializations, particularly noting how the rural queer teacher might deterritorialize the self, the community, and school. Synonymous with deterritorializing is the notion of queering. The rural queer person can insert queerness into the rural community and into the rural classroom, thereby deterritorializing the self and, potentially, community members, the community, the school, and its occupants. As Muñoz defines utopia as moments that exceed heteronormativity, it is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that queering, deterritorializing and utopia are bound together. When queer people engage in queering and deterritorialization of their spaces and their selves this results in utopic moments. Thus, searching for "the utopia of everyday habit" through home and belonging might be about the deterritorializing effects of connecting with nature, non-familial queer kinship groups, or it may be about two queer partners queering the holiday dinner table. Again, however, these utopic stories are not the only ones that must be analyzed. Group members will recount times of trials, of suffering, of harassment, of being in the closet and hating it, of non-belonging, of refusing "home" in their rural community. Returning to Muñoz, he would say this refusal enables a critique of the present and the past. Thus, in utopia's absence, group members might discuss what a rural queer utopia could look

like. In the discussion of what is not yet possible, there is an investigation of what utopia might

become in the future, and possible suggestions for how the rural may be further deterritorialized.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

Collaborative Autoethnography: A Shared Writing Practice

Like a rhizome, the methods for this project grew from various methodological stems, namely various life writing methodologies and a Deleuzo-Guattarian framework. This section will, therefore, combine the methodology and methods section together to map how various stems came together rhizomatically to create the method for this study. I will alternate between the methodological stems to the methods to show how the prior informed the latter.

Stem 1. Life Writing Methodologies

To begin, there are many writing genres that fall under "life writing." In their *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994) Denzin & Lincoln describe the qualitative researcher as a bricoleur, or a *quilt-maker*, where multiple methodologies can be used to create a bricolage. They define a bricolage as a "pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem…The qualitative researcher as bricoleur uses the tools of [the] methodological trade, deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical materials as are at hand." (p. 2) If new tools need be created to arrive at an answer, then the researcher will also create them. In this section, I explore a number of life writing genres, and show how parts of each methodology were brought together, as a bricolage, to inform the methods for my study.

The starting place for this project was the assemblage of my own queer autobiographical experiences in the rural over much of my lifetime. I collected some of these experiences in the *queer autoethnography* I wrote for my master's thesis. In *Desirable Queerness: A Critical Queer Autoethnography of Being and Becoming* (2016) I sought to write about the ways in which my queer self had been impacted by a dominant compulsory heterosexual framework in which heterosexuality and normative gender roles were assumed. My autoethnography was heavily

influenced by queer autoethnography scholars, Tony E. Adams and Stacey Holman Jones, who,

over many publications, explore how autoethnography and queer theory can be utilized together

to produce powerful writing. In *Autoethnography is Queer* (2008) Adams and Holman Jones

explain that autoethnography places "the autobiographical and personal in conversation with the

cultural and social." (p. 4) It is particularly useful for marginalized groups, as individual

experiences of oppression are explored along with the systems of oppression that created the

experiences. Autoethnography often employs evocative narrative writing to *show,* rather than to

tell about, an individual's experience. Holman Jones and Adams (2016b) state,

> Autoethnography is…painted as an evocatively rendered, aesthetically compelling and
>
> revelatory encounter…It is an effort to set a scene, tell a story and create a text that
>
> demands attention and participation, makes witnessing and testifying possible and puts
>
> pleasure, difference and movement into productive conversation. (p. 199)

Holman Jones and Adams' methodological vision is to write detailed, evocative, personal

vignettes about their queer lives and pair those narratives with queer theoretical discourses.

They view this pairing of narrative and theory as acting like a hinge. In *Autoethnography and*

Queer Theory: Making Possibilities (2016a), Holman Jones explains this hinge between

narrative and theory as follows: "We work to create possibilities by theorizing story and storying

theory, embracing vulnerability while taking a political stand, creating conversations and trouble,

and taking chances to make movement." (p. 143) Within this genre, the autobiographical

narrative creates an "accessible way of representing research, a way that devotes itself with

'grounded, everyday life.'" (Plummer, 2003, as cited in Adams and Holman Jones, p. 198) Both

the theory and narrative are validated when placed in conversation together, demonstrating the

personal and cultural in conversation.

The method and theory pair well as they both extend beyond dominant norms in society. In *Autoethnography is Queer!* (2008), Adams and Holman Jones proclaim, that queer is anti-normative in society and autoethnography is, or at least was, considered anti-normative in traditional social science research. Additionally, both queerness and autoethnography are political acts that speak back to authority and damaging dominant discourses by producing a minoritized knowledge and providing a voice to members of society that may be less-often heard (Holman Jones and Adams, 2016a).

My queer autoethnography used queer theory in conversation with vignettes that I composed about being a queer child, youth, and adult in my rural communities. At the end of this project, there was an element of healing that happened as I realized that my experiences were not solitary but were validated by the theoretical discourses and other queer scholarship that I applied to the stories. There was a catharsis that occurred in discovering my experiences were not solitary. Because of this, I wondered if it would be possible to bring this autoethnographic process to a group of other rural queer educators. I then began to read collaborative autoethnographic/collective biographic studies to see what the possibilities were in conducting such a study with other teachers.

A search for collaborative storytelling and analysis brought me to collective biography. Mulvihill & Swaminathan (2017) define collective biography as a feminist approach where a group of individuals come together and produce specific remembered moments from each individual's life, which, when collectively analyzed, allow access to the social world. Most often, collective biography is used by researchers working collectively, but it can also entail "…writing biographies of a group of people who are connected in some way," (p. 32) and can explore the lives of people who "…share a particular area, activity, or field so that there is deeper

understanding of the individual lives as well as the field or activity." (p. 32) I began by reading Bronwyn Davies' and Suzanne Gannon's extensive work with collective biography. A number of Davies' new materialist studies are comprised of herself and other researchers working collectively to produce data and then analyze it. Their description of collective biography is influenced by the model developed by Frigga Haug et al. in *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory* (1983), which explores memories associated with sexuality and the female body — told, analyzed, and written by collective researchers. As a collective, Haug et al. wrote remembered narratives of their bodies: how they were educated about them, how their bodies became sexualized, and the limits imposed upon their bodies by society. This created agency among the researchers who sought to create their own deterritorializations. They did not want the "fixed" way their bodies and beings were often characterized by dominant structures of patriarchy, nor their own constructions of self-hood, to be left uninterrogated (Haug et al., 1983). They eloquently explored how this was a feminist methodology as it was, "[o]nly through their own historicization can they retrieve from the dominant culture elements of a new image of themselves, on the basis of which they may possibly be able to construct alternatives for the future." (p. 49) To make this a collective enterprise each participant contributed writing throughout the book, which was written using the collective "we" to demonstrate the group production and analysis of the narratives. Davies and Gannon's texts use this method — researchers worked collaboratively from the beginning research questions to the end writing, producing the stories and analyzing together throughout. In some instances, they also bring theoretical/popular texts into the discussion to assist with their analysis (Davies et al., 2002).

Collective biography is, therefore, similar to autoethnography as it explores how power circulates, placing theory in conversation with narratives. A focus of both is also using affect and

emotion to bring the reader into the research. Davies and Gannon's collective biographic method involves each participant reading their individual narrative vignette aloud, the other participants are then asked to provide feedback concerning the writing, and they edit together until the stories resonate with the whole collective. This editing concerns how language conveys the affective feel of the vignette. They "work collaboratively to find those words that express the embodied sensations that make up the memory." (Davies & Gannon 2012, p. 359) They listen intently, they ask questions, they look for places that are unclear, they tell similar stories, they offer other words. They write and rewrite and in this way each individual story becomes part of the collective human story of the participants who are writing (Davies & Gannon, 2012, p. 360). They state that it is through collective memory processes that,

> memories are no longer told as just autobiographical…but as opening up for, and in, each
> other, knowledges of being that previously belonged only to the other… [where] our
> bodies take on the intimate knowledge of each others' marks of identity. (Davies &
> Gannon, 2009, p.9)

Many of their collective studies are also inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, and they analyze how the individuals, and their stories, affected each other within the group (becomings), thus, extending beyond individual accounts.

Encompassing many of these themes, Roberta Hawkins et al. (2016) developed a framework for collective biography research. For them, a collective biography has the following characteristics:

1) Researchers create data from their memories in response to co-created prompts.

2) The memory is read aloud and a collective process of revision occurs.

3) There is equal participation and collaboration throughout all sections of the project, where participants: construct the prompts, write and share their narratives aloud, provide suggestions to other participants, and analyze and revise their stories.

4) Critical reflection is necessary throughout, where participants think about their assumptions and beliefs, evaluate their narratives, provide additional details to the readers/listeners, and remain open to the interpretations of other group members.

5) Collective analysis occurs throughout the process, while the group analyzes not only the individual memory but that memory along with the other ones created in the group.

6) The process exemplifies how one becomes constructed as a subject.

7) Memories are accessed through embodied feelings which make the experience knowable to the reader.

8) There is particular attention to affect and emotion.

9) There is attention to space and place (which I particularly like for this study). (Hawkins et al., 2016).

This framework would be very influential to my project. I then wondered how collective biography was different from collaborative autoethnography. Like collective biography, collaborative autoethnography is defined as narrative writing that is collectively analyzed and interpreted by two or more researchers (Blalock & Akehi, 2018; Ngunjiri et al., 2017; Lapadat, 2017). Chang et al. (2012) define collaborative autoethnography as a "…research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomenon reflected in their autobiographical data." (as cited in Mulvihill & Swaminathan,

2017, p. 55) Thus, there seems to be little difference between collective biography and collaborative autoethnography. What stood out to me was both collective biography and collaborative autoethnography are typically created by a group of researchers. One of the main questions I, therefore, had was could I name a study as a "collaboration" with a group of teachers who were not researchers and full participants in every aspect of the creation? Herein lies a potential issue as typically in both collective biography and collaborative autoethnography, groups of *researchers* will work collaboratively on all phases of the project, including the research question, the creation and analysis of the narratives, as well as the writing of the research. Although it was my desire to have the study unfold somewhat organically, I had a vision and research questions that I wanted to have answered, and I, alone, would be engaging in the final analysis. However, Chang et al. (2013) do write that collaborative autoethnography can entail *partial* collaboration, where all group members produce autobiographical data and participate in data analysis but may not participate during the final writing stage. Ngunjiri et al. (2010) explain,

> Collaborative autoethnographers adopt various models of collaboration. Some collaborate fully at all stages of the research process. Others collaborate at certain stages and work individually in other stages of research. Whether collaboration is done fully or partially, cooperative data collection is a key to collaborative autoethnography. In this stage, some research teams may adopt a sequential model, in which one autoethnographer writes about his/her experience, passes his/her writing to the next person who adds his/her story to the previous writing, and passes it along to the next person for further addition of stories… Others use a concurrent model in which autoethnographers select topics for data

collection, independently collect autobiographic data, and gather to share and review

their stories and probe each other to extract further data. (p. 7)

No matter the level of collaboration, Ngunjiri et al. advise that in partial collaborative autoethnographies, the main researcher(s) must be aware of power imbalances within the collaboration (p. 42). The researcher(s) should be aware of how they influence the project and attempt to include as much participant voice as possible. This would influence how I would construct both the methods and analysis for this project.

Other studies that inspired this project employed the methodology of a shared life-writing community. Julie Rak (2005) notes that life writing has been used in many disciplines such as women's studies, Indigenous and post-colonial studies, and African American studies. The purpose of such writing is to produce texts that have "been left out of the historical record because they are by people without power of influence." (p. 3) For example, in her 2015 dissertation, Prabha Jerrybandan held writing groups with six Indo-Caribbean women living in Canada. This shared writing practice produced 36 stories from writing prompts that she created. She combined the stories with follow up interviews which were held over the phone or by email. Questions were asked to glean further information from the silences in the narratives, as well as the participants' experience with this practice of writing. She characterized this writing practice as "memory work," which Haug et al. (1987) define as a "bridge to span the gap between 'theory' and 'experience,'" (as cited in Jerrybandan, 2015, p. 59) — an approach very similar to Adams' and Holman Jones' combination of queer theory and autoethnography. She then employed narrative analysis, using the stories as data.

Another influential study is Karleen Pendleton Jiménez' *Lengua Latina: Latina Canadians Shaping Identity and Community Through Writing* (2005). Pendleton Jiménez held a

writing group with Latina women in a community centre in Toronto. The writing group met regularly for two hours each session, where a writing prompt was introduced, the members wrote to the prompt, shared their writing aloud, and offered and received supportive critique. Pendleton Jiménez stressed to her participants that because the pieces were "free writes" the criticism should not be too exacting or harsh. Comments were often on vagueness or confusion or where to possibly take the piece of writing (p. 199). The group discussions often elicited a range of emotional responses as group members explored personal connections to the written narratives.

It is clear that many of these life-writing methodologies, despite their naming, are similar in what they intend to do, which is to speak back to dominant discourses through the storying and discussion of marginalized lives. Mulvihill & Swaminathan (2017) write how there is not one comprehensive method to life writing and state, "…scholars have continued to experiment and push the methodological boundaries of autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, autobiography, and collective biography in ways that move away from the idea of a singular or correct mode of life writing." (p. 34) Indeed, returning to the idea of the bricolage, Denzin (2014) discusses how all of these methodological terms "flow together, intermingle; a montage of overlapping projects, images, voices, techniques," (as cited in Wyatt et al., 2014, p. 413) which together showcase "voices seeking a home;" (p. 413) a quite fitting analogy for my project.

The Methods

The methods for my study were arrived at rhizomatically from the methodological life writing stems previously elucidated. Put another way, like a bricoleur, a quilt-maker, I have pulled many threads from the studies above to create my own version of a collaborative

autoethnography, choosing the particular methods I felt would assist in the creation of a community of autoethnographic writers to elucidate rural queer teacher experiences.

Overview of Study

The main goal of this study was to create a focus group of LGBTQ+ rural teachers where we could share our writing and discuss our experiences in the rural. However, my first vision for this project was that these focus groups would be held in person with queer educators from one rural location and then the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Unsure of how to progress with in-person focus groups I decided to first hold interviews via Zoom with the hope that focus groups would happen in the future. In this stage I sent out a call for LGBTQ+ educators across Canada who would be interested in participating in an interview concerning their experiences of home and belonging in their rural communities. The goal was to find five to six participants across Canada. Membership criteria for the study were rural educators who considered themselves part of the LGBTQ+ community or those who identified as having a non-normative gender or sexuality.

Participants

The participants in this study were six rural queer-identified educators ranging from the ages of 28 to 52. Three participants were from Nova Scotia, two were from Ontario and one was from Manitoba. All were classroom teachers across the elementary to secondary levels. At the end of each interview, I asked each participant if they wished to participate in a five-week writing and discussion focus group via Zoom which would continue to explore the themes of "home" and "belonging" in their rural communities. Four of the participants agreed to participate in the follow up focus groups.

The Method: Participant Interviews

In the throes of the pandemic, I was not sure what it would be like, or if I wanted to, hold focus groups on Zoom. I embarked on interviews because I thought it would be important to meet each participant and see if they would be interested in participating in a writing and discussion group. The life writing studies I had read stressed the need for trust to be established. I was worried that because the focus groups would have to be held online that it would be difficult to build trust and vulnerability. Thus, I wanted the initial interview to be a space where I could establish a relationship with the participants, in preparation for the possible focus group.

This informed the way I conceived of the interview process. Swaminathan & Mulvihill (2017) discuss viewing the interview process as a conversation or "reciprocal interviewing." (p. 46) Similarly, Cigdim Esin et al. (2014) state that in interviews there is a … "complex interaction between responses" which turns the interview into "collaborative meaning-making rather than simply the imposition or reception of the interviewers or interviewee's framework of meanings." (p. 211) The researcher must be aware that in this interaction the participant is telling you narratives about their life, but what they tell you is also impacted by the relationship that is being forged with the interviewer. To that end, I did create a set of interview questions, dividing them into personal demographics, participant experiences in communities, and the experiences of participants in schools. However, the interview was semi-structured, and the questions used only as a guide, as I wanted the discussion to follow "lines of flight," which I could then respond to, and ask follow-up questions based upon, their responses.

As I wanted my project to be collaborative, my interaction with group members at the beginning phases of the study was meant to be one of collaboration. The idea of the *interview as a collaborative conversation* was influenced by the partial collaborative autoethnographies I had

read where the researcher must be aware of power differentials, as well as feminist principles of collaboration where the participants should not feel as if I were a detached researcher, but rather, someone who also had similar experiences that should be shared (Madriz, 2000, p 837). [3]

The Method: Introduction to the Focus Group Structure

Conducting focus groups seemed like the best method for a project about collaborative autoethnography. Beginning with Haug et al. and the other collective biographic studies that I referenced, the collaboration was informed by feminist research methods that highlight the marginalized voices of women, where conversation is privileged over more positivist research methods, such as sole individual interviewing (Madriz, 2000, p. 838). Ellis and Bochner (2000) also discuss how feminist writers often begin with the self, situating themselves within cultural narratives that have marginalized them (p. 741). Through this feminist lens, Esther Madriz (2000) defines a focus group as a "collectivistic rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants' attitudes, experiences and beliefs." (p. 837) I will now explore the story of our first focus group in some detail as I structured the session to explain to the group members what the methods of the study would be, the reasons for conducting the study, and possible outcomes of the collaboration. This introductory session had all the components that we would incorporate in every follow-up session. By recounting this session in some detail, the reader receives the same introduction to the methods as the

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[3] The interviews are not the primary focus of this project. The main focus of analysis consists of the stories and discussion that arose out of the focus groups. However, I include discussion of them here because I do include interview data throughout when it provides clarifications or further context to the stories told in the focus groups. There was also a greater amount of description about participants' home communities within the interviews, which I especially rely on to present a general picture of each participant's rural location throughout the *Findings* section.

participants did. Following the advice of Ngunjiri et al. (2017), when facilitating partial

collaborative autoethnographic research, I also begin to point out the way I may have influenced

the group members as the sole researcher — a role I will continue to explore throughout the

Findings section.

To begin, I first explained to the group members why I wanted to do this study, telling

them how rural queer teacher accounts have largely been absent from both the historical record

and the scholarship on queer teachers. I began by explaining that I had written a queer

autoethnography for my master's thesis and defined autoethnography as both the study of the self

and the study of the culture that the self emerges within (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011). I then

explained that I wanted to extend beyond my own story and to hear more rural queer stories of

community and school. I did not share any of my theoretical orientation except to note that I

would be using new materialism/queer theory to explore the narratives that we produced.

After the introductions I began to explain what the writing and discussion group might

look like. I gave them a general overview of how each session would unfold, namely, in every

session we would engage in writing to a specified writing prompt, we would have a discussion of

each writing piece, and end with "debrief" writing time to explore where the stories had brought

us by the end of the session. I explained that we might improvise this plan depending on time

and what the group thought. I told group members that I envisioned us writing to an agreed upon

prompt for 20 minutes at the beginning of each session. I imagined that we might write 1-2

vignettes during this time and gave group members the option of planning or writing the

vignettes beforehand. I, and I believe most group members, soon discovered that it was

impossible to write one vignette, let alone two, in a twenty-minute timeframe. I attempted to do

so in our second session together and discovered that even with a plan, it was rushed, and the

writing did not feel as polished for me as I would have liked. I then gave the group the option of drafting writing before we met, which I would say we most often did.

I stressed to my group members that to make this a more collaborative enterprise, I wanted them to assist me in analysis, rather than it just be me analyzing their stories. I imagined we would each share our writing piece aloud and that each person would then speak to the writing, and then through the discussion we would arrive at a collective analysis of both the individual vignettes and the overlaps and differences amongst/between all of the vignettes.

In sum, returning to Hawkins' et al. framework, the methods I borrowed were to have us create data from our memories in response to prompts (some of which we would eventually co-construct), which we would then read aloud, and then a discussion would occur where participants could offer feedback about the shared story, and we could engage in some collective analysis of the stories.

After providing this overview, I talked to the group about why we were using writing and how group members might write their vignettes. This was informed by the collective studies I had read where affect was used as a way to access our memories.

The Methodological Stems: Affect, Emotion and Writing

Another hallmark of Hawkins' et al. collective biography is that memories are accessed through embodied feelings and there is particular attention paid to affect. Davies and Gannon similarly use affect as a way to have the memory resonate with the collective group. Why is affect important in collaborative writing groups? Both Davies' and Gannon's and Hawkins' et al. research think of affect through a new materialist lens. New materialist research is concerned with assemblages, rather than an essentialized individual identity. (Fox & Alldred, 2015b; Mazzei, 2013; Jackson, 2013). It is concerned with how assemblages, made up of other humans,

discourses and the material world, lead to social production rather than social construction. New Materialist research essentially extends beyond the human and the body, "examining instead how relational networks or assemblages of animate and inanimate affect and are affected." (Fox & Alldred, 2015b, p. 399) Thus, new materialism engages less with subjective agency, but affective flows and what they produce (p. 402). We can return to Deleuze and Guattari and how they view the role of affect in becomings. They hypothesize that while affect does not create the subject it can undo the subject, as it is the "…active discharge of emotion" that leads to a becoming (as cited in Crawford, p. 133). An affective flow is, therefore, a line of force, such as a line of articulation or a line of flight. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth agree that affect is a force or forces that passes between bodies and that "…affect is integral to a body's perpetual *becoming* (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is) …through the forces of encounter." (p. 3) Thus, affective flows in an assemblage create a "becoming" that might be felt and manifest in a number of ways; "this change may be physical, psychological, emotional or social." (Fox & Aldred, 2015b, p. 402) However, affect is not only found within human-to-human interactions. The final point in the framework posited by Hawkins et al. is that affect can be associated with space and place. Rosiek and Snyder (2018) state that the materiality of place also takes on agency. Some examples of nonhuman agency include "…place and land, geologic formations such as rivers and mountains, the agency of general kinds of things such as animal species, tectonic shifts…ecosystems such as forests, and of the whole universe." (p. 4) Some spaces relevant to this study include the past rural location, buildings, classrooms, the school, houses (and homes), the countryside — the spaces and places where territorialization and deterritorialization occurred. Sometimes, affect also becomes attached to material objects within a space or place, as well. Why is this important? If affect leads to becomings, then the affect

found in past assemblages led to territorializations or deterritorializations, which now might be profound memories of oppression or freedom. It is not surprising then that collective biographers can use affect to take them back to the memory of the narrative they seek to write; a memory of a becoming that often is also associated with a particular space or place and the objects in that space.

In Bochner & Ellis' *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories,* (2016) the authors discuss how writing vividly about feelings, emotions, and sensations can assist the participant in accessing the memory, and also provides a rich narrative for the reader. For example, Ellis shares a short story about her mother entitled *Maternal Connections* which eloquently and vividly describes a scene where she is helping her mother who is sick and in hospital. She uses much sensory detail to bring the reader into the hospital as shown in this excerpt:

> When I push hard on the soap dispenser, small globs of thick, pink liquid soap smelling
> of perfumed bleach, drop onto the translucent washcloth. I load the white cloth with
> many squirts, hoping to wash away the lingering smell of feces, urine, perspiration, bile
> bags, plastic tubes, stale hair oils, and hospital odours. (p. 271)

Later, Ellis describes, with great openness, her mother's body as she bathes her, comparing it with her own body and speculating as to what her own body might look like as it ages. Clearly, the affective assemblage of the hospital with its objects, odours, materials, and the emotions attached to a sick loved one, was a powerful memory for Ellis, and, thus, she recommends using affect as a way to access such memories. In collaborative writing, this is also beneficial for the other group members as the sensory detail allows the reader/listener to recognize the scene, or if they do not recognize it, to enter more fully into the scene. Bochner & Ellis call this kind of

writing "performative writing," where like in a movie, the viewers' senses become activated by the scene (p. 110), and the scene becomes "real" by both the "visual and sensual representation." (p. 127) The affect felt by the person remembering can be found within the scene painted by the narrative and the reader/listener should be able to picture the scene, as well as "feel" it, if the writer has conveyed it evocatively.

The Method: Affective Writing

The next part of our introductory session was to explore how autoethnographers often write a vignette. Following Davies and Gannon who often bring texts into their collaborative writing workshops, I then provided two narrative excerpts from Tony E. Adams' and Stacey Holman Jones' (2008) *Autoethnography is Queer!* so that group members had a sense of how one might write an evocative vignette, at the same time noting they were not held to any kind of writing structure and the writing could encompass any genre, such as poetry, or a song. In fact, one group member would write many wonderful poems as the sessions unfolded. After we had read the excerpts, I pointed out the writing elements of the two pieces that I thought were important. Influenced by Bochner's and Ellis' and Davies' and Gannon's work in writing evocatively and with affect, I conveyed to the group members that my goal was for us to think about moments from our past and write those moments in a way that the listener is taken back in time, where the listener is able to sit in that moment and understand it. I stressed how the authors' set the scene, brought the reader into the experience, wrote with vulnerability, and made the vignette identifiable to the reader.

The Method: The Discussion

After we read the Adams' and Holman Jones' narratives and discussed the way they were written, I then gave the following discussion prompts that group members might consider when

thinking about the vignette: 1) Does the story fit your experience? Or doesn't it? 2) What does it say about queer life? 3) How does the story make you feel? Participants were told that these points were only starting points to begin a discussion of the vignettes, and they did not have to address these questions. I also disclosed to the participants that the queer texts I brought forward were not rural texts but should serve as a springboard to then bring group members to make sense of the story within their own experiences, and to begin discussion. Each group member then offered their thoughts and feelings about the texts.

The Method: Writing

After the discussion of the text, I wanted us to practice writing, informed by both the Adams' and Holman Jones' texts and our discussion of writing affectively. Before we began writing, I stressed to group members that the Adams' and Holman Jones' texts were published pieces, and I did not expect us to have such polished pieces when we wrote our own vignettes. Like the vignettes produced in Pendleton-Jiménez' study, our vignettes were meant to be free writes. Bochner & Ellis (2016) speak of the importance of "free writing" when composing initial drafts of narratives because at this stage the writer need not worry about conventions, grammar or wording, but seek to concentrate on the content. The writer is expressing themself naturally and freely which may make them take more risks in their writing (p. 100). I then provided, what I thought at the time was, a "no-pressure prompt" around an object. The prompt was: ***Find or think of an object in your home that holds significance in your life. Describe the object and discuss why it might be important to you, and the story of the object in your life***. We then took 20 minutes to think and write about this prompt — as we would write to a prompt in every session that followed. As this was introductory writing, I sought to make this a low stakes prompt, and I suggested that this story did not have to be about being queer and it was up to the

participants. The idea for this prompt was that a significant object would have many affective memories attached to it, which would bring both the writer, and the listener, back to their past through the description, as well as create an initial portrait of an object likely associated with "home."

The Methodological Stems: Sharing our Stories

Pendleton Jiménez writes about some of the challenges that might arise in discussion groups. These challenges include: members feeling unsafe to speak because of the words and/or actions of other members; voices eclipsed by more dominant voices; members who struggle with being vulnerable in their writing and/or feeling vulnerable in the discussion groups; members who see their identity as "rigid" and "essentialized," and who may have a difficult time understanding members who do not; participants who feel pressured to conform to the group and who may not speak up in order to fit in; and the amount of time it takes to build trust within the group (Pendleton Jiménez, 2005). Transken (2006) writes that trust is a central dynamic in making writing circles successful. Participants must trust the facilitator and other participants in order to be vulnerable in their writing, in sharing their writing, and to challenge each other in respectful ways, when necessary (p. 158). Indeed, despite the challenges that might arise in these discussion groups, Pendleton Jiménez says that it is often through the sharing of vulnerable stories that a bond is created in the group. She writes, "There is this magical spark in the sharing of stories, initial offerings that may or may not lead to longer relationships and community. It is the view of the community beginning to build itself through the practice of writing [and sharing] together." (p. 145) I was hopeful that the sharing of our object stories would begin to cement a bond between us and open the door to writing vulnerable, evocative stories throughout our sessions.

The Method: Sharing

After we had written our "object stories," I conveyed that in terms of sharing, group members needed to only share the parts of their stories that they felt they wanted to share. I wanted to set a warm tone from the very beginning and to establish this forum as a space that would be free for us to share openly and vulnerably. Indeed, as Pendleton Jiménez reminds, "when everyone is a "newcomer" to community …the foundation is at its most flimsy." (p.153) I had little to worry about in the above regard. We seemed to form a cohesive bond during the sharing of our object stories. Participants noted how the stories were beautiful and powerful, and later noted how this beginning session made them feel as if they could be vulnerable. These vignettes and the group members' responses to them will be shared as an introduction to participants in the next chapter.

Thus far, in this introductory session, group members engaged in the tasks that we would be doing every week: we would write, share and discuss our vignettes. However, the final component that I wanted to include returns us to both Hawkins et al.'s and Davies et al.'s framework where they collectively engage in revision of their stories. I did not want us to conduct collective revision, but I did want to provide group members an opportunity to engage in reflexivity at the end of each session, informed by the following methodological stems.

The Methodological Stems: Writing as Possibility: Reflexivity and Deleuzo-Guattarian Becomings

Autoethnographers are always engaged in the "ongoing work of storytelling in the making and mediation of worlds." (Stewart, 2007, p. 8) The issue with this world making, however, is that without reflexivity, a written account can solidify a narrative as "truth;" as an event that is finished, in the past, and not one that, like the subject, is open to further

interpretations or becomings. In *Writing with Deleuze in the Academy: Creating Monsters*, Riddle et al. (2018) ask, "What is possible when writing is actually allowed to be an act of becoming?" (p. VI) Many of Davies' and Gannon's collective biographies are rooted in new materialism, where the affect created in the *group research assemblage* is also investigated and "becomings" can be found through reflexivity. Take, for example, the following study: Jonathan Wyatt, Ken Gale, Suzanne Gannon & Bronwyn Davies (2014) collaborated on a study entitled *Deleuze and Collaborative Writing: Responding to/with 'JKSB.'* The collaborative writing authors discuss how writing collectively brought them all to new becomings. They speak of the 'JKSB assemblage', made up of the letters of their first names, where the multiplicities of one individual in the collective intermingled with the multiplicities of another, and another, and another, creating the collective assemblage. They wrote,

> JKSB, as we came to know ourselves while we wrote this book, was an assemblage, specifically not the sum of separately existing identities. In approaching each other through and with Deleuze, we did not keep or defend our separate boundaries. We immersed ourselves in our collaborative task of writing *in relation….* (p. 408)

They do note that they did not write using the collective "we" as some collaborative autoethnographic studies do but kept their voices distinct in order to put difference on display between their narratives. I think this is necessary as collaboration does not mean everyone has had the same experiences and it is important not to erase experiences in this process. In this way, participants may tell their own narratives of difference in response to the stories that are told by others, which then may lead other group members to reconsider their narratives. The differences found in each participant's story can also lead other participants to new becomings, as these differences become "written" into the lives of all members by the sharing of identities through

storying (p. 413). Thus, a story told by one group member can bring another group member to reflect upon their own narrative, leading them to feel their narrative is validated, or to think about their narrative differently.

The members of the JKSB writing group describe how the affect produced within the group changed the collective. They speak of the group affect as producing the following effects,

> …opening our ears, our eyes, our breath, our words, to the lives of each other. And coming to life in the space of that hearing/seeing/breathing, we came to know our own selves differently, to know that assemblage, an intensity that more than once bowled one or the other of us over. (p. 408)

Thus, in the collaborative research assemblage factors such as: participants' emotions, the affect attached to the way they read their narrative, the language and description used, along with the power of the memory itself, creates an affective force that can lead to becomings in the group (Davies & Gannon, 2012).

This is where reflexivity is key. It is through the group discussion that feedback from other members is elicited; where the narrative is reflected upon, validated, and/or gently critiqued. As each group member is affected by other group members' narratives, they can then be given the opportunity to re-think or revise their own narratives, which then exemplifies how the self is continually becoming something different. Jerrybandan (2015) calls this a "re-writing and reconstruction through a re-presentation of previously, unearthed experiences." (p. 59) Thus, new becomings are possible through the reflexive nature of the writing, as it is through the collaborative autoethnographers' re/evaluation of the past that change can occur. As group members reflect upon and revise their stories with the input of others, their original stories shift. A rethinking of their narratives may then lead group members to new territorializations and

deterritorializations, and in the latter case, may offer transformative, potentially utopic, possibilities for their futures. This speaks to the power of the group assemblage.

The Method: Reflexive "Debrief" Writing

Unlike many collective biographies, we did not work collectively to revise each other's writing or offer suggestions on how to change the writing, as my focus was not as much about the way in which the story was conveyed, as it was about the impact of the story on the group members. I did, however, want to incorporate some kind of reflexive writing activity at the end of every session. I envisioned that we would stop our discussion with approximately 25 minutes remaining and, in this time, now informed by the discussion and narratives of the other group members, I thought that we could re-visit our narrative, and add to our story, or alter our story, as a form of revision. However, I wanted to give group members another option if they did not want to revise their story. I told them that they could think of another vignette that was inspired by what they heard in the group stories and discussion. I called this a "debrief" session. All participants chose to create a new narrative response after each session which we then shared at the beginning of each subsequent session. Importantly, the input of others did provide group members with the opportunity to reflect upon their storying. In some cases, participants were able to critically interrogate their own writing after listening to other perspectives. In a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, these "debrief" narratives, also worked to chart the becomings that were happening within the group, as the new narratives that arose could clearly be mapped to past discussions.

Methods Conclusion

Hawkins et al.'s and Davies' and Gannon's tenets of collective biography were obviously very influential to the methods of this study, although the list was also modified. Namely, I

sought to keep the following: We responded to writing prompts, some of which were co-created, producing narratives for analysis; We used our embodied emotions to access our memories, conveying this affect in our narratives; The memory was then read aloud, and collective analysis occurred within the discussions; The "debrief" sessions served as a form of revision/reflexivity, as individuals reflected upon where the stories of the group members brought them. In keeping with my desire to have this project be a Deleuzo-Guattarian collective one, the collaboration here was in the shared storying, bringing each other to new stories that might not have been told without the input of others. It was in the discussion of stories, of making individual cultural meaning that resonated with group members' experiences. It was in the collective analysis that we offered throughout the discussions, and the final group session as we searched for themes.

Stem 2. Data Collection and Analysis

This section will discuss the methodological literature (the methodological stems) that describe how to complete data collection and analysis within collective and new materialist research encounters, once again noting how the literature then informed my own data collection and analysis.

The Methodological Stems: Mapping Data in New Materialist Research

This section will explore some key terms that New Materialist researchers have used in their analysis of data focusing on three components of analysis I will bring to my project. The first component includes understanding the concepts of: *mapping, affective flows, aggregative versus singular affect, lines of articulation, and lines of flight.* The second discusses the way Davies and Gannon (2013) uses Barad's concept of *intra-action.* The third investigates Mazzei's (2013) concept of V*oice without Organs (VwO).*

First, Martin and Kamberelis (2013) suggest that new materialist data analysis does not involve finding themes in the data but that findings are created through *mapping* techniques, which consist of "drawing lines that connect multiple acts, actions, activities, events and artifacts that constitute the data set." (p. 676) To return to Deleuze and Guattari, the mapping that should occur in the data analysis should involve investigating how *affective flows* produce moments of territorializations, deterritorializations and reterritorializations. Fox and Alldred (2015b) suggest that researchers should look for two types of affective flows: *aggregative* affects and *singular* affects. Aggregative affects are those which create territorializations. These affects categorize people, create static and normalized concepts, like those surrounding gender and sexuality, and therefore, undergird and support harmful discourses including patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (p. 403). By contrast, they consider singular affects as those which hold deterritorializing possibilities and do not carry any aggregative potential. These might include a kiss from someone you desire, a kind word from a stranger, or meeting another queer friend, which suddenly produces a "line of flight" away from territorialization, even if only momentarily. In essence, the researcher must map what Martin and Kamberelis (2013) call "lines of force" which create becomings, either the becomings created through "*lines of articulation*" that create territorialization, or through "*lines of flight*" that carry one away to deterritorialization (p. 671). The latter is key because this is where resistance against dominant power is located, and is the reason, in my mind, why the research should be undertaken in the first place, as queer research seeks to resist compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexist territorializing forces that attempt to name and contain us.

Second, in *Collective Biography and the Entangled Enlivening of Being* (2012) Davies and Gannon use concepts from Deleuze and Karen Barad to combine affectively felt memories

with post-structuralist deconstruction. "Inspired by Deleuze, we have sought to document the ways that life continually evolves through the flows and intensities of encounters." (p. 359) They also use Barad's concept of *intra-action* which, rather than interaction or what happens when two people meet, refers to when two people become different through the affect of an encounter (p. 361). These intra-actions produced affect in the past encounters which led to becomings, and also produce becomings within the research assemblage. They explain, "As memory workers we intra-act with each other's memories of being and with the language in which they might be written." (p. 361) In Davies et al.'s studies, the intra-action in the research/assemblage also suggest new lines of force for the participants, as each were brought to new understandings about self and others through the research.

Finally, Mazzei (2013) states that when researchers engage in humanist qualitative inquiry, they investigate an essentialized subject, but from a posthumanist perspective, voices analysed in the study cannot be separated from the assemblages created over their histories, and through the research assemblage itself. She calls this assemblage the *Voice without Organs* (VwO) which is taken from Deleuze and Guattari's *Body without Organs* and says that the VwO is an entity composed of a "researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis" assemblage (p. 733). In this way, the research produces a VwO and the VwO also produces knowledge. It is not about analyzing a person, but what the VwO became through the research assemblage. Because of this, new materialist researchers say we must think about data analysis differently (p. 733). Jackson (2013) explains:

> Ontologically, humanism refers to ways of thinking about human-ness that are essential and universal, with a single defining quality that is shared by everyone…Essentialism imposes itself on qualitative methodology by assuming that people (authentic, stable

subjects of research) who speak (from a conscious center) give us (the researchers, also

authentic) rational, coherent truths that serve as the foundation (data) for data analysis

and interpretation. (p. 742)

As implied, this is problematic as the uncovered "truth" might then be made generalizable to *all*

members of a studied cohort, such as women and queers, when in fact, there are multiple

possible becomings extending beyond any studied cohort. Jackson, rather, describes the

assemblages uncovered and also created by the research as the "mangle," which is reminiscent of

the mangle of stems and leaves and roots that is the rhizome, and the multitude of possibilities

within this assemblage. Looking at research in this way, new materialist research investigates the

becomings that have occurred through the past assemblages that produced them, as well as

through the research encounter in the present. In Mazzei's study with women who left their rural

communities to attend post-secondary institutions she states that she did not interview to arrive at

meaning but to "*map* the connectives" and show how production of the VwO, as she called it,

occurred. In her analysis she investigated the assemblage of "geography, family, institutions,

gender norms, aspirations, disappointments, and hopes that work together to produce a VwO"

(p. 736). Thus, the mangle of data (the VwO) that is produced in this specific research

assemblage will not be the same as another study with six rural queer participants because our

individual narratives may have looked very different depending on the prompts chosen, past

assemblages would not be the same, and the way the group intra-acts could also produce

different stories and different becomings.

To bring these concepts together, my data analysis will consist of two components. First,

I will map the past assemblage and the affect produced through intra-action in that assemblage,

that led a participant on a line of articulation or a line of flight, to show how the individual has

been territorialized and the ways in which they have deterritorialized their bodies in the past. This study will be particularly interested in those moments where deterritorializing power can disrupt repetitive territorializing norms. Martin and Kamberelis (2013) explain that we must analyze how assemblages produce exclusions and how we might escape them: "When these assemblages — constituted by unique configurations of lines of articulation and lines of flight — are made visible, individuals and collectives are better positioned to engage in deterritorializations and reterritorializations that produce new and more desirable assemblages…." (p. 677) Thus, when the past lines of flight towards deterritorialization are remembered, we are countering a rural queer amnesia of utopic possibilities, envisioning more "desirable assemblages" in the present and future.

Second, I will map how group members continually become something different through their intra-actions in the research assemblage, as the participants each share their own stories. It is through this analysis that we move beyond the individual story to multiple stories of assemblages occurring through intra-action, that do in fact, create a small glimpse into a general assemblage (a VwO) over a temporal period. For example, my research should be regarded as a very small cut in the assemblage of rural queer Canadian encounters encompassing the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. As Davies et al. (2013) so beautifully state in their collective study of female recognition:

> The citational chains, as we explored them, were normative, producing a generic subject specific to that time and place, *and at the same time* ontologically quite specific — lived out in and on the desiring and passionate body of each storyteller (past and present) as if she were unique. The more we moved into the detail of that specificity of each story-

teller we found we had arrived, paradoxically, at an intimate sense of what it is to be

human, that belonged to all of us, and that was affirmative and enlivening for all of us.

(p. 685)

The Methodological Stems: Analyzing for Affective Flows

In collective new materialist studies the affect found in the event being described as well

as the affect elicited through the research encounter is key to uncovering moments of

territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Thus, analysis must focus on the

affective flows that are found within the past and present assemblage, noting the becomings that

occur (Fox & Alldred, 2015a, p. 404). MacLure (2013) suggests that this kind of "affective" data

can be "felt," and describes this kind of encounter with data as observing "data that glows."

(p. 661) She describes this kind of analysis in a collective biographical account by 4 researchers,

and is worth referencing at length,

> Some detail – a fieldnote fragment or video image, starts to glimmer, gathering our
>
> attention. Things both slow down and speed up at this point. On the one hand, the detail
>
> arrests the listless traverse of our attention across the surface of the screen or page that
>
> holds the data, intensifying our gaze and making us pause to burrow inside it, mining it
>
> for meaning. On the other hand, connections start to fire up; the conversation gets faster
>
> and more animated as we begin to recall other incidents and details in the project
>
> classroom, our own childhood experiences, films or artwork that we have seen, articles
>
> that we have read…The shifting speeds and intensities of engagement with the example
>
> do not just prompt though, but also generate sensations resonating in the body as well as
>
> the brain – frissons of excitement, energy, laughter, silliness. (MacLure, 2010, as cited in
>
> Maclure, 2013, p. 661)

Interestingly, this affect may either be felt and noted by the researcher at the time the encounter happens with the participants, or it may occur in the data analysis after the initial encounter. When this affect is "felt," MacLure suggests that a becoming has happened – a line of flight is occurring within the assemblage either for a participant, co-participants, the researcher, or perhaps all of the members of the group (p. 662). To detect this affect, Davies suggests that the new materialist researcher must be a skilled listener, noting what is being said, how it is being said and also what is not being said (Davies, 2013). However, MacLure (2013) also states that new materialist data analysis must extend beyond verbal and written language to affective body language, expression, and the employment of silences. She continues, "Method is much less assured in dealing with quasi-linguistic stuff such as… [a participant's] silence, and all the tears, sneers, sighs, silences, sniffs, laughter, snot, twitches or coughs that are part of utterances." (p. 664)

Macht (2018) also advocates for "listening visually" to the participants. In her study of fatherhood, she reflected upon participants' non-verbal actions, their "visual symbols" which include their manner of dress, accessories worn, their expressions and mannerisms, and bodily markings such as tattoos (p. 12). The way the participant presents oneself may produce affect in an assemblage and affect other people.

As a result of the above considerations, Fox and Alldred (2015b), therefore, suggest that analysis should occur by hand and not by machines as the machine cannot represent the affect felt in the event being analyzed or in the researcher/event assemblage (p. 406). There are also criticisms of "traditional social science" data analysis methods such as "coding" and searching for themes. Jackson (2013) states that traditional data analysis follows essentialist practices of classification. Coding, sorting, and grouping by theme create categories imposed by the

researcher, which she states, works to create an "unchanging truth," (p. 742) which then produces a knowledge claim (p. 742). Fox & Alldred (2015b) state that posthumanist researchers must question knowledge claims and move beyond,

>…the researcher, who through efforts of reason, logic and scientific method, gradually imposes order upon "data," and in so doing, "makes sense" of the world. If, on the other hand, we see researcher and data…as a "research assemblage," with its own affect economy, we begin to recognise research as a territorialisation that shapes the knowledge it produces according to the particular flows of affect produced by its methodology and methods. (p. 403)

In this way, new materialist researchers must not look upon data as being inert evidence. The data is, therefore, a production of the research encounter. Even if the researcher provides opportunities for participants to express their own voice, Fox and Alldred (2015b) stress that in most humanist qualitative research,

>…the systematising and aggregating affects in the thematic analysis machine privilege the analyst's account over those of respondents: this is reflected in how the data is reported – typically within an imposed structure that establishes the researchers unitary account of the event, with interviewees' accounts used selectively to justify the researchers answer to the research question. (p. 8)

Thus, the analysis itself might territorialize the participants through the interpretation of the data if the interpretation reflects the researcher's agenda rather than what the participants intended. Therefore, Fox and Alldred state that researchers must make visible any ways in which the research-assemblage has created territorializations, and how the researcher impacts the group (p. 411).

The Methodological Stems: Collective Data Analysis

A way to address the amount of researcher influence when the researcher is also a group member is discussed in Chang et al.'s (2013) guide on how to engage in collaborative autoethnography. They insist partial collaborative autoethnographies should be egalitarian and researchers must be aware of power imbalances. This made me reflect on how I can analyze data in a research project that is meant to be collaborative? The way that I have answered this question is threefold: First, group member narratives must be central to the study. Second, participant voices should be central throughout the research process. Third, the group members should assist in data analysis.

To elucidate the first point about the importance of narratives in this project it is useful to explore the different autoethnographic frameworks that exist, as some approaches do insist that narrative(s) are central to the study. Manning and Adams (2015) explore four different frameworks. First, there is the *social scientific approach* to autoethnography. In this traditional approach researchers engage in fieldwork, data analysis and autoethnographic writing components, along with "the traditional introduction-literature review-methodology-results-discussion format common to most social scientific research." (p. 192) The *interpretive-humanist* autoethnography may use fieldwork, research and theories, interviews, observation, and autoethnographic narratives. The story is the primary focus of this kind of project and "at the heart of this orientation is "thick description," — the principle of recording personal and cultural experiences in descriptive, thoughtful and illuminating ways." (p. 193) *Creative-artistic* autoethnographies foreground evocative and vulnerable stories and may use different genres to report their research including poetry, music, performance and so forth. They may not be concerned with systematic data collection but may be "moved by the research/artistic process,

emergent questions and new ideas." (p. 194) Lastly, *critical* autoethnography uses personal writing to identify power imbalances and attempts to find ways to circumvent and ameliorate these imbalances (p. 194). For this project, I argue that I engage in all four of these frameworks. The project is critical in that it challenges stifling queer rural experiences (territorializations) and uses the notions of deterritorialization and utopia to, perhaps, conceive of the rural space differently. It is also heavily influenced by the social scientific approach, as demonstrated by the stems of this study. However, it is very important to me that this work be interpretive-humanist and creative-artistic as well. In this approach, the narratives should become the main focus of the data, and the process of what these stories do should be uncovered. Arthur P. Bochner (2002) writes,

> Narrative — the stories people tell about their lives — is both a means of "knowing" and
> a way of "telling" about the social world and communicative experience. It is also a way
> of displaying the enactment of meanings — acts of self creation. (p. 12)

The narratives illustrate our individual experiences of rural queerness and through the discovery of how our narratives are connected, we demonstrate how we have been impacted by the cultural. These connections are made through the group dialogue that occurs after the sharing of narratives. In *Collaborative Autoethnography,* Chang et al. (2013) write that participants may write individual stories but that a collaborative analysis of those narratives occur through a dialogical process (p. 48). In a study conducted by Cohen, Duberley, and Musson (2009) they used what they termed "autoethnographic conversations" as their primary data source,

> One person started off discussing issues particularly pertinent to her at that time and then
> the other two chipped in, asking questions, making comments, and then talking about
> their own situations. This enabled a process of "interactive introspection" (Smith 1999) to

take place in the conversations as we told our own stories and responded to each other's

interpretations of events. (p. 233)

The group members are, therefore, able to arrive at some interpretation/analysis of their

experiences through this conversation. In Geist Martin et al.'s. (2010) collaborative study they

write that "once the tales had all been shared, our collaborative efforts took the form of

discerning what these autoethnographies illustrated." (p. 9)

Extending this collaboration to analysis, Ellis (2004) writes that that the researcher

should, "listen to how your participants make sense of the stories…" and in this way, "you'd

ground your analysis in your participants' understanding as well as your own." (p. 199)

The Method: Collective Data Analysis

Informed by the above, the first entry point into analysis occurred through the narratives

that then led us to collective discussion. After each person shared their vignette, we would all

respond, placing the vignette in conversation with our own experiences, or noting how the story

did not resonate. Within the discussions we were often able to investigate our vignettes through a

cultural lens to make meaning. For example, within this particular research assemblage, group

members readily discussed queer theoretical constructs and how they could be applied to our

stories. Members discussed: interrogating cisheteronormativity and gender norms; the idea of

visibility/coming out in rural communities; Sarah Ahmed's (2010) feminist/queer killjoys;

disrupting binaries; queer teachers as activists; and teachers' queering effects in schools and

communities. Group members were undoubtedly informed by any theoretical perspectives that I

brought forward, along with a group member (Rachel) who had quite an extensive background in

queer theory. One member (Bera) had also completed a post-Baccalaureate where they

completed a critical analysis of their district's gender and sexuality policy. Additionally, all

group members may have had access to queer theoretical constructs that trickled down outside of

the academy, such as through professional development activities, as some of the professional

development sessions that I have facilitated and attended included interrogating heterosexism

and cisnormativity. This enabled us to apply some queer theoretical analysis in our discussion,

which would then inform the theory/research that I would then use to speak to the narratives. In

this way, my own analysis of the stories being told was often a result of the discussion that

occurred between us all.

 I also built group analysis into the framework of our final session. I asked each person to

provide an account of the themes that were brought up throughout the focus group sessions. I

was then able to put their discussion of themes in conversation with the themes of

territorialization, deterritorialization, reterritorialization and utopia that we/I uncovered.

The Method: Individual Data Collection and Analysis

 How, then, did the literature on New Materialist data analysis affect the way that I

collected and analyzed my data? I will now provide a map of the data collection and analysis,

noting the connections to a new materialist methodology throughout and any "traditional"

techniques I used to collect and analyze the data.

The Method: Data Collection, Participant Observation, Field Notes, Transcription and

Memoing

 To assist with data analysis, it was necessary to keep detailed field notes throughout the

research process. My method was to write notes and observations while the interviews and focus

groups were occurring. Zoom would, surprisingly, turn out to be an excellent platform for taking

notes. Because I wanted to establish camaraderie with my participants and wanted the interview

to feel like a conversation, I did not want it to seem like I was noting everything they told me. I,

therefore, liked Zoom because the participants did not know when I was writing as they could only see my face. However, during the interviews I also found it difficult to write down notes, engage in conversation, and think of follow-up questions. This was particularly true during the focus groups, where I also lead the sessions. I, therefore, tended to write fewer field notes during the encounters, the exception being when something was said that was affective and resonated with me and/or the other group members, or when I had an important thought that I did not want to forget before the session ended. After each interview and focus group, which were recorded via Zoom and also on a handheld recorder, I then re-watched the video recordings, where, to reference Macht (2018), I "listened visually" and engaged in taking field notes on factors including: the setting; the way the participants presented themselves; direct quotations that were important; the emotions in a group members' voices; their facial expressions while reading their vignette and during the discussion; how the group encounters unfolded; the affective verbal and non-verbal moments that moved either the storyteller or the group; and my own responses to the data (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007, p. 67).

I then set about transcribing the interviews and focus groups. Following Fox and Alldred's advice (2015b), I wanted to transcribe by hand in order to listen for any affective moments that I might have missed after the initial review. I could also note when I had an affective response based upon the emotion that came out in the moment, or during transcription. After transcribing each focus group, I went back to my field notes and added any new notes that felt important into the transcript in a different highlighted font. I also engaged in memoing throughout, where I began to make sense of what the data was telling me and writing my thoughts about the data, or any emerging themes that I saw. Montgomery and Bailey (2007) characterize memoing as "a documentation of the researcher's thinking processes rather than a

description of a social context." (p. 68) Field notes and memoing also helped me become, as Swaminathan & Mulvihill (2017) describe, a "researcher as cartographer," (p. 33) where one reflects on questions throughout the research process and moves forward based upon this reflexivity, and also the "researcher as an archeologist," (p. 34) because realizations about the data can inform where the study might go, a rhizomatic enterprise of looking for lines of force within the data. An excellent example of this is how as the study unfolded and there was the necessity to think of new writing prompts, I was able to make suggestions about future prompts based upon initial field notes and memoing about emergent themes being found in the data.

Within the field notes I also wrote about my own researcher reflexivity. I often wrote a general note about my sense of how the session went. I wrote when and why particular vignettes or discussions resonated and/or moved me. As discussion groups involved the sharing of narratives where we were vulnerable, I wanted an avenue to express my own feelings, and how I was affected as both a group member and researcher.

The Method: Data Analysis

Informed by a new materialist methodology, I knew that I would be analyzing for two main components in my data. First, I would be analyzing the data for moments of territorialization, reterritorialization and deterritorialization by noting the affective force that created lines of articulation or lines of flight in the past. Particularly, my analysis sought to uncover forgotten rural utopias through the themes of home and belonging that brought group members to deterritorialization. The second analysis involved exploring the assemblage of the research group for affect that led to becomings within the group. To speak to the first point, some initial analysis occurred through the field notes and memoing when I recognized moments of territorialization, deterritorialization and utopia. Next, I embarked on coding for themes. I did not

use a coding program, such as NVivo, as I wanted to sort through the transcripts personally.
Aware of the new materialist criticism of coding for themes, I decided to do so because with over
300 pages of transcription, it was necessary to apply some order to the text. In Greg Guest et al.'s
(2012) *Applied Thematic Analysis,* they suggest that efficient coding involves segmenting text to
make it manageable, identifying large themes throughout the text, and then creating codes of
evidence that falls under the theme. They also advise to note any outliers that are found within
the data. Although I engaged in coding, the ultimate goal was to investigate those themes
through a new materialist lens, first, using the themes to tell our collective *story* of rural queer
teacher lives, and secondly, using the themes to speak to moments of territorialization,
deterritorialization and reterritorialization in the rural space. Once this task was completed, I
engaged in the second task of my analysis where I completed a mapping exercise, a cartography,
of each focus group; mapping how each participant story may have influenced other group
members and myself from the initial session until the final one.

The Method: On the Construction of this Dissertation

It is important to note how an interpretivist/humanist autoethnographic lens informs both
my construction and analysis of the data as the sole researcher after the focus groups had ended.
To ensure this study is collaborative, a large focus on the narratives and our collective voices are
also central to the way that I have decided to both organize and think about the analysis of this
thesis. Regarding organization, in most *Findings* chapters I begin with our narratives. They are
the starting points that then bring us to discussion, to other stories, and to group becomings. This
also informs why I then include a great deal of the dialogue that we had as a group after each
narrative was shared.

Concerning the construction of the *Findings* chapters, because I am investigating for past rural becomings but also engaging in a cartography where I am mapping becomings in the research assemblage, I often do write about the focus group sessions somewhat chronologically. Generally, this worked, due to the nature of the debrief writing and how someone's story affected other group members. For example, a vignette written about *professionalism,* along with the corresponding discussion, might have been revisited in the debrief session by another participant, resulting in more discussion, producing a good amount of data over these two sessions. In this way I could most often follow a chronological thread. The reader must not imagine, however, that although I am somewhat following the trajectory of the focus groups, that I have not "constructed" these chapters. I very much have. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state that the "researcher…may be seen as a bricoleur, as a maker of quilts…" (p. 4) "The quilter stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together." (p. 5) To give an example of how I follow the trajectory of the focus groups but also craft the chapters, there is a progression of our collective story that is told in each chapter. For example, Chapter 6 is about the search for belonging/home in the rural, in Chapter 7 I include content about finding a home within kinship groups, and Chapter 8 is about kinship and queer world making. The primary data used in these three chapters is from our first focus group and the debrief session, where we each told stories that serve as the starting points for each of these chapters. However, I have crafted this data because interspersed within the focus group data is qualifying interview data, discussion of media that was brought into the conversation in the form of songs, videos, news footage, images of objects, as well as stories that were told in other group sessions that fit in the chapters. For example, a discussion in week six may have worked better to elucidate a concept in week three. Additionally, sometimes I crafted pieces of the data so that only partial vignettes were told in chapters where they best fit.

Following the trajectory of the focus groups also informs the way I analyze the data and may be different from the social scientific autoethnographic approach. Beyond the common practice of examining the data for moments of territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization that occur in each chapter, when I use theory/research to validate those moments of territorialization, deterritorialization, reterritorialization and utopia found in our vignettes and discussion I, of course, return to the initial literature review to assist with this endeavor. However, as this project also maps the becomings that happen in the group, the paths in this rhizomatic journey at times led me to literature/research that I had not considered when conducting the literature review for this study. In collaborative autoethnography, Thorne (2008) advises us to turn to "new literature" on "insights, observations and ideas" that emerged from the data that your original literature has not covered." (as cited in Chang et al., 2013, p. 111) In these cases, I have applied the theory/relevant literature directly to the vignettes and discussion in the chapter in which they arise. The reader may think that in these instances I should have gone back and included such discussions in the literature review or theoretical section. However, when I have not done so it is because the theory/concept was generated from the focus group and represents a *line of force* that would not have occurred without the vignette or story. For example, activism became a rather large theme based upon our stories and discussion, but I did not discuss activist teachers in my literature review on teachers because it was not something I anticipated in my original literature review. Rather, I bring the relevant literature into that *Findings* chapter to inform the data. Another example is how some of the vignettes brought me to consider, for example, "monster theory" and "affective hauntings," as "monsters" and "ghosts" came up at various points in our collective discussion. The reader may think that I might have taken the theme of "affective hauntings," for example, and then analyzed all of my

chapters through this lens. A social scientific approach would suggest that I should do that. However, as I am more concerned with mapping what happens in the collective group, and affective hauntings does not enter our conversation until our third session, it does not make sense to then apply it to conversations in chapters we had before the conversation occurred. However, once we had discussed the concept, it certainly might inform the conversations that followed, and our various lines of force. Again, what this does is demonstrate the rhizomatic and collaborative quality of this study, demonstrating lines of force towards concepts and theories that I may not have arrived at without my group members. Examples in this study include monster theory, affect theory, and critical race theory. Returning to Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) research as *bricoleur*, they expound that, "The bricoleur reads widely and is knowledgeable about the many interpretive paradigms," (p. 17)) and "the researcher-as -bricoleur- theorist works between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms." (p. 17) Weaving these theories into the analysis as direct lines of force from the group members then is a rhizomatic enterprise. Once again, this demonstrates how "the quilter is the theory builder and ultimately responsible for the final quilt, but the materials are bounded." (Sermijn et al., 2008, p. 824) I would not have arrived at some of these theoretical concepts or been brought to the literature without my group members' stories and discussion. I map when I am taken on these lines of force throughout the *Findings* section. In sum, rather than necessarily pulling large theoretical themes to analyze the entire document, I ask the reader to consider each chapter as speaking to one theme of our lives in the rural which consists of our stories, our discussion and some theory that speaks to the theme of the chapter. Each chapter is one "cut" into our rural queer experience, which when read together as a whole, becomes a larger picture (the VwO) of our rural queer lives.

I also do not always analyze the details of specific vignettes, but rather use the group interpretations to speak to the vignettes. Chang et al. (2013) write about how data interpretation is different from data analysis. They describe the difference as "not dwell[ing] on data bits," but rather a search for meaning in the data. I argue that the first search for meaning, the interpretation, is when the vignette and discussion come together. Therefore, it was not necessary or important for me to analyze and dissect each vignette fully, but rather to display for the reader the collective meaning that we all came to based upon the vignette being told, and then use "conceptual and theoretical tools from the literature to explain [our] findings." (p. 111) This should be considered when evaluating the way I have analyzed the data. Autoethnography scholar Arthur P. Bochner writes that,

> [e]valuation of autoethnography depends on the research orientation. For example, those using a social-scientific orientation should be concerned about evaluative criteria such as the soundness of data collection, the development of good research questions, and the validity and transferability of data. Autoethnographers who approach autoethnography from an interpretive-humanist, critical, or creative-artistic orientation are not going to be as concerned with those criteria. Rather, researchers working within these orientations are going to be focused more on providing coherent stories with details that help readers clearly envision a setting, the people and feelings involved, and the actions that occurred. (Bochner, as cited in p. 206)

Finally, Lenz Taguchi and Palmer (2013) remind that as researchers we can only make small cuts amongst the intra-actions that happen within assemblages, and because we are choosing which cuts to make, it behooves us to point out that we are doing so (p. 684). The researcher should emphasize that rather than creating a general knowledge claim, the research is

demonstrating what Barad names "agential cuts." (Barad, 2006) The data analysis can never really be complete, and never considered as "truth," as we have only made agential cuts into both the assemblages that created the events being analyzed and into the research assemblage itself.

Thus, as the sole researcher in a partial collaborative autoethnography, I acknowledge that I am crafting our stories together, and that this crafting will never be a complete picture of any of our rural queer lives. Of course, the events that the participants recall and describe are also agential cuts of their own making, and again, speak to the incompleteness of any research endeavour. According to Sermijn, Devlieger & Loots (2008) in *The Narrative Construction of the Self: Selfhood as a Rhizomatic Story*, the reader must understand that as the researcher who is making cuts — crafting this dissertation and the stories throughout — that one can "never have a view on the complete map of one's participant[s], seeing that this map is co-constructed, multiple and constantly changing. We can only explore several temporal regions and paths knowing that we are taking part in the exploration." (p. 644)

However, it is my hope that through the collective nature of collaborative autoethnography where multiple stories, multiple voices, and multiple understandings and interpretations coalesce at the end, a picture of the rural, queer, teacher emerges (a VwO) that extends beyond any of us, including myself as researcher. In the end, this is *our* story.

Limitations of study

Questions I had prior to the beginning of this study were: Would the cultural capital rural queer teachers hold in a rural community impact their experiences with queerphobia? Might they be more protected if they are perceived as well-respected educators in the community? Would experiences be different for rural queer people of various social classes and positions? I wondered if the school system provided a buffer where I was more able to be myself within the

community, as within the education system I was able to find many like-minded colleagues and

friends who I gravitated towards. Also, knowledge about queerness and queer theory may have

been obtained through the education system through professional development workshops. This

does speak to a cultural/class capital that teachers, in particular, might have, as this knowledge is

not as likely to be acquired by many members of rural communities. Although this study is not

meant to be generalizable to other rural queer group members, the uniqueness and specificity of

our cohort may grant us particular privileges within the rural space that other queer folx do not

have access to. With this said, my group members also pointed out how very stifling the

education system can be.

A large limitation of this study is the lack of diversity among participants. The group

members all identify as white. I had hoped to have a more intersectional group as I was

interested in the voices and perspectives of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour)

rural community members. One of my participants is of French Acadian descent and important

and rich discussions of intersectionality arose in her discussion of both her Acadian and queer

identities. Unfortunately, I was not contacted by any racialized person. When I distributed the

posters to my colleagues, I did particularly ask them to send the information to the teachers they

knew who had intersectional identities. However, numerous reports speak to how black people

are under-represented as employees in the education system in Canada. The 2016 census states

that "of the 31,320 elementary and high school teachers in Canada at the time, 580 (1.8 %) were

black."

 (https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2020001/article/00002-eng.htm) This

demographic would be spread over both urban and rural locations, and the number of rural black

and queer teachers can be surmised to be even less. In the rural board that I worked in I knew

one African Nova Scotian teacher who would hold the RCH role in our board. I was unable to find a national report discussing the number of Indigenous educators, but I did find provincial accounts. In British Columbia, there are between 4% to 6% of teachers who are Indigenous. (https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2019AEST0079-001231). In a news report about Indigenous underrepresentation in Winnipeg schools, only 9% of teachers were Indigenous (https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/winnipeg-state-of-equity-education-report-1.5752013). These alarming statistics may suggest why it was difficult to find BIPOC queer-identifying teachers to participate in this study. With this said, I must acknowledge that there is a justified historical mistrust of academic institutions, and in particular, white academics by members of the BIPOC community, with research ultimately not assisting, and at worst, harming, the communities being "studied." This may also have informed why it was difficult to find BIPOC participants.

Conclusion

To end, I reflect on what it means to use the methodology of autoethnography with a collective of people who are not all researchers? Chang et al. note how collaborative autoethnography can be used in university-community partnerships, such as with school stakeholders and educators. This speaks to the utility of partial collaborative autoethnographic projects, as collaboration with a university researcher may enable a safer space for marginalized participants to openly discuss their experiences under the safeguards of confidentiality and pseudonyms. One might also argue that collaborative autoethnography might be better used within marginalized populations, rather than by a group of marginalized researchers, particularly when most of the group members are writing about a community and workplace that the researchers may be somewhat removed from. Thus, the impact of collaborative autoethnographic

narratives in qualitative research can be profound for both researcher(s) and participants. It is for these reasons that I wished to extend the inquiry, and the experience, to other rural queer teachers, who through writing and discussing their memories of home and belonging in the rural, produce marginalized knowledge. Muñoz calls this work "queer utopian memory," that when attached to a medium like art, video, performance, or writing, becomes a political act (p. 35). In this sense, our stories also have the potential to be political and deterritorializing. Autoethnography scholars Arthur P. Bochner & Carolyn Ellis (2016), in discussing autoethnographic storying, suggest that the purpose of autoethnography is to bring the reader to an understanding of the ways the author(s) were impacted negatively by society, but that "…happiness is at stake in every autoethnographic story of suffering. It is an appeal for an 'ethics of happiness.'" (p. 70) Thus, even in stories of loss there is a search for something better, something more than what is, something utopic. The next *Findings* sections analyze the narratives of the past for those moments of ordinary utopia found in moments of deterritorialization, amid the many stories of territorializations, and seeks to ask what new possibilities and deterritorializations are created in the sharing of these narratives in both the present for the group members and, perhaps, the future for the reader.

Part 2. Findings: Our Community Stories. A Rhizomatic Journey

Chapter 5. Introduction to Group Members and our Object Stories

This chapter will serve as an introduction to the participants. The first section is a standard brief "description" of my group members and myself, created by the researcher, to give the reader an initial sense of who the people are and the communities in which we live. I will then share our "object stories" from our introductory session, where we each begin to construct our own stories. These brief portraits are meant to serve as a beginning introduction to us all. The reader will of course know us much better by the end of this dissertation. The "object stories" also provide an initial picture of each of our "homes." I explore Mezei's (2005) conceptualization of how an affective object can become a "touchstone" for memory that brings a person back to the past and how these stories would each serve as beginning points to our discussion of belonging and not belonging in the rural.

The Participants

Bera[4]

Bera is 52 years old and from a rural community in Manitoba with a population of less than 5000 people. Bera identifies as genderqueer (Bera has recently told me that they prefer queer now) and uses they/their/them pronouns, as well as the honorific 'Mx' at their school. They have lived in their current community for approximately 17 years. They note that prior to living in this community, they also lived north of their current location and have always lived in a rural community throughout their teaching tenure. They are currently teaching grades 4-6. Bera's gender identity has evolved over the last 9 years, but they note that defining their

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[4] The names of group members and their partners are pseudonyms, with the exception of mine. Each group member chose their own name.

sexuality is more recent, with the term bisexual feeling most appropriate for them. They point out that people tend to assume they are heterosexual because they are married to a woman, Sarah. They are not as "out" at this point when discussing their sexuality, except to Sarah and a neighbouring Pride group, *County Pride,* that they are involved in. Bera is much more "out" as genderqueer and was interviewed by a news outlet for work they were doing in their local Pride group, where they essentially came out as genderqueer nationally.

Adèle

Adèle is 31 years old and lives and teaches in a small, predominantly Acadian village in Nova Scotia with a population under 1000 people. Adèle describes her sexuality as asexual biromantic and her gender identity as cis female. Adèle is Acadian and teaches grades 9-12 in a French first language school. She has lived and taught in her current community for six years, and her hometown is located in another rural community in Nova Scotia. Adèle has a girlfriend, Christine, in the community who is also an active volunteer at the school.

Rachel

Rachel is also 31 and lives in a small community of under 1000 people in Nova Scotia. She identifies her sexuality as queer and uses she/her pronouns but considers herself genderqueer. She is married to Cindi, a woman from a rural community in another province. She has taught within Nova Scotia for six years and was teaching grades 10-12 at the time of the interview. The county she currently lives in is a neighbouring one to the community that she grew up in. She explained that she has lived in a few towns within the county and has built close connections there. Rachel encouraged her friend, and previous co-worker, Jenna, to participate in this study because she felt that the initial interview was a cathartic experience for her.

Jenna

Jenna was introduced to my study through Rachel. They are friends and also worked at the same school together and share a common experience of both trauma and friendship within the school. Jenna was 35 at the time of the interview. She names her sexuality as queer and her gender identity as female. Jenna was married to a woman in the community, but they had recently separated at the time of the interview. She lives in the same county in Nova Scotia as Rachel and is currently living in one small community and teaching in an adjacent one. She has taught since 2009 and was teaching grades 10-12 at the time of the interview. She has spent her career teaching in rural communities in the province and has lived in her current community for almost 11 years.

Renny

Of course, the reader already knows much about me, but I think it is important to situate myself again here as a member of the writing and discussion group, in addition to that of researcher. I was 42 years old at the time of the initial interviews. I identify my sexuality and gender identity as queer. I recently changed my name from *Darren* to *Renny* because *Darren* felt both too formal and too masculine for my liking. At the time of the focus group, because of the Covid-19 pandemic I had returned to my rural home community where I was raised. This community has a population of approximately 2000 people. I had taught within this community and in two adjacent communities for 15 years. I also returned to substitute teach in schools during this time, and I, therefore, had access to more recent knowledge about what was happening in schools regarding queer identities as I had been out of the classroom for 4 years prior to this.

The Object Stories

Our focus group writing began in our introductory session. The first writing prompt I gave group members was: ***Find or think of an object in your home that holds significance in your life. Describe the object and discuss why it might be important to you, and the story of the object in your life***. I chose an object to centre our first writing based upon the work of Mezei (2005) who wrote how "domestic objects and rooms become touchstones" (p. 90) for memory and self-reflection. These "associative objects" help to call up important memories, often relating to the home space. The object, if it is important to the individual, can produce a material affect as the object has been given meaning by the individual and when recalled has the power to bring the person to the past as they reflect upon how they acquired this object and it's meaning in their life. Thus, the affect attached to the "domestic object" should remind people of their past "domestic spaces." (p. 81) The stories also elucidated the affective connection the object had for the participants in the present, an affect that could be "felt" by group members.

The "object prompt" was meant to be a "zero stakes" way to get the group members writing evocatively. I told group members that they did not have to write about being queer, but it did come up in all of our vignettes, except Adèle's. However, Adèle would return to the people in this story in subsequent stories about being queer. All of the stories told here would set the scene for, and sometimes influence, the future stories of "home" and "belonging" we would tell. We began to hear stories about the affect attached to the past rural space, the landscape, other objects, buildings, childhood "homes," communities, and family. Family came up in every one of our stories. The fact that family was the first thing that we spoke about suggests the importance of familial structures in the rural (Gray, 2009). What was fascinating about this writing is that four of us referenced our "grandmothers." The exception was Bera, who after we all shared,

however, said that they were thinking about their grandmother as they wrote their story, and would write their own "grandmother" stories later, demonstrating how our stories could influence the ones that followed. This writing activity occurred near the end of our first session together and, therefore, this was the only session where we did not discuss each story in detail and our group analysis is missing. However, these stories are important to share and serve three purposes. First, they are an introduction to the group members. Second, they demonstrate how affect — in this case the affect attached to an object — can be used to bring group members back to the past. Third, they are an introduction to thinking about familial and material connections in the rural space.

The first person to share was Adèle. She wrote,

> *A moment captured in time hangs on my wall. A wooden house on top of the hill with endless views of the ocean waves hitting the rocks. The place where I grew up into a strong woman because I was raised by a strong woman, my great-grandmother. This was her home. This was my home and I cherish many memories there that I don't see in the painting. I don't see myself playing on the enormous rock facing the traffic while Grandma yells from the kitchen that I am giving her a heart attack. I enjoyed keeping her young like that by torturing her a little. This work of art doesn't show the several times we went blueberry picking together and probably ate more than we picked up in our containers. None of those memories are there in this painting, yet I feel them every time I walk by because she's no longer here to poke fun at me or to cheer me on for every accomplishment. She was my rock and all I have left now are those memories and this painting of a house that now belongs to a stranger that didn't know her.*

I was given this painting by a friend who thought he was painting a regional scene, and at the time, my great-grandmother was alive when I received it. I needed that painting because it was where I spent the first three years of my life. We moved around a lot, so I learned not to get too attached to any house we would enter but this place is special. I use it now to connect with her and to remind myself of the love we shared and how she was my person in my life. The painting shows her house, the harbour, and the parish church. A church I attended every week and volunteered frequently. As a young girl, I always dreamed of getting married in this church because it felt like home. Religion was also very important to her, so it reminds me of everything she believed in, religion and family. (Adèle, Object Story, Introduction)[5]

After Adèle shared, I wrote down in my field notes that I felt quite emotional because I was also reminded of those special places and people in my own childhood. In fact, I wrote about such a person and place in my own vignette. This beginning piece from Adèle is significant because as Adèle's story unfolds, we find out that she really does not consider any place as her home anymore. She describes three areas in the province when discussing what "home" means to her. First, she writes frequently about "down home," which is her hometown and the setting for this story, but which does not feel like her "home" anymore. Second, she enjoys her current community but still does not describe it as "home." Third, she explains how the community she went to university in could be her "home," if she were to move back there, as she made a number

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[5] When I use data from the interviews or focus groups I will note whether it is taken from a vignette, a discussion, a debrief vignette, debrief discussion, or an interview. I will also note which focus group it came from. I have named the focus groups based upon the prompts we wrote to. They are as follows: 1) *Introduction.* 2) *Home and Belonging in Community.* 3) *Belonging in Schools.* 4) *On Being Seen.* 5) *Celebration/Authentic Selves.* 6) *Open Prompt.* 7) *Thematic Session.* These prompts will be described as I address the data within the *Findings* chapters.

of connections in this place. Thus, as we get to know Adèle, we learn that she struggles to claim a place as "home." However, in this vignette, she *is* describing "home" and that is at her great-grandmother's house with her great-grandmother. What we do not see in the painting, as Adèle describes, is the affect attached to the place and to the memories. The material affect exists in the space of the house, that comforting abode sitting on the hill. It is the landscape; the views of the ocean, the memories of blueberry picking, the enormous rock she played on while her great-grandmother watched, looking out for her. It is the church, which meant so much to her great-grandmother. All of this connected to a grandmother who was her "person." As I listened to Adèle, this was certainly a glimpse into my own childhood, and I was affected by her vignette. There is joy, love and safety. There is no homophobia in small Adèle's world at her great-grandmother's house. But there is a longing for what once was; this home that she has not found again. She writes how she learned to not get too attached to any "home" because the family moved a lot. This longing for "home" can be found in subsequent vignettes that Adèle would write. Although I describe this memory as joyful, as "homophobia" is absent in this vignette, Adèle would also complicate this childhood "home" in future stories where she did feel territorialized.

Rachel shared her narrative after Adèle. She prefaced her piece by saying although her story is also about her grandmother, it describes a grandmother who she did not have a good relationship with. She told Adèle that her story "was really beautiful and it made me kind of wish that I had had that experience. Umm, that sounds really special, so…." (Rachel, Discussion, Introduction) At this point, Rachel half laughed, but it felt emotional to me, as if the laugh were covering up a real sorrow. Before she began to read, she sighed heavily. Here we see an example of how one story affected both Rachel and me in different ways. Adèle's story made me feel

joyful, whereas Rachel's own story, placed in conversation with Adèle's, made her feel sad, bringing both she and I to different lines of force within the group. Rachel shared,

>*I don't know why I keep all of these quilts. There they are, tucked away in a cedar-lined chest that belonged to my grandmother. She made them too: idle hands are the devil's workshop, right? And hers were never idle. I have so many of her quilts: some she made for me — pink and purple, or endlessly intricate floral designs — and others were given to me from her vast repository for significant birthdays. I think about those quilts, tucked away and untouched — except for the one I had on my bed as a child — and I can't pin down how they make me feel.*

>*She was a difficult person. Couldn't say a plain word to your face, everything shrouded in layers and layers of decorum and politeness and passive aggressive posturing. Unspoken expectations like layers of batting and fabric, tiny little squares that, if you were clever enough, you might be able to stitch together to make some semblance of meaning from. Honestly, that whole town — where that side of my family lived and went to church and politicked in the small-town way of theirs — is a place I still can't visit. It makes me feel like I can't breathe, not down by the waterfront that smells like curdled seaweed and pitch, or on the pretty little streets with their decaying grand old homes. It was on those sidewalks that I had my first panic attack; it was in that church (now torn down, good riddance) that I had to swallow every true thing about me while being told that I'd find the right husband someday.*

>*Quilts are supposed to keep you warm; they're cozy, handmade, representative of love. But all I ever felt from her, or from that place (the dining room table, the house, the*

street, the church, the town and its expectations that, as Betty's granddaughter, I would

be a certain person) — all those quilts ever represented to me was smothering.

> *But there they are. There that chest is, in the bedroom I share with my wife. Kept*
> *safe, perfectly preserved and smelling of sweet cedar. And sometimes I'll open the chest*
> *up and run my hand over all of those tidy stitches (less and less tidy as her hands*
> *stiffened) and I'll feel a longing for a world in which those quilts didn't feel like running*
> *out of breath. Where I could go back to that pretty town by the seaside and feel like the*
> *truest version of me: lungs full of salt air, hair wind-whipped, hands tangled with my*
> *wife's, fingers just starting to go numb in the fall-crisp air. Staring out at the perfect*
> *Atlantic coastline before heading to what feels, in so many ways, like the very roots of*
> *my family.*

> *Maybe I keep them because I like to imagine that, someday, time will save those*
> *things for me: that town, that street. Those quilts.* (Rachel, Object Story, Introduction.)

Rachel's vignette of her grandmother is, of course, in stark contrast to Adèle's. One can sense Rachel's ambivalence and uncertainty as she reflects upon how she does not know how the quilts make her feel. The materiality of the quilt represents the grandmother, the "layers and layers of decorum and politeness and passive aggressive posturing" become associated with the "layers of batting and fabric" of the quilts, and only when both are *read* together do they each become recognizable; both were smothering. What would become recognizable to Rachel was that being "Betty's granddaughter" meant that she would have to marry a husband someday and that she would "have to swallow every true thing about herself." However, it was not just her grandmother that made her feel this way. The affect that Rachel experiences when remembering the quilts becomes associated with the town itself. The materiality of the space, the town, has

taken on the territorializing affect that she felt. She could not breathe here, overtaken by the smell of the seaweed and the decaying homes. The place made her feel smothered. It still does. She cannot return here. The environment is filled with the past aggregative affect of her territorialization, it is everywhere in this material location; at the dining room table, the house, the street, the church, and it is represented by the quilts! Of course, accompanying this assemblage are the discourses that are populated and promoted within the spaces. For example, the church space did come up in some of our discussions. Rachel's experience in her childhood church is in stark contrast to Adèle's, and even my own, which I write about in a later vignette. Often considered a territorializing force in many queer lives, religion, and attending church, can also be a place of love and acceptance for many. For Rachel, this seems not to have been the case, and the church also takes on aggregative affect. Waitt and Johnston (2013) explore how affect becomes attached to places and objects. They state that,

> place is not endowed with deterministic qualities. Instead, the process of experiencing affect is cumulative, the outcome of a history of interaction between bodies (human and non-human) and places, through which an individual's embodied history gives the capacity for emotions to arise. (p. 146)

Thus, the affect associated with the quilts brought Rachel back to the past and cumulative aggregative affect felt within the town itself. This affect is described in the past encounter and very much "felt" in the present encounter. She could not breathe in this town in the past and she cannot now when she thinks of the town. There is not a lot of utopia here. Rather, Rachel also explores Muñoz's "utopian longing." She longs for a different world, perhaps then and now, where she can be the "truest version" of herself. She is looking for utopia and wishing she could find it in the past; a what-might-have-been. There is singular deterritorializing affect here as she

considers how beautiful the town could have been, walking with her wife, hand in hand, in the fall, and suddenly the materiality of the place has the *possibility* for deterritorialization. The quilts are what were and what could have been, and, perhaps, what they might be as they take up space in the home of Rachel and her wife. I later share with Rachel that the quilts are now queered. Removed from her grandmother and in the home of two lesbians, I wonder what her grandmother would have thought of their new home? It is also worth noting now, but will be explored further presently, how this community, although decidedly not a home for Rachel, is one that I also lived in and do consider as one of my homes in the rural. However, I also have similar experiences to Rachel within my own childhood home, and sometimes, as Waitt and Johnston (2013) explore, "home" can be found in adjacent rural communities, something that Rachel and I both write about as the focus groups continue.[6]

Next, I asked if I could share my story. I acknowledged to group members that I did have an unfair advantage because I had picked out this object prior to the group session, but I composed the vignette alongside them. The object I chose to share was a handmade miniature lobster trap that was made by my childhood neighbour, Leo, who would become like a second father to me,

> *The lobster trap has been written about before but not this physical trap. It has*
>
> *manifested in my memories of my hometown, a fishing community in Nova Scotia. It is*
>
> *my father and my brother and their livelihoods. It is the memories of getting up at 5 am*
>
> *to go fishing with them both. It is the salty air and the smells of fish that waft up to my*
>
> *nose. Sometimes it made me sick. It is the memory of the man who made it, my friend*

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[6] It should be pointed out that when Rachel first introduced this story about quilts, I had no idea of the "lines of flight" that would result for me and how the quilt would become a metaphor for this study in its entirety.

Leo, before he died of cancer. Both my dad and this man are represented by this trap. Two masculine men who loved me, even though I wasn't masculine. It's also Leo's wife, who I loved and was like a second mother, but we grew apart after she said, 'Ellen's name was degenerate, not DeGeneres.'

It's sailing away on a beautiful but blustery day on my brother's fishing boat to visit my adopted 'grandma,' adopted because she was my cousin's grandmother and I loved her, with her bottle-tinted silver hair, and her kitchen parties where she played the mouth organ and the spoons. She was an escape, I think. Her kitchen had a daybed in it: a safe space to lay.

This trap is walking down the same roads that I've walked since I was a child. As a teenager I would walk by the ocean wishing I were elsewhere. I walk differently nowadays. I often think of these memories as I walk by the ocean, different memories depending on the day. I think how complicated home is. (Renny, Object Story, Introduction)

There are many family members brought forward by the memories and affect attached to this object. Unspoken in this vignette, I spent much of my childhood at the wharf with my dad and brother. Sometimes I assisted with fixing these lobster traps, or helping to paint buoys, but often times, like Adèle, I ran and played along the rocks by the ocean. My dad seemed fine with this. The trap represents a familial occupation that I did not want, a tradition of rural masculinity that I would reject. My dad also seemed alright with this. The trap is also the memory of my neighbour who made it, who loved me. I wrote about him in my master's thesis, describing our connection and how his sister-in-law told me that he talked to her because he worried that I was not masculine enough, but ultimately deciding that he loved me just the way I was.

Lastly, it is sailing away on my brother's boat to visit my adopted "grandma." She lived in an adjacent community separated by the ocean. It took 45-minutes to drive there but was only a ten-minute boat ride. I note she was an escape: "She was an escape, I think. Her kitchen had a daybed in it: a safe space to lay." There is little doubt that these adults represented safety from the boys who would harass me at school and in the community for being feminine.

Only alluded to in this vignette, however, is a character similar to Rachel's grandmother, Leo's wife Meredith. She was like a second mother to me throughout most of my childhood. However, Meredith was very Catholic and very "old-school," as well as very unaccepting of difference. I decided many years ago that I would never come out to her or have the discussion about my queerness with her. She was probably the only "close" person from my childhood who I did not speak about my sexuality with. And because of this, we barely spoke. I would visit her once a year or so with my mom, and she never once asked any details about my personal life, as if it were unspeakable. So, even today I still detect that judgment with Meredith and there is still distance. We are more like acquaintances now. However, when I was visiting home awhile back, my mom and I went to visit her in the nursing home. I have to say that I was struck when she said that she liked to watch *Ellen* in the afternoon. People change, they become. Adèle remarkably mentioned in her interview these very themes. In talking about rural community members she explained how,

> I think sometimes they get a bad rap about not being able to change…so when I came
> out, I was really terrified that my great-grandmother was going to have a problem with
> my girlfriend because she would tell me when she would watch Ellen DeGeneres on TV
> that Ellen was going to hell. (Adèle, Interview)

I asked Adèle if this was the same great-grandmother who she described as her "person" in her object story, and she said that it was. Had Adèle's great grandmother not changed in her thinking, this may have generated a different story when Adèle thought of her grandmother's painting.

I would have also described Meredith as my "person" for many years, and yet I could not expand upon her in my vignette. This reflects the ambivalence I feel about her — a person who was at once loving but also seemingly homophobic. This ambivalence is also central to the vignette. Within the scenes of the narrative, there are utopic moments of love and acceptance, of sailing away to an adjacent rural community, of running on the rocks under the safe purview of my dad, of the safety of my neighbours' house. These material spaces, along with the people in them, offered me a deterritorializing sanctuary from the territorializing forces encountered when interacting with peers at school and more unaccepting people within the community. The utopia can be found in the deterritorialization where I felt I could be myself. However, there was also negotiation. Leo had to negotiate within himself whether my femininity mattered more than his love for me and decided that it did not. Aside from the *Ellen* comment, I detected no real change in Meredith and although her home provided safety and many moments of joy to me when I was young, the deterritorializing potential that I felt at their house, where I thought I could be myself, was indeed, tarnished by an acceptance that, as Rachel would note later, was conditional. Even visiting with Meredith became associated with a constant felt judgment and the feeling that I would never be able to be myself, an aggregative affect that reterritorialized me. This demonstrates that even in spaces that are meant to be deterritorialized, there is always the possibility for reterritorialization. The only way that I know to fully deterritorialize myself from

people like this, even if I love them, is to let them go. To write this makes me cry, as I think about how there is often a price that is paid when working towards freedom. [7]

Jenna asked to share next, continuing on with our unplanned grandmother theme,

There are many objects in my home that hold different significance in my life, but they have a theme of fragility. I have a glass egg decoration with a bird on the top of it. It is a clear-etched glass pattern, and it has a scalloped opening in the middle to hold small objects. It sits beside my bed and holds the wedding bands of my grandmother, mother, and mine. Funnily enough, we are all divorced. When I look at that egg that is frosted and hard, yet so delicate, it reminds me of their strength, connection and my own strength stemming from them. My grandmother on my father's side was Ukrainian so the egg represents her. My grandmother on my mother's side was an avid crow lover and birds have always been her symbol to me. My mother and I have a unique, complex, and special connection. She is strong yet fragile like an egg. The wedding rings all have stories of triumph and tragedy. Them being together somehow dulls the ache in my heart of my marriage ending. Relationships are so fragile and complex, like the exterior of the structure. (Jenna, Object Story, Introduction)

For Jenna, the egg symbolizes both strength and fragility. She comes from a long line of strong women. There is solidarity with these strong women that came before her and she finds solace in remembering their stories as it reminds her of her own strength. The generational wedding rings

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[7] Meredith passed away during this writing. Like Rachel's quilts, Meredith left something for me, as well. After her passing, a piece of paper was found on a chair outside my mom's house. It was a drawing I had made for her and Leo that included the three of us. I had written on the drawing that I was five years old and that they were my "special friends." Since we no longer had any real relationship, I could not help but feel hurt by this, and that the way it was left on the chair outside was not a friendly offering. Perhaps I now better understand Rachel's own feelings about her grandmother. There will be no more becomings for she and I…

held by the glass egg creates an important affect. They represent to Jenna both triumph and tragedy. The fact that Jenna's wedding ring also symbolizes a queer wedding must be noted. Both Rachel's quilts and the rings are objects historically associated with heteronormativity and specific gender roles in the rural space. Often "straight" women, perhaps "mothers" and "grandmothers" made the quilts, and of course a rural lesbian wedding is only a recent phenomena. This does speak to the deterritorializing power of both of these objects when they are queered. Yes, the rings represent triumph and tragedy, in Jenna's case, queer triumph and tragedy. There once was utopia here! There were deterritorializations of the self that happened with a queer marriage in the rural, even if it was not permanent. In a sense, this is also what this study is about; an examination of those moments that entail both "tragedy and triumph."

However, my sense with Jenna is that it took her a while to get comfortable with the group and there were some stories that she was not ready to share at the beginning of our session together. Jenna alluded to her divorce throughout our time together but it is something that she did not discuss in great detail with us, nor does she really discuss the relationship with her mom, although the sense is that it is a strong one. However, Jenna's next vignette would be about how difficult it has been to feel a sense of belonging in her communities and she would later connect this to how "home" would feel different for her if she and her partner had built one together.

It is then Bera's turn to share, and they note that they will be sharing something completely different. Bera's object story is about a small, tattered-looking grey rabbit,

One of the things that I've been working on is letting go of attachment to things. That said, there are certain things that have traveled with me through my life for quite some time. The oldest is a small, stuffed rabbit. It's probably the oldest personal item that I own as it was given to me by my dad's students when I was born. I'd often say that it

wasn't actually significant to me, yet here I am all these years later and that rabbit was close to hand where I'm writing and was the second object that I thought of. It has traveled with me from my home in Ontario, to my home here in Manitoba. I'm pretty sure that all three of our children played with it as babies as it is part of our collection of stuffed animals.

I sometimes wonder what it looked like new, as we have no pictures of it that I'm aware of. It's one of those little things that never made it into pictures, that was always in the background, but rarely seen or noticed by others. It's certainly not the first stuffed animal that draws people's attention. It's spent a lot of time hidden in corners or packed away, almost, but not quite forgotten.

It reminds me that my dad was also a teacher. There's a sadness there as my queerness is something I can't share with my parents, even as it's grown to be such an important part of my identity and my life. It speaks to students being aware of significant aspects of their teachers' lives and reacting to those aspects in their own way. And I think of how much of my life my students not only don't know, but aren't allowed to know, that I have to very deliberately hide from them (and as I type this I have to keep going back and correcting because my shaking hands keep hitting the wrong keys). They know that I use "Mx" as my honorific, but they are not allowed to know why beyond, 'That is the honorific that fits me.' They don't know that my pronouns are 'they, their, them' as explaining that would open up more than I'm allowed to. I think about my involvement in County Pride, that my students are oblivious to although it's a big and important part of my life. I think about how important their religion/faith is to many of them, and the fact

that being Pagan, I don't dare share that with them. I think about attending Pride events and keeping that to myself when I'm bursting to talk about it.

I think about the fact that, being a small town, they all know my spouse, 'Mrs. Z.' but I wonder what the situation would be had things worked out differently and there was a 'Mr. Z?' Then again, I probably wouldn't be here then. (Bera, Object Writing, Introduction)

As Bera described the rabbit as having "spent a lot of time hidden in corners or packed away, almost, but not quite forgotten," I could not help but reflect upon how the rabbit might also symbolize how they felt before they came out as queer, and definitely how they feel regarding not being able to speak in front of their students and express who they are, as well as their silence with their parents. In these beginning vignettes, Rachel, Bera and I all write about people we had to be silent with. There is a sadness here for what we could and can not say.

As Bera's father was a teacher, this vignette also exemplifies the privilege that straight-identified educators can have with their students. Bera's father was able to discuss his personal life with his students; he was able to tell them that he was going to have a baby, and the students were able to participate in his personal life by giving him a gift for the baby. And so, for Bera, it stings that they cannot share such important aspects of their identity with their students. Bera is exemplifying how they have been territorialized by their school and district to not be able to speak about their identity. Bera would continue to write and speak about these territorializations over many sessions.

The aggregative affect found in this territorialization manifested as sadness in Bera's present. It manifested in their shaking hands when writing the vignette. They included in their written component that their hands were shaking while writing and I also observed that their

hands were shaking when they read how they were "bursting" to share important aspects of their life with their students, demonstrating how such aggregative affect associated with the story manifested physically in the present for them, as well.

Bera was the only one of us who wrote about their experiences as a teacher for this prompt. The territorializations they felt within their school was also a large focus of our interview. This speaks to how powerful the aggregative affect is when they think of their workplace. As the study progressed, I realized that Bera needed to work through all the ways that they were territorialized within the institution and their community before they could arrive at a place where they could view their queering of place as a deterritorialization.

In these beginning pieces we begin to see how affect can become connected to objects. Group members were not told that they would be writing about an "object" until minutes before I asked them to write, and therefore, they essentially had to think about an object on the spot. This demonstrates that the object already had an affective force attached to it, bringing us to memories of important events/times/places/people in our pasts. (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Fox and Alldred, 2015b) In this case, the stories that were produced were much more than stories about a painting, quilts, a stuffed rabbit, a lobster trap and a glass egg. The affect attached to these items brought us all back to those past moments of belonging and not belonging in the rural. Thus, I echo the words of Waitt and Johnston (2013) when they say, "We therefore understand belonging as a process of identification and contestation generated by how subjects negotiate a sense of self through emotional response to places called 'home.'" (p. 148) We also see how the "home" space can also take on affect, so that the church, the school, or the entire community may feel like a place of suffocation or a place of refuge. As Perreault & Kadar (2005) write,

When the setting is a house, a home, "location" extends its metaphorical authority and enters the material world. And when location is the intersection of individuals and the laws that control their lives or the violence that shatters lives, [or the love that makes lives livable] their autobiographical texts open new ways to comprehend interpellation and agency. (p. 5)

Thus, reading our initial stories as a whole, there are already beginning themes emerging. We see moments of belonging and moments of exclusion with both family and community members in the rural space. The rural can be a place of both love and support and be complicated and exclusionary, a place where we might understand both the interpellation that leads to territorializations, but also the agency that leads to deterritorializations.

What is also important is how, rather surprisingly, these stories became intertwined in our future stories as we explored our queer rural experiences. I say "surprisingly" because I had called this prompt "a low stakes prompt" where group members did not have to write about their queerness, and yet, as we will see, this "low stakes" object writing laid the groundwork for the many queer stories that would come after it, demonstrating the rhizomatic nature of our collaborative group as we each influenced the other.

Chapter 6: The Search for Belonging in the Rural

This chapter is about the search for belonging in rural communities. The first section is about the search for a queer community and was a large theme generated from the first story Jenna told for our first focus group. The second section arose from the first story Adèle told and is about searching for belonging in our "home" communities when that belonging is conditional. Although the stories told in this chapter elucidate the many ways we struggle to find belonging within queer spaces and the "home" space in the rural, it ends with the deterritorializing potential of searching for and finding belonging in other rural communities. I utilize a study by Waitt and Johnston (2016) here to speak to how rural queers may find successful homes in rural communities other than their childhood homes, a phenomenon that interrupts the notion of queer rural to urban migration.

The Search for Queer Community in the Rural

As I begin to explore the search for belonging in our stories and discussion from our first official focus group, it is important to note how we were beginning to find belonging in our own small community of rural queer teachers. As Pendleton Jiménez (2005) writes, within the writing group, community is "beginning to build itself through the practice of writing [and sharing] together." (p. 145) This can be seen in the feedback that my group members provided in the debrief session after our *Object* writing prompt. Feedback sounded like: Renny — "Those stories were beautiful!" Rachel — "I just feel a nice genuine warmth towards everyone." Jenna — "I found it super emotional and I'm just so happy to be here, and I'm just so excited about the process, and I can already tell that it's going to be fabulous." Adèle — "…There were little moments in everyone's story that I could really attach to." She continued,

I really appreciated it just because I don't know the other people in this group, and it was good for me to hear other perspectives about personal lives and to get to know each person a little bit more. So, I felt a little closer to each of you through last week's session. (Adèle, Debrief, Introductory Session)

Rachel emailed me after our session to tell me that it was a profound experience for her and much needed to connect with other people during the pandemic. I then commented how I thought it was very powerful how,

…we are going to get to know each other so much more as this unfolds. We're all going to keep getting pieces of each other's stories and I think it's kind of neat to see how that happens over the next few weeks. (Renny, Debrief, Introductory Session)

We were beginning to build a community together. I knew after hearing our Object vignettes that the stories we would produce would be powerful and that we had already started to build on our tapestry of stories. Thus, as our object stories alluded to feelings of belonging and not belonging, it was quite natural to continue on with this theme for the second session and I provided the following prompt, "**Write one to two vignettes about your experiences of home and belonging or not belonging as a queer member of your rural community**." We all wrote to this prompt for 20 minutes at the beginning of the session.

Our initial stories and discussions involved themes of searching for community and a "home" in the rural. Jenna asked to share her vignette first. She seemed quite nervous about sharing her writing, prefacing it with, "Okay I'm going to go first but I'm going to ask if I can go first every time, because then I get really nervous as I'm listening to your stories that my stories are not polished enough." (Jenna, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community) However, Jenna does not go first in the next session, and I think her confidence in her writing builds

throughout our sessions together as people comment how they enjoy her writing. Jenna would be more confident in general as the focus groups unfolded. This speaks to the belonging that we created within the group as we supported each other in the writing and also is a "becoming" that I would observe in Jenna and map throughout the focus group. Jenna started us off discussing "the search for belonging."

Home is where the heart is — isn't that how the saying goes? Somehow, I don't equate that with the concept of home. I've been in [this part of Nova Scotia] now for over 15 years. It's beautiful and the views are stunning, yet I don't feel connected to this land. I was born in Newfoundland but moved when I was two and a half. I have no real memory of that time and connection to it as my home. That brings shame since my mom is such a proud Newfie [sic] and she feels so strongly about that being her home and she bears shame of leaving that land. She can't understand when I express no heartstrings to that place. In Newfoundland, when we visited, my family from there only used the word queer to mean strange. It wouldn't be unheard of to have someone say, 'That's some queer weather,' meaning its mixed up and can't make up its mind.

We moved to [a small city in New Brunswick] when I was two and a half and I lived there most of my youth. It never quite felt like home, it was where we lived. Something about being in French Acadian territory and being a second language learner never allowed me the heritage to claim this land as mine. [The city] was not queer, it frankly lacked any cultural significance that I was aware of. It felt like a newish industrial town. My experiences there were of trying to figure out my queerness. I distinctly remember the first Pride parade I attended. I think 'attended' is a stretch. I

lurked a block away from the parade which was being held not even on the main street of

the town. I walked aimlessly around the park where the parade ended and felt no sense of

community. I felt so far from a member of the community. The only gay bar in town was

in a basement of a work office building. Again, I can remember descending down the

stairs only to find a dimly lit bar with five regulars around. It felt uncomfortable. I didn't

know how to wiggle my way into the community to be seen.

> *When I moved to [this area] I had hoped to find a queer community. Again, there*
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> *were meetings in small places with regular attendees and I had no way to navigate how*
>
> *to belong. Where I am today, this community, again, has all the right signals. There is a*
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> *rainbow crosswalk downtown, the theatre shows queer movies and there are queer*
>
> *couples who are prominent in the town. Yet, same as always, I lack the roadmap, secret*
>
> *passwords and/or confidence to yet feel like I belong. My heart has yet to find the*
>
> *community I search for, to feel like I am heard, seen and truly belong* (Jenna, Vignette,
>
> Home and Belonging in Community).[8]

In this relatively long vignette, Jenna explores her attempts to find a home/community in each of

the places that she has lived. Analyzing her story of each place, I will begin with Newfoundland.

Having left the province so early in her life it is not surprising that she does not feel an

attachment to the province. It is interesting, however, that she told the story about what queer

means colloquially in Newfoundland, which she defined as "being mixed up or not being able to

make up one's mind." Why does Jenna tell this story? Is it representative of how her family and

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[8] All bracketed insertions are to preserve anonymity of place.

community make her feel when she does return there? She does not elaborate on her visits to Newfoundland again throughout our focus groups, and what we are left with is only this image of the province; queerness as being "mixed up." Perhaps, she has no "heartstrings" to the community there because she feels invisible when she returns.

When discussing the small city in New Brunswick, Jenna refers to the city as feeling like a "newish industrial town." Having been there, I do conceptualize it as a city, but the population in the 1990's was significantly smaller than it is now. However, noting that the demographics, like most communities in Atlantic Canada historically, consist of a majority of white Christians (with white, Christian values) it is not surprising that the emerging, less multicultural, city felt like a town, which returns us to Tiffany Myrdahl's (2016) stance that smaller cities can share the same values and beliefs associated with smaller towns. In her study, Myrdahl says interviewees describe smaller cities as "reflect[ing] or promot[ing] values that are at odds with what they understand to be a progressive urban aesthetic." (p. 39) Additionally, feeling no connection to French Acadian culture or queer culture made it difficult for Jenna to feel like she belonged there. Even though there was a queer community in this place she felt that she did not know how to gain access to it. There was not the visibility in the community with the Pride parade being held on a backstreet and one dimly lit basement queer bar with five regulars. Anecdotally, a recent discussion about the queer scene with queer friends who live there currently suggests that things have not changed very much in this city, supporting Myrdahl's stance that cities are not necessarily progressive. Finally, Jenna has lived in her current location since 2009 and has still found it difficult to find her queer community. She thinks this is about demographics. She said there are queer people within the community but that demographically they are between the ages of 60-75 years old "and they hold important places within the community. People know them,

and they are well-established, and business owners, and go to church, and they are well-respected and well-liked within the community." (Jenna, Interview) She continues that she also knows her former queer-identified students but that she really does not know many people between the ages of 25-65, and, therefore, has struggled to find belonging here. For all of these reasons, and similar to Adèle, she does note that she does not consider herself as having a home. She feels like the small city in New Brunswick is "probably home," but she also says that she does not attach the word "home" to this place. Being in her current area in Nova Scotia for a long time, she would likely tell people that this is where she is from, but she does not necessarily consider it "home" either. She does say that she and her ex-partner were married for six and a half years and had they stayed together, she would probably consider her current place "home." She thinks had they built a family in their community that it would have become "home" and that "home" to her is "where I feel the most alive, or the most relaxed." (Jenna, Interview) Their recent separation is difficult for Jenna to discuss and when she does talk about her marriage, she is sad. In the debrief vignette the following week, Jenna expanded upon these thoughts. She wrote,

> *It can be lonely in a marginalized community. I know it has been difficult this year when I became one instead of two. It's like I lost a headlight and veered off into the woods alone. When I had a wife, I inherently felt a sense of belonging. By being married to a woman, it was like a beam of light saying, "I'm here and I'm queer!" I've been a little lost since.*
> (Jenna, Debrief Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

As we will see from further analysis of Jenna's vignettes and discussion, her longing for belonging in community and in schools is also likely intertwined with the loss of her marriage, and the "home" she might have been able to establish with her partner. One gets a sense now

why her object story was about the glass egg and the three generations of wedding rings. Belonging is a function of relationality to Jenna, not land or place. She also does not get read as queer and so loses that important relation as well. She has lost a "beam of light" that illuminates her queerness. She would write about trying to rediscover her queerness throughout the focus groups.

After Jenna shared, Adèle said that Jenna's description of attending her first Pride parade was very similar to her own, where she stood and watched from the sidelines, not sure what she was supposed to do at such an event. She described how Jenna's vignette resonated with her,

> …the way you wrote it, it made me relive that, and I think it would make other people relive their beginning moments of trying to participate and engage in the queer community. So, I thought that was really powerful because it allows people to attach themselves and their experiences to yours, whether you said, word for word, their experience or not. (Adèle, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Of course, this is exactly what I thought would happen within our group, that we would connect to each other through our storytelling. Jenna's story made Adèle relive her own experiences, as she recalled the affect that she felt when she attended her first Pride parade. I also surmise that Adèle's comment helped to foster Jenna's confidence in her writing as she conveyed how the writing was descriptive enough to bring Adèle back to her own memories of Pride and a search for community.

This idea of the search for a queer community would resonate with all of us. Rachel followed up Jenna's vignette with a commentary on the need to find one's gaggle, as in gaggle of queer geese, in the rural space. She said,

There's a great podcast that used to be on called 'Nancy' all about queer culture. And I

remember really distinctly listening to an episode where they talked about the 'gaggle,'

where it's like, 'Oh, it's super important that you have your little family of queer people,

and you all do brunch together and so on,' and I remember listening to that and feeling

much like you did, this kind of total sense of loss, almost, and I was like, 'But how do I

do that?'

One of the challenges about being queer in a rural space is actually building

that community because there aren't the same kind of means to do it that there are in

urban spaces. So, it's like, you know, there might be three other queer people in your

community, but what are the odds you actually have anything in common with them,

versus, like, if you're in a city, you know, there are so many specialized groups and

interests and so I really, really related to that because I've often felt like that in queer

spaces, where I'm just like, 'I'm just being a weirdo and socially awkward on the side.'

(Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

In Rachel's response, she agreed with Jenna that it is difficult to find community in rural spaces

but additionally she said that she does not fit within queer groups/spaces either. Bera then

followed up with a response that addressed both of these points. They said that when they

attended Pride in a bigger city near them that they walked around with their spouse and they both

said, "This isn't us. We just don't fit here." (Bera, Discussion, Home and Belonging) Bera

continued that some of the "stereotypical events" just do not resonate with them. At this point,

we were all nodding our heads in agreement, and I said to the group that,

I think it's interesting that we're all nodding our head at that, and I want to say that I've

been in Toronto for the last five years, and I lived in Toronto in 2003 when I was much

younger...and back then, I did go down to the queer village, and so forth. But in the last

five years since I've been back here, I have not gone to the parade, I haven't gone to the

Village… and I just feel like that doesn't fit me either. So that really resonates with me

and how it is difficult to find other queer people in our communities. (Renny, Discussion,

Home and Belonging in Community)

At the time of this focus group most of my queer kin, my own gaggle, had been in the rural space

and I had found it hard to access the queer community within Toronto. When I lived in Nova

Scotia, I attended queer events such as dances and community groups, but they also were not

really for me. I did not make many relationships at those events, and I think we all convey how

just because there is a gathering of queer-identified people does not mean that connections are

guaranteed. Rachel agreed that it can be exhausting in larger groups and that even in large groups

there might be two people who she might connect with (Rachel, Discussion, Home and

Belonging in Community). Jenna returned to her comment about the demographics in her

community and how it is a very academic and artistic community which she does not feel a

general interest in. Jenna then responded to Rachel's original comment returning us to the

discussion of the gaggle, as she reiterated that it's more about the people in the space than it is

the actual space. She said she wants, "to find what Rachel was saying, like that gaggle of people.

I think that's what I'm searching for. It's not about the town, it's about the people in the town, but

it's so *hard* to find the people." (Jenna, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

 Again, Jenna is looking for belonging within a queer community, not necessarily

belonging within the town(s) that she has lived in. Bera then followed up with how they and their

partner were looking at moving to a bigger city for this reason. They did not know any queer

people in the area but then they attended a Pride event in a neighbouring community and met

many queer community members this way. Jenna then wondered, "Where is my lesbian softball league I've been looking for," and we all laughed at this exchange while Adèle joked that it can be found in her community. This speaks to how both Bera and Jenna want to build relationships with queer people within their communities.

Adèle then agreed with Jenna that the demographics in her town also make it difficult for her to find community. She is located near a large Community College and because of this she said that most of the organized "queer" events are held within this space and attended by younger people. Adèle continued,

> I don't want to hang out with 22 year-olds anymore. I don't. I'm too old for that. I'm not interested in that lifestyle and some of them are old students now, so I don't want to be part of that group, not because I don't feel part of the queer community, but because I don't feel part of the university lifestyle anymore. (Adèle, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Both Adèle's and Jenna's point about age differences resonated with my own experiences and I clarified my above point about why I no longer tend to go to the Village in Toronto,

> I think that's the reason why I stopped going to the Village in the city, as well, because I think that, perhaps, we're at a different phase than people who are much younger than us, and maybe we have different needs. (Renny, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

This dialogue incapsulates how difficult it has been for all of us to access a queer space in both rural and urban contexts, whether it be because: we do not know other queer people in our communities; there is a lack of commonality between queer folx (because it cannot be imagined that all queer people have things in common); the demographics of the community; differences

in age (both of which also inform commonalities); and a lack of desire to attend "stereotypical" queer events, such as parades and clubs. This is not just a rural phenomena. Although there are many more networking opportunities in urban areas, this does not mean that all queer people wish to participate in them, or to even participate within the rural space if such opportunities exist. Unfortunately, these factors may limit the ability to form queer belonging in the rural, or find your "gaggle," as Rachel says, and, therefore, may make the space feel territorializing because of the absence of other queer community members, especially if the conditions for "home" are ambivalent.

The Search for Belonging at "Home": When Belonging is Conditional

Adèle shared one of these stories of ambivalence after Jenna shared. Adèle's story continued speaking about the theme of trying to find a community to call home in the rural space. Adèle, however, spent much more time discussing how her childhood home was no longer "home" and the reasons why it was not. This would lead us to an initial discussion of the ways we felt territorialized in our communities. Adèle wrote,

> *Home, a place where you feel like yourself. I have a home, well in theory, because*
> *I have property in a location where I work but it doesn't feel like home. I've been so*
> *attached to my original home that I haven't given this place a chance to be just that. My*
> *home isn't this farming village that stinks every spring; it's the coastline where I grew up*
> *and where I can never live again. I think sometimes I miss the idea of home because I*
> *want this feeling of belonging, not because I once had it or it was taken away from*
> *me, but because I have lived there the longest and it has my history. I don't really miss*
> *the people or the small-mindedness; I'm so relieved to be away from that. I miss the wind*

and the waves. The waves from the ocean, as well as those from cars I've recognized for

years. Are they waving because they recognize me too or because it's what we do?

Towards this time of year, I always contemplate moving back home. I search the

available jobs and hunt for housing to then always stop and remember, I can't go home. I

can't go home because my family moved out West and elders have passed on. I can't

return home for fear that one or two parents would constantly complain that I teach their

children, just because I like women, too. I liked women when I served their masses. I

liked women when they forced me to wear that little white ball gown to receive my first

bread. I was accepted then because they only knew that I liked men, which I do, but not

only men. Is it worth getting harassed and maybe vandalized like the couple that lives

there now? I watch from afar hoping the outcome is different while knowing it

is unfortunately the same. (Adèle, Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

It is difficult to pin down exactly what "home" means to Adèle in this vignette because she

defines home as "a place where you feel like yourself," and also the feeling of belonging that is

attached to a place that has her history. The question raised here is what happens when you feel

like you cannot be yourself in the place that has your history? Adèle explores this by giving us a

glimpse of her childhood home, "down home," as she describes it. Adèle feels a connection to

the land "down home;" the coastline with the wind and the waves. This is the same coastline that

Adèle wrote about in the object story of her great-grandmother, where through the window she

could see the waves. The materiality of the landscape is affectively bound up with Adèle's

memory of her great-grandmother and she misses both. She has fond memories of this place, as

already discussed when talking about her great-grandmother. Adèle's decision to use the

homonym "waves" to represent not only the ocean but a small town familiarity also speaks to the

power of material affective gestures. She misses the waves from the cars that she has recognized for years. The vehicles, the gestures, the landscape, and the people merge to create memories of belonging in this community, but at the same time, Adèle asked whether the waves from the cars are because people recognize her, or it is just what people in small towns do. Later in the vignette she addresses how she does not feel recognized by her community, and this is why she cannot return there. Adèle describes how the community accepted her when they thought that she was straight, but that they likely would not now that she has come out, creating the ambivalence Adèle feels about "down home."

Adèle describes this ambivalence in more detail in our interview. She has many memories of queerness not being welcomed in this community. She says there are only two queer couples who live in the town and they get harassed. She notes the irony though — even though these couples are not welcomed, people are happy if there is a lesbian wedding (Adèle, Interview). I wondered whether she felt accepted and so I asked her if she would take her girlfriend, Christine, "down home" now,

> We go, but I almost get a heart attack every time…because the norm was that if you did identify in the community, you almost had to move away because it was a very religious-driven community… I remember being a teenager and going to a mass for my grandmother and the priest would say something like, 'Why should we reinvent the wheel. We don't have square wheels on our cars, so why would we change marriage?'
>
> And I would get so angry…because at the time I thought that I was an ally…I used to be a very active member of the church, and I still do get some relief from going to church and it's a pleasant experience, but I knew that there were grandparents that disowned grandchildren because they were gay, because the church told them to …, the

priest told them to, so I knew that part of the culture down home was to banish those who

identified [as queer] but lately there has been a lot more visibility. (Adèle, Interview)

We see examples here of the impact of the church as a territorializing institution within the rural.

The discourses from the pulpit circulated beyond the Church walls influencing how families

conceived of queer people, where they would be "banished" and forced to move away. Like

"down home" the church is also a space of ambivalence for Adèle as she says despite the way it

was territorializing, it is a place that she still attends because it offers some relief to her. Rachel

began to explore this in her *Object* story about her grandmother and the town that felt

suffocating. Like the town where Rachel's grandmother lived, institutions within Adele's

hometown also take on the aggregative affect of territorialization.

Adèle also internalized this affect when taking Christine "down home," for the first time.

She said that she was the first in her family to bring a same-sex girlfriend to social events and

that she was nervous the first time she brought her home,

but it was fine, and no one really said anything, and they might have said something

under their breath, but they didn't say anything to me. And family members who I

thought were going to be very opposed were actually very open. It was a pleasant

experience. (Adèle, Interview)

This acceptance is also found in other stories that Adèle conveys. Returning to her Great

Grandmother, Adèle said that when she took Christine home, she presented her to her

grandmother as her "friend" and her grandmother softly replied,

'Yeah, Ok, I get it.' And I could understand in her eyes that she understood but we never

had to really say it. Then one day her granddaughter said, 'Well, you know Adèle is with

Christine, like Christine is her girlfriend,' and she said, "Yeah, and what?" So, in my

mind, if she was able to go from, 'Ellen DeGeneres is going to hell,' to 'It's OK that Adèle is dating Christine,' and that one of her daughters, who we used to call 'Sister Elaine,' but she wasn't really a nun, we just called her that because she really thought she was Jesus' right hand man, if she was able to accept my girlfriend, and accept me, after knowing that Christine existed, I had a lot more faith in my family than before. (Adèle, Interview)

Despite the fear of being disowned and forced to leave "down home" for good, Adèle has found some acceptance from her family. She said that she has aunts and uncles who are very good to her and have made efforts to learn more about the queer community, but also acknowledges there are cousins who are going to be hateful, but that is who they are and they are this way to all minoritized groups. She does feel that things are better in the community since the Black Lives Matter movement. However, she also spoke about her uncle who is still very closeted in the community. She said that he grew up in a time "where it was dangerous to be gay "down home." She recounted how her uncle told her a story, which she also remembers from her childhood, about artists from there who were killed because they were gay, and this affected him a great deal. Adèle says that because of this he feels shame (Adèle, Interview). The aggregative affect attached to this gay bashing has territorialized Adèle's uncle to the extent that he has a boyfriend, or possibly husband, and the family knows about it because they have lived together for years, but he does not discuss his personal life with family. Adèle says she is the only exception because she is "out." He is able to deterritorialize himself with her because she is also queer but at the same time, the fact that she also does not know if her uncle and his partner are married or not, demonstrates how territorialized he is. He will not allow this part of his life to be known, even to a family member who loves him and would be a support.

This picture that Adèle paints of "down home" shows those territorializing moments of not being recognized, of fear of community members, of parents of students who might not accept her and her partner, of family members who would not accept her, as well as memories of what the community was like for queer people in the past. However, found within these territorializing moments are also moments of *utopia*, those moments that exceed heteronormativity, where she is able to insert her and Christine's queerness into the community, where she found acceptance from her great-grandmother and from aunts and uncles. Perhaps it is difficult for Adèle to reconcile both aspects of the community. She has memories from the community which seem for the most part to be pleasant ones, and she described generally positive relationships with family members, but it is the knowledge of how queerness is perceived within the community which prevents her from thinking that this community could ever be her home again. She says,

> It will always be my home, but it's an idea and it's not a place anymore…It's always
>
> going to be the place that I call home in my head, but in the physical sense, it will never
>
> be home again. It will always be a place I can visit, and for short periods of time I can get
>
> through it, but from day to day, it won't be like it was. (Adèle, Interview)

She realizes that she cannot fully be herself in this community and, thus, there is a territorializing aggregative affect attached to the space. "Down home" becomes associated with a place that once was "home" and no longer is "home" because of the way that queerness has been historically territorialized within the community. In order to deterritorialize herself she did have to leave "down home," but in turn, she also has deterritorialized this community by returning there with her partner and being accepted by her family members; something she imagined would never happen.

It is helpful to keep this ambivalent concept of "home," in mind as I explore belonging in communities that are and are not "home" for all of us. Rachel related to what Adèle wrote and commented the following,

> Um, something, I really, that struck me was that kind of feeling of home as something impermanent and fleeting and almost nostalgic, and the sense of mourning for something that existed, but was conditional, right? I don't really have a very articulate thought on that, but that just really kind of hit me right, in my emotions. Yeah, that was, that was, um, I understand that feeling. (Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Rachel was very affected by Adèle's story; she acknowledged her struggle to articulate her thoughts and said how the story hit her in her emotions. The aggregative affect in Adèle's story translated to Rachel, creating her own aggregative affect which manifested in a sense of mourning for something that once existed but was conditional, something that she could remember and understand in her own story. I responded by saying that some of this mourning showed up in her writing about her grandmother's quilts from the last session and she nodded silently and was clearly emotional. I was also emotional and teary-eyed from this exchange. We all were affected; there was a long pause in our dialogue. Jenna broke the silence and said how the story also made her emotional. This again demonstrates how our stories moved each other as we thought about our own. Rachel would also write further about this conditional home in a later vignette, which also demonstrates the lines of flight from the group intra-action.

This notion of *conditional belonging* within our communities, in both the homes of our youth and current ones, was brought up by group members. Bera began by saying that as long as community members do not have to see queerness then it is often not a problem. In discussing trans people in their community, they say that if people can pass then they usually do not

experience any issues, however, if they do not pass, "they get all kinds of derogatory comments and inappropriate questions." (Bera, Interview) Rachel had a similar response. Asking her what it was like as an LGBTQ+ person in her community, Rachel stated that it is a "mixed bag." She says that the people are quite friendly, and that the straight-identified people are "very queer friendly," but at the same time there is an evangelical church that "still marches around and protests with creepy burning cross signs." (Rachel, Interview) I asked Rachel if there were any organizations or groups in the community that offer supports to queer people and she said that she had not noticed any queer culture or community organizations. She did mention that the community in which she taught with Jenna had their first Pride parade two years prior and they painted a rainbow crosswalk "that immediately someone did tire burns on." (Rachel, Interview) I conveyed to her that my home community had also recently installed a Pride sidewalk on the main street and that,

> on the town website there were the, 'This is wonderful!' comments, and then there were the other comments. Then I saw that the town was deleting all of the negative comments…I did see some of them before they deleted them, however. (Renny, Interview).

Jenna said that the general feel of her town is one of safety and that when she is out in the community, she does feel supported overall, but she did not feel this support in the school. Jenna would stay living within this town but would move to a school in a neighbouring town after the difficult year with Rachel. She also discussed how the community started a Pride parade three years ago and that this has also brought out those community members who are allies, which adds to the community feel, but at the same time, Jenna says that the community is welcoming as long as there is not any pushing of an agenda. She said, "I was here before I met my partner, and

I would say they were better before they saw me actually interacting in a same-sex relationship."
(Jenna, Interview)

From these excerpts it is clear that our ideas of belonging in our "home" communities is a very complicated one. In the debrief writing the following week, Bera summarized their feelings about the complicated nature of living in our rural communities.

> *The term "othering" comes to mind after hearing the vignettes and the discussion — that being queer in rural settings means dealing with and coming to terms with being othered by the larger community, even if they don't realize they're doing it. Home can be found, but the conditions for it are narrower than for many other people in this community… Our very existence here draws attention — we can't be invisible even if we want to be. Part of being in a small community is I really can't pass as straight even if I try because people know who I am, or think they do (I'm also not as good at "passing" as I thought I was). As much as I have a place here, I hold it loosely, a theme I heard a number of times in the vignettes.* (Bera, Debrief Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

Bera makes two very important points here. The first is that "home can be found, but the conditions for it are narrower" than for other community members. The second is "as much as I have a place here, I hold it loosely." These points certainly speak to the ambivalence felt by many of us about our homes in the rural space. All of us have now described towns in the rural that we hold "loosely," where attachments are fraught with memories of territorialization. Knowing that this ambivalence is part of our lives, the question then becomes how do we find belonging in our rural communities? Perhaps part of this answer can be found by investigating *where* we can find belonging in the rural space.

The Search for Belonging in other Rural Communities

All of us have sought and found some belonging in rural communities that are not the "home" communities of our youth. These are other rural communities that we moved to in order to start new beginnings. Searching for "home" in other rural communities interrupts the notion of the queer rural to urban progress narrative. Adèle has experienced belonging in her current community, but at the same time, her experiences are also complicated. Adèle has lived in her current community for six years. It is a farming community, but there is also a Community College nearby, which brings more diversity into the community. Despite this, like "down home," there is a very strong Catholic value system. Still, not being "down home" made her feel safer to find someone to be with and still have that "little Catholic town feeling." (Adèle, Interview) She had some concerns when she first moved because she was not out yet but said that she started dating Christine when she arrived, and that she felt free to do that because she was not in her original hometown. For Adèle, moving to another community in the province allowed her to escape the affect of the internalized territorializations that she felt in her original community. However, that affect still lingered as she kept herself and her partner in the closet for some time.

> I didn't know if some families were going to have issues [with me dating a woman], but I was bringing a lot of hometown baggage to what I thought was going to happen. Like I knew what would happen if I did that down home, so, I, for some reason, thought it would be similar here…but I remember being just terrified the first year just to make sure that I wasn't saying, "Girlfriend." (Adèle, Interview)

It took a long time for her to be comfortable enough to engage in public displays of affection with Christine because she did not want to be stared at, and she did not want it to be a problem at

work. However, Adèle was outed to her students by a colleague[9] and since then is very open with her students about Christine. She said, "It's not an issue anymore and it's very known and no one really talks about it." (Adèle, Interview) Because Adèle's partner is known in the school their relationship is also known in the community. Adèle says,

> I think if I would have kept her hidden, I think we would have probably been a part of the
> culture that would have been here. It would have been the "shamed same-sexed partners"
> if I had of done that. (Adèle, Interview)

Adèle's comment suggests that there was a rural culture of heteronormativity in which same-sexed partners were either historically shamed or made to feel shame, or perhaps both, keeping them in the closet. Whether this is true in this community, which I suspect it was given the nature of heteronormativity in the rural space, or whether these are remnants of territorialization found in her home community, it is clear that Adèle and her partner have both found belonging within the community.

She shares many examples of this belonging. Christine volunteers at the school dances and holiday concerts, "so, the kids have just learned to know her, and they see her as someone who *belongs* at the school." (Adèle, Interview) Students treat her and her partner like family— "like we're the aunts that they've never had." (Adèle, Interview). The students will also scream after them in public when they see them together. Adèle said,

> I know the French community here has really welcomed me and my girlfriend into their
> community, and they know her by name, and when they go to where she works, they talk
> to her and they ask her how I'm doing, so it's opened their minds…I think they accept the

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[9] This is explored fully in a vignette written by Adèle and appears in a later chapter.

visibility of it, even if it's not what they accept for their own family, or their own individual preference. (Adèle, Interview)

Adèle says that the French community has accepted her as one of their own and she feels safe in this rural community and expands on this by explaining that she was familiar to the community because as a teenager she used to go there often.

They already knew me as someone of their community, so I think they've accepted me from the get-go, whereas other teachers that are not from here, (they don't identify in the community, but they're not from here) they're not as accepted by the people yet because they're still outsiders…So, I think my sexual identity was also accepted with me, because they accepted me…whereas, down home I think they've also accepted me because I'm one of theirs, and the ones who get harassed from down home are not originally from home…So in the rural aspect I feel safe because I was already part of the group. (Adèle, Interview)

Returning to Mary L. Gray's (2009) writing, she says that belonging in the rural comes down to a familiarity within the community and how "…one's reputation as a familiar local is valued above all other identity claims… (p. 31)." This can be seen in Adèle's claim that in her current community they already knew her because she used to go to the community when she was younger and, similarly, she is accepted "down home" because she is from there, whereas other people, both queer and straight, it can be implied, who are new to the community struggle to fit in, initially. Thus, Adèle's Acadian and Catholic identity seems to lead to acceptance of her queer identity offering her a sense of safety within the community and even "down home." This is a nuance that is missing in her previous accounts of queer people being run out town. Adèle

also discussed how this familiarity can actually lead to change, or deterritorializations, in rural

communities.

> I also think the rural gets a little bit of a bad rap about not being able to change. I think
>
> love can change anyone, so if people care about you as a person first, I think it's easier
>
> for them to transition their personal thought to a more open…way of thinking. And I also
>
> think a rural community allows people to get to know each other better. (Adèle,
>
> Interview)

People being able to change is exemplified in Adèle's stories of her family, and I think,

holds much potential for utopic possibilities in the rural space. There is no doubt that the

presence of Adèle and Christine in both communities create deterritorializations. Adele's story of

her great-grandmother and aunt who accepted them, the students who treat them like the aunts

they never had — it may be *familiarity* that enables these deterritorializations to occur.

Queerness becomes welcomed/accepted by community members because they know the queer

individual. I also feel quite accepted by particular family members and people within my home

community who I did not feel accepted by in my childhood and youth. One might equate

familiarity with other seemingly rural attributes such as tradition, maintaining compulsory

heterosexuality, prescribing to strict gender norms, and other territorializing notions. Indeed, it is

the familiarity of small communities that may push queer people out of them to the larger urban

spaces where they can blend in, where they can become unfamiliar. However, at the same time,

the familiar can obviously provide a safety where deterritorializations are possible. The

deterritorializations are two-fold here, community members who might not have accepted queer

people then may change their views when that person is a family member/teacher/friend, and as

the queer person feels more welcomed and that they belong, they may also begin to deterritorialize themselves from any internalized struggles they had.

With that said, I am not sure if Adèle would have felt so comfortable dating Christine if she still lived "down home" and it may be that moving to another community in the rural, even though she was known there, opened her up to deterritorialize herself further. Waitt and Johnston (2016) write that for queers who move to, within, or out of the country, migration can be viewed as the "spatiality of subjectivity…Migration offers possibilities for the transformation of self through how movement can evoke a sense of belonging as well as alienation." (p.146) Migration is deterritorialization in the literal sense, one is spatially deterritorializing from a territorialized location that may have been territorializing to the person living there. As we see with Adèle's story, moving from "down home" created the conditions where she could deterritorialize her current community, her old community, and herself, as the distance created the opportunity to embrace her queerness.

I also shared with the group the *belonging* and *alienation* I felt when returning to my hometown during the Covid-19 pandemic and how I have found other communities within the rural space that I felt much more belonging in. I shared,

> I think for me, what stands out, is that I'm currently in my hometown, but…this is not where I feel the most comfortable in all of the rural places that I've lived in. I have family support here and I do have friends here, but at the same time, I also have a history of ambivalence here, in this particular town. Growing up queer here in the 80's, you know, that's always with me while I'm here, like I find it hard to leave that behind. But at the same time, I feel that I made a home in another rural community here, in an adjacent one, and that's what I wrote about. Even though I have family and friends here I really

wouldn't consider this particular place as my home, as much as I would the community I

wrote about. (Renny, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)[10]

I then asked the group what it meant to establish a home in other rural communities outside of

our childhood ones, as this was something that we all have done. Adèle does feel like she

belongs in her current community, but she also said that there is another community in Nova

Scotia where she found belonging and could imagine creating a "home" in. This is the university

community where she went to school. In exploring this community and comparing it to "down

home" in our interview, Adèle said,

> I think my favourite place in the world is this community. I think I'd be able to live there
>
> now, with the way that it has changed. It has developed a lot towards accepting…and
>
> normalizing all kinds of identities, so I think I could actually live there, but I still don't
>
> think that I could live at home. (Adèle, Interview)

In answering my question in the focus group, Adèle expanded on her university community and

said,

> I always felt comfortable when I lived there. I know a lot of people there just because of
>
> organizations and community groups in the French community and I always felt a
>
> belonging to there too… I do feel like home there and I think that it would probably
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> englobe me in every aspect: culturally, sexual orientation-wise, and just everything
>
> together. Which is another place I look for jobs. (Adèle, Discussion, Home and
>
> Belonging in Community)

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[10] I share these vignettes in the next chapter as they are about finding kinship groups in the rural.

She explored just how much the community had changed by discussing how it hosted a Pride week that she participated in, noting that it was held virtually. It is easy to find utopia in this event for Adèle. She said,

> There were LGBTQ authors…they had a dance with a French DJ…an Acadian drag queen came and showed us a makeup tutorial and we were all following along. We did beadwork, and some point painting on rocks, and it was all people that were identifying in the community, or allies, so it started a lot of the conversation of, "Oh I didn't know you were part of the community, too" — people I was already part of another community with…. I really enjoyed it because I do have a very strong belonging to that French community. It helped me a lot to be able to celebrate both of my identities at the same time. (Adèle, Interview)

Within this description, the utopia manifests through celebratory and fun activities that encompassed both aspects of her identity, cultural and sexual; for example, a queer dance with a French DJ and an Acadian drag queen. There was also utopia in finding other queer Acadian people who she did not know were in the queer community.

As a brief, but important, aside, the university's Pride Week was likely online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but this is a prime example of deterritorializations and utopia occurring in the rural through the Internet as a boundary public, (Gray, 2009) where Pride was accessible online and open to the entire province. The university's Pride Week was a boundary public because it was both public to anyone who might search for it on the Internet, but also can be imperceptible for community members unaware of it — a double-edged sword in some cases — as the imperceptibility of the event may keep it hidden from rural queers who could benefit from accessing the space, such as youth or queer folx looking to create community. However, a

boundary public also maintains a somewhat safer space from community members who might not agree with Pride events in the province. Had the Pride Week typically been held in person, it would still likely be a boundary public, because often the general public are not aware of activities occurring at the university. In her interview, Adèle spoke about going into a coffee shop in her current community to discover a queer event happening that was facilitated by the university near her, and having no idea it was happening. (Adèle, Interview). In any case, the Pride Week at her old university also bolstered the idea for Adèle that her university community was becoming a safer and more welcoming place and one in which she could actually settle and belong in someday.

Rachel also spent time in her interview explaining her experience with moving to another community in the rural space. She discussed how she and her wife moved to their current county because she got a permanent teaching position, and her wife also works at a family-owned business there. Her parents had also recently moved to this community the year before "so everything was kinda pulling us down this way." (Rachel, Interview) Rachel, like Adèle and myself, has also lived in various places within the province. Rachel's home was in another county, and she and her wife had lived in Halifax for three years, and in another city in another province for four years. However, she currently regards three adjacent towns as feeling like "home." Rachel defined her community and home "as not just the village, but when I think about home it's the community I've made in this region." (Rachel, Interview) Rachel explained how she established extremely close friendships in these communities, as well, and conceptualizes community as "a little bit broader than just a little village," noting that this might be the way that rural space functions. Speaking from a Nova Scotia perspective, our jobs have us in districts by region and, therefore, one often becomes friends with colleagues from adjacent counties, or you

might have family in these counties. For example, I taught within three adjacent rural communities and made many connections in all of them. In one of them, particularly, I made many friends and kinship groups, and much like Adèle's university community, I do consider an adjacent county to my childhood "home" as somewhere I could return to in the future and happily live. Bera has also established contacts in their neighbouring community through their involvement in that community's Pride group. Jenna also moved between communities and is from three different provinces within Canada with established roots, friends and family. When asked if she would ever want to move, Jenna said she has thought of moving to another larger town in the province because she knows that there is a younger demographic but a similar feel to her current town. Again, for Jenna, it is about the demographics. She said that she does like the city space and it's great to see more diverse queer people there but that she likes the rural because there are reduced class sizes, and the kids are great: "It's hard to leave when you've got a good thing going." (Jenna, Interview) She also said that her mom lived in the town and that having family there is nice.

Thus, if belonging is not found in one particular rural community, then perhaps one might search for it in other rural communities, disrupting notions of the rural to urban drift that pervades the literature. As Rachel and Adèle have written, sometimes one does have to leave their childhood "home" space in order to deterritorialize and create a new "home" somewhere else. In a study on "lesbian affective home journeys" in the rural, which I would say is generalizable beyond lesbians, Waitt and Johnston (2016) say, "Lesbians [queer people] may become mobile subjects because of the ways they are policed by discourses defining appropriate gendered and sexual behavior in the parental home. The movement here is triggered by becoming a "stranger" in their childhood home." (p. 141). Both Rachel and Adèle aptly describe

this phenomena. In Adèle's and Rachel's cases, however, this is not the move to the city, but the search for home in other rural locations. Waitt and Johnston (2016) contrast this rural to urban drift with "…multiple, peripatetic, and ongoing journeys" (p. 147) between neighbouring rural communities, as well. One can see here how moving to the city, away from any territorializations felt in a small rural town, would produce many deterritorializations, but importantly, how even moving to another rural community in the same province can allow for deterritorializations to occur.

To conclude, this chapter used two vignettes from our first focus group session as a springboard to discuss the search for belonging in the rural. The first was Jenna's story about the search for a queer community which led us to discuss how difficult this was for all of us. The second story was Adèle's first vignette about the ambivalence of belonging "down home," as well as how she was able to find belonging in another rural community.[11] This was put in conversation with Rachel's and my own experience of finding belonging in communities that we were not raised in. Jenna and Bera would also leave their childhood communities and build lives and relationships in other rural communities. Much like Waitt and Johnston's (2016) rural queer migration narrative, our individual narratives are beginning to show "…multiple, peripatetic, and ongoing journeys," (p. 147) that involve the search to belong in the rural space; the search to create a "home." I wish to end with Bera's reflection on this topic. They wrote,

> *And I wonder, what is home? Is it people? Is it place? Is it a decision? Is it a feeling? I*
>
> *have had profound experiences of connection particularly over the last few years, but*

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[11] This chapter had a large focus on Adèle's experiences. The next chapter has a large focus on Rachel's and my own experiences. We did not all write and speak equally about the same concepts. In fact, Bera and Jenna shared more content about their experiences in school and, therefore, they have more presence in the *Belonging in Schools Findings* section than in this one.

they have been widely diverse in terms of location, prompting and participants. Is seeking home a desire to hold onto those moments of connection and live in them? Some of them still resound and send a shiver down my spine when I touch them. (Bera, Debrief Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

I was so affected by these questions and reflected how I wanted to know some of these *moments of connection*, and how the reader might love to know about these moments too; those affective moments that send shivers down our spines, as we seek to understand further where "home" can be found for us as rural queers. The next chapter explores some of these *moments of connection* in great detail; the belonging that can lead to feelings of "home" in and with various spaces and people in the rural, while not forgetting the territorializing forces that always exist "next door" to the "homes" we create.

Chapter 7: "Sideways Communities," Kinship, and Ghosts

In the last chapter, we explored the search for belonging in our rural communities and how difficult this can often be. I ended the chapter with the possibility of finding belonging in adjacent rural communities, as all of us have created "homes" in the rural that were not in our childhood homes. This chapter is grounded in three narratives by Rachel and myself that explore how belonging can be found within kinship groups in the rural space. A theme that originates from these stories is that kinship groups can provide a degree of protection for queer people in the rural that enable moments of utopia. This brought me to the writings of W.E.B DuBois and his concept of "double consciousness." Applying this notion to queer people in the rural space means that queer people need to navigate heteronormativity/homophobia in the rural, but are able to maintain a sense of self, and find utopic moments, through community and kinship. However, despite the protections offered by kinship groups, Rachel writes how the "ghosts of heteronormativity" are always "next door." A direct line of flight from Rachel's vignette, thus, would bring me to analyze our experiences through the lens of Avery Gordon's (2008) "affective hauntings," which manifest as territorializations and reterritorializations in our lives.

Rachel's vignette for the *Home and Belonging in Community* prompt explored finding a community in which she could foster belonging. This feeling of belonging was connected to the establishment of queer kinship within her rural community. Her vignette would lead us into a lengthy discussion of the importance of supportive kinship and familial groups in the rural space. She prefaced her vignette with the following,

> I think my piece is about feeling really grounded and rooted where I am and it's not
>
> something that we expected. You know, we very nearly moved out West, so I could find
>
> teaching work in a remote community, but then we really liked where we were, and we

ended up moving more rural …and I feel really settled here. We've kind of built a really cool chosen family. But I also feel like it was totally kind of happenstance and luck, we just happened to meet the right people… (Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

There are two things to note about this preface. The first is that when Rachel talks about finding a location to settle in, her goal was not to move to a city, but possibly to a remote community out West, until finally settling in a very rural space within Nova Scotia. Rachel and her partner enjoy the country life which is exemplified in her vignette. Additionally, she stressed to the group that she thinks it is happenstance that she did find her "queer kin" in the rural space, an act of care, perhaps, as many group members reflected upon how difficult it has been to find queer kinship groups in the rural. After sharing Rachel's vignette, I examine how important it has been for her to find queer kin in the rural, and how these kinship groups can produce utopic and deterritorializing spaces within the rural. Rachel wrote,

> *What does it mean to belong? I remember listening to a podcast interview with Dr. Lindo Bacon, whose body of research has been on the notion of radical belonging for queer and other marginalized people, on community-building and resistance and the generative energy that comes from building communities of our own — I remember hearing them speak as my wife and I were driving and thinking, yes, that's it….*

> *I used to not have queer friends incidentally. I remember our aunts — longtime lesbian activists who cut their teeth in the 70s and 80s — being bewildered that, first, we didn't socialize exclusively with other lesbians (at that time, I knew one lesbian — and I was married to her) and second, that we'd subject ourselves to a rural existence. And for a long time, I didn't "get" the first part of that — I didn't make friends because of their*

queerness, just like I wouldn't make friends because of, I don't know, their astrological sign.

But I get it now, I really do. Because there is a belonging — a being seen — by queer people, a generative power, a crackling life force, that just… doesn't exist outside of marginalized communities…

Rural life is both space and claustrophobia. We live in a house on a hill surrounded by woods that go clear across the province (except for the clearcuts). We could walk and walk and walk and see no one but birds and nothing but lakes and trees and sometimes mushrooms. But it's also suffocating, sometimes: everyone knows everyone and when you're not from here… (and as an aside, not being from this county, I grew up 30 minutes away, I'm a 'come-from-away') when you're not from here you don't fit the schema. You exist outside of the script. But I can do that; I know how to do that.

There are two worlds here, or maybe a thousand intersecting worlds. There's the realm of the folks who've 'always' lived here, who go about their lives in the paths of their forebearers, a thousand iterations of the same patterns. And then there's the rest of us, the come-from-aways — and because we're unmoored from the particular histories of this place, we're also free.

Belonging is walks deep in the woods and discovering new roads and pathways with new friends who soon become chosen family. It's staying up late and reading bad plays and realizing, together, that those words don't represent us — not any of us, that we're far off script. It's helping each other paint houses and do renovations and build a greenhouse. It's backyard conversations as the summer sun sets that start with, "I don't

know, where are you with gender identity right now?" and end with, "Yeah, just hold on, I'll grab you some seeds from our kale."

Belonging is taking up space because the country doesn't belong to the folks who can name every single person who used to live in every house on the street. So, here's where I've arrived: this place feels like home because I've side-stepped into a universe just a few inches to the left of the place I wouldn't want to be. I peered around corners and looked down wood-lined roads and I found some other folks who live in the slightly sideways world, where everything is a bit brighter, and the light diffuses softer, and we feel wild and alive. And the people here have clear eyes and see me for who I am, and I see them for who they are, and we hold each other in our hearts. We let the woods grow deep and dark around us, and it sounds like serenity and feels like peace. And even though a few inches to the right, there are people — like ghosts — living their own lives, they can't quite touch our world. (Rachel, Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

To begin, Rachel expanded on two themes from the last chapter. The first was the idea of finding and making queer friends in the rural. In the vignette she reminds that just because one meets someone belonging to the queer community it does not mean that you have anything in common, and, thus, for the longest time having queer-identified friends was not a priority for her. However, she said that one can be "seen" by other queer people, and that it is the feeling of "being seen" that creates the feeling of belonging in the rural space. Second, she writes about finding belonging in a *new* community in the rural. As Adèle said, people who move into new communities may struggle until they become familiar to the community, but Rachel adds a nuance to this point, observing how "come from aways" may have more freedom because they are not as enmeshed within the "norms" and histories of that particular community, unlike the

people who have lived there for generations; "a thousand iterations of the same patterns." Thus, as a "come from away," for Rachel, there *is* space and claustrophobia. The latter because everyone knows everyone else. One can be watched and talked about by their neighbors, as the outsider, however, at the same time there is space, and as Rachel says, there is freedom.

The rural is both space and claustrophobia and there are two worlds within the rural space, or perhaps many intersecting worlds, according to Rachel. This idea of "two worlds" lead me on a line of flight to Du Bois' work on "double consciousness" and "twoness." Theresa A. Martinez (2002) places these Du Boisian concepts in conversation with the feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "mestiza consciousness." Martinez argues that these concepts are related as they "represent resonant forms of oppositional culture or consciousness within a matrix of domination." (p. 158) According to Du Bois, a *double consciousness* is the result of living in a colonial white dominant society, where a "twoness" is created that is both American (in the context of his writing) and black (p. 170). According to Anzaldúa, a *mestiza consciousness* emerges from colonization, as well. Being mestiza means to be of mixed heritage — Indigenous and Spanish. Martinez writes that a mestiza consciousness "takes on more significant ramifications in Anzaldúa's work, signifying…a blending, an amalgam of cultures, sexual orientations, colors, and ideas. Further, it means learning to cope with and survive within this amalgamation." (p. 171) Anzaldúa extends Du Bois analogy to include gender and sexuality, as patriarchy also became solidified with colonization as well as the creation of binary categorizations: white/black, male/female, masculine/feminine, and straight/queer, the latter of each binary given the status of "other." (Lesko, 1996; Martinez, 2002) Aware of the criticisms of applying critical race scholarship to the experiences of the five of us who are all white, it is still important to recognize the commonalities between intersections of oppression, especially when

theory offers avenues to deterritorialize. José Itzigsohn and Karida Brown (2015) apply Du Boisian concepts to the field of sociology defining "twoness" as how one's, "self-formation is affected by taking the position of the two communities to which they belong — the dominant community that denies their humanity and their own community which is a source of support and an arena of agency." (p. 238) Further, Martinez (2002) uses the work of Mitchell and Feagin (1995) to elaborate how this agency can lead to a "culture of resistance" against domination. She states that,

> Subjugated groups will draw on their own cultural resources to resist domination. Such groups will generate a 'culture of resistance' or oppositional culture that embodies 'a coherent set of values, beliefs, and practices which mitigates the effects of oppression and reaffirms that which is distinct from the majority culture.'
>
> (As cited in Martinez, 2002, p. 160)

For any minoritized person in the rural, the experience can be looked upon as a space of "double consciousness." (Du Bois, 1903) Marginalized populations must live within the structures of a white, cishet, male-dominant colonial rural tradition that still persists today; however, they are able to create their own communities within the rural space that is also separate and offers some protection from the constant encroachments of this dominant group. For example, looking at Nova Scotia historically, as a result of colonization and settler colonial laws there are a number of reserves across the province. There are also many Black Loyalist communities spread throughout the province which were, of course, segregated from white communities, as well as distinct Acadian communities that were re-established after the Great Deportation. Although the racist, imperialist discourses of colonialism created these segregated communities, one thing they might foster is the space to breathe within a culture of one's own, offering some protective

factors against the dominant culture that would prefer assimilation and subordination. Thus, Rachel's assessment of many intersecting worlds, or many intersectional minoritized experiences, within a structure of two worlds that divides the dominant group from the minoritized, is accurate. Thinking about these concepts in terms of queer rural community, one might assume that we do not have such protective factors because, as the group has already elucidated, it can be very difficult to find other queer community members in the rural space. Noting that the rural space is traditionally white and heterosexual, I argue that double consciousness for queer-identified people is certainly applicable but also nuanced. White-identified queers may struggle to find a queer community to support them in the rural, but they do fit within whiteness, a privilege that must certainly be recognized. As well, black, Indigenous and queers of color who, *if* they struggle to find queer community within their own cultural community as well as in the "dominant" one, may struggle. In both cases, the queer world may feel more solitary, as if it is them, alone, versus the dominant social order. Searching for and finding a queer community then creates a "twoness" (for queers of color – a 'threeness,' perhaps, or beyond depending upon intersectional oppressions) that offers a protective space. Thus, when one is able to find one's people, these protections are possible. Itzigsohn and Brown (2015) explain that,

> There is a constant tension running through Du Bois's work between the description of the oppressiveness of the racialized world and the constant striving of racialized subjects to shape their world. Du Bois's portrayal of the racialized world is not merely one of oppression and suffering but also one of dignity, self-assertion, and creativity. (p. 238)

Du Bois said an implication of "twoness" is that minoritized groups have a "second sight." Du Bois says that within the twoness, there is a "veil" that separates the minoritized world from that

of the dominant one and that being able to see through the veil is a "gift," in that black people know how the white world operates and because of this "the double-consciousness is aware of and manifestly strives against domination for a greater goal." (Martinez, 2002, p. 170) Thus, in the everyday lives of black people there is religion, music, literature, and art and the "ability to shape their selves and their world." (p. 240) Muñoz calls this "disidentification" which, "focuses on the way in which dominant signs and symbols, often ones that are toxic to minoritized subjects, can be reimagined… a world-making project in which the limits of the here and now are traversed and transgressed." (Muñoz, 2009, p. 169)

Rachel begins to explore these possibilities for "new worlds" in her vignette. This is, essentially, the *radical belonging* through both community building and resistance which she effectively describes and which I will excerpt again here because of its importance,

> *This place feels like home because I've side-stepped into a universe just a few inches to the left of the place I wouldn't want to be… I peered around corners and looked down wood-lined roads and I found some other folks who live in the slightly-sideways world… And the people here have clear eyes and see me for who I am, and I see them for who they are, and we hold each other in our hearts. And even though a few inches to the right, there are people — like ghosts — living their own lives, they can't quite touch our world.* (Rachel, Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

Rachel, when talking of the "other folks" in her "slightly-sideways world" is, of course, talking about her queer kin that she has established in her community. They are her "gaggle," and they see her for who she is because they are also part of the queer community. Thus, applying the idea of "double consciousness" to Rachel's vignette, it is as if she and her queer kin are living in two worlds: the heteronormative rural world and her own queer world with her kin.

In Rachel's queer world there is much utopia. It can be found in the "utopia of everyday habit" as conceptualized by Cvetkovich. I will first examine the utopic possibilities in Rachel's vignette. Cvetkovich writes that the "utopia of everyday habit" is bound up in searching for everyday joys and pleasures that exceed heteronormativity. Thus, small moments within the rural space with queer-identified kin are utopic because there is a shared understanding of each other's lives, where they do not have to explain their lives to straight-identified neighbours, and there is freedom to be themselves. For Rachel, it is the everyday utopia of painting houses, building greenhouses and assisting with renovations, giving out seeds from their kale, and walking down tree-lined roads *as well as* the queer work of deconstructing heteronormative plays and discussing gender identity *with* her queer kin; both of which create a separate queer world in the rural and deterritorializes the rural space. Like Du Bois' "double consciousness" there is the awareness that the "ghosts" exist outside this bubble in their own "sideways communities," but it is within the safety of her queer kin group that moments of utopia are fostered, where the kinship group "shapes their own world," where they offer a protection to each other.

When I transcribed this vignette, I cried. I cried at the singular affective beauty of "sideways" communities that protect us from the "ghosts" of heteronormativity surrounding us. For me, this was MacLure's (2013) "data that glows" – an affective statement that is felt in its intensity. MacLure describes how a detail can grab the listener's or reader's attention and lead to sensations in the body such as "excitement, energy, laughter, silliness." (p. 661) When this affect is "felt," a becoming has happened (p. 662). For me it was the utopic deterritorializing power of looking at rural queer life through this lens and realizing that the vignette I had written for this session also involved my own moments of utopia with a queer kinship group in my own "sideways" community.

I would return to Rachel's idea of a "sideways" community many times —it was a line of flight for the study. Others were also moved by Rachel's vignette. Jenna agreed with Rachel's analogy about the "ghosts" and said, "Even though we exist with them, I don't really see them either, you know. It's like, they're there, but I'm like, 'Well, let's keep on keeping on.'" (Jenna, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community). Rachel replied that a sideways community feels like "it's almost like we're just on a *slightly different plane of existence…*like rural life doesn't just exist for them, it's ours too. The rural spaces belong to me and to us, not just to them." (Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community). Bera also felt that Rachel's vignette described the hauntings in their own life and the feeling of living out of step,

> A number of years ago… I left Christianity about the same time I was coming out…I stepped away from the cisgender community, stepped away from the Christian community and discovered there's a whole other community there that I didn't know existed…that idea of stepping into a *different plane of existence*. I've got friends who are cishet, and we interact well, you know, get along fine, but I'm seen differently by my queer friends, they see me in a completely…they get something that the cishet friends just can't… (Bera, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Of course, something that resonates very profoundly with me is that both Rachel and Bera are discussing alternate "planes of existence" in these queer "sideways communities." I did not discuss my philosophical orientation with the participants, and therefore, a discussion about a clearly Deleuzo-Guattarian notion was a utopic moment for me as the researcher. In a study that seeks to note territorializations and to map deterritorializations, it is amazingly powerful that my group members discussed how they have aspired towards deterritorialization by creating queer planes of existence that are separate from heteronormative structures. This is not a criticism of

our straight friends and allies, but, as Bera pointed out, it can be easier to have queer-identified friends who we do not have to explain our lives to, because they understand. In discussing both her kinship groups and her parents, Rachel said that she knows she can talk to them about anything, "and they get it, which is cool, because sometimes someone can have really good intentions, but they don't understand in that deeper way." (Rachel, Interview) For Rachel, having queer people she can rely on and who she does not need to educate is key; it is utopic. Similar to Rachel, Jenna wants a queer kinship group in her community. She does not want to educate people all the time. "You can have many people that have learned your experience, but unless someone lived your experience, it's hard… people who have lived the experience are so helpful to talk to about these things." (Jenna, Interview)

Bera also discussed the boundary public of Facebook and how over the past decade even their friend group has shifted to friends who identity as queer, and that after events like County Pride they get a boost in their friend requests. Importantly, Bera reflected that, "breaking that isolation is a big piece of safety, of knowing that there are other people in your area. You don't have to leave to be who you are and to be safe." (Bera, Interview) This supports the notion of how important it is to find community in the rural and returns me to my original hypothesis that the rural is not a place that necessarily needs to be escaped from. Adèle also mentioned the deterritorializing power of both Rachel's kinship and material protections. She said,

> You probably do live in the house that belongs to so and so, and they're watching every move you make, and every change you make to the property and are like, 'Oh, she's just ruining us.' But I just thought it was really great how you were able to create that serenity for yourself and all the while knowing that…the conflict lives outside of that dome that

you've created for yourself, surrounded by trees. (Adèle, Discussion, Home and

Belonging in Community)

Not only might Rachel change the house and the property, but she and her wife are also queering

the house, with their queer kin, in "the dome, surrounded by trees." Adèle's love for this vignette

demonstrates the utopic power of such a deterritorializing vision. It may also have influenced

Adèle to think further about her and her partner's own deterritorializing power in their own

community.

I also wrote two vignettes for this session that speak to the deterritorializing power of

rural queer kinship groups. Like Rachel's vignette, the setting was in a community that was not

my childhood community. I shared,

> *The following is about finding my kin in the rural. In 2009 I took a job at a school*
>
> *in the town next to my hometown and I moved to this community. I didn't know anyone*
>
> *there so I felt that this would be an adventure, but I was also worried about the move. It*
>
> *was in this community that I found a new kinship family. At the new school, I met two*
>
> *teacher's assistants, Katie and Leona, and we became fast friends. Katie and I*
>
> *particularly bonded over our love of Broadway, all things theatre, superhero movies, and*
>
> *showtunes (Ah, the stereotypes). Katie and I became inseparable, hanging out all the*
>
> *time. I would eventually find out that Katie was queer too, and her best friend, Josie, who*
>
> *was also queer, soon became, as we affectionately call ourselves, 'Besties.' Katie then*
>
> *introduced me to her parents, who I eventually would call Mama R and Big Daddy.*
>
> *Mama R was a small slight woman with an infectious laugh. Big Daddy is, as his name*
>
> *suggests, a big, leather-clad, bike-riding man with a garage full of Harley Davidson*
>
> *paraphernalia. He scared the hell out of me a little at first, until I realized he was a big*

softie. Mama R, Katie and I spent hours driving around our small community, going to yard sales in the summer, and attending weekly brunches at the Jungle Jim's restaurant. They became my second family. Big Daddy's mother and aunt then got in on our times together. Family pictures of us all sit on my shelf. I am one of theirs.

Vignette 2.

A few years back, it was time to leave my small community to go to Toronto and further my education. I was turning 40 just weeks before I was to leave, and my friend Leona decided we would have a birthday/going away party. She organized everything, with my input of course. I had really made a home in this community over the last 6 years. I had great friends from my school, and I also got involved with the local theatre and made wonderful friends. Leona invited them all to my party. We decided to hold the party in a Legion Hall in the community and about 40 of our/my mutual friends and family arrived. It was amazing to me because I had attended many such gatherings in these locations, but this was different. The food was cooked and brought by friends and family and laid out on the table, like any straight wedding reception, funeral, or community benefit I had ever been to, but it strikes me now, in this Legion, how this became a space where queerness and a bit of camp were on display. Leona had gotten a throne and crown from the local theatre for me to sit on, along with a wand that said, 'Fabulous and 40.' The cake was a hot pink concoction with a tiara on it. We had props and costumes for people to try on to take pictures: feather boas, Dame Edna glasses, and tiaras. I think it was pretty fabulous. I felt loved. I knew when I left, that I was leaving behind beautiful family and kinship groups. I also know, while writing this, that the

community was not free from intolerance and homophobia, but in this moment, I felt safe.

(Renny, Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

Analyzing the first vignette, this community would become a second home for me with many new queer and straight kin and a new "found" family with Katie, Mama R and Big Daddy. Katie's grandmother also became "Gran," continuing my tradition of finding grandmothers in the rural space. What I find very interesting is that this community also happens to be the same one that Rachel struggled in as a youth, which supports the earlier discussion that sometimes you must escape your childhood community to deterritorialize the self. Neither Rachel nor I have these kinds of kinship group in our "childhood communities." It may also speak to how communities do and have changed as the stifling and suffocating affect that Rachel attaches to this community is one that I cannot even imagine. However, it may also be that I just found my "people" and that we protect each other from the "ghosts" that are there, as I allude to in my final sentence. Perhaps, Rachel recognized this also as she was the first to speak after I shared. She said,

> Those [stories] were beautiful, and I think what really stood out to me was sometimes it's just about finding those one or two people who then open up this secret world for you. And I just think, in particular, I was struck by the idea of kind of being adopted into a family network and a community network that exists and kind of finding that you just are that right piece that fits. (Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Jenna also discussed finding her person in the rural, who is not part of the queer community. In her interview, I asked Jenna if she felt welcomed in her community when she first moved there. She said that in her first year she met a teacher across the hall who became her best friend, and they now live in the same apartment building, "and so I quickly found my person, which I think

without that, I don't think I would be here at all…When you find somebody that you're just besties with, it's like, 'That's great! I can be here. Yeah!'" (Jenna, Interview) Although Jenna wrote about the struggle to find queer community she has met her "person" in her community which makes the community feel like a place she can live in. Kinship does keep people in the rural space.

Rachel asked if I considered this community as home and I said that I did, but I still also consider my hometown as "home." For me, it is because of the many utopic moments that I have had in both with my kin and family. However, in the neighbouring community, I tell the group that there are my queer kin but there are also many straight-identified people there who have also provided friendship and allyship, both personally and professionally. However, much of my belonging in my adjacent community is associated with my found "family." This returns us to Kath Weston's writing on the *families we choose* and how they can become supports for us. Weston describes how queer found familial connections can be made beyond two individuals and how entire groups can be incorporated into a "kinship universe," (p. 109) in which heteronormativity is exceeded. The way we came together to form this "family" is very queer. For example, my mom also became part of this new family and would often attend many of our functions with us. I suddenly had two queer "sisters," a new "father," two "mothers," another "grandmother" and many new "aunts;" a "family" unit that was not homophobic and supported each other. I shared with the group that the summer before I left to move to Toronto to begin my PhD,

> We all went down to a park in the community — Katie, Mama R, Gran, Katie's aunt,
> Leona, and my mom — and we all got pictures taken on a gazebo in the middle of the
> park and that picture is up in our houses…You know, the three of us, [the besties] are out

and queer, and we're fully accepted by that kinship group. (Renny, Discussion, Home and

Belonging in Community)

The utopia is found in the disruption of the traditional family unit and in the love and support we

have for each other. Adèle's response inferred other utopic moments that we have, indeed, had

together. Adèle replied,

For me, it was the Hallmark moment of your story, where you guys took pictures together

and now it's like on top…of a fireplace, so I was just like, 'Oh, that's like the Hallmark

moment where they're all just looking around at this picture and it's Christmas time and

they're just all together and they're doing all kinds of party games, because it's Christmas,

and it's just everyone together, and that's like family and 'home.'' So, what I saw out of it

was that you were having that moment for yourself, the moment where you felt really

good. (Adèle, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Adèle did not know this at the time, but she was right about the "Hallmark moments." We have

had many moments like this together. I think Adèle inferred this from the birthday/going away

party that Leona held for me, which everyone mentioned above also attended. But there have

been many moments like this that include: Christmas brunches, gift exchanges, going to Katie's

for Christmas Eve dinner cooked by Big Daddy, a Boxing Day movie tradition with the besties,

the weekly brunches, trips and concerts; and many such moments. These are all certainly utopic

moments for me, and I think they might be utopic for Adèle too as she mentions how the

"Hallmark moment" stood out for her. Of course, this is a good example of how these

"Hallmark" moments can be queered. There are no queers in the Hallmark movies, and yet we

can create our own queer Hallmark moments so that we can see ourselves in them. The "queer

Hallmark moment" is about utopia and deterritorialization. In all of these encounters above, my

queerness, as well, as the besties' queerness is always present and openly discussed. There is little need to deterritorialize within the kinship group, but we do deterritorialize our selves in our "sideways" community, as we all realize that we can be our queer selves without any recriminations from the kinship group.

We also do have opportunity to deterritorialize the rural space, as the second vignette suggests, where we did deterritorialize the legion space, even for that evening. I recognized when writing the vignette that the space, typically associated with men, or the many other events that I attended: benefits, wedding receptions, or baby showers, was decidedly queered at my 40th birthday party. As Ahmed exclaims in *Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology (2006)*, a queer body at the family table produces a queer effect where "the table might even become wonky." (p. 568) The legion table (and the space) was certainly wonky the evening of my party (See Figure 6. C*ake and Legion Space).* Jenna responded to this point saying,

> I really loved the idea of…just making like a space that's not necessarily like a queer space to begin with, but like, maybe having this moment of a queer space anywhere. It can be just by the people and by the conversation. (Jenna, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

The legion, much like the church hall in Gray's (2009) study, for that one evening, became a boundary public, where queerness temporarily thrived, and thus, certainly could again. To remind the reader, Gray wrote how the Church, not realizing it, had hired a youth band that was known to be a queer band, and for this one event the space became one where queerness thrived. In both the legion and in the church hall, the public would not expect queerness to be on display in these heteronormative places, exemplifying why they are boundary publics. This also returns us to Detamore's (2013) study where a friendship group ensured a sense of safety in the rural.

The group of queer friends felt safe going to a rural bar because they all had each other and they were also familiar to the community (p. 88). We also generally feel safe when we are together. This returns us to Rachel's point and how kinship groups can serve as a protective factor in the rural. Rachel and I share many queer utopic moments in the rural space with our "kinship" groups where our queerness can thrive. However, this does not mean that reterritorialization does not occur. On the other side of Du Bois' "veil" is where the ghosts reside.

Figure 6. *Cake and Legion Space*
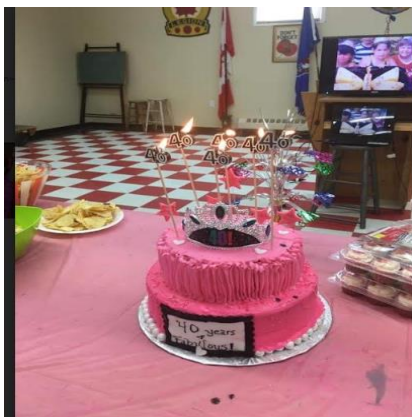
From Kinship to "Ghosts"

Our own queer "sideways" community offers some protection from the ghosts that can invade our queer bubbles. The work of Avery Gordon is applicable here. Thinking about ghosts from Rachel's vignette sent me on a rhizomatic line of flight to Gordon's powerful work, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008*)*, which speaks of the power of hauntings. When Gordon writes of hauntings, these are, of course, not the semi-materialized physical apparitions of story and film, but, perhaps, the ghosts that manifest in our minds; in our thoughts, feelings and memories. Gordon (2008) writes of how authors like Toni Morrison use ghosts as characters in their novels. To create the context for ghostly hauntings, I will focus on Gordon's assessment of Morrison's work, *Beloved*, as it is one that I am familiar with. In the

novel, Sethe, an ex-slave, and her family are haunted by the ghost of her baby, Beloved, now appearing in the flesh as the age she would have been had she lived. Flashbacks to the past (ghosts) show Sethe escaping from her cruel slave master, where she says she lived in happiness until she saw him, or specifically his *hat*, coming up the road in a wagon (p. 203). She then ran with her two daughters and two sons into the barn where she cut the infant Beloved's throat but was stopped before she could kill the remaining children (Morrison, 1987, p 150). Gordon states, "Sethe sees a hat and has to kill her child." (p. 203) Of course, the hat was not just a hat, it represented enslavement. Sethe, affected in the moment by the ghost of her past, was compelled to act in that moment, when she decided she would kill her children rather than see them enslaved. The traumatic ghosts of slavery caused her to act in the present; an action that would have far-reaching implications into the future. The adult child, this ghost, arrives and the family becomes aware of "what is usually invisible or neglected or thought by most to be dead and gone. They recover 'the evidence of things not seen, that paradoxical archive of stammering memory and witnessing lost souls.'" (Baldwin, 1985, as cited in Gordon) Gordon calls this a "seething presence," (p. 195) and the character of Beloved does seethe as she sets about to destroy stability in the home (Morrison, 1987). Sethe must deal with the "living effects, seething and lingering, of what seems over and done with, the endings that are not over." (Gordon, p. 195) Slavery is a ghost that continues to haunt black people; it cannot be relegated to the past because the social conditions of racism, prejudice, violence, and injustice against people of African descent is a result of and continuation of this event. History is the ghost that is always present. Thus, a haunting, like affect, is a social experience (Gordon, p. 201), enacted through social encounters in the past, and reenacted in and through present social encounters. In Morrison's

Beloved, the physical manifestation of Beloved becomes a ghostly metaphor for Sethe's guilt and shame.

Beyond Morrison's physical (yet metaphorical) ghost, how might a ghost make itself known in our lives? One way is through what Walter Benjamin (1978) called "profane illumination," which is an effect comparable to that which is found in surrealist paintings. The surrealists wanted to "bring…to the point of explosion…the immense forces of 'atmosphere concealed in' everyday things" (Gordon, p. 204) — this is affect! Thus, everyday objects, sounds, places and so forth, can carry an atmosphere of remembrance that can bring a ghost into being. Benjamin spoke of "ghostly signals," similar to the object of the hat in *Beloved*, which, at the moment of seeing it, brings up to Sethe the ghosts of being enslaved, forcing her to act. She was signaled by ghostly objects that were, "overlooked, until that one day when they became animated by the *immense forces of atmosphere concealed within them*." (p. 204)

Essentially, all of the objects we wrote about for our "object" prompt were *ghostly objects* as they were able to bring us back to past memories and exude a force upon our present when we remember them. Some are friendly ghosts (Adèle's painting), some are unfriendly (Rachel's quilts) and some border on ambivalence (Bera's rabbit, Jenna's egg, and my lobster trap). The stories we tell are also accessed through affect, and, therefore, our stories can also usher in the ghosts of the past which then manifest in the present.

A second way ghostly affect can be found is through the present encounters we have with people and places. Thus, to return to Du Bois' *twoness* in the rural for queer people, we can acknowledge that we can create some protection from the dominant structures of heteronormativity and homophobia when we are in our own queer kinship groups. But, as we know, the ghosts are still there, outside our "sideways" world, perhaps silent for now, ever

waiting to make themselves known. These ghosts, however, can haunt when they decide to do so. This haunting, in my experience, can be profound when it happens. If one has some protections from the ghosts, be it from belonging in community, or within your own "sideways" community, then when a haunting occurs, the aggregative affect can linger for a long time, as it can draw you back to the events that you experienced as a young person, and the feelings you may have felt then. This realization led me to the debrief vignette I would write for the following week's session. This is also a wonderful example of how Rachel's vignette and our discussion led me to write a vignette with much more aggregative affect than the two I had written the previous week about my kinship group. I wrote,[12]

> *Rachel spoke about those ghosts that exist sideways to her community of queer kin. I think often of the protections that I have in my rural communities. I have some family, friendship groups and particular workplace staff who provide me with a protective bubble where I feel that my queerness, me, is loved, accepted and validated...I draw my face on every day because I like the way I look. I wear one of my pretty scarves and bright-coloured sweaters and I feel so content to be me. I feel good, in no small part because my people have made me feel this way. But then those ghosts arrive to let me know they are there.*

> *Every Christmas my mom and I get together with close friends who are like family. We pick a day and meet for dinner. Recently we went to a restaurant that had a long line at the door. As we stood there, a group of loud men entered behind us. My mom*

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[12] Some of this vignette is modified from an article I published entitled *Searching for Utopia in Rural Queer Narratives* (2021).

was waiting in the car because she has chronic leg pain. The host approached us to say that we should have a table soon. I decided to get Mom. I turned around and said, 'Excuse me,' and the men parted like the Red Sea. As I walked through their stares and snickers, I recognized danger on either side of my body. In a small community, I am (usually blissfully) aware that my shoulder-length hair, foundation-ed face, and long scarves are not considered masculine.

When I came back, walking past the men with my mother, the snickering continued. I saw one of them pretend to kick a cane out of the hand of one of my elderly friends. Then one of them pushed himself into my back, hard. I continued to face forward. One of my friends saw this happening and gave them dirty looks. I felt terrified she would say something to them. I knew what a confrontation could bring, and I had no plan to get bashed on that day. I felt relieved when we were finally brought to a table. However, I also felt embarrassed that this had happened in front of my loved ones, as if it were my fault. I tried to pretend like nothing had happened, but for me, the encounter hung in the air throughout the dinner.

The ghost of past experiences with these men, who were once boys, boys like the ones who harassed and called me names for years, invaded my protective bubble, they haunted me for some time after. And then gradually I forget, the bubble closes, cocoons, but I know they are out there. (Renny, Debrief Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community).

I feel a protective bubble when I am with my found family and kin. They represent a place of safety for me in the rural. However, this vignette demonstrates how that bubble can be invaded by the ghosts of homophobia, past and present. The first point I must make is that within the

bubble I often do not recognize that I am queering and, therefore, deterritorializing the rural space. However, the actions of the men at the restaurant do, indeed, suggest that this is what I am doing because their response is for them to attempt to reterritorialize me. My disruption of rural hetero/cis normativity by my "feminine" presentation caused a violent reaction from these very "masculine" presenting men, even within the public space of the restaurant. Importantly, I already *knew* this encounter because I had experienced it before in the past, when I was verbally and physically harassed by boys throughout my childhood and youth. It must be recognized how the reterritorialization attempt is *known* and *felt*. It brought me back to how I felt as a child where it did, momentarily, cause me to internally reterritorialize my self. The aggregative affect of embarrassment, or perhaps more aptly, shame, that was felt was because I now saw myself as I thought my family must have been seeing me, as someone to be pitied because I dared be different. The ghost of this internalized shame, born in the name-calling and harassment of my youth, reappears in that moment, and, as I note, the affect stayed with me for some time after. It did not, however, actually make me stop presenting as "feminine," in the rural space because to do so would mean giving up the well-earned queer territory I have made in the rural, and, thus, this reterritorialization was only momentary.

It is clear that the affect attached to this story also affected the group. Rachel followed up by thanking me for sharing and said that she had "a visceral body reaction to that description" and that the story was "hard to hear and live through with you, so I'm sure it was hard to write and share." (Rachel, Debrief Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community) Adèle also expressed how she was worried that I was going to be in danger and that was all she could think about until she realized I was going to be safe. It was only then that she could form a thought about the content. This speaks to the power of our writing and the affective relationships that we

were building with each other over these group sessions. It may also speak to how my group members are very aware of these ghosts from their own experiences. Part of Rachel's "visceral body reaction" could be her own remembered experiences with homophobia. Ghost stories can also remind people of their own ghosts.

Rachel also discussed what happens when the "two spheres collide," the protective queer bubble and the heteronormative world, and that "it takes time to heal from that, to re-establish that bubble, to re-establish that cocoon." (Rachel, Debrief Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community). This reminded Bera of how this can also affect children and how in their school a teacher was doing a lesson on gender stereotypes and because the child's parents did not police such gender norms the child could not believe that such stereotypes existed,

> That wasn't part of his world, and it was a little traumatizing for him to realize there are people who still think that way. You know, it just wasn't part of his bubble, and so, when you talked about…that collision of very different worlds, I see some similarities there… Suddenly this other world crashes in and causes trauma, causes upset, and for him, it just escalated because he didn't know what to do with this. I mean he's a kid. And I just think of how many queer kids have experienced what you describe. They don't have the maturity, they don't have the support, in many cases, to deal with that collision, and how difficult that is for kids. (Bera, Debrief Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

For queer children, childhood is where the ghosts are born for the first time, where children's first forays into disrupting hetero norms, often within a bubble of their own making, brings about this collision. Like an ozone layer, the bubble can heal itself, but it is constantly poked and prodded and sometimes broken throughout our lives. Bera is very familiar with the ghosts

invading their own protective bubble. This comes up in the retelling of a traumatic event that happened to them nine years ago in their school and is what they shared for the *Home and Belonging in Community* prompt. Bera wrote,

> *In the Fall of 2011, I organized Ally Training for teachers in my region. It was facilitated by a [Queer Resource Centre] and had attendees from various communities in Manitoba. This was a few years before I recognized that I wasn't an ally, I was queer.*

> *Following the training we each received an 'Ally Card,' which a number of us posted in our classrooms. All hell broke loose about a month later when a parent saw the card posted behind my desk. Things rapidly got ugly, with calls for me to be disciplined or even fired. I was castigated by parents and colleagues. I distinctly remember a colleague coming into my room and screaming at me during those events. The news went international. A Canadian singer/songwriter wrote a song about what happened that was included on her CD…*

> *One of the things that still stands out in my memory is my spouse telling me, when I was late getting home from school one night, that she was worried that I had been shot or otherwise assaulted. I distinctly remember walking home and getting anxious every time I heard a vehicle come up behind me as I walked along the side of the road, wondering if they would swerve to hit me. In case anyone thinks this is an exaggeration, it is well known that people in the region have talked (supposedly joked) about hunting down and killing gay people in the area. It was not at all unreasonable for my spouse to wonder about my safety, or for me to feel the anxiety that I did.* (Bera, Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

I will dissect the impact of this story more fully in the *Our School Stories* section of this dissertation, but for now, this story is a perfect example of the arrival of the ghosts in Bera's world. At the time of the ally card event, Bera was not yet aware that they were anything more than an ally to the queer community, and yet, was still very unprepared for the level of vitriol that was directed at them. They said,

> even as an ally, the level of vitriol and attack at that time was astounding. I mean my spouse grew up in this area and even she was astounded at just the level of anger and vitriol and hatred that was spewed at us." (Bera, Interview)

The ghosts of homophobia from this event showed up in Bera's world for years after the event occurred. In their interview, Bera also said that after the ally card experience, they had people ringing their doorbell late at night and the police would get involved and it would stop and then start up again and that happened for a couple of years (Bera, Interview). They also described wanting to put up a Pride flag during Pride month but feared it would make the house a target for vandalism. They reflected that much of their fear is a result of the ghosts from the ally card experience. Bera spoke about the ally card story often. This is important because the stories that are told more than once are often ones that hold much affective power. This was a difficult story for Bera to recount. Trauma and aggregative affect were brought up in this retelling as evidenced when Bera had finished sharing and said, "Phew, you need to take a breath after that one." (Bera, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community) I observed in my field notes that we all seemed to feel the ghost of this story within our group, but that as a collective we also would support each other through these kinds of stories. For example, Rachel not only commended and applauded Bera's courage but also jokingly said that she would fly out to visit them and they could "point me in someone's direction" and then laughed. Bera then said that they and their

partner were thinking of visiting the East Coast, and I said how great it would be if we could all

get together in person, to which Jenna replied, "We could rent out a legion!" and we all laughed

at this exchange. This speaks to the potential deterritorializing power of what can happen when

the queer community comes together, and the power that we have in our micro *sideways*

community to uplift and protect each other from these ghostly intrusions within our group, be it

through shared sympathy, understanding, or humour. This support is crucial when these ghosts

do attempt to re/territorialize. Bera also explained how there were other teachers who were

targeted during the ally card event and that they helped to support each other through this time

together. Bera's partner would also serve as a huge support in protecting them from the ghosts

outside their threshold.

Rachel also told a story in both the interview and in our introductory session about what

happens when the ghosts come knocking at our doors. It would become clear in her second

retelling to the group how much she was affected by this encounter. Rachel told us how she and

her wife have a Pride flag on their house which they were unsure about putting up. Like Bera,

they worried, "Are we going to get run out of town?" but she says that she thinks it serves as a

warning and keeps some people away. However, she then told a story about a politician who

arrived campaigning for local Council. They were having a nice conversation when he said,

> 'You know, it's been so nice talking. I was really worried when I came up and I saw that
>
> you had a rainbow flag!' And I was like, 'Uhhh huhhh?' And he said, 'Well I thought
>
> you were going to be like someone weird.' And I was like, 'Nope, just a normal gay
>
> person,' and I kind of laughed it off and I was like, 'Alright, see you later.' And I wish at
>
> the time I had said something more, but at the same time here he is on my front porch and
>
> I'm by myself with this guy. So, I went on Facebook, and I wrote a post about it, which

then gained some traction, and he did show up, actually, a week later and I was kind of

shitting myself a bit, because…this post had been shared quite a bit… Anyway, he

showed up crying on my front porch and he apologized profusely but I think that made

me feel maybe vulnerable in a way. (Rachel, Discussion, Introduction)

Perhaps Rachel is right that the flag does keep the ghosts out, because the council member felt

reluctant to go to their house, not knowing what to expect, and fearful that he might encounter

"the strange." In this instance, the politician thought that he was entering the haunted house, the

house of the strange, whereas from the perspective of Rachel, the ghost had found its way to her

doorstep. This is another example of when the ghosts make it into our sideways communities.

Rachel felt reterritorialized in her own home from this encounter as she says she was worried

that he would go back to her house if he found out what she posted on Facebook, which he did.

Rachel actually said that it was her "allies" who "got on it" and made it known that what the

politician said was not appropriate. The politician told Rachel that this was not the person that he

wanted to be and was crying, and, thus, it is also important to note that perhaps the encounter

sent the council member on a line of flight. Perhaps he was genuine about wanting to do more

self work and maybe this encounter encouraged him to do that work. However, Rachel was left

feeling vulnerable from the encounter. She continued how she worried when the Facebook post

was shared and thought,

Oh, is this guy going to show up? Is he going to come burn my house down? Like, I

didn't know what I was going to get. So, the tears were welcomed but yeah, I guess that's

the hard thing about speaking up and being visible… (Rachel, Discussion, Introduction)

It is interesting because this was one of the first stories that Rachel told in both her interview and

the focus group. At the time of this storying, what struck me was the emotional way that Rachel

told this story to the group. It was more emotional than the way she told it in the interview. In fact, in the interview Rachel laughed throughout as she told the story. My analysis of this is that Rachel did not know me at the beginning of our interview and, thus, such a vulnerable story might have manifested in laughter. She also described in the first session how the interview encouraged her to seek therapy about her territorializations in the rural space, and thus, perhaps, she was now more comfortable to be sad about such interactions. Throughout this recounting in the focus group, Rachel sighed often, especially when she worried about the repercussions of standing up for herself! She said that the man standing on her porch sobbing felt like a lot of emotional labour for her. The emotional labour Rachel described is also another reterritorialization as she said that she does not mind educating students, but it does get tiring having to educate adults; "You guys have the Internet, like, you can figure it out." (Rachel, Interview) Assisting Rachel with this emotional labour, however, are those friends who had Rachel's back during this territorialization and who assisted with deterritorialization, who will be there when the ghosts arrive, with "the appropriate level of outrage when things go bad." (Rachel, Interview) And she said they *are* in her community: "I will say that we have found a really good group of people. I know that there are people here who would have my back no matter what, which is pretty cool." (Rachel, Interview) This again demonstrate the two separate spaces and the protection offered in a queer space until it is penetrated by the ghosts and suddenly it is not a safe space anymore. Like my own protective kinship group, Rachel was re-embraced by her kinship group that offered outrage, support, and healing.

To conclude, a few thoughts on why have I used Du Bois and Gordon to examine our vignettes in this chapter. A *double consciousness* is a result of colonization and slavery — the ghosts of which very much linger. Gordon asks an important question in her book, later offering

a potential answer. The question is "How do we develop a critical language to describe and analyse the affective, historical, and mneumonic structures of such hauntings?" (p. 18) She answers, "Could it be that analyzing hauntings might lead to a more complex understanding of the generative structures and moving parts of historically embedded social formations?" (p. 19) Indeed, this chapter has elucidated how ghosts are most often territorializing and created within our past assemblages, situated within large social structures of oppression. Writing about the ghosts is writing about the social structures that created them. As Gordon said,

> Ghostly matters are part of social life. If we want to study social life well, and if, in addition, we want to contribute, in however small a measure, to changing it, we must learn to identify hauntings and reckon with ghosts, we must learn how to make contact with what is without doubt often painful, difficult and unsettling. (p. 23)

In our stories, the ghosts were territorializing to us in the past, and have the power to reterritorialize us in the present and in the future when they arrive. They can do so through affective objects, through memories associated with past stories, and through current encounters with those "next door" who are homophobic. However, to return to my original premise of this work, these stories must be told so that we might "reckon with these ghosts." Perhaps, we are collectively doing this by telling these narratives and supporting each other through this process. Yes, the ghosts and their territorializing affect exist, but so does protective community — this is the double consciousness — in which we can deterritorialize ourselves, in which we can find moments of queer utopia, that keep the ghosts at bey. Ghosts and community would continue to come up in our writings and discussions moving forward.

Chapter 8. Queer World-Making

Queer World Making in Kinship

Du Bois speaks about the potential of world-making possibilities on the minoritized side of the "veil." This chapter investigates what this queer world-making can look like. The first section begins with a vignette by Rachel which explores queer world making in a Dungeons and Dragons group that both Rachel and Jenna have participated in. The second section is about my own queer world-making with kinship groups within the rural space itself. The discussion around queer world-making ends with commentary about how rural queer culture (queer worlds) may be distinct from urban queer culture.

Both of these vignettes and subsequent discussion came from our fourth prompt which was about celebrating our authentic selves.[13] The prompt was as follows: ***Describe a moment where you felt your queer self/identity (or intersectional identities) was validated or celebrated, or a moment that inspired you to be your "authentic" self.*** Within the vignettes that Rachel and I both share, our "authentic selves" feel most celebrated when we create our own queer worlds in the rural space. Both of these vignettes are also direct lines of flight from our stories told in the previous chapter which were about finding belonging within queer kinship groups.

Rachel deftly explored a rather unique, rather queer, way that she creates belonging in the rural space with her queer kin; a space where she feels she can be her authentic self. Rachel

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[13] Until now, much of our discussion stems from vignettes written in the *Introduction* and *Home and Belonging in Community* sessions. The prompts/sessions that followed these were *Belonging in Schools*, *On Being Seen*, and *Celebration/Authentic Selves*. The *On Being Seen* and *Celebration/Authentic Selves* prompts were very much a product of both the *Home and Belonging in Community* and *Belonging in Schools* prompts. However, because the reader has yet to read the school stories, I will discuss how the latter two prompts came about in more detail (as lines of flight from our group stories) in the chapters pertaining to education.

began, "I have to end up talking about one of my favourite hobbies and one that has built and solidified all of the key friendships in my life — Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)."

Several years ago, I gathered together a group of friends — then a mixture of friends and acquaintances — and invented a fantasy world for us to play through; we regularly gather around a table, eating a potluck and catching up and then playing in our collective imaginations for hours. The world I've built — the playground that my friends get to explore — is incredibly queer. I designed a world in which queerphobia doesn't exist; I have to remind myself to add in straight-presenting characters (none of them are actually straight); three of our players' characters use they/them pronouns. It's gay as heck! And weirdly enough, when we sit down to play, and I get to embody a dozen different characters as my friends explore this little imaginary world, I feel most like myself: slightly frantic, definitely melodramatic, using so many bad accents, and prone to bad jokes.

This past Halloween, one of my players ran a spooky one-off game for us, which means I got a break from planning and running the sessions. We all dressed up for the occasion, in full, ridiculous make-up: one of the players was green from head-to-toe, another did full drag-style make-up. We helped each other put together our costumes and build our characters and we gathered to eat, drink, and be merry. Although we were doing a horror-themed session, we laughed until our faces and sides hurt: our little ragtag group of adventurers — an all-lady crew of ghosthunters, we decided — flirted and fought demons and had an epic slumber party. And while I am not, in actuality, a 7.5 foot tall axe-wielding goliath with Viking-style make-up, there's something immensely liberating of sliding into a different character, a different mind, for the span of several

hours. Of playing with identity and gender, belief system and personality — all in the safe

space we've created together.

> *I think, especially when we do improv, we tend to pull out and explore aspects of*
> *ourselves, or aspects of the human (or elf) experience that we relate to — and so when I*
> *sit down at the table with my little found family and I pretend I'm the taciturn head of a*
> *league of assassins, or a brawny and mustachioed male courtesan, or an unhinged druid*
> *turning people into mushrooms, it feels like we're all celebrating the mutability of*
> *identity. We're playing — and in the joyful play, the collaborative building of a narrative*
> *that, at times, is emotionally devastating and riotously funny, that's where I feel most like*
> *myself. Surrounded by my people, full of good food, and exploring the wonderful depths*
> *of our imaginations — safe to be as wondrously weird and queer as we can imagine.*

(Rachel, Vignette, Celebration/Authentic Self)

To begin, this strange queer world that Rachel and her friends create is full of the "utopia

of everyday habit." There is a gathering around a (wonky queer) table with a potluck, where

friends "catch up" and then the game is played. My entire life has involved sitting in various

rural dining rooms and kitchens doing the same thing. However, usually the game of choice is

cards and not something quite so queer. The utopia of everyday habit can also be found within

the Halloween party, where the adults gather and dress in costume, where they "eat, drink and be

merry," while having an "epic adult slumber party." However, this game is not heteronormative,

and, thus, the utopia can be found in the pushback to the heteronormativity that exists in the

communities around the group of queer kin. Within the queer world of the game, straight

characters are few and far between, cisgender identities are not the norm, and normative sexist

notions are thrust aside by "axe wielding goliaths" and the "head of a league of assassins;" "an

all lady crew of ghosthunters," who are fighting imaginary (yet, perhaps, real heteronormative)

demons. Each participant in Rachel's game can create their own queer character and they are "safe to be as wonderfully weird and queer…" as they can imagine. There is celebration here, a "joyful play," where Rachel feels most like herself when she is safely "surrounded by her people."

This is all happening in the space/world that they have created together. In this world there is a "mutability of identities" where there is the potential for continual change and new becomings. The game is a Deleuzian adventure in deterritorialization, a constant becoming otherwise. For Deleuze and Guattari becomings happen as a result of affect. For Barad, becomings are a result of the affect that is produced through intra-action. Thus, Rachel's discussion of the "world" she and her kinship group have created reminded me of what affect theorists have said about how affect in groups can create "worldings." This demonstrates another theoretical line of flight. In *Atmospheric Attunements*, Kathleen Stewart (2011) discusses the "charged atmospheres" of everyday life (p. 445). She discusses how "forces come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments," (p.445) and that atmospheric forces continually circulate, and these attunements can form worlds; a worlding (p.445). Similarly, In *An Inventory of Shimmers* (2010) Seigworth and Gregg discuss how affect is felt in atmospheres, through the "worldings" that we create in group encounters, "where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the boundaries of the norm." (p. 7)

Within Rachel's D&D group, she and her kin are affectively creating imagined worldings which critique normative conventions. This imaginative creation is like art, like quilt making, as each group member contributes something more to the group assemblage, whether it be a new

character, or a line of flight that takes the group on a new story arc. It is at once a game, but also a political critique as it is a fully queer world, with no heteronormativity. Because the affect creates feelings of belonging, the queer world making does not *only* occur within the game, but also helps the group reinforce their kinship bond in their "sideways community."

I responded to Rachel that I love how they are creating queer worlds and that imaginary worlds can often become real worlds. I did not obviously mean that we could create a world of monsters, but a world where identities/sexualities/genders are not fixed, opens up a space for thinking of possibilities beyond the normative.[14] The D&D group is a queer group of kin who support each other while deterritorializing normative notions of the rural. After this session, Rachel sent me a picture of the group in their Halloween costumes, standing outside on Rachel's property with the beautiful fall trees in the background. I was struck by this visible queering of the countryside, which on Halloween becomes very much a boundary public, with the possibility to be seen but not recognized, but queer, nevertheless.

In my field notes I also noted two points: I thought about how we are creating queer worlds, a queer quilt, within this study, which is also a boundary public, as we present pictures of rural queer life that might be unknown to others! I also observed how queer world making is a theme of this study and that we do create these queer worlds in the rural: Bera has developed a kinship group through their involvement in their rural Pride group; I have my experiences with my queer kin; Rachel, with her homestead and queer kin; Adèle, with her partner and school community; and Jenna, when she was married and the community she built with Rachel when

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[14] Imagine what these non-normative possibilities can do for the young? Perhaps this is why we have seen the evolution of video games into more role playing games and why young people are drawn to them. These games could definitely serve as a boundary public for queer and questioning young people, and all youth, who want to try on other identities beyond the ones they are limited to in their normative lives.

they worked in the same school. Jenna has also joined Rachel and the group on D&D adventures;

Queer world making in our "sideways communities."

Queer World-Making, Kinship, and the Materiality of the Rural Space

This section connects kinship and "world-making" with the rural space itself. I, rather

coincidentally, shared the following vignette after the one Rachel wrote above, further discussing

kinship bonds and queer world making in the rural and expanding upon the place of the

landscape in these bonds. I wrote,[15]

> *I feel so alive when I can just be, when I belong with groups of friends and family,*
>
> *queer and straight, who I don't have to explain myself to, where I can hug, cry, laugh and*
>
> *feel emotion, where I can imagine romantic notions of queer country idylls inspired by*
>
> *the multitude of L. M. Montgomery books that I have read throughout my lifetime — even*
>
> *though within the pages I could never find me. I can create this home in the rural.*
>
> *Therefore, for me, the landscape really is tied up with my queer identity.*
>
> *So many moments of belonging and love have happened in the rural space.*
>
> *Becoming queer has been tied up with travelling these rural back roads since I was a*
>
> *child, singing along to Hank Williams with my dad as we drove down country roads in*
>
> *his chip delivery truck, to belting out Barbra Streisand, tolerated by my queer besties, as*
>
> *we drove to the middle of nowhere to go for a hot summer's day swim in a lake. Or as a*
>
> *teenager, driving around this town with my best friend Jake who was the first person I*
>
> *came out to. Later she came out to me, as well. We travelled down the back roads and out*
>
> *into the countryside. I saw the beauty of the town: the rolling landscapes and hills*

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[15] Some parts of this vignette are excerpted from vignettes that appeared in the article *Searching for Utopia in Rural Queer Narratives.*

looking out over the ocean. We sat at the lighthouse and watched the boats come in. We went into someone's expansive field where she photographed me sitting in a wooden chair, smiling. We had each other. And when Tracy Chapman's Fast Car *would play on the radio, I finally believed I could "be someone."*

Or just recently, even, I met up with my friend of many years, Judy, who was also a teacher within the district. Judy opened up to me a few years ago that she wasn't straight, but she lived with a man and would never come out at her school. Over many years we have had conversations about what being queer meant to both of us and how queer topics are approached in schools, but perhaps, as one settles into these 'old' friendships one needs to speak less about who they are and can just be… together.

I'm reminded of a day a month or so ago. Judy and I got together and drove around the back roads of her community. I told her that I wanted to explore it more; I wanted to see lakes and rivers and brooks. We spent the afternoon driving around in her massive 4x4, stopping to get out and sit by lakes, to get out and walk to the middle of an old rusted green suspension bridge and take pictures of the bubbling river, to stand on a cliff side looking over the ocean with my hair blowing in the wind, and I became that L. M. Montgomery character with my bosom friend, a short spiky haired lady — two rural queers, erased from the story books, but there we were. And I felt alive. (Renny, Vignette, Celebration/Authentic Self)

To begin, this vignette has much utopia of everyday habit. Like Rachel, I have had many utopic moments within the rural landscape with my kin and familial groups. The rural spaces are full of affect that becomes attached not only to the people in them but the landscape itself. I will start by expanding on the story of driving with my dad. I have written about my dad elsewhere (See

Searching for Utopia in Rural Queer Narratives), and in this writing I explored how he was a "safe" person to be with, perhaps one of the only men in my childhood who I felt I could be myself with. I have many beautiful memories of driving with him in his chip delivery truck. Expanding on this narrative in *Searching for Utopia in Rural Queer Narratives*, (2021) I wrote how,

> …I would get up in the morning and drive with him in the chip truck…We would go to small local community stores where he would take inventory of what was needed and then I would help him bring the boxes in. My fondest memories involve these trips. A Hank Williams Sr. cassette would invariably get put into the tape deck, and we would begin to sing. As we drove, I would lean out the rolled-down window, taking in the green fragrance of the countryside. Or if I were tired, I would lean into him and fall asleep. (Cummings, 2021, p. 166)

On these excursions, dad was everyone's friend. He was warm and generous, dolling out kind words to adults and the odd free bag of chips to children and when he died when I was ten years old there were approximately 200 people from our small community who attended his funeral. He belonged, and I think as an extension of him, I also found belonging. However, what also stands out in this memory is the materiality of the rural landscape, and how the feelings of love and safety with my dad were also associated with the "green fragrance of the countryside" which also became associated with he and I singing along to the music and driving in the vehicle. In this scene there is utopia for me, as I could be completely myself with this man. This would be repeated many, many times in the future with my queer kin. With my best teenage friend Jake, two closeted queers who had each other, where inside the cab of her mother's pick-up truck we sang and sang along to the radio, songs of love and longing and leaving, while we travelled down

the same old streets and highways that we had travelled for years, safe with each other. 15 years later the besties and I began travelling down the same roads, discussing queerness, identities, crushes, and offering support to each other over the rocky road that is life. We are, gratefully, still on this road together. Finally, Judy and I, perhaps, spend less time talking about identity these days and more about life and relationships, as we travel down the rural roads together.

As an adult, I have lived and worked in three adjacent rural communities where I have spent hours driving between my three communities on two different highways to connect with kin and community members. Rachel also discussed how even the highway connecting the communities becomes part of the home space. "Along the highway, those two stretches feel like home. Like I know five years ago I never would have guessed that I'd know every turn in those roads, but now I do, and it feels like that's the place." (Rachel, Interview) I feel the same. For me, the highway, the trees lining the road, the pastoral scenes, and the beauty, becomes connected with queer kinship, of road trips with my besties, of Christmas shopping excursions, of Sunday afternoon yard sales and brunch dates, with laughter and music and safety — this is one aspect of my rural utopic assemblage. Indeed, the material moments in cars on country roads and highways is both utopic and deterritorializing. There is freedom in the expression, exploration and discussion of queerness within the space of the vehicle, and within the spaces in the countryside a deterritorialization can occur as we queers write ourselves into the missing stories of rural country frolics.

There is also queer world making that occurs within these outside spaces, perhaps, even imaginary worlds. The idea of deterritorializations happening *because of* the material rural space sent me on a line of flight to new materialist studies that investigate such becomings. Renold & Ivinson's *Horse-girl assemblages: towards a post-human cartography of girls' desire in an ex-*

mining valleys community (2014) explores how girls' relationships with horses were part of a community assemblage with a history of mining, stifling normative gender roles, but also "liberatory moments of 'pure desire.'" (p. 361) Within these accounts, girls recount how their lives are fraught with contradictory messages. They speak of poverty, heterosexual violence, and normative gender roles that they are expected to uphold, while at the same time, institutions, like the school, tell them to aim high (p. 364). Some girls speak about how they are always under surveillance by men and knowing where they can run to or how they could avoid "…places and people who might 'take you', 'attack you,' 'kidnap you,' or 'rape you.'" (p. 366) It was, however, the *horse-girl assemblage* that offered a deterritorializing potential. They spoke about the freedom associated with riding the horses, that took them out of the domesticity of the house. In a location where many girls expressed fear of being alone in nature, one girl felt physically safe while on her horse (p. 369). In another article by Ivinson and Renold, *Subjectivity, affect and place: Thinking with Deleuze and Guattari's Body without Organs to explore a young girl's becomings in a post-industrial locale* (2013) and from the same location, they use the interview of one girl in particular. The young girl in this study, Rowan, discussed feeling trapped in her small town. However, the authors' observed that when she began talking about *escaping* to the mountains, or walking and biking, her voice became animated; a felt intensity that was a marked contrast to her accounts of her everyday life. As Ivinson and Renold (2013) observed,

> Indeed, specific places and objects such as mountains and bikes seemed to play important roles in allowing Rowan to manage to live in a town where she felt stifled, unable to leave, and trapped in a school where she felt forcibly contained. (p. 370)

There is deterritorializing potential in the form of freedom within nature. Rachel discusses how the materiality of the rural landscape plays a role in providing protection as there is freedom in

the physical space to roam where one would like. Rachel described her house and land as offering a place of refuge. She writes, "We let the woods grow deep and dark around us, and it sounds like serenity and feels like peace." (Rachel, Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community) The landscape offers a space in which to escape. As Rachel wrote, "We could walk and walk and walk and see no one but birds and nothing but lakes and trees…." (Rachel, Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community) Like the experiences of the girls in the Ivinson and Renold study, nature, itself, can act as a protective factor, as for Rachel, there is a physical protection from the prying eyes of the community which is offered by the trees lining their property. There is queer utopia here as she and her wife can walk and walk among the sounds of serenity, alone in the forest. This physical space, thus, serves as another protective bubble against the ghosts of heteronormativity.

There is also utopia and deterritorialization in the vignette of Judy and me as we explored the countryside together. I have, in actuality, imagined myself as an "Anne of Green Gables" character standing on the cliff edge while the wind blows through my hair, taking in the beauty of the rural space. For me, there is utopia in this moment as I realize how queer I must look and how good it feels. In Ivinson and Renold's (2013) study they name these singular affective and utopic moments in nature as registering in the data as "wild intensities;" these were moments of freedom, of speeding down a hill on a bike, of stopping to notice the stillness of nature and to capture it in a photograph (p. 382) — the wild intensity of the cliff wind blowing through my hair. There is also deterritorialization as Judy and me deterritorialize the rural space by our non-normative gender expression and queerness. We are a presence in this space that is often absent.

Adèle's response to this vignette suggests that the utopia that I felt when recalling these memories also translated to her. She said,

I think you gave the perfect, Hollywood movie setting. It wasn't romantic because it was friendship, but like the scene of just the hair blowing in the wind [I laugh] and being together on an adventure and in the car singing the tunes. I just felt like it was this movie that I would just really enjoy and feel good about, but I would also feel represented in it. And I think that's what was really important in what you shared because it was so similar to what we do see on the screen, but it was about us, even though it's about you, it was about us too. (Adèle, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Self)

I wrote in a field note that this comment held a powerful resonance for me. Perhaps it affected me as much as my own story affected Adèle. When she said that it was like a Hollywood movie that she would feel represented in, I exclaimed "Ohhh!" I felt very moved that she felt represented in the vignette and that she said, "even though it was about you, it was about us, too." Perhaps the vignette was so powerful for both Adèle and myself because of the fact that these kinds of rural stories are erased from dominant culture, from the Hallmark movies, from the Hollywood movies, replaced by terrifying stories of the *Brokeback Mountain* ilk where a queer character in the rural gets bashed. Living and telling these everyday rural stories offers two kinds of deterritorializations; once in the moment of the story as the countryside is queered and later for the listener, like Adèle, who then feels represented by the story. The affect of the vignette was also felt by Rachel. She said,

It just made me feel like here I am in a country setting and it made me nostalgic for the country. Like, it just made me want to go drive on those dirt roads into those hidden places. Those queer country idyls. It's so beautiful in your images — I was just there with you. That was just lovely. (Rachel, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Self)

Amid the stories of struggle that we would all tell about the rural, these stories did serve as a reprieve and were welcomed by all of us when we told them. They can remind us of the ways we can and do deterritorialize the rural space to create our own belonging. In fact, Bera pointed this out in their response:

> This made perfect sense to me because in a lot of ways, rural settings have been denied to queer folk…When we had County Pride three years ago, so many people came and said, 'It's so wonderful to see this happening in a rural setting because so many queer folks have been forced to leave the rural setting.' You know, we've long gotten this message… 'You don't have a place here!' I mean very much what we're doing as County Pride, is making it clear that we do have a queer community here in the rural. You don't have to go to the 'big city,' you can be queer right here. And I think that really came through in a number of your descriptions that, 'Yeah! We belong here! Just as much as anybody else, and we can appreciate it. We can be together as a queer community right here…We can enjoy this, because, for a lot of us, this is what we enjoy. This is where we belong and you're not going to chase us away.' (Bera, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Self)

The message that we do belong in the rural had been brought up now by Rachel and myself in our discussions of belonging in our kinship groups, by Adèle who found belonging in her community, by Jenna who has also created strong friendships in her community, and by Bera who has found belonging in their rural Pride group. A key point from Bera's response is that in the past, rural settings have been denied to queer folks with the message that queer people must leave the country and move to the city. This does follow the rural to urban discourses that exist. Perhaps, it might be easier to live a queer life in the rural today than it was historically, something we all alluded to in our stories of how things have changed for us since we were

children. I do, also, think that there have always been queers who have lived in the rural, and had

successful lives, and that their stories of belonging have been less documented, as Johnson's

work on "historical amnesia" suggests. However, Bera reminds that we do belong, and beyond

that, we want to be in the rural space. This returns us to Crawford's (2008) work where he

discusses how trans/queer people do stay in the rural, "by choice and not by accident or

unfortunate circumstances," (p. 129) because they want to be there. Each of us described how we

like the rural space, despite its challenges.

Unexpectedly, within this discussion we talked about how there may be a particular rural

queer culture that is, indeed, different than urban queer culture. We all noted how we were not

drawn to the big Pride events of the city, and we commented on how rural queer culture might

have a different affective feel than urban queer cultures. Bera explained this succinctly below,

> …The stereotypes of partying and the whole big Pride culture thing…well, those don't fit
>
> for me either. So, do I even want to be in that culture? And being out here [in the] rural,
>
> I'm talking about rural queer culture, it's been interesting getting involved with County
>
> Pride because it is a very different culture. Like people are rural in attitudes and views, so
>
> we're all kind of home bodies and like gardening, and you know, those kinds of things.
>
> So, we're queer culture but we're different queer culture. I don't know, maybe it's a rural
>
> queer culture that's developing, which would be kind of cool. (Bera, Debrief Discussion,
>
> Home and Belonging in Community)

Rachel also wondered if rural queer life was distinct from urban experiences.

> And I wonder, I don't know about everyone else, I'm a huge introvert…And there are lots
>
> of introverts who live in cities, obviously, but from when I lived in the city you were
>
> going out to a lot more events and doing things. Here a lot of what we do is, you know,

go to the woods and kind of just live, in some ways, a quieter life, and so I find it very

daunting to go out and join groups or do events, because I kind of just don't have that in

my tank a lot of the time. (Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Rachel expands that in the rural "there's so much space to live my most authentic truth here, and

there's so much privacy, that feels really good." (Rachel, Interview) Much of this rural queer

culture seems to be associated with the land. On the land itself, Rachel says that she and her wife

feel a connection to nature,

We love hiking and snowshoeing and having space to do what we want and feel like we

have total privacy. We're big in gardening and kind of being as self-sufficient as possible

and so we have that room and space here. And the goal is, we're set back quite far from

the road, so it's still very private and we work to make it more private…I like that

independence and feeling like it's just you and your chosen people, your chosen family,

and nature. (Rachel, Interview)

Jenna also said that the nature element of the rural is important and that they have a local park

and gardens that is "like paradise on earth for me." (Jenna, Interview) Bera also described the

wonderful things about living in their area,

We're big gardeners. We can have a big garden in the backyard. If I want to get manure, I

want to get straw, I contact a local sheep farmer I know in the area…My oldest son and

family live in the hills south of here; a short little drive and you're right in the hills. The

colours of fall are incredible. (Bera, Interview)

We can, thus, observe how queer kinship and a love of the rural space can result in queer world-

making in the rural, which, perhaps, has created a distinct rural queer culture that offers a utopic

assemblage of belonging for group members.

Lastly, although belonging can be found within kinship and within the rural landscape, it should be noted that the case for belonging that has been made in our rural communities should also be put in conversation with the difficulties inherent in the search for belonging, within both a queer and straight rural community, that we all spoke about at the beginning of this section. Group members also reflected upon how the rural space can also be a place where territorializations and reterritorializations occur, and this should not be forgotten. It is not lost on me that had Judy and I, or Rachel and her wife, encountered the men from *Jungle Jim's* outside, alone, in the rural space that perhaps our physical safety might be threatened. Bera also certainly felt threatened after the ally card incident when walking home from school. Additionally, the rural landscape was not always safe for me as a child. The ghosts and the "sideways" communities exist at the same time.

Chapter 9: Family: Seeing our "Authentic" Selves

This chapter moves from the kinship groups and queer world-making that we have created in the rural space to a discussion of how family members, in both the past and present, either create a space for us to be our "authentic" selves, assisting us with deterritorialization, or create a space where our "authentic selves" are stifled and territorialized. The vignettes utilized in this chapter stem from two prompts which ask about the conditions that create a feeling of being seen or not seen in the rural space (On Being Seen), and how our "authentic selves" are celebrated and how they are not. (Celebration/Authentic Self). The *On Being Seen* prompt was as follows: ***When do we feel seen? Does that feel good or not good? What about being invisible or being made to feel invisible?*** I begin with a vignette from Bera which describes the relationship they have with their spouse and how she supports them in being their authentic self at school and at home. Next, I return to Adèle's experiences of "being seen" "down home" when she takes Christine home for the first time. I end with vignettes from myself and Rachel which both explore not being seen by family when we were young, and what this means for our "authentic selves" in the present. Once again, the ambivalence of the rural experience is highlighted.

Bera wrote the following vignette for our "Celebration/Authentic Self" prompt. This vignette was about the relationship they have with their spouse, Sarah, and the ways in which she helps them be their "authentic self." They wrote,

> *My spouse, Sarah, played a huge role in helping me silence that inner critic and*
> *acknowledge that I am very good at what I do [teaching]. In a similar, though more*
> *surprising way, she did the same for my identity as a queer person. Coming out has been*
> *a thing of fits and spurts for me. Suddenly slapping a 'genderqueer' sticker on my chest*

at Pride, leaving her asking what that was about and more recently, coming out as bi —

those were tough times as we worked through what that meant for us as a couple.

The first time she took me shopping for nail polish and makeup was, well, I really

don't have the words for what it was. Once she knew that my coming out was not the end

of 'us,' as it had been for quite a few people we know, she became a huge help for me as I

navigated what it meant to let my queer flag fly; teaching me how to put on makeup,

choosing nail polish and earrings, finding skirts that fit my decidedly NOT feminine

frame.

And now, when that inner voice tries to tell me that I'm not really queer and I

voice it, she'll raise an eyebrow and imitate how I'm sitting in a rather stereotypical gay

pose, often right in that moment. Or she'll comment on how I swish when I walk,

something I wasn't even aware of. And I know, I am me! I am queer! And we're going to

be just fine. (Bera, Vignette, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

In their interview, Bera spoke about the gradual process of their "queerness… pushing itself

through" at school, where they first began expressing their queer identity by wearing kilts to

school and gradually wearing nail polish, getting a "queer haircut" and wearing earrings, to

wearing skirts to school and not thinking twice about it. When they first began to express their

gender identity they said they often experimented with family and friends first before they

attempted presenting in a queer way at school (Bera, Interview). Sarah, particularly, has been a

key support in helping Bera express their gender identity through teaching them how to apply

makeup and helping them pick out earrings and skirts. However, Bera said they struggle on days

that they do not feel like wearing a skirt or scarves because then they then appear more "male-

looking," and this is problematic for them as their appearance may not match how they feel

about themselves, causing them to question whether they are "queer enough?" They have found themself asking, "Am I being the right kind of queer in this space?" (Bera, Discussion, On Being Seen) Sarah provides a space of affirmation for them to believe in themself as a teacher and reminds them that they are "queer enough!"

But what was surprising for Bera was how Sarah also supported them in their queer journey to deterritorialize their self. In their interview, Bera elaborated that, "When I came out as genderqueer, came out as bisexual, there is a lot of relationship discussion that's got to go on. I mean this has fostered us talking about things that we probably wouldn't have otherwise." (Bera, Interview) They reflect upon how a prevailing discourse around being both genderqueer and bisexual is that "you have to pick one or the other, kind of thing." (Bera, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community) However, Sarah stood by Bera, supporting them as they figured out how to "let their queer flag fly!" Thus, it was wonderful to hear how Sarah validates Bera both by supporting them in their gender expression and by reminding them that they are very queer.

Of course, there is much utopia in this vignette. It could be felt when Bera shared as they smiled while telling the story of how Sarah supports their queerness. This singular utopic affect was felt by us all. Jenna wanted to respond first because she was so taken by the writing. She said,

> Your vignette, it was just spectacular! It's just so beautiful! I'm just, I just, I don't even know if I have the words for it. I just, I'm so grateful that you shared that, and it just feels so loving and I just, I just really enjoyed hearing about your partnership, and what that looks like. (Jenna, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

I purposefully left the many "justs" in that Jenna included because they exemplify how sometimes a story can be so powerful that one might not have the words for it! These utterances

speak to *data that glows* as the affect in her response was palpable. Bera also did not have the words to describe how Sarah taking them shopping for makeup made them feel. Sometimes the most powerful affective stories are indescribable! What may also be missing in these utterances are Jenna's own memories of the relationship she had with her partner. She alluded to how she felt more belonging when she was with her ex-partner and how her current community would have become "home" had she and her ex-partner been able to create that together. Jenna did not go into great detail about her married life with her ex and tended to tell more stories about work. Of course, those past utopic moments with her partner in the rural space happened, but I think she could not tell them to protect herself from those ghosts.

Adèle then followed up to Bera's story. "Coming out" is often a frightening deterritorialization that many of us have experienced, but Adèle also realized that there is hope within Bera's story, because the dominant story that tends to be told when queer people in heterosexually defined unions tell their spouses that they are queer or questioning is that the union will end. She said,

> It makes our hearts feel warm to know that you have that kind of partnership, but even for someone who wouldn't know you, I think it gives a lot of hope to someone wondering, 'Okay, if I do tell my partner this…is it always just going to be a bad downfall?' And you give that glimpse of hope that it might be hard for a little bit, and it might be a lot of conversations and a lot of clarifications, but it can work, and it can be beautiful. That's what you presented in your vignette, showing that it does happen badly, you've seen it happen with people close to you, like you mentioned, but for you two, who are willing to put the work in. It was great. That was just wonderful! (Adèle, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

In this instance, Adèle is really alluding to how utopia in Bera's vignette is found in the past as Bera's utopic queer moments with Sarah unfolded, within the present when she exclaims how it makes our "hearts feel warm" and how wonderful the story is, and is a vision for a utopic future as it does provide a "glimpse of hope" for anyone who is listening to the story who might wonder if such deterritorializations are necessarily "deal breakers" in one's relationship.

Other than describing how she and her partner, Christine, fit into her current community, Adèle does not discuss their relationship dynamic, but the sense is it is a strong one, demonstrated by how they attend community functions together, and how Christine volunteers at her school, and has become part of the school community with her. Rachel also does not overtly spend time discussing the relationship that she has with her wife, Cindi, but one also has a sense from her previous writings that her life with Cindi is certainly connected with her feelings of belonging associated with the safety of their homestead. Rachel did respond to Bera's vignette by saying,

> I think it's incredibly powerful to have an affirming partner. And something I often realize, as I bemoan so many staff room conversations about, 'the old ball and chain,' is like, 'What, how does that work?' And I think there's something just beautiful about a relationship that is a partnership, and coming together, and so I love hearing about that. That affirming quality is just lovely. (Rachel, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Self.)

I do not have a partner and have not for many years and, therefore, my story of the search for belonging in both rural and urban contexts does involve this absence. I, however, perhaps for the same reasons as Jenna, did not discuss this absence, and chose to focus on family and friends instead.

Lastly, I returned the conversation back to our initial prompt which was about celebration and being our authentic selves. I said that,

> I loved when you said, "I am me, I am queer and we're going to be just fine!" …I mean that's your authentic self…Your partner can finally see that authentic self, right? And then how much more comfortable are you in that relationship because you can be authentic? And there's something…about the idea of then just being able to *be* in that relationship, to *be,* without any expectation on you to be anything different than who you already are. I think there's a lot of beauty in that. (Renny, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

This also returns the reader to the discussion of the protections offered within our queer kinship groups. I also told Bera that this vignette reminded me of the one I was going to share for this session which happened to be about my relationship with Judy, the Besties and my adolescent friend, Jake, where I could just "be" my authentic self. My response to Bera was, therefore, a line of flight from the connections I made between Bera's vignette and my own.

Moving from a discussion of our partners to that of our immediate family, the story of "being seen" as our "authentic selves" becomes much more complicated. Often the memories associated with family describe both territorializing and deterritorializing affective moments. In Adèle's vignette written for the prompt *On Being Seen* she continues to explore the dichotomy associated with family and going "down home," that is very much rooted in her remembrances of what her home community used to be like. Adèle addressed these dichotomous feelings as she described being "outed" to her family and the first time she took Christine to an anniversary party "down home." She recounted how,

I'm not the first queer person of my family, there have been others, yet we never

talked about their queerness because they felt they needed to keep it quiet. I also thought

I needed to keep it quiet… I wasn't out yet and then I was. My family had figured out that

I was dating a woman because social media policing had failed me, and the Bingo ladies

travelled that information quicker than the local virus. I wasn't ready to be seen. Too

bad. It's what destiny had planned for me, so I had to roll with that feeling and

struggle. (Adèle, Vignette, On Being Seen)

In this beginning excerpt of her vignette, Adèle explored the historical silence that

existed around queer people "down home" and how she actually did not plan on coming out to

her family. She did not clarify in the focus group but explained in her interview that she had a

private Instagram account with pictures of her and Christine and that it was discovered, and this

is how her family found out.[16] Adèle then described a moment after she was outed when she

brought Christine to a family gathering in the community,

My aunt had an anniversary party and I needed to find a place to stay down home

but I didn't know who would approve of my partner staying overnight in their house. It

was one thing for a family meal but sleeping in the same bed was never discussed. Days

went by and I was finding it quite difficult to find a place to stay so I had decided I

wouldn't attend. When my aunt found out, she contacted her brother right away to ask

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[16] As an aside, I have to acknowledge that I laughed when Adèle wrote about the Bingo ladies quickly traversing the news that she had a girlfriend. I made a field note that I know those Bingo ladies well from my own hometown. I did not write about this, but the Bingo ladies and the ladies who attended the "card parties" that were held in the local church hall also became safe harbours for me as a teenager, where once again, I escaped the torment of my peers by being with these "grandmother-type" figures where I did find acceptance. Thus, I hold the idea of the "Bingo Lady" with much love. At the same time, I do acknowledge that small town gossip was certainly told in between the furious Bingo dabbing to get that full card.

him to make room for me and my girlfriend. I was so pleased and knew I would be

welcomed because he is a great uncle and has many queer grandchildren of his own.

   I thought my worries were over. I forgot that I was used to seeing me and my

partner together at social events, but my family was not. I immediately felt that my

situation was different when I felt all the eyes come towards us for family photos and to

see if we would dance. Oh no, I was spotted like an eagle in the sky. We danced and I

didn't think it was such a big deal, but for that younger cousin, who wasn't permitted to

live so freely in our family, it meant so much to him and saddened him because there was

an inequality in our queer family experience. Gay men were not treated the same way as

lesbian women in my family, yet they didn't know I am Ace and biromantic. Oh, the

things they don't understand… (Adèle, Vignette, On Being Seen).[17]

In this vignette, we again see the dichotomy present in Adèle's familial experience.

Reterritorialization is found in Adèle's fear of her family's possible rejection of her relationship

with her partner based upon the past territorializing experiences within the family unit and

community. To remind the reader, she already described violence that was committed against

queer people in the community, as well as anti-queer sentiment through church doctrine, and

how the lesbian couple there now are not treated well, but on the other hand, she also described

how a lesbian wedding will be celebrated. Because of this she thinks that the family is not going

to accept her and her partner sharing the same bedroom and decides she cannot attend the party.

However, then we see that when her aunt did find out that this was her reasoning for not

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[17] "Ace" or "Aces" is shorthand for Asexual.

attending, she found her a place with an uncle who also had many queer grandchildren and clearly was accepting. Adèle does not outrightly express that the family acceptance is utopic for her. In fact, she downplays the dancing with her partner by saying it did not feel like a big deal to her. However, she does express how pleased she was that her uncle had invited them to stay and that she felt welcomed. Both the dancing with her partner and sharing a bedroom at her uncle's house are singular utopic moments because in both instances her queerness is present and welcomed. Utopia is once again also connected with deterritorialization because on both the dance floor and within the familial home queerness is disrupting heteronormativity. There is utopia for Adèle, but this is also an example of a vignette that offers a possible future utopia for the reader who may not be able to imagine such a story of acceptance happening, perhaps, much like her male cousin cannot. In the same vein, although she does lament how her gay cousin cannot be "out" like her, we cannot know how much this action might open up spaces for deterritorializations for him in the future. Rachel would comment on this,

> Something that really struck me was the idea of when we're feeling seen or watched and I think often I tend to think about like the haters who are watching, but I sometimes forget about the queer folks who might not be visible, or we're not seeing that part of them who are also seeing us and how that can be really important… And it's neat to think that we could potentially, through being seen, even when it's uncomfortable, be that beacon for someone who needs it. (Rachel, Discussion, On Being Seen)

The moment at the dance "meant so much to him" because it was something that he possibly could not imagine for himself, and in this we find Muñoz' "utopic longing" and the possibility for something other than what already is. There was definitely possibility here because the cousin was able to see that there is some acceptance for Adèle and her partner. Even if it is the

case that, as Adèle says, lesbians are treated with more acceptance than gay men in her family, this encounter suggests that if he ever did bring a partner home he may be as surprised as Adèle to discover that more family members also accepted him. However, the territorializations remain. According to Adèle, his queerness is not accepted. Adèle also writes how she is "seen" by her family, but she is also "not seen," because they actually do not understand her full identity, and it seems that Adèle does not want to engage in the emotional labour it would take to explain this. Jenna was also struck by how Adèle had to resist her own reterritorializations within this encounter. The ghosts of her past experiences with family were haunting the dance floor as she had to figure out whether it would be acceptable to dance with her partner. Jenna said,

> You had been out with your partner in a social situation, but then it's different when it's
> the family and that kind of dance that you have to figure out, you know, what am I going
> to do in this situation, compared to in other situations? (Jenna, Discussion, On Being
> Seen)

Indeed, it was literally the dance that Adèle had to figure out. She did choose, however, not to be reterritorialized and essentially did deterritorialize the heteronormativity of the anniversary reception, perhaps much like my own deterritorializations of the Legion space.

We also wrote about and discussed stories about our past experiences with our family members. Many of these moments occurred when we were younger, a very different time from today in terms of queer acceptance, as Adèle has already alluded to, and therefore there are, perhaps, more memories of territorialization than there were moments when we were able to deterritorialize ourselves. Stories of territorialization particularly arrive when we are remembering past family stories, when the ghosts of homophobia and often the ghosts of our past selves are re-encountered in the present. Like Adèle's stories of "down home," these narratives

can be filled with both territorializing and deterritorializing characters, and there can be moments

of utopia which can be found. For our sixth session, we all wrote to an *open prompt.* I had asked

group members to send me possible prompts for this session and as a group we could not decide

upon which prompt to choose, so I decided to leave this prompt "open," and people could write

what they wanted to write. As a direct line of flight from Bera's relationship with their spouse

and Adèle's writing of her aunt and the anniversary party, I would write about an aunt who I felt

offered me sanctuary as a young person, amid moments with family where I felt invisible. As I

mention in the vignette, she was not the only family member to do so, and it should be assumed

that there were others, mainly women, who provided utopic moments of relief where I felt loved

and accepted for who I was. This vignette is lengthy but feels important for me to include in its

entirety, perhaps as a tribute to those family members who even 30-plus years ago provided me a

protection from the ghosts of heteronormativity and homophobia. I wrote,

> *Last week's discussion brought me to thinking about belonging with family, as it*
>
> *was brought up in some of our discussions. I'm particularly thinking about who I belong*
>
> *with and who I do not. This vignette is about one of my aunts who I want to shine a*
>
> *spotlight on. She was a bright light in my life and so I think the light should be on her*
>
> *now. The other characters that I mention will stay in the background. Like in a theatrical*
>
> *production, that doesn't mean that they weren't important contributors to my life events,*
>
> *but I choose to leave them in the shadows, for now. My aunt Vera was a beautiful black*
>
> *and eventual white haired lady with a beaming smile. She had a very soft voice and*
>
> *almost spoke in a whisper but if you said something that would tickle her fancy, her laugh*
>
> *would resound like a happy bell ringing in a bell choir, stopping and then starting again*
>
> *as the amusement overtook her. My mom and dad and mom's brother and Vera were very*

close, so a lot of my childhood, teenage years and early adulthood were connected with Vera and her family. I would often go out to their house as a child, and we spent many summers at their cottage on a lake in a nearby community. I was a very trying child. There is no doubt. I got into lots of mischief, but Vera was always so patient with me. She, her daughter and I would go swimming together, we'd go for bike rides, she took me trick-or-treating, where, more often than not, she said she would never do so again because I really was unruly. But, throughout my challenging childhood years she still loved me. Every Christmas Eve we would all go out to their house and spend the evening there. I loved it. But as I reached my teenage years and I came to the realization that I was 'gay,' at least that's the word I had at the time, I began to feel very uncomfortable going to the house. All the men sat in the kitchen and all the women in the living room, year after year, and I simply did not fit in with the men. So, I sat in with the women, which provided much fodder for the men in the kitchen. It was the epitome of heteronormativity and I felt like I did not belong. So, I stopped going for many years. This was a different time, because Vera also had a sister who was in a relationship with a woman. They both used to visit over the holidays, as well, but they were always referred to as 'Lynn and her friend.' There was never a mention of their relationship status. At the same time, there was no homophobia directed towards them. There really never was to me either. Just a stony silence about who we were, and, perhaps, the occasional homophobic joke out at the kitchen table, which Vera would never think of participating in. She walked around the room, beaming that smile and making sure that everyone had a drink and enough to eat. She was joy.

Although I stopped going out for Christmas, Vera, my mom and I also went to the United Church together. She was quite religious and enjoyed going to church and I did too as a young person. When I was a teenager, I began to teach Sunday School there. I loved the small community feel of the church, the small harmonious choir, the organist who I would talk to every Sunday morning before church, even though I'm sure she didn't want the kid bugging her when she was practicing, the small church luncheons on Sunday. I never felt or heard homophobia here, and I feel lucky that I belonged to a church that seemed more inclusive than others. There are many I won't set foot in because they openly profess that they can't accept queer people. I bring this up because the church and Vera are connected in my memories. I think she lived the best teachings of the religion.

A few years ago, I decided to go back out to their house one Christmas eve, just for a little while. I hadn't attended for a number of years. I still felt uncomfortable and many of the characters didn't really talk to me. I don't know if that has to do with my queerness, or maybe it's because I have distanced myself from them for so many years. There are no winners in that situation, and I know that neither myself nor them are bad people. I stayed for a bit and as I was getting ready at the door to leave, Aunt Vera came out and gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek and said to me, "I'm so glad you came. It's not Christmas unless the whole family is here, and you're family."

Praise Him from whom all blessings flow,

Praise Him all creatures here below,

Praise Him above the Heavenly host,

Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

This is the doxology. We would sing it after collection in church. As I got older, I stopped going to our little church. I felt it no longer spoke to me as it once did. The last time I was there might have been at Vera's funeral when her family asked me to be an usher. I felt honoured to do this. I felt honoured that they would ask me. I felt like this validated the relationship between me and Vera, and maybe my place within the family.

I found an instrumental violin version of the Doxology on Spotify. When it comes on my playlist, the beautiful melody reminds me of sitting in the same church pew every Sunday beside the beautiful Vera. So, this is for her. Honestly, I've had a few 'Vera's' in the rural and if I had time, I'd write about them all. (Renny. Debrief Vignette, Open Prompt)

I will begin the analysis of this vignette with the responses of my group members to tease out some of the themes that resonated. To begin, Rachel and Bera both spoke about recognizing the Doxology. Rachel said, "You should know I sang along with that because I also I grew up in a Baptist church and that was also an every-week refrain." (Rachel, Discussion, Open Prompt) Bera replied that they were "singing along as well, the Mennonite background in my case, but the Doxology was there too. I was trying to remember which was the number in the hymnal because it almost came to mind." (Bera, Discussion, Open Prompt) This suggests how steeped we were in the church in the past, including Adèle who has already discussed her past and current attachment to the church. The only person who did not bring up the church was Jenna. As another line of flight, it seems fitting to explore how the church has served as a place of territorialization for some of us, but also a place where utopic moments did and might exist in the rural space. In my experience, queerness was not condemned in my church, and my queer body was able to exist there. For Rachel, the church, "now torn down, good riddance," in the

community of her youth that she struggled in, was the place "that [she] had to swallow every true thing about [herself]." (Rachel, Introductory session) With that said, she also sang along to the Doxology and both her real name, and the name she chose as her pseudonym, have a Biblical origin, which might lead one to infer this is important to her. Again, church is a place associated with conflicting feelings. For Bera, the church and community did not support them when the ally card incident happened, precipitating the decision for they and their partner to leave it as they felt attacked within the church. Bera described their community as traditionally very white and Christian up until the last couple of decades but discussed how the Christian church is an organizing factor within the town. (Bera, Interview) I would also leave the church after attending for most of my childhood and even teaching Sunday school throughout my teenage years. However, I decided to leave because eventually I did not believe or agree with some of the doctrine and, therefore, unlike Adèle, it did not provide me with any real solace in my adult years. However, I will say that I did not experience any real negativity or homophobia from the church community when I was a member. I believe one of the factors may be because I was a congregant within the United Church of Canada, which seems to have a more liberal bent towards LGBTQ+ people. For example, a 2014 document entitled *Moving Towards Full Inclusion: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the United Church of Canada* distributed by the United Church of Canada states that,

> In 1988, the United Church's 32nd General Council made two statements about sexual orientation, church membership, and church leadership. General Council declared that 'All persons regardless of their sexual orientation who profess faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to him, are welcome to be or become full members of The United Church of

Canada,' and, 'All members of The United Church of Canada are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry.'

(https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/full-inclusion.pdf)

This interesting document charts the history of the United Church since it's advent in 1925, illuminating how the church doctrine evolved through and with the political movements over the decades including: the Civil Rights movement; Women's movement; and Gay Liberation movement after Stonewall; as well as reflections on the church's role in the Residential School system in Canada and the silence of the church during the Holocaust. This document is very open in the discussion of the advances the church has made but also the ways in which it still might grow. Whether or not the "official" doctrine of the church did affect the way the congregation accepted me when I was young, I certainly did not hear any homophobic preaching from the pulpit, as Adèle did, and so felt relatively comfortable there, as described in the vignette I wrote. I do think, perhaps, that it is important to include such a vignette where the affect associated with how I felt about Vera becomes intertwined with the material affect of the Doxology and the church space, itself, and how when the Doxology does play on my device I am automatically transported to beautiful and utopic moments where I did feel free to be my "authentic self" with Vera and my mom in church, that I wish I could relive one more time.[18]

Holiday/family celebrations was also a theme that showed up in my vignette, as well as in Adèle's anniversary party story and was commented upon by the group. Jenna, particularly, had an affective response. She said,

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[18] Again, I am crying as I write this, as the singular affect associated with these utopic memories also now translate to a "utopian longing" for what once was.

> It was really a spectacular piece. I got emotional through the middle of it. And I can't
>
> quite pinpoint why either, what moment kind of made me break down, but I think it's the
>
> holidays. I am such a sap for the holidays…It was a really beautiful piece about the
>
> complexity of families. I think from this experience of being with everyone, I'm just
>
> realizing how complex things are, just on a regular basis, and I just really liked that it was
>
> a complex piece. (Jenna, Discussion, Open Prompt)

Echoing both the holiday component and the complexity of the familial dynamic at such events,

Rachel said,

> That was beautiful. That was really powerful. I really connected with the family
>
> Christmas…It is interesting thinking about those family spaces and the way those spaces
>
> are then coded and that feeling of belonging and what the holidays are supposed to be, or
>
> what they profess themselves to be, and then kind of what they are. But then, when you
>
> get those little moments, you speak about so beautifully, I'll say I'm a little envious. I
>
> wish I had someone like that in my family, but I love hearing that kind of story. (Rachel,
>
> Discussion, Open Prompt)

There is a definite affective association that happens with stories concerning the holidays.

Perhaps, the complexity that Jenna spoke of at these family functions is the feeling that Rachel

also described where these moments with family are supposed to be loving, welcoming and

hospitable, but often they are not this way. It returns us to Adèle's idea about looking for

belonging in a Hollywood or Hallmark movie. Because these movie moments have often been

denied to us, and in all honesty, they are denied to many who do not live normative lives, there is

a particular sting when we attend these events and are decidedly excluded. I think we can all feel

that exclusion from the story. Yet the complexity is found within the character of Vera who

always wanted me to attend at Christmas and made me feel the most welcomed when I did. I wonder if perhaps she understood why I did not want to attend, as well. The special way she made me feel, and what she said to me at the door, certainly makes me feel that she did understand. Adèle picked up on this as well and said,

> I think it's so important to have those people that are willing to fight for our presence in our families, and that person made sure that you knew you were welcome and if anything would have been said I'm sure that lady would have had her dukes out ready to be like, 'Well, you can go sit outside.' And I think that's just so important, it's that allyship and knowing that you are welcome, knowing it's unconditional. There are no exceptions to that acceptance, and I think that's just wonderful. (Adèle, Discussion, Open Prompt)

Being the gentle soul that Vera was I do not know if she would have had anyone go sit outside but I do know that if she knew that someone had upset me then she would have at least told me to never mind what they had to say. She was an ally for me, there is no doubt. Bera also recognized how remembering this allyship is important. They were, "struck by how you have some good memories, even though there are some things that aren't so pleasant, but that doesn't get rid of, or doesn't downplay, the positives." (Bera, Discussion, Open Prompt). This statement, of course, aligns with my project of searching for these moments of utopia even within territorialized spaces.

However, sometimes the utopia is more difficult to find, and a memory of the space and event can only be viewed through our territorialization. Rachel was also influenced by the stories of family from the weeks before and also wrote a narrative about her experiences with family and family spaces in the community that she felt territorialized in as a child. She prefaced the following story as being full of *old echoes*. Of course, by this time we had spoken about the

ghosts that haunt us, and thus, echoes from the past are also often hauntings, which this piece is for Rachel. Affectively, this was a difficult piece for her write and share and she said that she did not know how to feel about it. She also said this about her quilt story which shares the same setting and association to her grandmother as this story, and thus, the ambivalence is the same. Rachel wrote,

> *Grammie's cottage, tucked away on a lake outside of [Community], was a mythical place from my childhood. Because both of my parents were teachers, the two months of summer were always filled with travel to sun-drenched beaches with our little trailer in tow — and also with trips down to the cottage. This place, with its creaky linoleum and that always smelled inexplicably like my grandmother's turkey stuffing, was pure magic: it was there that my grandfather first cut me a stump that had been chewed off by a beaver. It was there that I spent hours playing with my two cousins. It was there that we watched Bonanza and went paddle-boating and were spoiled with too much Jell-O salad for dessert.*

> *Of course, it got more complicated as I got older. Going to that town, or that cottage, became fraught…The cottage was hot and stuffy, claustrophobic. I felt watched at all times, as if that side of my family were always waiting for a missed step… And still my grandmother and aunt, uncle, and cousins would go into their church on Sundays, while my brother and I went fishing with leftover pasta salad or caught snakes. Those were the good days.*

> *The two final trips we took there while my grandmother was alive were a couple of years apart: the first, when I was fifteen, was with only my mother and brother, who met Grammie there. My brother and I went paddling and fishing as usual, and I worked*

my way through my stack of books, but I had other things on my mind. I'd decided to come out to my mum and spent the whole week there working up the courage. We climbed back in the car to make the 3-hour drive home and I thought of nothing else, until we took the exit for our house — at which point I blurted out, sweaty and clammy at once, 'I'm bisexual!' 'Oh,' said my mom. 'Alright.' In the backseat playing Pokémon on the Gameboy, my brother looked at me as I craned my neck to catch his reaction. 'So what?' he asked, bored, and went back to playing. (I will say, as an aside, that my dad was much more congratulatory when I got home!)

The last time I was at the cottage while my grandmother was alive was after I'd graduated from high school. I had my new MacBook with me — which was my graduation gift and had opened up even greater Internet access. I laid on the back deck with my cousin — with whom I no longer speak — and we listened to bad emo music. She was interested in everything I'd declared was cool, which was a decidedly new dynamic in our relationship. I remember walking around the cottage and feeling above all of it — floating, untouchable. I managed to wring out some enjoyment from that trip, but the sense of detachment I cultivated — was it dissociation? — made actual enjoyment difficult.

It was almost another decade before I went back, the year after my grandmother's death. Cindi and I had talked about going earlier, but I never bothered coming out to my grandmother. My mum had fought tooth-and-nail to build a positive relationship with her mother; she also loved me unconditionally. I knew that coming out would force a conflict in their relationship, while my grandmother was in the last years of her life. So, I remained an unspoken thing with that side of the family. But once Grammie passed away,

we decided it was time to revisit this place I spoke of so affectionately (even if that affection was tinged by the hurt I always feel when speaking about anything relating to that place or those relatives).

The cottage had been inherited by my aunt and uncle, and mum had negotiated — no, really; that side of the family is complicated and awful — for Cindi and me to go to the cottage for a few days after my last day of school…We packed up the car and our dog and drove down to the cottage — and it was at once exactly the same and completely different. It smelled like mildew and mold…

The lake was frigid, the building dank, the forest riddled with ticks and bugs. We slept in the sour-smelling bed one night, then packed up and left — and I realized there was no going back. It was, and is, such a complicated place for me, and it belongs fully to the family members I've stopped speaking to after they made their views on queerness clear. I return Christmas and birthday gifts. I've unfriended them on social media. I avoid any lunches they have at my parents' place.

But the cottage that existed in my childhood, drenched in sun and full of endless adventures on the water and in the woods, hours in our imaginations, still exists in my memories, even if they're haunted with that mildew-like small of queerphobia. Persistent, lingering, a reminder that I didn't belong, and I don't belong — but theirs isn't a world I've ever wanted anyway. Besides, we prefer tenting and travelling abroad. Roaming widely rather than being tethered. (Rachel, Vignette, Open Prompt)

The first point I would like to make is in my response to Rachel's vignette. At the time, I replied, It was really close to my vignette in a lot of ways. When I think of Vera's family, we went to their cabin on the lake every summer. We spent a lot of time there and that place

is now gone, they ended up selling it. There are good, wonderful memories associated

with that place, as well. I can smell the dampness as you're talking about it. So those

memories are there, my childhood is there, and I loved that place, but at the same time it's

still haunted by those other remnants that you spoke about, I mean — 'the mildew- like

smell of queerphobia!'" (Renny, Discussion, Open Prompt)

The first point that can be made from this vignette is that, like my own experiences at the cabin

on the lake and Adèle's moments at her grandmother's house, there were moments of joy here.

We all had moments in these spaces where fun was had. Rachel, herself, calls the affective

memories mythical and magical, with the material nostalgia of the camp with its cracked

linoleum and the poultry-seasoned smell (that is what I smell!) of her grandmother's stuffing, the

Jell-O salad, and the pasta salad (that reminds me of the many barbecues held on the camp deck

at Vera's) as well as the material space of the lake itself where much fun was had with cousins

and memories of fishing with her brother. The memory of the charm of the cabin and the lake,

mix with the remembered smells of food and moments of fun to create a nostalgia that certainly

resonated with me as I was brought to my own moments with Vera and her family at their lake.

In a way, Rachel's memories are also my own. But then, as Rachel says, the space became more

complicated. Infused within these joyful memories are also territorializing moments where

Rachel had to hide who she was from "that" side of the family. The place that was once a

childhood idyll took on new associations as she grew older, and the place became associated

with those she wanted to escape from. Rachel described how her mom had to *negotiate* for she

and Cindi to go to the cottage once it had been inherited by her aunt and uncle. This word is

important because as she got older negotiation became what the space was about. She had to

negotiate the parts of her identity that she could share there, until she eventually just stopped

attending, much like I did at the Christmas eve parties at Vera's. Thus, the memories of a place

that was once associated with fun and family now becomes associated with mold, mildew and a

sour-smelling bed, and the toxic relatives who she no longer speaks to — the camp for both of us

becomes a ghostly object. Thus, both Rachel and I are left with feeling that those childhood days

are gone forever. I would love to go back to the camp, but it's been sold, and I was never invited

there again as an adult. This was the same at "nan's" house once she passed away. What I would

give to go in the kitchen and lay on the daybed, which my cousin says is still there, and listen for

the echoes of her laugh, the tapping of the spoons and the harmonica. I think in many of these

spaces the people who would have invited me are already gone, and like Rachel, I recognize that

I did not really belong in these spaces with some family members, and I still do not. Bera then

responded with how childhood memories of spaces change as we change and become someone

different. Bera said,

> When I think back there's actually a number of different camp or cabin pieces that in my
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> past were brought to mind, but particularly for me, it didn't connect as much with the
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> queerness piece, but there was a long period, about nine years, where my family went to
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> summer camp every summer and worked there at the camp. I was very involved! It was a
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> Christian summer camp. And it's the religion piece that really tied in because for me, it's
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> having left Christianity, I've still got these memories of that camp, but I know, going
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> back to it now, your description of that cabin, you know when you're older, it is the same
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> place but it's not the same place at all. That really resonated with me because I haven't
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> gone back to the camp very deliberately for that reason because it would not be the
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> same…At the time, yeah, it was all wonderful and I enjoyed it, it was just great. It's a

completely different place for me now because I'm in a very different place. (Bera,

Discussion, Open Prompt)

Bera addresses here how territorializing affect can become intertwined with material space.

Although, Bera says that the resonance they took away from our discussion was more about

Christianity and not as much about queerness, I do wonder, however, if this is quite so because

Bera had already written about how a factor of leaving Christianity was the views held about

queer people within the church that they were attending. Thus, when they remember the

Christian camp, it is now a completely different place in their memory because, as they say, they

are in a completely different place.

In our remembrances of our childhood, there is the knowledge that our "authentic" selves

really just did not belong in that time and space, and therefore, we might struggle to return to

those places because they never really belonged to us either, and particularly to the people that

we have now become. Adèle elaborated on this point succinctly in her response.

For me, it was the separation of when it was okay for you to be there and then when it

was no longer okay for you to be there and you're the same person, you were always you.

But all of a sudden, it's not okay. I find that death also has a lot to play into that and it

came in Renny's story when you mentioned that at the moment she died, it became very

clear where the lines were going to be drawn and it's really sad because it happens very

often that it's while those people that are aligned with us are alive, there's a little bit of

grey, sometimes…Like you said, going back is not the same, and it happens for parts of

our lives, like you mentioned the cottage, Rachel, Bera mentioned that religious aspect or

religious memories that we have. It's the same thing. You'll have those childhood

memories and then, all of a sudden, we're the same people but it's not okay for us to be there. (Adèle, Discussion, Open Prompt)[19]

Of course, Adèle already alluded to this point in her own story about why she does not like to return "down home." To remind the reader, she said,

I liked women when I served their masses. I liked women when they forced me to wear that little white ball gown to receive my first bread. It was accepted then because they only knew that I liked men, which I do, but not only men. (Adèle, Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

In all of these instances there became a dividing line when we felt it was acceptable for us, even fun and joyful, to be in particular spaces with family. The dividing line likely occurred slowly as we discovered our queerness and also our families' reaction to queerness. When we were young, we did not yet have any expectations on us to exclaim an identity that would eventually be held in contempt, so we could have fun and play and enjoy our time in these spaces, until our queerness began to manifest, and we realized that these spaces would no longer be open to us.

Thus, our stories are full of tension, negotiation, and complexity as we attempt to reconcile the good memories with the difficult ones. However, in some cases there is no reconciling. There is letting go and returning the gifts and no longer speaking, but there is a loss in that, and for all members of the family. Rachel and I both spoke to this point. I said,

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[19] One can see the becomings that we were brought to throughout this storying. Rachel's account of the cottage spurred my own further consideration of the camp and lake that I attended as a child, and for Bera it brought up working in the Christian camp, which might have also been influenced by my discussion of religion in the first vignette I shared where I included the discussion of the church and the Doxology. It also brought Adèle to reflect again on her experiences with family "down home."

Since Vera died, I went back out to the house for a Christmas Eve get together and I very much felt like, 'This would be the last time that I'm coming out here to this place.' And again, it's because I felt like I did not belong there, and I don't know, like I said in the first piece, if that's because of who I am or because of that distance, or whatever has happened, but I just felt like I can't do this anymore. There's the sadness that comes with that because you do end up letting people go, but at the same time, and this is how I think I act in life in general, when I have to let people go, it's as a form of protection. (Renny, Discussion, Open Prompt)

Rachel replied that,

I think it's a really good way to put it because for me, it was very deliberate when I decided to cut those relatives out of my life…It's like that protective measure. I was like, 'If I let them, they're going to just pick away at me, bit by bit, every time I see them or have to interact with them, it's like poison. So, you know what, I don't need it.' But it's hard because of how we conceptualize family, I think, and what family is which is why maybe the idea of a queer found family is so powerful. (Rachel, Discussion, Open Prompt)

This discussion took me on a rhizomatic journey that was informed by some of our previous discussions and by a quotation I received from a friend as well as the theme of when we can be our "authentic selves." I have already discussed feeling like an outsider at the lake, even though Vera was very good at creating belonging for me. However, discussing the lake brought up affective memories of my dad who also loved it there. We had spent many weekends of my childhood here together. Many memories of him have faded but when I think of the lake, I can still picture him stretched out in a cloth hammock, asleep, with a baseball hat over his face. Dad

comes to me in memories of moments nowadays, of affective associations with objects, places

and people at different times, a ghost I look forward to seeing. Rachel's story of the cabin on the

lake reminded me of him. The other moment in this group that reminded me of dad was when

Bera shared the vignette about their rabbit. I also have a rabbit that I have had for 40 years. His

name is "Hoppy." Dad and I won him in a colouring contest that was in the newspaper when I

was five years old, and, thus, he is a ghostly object that reminds me of dad. Hoppy used to have a

white body with five buttons running down his front, bright pink trousers, a blue bowtie, and

grinning red mouth. He was well-played with when I was a child. Now he sits on my living room

shelf, with just the centre piece left of the bowtie, a dot for a mouth where a smile once was, the

white fur browned over time, and two holes in his pink pants that have been stitched up (See

Figure 7. *Hoppy and Bera's Rabbit*).

Figure 7. *Hoppy and Bera's Rabbit*

Why am I bringing this up here? The affective assemblage of Rachel's story of the cottage, my

stories of the lake, which brought me to memories of dad, was added upon by the following

quotation from the Velveteen Rabbit that a friend had sent me, which then, of course, reminded

me of Bera's rabbit and then Hoppy. The quotation then took on new meaning when placed in

conversation with our discussion of when and where we can be our "authentic selves." The

quotation reads as follows,

'Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.' 'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit. 'Sometimes,' said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.' 'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' he asked, 'or bit by bit?' 'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.' (Bianco, 1922)

There's something here that can be applied to our queer childhoods. We start out as new, polished, defined and shiny, in the eyes of others, if we fit within the heterosexual matrix. We look right! Unless we do not and the first hole in the fabric is exposed and the queerness shows. We become battered by microaggressions and attacks. Through the years, our sheen is lost, but we did not want that heteronormative sheen anyway. We then leave the attackers behind but remember those loved ones that taught us how to love ourselves. Perhaps by the time we do so, we have been through so much, we are no longer bright and young and *innocent*, but we are REAL. We *become* real! In a sense, our queerness is torn open, first by others in disdainful ways, and then by us as we fall in love with ourselves, as we fall in love with others, and we become the truest versions of ourselves, we deterritorialize! This, perhaps, is ugly to some, but it is beautiful in our own eyes, and in the eyes of our loved ones. Through this process we *become*

our "authentic" selves, and those who cannot and will not love us, those who refuse to see our beautiful queerness, we let fade away.

This really does bring us full circle to our discussion of why queer kinship is so important for us. As Rachel says, this is why "the idea of a queer found family is so important." However, as this section is on family it is also important to recognize those family members who have stood by us through the years, and not just the ones that we had to let go. Thus, I embrace those family members I do belong with, including the ones I *did* belong with, like Vera. Rachel also recounted how her memory of coming out is also associated with the camp, and within this memory there was an acceptance offered by all her immediate family members, even in her brother's, "Who cares?" It's very clear that her immediate family would serve as a protective force against the side of the family who she no longer speaks with. In speaking of her family in the interview she said that her family was very supportive and always willing to listen, "They would be PFLAG parents if we had a PFLAG chapter here…I know I can talk to them about anything and they get it…I have amazing parents, my brother is great." (Rachel, Discussion, Open Prompt) Although Jenna spoke very little about her family, she did say that her mom lived in town and they were close, "so having family here is kind of nice!" (Jenna, Interview). Bera also did not talk about their immediate family very much but did say that they were very close to their mother-in-law who lived in town. They said that it took their mother-in-law some time to get her head around Bera's transition, but that she was open. Bera explained,

> My mother-in-law — I'm probably closer to her, than, well, my own parents for sure, and
> a lot of others, and in terms of being out with her, it's still something that's hard for her to
> wrap her head around, but she's willing to try. And so, you can connect! There are

straight people that even if they don't quite get it, they're willing to try and make room for

you. (Bera, Interview)

As an aside, besides my dad, and Adèle's uncle, close male-identified family members have only

made brief appearances in our vignettes. Beginning this section, three of us wrote about

grandmothers, Jenna would speak fondly about her relationship with her mom, I wrote about

Vera and my found "grandmother," and Bera just spoke about the wonderful relationship with

his wife and mother-in-law. Interestingly, Aaron & Rostosky's (2019) study with 25 transgender

participants from Central Appalachia found that mothers and maternal figures provided a sense

of protection for the participants in the rural. The participants also felt that their mothers were

able to influence both close family and community members (p. 1). They wrote that,

Participants perceived that their mothers influenced how their fathers/step-fathers and

other family members treated them. Regardless of whether a mother was supportive or

rejecting, other family members tended to follow her lead or at least modulate their

behavior in her presence. (p. 9)

Given this information, perhaps the side of Rachel's family that she does not have relationships

with followed the lead of a grandmother who was not supportive, whereas Adèle's grandmother

did support her which perhaps influenced her aunts and uncles to be accepting. My

"grandmothers", mom, and Aunt Vera certainly opened up spaces of belonging within my

family. This study also found that supportive mothers were also influential in creating change

within the community. Like Rachel's would-be PFLAG parents, some participants reported that

mothers worked with advocacy groups within their communities (p.10). Lastly, some of the

mothers told their children that family loyalty comes above everything else and that they would

support them. This returns us to the work of Mary L. Gray who wrote about the importance of

the family unit in the rural space. To remind, she said that rural identity means adhering to notions of loyalty to a rural family unit that depends on one another. With this said, this was not true of all the participants in this study and some participants recounted very painful stories of rejection that led some to consider leaving their rural communities (p. 8).

To conclude, I must return to the idea that the way Rachel thinks of her childhood community and the way I think of that community now are completely opposite. Again, this is where many of my kin are, and I feel nothing but belonging. This is interesting in terms of the nature of belonging in the rural for queer people. It is not about the rural space itself, or all people in that rural space, but rather, the conditions created by the people we belong or do not belong with, both our kinship group and our family, that fosters a protective space of belonging where we can be our "authentic" selves.

Chapter 10: A Return to the Material: Rural Queer Crafting/Quilt Making

This chapter begins with a vignette from Bera from our *On Being Seen* prompt. Bera recounts a moment where they stitched a queer quilt block for a Newcomers association; a political act that aimed to deterritorialize the rural space. Bera's vignette would lead me to write a debrief vignette about the queer, deterritorializing power of craft-making, returning us to the political possibilities found in Ann Cvetkovich's "utopia of everyday habit." This brought us all to a discussion about the deterritorializing power of queering "traditional" rural activities. A discussion about crafting and quilts, thus, returned us to a discussion about Rachel's grandmother's quilts, and Aunt Sweet's quilt which, once again, brought us to discuss relationships with family members. The rhizomatic nature of our writing and discussion group is put on display here as themes from past chapters are revisited through the lens of crafting as disruption and deterritorialization.

Another theme that emerged from our focus group sessions was a felt allyship and solidarity with other marginalized groups within the rural space. This is discussed further in the *Our School Stories* section through our work as social justice advocates within our schools. In Bera's community they observed that the town demographics had recently been changing due to the arrival of refugees and immigrants. They said that a number of churches have sponsored refugees and there has been an increase of Muslim families, as well as a number of families of African descent and people from the Philippines. They said the reaction from some people in the community is that this is wonderful, and they are welcoming, but that others are not so welcoming. They continued,

> I mean some of the comments that get made to black, Indigenous, and people of colour in our community are just jaw dropping. My spouse is a manager, and a number of her

coworkers are from the Philippines or are black and sometimes share with her things that are said within the community and it's mindboggling. (Bera, Interview)

For our *On Being Seen* prompt, Bera told a story that brought us back to the utopic power found in deterritorialization within the rural and within a Newcomer organization that may be seeking to include more intersectional experiences in its delivery. Bera wrote,

> *Several years ago, an organization that supports newcomers, particularly refugees, organized a quilt with blocks, contributed by various individuals with varying backgrounds, as a way of visually showing how people of different backgrounds have come together in our community. A young lady from one of the newcomer families who knew me through school, and knew that I was a quilter, insisted that they ask me to contribute a block.*

> *I'd started a quilt based on the original Pride flag, and I immediately knew I wanted to take elements of that design and incorporate it into my block. I wasn't sure if it would be accepted, but I knew what I needed to do, whether it ended up in the final quilt or not.*

> *To their credit, the organization did include my block in the quilt, which hangs in their office here in town. They were very appreciative of the block, and its message… While I was no longer a member of the Quilt Guild, a friend told me that there were some people quite upset that my block had been included in the quilt. It gave me a measure of perverse pleasure to know that my quilt block pricked the ire of those people, and there was not a damn thing they could do about it…* (Bera, Vignette, On Being Seen) (See Figure 8. *There's a Home for Everyone in the Rainbow)*

Figure 8. *There's a Home For Everyone in the Rainbow.*

Bera's quilt piece with the message, "There's a Home for Everyone in the Rainbow" is an

important piece to contribute to the Newcomers association because in communities that are not

fully accepting of both newcomers and queerness, the queer aspect of their identity likely

remains unspoken and unacknowledged by heteronormative organizations that seek to offer

support. This was a way for Bera to deterritorialize the rural space by sending the message that,

of course, there will be newcomers who are also queer, and that they can find a space, a home, in

the community, as well. Bera is really deterritorializing in many possible ways here. They are

deterritorializing the community, as the block "pricked the ire" of some community members but

still was included in the quilt, they are possibly deterritorializing the organization that may not

have thought about queer newcomer inclusion before, they are possibly offering a

deterritorialization to queer newcomers themselves, who may then feel they can express more

aspects of their identity in the community, and, lastly, Bera is deterritorializing themself. This

self- deterritorialization can be found in how utopic the submission of this quilt block was for

Bera. Bera is joyful that they were able to do this and the utopia in this vignette is palpable. In

this instance the utopia is associated with being queerly political and engaging in activism. This

reminds the reader that utopia/deterritorialization/queering often are synonymous in my

discussion. We all realized this as well, which was reflected in our responses. Jenna picked up on the utopia. She exclaimed, "I love that story, it just made me feel so, so, so, happy. It was just a feel-gooder. I'm just so happy they included the block…" (Jenna, Discussion, On Being Seen) For Adèle, it was the activism and deterritorializing power that resonated. She said,

> For me, it was the attitude that you chose really to feel empowered in that moment, and to be like, 'That block is in that quilt and there's nothing you can do about it, so now just stare at it and complain all the way home if you want!' (Adèle, Discussion, On Being Seen)

For me, it was also utopic and deterritorializing as I felt it echoed my own vision for this project, which was to make the idea of a home in the rural more accessible for queer people. I said, "For me, obviously, it was the idea of home that I thought was kind of lovely and beautiful and that there is a home for all of us. It's part of the reason why I want to do this work, too." (Renny, Discussion, On Being Seen). Adèle also brought up a very important point that we expand upon in the *Our School Stories* section, that is, how much of our activist work in schools involves working with and educating about many marginalized groups to create change. Muñoz' idea of utopia is also deeply rooted in notions of solidarity between marginalized groups. Muñoz states that "the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity." (p. 20) Thus, Adèle reflected upon how the inclusion of the quilt block was,

> a moment for you to feel included in another group. Another group that doesn't necessarily feel included all the time, so it was that we can maybe find, not necessarily a community identical to what we need for ourselves, but we can find other people that feel the same way for different reasons. (Adèle, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Thus, kinship relationships resulting from or leading to activist affiliations for change are possibilities for establishing community in rural spaces.

Lastly, Rachel's response was fitting as she was brought back to her own reflections of her grandmother's quilts. She said,

> Yeah, those are, that's awesome. Um, yeah, my, I don't know a ton about, you know, I have an adversarial relationship with quilts. However, my mom really loves quilting, so I know how much work that is and love that design. I think I would, I would, like quilts more if I had more, like, radical quilts in my life. (Rachel, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Rachel and I both laughed when she said that she had an adversarial relationship with quilts, but I think she struggled somewhat to form a response because Bera's quilt block with, "There's a Home for Everyone Under the Rainbow" reminded her of the quilts her grandmother made and how this home was not granted to her as a young queer person. Bera's vignette and this discussion, as well as Rachel's comment about wanting more radical quilts in her life led me on a line of flight to write the following debrief vignette for the next week, which also returned us to a discussion of connections with family,

> *I'm thinking about the quilt pieces that Bera created and showed us. Ann Cvetkovich writes about 'the utopia of everyday habit' and discusses how within everyday activities one can find joy, love and healing, and that when attached to a medium like art, 'everyday,' perhaps, even traditional art forms, like quilting, can be used for political and empowering purposes. I see similarities in some of my own craft work. I have spent many an evening, sitting and watching TV while stitching plastic canvas art. There is something about moving the yarn in and out of the small square holes that brings me great peace. I also am frequently overcome with nostalgia as I think*

back to my childhood and sitting at my Great Aunt Sweet's house where she first plied me with baked goods and then proceeded to recount all the mischief that she got into during her long life, all the while crocheting afghans. She was a disruptor and a survivor from way back. Stitching reminds me of her.[20]

Like Bera's quilt, within some pieces I have made, there is disruption. I have stitched a giant Trixie Mattel face (who is a drag queen if you don't know her), for my niece who loves her (See Figure 9. Trixie Mattel). I stitched the Schitt's Creek characters standing outside the Rosebud Motel (See Figure 10. Rosebud Motel), because Dan Levy wanted to create this fictional rural town that had no homophobia, and for my best friends and myself, three 'Friends of Dorothy' hanging canvases (See Figure 11. Friends of Dorothy). Can one get more queer than Judy Garland and the Wizard of Oz? ('There's no place like home!')

I've done this for fun, without thinking of their political purpose until now. Like Bera, I think maybe we are taking this traditional art form, and perhaps, traditional gender norms, and we are disrupting them, we are queering them. This is no longer just the work of elderly ladies, those grandmothers who we love, and those who made it difficult or impossible for us to love them. And I hope this doesn't upset you, Rachel, but I have also been reflecting on your grandmother's quilts, and how you said that you need more radical quilts. I wonder if a different story can be told about the quilts now that they are in a queer household. Maybe that is where they are supposed to be. (Renny. Debrief Vignette, On Being Seen)

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[20] The descriptions of Aunt Sweet found here and below are modified from *Searching for Utopia in Rural Queer Narratives.*

Figure 9. *Trixie Mattel* Figure 10. *Rosebud Motel*

Figure 11. *Friends of Dorothy*

To begin, there were many lines of flight for me here. Obviously Bera's quilt piece and Rachel's

response returned me to thinking about her grandmother's quilt and how she might reclaim it.

This then brought me to my own crafting and the above vignette. Thinking of this crafting as a

political endeavor, thus, returned me to Cvetkovich's "utopia of everyday habit." For

Cvetkovich, this is not simply about those everyday mundane habits that bring joy, but this

utopia also serves as a political response to unjust systems of oppression. For example, the art

that is included in Cvetkovich' book "Depression: A Public Feeling" include performance

pieces, crafting, and art installations that are meant to actively combat depression, by not just

pointing out what depression is and how it affects people, but by providing examples that are

"reparative ones, which tell us something not just about depression but about ways of living…

that attempt to make things, to be creative, to do something." (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 161) It is this

"art of daily living" that might be offered as a respite from depression. The same can be applied

to the utopic stories that we are telling throughout this study. It is striking how similar this is to

Du Bois notion of "double consciousness" and how one is able to have knowledge of oppression but also knowledge of utopia within community as a protective force against it. Thus, the pieces that I have stitched are disruptive pieces. They are all queer pieces that are on my apartment wall and in the homes of my friends that mark the spaces as queer. It is compelling to me that the queer works that I have stitched are also on the wall at the same time as a 12-piece Victorian village that I stitched and constructed which sits on my desk over the month of December (See Figure 12. *Victorian Village*). I named the park in the village after the park in the community where my besties live. I created storefronts with their names on them, and I named the school after the school I taught at in this community. And much like Levy's conceptualization for *Schitt's Creek*, there is no homophobia in my plastic canvas village. (https://www.vulture.com/2018/11/dan-levy-explains-why-schitts-creek-has-no-homophobia.html) When I look at it, I do think, "There's no place like home," and, therefore, like Bera's quilt piece, my conceptualization of my home community is one where I do belong.

Figure 12. *Victorian Village*

For Cvetkovich, this political crafting is both coming from women's culture and also rooted in feminism. She states that,

> Crafting emerges from the domestic spaces that are at the heart of women's culture to provide a model for ways of living that acknowledge forms of structural inequity while also practicing bodily and sensory life that incorporate or weave them into the fabric of a daily life that literally includes texture, color, and sensory pleasure.

(Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 168)

As a feminine queer man, feminism and queerness are often interchangeable for me and, therefore, I commented on how the disruption and deterritorialization also happens because both Bera and myself are challenging traditional gender roles associated with crafting. We are queering a traditional heteronormative activity by first making the crafts and secondly by including queer content within them. Quilt-making, in particular, has historic associations with both the rural and the work ascribed to women within the rural household. Indeed, in *A Fair-Ribbon Quilt: Crafting Identity and Creating Memory,* (2018*)* Nurse-Gupta explores how in the 19th and 20th Centuries in Canada, quilting was a necessary contribution to a rural home as, "this not only allowed rural families to survive but also flourish… Quilts were not necessarily rural in origin, but as artifacts they evoke the image of the independent and self-supporting rural household…" (p. 10) In addition to the utility of quilt making, Nurse-Gupta also describes the way quilt-making could foster female connections, as the craft was "passed on through generations of mothers and daughters, reaffirming the meaningfulness of family ties and female connectedness." (Kaethler and Shantz, as cited in Nurse Gupta, p. 229) Thus, I do think there is power in, as I gently pointed out to Rachel, reframing and reclaiming the quilts that her grandmother made by thinking of their meaning now that they are in a queer household. I was worried about upsetting Rachel with this comment, but I also wanted to try to help take away some of the burden of the quilts and I checked in to make sure she was not upset by my saying so. She replied,

> I loved that, and that doesn't upset me at all, so don't worry about it. I find the idea of
> reclaiming and queering some of these traditional crafts or activities really compelling
> and it's something I'm interested in as well. Even things like farming and the idea of rural

spaces as being these kind [of spaces] where people farm, we tend to think of that as being very conservative…We're super into food production and permaculture. There's a queer commune up on the mountain where they're totally off grid and just produce all their own food, and I find that this kind of circles back to my first piece around like, "We also have a right to this place." It's just a slightly different layer of the reality here. And I think it's neat when we can queer the things that sometimes have been symbols of something repressive or inaccessible. So, like this traditional little household…and the way you can kind of take that and make it representative of who we are, is I think, quite powerful and compelling. (Rachel, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Once again, we are brought back, or sent on lines of flight, to some now familiar themes. Not only can the materiality of the quilts be queered, but we can extend this to the countryside itself where traditionally masculine occupations of farming and homesteading in the rural can be deterritorialized when it is happening in a queer household or "gay commune" even. We did not explore this gay commune in any detail, but the notion that this exists in the rural, again, speaks to the importance and value of rural queer kinship communities.

This also returned us to a discussion about familial supports in the rural as a result of my comments about Great Aunt Sweet. Jenna's response was,

For me, I really, really enjoyed when you referenced disrupter and survivor women in your life and I have this picture beside my bed with one of my grandmothers and another lady that was kind of like a grandmother to me, and they both passed on. I keep them by my bed every night and when I turn over I kind of look at them and I'm like, 'Now I'm raising hell, just like you guys were raising hell back in the day,' and I don't know, there's just something comforting about that idea. (Jenna, Discussion, On Being Seen)

This foreshadows an important change in Jenna that will be discussed further in the *Our Schools Stories* section but, briefly now, at the beginning of her workplace discussions Jenna felt cowed by many territorializations within the school system and had a difficult time with the notion of being an activist teacher. However, in this story, she does feel empowerment by being a disrupter woman and "raising hell" like her "grandmothers" who came before her. She does not describe how they were disruptors in any detail, but it is obvious that they held important places in her life, as Aunt Sweet did in mine. I did not share a personal story about Aunt Sweet at this session, but I have written about her before. Aunt Sweet was a disrupter her entire life. She would sit and crochet tirelessly for hours while entertaining any company with stories from the past of how she survived and thrived. She gleefully told stories about how she was one to be reckoned with. She recounted a sister who kneed her in the back constantly to get out of bed and turn off the light until she got so angry that she got up and yanked the light fixture out of the ceiling. She told many stories of a husband who was drunk and abusive, describing the lump on the side of her head from the frying pan that he hit her with, to how she would "borrow" money from his pockets when he was drunk and buy things for the house, which, when questioned, said that someone had given her. She would laugh mirthfully through these retellings, unafraid of using colorful language, unafraid of anything. She took this little boy in for many years of his childhood to escape his own abusers, a safe haven, and one she also likely offered to one of her best friends, next door neighbour and hairdresser, who was also known in the community to be gay. I said I had many "Vera's" in the rural and, indeed, I have. Thus, the assemblage of the materiality of the stitching, the affective remembrances of Sweet's house — the smells of baking

and dust, the memories of her disruption, as well as the afghan that she made me and is on my bed (you know it well by now) — perhaps, are remembered in my own disruptive stitching, and there is utopia here.

As I wrap up this section on *Our Community Stories*, it is very clear just how much one story told by a group member could affect another group member. In this chapter alone, Bera's quilt story could have been affected by Rachel's story of her grandmother's quilts. Both of these stories brought me to consider my own crafting and to Cvetkovich's utopia of everyday habit, which also returned me to thinking about Aunt Sweet, which then reminded Jenna of her own "survivor women" who inspired her. In a very real sense, in many instances, we are crafting our stories in response to the becomings that are generated through each other's narratives and discussion. The quilt stories brought me to think about the quilt as a rhizomatic metaphor that is now a connective thread throughout this dissertation. We are weaving together our own *story quilt* in a project of deterritorializations. Like a quilting circle there may be a grand vision for such an enterprise, or a general theme, an agreed upon color palette, but each individual brings their own vision and experiences to the quilt. Throughout the process, we may not know what each individual is going to stitch next, the possibilities are endless, rhizomatic, we may not know the colors that are going to be used, although we know they will likely be rainbowed, but watching the other quilters work their magic influences our own blocks and might also influence the quilts we then craft after this quilt is finished, after we say goodbye. The finished products, stories or quilts, then stand to represent an experience, one that is filled with the affect attached to community, to a found kinship group, to the discussions that occurred that brought the crafters to new ways of being. Cvetkovich wrote,

…one of the most important dreams attached to the current crafting scene is that it gives rise to new forms of collectivity and politics. Knitting circles and other groups in which people share information and make their labor more social, easily lend themselves to other forms of collectivity, including activism or what, in a redescription of the political, some are calling 'craftivism.' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 173)

In a sense, we are engaged in "craftivism." Through our crafted stories, we are pointing out the way we are oppressed, but going beyond this to craft stories of the everyday that do not leave us in a state of despair. The crafted pieces are put in conversation with the social, with the political, as an act of activism, where we display possibilities for different, and perhaps, more loving future queer experiences to occur. This craftivism that we are engaged in is, therefore, utopic and autoethnographic! Indeed, as we begin to explore *Our School Stories* it would become clear that none of us were strangers to activist/political work and the utopia and deterritorializations that can result from such activism. Of course, by now, the reader is also aware that with such deterritorializations, especially within a normative institution such as Education, there are also many re/territorializations that occur that must be constantly navigated. This moves us into our next session as we explore *Our School Stories.*

Part 3. Our School Stories: Our Rhizomatic Journey

Chapter 11. Queer Activism in Schools: *Lightning Rods* and *Brick Walls*

Many of the stories in this chapter are from our *Belonging in Schools* session. The writing

prompt for this session was, ***Write a vignette about your experiences of belonging, or not***

belonging, as a queer teacher in schools? This was our third focus group session and much like

the chapters in the *Our Community Stories* of this dissertation, this section will follow lines of

force that begin with the vignettes told in this session about what it is like being a teacher in the

rural school.

The following *activist* chapter is very much an unexpected line of flight from the school

stories. I, therefore, did not include *activist* teachers in my literature review because this theme

did not show up in the initial literature I read about rural queer educator experiences. However,

our experiences as a result of our activism certainly were discussed in the literature around the

repercussions (reterritorializations) that queer teachers face when they attempt

deterritorialization within their schools. This chapter focuses primarily on the narratives of Bera,

Rachel, and Jenna and the ways they have been reterritorialized within their schools when they

have engaged in activist/deterritorializing work. I have chosen to identify us as *activist* educators

because as the focus groups progressed we discussed how all of us engage in social justice work

that extends beyond queer activism, and therefore, this moniker was one that spoke to the

deterritorializing work we do within the schools.

This chapter begins by offering a definition of activist teachers. I then briefly explore

Sarah Ahmed's conceptualization of the *brick walls* that diversity practitioners come up against

in their respective institutions (Ahmed, 2012), using this analogy to explain our experiences

within the education system. These hetero- and cis- normative sites act as resistances to queer

teachers, the resistance felt, according to Ahmed, when, "banging your head against a brick wall." (p. 26) These are the walls that re/territorialize both queer educators and queer students in schools. We then investigate through our narratives and discussion how these *brick walls* are reinforced by the *school district*, *policies, administration*, *school staff*, *parents, and students*.

Queer teacher activists can and do resist, as well, working towards deterritorialization of the classroom, the school, policy and community. Throughout the chapter, we also explore how the introduction of our own queer bodies into the school space, the queering of the classroom environment, and attempts to disrupt heteronormativity within the institution can lead to deterritorializations. However, in some cases, the re/territorializing walls were extremely traumatizing. Instead of being celebrated for their activist work, Jenna, Rachel, and Bera were deemed as troublemakers and called *lightning rods* by their administrators; an admonishment that suggests that just by speaking their truths they attract difficulty! The attempts at silencing their voices deterred them from engaging in further deterritorializing work within their schools for a period of time and led them to despair. However, the final section of this chapter has group members interrogating and reclaiming the *lightning rod* moniker as a collective deterritorialization that led to healing.

The Activist Teacher

First, it is necessary to define what an activist teacher is and why I am choosing to use this descriptor to describe the members of our group. Kristopher Wells, in his article *Sexual Minority Teachers as Activist-Educators for Social Justice* (2017) states that it has primarily been the responsibility of LGBTQ+ youth to fight for their rights in schools, and that queer teacher activism has rarely been studied (p. 267). Wells explores the stories of four teachers that

he describes as activist-educators, drawn from a study of 53 queer teachers from across Canada.
In this study, Wells writes that these educators were activists because,

> each had undertaken significant actions, on their own impetus, to challenge the
> institutional workings of heteronormativity and gender-normativity present within their
> educational environment. Their critically queer educational praxis involved analyzing,
> strategizing, and taking action to advance LGBTQ inclusion in their schools and
> communities. (Wells, 2017, p. 270)

For the activist teachers in Wells' study, there was an active fight against the structures that
territorialize queer teachers and students. He wrote that activist teachers engage in three types of
educational activism:

> (1) personal activism, which focused on the individual classroom, creation of safe spaces,
> and the development of inclusive curriculum; (2) institutional activism, which focused
> on organizational policy, procedure, and cultural change; and (3) judicial activism, which
> represented a direct challenge to the educational system and the workings of state power
> and heteronormativity. (Wells, 2017, p. 290)

I argue that the participants in my study, as well as myself, regularly engage in the first and
second points as we attempt to deterritorialize the classroom, school space, and institutional
culture.

However, these attempts at deterritorializations do not go unchecked. In her book *On
Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life,* Sarah Ahmed (2012) speaks with
"diversity practitioners about their experiences of doing diversity work within the higher
education sector." (p. 7) I could immediately reflect upon my time spent as Race Relations,
Cross Cultural Understanding, and Human Rights Coordinator with my school district and how

Ahmed's assessment of how "diversity" rolls out in higher education was also compatible with

the framework in the public school system. As Ahmed states,

> The institution can be experienced by practitioners *as* resistance. One expression that
>
> came up in a number of my interviews was "banging your head against a brick wall."
>
> Indeed, this experience of the brick wall was often described as an intrinsic part of
>
> diversity work. (p. 26)

The next section explores the many *brick walls* that queer teachers are faced with as they engage

in deterritorializing activism within their schools.

Queer Teachers and Deterritorializations through Professional Development and Workshops

One way that queer educators work to deterritorialize their school assemblage is through

the educational opportunities that they bring into the school space, be it through professional

development workshops with staff, bringing guest presenters into the school space to speak with

students, or providing workshops to students which explore queer themes and topics. In my role

as RCH Coordinator for my rural school board, I engaged in all of these educational endeavors.

In my first vignette for the *Belonging in Schools* prompt, I share some of my experiences of

doing this work within schools,

> *Over a ten year period in my school district, until about 2015, I served on an RCH (Race*
>
> *Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding and Human Rights) leadership team. The*
>
> *existing Human Rights coordinator at the time wanted to expand capacity within the*
>
> *board and sought to create a team of social justice-minded educators. The team was*
>
> *initially made up of a guidance counselor, an administrator, an African Nova Scotian*
>
> *Student Support Worker, and me and another colleague who were both GSA advisors at*

the local high school. The coordinator would become a mentor to me, a supportive and protective ally, and eventually a wonderful friend… She consistently supported me in my efforts to be vulnerable enough to educate staff about the impacts of homophobia and my own personal experiences with it…We facilitated a number of professional development sessions to board staff, administration and teaching staff, using an intersectional and critical approach, where we first created opportunities for educators to investigate their biases and the structural barriers within our educational system, to engage in work around interrogating white and straight privilege, and there was opportunity to hear from members of marginalized groups within the school system: the experiences of African Nova Scotian staff, a Muslim newcomer's experience, and my experiences as a queer educator. (Renny, Vignette, Belonging in Schools)*

It was this beginning work that sought to question and disrupt the status quo, to engage in deterritorialization, that led me to the coordinator position after my mentor retired. In the discussion that arose after I shared this story, I relayed to my group members that I had a particular privilege as I felt supported and protected by my mentor and friend within the Board, and later, the mandate of the position also protected me when I served as coordinator. My group members, however, would share very different experiences of what happened when they attempted to deterritorialize their schools through professional development sessions. In the following section, Bera, Rachel and Jenna share what happened when they tried to bring queer workshops into their schools.

The Walls Encountered: Staff, Administration, Parents, Policy, Districts, Community, and Students [21]

Over the course of the interviews and the focus groups there were some stories that came up often. In many cases, these were stories of trauma and territorialization that have stayed with group members for years. For Bera, this showed up in their stories about the "ally card" incident. Bera wrote two vignettes for their *Home and Belonging in Community* prompt. The first was about territorializations within the community and the second was about territorializations within their school in the form of the "ally card" incident. To remind the reader of this incident, I will excerpt it again here. Bera recounted,

> *In the Fall of 2011, I organized Ally Training for teachers in my region. It was*
>
> *facilitated by a [Queer Resource Centre] and had attendees from various communities in*
>
> *Manitoba. This was a few years before I recognized that I wasn't an ally, I was queer.*
>
> *Following the training we each received an 'ally card,' which a number of us posted in*
>
> *our classrooms. All hell broke loose about a month later when a parent saw the card*
>
> *posted behind my desk. Things rapidly got ugly, with calls for me to be disciplined or*
>
> *even fired. I was castigated by parents and colleagues. I distinctly remember a colleague*
>
> *coming into my room and screaming at me during those events. The news went*
>
> *international. A Canadian songwriter wrote a song about what happened and included it*

---

[21] The first observation I wish to make is about the organization of this chapter. It may have been clearer to give each barrier its own sub-heading, for example, "Administration" would have their own section, "Parents" would have their own section, and so forth. However, this became impossible to do when sharing the stories because each story contained multiple barriers within the school assemblage, which demonstrates multiple territorializations occurring in each narrative. Thus, in each story presented I will explore the various "walls" as they arise.

on a CD about queerness in Canada. (Bera, Vignette, Home and Belonging in

Community)

The reterritorializing walls that Bera encountered after the ally card professional development

included parents who demanded they be fired, staff members who distanced themselves from

Bera, and a community that attacked them. As already mentioned, Bera and Sarah both worried

about Bera's safety when they were walking home from school after the incident. Bera also

talked about how there were a number of staff members at the time who were very angry with

them for posting the ally card and creating a disturbance in the school (Bera, Interview). The

affective trauma brought up in the retelling of this story is felt by both Bera and the group. As I

wrote in the *Our Community Stories* section, when they finished reading, they exhaled, "Phew,

you need to take a breath after that one." They would send me an email that evening saying that

after the session they put on the song written about their experience and they had an "ugly cry."

They also sent me the song to listen to. It is clear that this moment, a moment that happened over

ten years ago, was still a haunting that was full of aggregative affect for Bera. Being

territorialized in both the school and community made Bera reflect upon their experiences of

belonging in both. In the debrief session the following week, Bera confirmed how listening to the

song itself was an affective force, much like the affective object we each wrote about in the

introductory session, that brought them back to the memories of this event as they considered

what belonging is,

> And it's one of those pieces, I mean that's 10-some, almost 10 years ago now, and every
>
> time I listen to that song, I mean, it just brings back both the horrible things from that
>
> experience and some of that question about longing, wanting to belong, not belonging,
>
> and whose fault is that? (Bera, Debrief Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Here we can see how the affect attached to the song brought Bera back to the traumatic ally card experience and suggests a line of articulation in both the past and the present, as the territorializing nature of the experience is still affecting to Bera; the ghosts of that event return to Bera often. After hearing Bera's story, both Rachel and Jenna would also ask, "Whose fault is it?" as they recounted their collective shared stories of activism and the territorializing walls they would encounter at the school they worked in together.

Rachel and Jenna's joint story in their school assemblage unravelled slowly over the time of the interview and the focus groups. Rachel began quite quickly in the interview discussing the "trouble" that she and Jenna got into at their school. She stated that this happened during her fourth year as a permanent teacher, and it was the first time she had worked with another out queer teacher. Jenna also reflected on the year that she and Rachel taught together and said that Rachel was much more an advocate than she was, and that Rachel helped her to advocate further. However, she noted that this advocacy, this deterritorialization, brought about many reactions the year they worked together. The first reaction to this advocacy occurred when Rachel wanted to bring a queer organization to the school to speak to students. Rachel explained that she started up a Gay Straight Alliance in the middle level at the school she and Jenna taught in. She explained that they had a transgender student at the school who was using they/them pronouns and she wanted to get presenters from the Youth Project in Halifax to come in and speak to the students.[22] She said that the principal "kind of yelled at me a little bit" (Rachel, Interview) and

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[22] The Youth Project website states that, "The Youth Project is a non-profit charitable organization dedicated to providing support and services to youth, 25 and under, around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. We have a provincial mandate…and travel around the province to meet with youth in other communities. We provide a variety of programs and services including support groups, referrals, supportive counselling, a resource library, educational workshops, social activities." (https://youthproject.ns.ca) I have had many wonderful interactions with the Youth Project over the years, organizing workshops with them for both staff and students.

said that she could not bring the Youth Project in because it did not fit within her curriculum outcomes as she was teaching English Language Arts. She then worked with the Physical Education/Health teacher as there were outcomes in this curriculum that addressed sexuality and gender identity. She reflected upon how some of the presentations happened in her classroom on her spare and "then the parents decided it was all me and my gay agenda." (Rachel, Interview)

Here we see the walls occurring through a principal who "sort of yelled," at Rachel and used the absence of curriculum outcomes in her subject to attempt to prevent her from having the Youth Project in. The parents also serve as walls as it was brought to her attention that some parents felt these presentations were part of her "gay agenda," a frequent charge against queer activists to try to discredit their work.

The Youth Project would come to Rachel's and Jenna's school over a two-year period and Rachel described how in the first year that the Youth Project came in the Administration told her that they had to send home letters informing parents that the presenters were arriving. She then discovered in the second year that this was not board policy and did not send home the letters. I have also been told that it is necessary to send letters home to parents when engaging in queer-related professional development. Administrators want to do this to protect themselves from any potential parental backlash. Thus, if you are a teacher who does not know the policy, it can be accepted that something is so, simply because the administrator says it is so. Queer topics (and teachers) are then policed in this way. Sending home a letter about queer content serves as a "warning" and parents then think they have the right to keep their child at home; a damaging delegitimization and re-territorialization for the educators planning these workshops, as well as a disservice for the students who could benefit from attending. Jenna also confirmed how letters

were sent home to parents when the Youth Project first came in, giving the parents and students the choice to "opt out."

In the second year when letters were not sent home, Rachel continued that there were "parents who were furious that they hadn't been forewarned about our little 'gay pep rally.'" (Rachel, Interview) She said that she received backlash from a number of parents in the community, in the form of constant emails, and feeling threatened at parent teacher,

> I had one parent who said that her husband didn't come in because he was so mad that he didn't know what he would do and… you know, our son just loves you except for when you're talking about queer stuff." (Rachel, Interview)

Parents do hold power and can exert pressure on administrators and board staff which can reinforce (re)territorializing walls in the lives of queer educators. This was a theme that was explored in detail within our group stories and discussions. Jenna also had reterritorializing things said to her at parent teacher. She recalled how parents said that when she talks about gender and sexuality, if feels like she might be "shoving it down people's throats" or "making it a circus show." (Jenna, Interview) Adèle also observed that queer educators constantly have to have their guard up when interacting with parents,

> …to get the relationship with the parents can be great for the most part, but we don't know them like we know those kids… We don't know if we're safe with them, even though we know that we create a safe space for their children in our classroom, we don't know that they believe in that safe space. But then once there's an academic problem or something, all of a sudden, they show up…and you don't know where you stand with them and what the real underlying issue is. Is it really the academic issue, or is it now you have a bigger issue with me, because you realize something else? Like, I'm very

intersectional when it comes to like, I'm French, and I'm very strong-willed when it comes to human rights, when it comes to gender equality, and when it comes to sexual orientation equality in my classroom, and so, I have a lot of causes, if you will, that I defend in my classroom… But the parents are the unknown factor that we don't know what we're getting involved in… (Adèle, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Adèle provides another prime example of parents being an "unknown factor." She recalled how a student wrote the following in her journal,

'I know you gave us a prompt Madame, but I want to write about this, because you need to know that my mom doesn't accept LGBTQ people, and I know that she comes to parent-teacher all the time and she's polite to you, and whatever, but I want you to know that.' And I was just like, 'Oh, my goodness,' and I've met this parent many, many times and I was just like, 'What am I going to do?' and then we went virtual right after that, no parent-teacher interview, so I was just like, 'I'll have to deal with that another year.' (Adèle, Discussion, Belonging in Schools).

This story further emphasizes Adèle's first point about how we really do not know which parents we can feel safe with and that this is a concern that a queer educator always must be aware of. Rachel also said,

I'll just say that parent-teacher brings up so much trauma for me that I basically can't even… like, maybe some day I'll tell the full story, but it is like I have such a fight or flight response now to the idea of parent-teacher that I can barely talk, so I've been there. (Rachel, Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

Rachel never did return to the full story of the trauma that is the parent-teacher interview but there was a glimpse into this when she discussed being threatened by parents in the community.

Bera also discussed how on a consistent basis since the ally card incident, parents will literally pull their child out of the school rather than have them in their classroom (Bera, Interview).

In Aoife Neary's (2017) study *Lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers' ambivalent relations with parents and students while entering a civil partnership* she found that when teachers in Ireland were open about their queer identification that there was always the threat of being deemed professionally delegitimate by school stakeholders, and namely "the threat of illegitimacy was mobilized primarily through parents' unpredictability." (p. 61) Thus, homophobic parents can and do arrive as ghosts, often when we think all is going well. With this said, as much as parents can serve as barriers to queer educators and queer education we also spoke about positive, wonderful, utopic relationships with parents in a later section which focuses on how we celebrate, and are celebrated for, our queer selves in schools.

"Lightning Rods:" When the Administration Perceives the Queer Teacher as "Trouble."

In their joint story, both Jenna and Rachel describe administrators at their school who were very problematic and did not support them. They both were effectively told that they should keep quiet because when they spoke about queer topics they invited "trouble" into the school. Rachel said,

> The struggle at my previous job was feeling like I didn't think the administration had my back. They just kind of wanted me to shut up. And to an extent, I felt that the Board felt that way too, you know. They'd say all this great stuff and then would not really follow through. (Rachel, Interview)

Rachel told a story that clarifies why she felt administration just wanted her to shut up. She explained how one principal was removed because of how he handled LGBTQ+ and black students. She recounted how a teacher said the N-word in class and instead of reporting it, as the

RCH policy states one has to, the principal essentially did not address it. To respond to this, the board,

> brought in another principal out of retirement to make things *better*…so, this incoming
>
> principal, his job was to be the fixer. And he had a conversation separately, but with both
>
> Jenna and I, where he told us, the phrase was that we were 'lightning rods,' and so that *by*
>
> *existing,* or mentioning queerness …he's like, 'You just can't, you can't talk about
>
> anything because whatever you say, you're a lightning rod.' And so somehow by existing,
>
> in a way that my queerness was obvious, then it was like, 'Oh, just, you know, just shut
>
> up and be quiet and act straight, and then it's fine. Then none of the parents will mind
>
> me.' …It's so conditional. It just makes me so mad because belonging is being seen as
>
> you are for who you are. (Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

When Rachel recounted this during our discussion, Bera was astounded and exclaimed,

> Being called a lightning rod — I've been called exactly that thing, that phrase exactly! I'm
>
> here, I'm halfway across the country and I'm getting called exactly the same thing in my
>
> school, like blows my mind…As soon as you said those words, like, you gotta be kidding
>
> me. Are these people talking across the country? What is this? (Bera, Discussion, Home
>
> and Belonging in Community)

Rachel explained that she does not think of herself as a troublemaker, but that her values and principles lead her towards activism and deterritorialization. She reflected how, "I also don't want to think that it's me that's made this hard for myself." (Rachel, Interview) Rachel also discussed being given pride and trans flags by the Board but was told again by her administrator that she should take them down due to her "lightning rod" effect.

The lighting rod motif would appear many times throughout our stories and discussions and speaks to the way that the queer teacher becomes "problematized" or the "trouble" in schools when they challenge the status quo. This further reterritorializes the educator by situating their identity as the problem.

In our debrief session after the lightning rod discussion, Jenna shared her own story of when the administrator made her feel like she was a lightning rod in her school. This vignette also exemplifies when the assemblage of administration, parents, and students come together as reterritorializing walls. This happened the second year that she worked with Rachel,

> *I'm sitting at my desk, hands shaking on a Halloween candy bowl filled with slurs, insults and hurts. It is just after Halloween at the school. The African Nova Scotian Support Worker and I have just given presentations about speaking out when injustices have happened at school, on the bus, or in the locker room. We stood at the front of the room and gave our hearts and souls to the kiddos in the audience. We told the kiddos what to do when they heard cruel and inhumane words. We helped them identify what is hate speech and hurt speech in Canada. We tried to empower them to speak out and seek support. We told personal stories of how hate speech had impacted our lives and how what they hear others say really does impact their lives. It was raw and real and so deeply felt. Students were asked to give examples of things they heard of derogatory speech and to place it in the bucket. It was clear this was so needed.... there were racist comments, classist comments, homophobic comments a-plenty. I felt like this was so hard but needed, so I pressed on hopeful this would be a turning point.*
>
> *Unfortunately, the tide turned in a way that left me washed out to sea. The word must have gotten around at recess about the presentation and by the time the Grade 7*

students were to show up some kids were missing/outright refusing to come to the

presentation. Then the administration showed up, not as a sign of support but as a sign of

suspicion. What waves were these educators making and let's settle the sea!

> *At lunch, I stopped my Admin in the hallway, desperate for them to see me, see the*
>
> *need for this presentation, see the hurt that everyone was being exposed to in a supposed*
>
> *safe space. They told me it was not the right time to talk and that I needed to calm down.*
>
> *The kids who skipped out of the presentation and played on their phones in the cafeteria*
>
> *instead were tolerated and, therefore, supported by the leaders of this building. There*
>
> *would be no consequences, no difficulties, no waves to maneuver except for me*
>
> *feeling left out to drown.* (Jenna, Debrief Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

It was not the right time for her to talk. Jenna needed to calm down. She was the one being

irrational. The administration arrived because they were suspicious about the waves she was

making, the lightning rod that attracts difficulty. Again, in this account the "trouble" is placed

within the queer teacher, and when Jenna protested to her administration she was effectively

silenced. Meanwhile, the actions of the students who skipped out on the presentation do not elicit

any repercussions. In her interview, Rachel corroborated Jenna's experience. She remembered

that her grade 8's were attending the presentation and she went also, because she felt like she

wanted to be there to support Jenna. She recalled how she,

> had students out of my homeroom who were excused half-way through the presentation,
>
> their parents came and picked them up…The principal also came and stormed in on the
>
> presentation like he had been tipped off, like something sketchy was going on. And it
>
> was a Board-created presentation (Rachel, Interview).

Jenna concisely and emotionally followed up, discussing just how this reterritorialization felt for her,

> And I think the worst part of the whole thing was being left with this bowl, of like, this is what they've heard in the last day you know, and it was explicit things, and it's like this doesn't matter! This, this right now we're just going to… like literally we took the bowl and eventually just put it in the garbage… because you don't want to hear it, you don't want to do anything about it, and I was like, 'I'm going to quit. I'm going to quit that very day. I'm not going to come back.' I was just like, 'Why am I here? What am I doing here if you can't at least have a conversation with me about this?' (Jenna, Debrief Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

The aggregative affect in this retelling is keenly felt as one can picture the bowl of slurs with the concerns of the students in the building, as well as the concerns of Jenna and her co-presenter, who was also a minority, go unaddressed, dismissed, and relegated to the garbage, further reterritorializing Jenna, her colleague, and her students. It must be reiterated that the professional development that Jenna and her colleague were providing was a board-initiated one. The way that these professional development workshops tend to work, given my experience within Nova Scotia, is that often in schools there are a select group of people who attend RCH-related in-services and then they are asked to take sessions back to their schools in order that capacity might be built. However, this is a prime example of how even board-supported professional development that is mandated to deterritorialize, can be co-opted by territorializing forces (in this case, administration, parents, and students) and effectively re-territorializes the well-intentioned staff (who are often members of marginalized communities, in my experience) who are facilitating the professional development.

Indeed, Rachel explored how the actions of both the administration and parents emboldened students' homophobia. Rachel described how she received,

> *furious emails from parents… and students — once mine, but no longer — emboldened by both… A straight pride flag in a locker, left for me to handle. A student's implicit threat in his journal after a LGBTQ group's presentation — 'If this goes on any longer people will be hurt and I cannot be held responsible' — and the utter lack of interest from Admin (about that whole incident). Another student's journal entry — 'No gays here, no way, not in my life!' — while others spoke surreptitiously to their math teacher about how teachers like me 'couldn't come here and change the way we do things. I'd learn…,' they said.* (Rachel, Vignette, Belonging in Schools)

Schneider and Dimito's (2008) study found that fear of harassment from parents and students can stop staff from addressing queer issues. Rachel received "threats" from both parents and students in an attempt to reterritorialize her, to stop her from speaking out. Under these conditions, it is easy to see how a queer teacher might then stop addressing queer topics in their school.

Lastly, it is important to note that the final board administrative response to Rachel, because she had so many issues with the school administration, was to move her to another school. In discussing this move, Rachel questioned the ineffectiveness of such a response, "What have you done, besides, like, move me, like I'm the trouble." (Rachel, Discussion, Belonging in Schools) Rachel also told us at the first session that she had also just left her second school as things were not good at this school either. She did not go into detail about what occurred at the second school. Jenna would also leave the school they taught at together the same year that Rachel did. Although both Rachel and Jenna felt happier at their current schools, this is yet another reterritorialization, this time initiated by the district, because both Rachel and Jenna

would leave this school feeling defeated, feeling as if they were the "lightning rods" that caused the "trouble." The district missed an opportunity to insist that leadership at the school address homophobia appropriately and, unfortunately, unless the administration changed, it is likely that the school culture stayed the same after their exit. They tried to chip away at the wall, but it remained.

The district also can reinforce reterritorializing conditions for their queer educators. Often times districts will expound upon the need for diversity initiatives but not follow through. Activist queer educators can often feel like they are finally making progress within their building and are proud of their work to suddenly be reterritorialized. Bera discussed how thin the support can be from districts and how support can be pulled back at a later date if controversy is generated. Returning to their ally card experience, Bera recalled,

> Going back to the experiences I had… where, you know, things are rolling, you've got plans, this is going to go great, and then some parents complain, and suddenly all that support is just gone away. Like, we had this all lined up, we were going to go ahead, you know, and you get just a little bit of pushback and suddenly, none of it? Like really? I mean, I guess what strikes me is how thin that support often is. It's like it's there but it doesn't take very much opposition and it evaporates immediately. (Bera, Discussion, Home and Belonging in School)

Jenna agreed with this and followed up with her own story of the district pulling back support. She said,

> That idea of, like, you felt like it was something and then it got pulled back, that's something that I'm even struggling with this year. Our school board had announced that they were going to have a Pride week this year, so I was like, 'Oh man, that is amazing!'

And it came from the board, and it was like, 'It's going to be student-driven and student-led.' I was like, 'Wow! This is real progress.' I was really feeling good about it. So, we had a staff meeting and there were boxes of these bags (Jenna holds up a rainbow bag). There were bags upon bags for all of the staff members. I was like, 'Great! They're Pride bags, this is going to be great. I'm really excited!...' And then out came this script that was to be read, word for word, from our principal saying, 'They're not Pride bags. They're rainbow bags and they're to represent all of our students and their diversity,' and I was like, this feels so much like, 'Somebody had an idea,' and then they go, 'Well, we shouldn't say it this way, we should step back,' and it was rewritten and then rewritten again and then, 'This will cause the least amount of drama. Now, we'll send it out.' So, just when you think you're making progress, you know, and then you're like, it is still progress but it's like… this much. (Jenna indicates a very small amount with her fingers)

(Jenna, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

Sometimes the district policy is also ineffective or absent. Bera discussed how when they started to use Mx that the division had no policy to support them. Instead when Bera told staff and students that they would be using Mx, the division told them that "you went about it the wrong way." (Bera, Interview). Bera questioned then, what would have been the right way? This is another example of the burden being placed back on the queer person who is attempting deterritorialization.

We only need place Ahmed's discussion about diversity requirements in management in conversation with what the group members are saying to have a sense of why this support is so weak. Ahmed's work explores how diversity in institutions is intertwined with whiteness. "Diversity becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness

of organizations." (p. 34) Whiteness and heteropatriarchy are intertwined as the dominant

structures within organizations. Therefore, many organizations do not *actively* seek to

deterritorialize the status quo as many people in management positions benefit from their

privilege. However, we now live in an era where organizations feel the pressure to have

"appropriate" policy that addresses diversity and social justice, likely in large part due to the fear

of human rights complaints and legal action rather than it being the "right" thing to do. Thus, a

policy might exist, but this does not necessarily mean that the policy is followed through.

Ahmed states:

> When reading these (policy) documents as commitments, it becomes evident that
>
> commitments are not simply doing what they are saying. Statements of commitment can
>
> thus be understood as opaque: it is not clear what they are doing if they are not doing
>
> what they are saying. A commitment does not necessarily commit the institution to
>
> anything or to doing anything. (Ahmed, 2012, p. 116)

Bera confirmed this, "I mean, they have a policy on inclusion that applies mainly to students and

the words look nice, it looks good on paper, but it's not worth the paper it's written on." (Bera,

Interview). Rachel also discussed how district "diversity requirements" do little but maintain the

status quo,

> I think there is such an element of lip service in this profession because…when I look at
>
> the Department of Education what they say they want, it's fantastic. When I look at our
>
> Human Rights Code and our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, it's like, 'Yes, awesome!'
>
> But kind of like any political entity, I think, when you actually go about implementing it,
>
> it's like everyone has to pay lip service to diversity and inclusion, but they don't have to
>
> feel it. And it seems like people who rise to power are often the middle management type,
>
> whose, you know, main job is to placate everyone and keep it all on the surface, and

that's so frustrating, because I do think many teachers, we tend to be idealists, we want to

change the world and we have big dreams. We want an equitable classroom certainly,

you know…So, it's frustrating to work in a system that has so much inertia and so much

tendency toward the status quo. (Rachel, Debrief Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

Interestingly, Rachel is pointing out how in many cases there seems to be a disconnect between

who attains district level jobs, the "middle management type," as she says, and those seeking to

move beyond management to making change. In my own experience working at a district office,

I share her assessment. The biggest issue that I saw when I was the Human Rights coordinator

was that each of the board staff had their own portfolio, which might include, literacy, math,

healthy living, assessment, or curriculum, for example, and often times we did not coordinate

enough together. In each of these jobs, most of my colleagues were passionate about their

subject, but from my point of view, because we were all in our separate silos, it sometimes

became hard to work together. I was always of the mind that social justice and human rights

should be part of every portfolio, but the fact remains that for some coordinators/consultants,

social justice was not as important on their radar. This is a missing component. Additionally,

Rachel's suggestion that the role of diversity coordinators is to placate people and keep it all on

the surface level feels accurate, they too are hitting their heads against brick walls. There were a

number of occasions where people from other departments or the director would contact me

when crises arose, such as a parent who was upset that her child was bullied, or human rights

issues between staff and students, as if it were my job to "fix" the problem, to make it go away.

This reactive process, once again, is demonstrated in the district response to just move Rachel

from her schools rather than change the structures within the organization that created the

"crisis" in the first place. The way initiatives get "pulled back," returning to the rainbow (Pride!)

bags is also often a reactive process. Something was likely said after the initial discussion about the distribution of the bags that made the Board reconsider the way they would brand the bags!

Much like the anecdotal stories recounted in Jennings (2015) edited collections, the above stories are examples of how administration, district staff, parents and students can reterritorialize their teachers who are attempting to interrogate structures and create change in their building, reinforcing those institutional walls that territorialize marginalized teachers and students. As J.B Mayo writes "…individual queer teachers are subject to the homophobic whims of students, colleagues, and administrators who may or may not embrace their queer identities." (p. 33) The reterritorializations that Jenna, Rachel and Bera felt as they attempted to deterritorialize their schools are felt affectively throughout their retelling. These stories are heavy to hear and also felt heavy to Rachel, Jenna, and Bera. This heaviness manifested for them physically and emotionally at the time these events occurred and still linger as affective hauntings, which we explore in the next section.

The Legacy of Reterritorialization: The Difficulties of Being an Activist Teacher

A theme explored in our final group session was whether or not the group members felt that they were activist teachers. I will explore this in more detail at the end of this section, however, it is clear that for all of the group members, their conceptualizations of being activists changed as the focus group unfolded. It is clear how the school and community assemblage attempted to re-territorialize Bera, Rachel, and Jenna in their schools as they sought to offer spaces for deterritorialization to occur. The events were so traumatic for them that it made them all reflect on whether they could or would continue such activist work. When I first interviewed Rachel and she recounted some of the above stories, I asked her if she would consider herself an activist teacher. She said, "I feel like, [sigh] I feel a bit cowed, you know. Like that experience at

the first school really messed me up. It really did some damage that I'm still unpacking." (Rachel, Interview) In the interview she was quite emotional in retelling these events, and the sigh, an affective sign of her tiredness, was felt. At this time she said that she had taken a step back. She said,

> I'll see posts for teachers who've done cool Pride flag displays, or who are doing a lot of stuff for Orange Shirt Day… and I'm jealous because that's what I want to be doing, that's what really maters to me, like social justice is kind of the way I move through life, but I feel like I've almost been perceived as a troublemaker. (Rachel, Interview)

At the end of her interview Rachel also said how she appreciated being able to talk about what happened to her and in the first focus group session she told the group that the interview motivated her to go to therapy to work through the reterritorializations she had experienced. She recounted how, "I realized through that conversation that I had a lot of baggage that I hadn't really dealt with, and kind of a lot of trauma from that position and the stuff that happened there." (Rachel, Introductory Session) Jenna also said in the interview that the traumatic experiences changed her. She talked about how before she worked with Rachel, she was more guarded and,

> not being too much, and then I met Rachel and I was like, 'Oh, you can be like that?' … But it was also like there was so much negativity from the school and the community that it scarred me hard. It was like, 'Oh, if this is what that is, I've got to back up!' (Jenna, Interview)

Thus, the year after she left the school, Jenna did not engage in any activist/deterritorializing work. She did not put Pride flags up in the classroom, nor did she lead the GSA. She recounted how "I just don't want to put myself in the ring of fire." (Jenna, Interview) Jenna then said that

slowly her Pride shirts came out again and she began to re-engage with activist work. Bera also

explained how after the ally card incident they had intense anxiety for their safety, an anxiety

that still manifested when they shared the story with us. Bera's beginning vignette described how

the ally card experience affected how they perceived of their queer identity in the classroom,

leaving them to worry about how much queerness they could display in the classroom, and at the

same time, being worried that they were not "queer enough." The ghosts of these pasts

encounters still affected group members in the retelling of these traumatic stories and they all

needed time to heal from the reterritorializing effects of "banging their heads on brick walls."

(Ahmed, 2012) Some of this healing would occur throughout the process of our group intra-

action, where an unexpected reclaiming led group members to deterritorializations.

A Reclaiming that Leads to a Healing

In this section I return to the discussion that resulted from Rachel's story about she and

Jenna being called *lightning rods.* Bera was astonished that they had been called the exact same

thing. I offered the group the same analysis as I did above, that the *lightning rod* moniker places

the "trouble" within us, that "we become the problem rather than interrogating a system…that is

unjust." (Renny, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community) In responding to both myself

and Bera, Rachel said,

> But it's so interesting to me that you heard the exact same comment, like my mind
>
> is blown. But I think it's symptomatic of the way that…the power structures
>
> currently think about queerness, which is like almost like a problem to be solved… It's
>
> like, 'Oh you're attracting difficulty,' instead of like, 'No, no! It's the power
>
> structure that is marginalizing us that is the problem.' (Rachel, Discussion, Home and
>
> Belonging in Community)

Both my initial point and then Rachel's uptake of it speak to both our awareness of queer theory and its usefulness for interrogating power structures with the intent of freeing oneself from the confines of those structures, or in a Deleuze and Guattarian sense, arriving at deterritorialization. This conversation would serve as a beginning trajectory towards further interrogation of the heterosexual matrix, and foster in us all a sense of healing, strength and resiliency.

This discussion led Rachel on a line of flight to her debrief writing for the *Home and Belonging in Community* prompt. When we finished the debrief writing, I asked the group how they were feeling, and Rachel responded that she was "amped up!" After the session she would email and express how *amped* she was again, and she sent a song that she was reminded of while writing her debrief piece. She exclaimed,

> Wow!!! I feel right now like I'm invincible! What a brilliant session. In my reflection, I
> linked to a song that was running through my head by a fantastic hip hop artist and poet
> about lightning as a primal force — anyway, thought you might appreciate it. It's called
> 'Lightning' by Guante. He's an incredible activist (the whole album is about activism
> within marginalized communities), so it's not a big surprise to find connective tissue
> there. (Rachel, personal communication, May 12, 2021)

In looking at Guante's lyrics, what sticks out is a section that talks about how when a storm approaches and lightning strikes you, the spark is now inside the person and the person can use this spark to fight back. Rachel's debrief vignette was clearly influenced by this notion, and the effect this vignette had on our group was so powerful that it is worth citing in detail,

> *If queer energy is anything, it's obviously lightning…* I am so grateful that I'm queer.
> *It's something I recall saying to a professor once when we were sitting for a one-on-*
> *one* let's talk about life (and also Beowulf) *chat. It had given me a new perspective, I told*

him, like a fresh set of eyes. It was as if I could see, now, these words and scripts hovering in the air around me, telling me who to be and how *to be. I'm so grateful, I said, because otherwise I might never have known the truth of what I can become. It's like queerness peeled back the layers of bullshit that I'd spent my life accumulating, like mud on the hems of my jeans, and it left this pure version of who I am behind. Nothing but energy, undiluted; elemental.*

And so of course it threatens them — of course *they're scared. We're the atomic energy trembling beneath the surface of the things they think are real, immutable,* biological. *We destabilize the motherfucking heterosexual matrix. We set the world on fire, just by* existing. *But not the world, not really. Just theirs, made of paper mache. I mean, that's not on me: who builds their worldview and identity out of something as impermanent as paper, a social script, a dream they imagine to be a reality?*

So no, I'm not your lightning rod; I'm the arcs of energy lighting up the sky, illuminating your cardboard world. And we're the roll of thunder laughing through the sky, resilient, generative, primal — alive.

And although they might like blue skies and pretty little clouds, there's no way I'm making myself less *than the totality of who I am. There's no way I'm reducing myself to pastoral prettiness, tame and controlled, when I can be wild and* sublime *and* unending. Fucking right we're made of lightning! (Rachel, Debrief Vignette, Home and Belonging in Community)

At the end of this wonderful rebuttal to being called a lightning rod, Rachel laughed and said again that she was "really amped up." Rachel's vignette does a number of things for our group. She sets about to reclaim the lightning rod comment by situating lightning within herself as a

primal force that not only represents queerness but also activism. Within this force, there is

celebration and there is joy. Rachel is so grateful that she is queer. There is utopia in being able

to "destabilize the heterosexual matrix… just by existing." Within her language and laughter,

Rachel is indeed like lightning, she is "amped up," "wild and sublime and unending." This

reminded me of the Ivinson and Renold (2013) study where they discuss queer "wild intensities."

(p. 382) Renold and Ivinson (2014) observe that some of these intensities manifest in

remembered moments that seemed to suggest a line of flight, "a moment of remembering being

other." (p. 371) They continue that, "recovering and recognising these as queer affects is for us a

pressing ethico-political priority because it allows us to detect potentialities of being otherwise."

(p. 371) Thus, in this reclamation, Rachel is not a lightning rod, she is lightning! She is

celebrating her queerness, but not just her queerness either. She exclaimed that *we* are "resilient,"

"generative" and "alive" and that *we* are also all made of lightning. She offered us an invitation,

within the vignette, to re-imagine ourselves, to be otherwise than what we have been called, and

transcend a lens of trauma and deficit, moving towards a lens of celebration. This is queer

theory. It is destabilizing and fighting back. It is deterritorialization and would assist all of us in

deterritorializing ourselves from the heterosexual matrix. This can be seen in Bera's response to

Rachel's vignette,

> When you talked about being this energy that makes people destabilize things, after the
>
> whole ally card thing I talked about last week, I was doing a presentation and it really
>
> pissed me off because I couldn't have the card up that, you know, made the statement and
>
> so on, and one of the participants looked at me and said, 'You are the ally card in your
>
> school! You don't need a piece of paper. You just being there destabilizes, you know,
>
> makes people question.' And that, when you mentioned that, I mean, every so often I just

hear that voice again, that person saying, 'Oh hold on a minute, don't worry, you are, just

by being in the space, you are doing that!' That really, really struck me! Thank you.

(Bera, Debrief Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

I note in my journal that evening that Rachel was able to turn the lightning rod comment around

and reclaim it, which influenced Bera to reclaim the ally card incident by looking at it like they

are the ally card in their school. This realization would help Bera in continuing to work through

that event, as they noted, "Every so often I hear that voice again." More than anyone else in the

group, Bera tended to tell traumatic stories in their vignettes. At the same time, they do also

begin to celebrate themself, as we also celebrate the work that they do in schools to

deterritorialize. For example, Bera did become an advocate for queer students after the ally card

experience. They said that when the ally card incident happened they told their district that they

had to get ready because there would be openly trans kids in their schools, but the district did

not. They also said that in learning about themself they were able to support a trans child who

was in their class a few years later. They described how they could advocate to the administrator

on behalf of the child because from their own experiences they knew what the laws of the

province and the district policies said. They described talking to their administrator about "which

bathroom the student can use…what name do they use…this is what the law says, no you don't

have a choice. This is the law. You have to do this, this, this!" (Bera, Interview) They are able to

deterritorialize themself when they think of the work they are doing in schools to support queer

children.

The lightning rod motif also resonated with Jenna, which is not a surprise given that she

was also called a lightning rod by the same administrator. In Jenna's debrief vignette she

acknowledged how such a comment reterritorialized her but then also how she might reclaim this image,

> *It only takes one spark to light a forest fire. I know I can spark a flame if I speak up and am more out and proud. Unfortunately, that causes a lightning rod response and I'm not looking to cause a forest fire right now. It would burn me before I can escape, and I have been burnt before and not looking to be charred again.*
>
> *I felt a little aimless. Just as I felt I have been walking in circles, I began to look up and see the stars. You the stars, my queer community, remind me that there is a path forward. There is direction and an eternal flame up in the sky, always there to guide me when needed. I need to harness that energy, catch a ray of light and make my own fire again. One that is comforting, cozy and leads me back to where I am going. And baby when I get there and feel energized enough, I'm just going to let it burn brighter than ever.* (Jenna, Debrief, Home and Belonging in Community)

This debrief speaks to the hesitancy that Jenna felt when thinking about re-engaging in activist work. She knows that she can "speak up and be more out and proud" but she has also experienced being a "lightning rod" before and does not want to spark a forest fire. However, it is profound when she states that her queer community reminds her of the path forward. At the time, I wrote down, "Is this us, I wonder? Are we helping her to become something else with our stories?" This would be confirmed for me as the focus groups continued. In discussing being able to make her own fire again and to "burn brighter than ever," there are similarities to both Rachel's debrief and the Guante lyrics, which is interesting as Rachel and Jenna had written this in separate spaces at the same time. Jenna was worried about creating a forest fire through her deterritorializing work. However, although a forest fire appears to be destructive, it can also

erase borders and boundaries, it does not care about land that is territorialized and, thus, territorializing, and when the old growth is gone, new life can flourish. Forest fires can deterritorialize. Jenna knows she has a spark in her to continue her own deterritorialization. Jenna would regain this strength throughout our study culminating at the end when she sent me a video that she participated in where she was very much an activist for her students. She participated in a documentary that one of her students had created about the "coming out" experience. Jenna's involvement in this documentary will be discussed in more detail in a later section. There can be no underestimation about the effect that Rachel's *lightning rod* reclamation had on our group. This line of flight would eventually lead us to tell more stories involving a "celebration" of our queer selves.

To conclude, this chapter explored the reterritorializing walls that group members encountered in their schools when they attempted to deterritorialize the space. This resulted in a traumatizing affect that forced group members to consider whether they would continue to engage in activist work. However, telling these traumatic stories within the safety of our "sideways community," enabled deterritorializations to occur for Bera, Rachel and Jenna, as they all then reconceptualized themselves as a powerful force (lightning), removing the "trouble that attracts difficulty" (the lighting rod) from themselves and locating the trouble within the heterosexual matrix from which it arises.

Chapter 12: Allies: Sharing the Burden of Deterritorialization

This chapter continues from the last with a group discussion about how difficult it can be to engage in deterritorializing actions within the school space. We begin with a discussion about the "burden" placed on queer-identified educators when they take up deterritorializing work in their schools. We then extend our conversation about how straight allies within schools can and do support us to remove some of the burden from our professional lives, and how, in some cases, allyship can result in the formation of kinship groups within and beyond the structures of the school. We also discuss how queer educators can form kinship groups within the school, using Rachel and Jenna as examples. Finally, we end with a discussion how we need more workplace "allies" to step up and help shoulder some of the burden that we face as activist queer educators in the school. All but one of the vignettes in this chapter are from the Belonging in Schools and Belonging in Schools debrief prompt, demonstrating the lines of flight we took together to arrive at the content for this chapter.

The previous chapter elucidated the burdens that can be placed upon queer teachers when they attempt to deterritorialize the school. Jenna's last vignette described that because of the "lightning rod" effect she had within the school with Rachel, there was a period of time where she did not wish to start a "forest fire" and, therefore, she avoided activist, deterritorializing work. Rachel, fully, aware of this burden, followed up with,

> When we're kind of fighting battles in our workplace and in our communities and, you know, engaging in activism and advocacy, there has to be space to *not* do that, as well, because that is a path to burnout whether you're an educator or not. And, so I think honoring that, like knowing that you need more time and more space and kind of not having to shoulder that by yourself is…an important idea to hold space for because I

think probably if you're a teacher you kind of always want to change the world, but it's like we don't have to do it by ourselves. (Rachel, Debrief Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

This idea of the "burden" of engaging in deterritorializing/activist work is a theme that was brought up throughout our stories and discussions. When asked if there was professional development provided to staff around queer topics, Jenna said that "somehow those things always fall on the backs of queer educators… and I think that becomes a real burden." (Jenna, Interview) In discussing the professional development session that she facilitated that the administration stormed in on, she said, "We're always the ones doing the presentations, we're always the ones carrying the load." (Jenna, Discussion, Belonging in Schools) In this way, we often place the target on our own backs. Adèle also said that we always have to do the presentations or bring up queer topics to other staff members and administrators, and questions why this is always our responsibility (Adèle, Discussion, On Being Seen). The idea of feeling this "burden" is something that Adèle would bring up until the end of our sessions. Rachel also described how,

there can be a lot of power in being other, and in kind of being a counterpoint to this system, that is made to seem like it's innate and natural and just the way things are. But there's a burden to that. (Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in School)

A discussion that originated alongside the burden theme was about the possibilities and problematics of allyship in schools. I was hoping at the beginning of our group sessions that both Rachel and Jenna would discuss their experiences of being allies to each other when they taught together, and they both would do so throughout the study. *Ally* is a term applied to straight people who are allies with queers, but I argue that queers can also be allies for each other. Queer

allies in schools can work together to support each other and to change educational structures, like Rachel and Jenna did. I consider them allies due to the uniqueness of Rachel's and Jenna's experience, as having another queer educator in the school building does not necessarily mean that a friendship or allyship will occur. They were and are allies in activism. I also wonder about those "allies" who are queer and may not be "out," but are very supportive of queer issues and queer people. In discussing their "ally card" experience, Bera said at this time they were an ally and had not yet identified as queer. Thus, perhaps, there is a bit of room to play with the idea of queer allyship. In the 15 years that I taught, I never had another queer-identified friend/ally in my school, thus, I was very interested in the support that Rachel and Jenna offered each other. For our prompt about celebration and validation about our queer selves, Jenna wrote the following vignette about her relationship with Rachel,

> *I was so lucky in 2017-2018 to have a partner across the hall from me. My partner was queer, fierce, and fun. Her name was Rachel. What we did was something major, we fostered a feeling of safety and security in young teenagers from 11-14. There is a magic in being there for students during their prime moments of puberty. Rachel and I grew this mighty group of GSA kiddos. It may have been the food, in which not one scrap was ever left over from the meetings. It may have been the introduction of great queer/non-queer music. It may have been the multiple Pride flags and pronoun pins and button-creating. But one thing was for certain, our partnership was a factor in it all. In those meetings we were like two momma bears, gentle with our cubs but willing to claw and kill anyone who was threatening them.*

> *Our kiddos in the group were beyond the best. They were young and curious and kind to one another. We had so many boys who had not yet bought into the toxic*

masculinity gender norms past puberty. They were brave and unaware and so willing to read out queer trivia on the announcements. So young and innocent to the total homophobia in that office, because we sheltered them from that. They planned our first official Pride at that school filled with lip sync, soc hops, Project Runway *and karaoke with youthful exuberance. They saw us as a safe space to land.*

Rachel was a safe space for me, and I hope I was equally to her. We celebrated and validated each other. We leaned on each other in the challenging times, and they were many. Looking back on that experience with Rachel makes me realize what it is like to have a partner in education. A person who gets you and it. A person who you meet in the middle of a hallway every day, many times to check in. We bounced ideas back and forth and juggled it all. It was something special and it made me see the shine and sparkle in us both. We were two gems who illuminated the hall and the students in our care. (Jenna, Vignette, Celebration/Validation)

Within Jenna's vignette, one can detect a shift from discussing activist/deterritorializing work through the lens of difficulty and burden to one of allyship and celebration. Despite the difficult challenges at their school, there is utopia here, as demonstrated by those beautiful queer moments with their GSA "kiddos," as they and their students worked towards deterritorialization of the school space through Pride flags, pronoun pins and buttons, queer trivia on the announcements and the first official Pride celebration at the school. It is important to note that in Nova Scotia, GSAs are mandated for all schools and, thus, an administrator who did not support the queer deterritorializing activities that the students engage in would have a more difficult time trying to reterritorialize the youth because they cannot deny the youth (or the educator staff supervisors!) the space to have a GSA. What stood out to me was how Jenna spoke about she

and Rachel sheltering the students against the (re)territorializing structures, but that they also sheltered each other. Jenna then continued to reclaim the lightning rod metaphor as she noted how they shone in the school together. Her shared activism with Rachel produced a utopia for them both and would offer some protection (a sideways community of activists) from the territorializing factors (those ghosts) they encountered. Thus, their shared allyship because of their queerness, and likely their collective experience of reterritorialization in their school, moved them beyond allies and into kinship. This can be seen in Jenna's vignette and Rachel's response. Rachel responded that Jenna was going to make her emotional and she sniffled. I could feel the affect in her voice,

> I just want to echo that sentiment, it was phenomenal to have my person at the school and I've yet to find anything like that, but I'm really glad that we get to have this together. That's really significant and special. It would be great to be in the same building, even if not, I still feel like we're queer warriors living our best lives, and you know shaking things up in our region. (Rachel, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Self)

Similarly, in Rachel's own vignette about belonging in schools she spoke of the trials that she had in the school with Jenna, but she also spoke of the relationships that she formed there,

> *In the school, belonging hung in those hallways like a shroud of mist over the still waters of the local river. Sometimes, I could see it; sometimes, it was right next to me, sometimes it was right across the hall — Jenna — and I would stop and marvel, breath caught in my throat. I worked with amazing colleagues creating a vibrant and dynamic middle level culture and envisioning a progressive, queer-friendly school. But then that feeling turned to spectral fog, a promise burnt to nothing under the scorching noon sun…*
> (Rachel, Vignette, Belonging in Schools)

This provides a sense of Rachel's relationship with Jenna and the colleagues in the school and the vibrant culture they might have been able to create if they were not stifled by the administration and the community.

Also elucidated in Rachel's response was the importance of having straight colleagues within our schools to help us shoulder the burden. When Jenna wrote about "partners in education" it reminded me of my own experiences with the social justice allies and my mentor on our leadership team. In the vignette I shared at the beginning of the activism chapter concerning the board-wide leadership team that I was part of over a ten-year period, I wrote about the importance of our allyship together. We were an intersectional team of colleagues who gathered frequently to plan and facilitate professional development activities and over time we became, and still are, friends. I wrote about this when describing the team, particularly discussing a kinship relationship that I have with the original Human Rights coordinator,

> *The coordinator would become a mentor to me, a supportive and protective ally, and eventually a wonderful friend. In fact, she is also kin. She consistently supported me in my efforts to be vulnerable enough to educate staff about the impacts of homophobia and my own personal experiences with it. She attended my master's defence along with my best friend Katie, after reading my thesis, because she believed in the importance of work that focussed on queerness within education. She calls another colleague and myself from the team her 'other children,' and I always send a Mother's Day text to my 'other mother!'*

> *In my opinion, this team did some good work.... I am proud to have been a part of this team, in its many iterations, over the years. We came from a place where we were only doing this work because we wanted to create change. It was not part of our teaching*

duties. These teachers, who are still my friends, will always hold a soft place in my heart.

(Renny, Vignette, Belonging in Schools)

I would not say that allyship always translates to the formation of kinship groups, but in some instances it certainly does, for example, Rachel and Jenna, and the relationship I had with my mentor, who became like a second mother. There were members of the RCH Leadership Team who I would consider friends but not necessarily kin, as the relationship does not always sustain beyond the professional work. However, kinship is a possible outcome for those who work together closely in activist endeavors. Regardless, for Rachel, with her fraught relationship of belonging in her schools, identifying people in schools who are allies is crucial. She reflected upon how hearing my story of allyship with my RCH team "…makes me hopeful, because I know that you can find the right people, they're there. I know they are there." (Rachel, Discussion, Belonging in Schools) In her interview, Rachel also reflected upon the allyship within her own school-wide diversity team,

I will say that I did have some awesome allies at my last school. And it was interesting that all the marginalized groups, like, flocked together, as well. I had a really good relationship with our African Nova Scotian Student Support Worker and our Native Student Support Worker, and we were like the little RCH team. (Rachel, Interview)

My experience with our board-wide team was similar and is an important consideration given Muñoz' discussion of utopia occurring through intersectional identities working together. The intersections of oppression/territorialization are felt keenly by marginalized adults within academic structures manifesting through the likes of systemic racism, overt racism, a colonial past and settler-colonial present, and patriarchal notions of compulsory heterosexuality and gender. When I was the Human Rights coordinator for the district, part of my mandate was the

African Nova Scotian Student Support Worker Program. This program places African Nova

Scotian (ANS) community members in schools to support ANS children and their communities.

We would have monthly recurring meetings where the Student Support Workers would come

together as a group to discuss what kinds of things were happening in their buildings. Always

brought to the table were the moments of re/territorialization experienced in the form of

microaggressions and overt racism directed towards both them and the students. Also discussed

were the successes they were having in their schools. It became clear to me in these necessary

meetings how important it is to look at territorialization through the lens of intersectionality.

There is also power in collective acts of activism between marginalized groups.

In her debrief vignette for *Belonging in Schools*, Rachel discussed the power of what a

collective can achieve,

> *It's almost like a flock of geese, right? There's always one stalwart navigator at*
>
> *the arrow tip of the formation… but that's a role that each bird takes in turn. The*
>
> *collective works as a group, and that, I think, is belonging. Cohesion, disparate actors*
>
> *moving in unified purpose, appreciation for each person's contribution — and time for*
>
> *rest. Time to lean on the group that we were leading three wingbeats back. We're so*
>
> *often asked to go above and beyond; we scrutinize so much of our behavior, our*
>
> *conversations, our essence in order to fit within this profession and in order to meet its*
>
> *requirements of respectability politics.* (Rachel, Debrief Vignette, Belonging in Schools)

Again, the idea of the burden is brought forward here and how the metaphor of the flight of

geese might work to alleviate some of the stress the queer educator encounters. The geese

metaphor resonated with Jenna, and she exclaimed, "I just love that idea of geese, and, you

know, I'm going to go for awhile, but then I need somebody to keep going in this direction. I

think that's so important." (Jenna, Discussion, Belonging in Schools) Adèle then said how nice it would be if everyone was helping to take care of each other within school buildings,

> But if we could do that on a school level that would be the ideal school where everyone was taking care of our needs and wants…We could fly south every year! … We would have one mission; it would be good. (Adèle, Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

Of course, by this point we had already explored the importance of having one's "gaggle" in rural communities to offer a protection against territorializations, and, therefore, it is also necessary to establish a "gaggle" of allies within schools. Thus, in addition to having allies who take up the "burden" of social justice education, having a gaggle of allies can also offer a sense of solidarity and protection within the school. Adèle reflected upon how important it is to have allies within rural schools, and then also confirmed that hearing about Rachel and Jenna's relationship was also reassuring for her,

> Especially since you guys have been sharing a lot of shared history with this group…it's also knowing that you both went through those difficult times together, as well as the good times. So, knowing that you didn't have to go through it alone is also reassuring…Like the time that Rachel mentioned that she went to your classroom knowing that you were nervous about presenting that activity to your class to make sure you're going to feel that someone's going to have your back. Like having that person as a rural teacher…whether they're part of the community…or as an ally, is very important because it allows us to be teachers at the end of the day…It allows us to be teachers because we don't have to worry about feeling safe, because we know someone else will be there, in case we're not. (Adèle, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Self).

Indeed, it would be extremely difficult to survive the worst re/territorializing moments without the support of our allies in buildings. Bera also explained, in both the interview and focus group, how even though there was so much uproar during the "ally card" experience, they did have allies who offered protection to each other,

> For me, when I had that ally card experience, like 10 years ago, there was a young teacher, I think it was her second, third year of teaching, who got targeted along with myself in that process, but having someone else like that to go through that… I mean, we had another friend in the school, who wasn't quite directly in the line of fire but who also supported us. The three of us, I mean, we would get together for drinks after school, after particularly hard meetings…Having someone like that in the building makes a world of difference. And I mean I certainly don't take it for granted, because you're right, you don't always have that and that can be hard to find and when you do it's precious. (Bera, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

Bera was able to find some solace in the fact that they had teachers in the school who did support them during this difficult time. Rachel also explained how the health teacher supported her when the Youth Project drama was happening,

> The health teacher was furious that I was getting any kick back about the Youth Project and he was like, 'It's so stupid that we can only talk about this in health.' He said, 'If Rachel was in the classroom I know she would do an amazing job and she could explain it…' He acknowledged that my experience empowered me to be an effective educator in those situations, and although it was a really difficult meeting that we were having, and it was a bummer, overall, that made me feel really good, like my unique experience and

perspective was kind of seen and validated. I guess it made me feel like being queer was

an asset rather than a burden. (Rachel, Interview)

The health teacher acted as reassurance for Rachel that she was an asset in the school, helping

her to get past the reterritorialization from her administrator. In relaying my own worst story of

territorialization from a parent in one of the schools that I taught in, I also explored how

important it was to have a staff of allies who were able to reassure me that I had done nothing

wrong, acting as a form of protection in a moment where I felt the most vulnerable. I would

explore this in detail for the debrief session following our *Belonging in Schools* prompt,

Last week, Adèle talked about the fear of interacting with a parent at parent

teacher because she was told by a student that the parent didn't like LGBTQ+ people.

Rachel reflected upon parent teacher meetings that she couldn't yet discuss, and Bera

discussed family pulling their kids out of their class. This brought me to one moment in

my 15 years of teaching where I did have a very traumatic experience with a parent, one

that I have pushed down deep and that I have rarely spoken about. A parent removed a

student from my classroom and to another community school, and made a comment to the

principal that was decidedly queerphobic about me, in my opinion. I had never had this

happen before and I struggled with how to process this or what to do. I asked my

principal if I should contact the parent and have a discussion and was told that this

wasn't a good idea. I then took myself down to the district office, on my own accord, and

had a meeting with a member from HR and the superintendent. I explained that I felt this

was a homophobic action. They suggested that there was little that could be done. I then

contacted a colleague in the Union (because I don't like to let things rest when I feel that

they're not right) who I felt should have been more supportive than he was, given his position, and he referred me to a staff person who never followed back up with me.

I felt like I was left out in the ocean to flounder, left alone to work through what had happened, dealing with a shame that makes me not want to talk about it today, even though I know I did nothing wrong. I reflect upon how there might have been some recourse if homophobia had been directed at me from students or staff, but how we really are not shielded from the actions of the community and parents. I also must reflect upon how this was one situation in a 15-year career and the multitude of parents who were grateful that their children had me as a teacher...the emails from parents thanking me for being there for their child, the students who have contacted me after they graduated to tell me that I changed their lives.

I also must reflect upon how my time at that school was one of the happiest times... When I told the staff what had happened around the staff room table, they were all supportive of me and tried to convince me that it wasn't my fault. Hugs and kind words were not in short supply. This group of teachers did more to uplift me than anyone else. Maybe it's a defence mechanism to not want to stay in the traumatic space, but here's what else that school was — There were many meals together out at restaurants and the odd Friday excursion for martinis, there were staff parties and Christmas parties at my house, invitations by one colleague to a dinner and a soak in her hot tub, concern and care for a staff member going through cancer treatment, muffins brought to my house from my friend Bob when I flipped my car one winter. We had such camaraderie. I can't think of that one horrible moment without thinking of the belonging felt in that school community. (Renny, Debrief Vignette, Belonging in Schools)

Reiterated within this vignette are themes already brought forward by our group members: parents who territorialize us, and the little recourse available to us when this occurs, as well as an administrator, board staff and Union that were not at all helpful. I did not share in the vignette that a notation was made in my "file," again, making me feel like I had done something inappropriate. Years later, when I would then work for the district, the Superintendent apologized and told me that she would have dealt with this differently than she did then. I think she was aware that the parental response to me was a homophobic one, but I am unsure about what she could have done differently. I believe the note is still in my file!

I must also discuss the shame attached to this event and how I did not want to tell the story. Before sharing, I told the group the following, "I have to say that… this was difficult for me to write. It's probably the hardest vignette I've written, and I didn't want to write it, and I still don't know if I want to read it, but I will." (Renny, Debrief Discussion, Belonging in School) I felt the need to write and share this vignette as a direct line of flight from our discussion of how parents reterritorialized group members in their schools. Prior to those stories, I had no intention of telling this one, as this situation is not one that I have discussed with even my closest friends. In rewatching the video recording of when I shared this, I can tell that I am very nervous, my voice sounds shaky, and I sigh often throughout the retelling. Indeed, aggregative affect manifested often within the group. When Jenna told the story about the "bowl of slurs," I wrote in a field note that Jenna took a breath in the middle of her retelling, like "hewwww." The story was hard to share. It felt raw. After Rachel spoke about not belonging in schools, she sighed and said, "I just feel kind of sad about it." And Bera, after the ally card story, said, "You need to take a breath after that one." We all tend to sigh throughout these difficult retellings, a non-verbal affective gesture. This happens when we tell these traumatic stories. It's when the ghosts arrive.

Like telling my story about my encounter with the men at *Jungle Jim's* with my family, the ghosts of homophobia showed up unexpectedly to haunt me in the present. I felt reterritorialized in the retelling because it felt shameful for me, a shame placed within me (the trouble), not a shame borne out of something I had actually done. It is an example of how the reterritorialization was felt in the past, but also felt in both the present moment of the group, and also now as I am writing this dissertation in my present. I feel anxious and sad right now as I am writing. I know that I did nothing wrong, just like when I was in the restaurant with my family, however, internalized shame from the ghosts of homophobia is very real.

However, within the territorializing stories that we have told, utopia can be found within the stories of allyship within our schools: the health teacher helping deterritorialize Rachel's school; the allies who ran the "ally card" workshop with Bera and supported them after; the way my RCH team worked together to change schools, and the support I felt from my allies at the school where the parents took their child out of my classroom. These stories can help us see that we are not alone in the schools, that there is allyship and support.

This discussion led me to reflect upon not just allies within the school, but also upon the power of our focus group. This was the first time I had sat down with a group of queer teachers to share our experiences. It had brought me to think about the power of queer allies, in buildings, in boards, provincially. I reflected upon what this group was doing for me individually and what it was doing for us a collective. Although the above story was very difficult for me to tell, I did feel the developing kinship bond of our group and I did feel support from my group members for sharing. Rachel would also comment on this,

> I think that something that I really am appreciating about this group is we're not in the
> same building and so we're not, you know, all seeing the same stuff and having that kind

of common ground. I think it's really powerful to have people who, if I tell you about

something that's happened, I know you're going to have my back and you're going to

understand what I'm saying and vice versa, and that we're all on the same page. That's

really quite powerful and in a system where you are marginalized it can be an incredibly

important thing to feel seen. (Rachel, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Self)

When we tell these difficult stories, there is also utopia found within the allyship of our

collective group. We can share the stories of trauma and work towards healing, which we do

through telling our stories and supporting each other. This group is a boundary public in our rural

spaces. We all see each other within this group, and we can be authentic here!

The Trouble with Allies

In addition to discussing the need for supportive allies within schools, the group also

troubled the notion of allyship and what it currently looks like. Rachel discussed in great detail

how she is tending towards allyship with other queer folk within the community, her kinship

group, rather than seeking out support from straight allies. She reiterated,

And I think one of the things that I want, probably one of the reasons that I'm

increasingly turning towards our people, is because what I see from straight allies, or

they're not allies, they're self-professed allies, is they don't understand that allyship is

active. It requires action. It isn't just like, "Oh well, I'm okay with you existing." It's

actually standing up and doing the work and not making us shoulder all of that…

And I think what makes it so frustrating is that lip service, that people will say

like, 'Yeah, we want to be inclusive, we want to be progressive…' I just had an interview

with HR [Human Resources] and they said, 'We think of ourselves as an equitable

organization.' It's like, 'What have you done besides, like, move me, like I'm the

trouble,' … I just want to see more active people putting their necks on the line

leveraging that privilege. (Rachel, Debrief Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

For Rachel, the allyship that she experienced from her colleagues in schools, many of whom

identify as heterosexual, has not been sufficient. Additionally, there has been no allyship from

the district, as, once again, the solution offered by the district to Rachel's ongoing

reterritorialization within two of her schools was to place the trouble inside of her and to move

her out of the buildings; a band-aid solution that has left a gaping wound in both Rachel and also

serves to cover up the territorializing heteronormativity in the schools. This "allyship," returning

to Ahmed, is about paying "lip service" to the tenets of diversity without creating any real

change within the organization. Bera also troubled the lip-service of district and teacher "allies."

In their debrief writing from the *Belonging in School* prompt, Bera recounted how,

> *A couple years ago our provincial union had 'safe space' signs printed up for*
>
> *posting in schools. Our local president, a friend of mine, was quite excited about them,*
>
> *until I pointed out that unless a space actually WAS safe, it would not only be*
>
> *disingenuous to put up the signs, it would be dangerous. There's a poem that I've heard*
>
> *before…*
>
> *'You say this space is safe,*
>
> *But,*
>
> *Your actions are speaking so loudly,*
>
> *I can't hear what you're saying.'*
>
> *Our schools are NOT safe spaces. Many teachers and senior admin would be*
>
> *deeply offended to hear that, as many of them see themselves and our schools as safe*
>
> *when in fact any queer kid can tell them they're not. 'Love the sinner, hate the sin,' is*

not allyship, nor the belief of a safe person, but it's held by far too many in my

community. It is not support and queer folk can smell that a mile away.

> *That allies need to do heavy lifting rather than leaving it to minoritized people is*
> *a fact that being queer has really driven into my consciousness. If we are not actively*
> *breaking down barriers and stereotypes, we are perpetuating them, there is no fence to*
> *sit on.*

> *I'm part of a goal group at school that was able to order a whack of books that*
> *portray the diversity in our school. Will any teachers use them, or will they sit on the*
> *shelf in the library gathering dust? Of course, the ones that portray gender and sexual*
> *diversity CAN'T be read to the class by certain teachers, those ones HAVE to be picked*
> *up by individual students on their own, which is a constant source of irritation. Why are*
> *the teachers most able to answer student questions also the ones prevented from doing*
> *so?* (Bera, Debrief, Belonging in Schools)

Bera dissected how even the best-intentioned "safe space" resources from unions or boards can be very problematic as they often are given out en masse to teachers whose spaces may be anything other than safe. They also discussed how often it is the case that books on diversity get sent out to classrooms only to sit on classroom bookshelves, unread by the teacher. As RCH coordinator, I had the mandate to send out posters and resources to classrooms, and I had the opportunity to visit schools and the classrooms of educators, where often it was not difficult to observe which rooms were culturally responsive in terms of images and books on display and which were not, and those teachers who were allies and who were not. Some straight teachers would never address queer content in the classroom. This supports Meyer et al.'s (2015) findings that LGB educators are more likely to attempt to queer their classroom while it may not be a

priority for straight educators (p. 224). However, Bera makes the point that *certain* teachers (them!) are not even *allowed to* discuss queer content in their classrooms. Jenna also reflected on how when straight teachers do engage in social justice work, they often do not get any of the same pushback that the queer teachers seem to get. Jenna explained,

> I think, what's been hard this year is that I had a teacher at my school who was really progressive in the way she talked about a lot of different issues, talked a lot about queer issues, but was not part of the community and got zero flack for it. And that made me start to feel like, 'Oh, when I get flack about it, it's not about what I'm saying, it's about who I am.' That was the first time I've had a real straight ally really do the work and get none of the backlash, and then I kind of felt really bad, like I felt good about it, but I also was like, 'Oh, it is me! It's not the subject.' (Jenna, Debrief Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

Jenna's discussion brought Bera to talk again about the script they must follow and what they are not allowed to do or say, while another cis/straight teacher is able to share content that they have been told they cannot. Bera explained:

> Well, first, what you just mentioned about the cis teachers getting away with stuff that we can't. One of my colleagues was telling me she was reading 'Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress.' And she read this to her class and I'm like, I've been told deliberately I'm not allowed to read books like that to my kids. I can't even point them out to my students, meanwhile, my cis colleague, 'Go ahead do it!' But I've been like, seriously told by Senior Admin, I may not. And that kind of thing just drives me crazy. (Bera, Debrief Discussion, Belonging in Schools.)

Bera is not allowed to discuss queerness in their grade 4 classroom. They have been told this by their district. They have many restrictions imposed upon them by their district and administration. Bera previously explained that they are called Mx Z in their school, but if students ask them why they use "Mx," they actually have a script they have to follow. Bera said, "All I'm allowed to say is, 'That's the honorific that fits me, or that I use, or that works for me.' That's all I'm allowed to say." (Bera, Interview) They are not allowed to discuss their gender presentation with their students. They are not allowed to talk about their pronouns with their students either. Bera continued "Because so many people base the pronouns on what they perceive, they use 'him, his' as my pronouns." (Bera, Interview) They also said that they are not allowed to correct students when the students use the wrong pronouns and they are not allowed to ask students their pronouns. Their district has informed them that only students can initiate the conversation by telling others what their pronouns are. I asked Bera what their Union's response to this was and Bera said that they went to Union lawyers but that the way the policy is worded, the district can get away with imposing these limits upon Bera. Applicable to Bera's circumstances, in *Differences in Trans Employees' and Students' School Experiences* (2022) Suarez et al. found that, "cisgender adults in school systems may be resistant to the presence of trans workers, contributing to inadequate policy implementation and supports for school workers who do not easily conform to state-regulated categories of male and female." (p. 353). It is clear that Bera feels very territorialized within their school space. Bera explained how their only "out" is by being able to dress the way they want and so they often wear skirts, scarves and makeup to school.[23]

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[23] Bera would explore this in great detail, and I include this discussion in the next chapter on *Professionalism.*

As Bera elucidates, queer topics/people in school seem to often come with a script to navigate, whereas straight allies do not seem to be under the same constraints. We have seen throughout our vignettes what can and cannot be said in classrooms by queer teachers, with admonitions that queer topics must not be approached if they are not explicitly in one's curriculum documents, with Pride bags that suddenly become *diversity* bags, and with letters that must be pre-emptively sent home to "warn" about queer guest speakers. We also see an example in Jennings (2015) anthology where he recounts the experience of the teacher who won *Teacher of the Year* and was then given a script about what he could say when he started discussing queerness in the media. These are all re/territorializing actions that are meant to keep queer teachers and queer topics as silent as possible. As Bera noted, "So being queer in the school, it feels like when I walk in like I'm being shoved back in the closet." (Bera, Interview)

One must ask why a straight teacher would be able to address queer topics in their classroom, but a queer teacher must not. For a possible answer we might return to the history of queer teachers in schools. There is a mythical historical discourse that has framed the queer educator as a predator (Connell, 2012; Jennings, 2015; Russell, 2010) who may attempt to proselytize or convert the children to queerness. For example, Neary (2017) wrote how teachers in Ireland reported, "anxieties about being perceived as recruiting, being reduced to negative stereotypes and/or their LGBT-Q identity being conflated with paedophilia." (p. 58) This queer teacher as predator discourse is a trope still very present today. The discourse is that a straight teacher would not attempt to proselytize, and, therefore, the straight teacher might be able to justify that they are using curriculum outcomes to support any discussion they have about queerness, without seeming like they are coming to the table with any kind of "queer agenda," or that a "gay pep rally" is occurring — language levelled at Rachel in her negative encounters

with parents. Much of this discourse is upheld in schools by a "professionalism" discourse that holds queer teachers at a different standard than their straight counterparts.[24] The deterritorializing activist teacher encounters these re/territorializing attempts on a regular basis. When straight allied teachers do not experience such pushback, as Jenna and Bera note, the cognitive dissonance is profound as often the queer teacher has more stakes in the game. Thus, if districts truly want to uphold diversity and be allies for queer educators, they must permit queer educators to have the same voice and address the same topics that straight teachers seemingly can without recourse, and they must support them when they do so.

Bera also wrote how many of the staff and board staff would be offended by anyone saying that the school space was not a safe one. This elucidates how far removed some straight-identified educators are from the experiences of queer students and teachers. Rachel accounted for this when she said that what is often missing on the part of straight educators is a form of queer cultural literacy,

> I'm starting to see queerness more as a culture. So, you know, when I talk to my colleagues about gender identity and pronouns and they're like, 'Oh, I've never heard of this before.' It's like, 'Right! You don't have that cultural literacy. You don't have that language, you know, you don't have that experience. It's a different culture.' So that's something I've been really reflecting on a lot and, increasingly, I just want to spend time with queer people. (Rachel, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community)

This comment made me wonder if straight educators understood queerness as a culture and if they did, would this assist with allyship. Within our school district, we used Randall Lindsay's

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[24] Again, we discuss professionalism in the next chapter and I will return to this discussion then.

work on Cultural Proficiency in many of our professional development workshops. Cultural proficiency begins by examining an educator's own assumptions and biases as well as examining harmful school and district policies with the intent to move toward more culturally affirming practices (https://ccpep.org/home/what-is-cultural-proficiency/). Within this framework, Lindsay and colleagues also proclaim that queerness is, indeed, a culture, and as such, a similar process of queer cultural proficiency involves educators being educated about queerness, interrogating their biases about queerness, and understanding the limits imposed upon queer individuals in schools and districts. This might help straight educators be better allies. The concept of queerness as a culture could also translate to the classroom space as well, as teachers could teach queerness as a culture, thereby expanding beyond the deficit discourses of queerphobia and heterosexism that queers do experience but need not be central in discussions of queer lives. The lack of cultural literacy was exemplified in a powerful vignette that Adèle shared about being outed to her students in her current school by another teacher. For her *Belonging in Schools* vignette, Adèle wrote,

> *I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready for them to know about me, I wasn't ready to talk about it because I didn't know how to explain it to myself. I would sneak around while dating this friend, trying to make sure not to be seen by staff members, students or parents. I didn't know how they would react, and I wasn't ready to find out.*

> *It was summertime and I had a bit more time for myself and I invested myself in this relationship. She was great and we had a lot of fun, but I still wanted it to be a secret. I wasn't ready to come out yet. She was out for many years now and had a hard time accepting my concern, so one day she posted a picture of the both of us on her social*

media. I was wearing flats. We argued but that passed, and my priority became school once again.

The secretary would ask me if I had found a boyfriend yet and I would just laugh it off and say, 'Who has time for that?' while walking away. I wanted to fit in. The students were talking, when one decided to come see me and say, 'Those flats, Miss, were nice on Instagram.' That's when I knew he had seen our picture. I was in shock and didn't know how to respond so I asked, 'Why are you looking at pictures of me on Instagram?' and he replied in a lower volume, 'She showed me.' (Pointing to a colleague!)

That's when I knew that my colleague showed my students a picture of me with a woman and now they all knew I was dating a woman. How could she do that to me? She took away my right of sharing my own life and felt the need to talk about me with students. None of the students had a problem with it but, it wasn't the point. She pushed me out into the spotlight without warning and I was stuck middle-stage with the lights shining brightly. I felt like nothing was sacred anymore, she made my life common knowledge like a Wikipedia page. (Adèle, Vignette, Belonging in School)

The inappropriateness of what this teacher did is extremely clear. She was, either, at best uninformed about the repercussions of outing a queer person or she was malicious in her intent. Rachel was outraged at how unprofessional this was (an interesting point when queer teachers can be deemed "unprofessional" when they "out" themselves or engage in deterritorializing queering of their classrooms. We will examine this in the next chapter). When Rachel expressed how inappropriate this was in a workplace, Adèle clarified that she even had her Instagram page set to private and that the staff member incredulously showed the students her girlfriend's

Instagram page. The affect we felt when hearing this experience was shock. Rachel began with a

much warranted expletive to preface her above response, while Jenna said, "I had goosebumps,

like, from my head to every part of my body…I'm just so sorry that that was your experience

with your kids, so sorry that was robbed of you in that moment." Then Bera responded that, like

Rachel and Jenna, they were,

> …on the one hand, sorry that happened to you, Adèle, but also furious that happened to
>
> you. I mean, we talked about queer community or queer culture, I mean, and one of the
>
> first things I think I ever learned was you never 'out' somebody else, like you do not
>
> 'out' someone. That's, that's kind of, like, a foundational part of our culture, you just don't
>
> do that. Straight people I guess…don't know, how serious that can be. (Bera, Discussion,
>
> Belonging in Schools)

This again returns us to the idea that "allies" (this teacher seems like they were not an ally!), and

teachers, in general, therefore, might be missing a queer cultural literacy education piece when

interacting with queer staff and students. Jenna also noted how this demonstrated the collision of

our two very separate worlds, how in "the summer we kind of develop ourselves, and then, it's

like, 'Okay, summer's over! Back to 'Madame!'" I then told the group that what struck me from

this comment was the idea of the two worlds; the sideways "flats on the beach queer summer

world", and the heteronormative profession that we all belong to. The ghost of that encounter

still had an affective hold on Adèle, and it was still something that she was reminded of in her

building because she still had to work with this teacher; a relationship she said she was never

able to heal because she, rightly, resented the teacher for making her so vulnerable to her

students. She ended, "I'll never have a coming out story because she took that away from me and

I was just out. So, it just, it was never healed." (Adèle, Discussion, Belonging in Schools.) At

best, this teacher needed queer cultural proficiency to understand that an "ally" would never "out" another queer teacher to their students!

Finally, for Rachel, straight allies also need to take the initiative to *educate themselves* about queer culture as she says it is also a burden to the queer colleague/friend who has to continually provide education to straight people. I have also experienced this. I have had teachers from home write me during this PhD, post-Human Rights coordinator role, to ask me how they should incorporate queer content into their classrooms, or my thoughts about queer issues, and sometimes I have not replied to them, because I sit with queer theory and queer education most days out of the year and simply do not always have the capacity to educate adults. Thus, I appreciate their allyship, but also think that allies need to do their own "heavy lifting," as Bera says, and research, in order to be proper allies.

In writing about the experiences of beginning queer teachers, Blake Cutler (2022) writes that "the explicit support of colleagues is crucial in empowering queer beginning teachers to reconcile homophobic incidents in their school context," (p. 12) and that,

> being an effective ally, at its core, involves respecting and valuing our embodied
> subjectivities as queer beginning teachers. Only by doing so, is it possible to move
> beyond positioning homophobic abuse as our 'prideful' burden to address the
> heteronormative societal beliefs that perpetuate these experiences. (p. 13)

Of course, our stories demonstrate how Cutler's findings clearly extend beyond beginning teachers. We need allies to support us when homophobic incidents occur, to assist with shouldering some of this "burden," which then removes the burden from us. An awareness of queer cultural literacy would also help allies be aware of the heterosexist structures that exist and help us to dismantle them. By the same token, Leigh Potvin (2016) writes that allyship is not

about *acceptance*, but that we need straight educators to "unlearn straight privilege." She writes that "unlearning oppressor culture is essential for allies. It is also work that is never total or complete. It is, and should be an ongoing process requiring responsiveness and adaptability," (p. 27) as all forms of cultural literacy must be.

To conclude, this chapter has discussed how good allies can assist activist queer teachers by shouldering some of the burdens that are a product of re/territorializations. We also discuss how allyship can lead to both straight and queer kinship groups, and how queer educators can also create kinship groups with each other in schools. We end the chapter with an interrogation of "allyship" that is not really "allyship," with a call for straight educators to educate themselves about queer culture to better support queer colleagues and students in schools.

Chapter 13: On Being Seen: Professionalism and Queerness

Many vignettes from the last two chapters came from our *Belonging in Schools* prompt. I originally did not have a prompt prepared for our fourth session and decided to create one organically out of themes arising from our previous sessions. A theme that emerged in our *Home and Belonging in Community and Schools* writing was the idea of how we might go beyond conditional acceptance in the rural to "being seen" by our queer kin and allies in our "sideways" communities. Additionally, up to this point we told many stories where we did not feel seen in our schools. Thus, as a direct line of flight I wanted to expand on these themes and asked, **"*When do we feel seen? Does that feel good or not good? What about being invisible or being made to feel invisible*?"** This prompt generated a great amount of discussion on what it meant *to be seen* as a professional.

I begin this chapter exploring what the literature says about queer teachers and teacher professionalism. Next, informed by a vignette from Rachel on professionalism and clothing, we then spend much of this chapter exploring how professionalism affects how we present in schools. Within this discussion we continue to examine how we are territorialized by the concept of *professionalism* and also the ways that we can deterritorialize professionalism, ending with what it could mean to *queer* professionalism.

Boards and unions consistently remind their employees/members about the need for professionalism. A brief history of how professionalism informs queerness will be discussed here. Blake Cutler (2022) explores how discourses of professionalism have historically separated the actions of the teacher from their sexual and gender identity, creating a professional versus private realm. They write,

> Since the early 1900s, social discourses have repeatedly stereotyped secondary school teachers as 'white males of Judeo-Christian beliefs, preferably mature and married, definitely heterosexual' (Reynolds, 1996)…Thus when queer teachers find themselves in contexts where heterosexuality is positioned as the norm, they must attempt to reconcile their identity with the 'professional/cultural expectation of what it means to be a teacher' and manage their identity in the school context. (p. 3)

Within the above statement, we see two norms occurring, the first is the obvious heteronormativity of the profession, but also implied is a gender normativity where secondary teachers are mostly male. "Male" teachers are not historically associated with the elementary grades perhaps due to the discourse that teachers at this level need be more "nurturing," reinforcing this particular "feminine" gender norm. As queer-identified elementary teachers, Bera and I challenge that particular norm. The question then is what does professionalism demand when the teacher's sexuality is queer and/or they are gender non-conforming? Cutler writes that the *professional/cultural expectation* is that personal sexual and gender identity should remain outside of the classroom experience, particularly when it is not a heterosexual/cisgender identity. In Eva Reimers' *Disruptions of desexualized heteronormativity — queer identification(s) as pedagogical resources* (2020) she writes that "desexualized heteronormative schools create situations where heterosexuality becomes desexualized as the normal position without acknowledging sexual desires, while it simultaneously makes articulations of homosexuality into solely sexual identity positions." (p. 114) Indeed, Llewellyn (2022) states that professionalism for teachers is,

> bounded by discourses of asexuality and heterosexuality. Any presentation outside of this can be viewed as a threat to childhood innocence and the heterosexual order. LGBTQ+

teachers, thus, are always in a position of navigating or often upholding a

personal/professional boundary around their LGBTQ+ status. (p. 3)

The queer/gender non-conforming teacher has, thus, historically been told that they must remain

silent about their personal lives, and they certainly must not be seen as influencing children in

anyway outside the confines of heterosexuality and cisnormativity.

We began interrogating the concept of professionalism through how we present in the

classroom. Rachel eloquently described in her vignette for the *On Being Seen* prompt how the

conservative nature of the profession originally affected how she presented at work, particularly

noting how she changed her wardrobe to appear more "professional" and essentially less queer.

> *One of the first things I shared with the group was a feeling, sometimes, of not presenting*
>
> *as queer enough and I've been unpacking that. I think the origins of a great deal of this*
>
> *tension has to do with being a teacher and worrying about professionalism. I participated*
>
> *in a research study …at the end of my B.Ed. about queer pre-service teachers, in which*
>
> *we spoke at great length about professionalism and respectability. I said then that so*
>
> *many of my classmates, and even their cooperating teachers, seemed to think being a*
>
> *professional involved buying the right clothes and wearing them well. For me,*
>
> *professionalism has always been about the integrity with which I do my job and the*
>
> *excellence for which I strive.*
>
> *Still, I did nonetheless go out and buy a wardrobe of business casual attire, which*
>
> *struck the right balance between equal parts uncomfortable and ugly — and decidedly*
>
> *with a femme bent. I felt then that if I dressed the part of a teacher, the students might*
>
> *believe that I was one. It was almost like a drag persona: this was who I was as Ms. X.*
>
> *untouchable and consummately professional; Rachel had separate civilian attire.*

Being seen as queer strikes the same note for me, I suppose — except that, while I wanted to be perceived as queer when I was in my 20's for the sake of validation, now I see being visibly queer as armor. If I look queer, straight men won't try to talk to me in public — thank God! If I look queer, the people waving their religious signs will give me a wide berth. If I look queer, I become a walking beacon — drawing in the people I want, and hopefully driving away those I don't. I don't want to look like someone who'll passively sit back and listen to racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or other varieties of ignorant shit. What I want to look like is a counterculture goblin. Like I think that's what my gender identity is. But of course, wanting to be a slightly feral and largely agender backyard gardener/gremlin and working for the government/teaching children are two very different energies — and so I have spent quite a bit of time these past few years figuring out how to integrate the two very different parts of myself.

I began with getting rid of a lot of the pretty things I owned because, while pretty — dresses and blouses and lacy cardigans — they were performative in a way that felt compulsory. I stopped wearing make-up and started dressing almost exclusively in outdoor gear (this was the benefit of a camping-oriented school). But of course, that was performative in another way. I'm just now beginning to figure out how to be both parts of myself and how to present that in the way I dress (and the way I live in my body — how I embody my sense of self).

I remember, when I was a teenager and just starting to think that I might be, like, gay, that I was terrified of lesbians, because they just looked so gay. Their enviable confidence, which was something I wanted so desperately that I couldn't look too closely — like being burned by staring at the sun. And now here I am, chasing

after that energy — while also figuring out precisely how to do that, but

the me version, just like I'm figuring out how to do teacher, but the me way.

I know I'm at my best — as a friend, a child, a partner, a teacher — when I'm

feeling seen, when the outside of who I am aligns with the inside. (Rachel, Vignette, On

Being Seen)

This idea about professionalism and how a queer teacher presents at work may sound frivolous at

first glance, but it is something that resonated with us all during our discussion. In fact, Cutler

said, "It is not uncommon for queer teachers' narratives of embodiment to centre around their

clothing or appearance." (p. 8) Many of us felt that our teacher identity and our "civilian"

identity, as Rachel called it, were very separate. Again, this exemplifies the double

consciousness that we all have — our queer worlds and the heteronormative world of teaching.

In so many ways we are asked to hide our queerness in schools, to make it less visible. Dressing

the "part" of the teacher for some queer teachers may mean dressing in gender stereotypical

ways that do not necessarily align with our queerness. Interestingly, Rachel called this a drag

persona and recognized the performative aspect of dressing as "teacher," harkening back to her

knowledge of Butler's notion of gender performativity. Briefly, Butler (1999) defines

performativity as "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects

through its naturalization in the context of a body." (p. xv) Butler is saying that gender is

performative in that we take on existing gender norms and reproduce them repetitively, which is

how they sustain over time. This is also how these norms can be subverted through repetitions of

difference. Teacher professionalism, for Rachel, demanded a performativity of a normative

gender presentation, one with a "decidedly femme bent." Like internalized homophobia, this was

not a territorialization that was imposed upon Rachel by the school district; no one explicitly told

Rachel that she must look a certain way, but this is an example of how queer people can take on

existing gender norms and territorialize themselves in order to fit particular societal boxes.

Because professionalism means being asexual and heteronormative, as Llewellyn suggests, often

queer teachers attempt to make the queer parts of themselves less visible. However, findings

from their study of 50 LGBTQ+ teachers from the UK suggest that "many teachers are able to

disrupt the binaries of professional/personal and a "new" teacher subjectivity emerges, that

acknowledges their LGBTQ+ status." (p. 1) Thus, we can also recognize in this vignette how

Rachel works to deterritorialize herself and the school space through her queer gender

presentation, her armor. As she said, getting rid of her "pretty" clothing in exchange for outdoor

gear is also performative. Both the reproduction of gender norms, if one so desires, and

challenging such norms, show how gender norms are tentative and socially constructed through

their uptake and transgression, and the latter is a queer performativity that is also necessarily

deterritorializing, as there is a disruption to the repetitive conceptualizations of traditional gender

norms. Importantly, Butler does not imply that there are not internal feelings that make people

want to take on these norms, or not want to take them on, which she clarified after the original

publication of Gender Trouble (p. XV). Therefore, any discussion about performativity must also

be placed alongside conversations about how presenting "feels" right for the individual, as

Rachel noted when she said that she was figuring out "the way I live in my body, how I embody

my sense of self." Her last sentence bears repeating when discussing the deterritorializing power

of "being seen" in schools, "I know I'm at my best when I'm feeling seen, when the outside of

who I am aligns with the inside." (Rachel, Vignette, On Being Seen)

      After Rachel shared this vignette I was moved by the singular affect that this telling

produced. I wrote in a field note that as Rachel shared, I laughed. I laughed due to the joy of the

deterritorializing power of such a vignette where she rejects normative gender/professional attire in exchange for her queer gardening gear. The utopic nature of such a vignette must also be discussed. Rachel feels seen when she dresses as she wants. She feels good when her inside matches her outside. It must be imagined that every day when Rachel gets up and puts on the clothing that feels comfortable for her that she experiences joy in this; this is Cvetkovich's utopia of everyday habit — it feels right and it *is* at the same time, a political statement. She deterritorializes notions of professional dress in her gardening gear which is utopic because it exceeds gender specific norms of dress. Again, we see how deterritorialization often coincides with utopia.

Similarly, in responding to Rachel, Bera also recognized the performative nature of being a teacher,

The performative aspect of teaching and what you wear, that's, I mean, this is my 29th year of teaching and I think back over it and how the way I've dressed has shifted over the years, particularly over the last 10 years as I've been coming out. It just seemed like, 'What am I wearing?' Am I wearing this because of what I'm trying to perform or because this is what I want to wear?

I mean, the key cards we have, the picture was taken a number of years ago and I'm wearing a shirt and tie. I don't wear ties anymore. I haven't for a number of years, and it irks me. But at the same time, I haven't laid out the money, because I have to pay for a new one if I want a different picture on there. But every time I see that picture it irks me because like I know why I was wearing it at that time, and it's not who I am, you know? But as Rachel mentioned, it's that idea of the teacher clothing being kind of drag performative. (Bera, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Much like Rachel and her *pretty* clothing, the shirt and tie for Bera is conceptualized as a performative piece that is more about looking the professional, and therefore, masculine part. For Bera, presenting in this way was territorializing as they noted how much it bothers them to still have the photo ID with the shirt and tie. Rachel and Bera both were affected by what they felt they should wear as a professional. Iskander's (2021) study, *Nonbinary Beginning Teachers: Gender, Power and Professionalism in Teacher Education,* investigates how these ideas are still found in Teacher's College. In their study they write that the university told the students to always dress more professionally than their mentor teacher, so like Rachel, one transgender teacher candidate recounted how they would "go to the elementary school to teach dressed in 'really feminine clothing' and then come home and change into clothing that they 'actually felt comfortable in' before leaving to attend their college classes in the evening…" (p. 208) Thus, notions of professionalism and how a teacher "should" look may be cemented as early as teacher's college, and create territorializations when the teacher feels they must erase their queer identity.

However, like Rachel, queer teachers can eventually resist, can deterritorialize themselves, by dressing in the ways they feel comfortable. Bera would also work towards deterritorialization through expressing their gender at school, particularly noting that it was a process for them. Bera would explore this in detail. Through Bera's writing in this section, I ask the reader to note how they consistently maneuver between feeling territorialized because of the professional script they must navigate, to acknowledging the deterritorializing work they do in schools, sometimes within the same vignette! This demonstrates the ambivalence they feel about their work environment.

They said that in the beginning of discovering their gender identity they began to wear kilts to schools, and at the time they did not really know why. They continued,

> I look back and go, 'Yeah, I know where that was coming from,' but at the time I had no idea…and even doing that was, and I couldn't have articulated it then, it was important for me to do it, but I couldn't really explain why. Now I know why. I mean, it was part of my queerness kind of pushing itself through. (Bera, Interview)

Bera is sharing here their own becomings into queerness. Bera is a perfect example of someone discovering queerness later in late, highlighting the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion that identity is continually becoming. They described how over the years they moved through experimenting with nail polish, coloring their hair, getting a "queer haircut," how their wife helped them choose eyeliner, and how they wear makeup to school. But it is interesting that Bera began wearing kilts to school before they had awareness of their queerness and how they noted the importance of doing so. This may have been an initial attempt at deterritorialization that was slightly safer, as a kilt is not perceived as queer or feminine, at the same time, it is not the norm for a "male" teacher to wear a kilt to school. This may have been an initial way for Bera to figure out how they felt when wearing the kilt to school, perhaps leading to a beginning feeling of utopia as they realized how "right" it felt to wear the kilt, and how right it would then feel to wear skirts and makeup to school. Becoming more and more queer-presenting over the years in their school district also provided Bera with some deterritorializing power, as the district cannot stop them from presenting or naming themself in the way that feels right for them. This offers some reprieve for Bera as they continually face the territorializing brick walls that the school district imposes on them to silence the speaking of their truth to the students. They exemplify this in a poem written for our session *On Being Seen,*

I often feel

Invisibled.

My queerness

Is not an add-on.

It is integral to who I am,

How I move

How I speak

How I see.

And to throttle it in the classroom

Is to leave a hole

In who I am

To my students.

My students were fascinated

That I am part of this group

But all I could tell them

Is

I'm part of a writing group.

The essential character

Of our group,

I could not talk about

And I could feel the strain

Of their curiosity

As I reluctantly

Turned it aside.

My earrings,

My skirts,

My make-up,

My swish,

My colours,

Are not worthy of comment by my students,

Which really throws

Other students at times.

What is noticeable to the latter,

Passes unremarked by the former,

And I don't know whether to be pleased

Or bothered by that. (Bera, Vignette, On Being Seen)

In this poem we see the ways that Bera continually negotiates being territorialized and how they can deterritorialize. They often feel "invisibled" while presenting to their students in ways that are decidedly queer, but perhaps, imperceptibly queer, since they are not allowed to discuss their full identities with their students. They must constantly censor parts of themself, even censoring what our writing and discussion group is about, while longing to tell the students. Would it be deemed unprofessional to talk about being in a queer writing group with elementary students? Previous notions of professionalism and the "innocence" discourse associated with children would say, "Yes!" In Neary's (2017) *Lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers' ambivalent relations with parents and students while entering a civil partnership,* she wrote how,

[t]he boundaries of public and private, personal and professional are negotiated extremely carefully by LGBT-Q teachers…Balancing and knitting together a teacher professional legitimacy with attempts to be 'authentic' and 'honest' about their LGBT-Q identification is a continuous project for many teachers. (p. 61)

Thus, Bera wants their students to know their "authentic" self but is constantly aware of the boundaries imposed upon them by notions of professionalism, as well as the scripts from the district they must follow.

Bera's final verse is also profound because it speaks to how their silence about their queerness is unremarkable to those students in their classroom who know them as their teacher. Bera's students may not understand why Bera presents in the way that they do, but they do understand that Bera is a supportive, welcoming and safe teacher. Bera discusses in their interview how children who are perceived as some of the more difficult students do very well with them (Bera, Interview), and they are able to build strong relationships with students over the course of the year. Because of these relationships, students may tend to not notice Bera's presentation over time, whereas the students Bera does not teach can be "thrown" because they do not know them personally, and Bera is not allowed to explain to the students who they are.

I have had similar experiences when I have moved to new schools or gone into schools to conduct professional development. There can be a visceral physical or verbal reaction from students when they first encounter me. Like Bera, I am very queer in appearance. I have long black hair and wear makeup and scarves regularly, while looking "male." I definitely stand out in rural schools. I have found that when students first encounter me that they can often react poorly, and they may comment on my appearance. Occasionally some homophobic slurs are muttered as I pass by in the hallway or outside my classroom door, but I also have found that within a few

months, as relationships are made with the students in my classes and they find out that I aim to be someone who cares about them and wants to assist them through their school journey, these reterritorializing behaviors have tended to end. As I build relationships and word of mouth spreads through the school, and into the community, that I am a "good" teacher/person, attitudes begin to shift. Bera and I are both good at building relationships with our students, and thus, after they get to know us our gender presentation becomes "normalized" to them, a normalization of queerness.

In *Reflecting on 'Coming Out' in the Classroom*, Khayatt and Iskander (2020) write about a nonbinary pre-service teacher who went to practicum presenting in high heels, a dress, long hair and a beard (p. 10). They write that the pre-service teacher did not discuss their gender identity with the students but that their presence clearly deterritorializes the classroom with their non-cisnormative presentation. In the instance Iskander recounts, there was a shocking attempt at reterritorialization as the practicum supervisor told the student they should choose between their gender and their profession (p. 10). However, this participant did not and continued to present in the way they wanted. Iskander said that "their being a teacher and being gender nonconforming felt inseparable." (p. 10) This is an important deterritorialization. Indeed, depending on where one lives and the political climate, queer teachers may not feel as bounded by professionalism. Llewellyn's (2022) research suggests that,

> discourses of the professional teacher are no longer constrained by an asexual heterosexuality and instead are built upon honesty and relationships. As such, rather than view their personal and professional subjectivities as in conflict… these teachers had space to construct a new teacher subjectivity that included being LGBTQ+. (p. 11)

Bringing this discussion to how Bera and I build relationships with our students, our gender presentation is at once accepted by our students who know us, as well as potentially deterritorializing for *all* of the students we come in contact with as our presentation challenges gender norms. However, for Bera, they have the very real constraints imposed upon them by their district and a question that this professionalism discussion brought up for them, again, is whether their queerness is enough. In a subsequent poem they continued to explore the territorialization that is professionalism and how this impacts the way they view their queer expression. They wrote,

> *I put on my makeup*
>
> *My teaching face,*
>
> *An animation that you wouldn't see elsewhen.*
>
> *An outgoingness*
>
> *That engages*
>
> *And pulls kids in,*
>
> *When outside that space*
>
> *I sit back*
>
> *And watch.*
>
> *I put on my outfit*
>
> *My costume,*
>
> *Seeking to balance*
>
> *Teacher professional*
>
> *With*

My authentic self.

How queer can I be?

Am I queer enough?

Some days

I only have the energy

To pass

Other days

It's purple scarves and sequins

And both

Are me.

Lesson plans,

Unit plans,

But the best teaching

The most memorable lessons

Are improvised

On the spot

In response

To student queries.

But

I always have to filter out

The queer. (Bera, Vignette, Open Prompt)

The way Bera is territorialized to not be able to speak their "truth" to their students has produced

two dichotomous realities for Bera. They can be "queer enough" by how they present to their

students, but what happens when they feel like they do not want to wear scarves and sequins? To

then appear "male"' along with their lost voice makes them question "Am I queer enough? — a

further self-territorialization. Again, one can recognize the ways that Bera is continually

territorialized but also continually works towards deterritorialization. This can be seen by

juxtaposing the above poem with their statement below,

> I mean in my own case, as much as being openly genderqueer has been very scary at
>
> times and very difficult, I mean, that started when I was in my late 40s and I'm kind of
>
> getting to the point where to a certain extent, I really don't give a shit what people
>
> think… I'm not going to change who I am because you don't like the fact that I wear a
>
> skirt or that I wear makeup or whatever. (Bera, Interview)

Thus, we see Bera oscillate between questioning themself and knowing that they do

deterritorialize their school, because there is a deterritorializing political force, a queering, that

takes place when queer folx choose to present in ways that are anti-normative. Bera does

acknowledge throughout the interview and writing sessions the many wonderful ways that their

queer presentation in their school works to deterritorialize the space. For example, as a direct line

of flight from our "grandmother" stories from the *Object* prompt, Bera wrote the following two

vignettes for the *Belonging in Schools* prompt,

> Vignette 1.
>
>> *In school, teachers do get called 'mom' or 'dad' on occasion, but a number of*
>>
>> *years ago a student quite unconsciously, called me 'grandma.' Their peers started to*
>>
>> *mock them for it, but I yanked them up short and thanked the student for honouring me in*

that way. When the other students looked at me quizzically, I asked how they felt about their grandmothers. For many of them, their grandmother was a very important person. You could see their awareness shift. I wasn't very 'out' at that point, but for that student, in a moment of connection, to use the term 'grandmother' to reference me, was incredibly affirming and has stayed with me ever since. (Bera, Vignette, Belonging in Schools)

Vignette 2

I love shopping at thrift stores, though with Covid, I haven't been able to do so in quite some time… One of my finds a few years ago was a long, London Fog, winter coat. It goes down to my ankles and has a faux-fur collar. I love it — it keeps my legs warm on winter duty days without my having to put on snow pants.

One day, as I was entering the school, a grade four student looked at me scornfully and said, 'That's a grandma coat!' I said, 'Thank you. Some of the people I most respect are grandmothers,' and I walked away. He didn't know how to respond to that. (Bera, Vignette, Belonging in Schools)

Although, Bera has a script about what they can and cannot say, Bera can and does still challenge students' perceptions of gender norms! There is utopia in these deterritorializing moments for Bera as they queer gender norms in the school. They also told this story in the interview and laughed when they told it. In the interview, they described how their gender presentation "freaks out" some kids but for others it makes them think, and this is what makes these kinds of conversations with students utopic for them. Bera told another story in the interview about wearing a pair of sunglasses to school and a child said,

'Oh, those are women's sunglasses.' And I went, 'They are *my* sunglasses. These aren't women's sunglasses, they are my sunglasses.' It does kind of chip away at some of those

assumptions for quite a few of the kids, even if we don't talk about it, even if I can't say

anything, just the fact that I'm doing it questions their assumptions. (Bera, Interview)

Thus, in talking about if they are proud to be queer at school, Bera said that when they are,

queering the classroom…it makes me proud to do those pieces, but I mean anybody

could do those, allies…part of it would be I'm just proud that I AM queer…And there's

not a damn thing you can do about it. That I'm proud of! (Bera, Interview)

This pride in their identity is utopic for Bera, as despite the restrictions the district places on

them, the district cannot remove that pride from Bera; they cannot completely reterritorialize

Bera as they have sought to do.

Like Bera, I also refuse to wear a shirt and tie; to work, to church, to weddings, and so

forth. I have switched out such clothing for any of the 40-plus colorful scarves that hang in my

closet, which I like to pair with equally colorful shirts and cardigans. At this time, I actually

refuse to wear clothing that will make me look "masculine." In my case, this stems from growing

up in a working-class family of fishers, butchers, and hunters who wore the overalls, the green

hip wader boots, and the various plaid (not my pale pink and blue plaids, but the rugged manly

plaids) and camo jackets, that I would often associate with either a masculinity that felt toxic or

one that I felt like just did not fit me. There was also the expectation that I should wear these

things that bothered me the most and something that I still rebel against. I explained this further

when responding to Bera,

I refuse to wear a tie to anything now. I have no desire to wear a tie. I wear my scarves

when I go everywhere… And I have to say I have a couple friends who are very

conservative in all of their values…I just feel like I'm always maneuvering around them,

and their ideas and my ideas do not align. One time they wanted me to go out in the

backyard and do something in the garden, and my friend told me to put on the husband's

overalls. And I was like, 'I'm not putting them on! I'm not putting on the overalls,' and

she could not understand why I would not, and I said, 'You know what, if I told your

husband right now to put my scarf on and go outside, it would be World War Three, so

I'm not putting on the goddamn overalls.' (Renny, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Rachel's immediate response to this story was both hilarious and interesting,

Yeah, whereas I'd kill for a good pair of overalls. But I think, you know, you're right.

There's almost a social praise when you fit in a box, when you're easy to define and it's

like, on the one hand, I guess it's the idea of passing, right? I used to find that like, 'Yeah,

I did it. Cool!' Versus now, it just makes me kind of pissed off and irritated and so I

make jokes about tattooing queer on my forehead. (Rachel, Discussion, On Being Seen)

What's interesting about these two pieces in conversation is how both Rachel and I reject the

normative stereotypes of how we should present, but at the same time we embrace the queer

stereotypes associated with the lesbian gardener and her overalls and the queer feminine man

with his scarves and makeup. We do see with Rachel, Bera and myself that there is a political

and deterritorializing power associated with a queer performativity that challenges gender norms

in and out of the classroom.

Jenna had a different response to embracing a queer presentation than the rest of us.

Although Jenna is out to her students regarding her sexuality, her gender expression is more

imperceptible. She wrote,

It's like I've been playing hide-and-go-seek my whole existence. I am ready just to be. Be

discovered. Be explored. Be myself. I am worthy of my space, just as I am. Not

exactly ever 'read' correctly but who does that fall upon, the person to change or society

to see more variety in the human experience. I am learning to be the enigma that I am,

very comfortable in my gender identity as female but express my gender identity in more

masculine ways.

I am very much queer and sexually curious but my expression of that comes

across as a very straight, white, suburban, soccer mom. What I am trying to grapple with

is why does my inside not match my outside? Why is there a disconnect between identity

and expression?...

Recently, I have been following more queer content on social media. This has

brought me part inspiration, part confusion. Do I want to be this version I see, or do I

want to be with this type of person? I have tried to change up my clothing, to be seen as

more queer. The problem with that is others see me, but when I look in the mirror I lose

myself...Have I completely melded the human me and the teacher me. Not yet! (Jenna,

Vignette, Thematic Session)

Jenna seems to be in a process of discovering what her queer identity looks like. Perhaps she is

more similar to Bera and the process they went through a few years ago. This is such an

interesting vignette that exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's notions of continual becomings and

imperceptibility. For Jenna, discovering who she is has been like a game of "hide-and-go-seek."

This is a wonderful analogy for queer people who might initially be in the closet and the process

it takes to discover an identity that works for them. However, it goes beyond the "closet"

experience to also show that being out of the closet does not mean that identity-work is

complete. When Jenna said she is "…ready to just be! Be discovered. Be explored. Be myself," I

argue that Jenna is not ready to be explored or discovered by others, but that she can give herself

permission to explore her own self, and to be comfortable with who she is discovering. Part of that discovery is wondering why her identity and her expression do not match; how she presents as a white, suburban soccer mom, but also how she feels she can express herself in more masculine ways that are not as readily perceptible. At the same time, Jenna recognized that she tried to dress "more queer," but that this did not work for her either; she only felt lost when looking in the mirror.

The deterritorializing power and utopic feelings that Bera, Rachel and I express when presenting in ways that are queerly performative, is not something that Jenna embraces. I will note, however, that Jenna also says in another vignette that she is not one who gets "gussied up," and in all of our meetings she appeared fairly casually dressed. In the last chapter she said that she just wanted to live in a community that had a lesbian softball team. (Jenna, Discussion, Home and Belonging in Community). Indeed, I can picture her both as a "suburban soccer mom" and on a lesbian softball team, the prior might appear to be more heteronormative, but could also certainly be very queer as one could be a queer soccer mom and/or be on a lesbian softball team in the rural. I had originally read Jenna as someone who was out with her students and therefore not imperceptible, but this vignette suggests otherwise, as she is often read in a way that does not represent who she feels she is. What is clear is how Jenna also described how her teacher self and her personal self have not yet melded, and in this context, it may be because she *does* present in cisnormative ways that would also be considered professional, while feeling that this does not represent who she really is. This is a seemingly different experience than the rest of us, and yet, it is not so different, as we all struggle to come to terms with our *true* selves within the profession of teaching.

Responding to Rachel's vignette, Adèle also discussed how she negotiated her gender presentation at school. It is interesting because like Jenna she also seems to be in a process of discovery about her gender identity/expression. She stated,

> I think that it was the outfits that really resonated with me in your piece, and I always try to, like, attach myself to your stories, as if they're an inch of my own. And so, it was a part that I could really relate to because I get so pissed off when I get compliments when I wear a dress. Like as a teenager I never wore dresses. I was very tomboyish or whatever. We have very stereotypically manly women down home, so I was one that always wore pants, not by choice, but comfort, and as an adult I was like, 'Oh yeah, I could wear dresses, why not?' So sometimes, I wear dresses, when I want to, but I always get compliments on the days that I wear dresses. And it pisses me off so much because I always take it as, and I know that people might not have that intention, but the compliment to me on that day is them congratulating me for following social norms… So, it's really hard for me to accept those comments on those days, with them trying to put me in the box that they want me to be in…
>
> For me it's like I feel my gender identity more because I started questioning my sexual identity, so I just don't like their boxes and your description of that was like, 'Yes!' When I started wearing T-shirts, I felt so much better as a teacher at school; T-shirts and cardigans, you know? And I was just like, 'Oh that's so me,' and when I see pictures of me now, I'm like, 'Yeah, look at that teacher! She's so pretty in those pictures.' (Adèle, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Of particular interest in Adèle's discussion is how she said she tries to attach herself to our stories and can find her own stories within ours. This speaks to the power of our collaborative

work together. This section on gender norms and professionalism all originated out of Rachel's vignette, leading each of us on a line of force to our own experiences with performing gender in schools and how we can subvert those gender norms. The "stereotypical manly women" that Adèle described from down home has been discussed in the literature, where it is often supposed that masculine presenting women are more normative in the rural space due to the nature of rural lifestyles. Kazyak's study *Midwest or Lesbian? Gender, Rurality, and Sexuality* (2012) suggests that masculinity underpins rural life, and that lesbians and gay men find acceptance in the rural by "doing masculinity." (p. 825) There are also studies that suggest that feminine or trans men who are not masculine may not fare as well in the rural, because many men adhere to a rural compulsory masculinity, and femininity does not equate with rurality (Abelson, 2016; Kazyak, 2012). However, Adèle countered this first point when she discussed how she is still applauded when she wears a dress and how this upsets her because to her it feels like she is being congratulated for following social norms. Bera and I also counter the second point about feminine men and rurality to a certain degree. Bera expressed earlier that trans men who *pass* fare better in their community than those who do not, but at the same time, I am not sure that either Bera or myself "pass," and like Crawford wrote, perhaps Kazyak's study is missing the voices of those feminine/trans men who remain in the rural. This was a topic that I wanted to investigate further, and I mentioned this to the group, but we did not return to it. However, returning to my own discussion about not desiring to dress in "masculine" ways, like Adèle, I similarly do not want to be told how nice I look in a suit and tie because I am not celebrating my own self when wearing such things. Adèle does seem like she might like to wear dresses here and there, but she does not wish to be celebrated for doing so. If dresses did not carry the normative expectations of femininity she might be happier to wear them, but she does not want

to be congratulated for presenting in feminine ways, and ultimately ends with how comfortable and "pretty" she feels when she is wearing a T-shirt or cardigan to school.

Finally, Adèle's exclamation of "Yes!" to Rachel's experience accompanied by how proud she sounds at the end of her writing when she says, "Yeah, look at that teacher! She's so pretty in those pictures," is, for me, another example of MacClure's (2013) "data that glows" — an affective statement that is felt in it's utopic deterritorializing power. For Adèle, the utopia is the deterritorializing action of subverting gender and professional dress norms.

It cannot now be underestimated how important our gender presentation is for all of us as we attempt to project a reflection of our selves that feels the most authentic, and work to deterritorialize gender normative scripts of professionalism.

Queer Professionalism?

Adèle would interrogate professionalism again the following week in our debrief session. She told us that she wrote this vignette as soon as our previous session had ended, suggesting that this topic especially resonated with her and sent her on a line of flight. Within this telling we see Adèle expound what professionalism is and is not,

> *As an educator, I find it difficult to walk that line of 'professionalism' because it isn't defined from a queer perspective but structurally from a cisgender heteronormative point of view that doesn't represent me… My professionalism in a rural school means that I can teach my curriculum while also defending, promoting and representing those who don't yet have voices but have great ideas. I show up and have respectful yet sometimes difficult discussions and debates with young minds that sometimes see it differently than we do… It is excruciatingly tiring to always be that teacher…Do not question my professionalism when I bring social issues into my*

> *classroom…. I think we can solve them, with one, maybe awkward, but very important*
>
> *discussion at a time to reveal what truly is unprofessional in our school system; here's a*
>
> *hint, it's not me.* (Adèle, Debrief Vignette, On Being Seen)

Adèle returned us to familiar themes already brought up; the burden of having to be "that teacher" who is "making noise," but, at the same time, professionalism for Adèle, is about addressing queer and social justice topics in her classroom and supporting students through her openness about her own queerness, through the curriculum, and through discussions and debates in an attempt to move hearts and minds. She also employed some queer theoretical constructs as she interrogated who defines professionalism when she stated, "I find it difficult to walk that line of "professionalism" because it isn't defined from a queer perspective but structurally from a cisgender heteronormative point of view that doesn't represent me." This is a profound distinction. A cisgender heteronormative point of view, as we have noted, defines queerness, queer teachers, and queer topics as taboo, a subject/subjects, subjectified, that need be silenced and "invisibled," to reference Bera. Rachel then shared an example of how Administration, in her case, used "professionalism" to attempt to silence her voice. Following Adèle, she said,

> Professionalism as being defined from a cis het point of view reminded me of a
>
> conversation I had with a very bad principal who came in and he sat down with me to
>
> have a little one on one. He's like, 'You know I'm heterosexual and it's just a very small
>
> part of my life, so I don't ever need to talk about it.' And how that kind of
>
> heteronormativity is so pervasive so that like, if you mentioned your wife, or you know,
>
> the vacation you're taking, that's considered invisible, but if I did the exact same thing
>
> then somehow, I'm necessarily being political. And if I want to be political in a way that
>
> aligns even with what our directives are around, you know, celebrating and making

queer identities seen, like somehow, that's not professional, like you said. It's just so interesting, that kind of difference, and how I don't think that many cis het educators get it, because they just take it like the water they're swimming in, they take it for granted, but when we have to do it, it becomes political. (Rachel, Debrief Discussion, On Being Seen)

Within this discussion, Rachel exposes the nature of compulsory heterosexuality, where the straight-identifying administrator feels that his sexuality is just a small part of his life and, thus, something that he does not have to discuss. The issue is that if the administrator did discuss with students what he was doing with his wife on the weekend, or bring up his wife in conversation at all, there would be no repercussions or reprisals from staff, the district, or the community for doing so, and this is a heterosexual privilege that is, of course, taken for granted by many straight educators, as Rachel points out. Thus, Rachel also rightly observes that when she discusses her wife (or queerness) that this is a political act, and also one that is not considered professional. Reimers (2020) says that "LGBTQ teachers who talk about their partners, their friends, and their plans for the weekends therefore risk being seen as flaunting their sexuality." (p. 114) Jenna spoke of this when she said parents told her that speaking about sexuality was, "shoving it down people's throats" or "making it a circus show." (Jenna, Interview)

Adèle's vignette and this discussion brings up some questions. Does being an out or imperceptible queer person in schools make one inherently political? Can an activist queer person even be professional? How does one queer professionalism? The last question led me to bring this up with the group members. I wondered,

And so, this whole conversation is making me think about what professionalism is from a queer perspective? And can the two even go together and what does that look like? If

you're looking at truly what queer is, wouldn't that just be disruption, and how can [a

profession] … ever have that? (Renny, Debrief Discussion, On Being Seen)

Bera then elaborated on how even something as innocuous as their pronouns becomes a

disruptive, political act,

I think that disruptive piece you're talking about… I mean we're talking about not being

able to talk about things. Like I'm not allowed to talk about my pronouns with my

students, like really? But it's exactly that, like, 'Oh no that's too political. That's,

too disruptive.' They're my pronouns! Like really? That's too disruptive? But you're

right, like it's not heteronormative, so then that's too much. (Bera, Debrief Discussion,

Being Seen)

It, then, bears asking what might professionalism look like from a queer point of view? Adèle

might give an initial answer when she explains that her own professionalism should not be

interrogated when she brings social justice issues into her classroom, explaining that the problem

is not her, but a professionalism that is historically rooted in the territorialization and erasure of

the experiences of queer, and all minoritized, staff and students in schools. Notions of

professionalism may, therefore, act as another territorializing wall that queer educators are

placed up against within the profession. If professionalism is used in a territorializing way to

keep us from discussing/being queer then it does stand to reason that professionalism also needs

to be disrupted, to be deterritorialized. Perhaps, this is exactly what we are doing with the way

we bring queerness into our schools, through our disruption of professional norms. The idea of

disruption will be brought up again in the next chapter, as we interrogate how disruption and

celebration can work together to create deterritorialized and utopic queer worlds in schools.

Lastly, I argue that queer teachers can not queer professionalism alone and that queer teacher professionalism will be queered when districts begin to conceptualize queer teachers as "assets" rather than "burdens," as Rachel described earlier. Eva Reimers (2020) said, "As positioned outside the heterosexual norm, the [queer] teachers have acquired experiences, perspectives, interests, sensitivities, and knowledge that they bring into the educational space." (p. 112) Imagine if our employers looked at us as professional queer cultural assets and people who could help contribute to more acceptance within schools, as Adèle wrote in her last vignette. Imagine if being a social justice advocate was *professionalism*. Imagine, once again, if districts could be allies for us, helping to remove some of our "burdens," rather than placing that "burden" within us. As Reimers says, "the aim is to shift the perspective away from queer teacher bodies as problems and to propose positive pedagogical effects of LGBTQ teachers." (p. 112) Acknowledging and honoring our queer identities and what we bring to the space as queer teachers would shift conceptualizations of what queer teacher professionalism is. Finally, given the many territorializations that we experience in schools, it seems like, once again, the enterprise of viewing our *own selves* as "assets" is of the utmost importance. This moves us into the next chapter where we begin to write about how we can celebrate ourselves within schools.

Chapter 14: Celebration, Joy and Utopia in Activism

Up until now, I have discussed a number of territorializing walls that we have encountered, as well as the ways that we must continually deterritorialize ourselves within the education system. I have also noted moments where this deterritorializing activism has resulted in moments of joy and utopia for the group members in this study. This section will further expand upon those utopic moments which undoubtedly serve to keep us anchored within our profession, within our communities, despite the many ways that territorialization manifests. I begin with a discussion of how and why the prompt for this chapter was created. Next, participants share stories in which they felt their identities were celebrated in their schools. Interspersed throughout the stories I continue to reflect upon how group members were able to recharacterize their place within schools through the telling of more celebratory stories.

To begin, many of our vignettes and discussion for this chapter originated from our fifth session prompt which was, ***Describe a moment where you felt your queer self/identity (or intersectional identities) was validated or celebrated, or a moment that inspired you to be your authentic self.*** I had asked group members to help me come up with prompts for this session and the one following. Out of the list of prompts they sent, I recommended that we combine two prompts to focus on *celebration* and our *authentic selves*. I did influence the group members here, but I also felt that this was a necessary prompt to write to, given that I felt the previous sessions were heavy in content describing territorialization, as the reader can likely see. I wrote the following after our Belonging in Schools session ended, noting how emotional the evening was for many of us,

> *Last night... it was a different feeling right away. I think people are feeling the stress*
> *of Covid restrictions and online learning and some of that was expressed at the*

beginning. One of my participants said they were having a difficult day and didn't know how present they might be. They didn't participate as much in the debrief section but in the second hour they did and seemed ok. It just all felt emotional. I was emotional; one of the stories made me cry, another participant also. I always expected this to happen, and I think it comes with how we are all making ourselves vulnerable. However, I also felt nervous and vulnerable myself when sharing last night, which I really didn't anticipate I would. I left it feeling heavy, and I wonder if others did too. It was certainly a different feeling than our first two sessions. I also think all of this is ok and, likely, part of the process. (Renny, Field Note)

During this session, we spent time focusing on the ways that we were territorialized. We discussed stories involving shame: I wrote about homophobia from community members; Adèle wrote about being outed to her students by another teacher; Rachel wrote about how she fosters belonging in her school but how sad she is that she does not belong, which then brought Jenna to reflect on their experience together and how difficult it was. Similarly, in the next session, Jenna said her vignette was the hardest one she had to write. This was about the professional development day that was quashed by the Administration. I shared about the student being taken out of my classroom and school. Bera wrote about all the things they are not allowed to say in their school, and we had the discussion on professionalism and gender. These were heavy topics. However, interspersed among the heavy stories were also stories of joy, celebration and utopia. As I noted at the beginning of this study, I knew that there were stories of utopia that must be told, and the idea of celebration was a topic that was brought up often over the *On Being Seen* session. I also wrote in my field notes that my desire to do the celebration/authentic selves prompt was a line of flight from a vignette that Rachel shared from our *Belonging in Schools*

prompt, as well as Jenna's vignette for the *On Being Seen* prompt the previous week, both of

which I will share now. Rachel had written a well-received vignette where she discussed how we

should *celebrate* and be our *authentic* selves. Rachel wrote:

> *We're permitted so little space to be our authentic selves — things our cishet*
>
> *counterparts just don't have to think about. We're praised (sometimes) for our leadership*
>
> *when that's convenient; we're ignored and silenced when it becomes inconvenient.*
>
> *These school communities are so lucky to have us, and I think that's something*
>
> *we need to recognize and celebrate. Even if they don't understand or articulate it, they*
>
> *are so fortunate to have our vibrant energy, our reflective kindness, our queer way of*
>
> *perceiving the world in classrooms, schools, districts. Our visionary power.*
>
> *This must be where community comes in: if my school doesn't necessarily*
>
> *provide me with the belonging I need, the queer community can — the one that aligns*
>
> *with who I am, what I offer, and what I need…Which is why it's so important to nurture*
>
> *who we are outside of that building and that system, to ground ourselves in our authentic*
>
> *queer identities.* (Rachel, Debrief Vignette, Belonging in Schools).

We have seen the ways that Rachel continually feels territorialized within the school building,

and thus, for her, it is the queer community outside of school where she can *celebrate* and

validate her *authentic* queer self, as demonstrated in the *Our Community Stories* section.

Importantly, Rachel's vignette was an epiphany for Bera at the time. My sense is it was another

reminder for Bera where they could start to think beyond their stories of trauma and shift that

thinking into how they might celebrate themself. After Rachel shared, Bera responded,

> I wonder how…certain teachers in buildings stand out *because* they're queer. I mean, I've
>
> had people tell me, 'Oh, you're a great teacher!' Well, why?" And they can't quite put

their finger on it, and when you were talking, Rachel, I'm going, 'I wonder how much of that is because I'm queer, not in spite of…but I'm that teacher *because* I'm queer.' So, thank you for that. I don't think it had really struck me before like that, but while you were talking, maybe that's the key ingredient, at least for me. (Bera, Debrief Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

This amazing line of flight is exemplified in the poem that Bera wrote for the next week's session. They wrote,

> *What makes me different as a teacher?*
>
> *I've long been told*
>
> *I'm a great teacher,*
>
> *Though it's taken most of my career*
>
> *To come to believe it.*
>
> *But no one can tell me why.*
>
> *And now I wonder*
>
> *If it's because*
>
> *They can't see*
>
> *That it's the queerness in me*
>
> *That my students' sense*
>
> *And it tells them*
>
> *I'm safe.* (Bera, Vignette, On Being Seen)

Rachel's words about our vibrant queer energy and "queer ways of perceiving the world" moved Bera from the deficit thinking of queerness as a liability, of everything about themselves that they cannot say; from the notion that they are a great teacher "in spite of" being queer, to

remembering that they are a great teacher because they are queer, and how this queerness positively affects their students in their school, and, really, the school itself. In these moments, they began to deterritorialize themself from the projections that have been placed upon and taken up within them; all of the territorializing messages received from the district about who they are as a queer teacher begins to be questioned, as a line of flight towards queerness as celebration is opened.

Rachel's impact on Bera is another example of data that glows for me. They are appreciative of this realization, thanking Rachel for giving them a new way to think about their queerness. Within this, the potential for becomings, lines of flight, in the group is once again put on display.

Rachel's vignette and our discussion about how difficult it is to be our authentic selves in schools may have also influenced Jenna to write her vignette for the *On Being Seen* prompt, as Jenna questioned how she will be received if she shows her true self,

Showing up for myself is a process. I am not a human being that takes time to get gussied up, but showing up as me can be complex, confusing and time consuming. You can't be seen if you don't show up but if I show up do you see me? Do I need to standout? Shout? Can I just be? Should I change my look, my way, myself? If you see me for all that I am, all that I am trying to portray to you, what is your reaction? Do you tolerate me? Do you celebrate me? How many layers of me will you find worthy? Can I take off my coat and come in? Can I bare my soul and body to you? What if you could see the me behind the mask? What if you could see my thoughts, feelings, desires and insecurities? I am learning slowly that the only voice that matters is my own, 'Yes, I see you. Yes, I love you. Yes, you are worthy, just as you are!' (Jenna, Vignette, On Being Seen)

Given Jenna's experiences in her school with Rachel and our discussion about professionalism, it is clear that she has been territorialized to question just how much of herself she can show in her schools. She must always consider the reactions that she might elicit if she shows her "true" self. Will showing herself lead to toleration or reterritorialization, or deterritorialization and celebration? Jenna ends with the reminder that the only voice that really matters is her own and that she can find her own queer self worthy. Echoing Jenna, Rachel then brought up the idea of self-validation,

'How much of myself can I trust you with and how much of it will you see?' That, as an image, really strikes me as being very compelling and I think that highlighted the importance of *self-validation*. And you know, while I see myself, and I know my worth and I know that I'm worth loving, I think that's so, so important because that's a hard, hard voice to cultivate. (Rachel, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Adèle also recognized how difficult it is for many queer people to love themselves. She recounted how,

It took me a long time to love myself, once I accepted the fact that I was part of the queer community. To accept that for myself and that it was going to change the way I defined myself in all of my environments… But I think that's so powerful… about finding that love for yourself and that you deserve it. Because I think that a lot of people struggle with that self love, at all stages of their identity in the queer community. (Adèle, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Indeed, for all of us, it seems as if we need continual reminders that we are queer enough and to love and be proud of who we are. This would give me a lot to think about as I began to think about the importance of self-talk and how negative self conceptualizations in the form of

internalized homophobia were also territorializations, where a person can get so stuck in self-doubt that they cannot move forward (or beyond the territorialized space of their own thinking). I began to think further about what sharing memories of stories about celebration and joy could do.

This lead me to the prompt on *celebrating* and *validating* our *authentic* queer selves, and is yet another example of how this research methodology is Deleuzo-Guattarian: this was not a prompt that I had pre-planned but was one that was arrived at through an initial analysis of the stories and discussion above. This is how the celebration of our queer teacher selves, as well as the celebration of the work we do in the schools, became central to our week five discussion.

The Celebration Stories: Pride and Pride Month — An Assemblage

Over our final few weeks together, stories of celebration would coincide with stories of Pride, as coincidentally, this session was held at the beginning of Pride month. Thus, by chance, Pride month became part of our research assemblage as the events occurring, or not occurring, at our schools would become topics for storying and analysis.

Jenna began our fifth session by sharing a debrief vignette from the *On Being Seen* session. In this vignette, Jenna described how the students bolster her because she can also see herself through them; it is their courage, bravery, and authenticity that she can then find mirrored in herself,

> *When I see you, I also see me. I look out on my students and their bravery, courage,*
> *enthusiasm, and authenticity, it is like it is reflected in me. I am a student of theirs and*
> *they of mine. I love seeing their courage to smash gender norms and it gives me a boost*
> *to fight with them. I love their quiet whispers of, 'This is my first Pride,' and it reminds*
> *me to be gentle and curious. I love their unbashful declarations of queer love and it*

reminds me to shout out my adorations as well. When they get excited to decorate for

Pride events, I burst with giddiness alongside them. I love their support for their peers,

and it reminds me that connection and community are key. Their vibrations of life make

me want to sing and dance right along with them. Their outrage of injustices makes me

want to fight like hell for them and me too. When I look at you, it helps me see me. (Jenna,

Debrief, Being Seen)

Jenna perfectly described the utopic nature of the deterritorializing power that her students

engage in, which also helps to reinforce her own activism. Their "unbashful declarations of queer

love" encourages her to "shout" out her own, and their "outrage" makes her want to engage in

activism, "to fight like hell," for both she and them. This is not the Jenna that we hear from

earlier in the group sessions who is more fearful to proclaim an activist identity. She is able to

find parts of her *authentic* self in her students; parts that she has been punished for sharing at

school in the past. She is given a "boost" to fight against harmful gender scripts and is aware that

discovering identity is a process of becoming. Like the student quietly acknowledging their first

Pride, she is reminded to keep being curious, that her own identity is not solid. Indeed, she

demonstrated this in how she questions her gender expression in the previous chapter. Would she

have interrogated her gender expression had she not had this writing group and the kids who

were doing their own explorations?

Found within the vignette are the singular affective flows of "giddiness," and

"vibrations" of singing and dancing, that she and her students both feel when they are

authentically queer. This is another example of MacLure's (2013) "data that glows," as joy and

celebration are present within the memories and are felt by the listener when shared. Within this

freedom to be themselves, the affect felt leads Jenna and her students to deterritorialization, and

utopic queer moments are created within these encounters. Additionally, when these stories are shared with us, we also feel the joy that the story elicits, and a utopic moment is found within the present moment, reflecting Muñoz' position that remembering past forgotten utopias creates a utopia in the present, as well as offers potential for future utopias, as we do not know how the stories will affect the reader (p. 37). Future utopias might be realized, for example, when a new LGBTQ+ teacher may want to be out or want to support their queer students but may fear doing so. Our stories certainly demonstrate the reasons to be fearful, but like this vignette, and the ones that follow, suggest, utopic possibilities may be opened up in the life of the reader, as they explore our utopic moments.

Indeed, Adèle insisted that there is more to stories of queerness than stories of struggle. She stated,

I really like the positivity that you added in that piece where it doesn't always have to be about fighting and about defending and about preserving. It's also about celebrating. And about realizing that for the first couple of generations it's going to be a lot of defending and fighting and there is going to come a time where it will be a lot of celebrations…and we can enjoy the little [celebrations] now to re-motivate us for when we do have to defend, and I think you said… it beautifully. So, for me it was really the positivity aspect that I really enjoyed. (Adèle, Debrief Discussion, Being Seen)

I wondered if Adèle's Acadian identity and history informed her stance about celebrating queer identities because of the historic Acadian deportation from Nova Scotia and the subsequent return and rebuilding of Acadian communities within the province. I asked Adèle if this were the case and she said it was, recounting stories from her youth where she faced persecution as an Acadian,

Our school board is not very old. Our school Board was created officially in 2001…and

when we became a French school board we had to deal with a lot of things. My house got

vandalized. My house was also divided, I have a very anti-French sister, so it's a very

interesting family dynamic. We played sports and our locker rooms were trashed. We

were called 'French frogs' at every English school that we attended, and they put it

on our banners. My students don't have to deal with that, but when we share those types

of stories our students feel empowered that they don't have to deal with that anymore.

(Adèle, Discussion, Open Prompt)

Adèle offered the group an intersectional perspective where she has unfortunately experienced

discrimination both for being queer and being Acadian, the latter more so in the past. In many

Acadian communities there is now a sense of pride and a celebration of Acadian identity.

Perhaps she is right that eventually we will not have to tell deficit stories, we will not have to

fight and struggle so much to deterritorialize, and being queer will become more about

celebration! Maybe that is what is happening in queer communities now, beginning with the

onset of Pride, (originally conceptualized as activist work), and perhaps seen in recent scholarly

literature that seeks to move beyond stories of trauma within queer communities, which also

informs this very work (Fields et al., 2012, 2014; Tuck, 2009). In a later session, Adèle wrote

how things have changed and the importance of those who fought for change before her,

I see how the students I teach don't have to fight as much with the Anglophones of

the region compared to when I was a teenager, and they would vandalize our school on

their days off while we sat in class. My students don't deal with as many injustices as

we did, and I am so grateful because the pain lasts a long time. I can't wait for that day

when discovering one's identity will be just as natural as ordering their cafeteria lunch.

I'm fine with the fact that I had to deal with certain issues so that others don't,

and I am beyond thankful to those who had to deal with them before me. Thank you for

allowing me some days to breathe and now it's my turn to give some extra oxygen to the

next generation that will make this their own. I can't wait and I'm excited for them.

(Adèle, Vignette, Open Prompt)

As we think about celebration, I do think it is necessary to think about the climate and

people who came before us, who did fight battles that we no longer have to fight. Rachel picked

up this point from Adèle,

I love the idea of giving extra oxygen to the next generation and kind of taking a minute

to pause and appreciate, you know, how much progress has been made in the past 50

years and that there was a lot of hard fought ground that we've gained and, of course,

always at the awareness that human rights are fickle and to proactively protect them. I

think that's a beautiful kind of generational way to frame things that we sometimes miss

out on in the community, because we are so disparate. Obviously, we had a huge loss

during the HIV/AIDS epidemic of so many of our activists and so many of our history

keepers that sometimes that sense of historical continuity and, 'This is how you fight,'

and, 'This is what progress looks like,' — we're missing that. So, I just thought that was a

beautiful way to phrase how we conceptualize our role as queer educators, which is

creating that breathing space for the kids who need it. (Rachel, Discussion, Open Prompt)

There is something profound here. Johnson's (2015) work discusses how queer life suffers from

amnesia. Rachel addresses a possible factor contributing to this amnesia. The activism that

produced Pride was born out of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980's where predominantly gay

men were left to die by countries who cared not whether they lived. This necropolitical agenda

(Puar, 2007), along with decades of queer erasure and silence about queer identities, robbed us of our "history-keepers," creating a certain amnesia in younger queers. This erasure is also found in classrooms when Stonewall, queer activists from the Civil Rights Movement, and any type of queer history at all, are excluded from the curriculum. But the people who deterritorialized before us are necessary to remember, to counter that amnesia, because they did open this breathing space so that we could become queer activists in our communities and schools, and at best, perhaps, we will be remembered, by our students at least, as doing the same.

Thus, an important point from Adèle's discussion is that perhaps celebrating ourselves more frequently may work to shore us up for when we do have to defend ourselves and our queer students. To celebrate one's self is an act of deterritorialization when the self also has internalized territorializing discourses of deficit. Again, we can see the connection between utopia and deterritorialization, as celebrating the queer self brings the subject to joy, love and other positive affects. Adèle would write her own lovely story of fostering not only her own authentic self, but like Jenna, the authentic selves of her students. Adèle wrote:

> *I do know that my presence and my decisions about activities we explore have helped students talk openly about themselves with their peers instead of feeling ashamed and unworthy. This year, I have new students for the first time in four years and I was nervous because I didn't know what to expect. The first week of class, I always decide to do a few activities to get to know my students and to allow them to get to know me. During an activity about making a virtual locker, I asked them to decorate it with things that represented them since I was teaching them for the first time…I decorated my own virtual locker to model what I was looking for but also to introduce myself. I placed the progressive Pride flag, as well as my sports, hobbies and favorite novels. To my surprise,*

many students not only shared their flags as allies but shared with me which flag belonged to them. I was beyond moved to have been given that trust…because it was our first day together.

As a routine, I also give out a survey where they inform me of their pronouns and if they feel safe with me using them at school or to talk to their parents. I was beyond grateful that my students felt they could tell me this information…Seeing that a student wanted to identify as 'they,' I casually spoke with them about the French pronouns that were similar and if they felt an attachment to those to please use them and let me know. They decided to do so, and it has been extremely liberating for these students.

I was also asked as the 'token' to present about gender neutral language in French and I did my best, only being informed about this for a few years. Afterwards, a teacher, who is also a parent, came to me in tears to thank me for making sure their child would feel safe in every classroom and not just mine. That parent tells me often how my presence makes their child want to go to school because they know someone understands them. (Adèle, Vignette, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

Like Jenna's writing, Adèle explored how the celebration of her authentic self coincided with the celebration of her students' identities. Within this celebration, Adèle and Jenna are both engaging in a queering of their classroom space. To return to Harris & Gray (2014), the queering of a space should open up possibilities and act as "a site of permanent becoming." Thus, by introducing queer content, queer bodies (both perceived and "known") to a space, possibilities of becoming are made known to the students (p. 3). All of us engage in queering the classroom space to some degree and many of those stories would come up over the next few sessions. We

would also discuss how the queering of our classroom spaces was also activist and, therefore, deterritorializing work. Adèle offers queer possibility to her students by sharing her own queer locker and by giving the option to use gender-neutral pronouns. The utopic nature of such activist/queering work can be found in Adèle's vignette when she discussed being "beyond moved" and "beyond grateful" to have been given the trust of students who came out to her in their virtual lockers and who shared their pronouns with her. She opened up the space for her students to present a queer identity, creating a utopic feeling in herself.

However, in both her interview and her stories, Adèle frequently discussed how she does not want to be seen as a *queer token* in her school, and she expressed a dislike when other educators or the administration come to her to speak about queer topics. She does not feel as if she has all the answers herself and, therefore, feels uncomfortable about speaking on behalf of other members of the queer community. However, she still does so because she knows that this work is important to her students. Adèle also did not consider herself a queer activist throughout most of our session and identified as more of a cultural activist, but this would change for Adèle towards the end of our sessions together. Perhaps her dislike with being that *token* queer teacher changed as she reframed herself as an activist educator. In a later discussion Adèle talked about how the teachers in the school have embraced French gender-neutral pronouns, for example, 'iel,' (pronounced 'yell'), rather than 'il' or 'elle'. She wrote how they have incorporated this into the school and even into report card comments,

> The high school teachers have been really making an effort to use these neutral terms for the students that do use the pronouns 'they/them.' And even in report card comments we make our comments together and are like, 'Can you just read this over to make sure I did this properly, because I don't want to offend the student.' … Unfortunately, it always

comes my way, but they only came to ask me once. For the second report card, they did it

on their own… They really took the time to learn it properly the first time, and I was

really pleased. And they use it in the hallways, they use it verbally, it's really become

normal. (Adèle, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

This recognition of gender neutral language by her colleagues is again utopic for Adèle as she

knows that her presence in the school produces queer deterritorializations. She still feels the

burden of the teachers approaching her for guidance, but in the end is "very pleased" that they

seemed to learn how to use these pronouns the first time, as well as undoubtedly pleased that

they are, indeed, using this language and that it has become normalized within the school

environment.

Adèle also shared how making her classroom a safe space for discussion about queer

topics, or queering her classroom space, has created an environment where open dialogue among

her students occurs. An example is as follows:

A student showed me this calendar from 2020 about [how] each day… is dedicated to a

different orientation or gender identity in Pride month. And he shared it with the class

and said, 'Oh, Madame, you should really look at this!' …And another student, who was

an ally, turned around and said to him, 'Oh, so which day is your day?' And he felt free

to [tell the other] classmate… Then he said, 'Oh and by the way, I have another day too.'

… And the classmate said, 'Oh that's tomorrow! We're going to celebrate this person

tomorrow.' And so, there are 20 flags coming to my classroom…we've been ordering

them, the school is getting all of them, and the school is on board for putting them out,

putting a pole outside and everything. (Adèle, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

This vignette is chock full of deterritorialization, activism, and utopia! The heteronormative classroom is deterritorialized as students openly name their queer selves and celebrate each other. Adèle laughed gleefully when sharing about how a student talked about "celebrating" another student on "their" day, and again when discussing the various queer flags that will be arriving. These are utopic and disruptive queer moments that bring Adèle joy. However, it must also be noted that out of all of us, the walls at Adèle's school —the administration, parents, district and community —all *seemed* to be less territorializing than is the case for the rest of us, who might struggle when having these kinds of open conversations with students. There is a sense that Adèle is seen as part of the Acadian community first, and therefore, is granted some protections as a member of the queer community. In the interview, Adèle discussed her connections to the Acadian community, "I am someone who is from French descendants, so for a long time I actively participated in developing that community first…I volunteered my whole life, and I still do, to develop that community." (Adèle, Interview) This aligns with Gray's (2009) notion of the rural space, in particular, as offering a protective factor for queer people who are viewed as community members first, which usually ensures at least some acceptance regarding their queer identities. This may be especially true for someone who is part of a larger community in the rural that has been historically marginalized, which may offer an even greater protective factor as community members tend to support and look after each other.

Within this discussion of celebrating the work we do in classrooms we also began to discuss feeling validated by parents. This was an important conversation to have given the many territorializing experiences with parents we conveyed previously. We all do have positive stories with parents and community members who are grateful for the deterritorializing work we do to make some space for their children in our schools. After Adèle's first vignette about the parent

who was grateful that their child was in Adèle's class, Jenna responded that she was moved by the parent interaction in Adèle's story. With much emotion in her voice she said, "I got teary-eyed towards the end because I don't know why the validation of parents means so much to me. If a parent validates what I've done, it just goes so far beyond my expectations." (Jenna, Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves) Of course, this validation means so much to Jenna given the negative experiences she has had with parents. She is "teary-eyed" because there is a utopic longing to have more uplifting interactions with parents. However, Jenna did recount positive experiences with parents and community as well, "I've had very positive responses from families too, of course. Many families have been lovely and supportive and wonderful. It's just, the ones that aren't kind of stick more closely." (Jenna, Interview) Jenna's ex wife was also a staff member in the school and known to the community and she said some families had been very welcoming, inviting them both to their homes for tea, or "it's the little things, right? It's like when you go to a music concert with your partner, and they're like, 'Come sit with us.' It's more those little accepting moments." (Jenna, Interview) Bera also remembered moments where parents have been wonderful, "There are families who make a point of going to the principal and saying, 'My kid's in that teacher's [Bera's] room!' (Bera, Interview) Bera also described an encounter with a parent at a "Meet the Teacher" event that was very fulfilling,

> When they came with their child, the mother made a point of reminding the kid, 'This is Mx Z, not Mr. Z, Mx Z, make sure you use the right honorific.' I was like, 'Wowww!' That was just, that was just so cool, you know?' (Bera, Interview)

These are both utopic moments for Bera. The utopia can be found in the fulfilling encounter at "Meet the Teacher" where Bera's queerness is acknowledged and also in the singular affect attached to the expression, "Wowww!" that Bera used to describe how they felt when the parent

validated their honorific. Bera explored this validation further in their vignettes for our celebration/authentic self prompt. Bera wrote two vignettes, one that discussed how their partner helped validate their queerness, which was previously shared, and the second about an interaction with parents in their community. The second is as follows,

> *A couple of teachers moved in down the street from us last year. One of their daughters is in my school and we've chatted a few times walking to or from the building. I had worked with her mom and talked with the father at a professional development. Today I ran into her again. She called out to me and brightly, cheerfully wished me a 'Happy Pride!' I instinctively said, 'Happy Pride!' back before my filters could kick in, and she beamed. Turns out her mom had suggested that she wish me a Happy Pride, likely in response to a letter that a friend and I sent to local papers on behalf of our local Pride group. I don't care why. I was seen. Pride, right here in this community, for me as a queer person, was affirmed today in a totally unexpected and very joyful way.* (Bera, Vignette, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

This vignette demonstrates Bera's activist work within the community. They may not be able to be as vocal in their school, but they certainly are within their community with the Pride Association. Bera would send me a video after the study ended where they were on a local news outlet discussing how the Pride group brought a queer art display to their hometown, which was then housed at the local police station. They also included a radio interview with the CBC where they were discussing harmful provincial legislation that would have dire effects on queer people. They have more freedom to be themselves out in the community. In fact, outside of the school walls, the child's greeting of "Happy Pride" elicited an "instinctual" greeting from Bera, one that is free from any filter (a territorialization) imposed upon them from school structures. The utopia

within this deterritorializing moment is when Bera felt *seen.* This is yet another nod to the becomings in our group as Bera wrote this after our *On Being Seen* session, combining the feeling of *being seen* when their *authentic* self felt *celebrated.* They said that Pride was affirmed for them, but I would suggest that it was not only Pride but that it was their authentic self that was "affirmed in a totally unexpected and joyful way."

This is another example of MacLure's (201) data that glows, where the affect of the encounter is felt by the storyteller and also by those of us in the group. And we did feel this joyful affect; something that was commented on by group members. Responding to Bera's vignettes, Jenna exclaimed, "I love it! I love it! I love it! I love it. More stories! I love it. It nourishes me." We all expressed how validating this session felt for us: Rachel said, give me "more stories." Adèle appreciated the positive stories that were being told. It felt celebratory perhaps because the prompt was celebratory. I do firmly believe that this is what happens when you set up the encounter to tell stories that move beyond trauma and struggle; the celebration of our selves become acts of deterritorialization. The nature of doing this work collectively is that we also encouraged each other into celebration. In hearing from each other, we became aware of the many aspects of our queer identities that are worth celebrating and the reasons why we should do so**.** These realizations may not have been as available to individual group members if they were doing this study in queerness on their own.

In our debrief session for the "celebration/authentic selves" prompt, there continued to more stories about how Pride was manifesting in schools. These vignettes are worth discussing to point out the possibilities of Pride activities within schools. Jenna responded to Bera's vignette above by recounting how some of the students and a fellow teacher also wished her "Happy Pride" in the school parking lot. Jenna and Rachel's district were actually holding a Pride week

in all of their schools which likely helped usher in these greetings and Jenna recognized how validating this felt. In her debrief vignette, Jenna expanded upon feeling validated by the Pride activities that were occurring. She wrote,

> It is Pride week this week at the school, and I have yet to have fully processed the magnitude of everything, but it is one of the first weeks I can remember that the queer me and the teacher me coexisted without anxiety. This year at school I became the lead for the GSA group. We have a small but very mighty crew of young adults. In those meetings it sometimes feels like it is more a queer theory circle than a social gathering. They are young, wise and woke on many marginalized communities and it is a joy to be around them.

> My school board this year announced a Pride Week in June to 'Educate and Celebrate.' I can't quite put my finger on it but them putting it out there has really allowed me to feel safer and more secure organizing and participating in activities… We have focused on the LGBTQ+ [community] and two colors of the rainbow each day …I have been holding my breath slightly throughout the week waiting for the backlash about highlighting and celebrating queer Nova Scotian kids and staff. I expected minimal participation. The turnout and support have blown me away. We have painted the crosswalk, discussed terminology, had a Pride Stride from PP-12, did trivia, coloring contests, made flags, created displays, tweeted pictures and read "George" to all the Grade 5's.

> I participated in a film and video project of one of my queer students this year about coming out and I got the final product back this week. It featured me and other students from the school sharing their stories. This school, this year and this week has

changed me. I have come out a little stronger, braver and happier with who I am. (Jenna,

Debrief, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

There is much to deconstruct in this joyful vignette. To begin, Jenna started out by re-addressing

our discussion about professionalism and how this mandated Pride week created the conditions

for her queer self and teacher self to "coexist without anxiety." The district deserves credit here

for providing a space where queerness is *celebrated* and education about queerness is expected in

each school. This effectively reduces territorialization and the height of those walls that queer

educators and students encounter. Of course, it does not remove those barriers because one does

not know how the school climate and district may change after the week is complete. For

example, does it just return to "business as usual?" Does the district receive complaints from

parents/community members? Is there any pushback from teaching staff and administrators?

Will the same district staff be present in subsequent years? — questions which will inform

whether the district will decide to hold such a week again. Even Jenna is aware of the tentative

nature of such deterritorialization as she said she was "holding my breath slightly" and waiting

for possible backlash. Adèle also pointed this out in her response when she said the following,

> The funny piece is that I really want to go work at your school now, but I found it was
>
> really interesting that there was all that positive happening, and you did feel that safety,
>
> but yet you still felt the worry of, 'Oh my gosh, is someone going to say something to
>
> ruin this? Like, is there going to be a crack in this happy moment?' And I just wonder if
>
> your colleagues felt that same worry, since it was something that they would have had to
>
> talk about as well, but you had to feel that because you're like a token in the school, and
>
> you have to feel this guilt all the time. (Adèle, Debrief Discussion, Celebration/Authentic
>
> Selves)

Adèle makes a valid point that with any kind of deterritorialization, there is always the risk of reterritorialization, as Gray (2009) points out in her study of rural queer communities. Returning to Gray, one may attempt to deterritorialize the space, such as when a queer community member places a rainbow sticker on their vehicle, but at any time they may become a target for such an action, which may result in their reterritorialization. Jenna knows this reterritorialization well as she experienced much pushback to her activism when she worked with Rachel.

However, there is a clear change in Jenna from our initial interview and discussion about her experiences with Rachel, where she explained how she needed the time to pull back from queer activist work in order to heal from the trauma of reterritorialization that she faced. Moving to a school that she felt more supported in was the first step in her healing. This support led Jenna back to the GSA. She described in her vignette how the Pride week enabled this active GSA to create so many wonderful educational (and queering) activities to assist in deterritorializing the heteronormative school space. Additionally, she spoke about participating in a video that one of her students created where she and other students shared their coming out stories. Jenna sent me this moving video when our study had finished. In this video, Jenna talked about when she first knew that she was queer and her coming out story, how she came out to her family and then how she came out to her students in the first school she taught in. She discussed how she comes out at the beginning of every school year because she does not want it to be a big "scandal," and also about meeting other activist, loud and proud queers (Rachel?), and how she found out it was possible to be this way. She then discussed maneuvering between those who were fine with her being gay, married, and quiet but not when she was open about who she was. She described how she includes queer topics in lesson plans and in the classroom. She talked about becomings in this piece, as well, and coming to terms with who she is and the labels that

work for her, noting that queer is the only label that she's comfortable with, and saying how this label most incapsulates her sexuality and gender. Jenna's honesty within this video moved me because she sent it to me when our sessions had ended, and it was a wonderful conclusion (although we know there are no conclusions and only becomings) in the map of her story throughout our writing group. At the time of our first interview, the repercussions from her experiences at the school with Rachel caused her to pull back and avoid any kind of activist work, until slowly through our discussion group, her voice became stronger, culminating in the celebration of herself and her students over her Pride week activities and ending in this celebratory and deterritorializing video of her authentic identity. I followed up with Jenna in an email correspondence, asking her when she made the video and if she felt she was influenced by our writing group. She replied, "The video came while we had been working together. I think my responses were more open and honest because of the work we were doing in the group." (Jenna, email correspondence) The reader may also recognize many themes in the video that have also been explored in previous vignettes and discussion! Jenna really is an activist. She participated in this documentary which is really brave as an educator in the school. She felt more celebratory of herself and more *authentic* after our sessions together, we all did. This is joy. It is utopia found in celebrating her queer voice and in helping her students find their own.

To return to Jenna's Pride week vignette, Bera aptly noted how it is important that the Pride week was supported by the district. They stated,

> The piece about the division statement…really kind of struck me, partly because I can't ever imagine my division actually doing something like that. But no, it completely makes sense to me that, having the division say, 'This is Pride week.' I mean, regardless of what happens, it makes perfect sense to me that that would give you a level of security,

a level of comfort, that you wouldn't have had otherwise. I mean it's one thing for

individual teachers to do that, for schools to do that, but for that division to say, 'This is

what we do as a division,' that is a big deal, and I mean, I think that's part of why you

 saw the turnout you did, and so on, because you know any kid who is kind of wondering,

'Okay, yeah, but the division said this is okay,' you know, and I think that's a huge, huge

piece. So, I mean, 'Yay! Yay for you!' I'm glad that you've got that. That's wonderful.

(Bera, Debrief Discussion, Celebration/Validation)

Importantly, Bera cannot imagine their division holding such a week. Adèle's district is also not

participating in a Pride week, nor was the board that I was substituting in, but there were Pride

events scheduled in one of my schools which I wrote about for my vignette. This is important to

note because it is very clear from the interviews and discussion group that conditions for queer

teachers and students vary by location, district and province. Bera said that district support is

important because it sends a message to the students that validates queer identities and education,

but it also sends a similar message to parents and community members and does serve to take

pressure off principals and staff members who are allies and can forward any parent or

community concerns off to the district for discussion. Bera commented how this is a very

important piece in deterritorializing heteronormative schools and Rachel echoed how this year

felt very different for her compared to other years because,

…all schools are participating in this, and now you figure out what that looks like on site,

but at minimum, everyone's flying the Pride flag and here are the resources… It just

makes me feel hopeful because I would not have guessed that was possible a few years

ago. I wouldn't have anticipated that. So Yayyyy! (Rachel, Debrief Discussion,

Celebration/Validation)

I have left these exclamations of |"Yay!" in our discussion because Renold and Ivinson, in their *Horse-girl assemblages: towards a post-human cartography of girls' desire in an ex-mining valleys community* (2014) study state that "scattered throughout girls' accounts of horses and riding were gestures, sighs, throwaway comments and expressions that hinted at feelings of liberation." (p. 369) They continue that some of these moments manifest in the transcript in remembered moments that seemed to suggest a line of flight, such as the exhilaration expressed when jumping on a horse and taking off, exclaimed in a "YAR" (YEAH!) at the end of the sentence (p. 371). Rachel uses "Yayyyy!" because she is hopeful that perhaps real structural change is occurring — a deterritorialization. Similarly, Bera exclaimed, "Yay! Yay For you!" when hearing about the deterritorializing potential of districts offering a Pride week. Adèle said, "Yeah, Look at that teacher! She's so pretty in those pictures," her own deterritorialization of self from an expectation of how she should dress at work. As MacLure said, these expressions should also be analyzed in new materialist data analysis that is interested in deterritorializations!

Celebrating our "Monster" Selves

In her last response to Bera, Rachel conveyed how hopeful she was that the district actually had a Pride week. There is a sense of progress occurring here, and, perhaps, a sense of hope that she will be more supported in the future. Like Jenna, there are many becomings that happened for Rachel from the initial interview and through the progression of the writing group. She moved from a place of real despondency about how she was treated in two schools, where she was effectively silenced about her queerness and how she addressed queer topics, and then moved out of the schools in both cases, to feeling a sense of hope in her new school and a sense of empowerment as she reflected upon the queering work that she does in her classroom and how this affects her students. I will now combine two vignettes of Rachel's in which she discussed

how she affects the students in her room. The first is a vignette from our session on *Belonging in Schools*. The following describes how she does create belonging for her students. She wrote:

> *Schools are artificial communities: children from a set geographical boundary and of a specific age are brought together in disparate groups, lumped with adults whose primary job, I believe, is to create belonging…And I'm good at it. I'm good at making belonging, building that sense of community moment-by-moment until it's like a fabric you can see draped over our classroom. I hang it like bunting between fluorescent lights. It sings like chimes in the air. It feels like home when I get it right— and I often do. I like to say that connecting with kids is my superpower, but really, it's creating belonging.*
>
> *I created belonging when I grew a middle level GSA from a fleeting idea to a thriving, excited group burbling over with anticipation for our lunch meetings. I fostered it when students would write in their weekly writing prompt journals, which would end up in a tottering stack on my desk, awaiting my replies— an option that nearly every child selected. I built it from little matchstick moments, recess and lunchtime conversations — a national Judo champion crying during lunch because he was in love for the first time and it felt scary; an earnest heart-to-heart about how frightening it is to stand on the precipice of adulthood and not know how to take that first big step; so many coming out stories that were met with excitement and joy; a sheaf of emails from students just this week who are struggling so desperately with distance learning and a sudden loss — who are so willing to be vulnerable with me, even after only two months together.*
>
> *I'm good at making belonging. Because when those students enter my classroom, and although we're from different places and different lives, they become mine — and I make them believe it. They belong in our space… I take care of the trust they place in me.*

I treat it like porcelain, and I try my best to protect it from the upheavals of the world…

(Rachel, Vignette, Belonging in Schools)

For Rachel, there is utopia in creating belonging for her students. She characterizes making these connections as her superpower as she is able to create a community within the institutional walls of the school; a fabric (rainbowed) that she creates and hangs from the harsh fluorescent lights, that is reminiscent of a celebration, a birthday or a wedding, that feels like home, and that, perhaps, makes the school feel like a home for her students. Rachel undoubtedly creates this belonging for all of her students, but she is particularly proud of the belonging that she creates for her queer students, evidenced by the excitement felt by her GSA students and the exclamations of joy that she felt when her students come out to her. She wants to create this belonging because she does not belong as a teacher within the same school system as her students, and so she strives to recognize the porcelain in all of her students. Rachel continued,

And so onwards I go to the next *school where I have and I will stitch together belonging for my kids — particularly for the ones nearest and dearest to my heart: the freaks, geeks, and rejects, the queer weirdos, the misfits with soft hearts in need of protecting — all while hoping, desperately, that someone will make a place for me… Maybe they'll hold space for the porcelain inside of me. Maybe this time, I will actually, finally belong*

(Rachel, Vignette, Belonging in Schools.)

Rachel ended this vignette by noting how she felt sadness about her experiences of not belonging and there was emotion in her voice. I was also quite emotional after this vignette and the subsequent discussion that occurred because group members attempted to support Rachel and make her feel better. I will relay parts of this discussion now to exemplify what this support looked like. To begin, Adèle said,

I think there's something to be said, though, about the way children do feel comfortable

coming to us as teachers when they do find that link between us and them. And that they

always run to you to tell you everything about their queerness, because they know

that you understand them, even though you don't understand every… well I don't

understand everything about queerness, but I am there to listen, and that's all that they

really want…And then you feel, like you said, you want to protect them, and you do stuff

to burden yourself, or to go out of your way, to make sure they don't feel the same

burdens in life that you felt growing up. That's what it made me think of when you were

speaking. (Adèle, Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

Adèle helped confirm for Rachel that the children do benefit from Rachel's efforts to create

belonging in her classroom because they do seek her out to talk about queer topics.

Jenna then followed up with this beautifully affirming sentence that moved me, "I really

hope that this new place just sees your super porcelain and just loves it and just cherishes and

supports it." (Jenna, Discussion, Belonging in Schools) I then told the group that I was feeling

very moved by this discussion and the friendship between Jenna and Rachel. I stated,

I feel really emotional right now. I love your allyship together; I have to say that. And

the idea that you foster belonging when you don't belong. I think that's powerful. And I

also think it's so important that you are celebrating yourself, you're celebrating how good

you are with those kids, right? And you might not belong in the system that we're in,

according to the people who are in charge of the system, but you belong in the eyes of

those kids, Rachel. (Renny, Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

To which Jenna replied, "Trust me, from somebody that has seen it, she is literally the best. I was glad when she was like, 'And I do it great!' 'You do it the best!'" (Jenna, Discussion, Belonging in Schools)

 I wanted to include this entire dialogue because it exemplifies how even within the stories of trauma, there were openings into utopia. Rachel demonstrated this by writing about how she does not belong but that she still fosters belonging; an action that is queerly utopic and deterritorializing for Rachel. Additionally, the ways that we supported each other when we recounted such territorializing stories and the emotions that were often attached to them, is also exemplified in this dialogue. We were all celebrating Rachel here, reminding her how important her contributions are for her students, reminding her that she does belong in the eyes of her students, especially, I would suggest, in the eyes of those students who are the "freaks, geeks, and rejects, the queer weirdos, the misfits with soft hearts in need of protecting," who do, perhaps, understand that she belongs to the same "queer weirdo" club as them.

This brings me quite naturally to Rachel's debrief vignette that she wrote for our *celebration/authentic self* prompt, where she continued discussing the utopic and deterritorializing work she does in her classroom. Rachel wrote,

> *I'm sitting in my classroom… Next to me is an inclusive pride flag, an illustration of*
>
> *Marsha P Johnson, a QR code students can scan to access queer educational materials, a*
>
> *picture of my wife and I walking down the stairs of city hall, signed marriage papers in*
>
> *hand and beaming with joy. A unicorn figurine sits on my desk, a small mason jar with*
>
> *flowers from my garden perched on the corner. My lanyard always dangles out of*
>
> *my pocket, a little stripe of rainbow swishing as I walk through this building.*

The idea of queer educators as a positive disruptive force has been at the forefront of my mind. We've been referred to as lightning rods, trouble-makers. We're riddled with bias. We're political through our very existence.

I've also been thinking a lot about the monstrous, the idea of the 'other' haunting the status quo. When I was in university, I was incredibly interested in monsters: how a society's spectres, its zombies and demons, tell us a lot about what is feared… and who is feared. Think of any horror film, how the monster crosses boundaries and thresholds, how it always returns – it is fundamentally unkillable, always coming back, always present. Indelible and impossible to pin down. Impossible to escape.

What an incredible power to be given. Imagine – to be so frightening through the immensity of our passion, the enthusiasm with which we fight for justice, the certainty with which we proclaim ourselves? To make them quake through merely being.

I remember sitting at parent-teacher and having a mother tell me that her husband was so angry that I'd talked about queer identities in my classroom, that he'd decided not to come, that he wasn't sure he would be able to control himself.

Because I spoke who we are into existence. Because I made the ghost visible. Because I stood up and said, I am the thing that you fear, and that won't stop me. Because I corralled the little monsters in my middle level together and made them feel safe. Because I made my classroom a space for all of them, warts and bat wings, fangs and fury.

There's something deliciously transgressive about the idea of embracing the monstrous. Of disrupting the status quo – because silence serves the status quo, and it needs to be disrupted. Broken. Remade.

> *One person's monster is another person's hero, their knight in*
>
> *shining armour who can sometimes also be a dragon from time-to-time.* (Debrief,
>
> Celebration/Validation)

Dissecting this vignette, Rachel began by writing about how she queers her classroom space through educational materials, posters, the Pride flag, but also by her personal wedding photograph and her rainbow lanyard. Interestingly, the flowers planted and subsequently picked from her own garden takes on an imperceptible queerness. In the *Our Community Stories* chapters, Rachel conveyed how gardening and the home space is also an important aspect of her queerness, as part of the deterritorializing work that she does within the community can be found in her subversion of gender norms as she works her land, a task traditionally left to the rural menfolk, of course. Her garden space (and surrounding property), which she shares with her wife, also serves as a protective and utopic abode that offers distance from the pervasive heteronormativity that is all around her.

Additionally, I surmise it was from the conversations that we had up to this point about celebrating the queer self that brought Rachel to the idea of queer educators as a *positive* disruptive force. Rachel was able to recharacterize herself and the rest of us, to deterritorialize herself and us, by rejecting the notion that we are somehow "lightning rods" or "troublemakers." However, then Rachel began to think about the "other" as monstrous. Her monster metaphor works perfectly well to demonstrate how society views queer people, how we are feared; the *phobia* in queerphobia. One can put this metaphor in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari as well. Society always attempts to kill the monster, or at the very least to contain it, always with the intent to territorialize it, but as Rachel wrote, the monster can cross "boundaries and thresholds," it can move beyond territorialization, where it is "impossible to pin down," it's

almost *imperceptible*, and in this way, it is deterritorialized and this is where the monster gets its power. I did not speak about Deleuze and Guattari and their theories in the discussion group and therefore this analogy came as a surprise. It is the power that the monster has that Rachel is celebrating in this vignette, that even though she is constantly faced with territorialization, it will not stop her from deterritorializing her classroom space, and from "corralling the little monsters in her room," another reference to the queer students who she supports in her classroom. She speaks about disruption here, of disrupting the status quo. This conversation would again bring Bera to a new way of conceptualizing queerness. In replying to Rachel, they said,

> Your last comment about the dragon reminds me of a comic I saw recently. There's, you know, the princess, the dragon, and the knight in shining armour [exclaiming], 'I will rescue you!' and the next frame the dragon and the knight are flying off leaving the princess behind. You know, kind of turning it on its head, I love that one. That idea of embracing the monster, in the sense of, 'I am the thing you fear,' and turning that right on its head. There's an empowering piece to that. It's because we're seen as monstrous by so many people, but the idea of embracing that... Yeah, I haven't really come at it that way before, so you gave me some stuff to chew on. Thank you. (Bera, Discussion, Open Prompt)

Bera was brought to a place of empowerment through the knowledge that the "monstrous" can be embraced and even celebrated. Perhaps, this was a reminder to them about how they also affect the students in their room. Bera recognized in their interview that they also queered such stories in their classroom. Bera told me that although they cannot discuss their pronouns that they do "poke at this" in class, as I previously mentioned. They said,

> I'm a storyteller…I tend to use a lot of folk tales, fairy tales. I've done things where I've flipped the gender of the main characters or actually, I've got a few where I …left out all gender references entirely. (Bera, Interview)

They continued that some students really enjoy this while other students *need* to know what the gender of the character is. They said,

> particularly when I do things like either not identifying gender or take ones that have traditionally been male main characters and I flip them and have them female, some of the girls in my class have really appreciated that because in so many folk tales and fairy tales, the protagonist, 'the hero' is always male. (Bera, Interview)

These are further examples of how Bera is able to deterritorialize their classroom space even though they are not allowed to speak about their gender identity.

This discussion about heroes brought me on a line of flight to the literature. Rachel's statement that, "one person's monster is another person's hero," along with her reference to how creating belonging is her "superpower," does lead me to interrogate whether it is problematic to position oneself within a "hero" discourse, and what are the criticisms of looking at deterritorializing activist work as heroic? Goldstein (2005) writes that when teachers position themselves as heroic or a "superhero" they may then attempt to become "super-teachers," which may encourage them to go above and beyond excessively, resulting in eventual burnout. They can also think of themselves as "savior teachers" which can be problematic if they think they are going to "save" their students who may have less advantages than they do (p. 12). This can lead to a "savior complex," which, if the teacher is white, has a particular history of racism attached to it. However, Goldstein also explored how typical hero imagery throughout historical storying involved straight males, and as Bera acknowledged, a queer reclaiming of such a notion might be

what the term needs (p. 21). I think what is key here is that Rachel positions herself as both the monstruous and the heroic; they exist at the same time. It is not self-aggrandizing to position oneself as heroic when the hero is also a monster. The dragon and the knight in shining armour are the same, and the monstruous is embraced, and within this there is self-love for our queerness and there is utopia. An embraced monster-hero identity can become a form of protection against a society that would proclaim the queer as monstruous, a protectionism that Rachel extends to her students, her "little monsters," as she seeks to shield both herself and her students from the territorializing status quo (perhaps creating a *sideways* community in the school for she and her queer students!)

There is also an interesting parallel here to the pop artist Lady Gaga and her fanbase which she has named "Little Monsters." Click, Lee & Willson Holladay (2013) discuss how Gaga's reworking of the monster trope allowed her fans to stand in solidarity with her to embrace their "monster" selves and difference within mainstream society (p. 360). Gaga herself, known by fans as "Mother Monster," becomes a hero/monster and instills this within her fanbase. She tells her fans to explore their identities, to not hate who they are: "Her messages about appearance, gender, and sexuality have struck a chord with fans, who identify with her history of being bullied in school for being different." (p. 361) Click, Lee & Willson Holladay state that "scholarship on monsters and the monstrous reveals that monsters tend to transgress social norms…giving necessary context for understanding how and why fans have rearticulated "monster" as a term of unity and pride." (p. 365) Gaga has a large queer fanbase who, as a result of Gaga's advocacy and support for the queer community, have found solidarity and pride together in their monstruous queer identity. Indeed, the creation of this little "monster" community, in a sideways world, sounds very much like the queer world making that Rachel also

discussed creating in her D&D group with her own monstrous kin of 7.5-foot-tall goliaths and green-skinned queers. Like turning the *lightning rod* into *lightning* there is the possibility for deterritorializations to occur with the reclamation and reframing of such identifiers that are meant to stifle us**.**

To conclude, this chapter focused on stories where group members felt celebrated in schools and those utopic queer moments where they could be their *authentic* selves. Often times, these moments of celebration co-existed with the celebratory moments of queer students in the classroom. All group members celebrate their own identities when they recognize the positive affects they have on their students! This assists us all to move out of the mire that is *professionalism* and to view our professional selves as "assets" in our districts. Telling these celebratory stories does help us counter the negative stories we are told, and have told, about ourselves. Returning to my original premise that these joyful stories may interrupt queer research that overwhelmingly depicts narrative of suffering. Reimers (2020) writes,

> The outcomes of all research are delimited by how we construct the problems we want to explore and by the questions we ask. Considering this, it is apparent that for more than three decades…research on LGBTQ teachers has repeatedly focused on questions about limitations for LGBTQ teachers in schools. (p 112)

The three chapters preceding this one clearly show the importance of telling stories that are territorializing, but had I not asked group members to write to this specific prompt then I may not have received these wonderful stories. This is something researchers must consider when conducting research with queer participants. They may need to further investigate their own biases about what the queer experience is, or if they are queer researchers, they may need to ask themselves whether their own trauma has subconsciously informed the kind of data they are

looking for and the questions they ask. Collective trauma stories can validate one's own experiences, but, perhaps, researchers need to be aware before they conduct research with queer participants that their findings become part of a larger discourse, and to reflect upon what their research does to reinforce or challenge this discourse.

Chapter 15: Celebrating Myself. Thinking about Outness and Imperceptibility: An

Agential Cut

Thinking of the celebration stories led me to reflect upon those educators in the closet who cannot or do not want to be out to their students. This would become a large theme for me as I would grapple with how a queer educator might celebrate themselves if they were in the closet, or if they chose or were forced to be *imperceptible*. In this chapter, I explore some of the vignettes I wrote, along with a discussion that I had with the group in which I explored my own experiences of "outness" in schools. I have included these stories in its own chapter for two reasons. First, my experience and thoughts on being out were different from other group members, and many of the stories I told around Pride grappled with what it meant to be out or not in schools. Second, in the previous chapter I noted how group members had changed as the focus groups progressed. In this section, I more closely map my own becomings as the *celebration* stories would have me interrogate my thoughts about being out in the classroom.

This section is a small "agential cut" (Barad, 2006) into the research assemblage that would inform my own stories. Taylor (2013) provides a succinct summary of Barad's agential cut:

> an analytic practice which both separates out 'something' – an object, practice, person – for analysis from the ongoing flow of spacetimemattering, but which at the same time as separating and excluding, entangles us ontologically with/in and as the phenomena produced by the cut we make. (p. 692)

Within this cut, I can analyze and reflect upon my own assemblage, while also demonstrating how the group intra-action led me towards lines of flights and new becomings, as I put our discussions in conversation with what I was experiencing and remembering. This is also part of a

diffractive analysis because my philosophy to not be out with my students was different than my group members. Thus, in this section I reflect upon my own personal assemblage of leaving the university setting to return to my rural home due to Covid-19, returning to substitute in the schools after a four-year absence, the collective writing group, and Pride month; all of which led me to revisit my thoughts around being out in the classroom. My initial re-evaluation began when I listened to my participants discuss the deterritorializing and celebratory power of being out to their students, forcing me to revisit how I typically do not discuss my sexuality or gender identity with students; something that I had addressed in my masters autoethnography and imagined I had resolved.[25] The stories of re/territorialization that we have told up until now elucidate many reasons why an educator may not feel they can be out with their students. Some of these reasons include: job security, pushback from parents and the community, difficult relationships with administration, being told that one is not *allowed* to be out, etc. Something that we had not discussed were those queer educators who did not want to proclaim an identity to their students. Halberstam (2005) writes that not being out can be a "deliberate misrecognition": a purposeful attempt to disrupt the norms, rather than solidify an identity. This is where I was five years ago when I was last in the classroom. I never felt that I had to share this aspect of my life with my students, and I liked the idea of being "deliberately misrecognized." As I read the work of Lucas Crawford (2008) who utilizes Deleuze and Guattari's notion of imperceptibility, I realized that I could also apply the notion of imperceptibility to my own outness. To remind, imperceptibility is about not proclaiming any identity. It is when an individual might register as "different", or as "queer", and yet, not necessarily be out or visible. Imperceptibility is different

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[25] This is also another rhizomatic example of how life writing is never "finished."

from binary notions of in/out of the closet. An identity may not be proclaimed but this does not mean that the teacher is not *recognized* as queer or that they do not queer their classrooms. Acknowledging this disrupts the hierarchy of the binary where the out educator can be thought of as more self-actualized, as a role model, even as a "hero" perhaps, while the teacher who is not out may be looked upon as not living up to their teacher role, or as suffering in silence (Connell, 2012; Ferfolja, 2014; Harris & Jones, 2014; Whitlock, 2007). Thus, I ask the following questions: What does the imperceptible queer teacher look like? How does an imperceptible teacher deterritorialize their spaces if they are not "out" and "proud?"

To answer these questions, one can look at the group members. Rachel, Adèle and Jenna all talk about the positive work they have done through being out and supporting queer students, whereas I would argue that Bera and myself are more imperceptible, not nameable, but that we do still queer the classroom through our very presence and the content we bring into the room. After analysis of the professionalism stories, I would also suggest that for all of us our gender identity is imperceptible, as we all transgress gender norms in some ways. However, Adèle, Rachel and Jenna are often assumed to be cisgender when this may not be the case or is still a process of discovery.

It is the amazing deterritorializing work that my out group members share that makes me start to question my stance on being out. The storying and discussion about how the educators in the group queer their classroom and support their queer students brought me to disclose to them that I have not been out with my students in the public school system. I disclosed this to the group in our *Belonging in Schools* session. In my field notes I wrote that when I told my participants this, I sounded shaky and was nervous, something I didn't expect. I wrote,

This business about not being out to students is very unsettling for me. I don't think this should be something I should have to defend, and I think I can support my reasoning with scholarly literature for not proclaiming an identity… but I also wonder if it's just plain fear. Maybe I would come out now. I hate feeling shame around not coming out. I hate when queer people feel shame in general. I did feel it last night, not from my group members, but from myself. It felt heavy and that I was too vulnerable. I think I'll turn this into a vignette. (Renny, Field Note)

And so, for our next session, I wrote and shared the following,

I continue to reflect upon all of the work I have done within the district and my own classroom to advocate for queer and all minoritized youth. I ran or participated in the GSA whenever I was in a school that had one; Pride flags and gender-affirming posters were in my classrooms; I interrogated gender roles and norms in my history and English classes; and students knew not to use derogatory terms in my room. Yet, I didn't come out to them, and no student ever asked, although some did come out to me.

Honestly, I felt like I never had to come out, and part of me still feels that way. Some moments I may feel like I want to exclaim my queerness. Other moments I want to walk in and let my presentation speak for itself. I feel there is power in this. I don't think of this as 'hiding.' I think a guy wearing the flower shirt and scarf and exuding femme stands out in a rural classroom in a sea of camo and green work boots! (Added — that's a little facetious). I don't feel the need to exclaim an identity, some scholars suggest I shouldn't anyway, but I will always defend and advocate for queer people.

Is this enough? Do the ghosts of the closet in the 80's and 90's keep me from being as visible as I might be? Has not being 'out' in the classroom shielded me from

backlash from parents, and has this led to my sense of belonging in rural schools? Lastly,

should I feel shame about this, because I do? Haven't we internalized enough shame?

There is always work for the queer to do, to free oneself from a tightly wound web of

shame. (Renny, Vignette, On Being Seen)

However, I also wrote a second vignette for this session where I would begin to question my

stance on this subject, and I also shared this vignette to speak back to what I had written above.

This second vignette was informed by what I was now seeing in the schools I was substituting in,

I've been out of the school for a few years now but due to the Covid-19 pandemic

I returned to my hometown and decided that I should put my name on the substitute list.

There have been some changes since 2016. I couldn't help but smile when I saw Pride

posters and the pride and trans flag hanging in the school common areas. I know they do

not show a complete picture, that they can be symbols of diversity that are just that,

symbolic but not actual representation of queer acceptance.

However, in one class a group of students were sitting near the front wearing

board GSA clothing and I thought, 'How wonderful!' As I walked by, one of the students

said to me, 'I'm wondering what your pronouns are? I can't really tell by looking at

you!' I said to the student, 'It's he/him, and thank you so much for asking me!' I didn't

ask what their pronouns were because I wasn't sure if I should, or what might be the

repercussions if I did. But I felt joy in that moment that the student felt they could ask me,

and I also felt joy that I was in a sense, unreadable, undiscernible, but still very queer

and the kids knew it.

I don't know, maybe in 2023, if I return to the classroom, maybe I'd want to be

more visible for kids like these ones. Maybe I'd still feel that just my presence in the

building has a queering effect.

To be continued… (Renny, Vignette, On Being Seen)

In my first vignette, I am both defending and questioning my stance on imperceptibility. I do

think there is something powerful about letting both my queer activism and queer presentation

within the classroom stand without feeling the need to proclaim to students that I am queer. I am

acknowledging the queer deterritorializing work I do in the schools whether I disclose my

identity or not. However, I do think it is important to question my reasoning for not doing so and,

thus, I do ask if whether it is residual shame (the ghosts of homophobia) that keeps me from

being out, or the fear from parents, which causes me to reflect upon if I am sheltered to an extent

from the experiences that Jenna and Rachel have had with parents by not being out? But, again,

if this is the case, I reflect upon how this brings me shame, and if it brings me shame, and I feel

that I am an activist teacher who is not in the closet, then what does this kind of thinking do to

queer teachers who *are* in the closet and feel that they cannot be out at all? For the second

vignette, I am once again teetering between the idea of being out for the students — Should I

really be out for anyone other than myself? — but, again, the joy I feel by being imperceptible. It

is clear in this vignette that being imperceptible did not mean that I was not recognized, my

queerness was still seen by the student asking me what my pronouns were. It also must be

acknowledged how the student felt safe to ask me about my pronouns, and that this particular

classroom, perhaps, school environment, was more conducive to having these open

conversations than ones that I had been teaching in 5 years ago, evidenced by more queer content

in the hallways and the board-distributed GSA clothing.

In responding to these vignettes, Rachel suggested that perhaps scripts of outness have changed as conceptualizations of queerness have also changed since we were young,

> I think we have a narrative in our heads about what it means to be out. And you know, 'Oh, if I don't have the conversation, or if I don't go through the script,' …we have this sense that if we don't do that then we're not out, but there are many ways to be out, and that second story, especially, really illustrates that. And I think that, you know, with our Gen Z kids, that they're increasingly coming from a position of like, 'Oh well, you know, anyone can be whoever. Like it's all good.' There doesn't seem to be necessarily that same kind of heteronormativity… I think that makes it very different from what we kind of came up with, which is everyone is cishet unless they disclose otherwise. And then there's a sense of burden, of, you know, the silence around me, I have to break it, otherwise I'm going to regret it in this particular way, and I think that that's less and less true. So, this is kind of where that took me, just thinking of generational differences in a short period of time. (Rachel, Discussion, On Being Seen)

Rachel makes a great point here that we did go on to discuss throughout our time together; so much has changed since we were young and there is now a wealth of information on queer topics and identities that young people do have access to. This would lead to a secondary discussion about how young people are learning about their identities today. I will embark on a bit of a line of flight here to discuss three points that relate to my inquiry about my imperceptibility: The first is how young people today have more access to knowledge about queer identity. The second is how they might bring queer identities, or at least that knowledge of queer identities, into the heteronormative school space, and how the presence of queer-identified/allied students also affect the queer educators in the building, and in my case, how they would affect me! Lastly, I

reflect upon whether I would embrace the notion of imperceptibility today if the school space had felt like a safer space to disclose my identity earlier in my career, thus, further reflecting upon if the silence and hostility in schools in the past created a fear to not express who I was.

To address the first point, I asked the group if they thought that young people today were going to struggle as much as some of us did in our identity work, as they do have access to more knowledge than we had. Bera thought that they would not have as difficult a time,

> I had a conversation today with a colleague and she pointed out her daughter's Instagram and she's noticed that all of the kids her daughter's age automatically put in their pronouns. It wasn't asked. It's just, 'This is who I am. This is where I live. These are my pronouns.' … It was taken for granted, and she actually had some questions for me about pronouns, kind of coming out of that, but, yeah, I think with kids it is a very different context. (Bera, Discussion, Open Prompt)

Rachel also discussed how social media was even helpful for her when she was younger. Rachel observed,

> I think access to information is a huge thing. I think it was kind of true for me. I'm 32, and so I kind of grew up hitting the Internet as a thing that was accessible in my household when I was about 11 or 12. And so, for me, a lot of my experience of figuring out I was queer was because of the Internet, and it was because I was really into Harry Potter fan fiction. (Laughs) But I think that's even more true on any social media platform that youth are on today and, because the algorithms, as wretched as they can be, and, as you know, used for ill, can be such a great tool of education. And so, students are able to find these different communities and queer communities… It's such a huge shift, and I think that, because it's all very online it transcends any kind of rural/ urban divide. It

might be hard for them to find physical spaces to be together and have that face to face,

which is super important, but, you know, even since I was that age it's a totally different

realm, in a good way. (Rachel, Debrief Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Self).

Rachel takes up an important point from Mary L. Gray about the power of the Internet as a

boundary public for queer students, particularly in rural locations. It is difficult for queer youth

and adults to find physical spaces within the rural. Gray states that "the publicness sought and

established online is a response to strongly controlled access to public space in rural

communities." (Gray, 2009, p. 106) As Gray said, the rural is shaped by familiarity as well as a

compulsory heterosexuality that cements gender and sexuality norms. However, Gray says that

today it is not uncommon for "queer and questioning rural youth, in turn, to accommodate and

adjust to these depictions and continue on with their queer-identity work," (p. 107) within the

boundary public of the Internet. She provides a wonderful example of a rural youth named

Darrin who views websites as "a place to feel at least somewhat at home." He adds, "But then I

have to figure out how to make that home here too, you know?" (p. 127)

Identity work is a huge process, and unfortunately school is not the place where queer

identity work takes place, nor at home typically, nor the community, and so the importance of

the boundary public of the Internet must not be underestimated. The adults in this study do not

know what it would have been like to have various queer identities available to us as young

people. But perhaps this is different for some young people today. To return to Gray,

New media allow rural queer youth to respond to the hyper-commodification of LGBT

identities and politics of visibility that showcase them. They search online to determine

what is 'expected' of queer boys and girls. They look to fit identifiable codes. They

aspire to be readable to those 'in the know.' (p. 117)

In this instance, online identity and visibility politics do offer queer youth, who are lacking information, examples of possibilities of who they might become.

This brings me to my second point which is that this queer identity work is mostly due to social media apps like TikTok and Instagram, and certainly not from our education system, where queerness is usually ignored. This is worth noting here because queer identities are explored on the Internet and taken up by youth, perhaps even more so than their teachers or their parents, and brought to the school assemblages. It may very well be that youth, therefore, are more in the know around queer identities than their teachers and certainly the school district, and now can influence the school assemblage *if* they have support from educators in the building. As they bring knowledge of their identities into the classroom, they can create their own deterritorializations, and perhaps assist teachers in also creating their own. For example, the queering work that we see Adèle, Jenna and Rachel engage in is also done in conversation with the queering work of students who bring their awareness of queerness and queer identities into the classroom space. Jenna characterized her GSA as a queer theory circle and also discussed how she learned new terminology from her students and how they helped her think about her own identity. Thus, Jenna was correct when she exclaimed, "When I see you, I also see me." Adèle also provided an example of how students are bringing their identity exploration into the classroom space,

> These platforms are giving faces to people who use vocabulary to identify themselves and to take the time to explain what identities are, explain what different cultures are, explain the troubles that each community faces, and I think that allows everyone, whether you identify with a community or not, the opportunity to learn… to go looking for information…it gives kids vocabulary to speak with each other. Like, I had a student this

week, so I told you that they shared that calendar of different orientations, identities, every day, and someone said [to one of my students], 'Oh, I thought [you were] Bisexual?' and then she was like, 'No, I'm Demigirl,' and then she was like, 'It was a process.' Grade nine! It is just so cute and funny but at the same time it's like, 'Yeah, you're right! It was probably a huge process to figure out a term for yourself.' (Adèle, Debrief Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves)

Interestingly, although the visibility politics of the Internet allow youth to explore queer identities, in a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, identities are not necessarily cemented, as suggested by Adèle's student who has arrived at "demigirl" after trying on other identifiers that did not work for her, and who may later find another identifier that works even better than this one.

Additionally, like Darrin in Gray's study, who wanted to figure out how to create a "home" in their community and school, perhaps, this is occurring with other queer-identified or questioning friends. In two classrooms that I substituted in, the queer kids, or at least the kids who were wearing GSA clothing and had rainbow materials for Pride, all sat together, likely offering support to one another; a protective bubble within the school, (a sideways community, even here) in which to deterritorialize together.

What does all of this mean and what does it have to do with me being out or not? This brings me to the third point we discussed. Because we did not have access to as much queer knowledge when we were young, Adèle thinks she is still healing the misunderstood child as her asexuality as a young person was very confusing. She said, "I need to heal my younger self to finally understand who I really am and who I want to become." (Adèle, Debrief Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves) Rachel also talked about the process of discovering "who are you

versus who are you expected to be." (Rachel, Debrief Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves).

She says this is difficult, because we do not grow up in queer culture.

> It's something that we have to find for ourselves, and then kind of almost reverse
>
> engineer what this means to us, and like, you have to do so much digging and hard work
>
> to figure it out. It's not readily accessible. (Rachel, Debrief Discussion,
>
> Celebration/Authentic Selves)

I cited the following quotation from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in my master's thesis about how

difficult it is for queer young people to define themselves and how solitary their experiences may

be as they are growing up. Sedgwick wrote this in 1993, and it is worth citing again as she puts

on display the starkness of the territorializing nature of compulsory heterosexuality that is still

prevalent thirty years later,

> …Gay people, who seldom grow up in gay families, who are exposed to their culture's, if
>
> not their parents,' high ambient homophobia long before either they or those who care for
>
> them know that they are among those who most urgently need to define themselves
>
> against it;… have with difficulty and always belatedly to patch together from fragments,
>
> a community, a usable heritage, a politics of survival or resistance.... (p. 54)

Particularly for Bera and myself this was very much the case. Bera and I did not have access to

the Internet during our adolescence. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s in Canada we certainly

struggled to find examples of queerness of which to emulate. I did not come out until I was 25-

years old and at that time I only had access to the word "gay" to describe who I was, which

certainly is not complete when describing my gender identity. In my experience, I only had

access to the word "transsexual," "tranny," or "crossdresser" as a youth, descriptors with

negative connotations even before they began to go out of use.[26] I had no concept of the word queer, my current identifier, until I was in my 30's. Bera's genderqueer journey has only been over the last decade. Adèle also discussed that this was the case for her, as well, as she only had access to the language of "lesbian" and "gay" as a young person, and certainly no concept of an *asexual biromantic*. Thus, she stated that adults, along with young people, are learning new terminology and learning about ourselves as we have more access to information (Adèle, Debrief Discussion, Celebration/Authentic Selves). Perhaps today, young people are, to quote Sedgwick, "patching together a community" of solidarity and resistance much earlier than my generation did, due to the assemblage of the Internet, some supportive educators, community members, family and peers, and a generally more accepting school environment than I experienced as a young person. There has been progress. With this said, Sedgwick's quotation about belatedly patching together a community, is still valid even for young people who have the boundary public of the Internet. Even with awareness of queer identities at a younger age, this does not mean that they will be able to express this queerness.

When I first began teaching in 2003, queerness and discussions of queer identity were invisible. It was not the cultural climate that exists today for queer people. At that point, I was also still very much in the closet, and queerness was not as openly discussed in popular culture and in the media as it is today. Thus, I continue to wonder if it is fear that has kept me from disclosing my queer identity. I am also not sure if without the assemblage of the students, my group members' stories, and Pride month, if I would have re-considered my stance on not declaring my identity.

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[26] With that said, some queer people do use these descriptors, perhaps because they have reclaimed them, or they work best for them.

Much of this thinking informed a vignette I wrote for our sixth session. I had purposely worn a Pride shirt and I stood up to show my group members as a preface to the vignette I had written. Coincidentally, and to my surprise, both Jenna and Rachel were also wearing Pride shirts, as well. Rachel then asked if she could show hers and then Jenna followed, and we laughed together because we all happened to be wearing them. I told them that I wanted to wear it while I shared the following vignette,

There have been many changes in society since I was a child and teenager in this rural community. As I walk into this new high school that is situated on the grounds where the former decrepit and fading one sat, I do not recognize it. The only tell-tale signs that it existed is some of the landscaping: the playing field and the grassy area on the side of the building where the kids sit, where my friends and I sat some 25 years ago. Back then there was complete silence about queerness, about who I was. There was no Pride in the hallways, there were no lessons about queerness in the classrooms, there really was nothing that said to the children that it was ok to be queer, let alone, to let young people know that it was wonderful for them to be queer. That they were loved and lovable because of their queerness. But it's also not correct for me to say that there was only silence, because among the silent classrooms hung the din of student voices exclaiming how wrong I was for simply existing, with their words and their looks and their actions. And the only thing to offset these voices, because Ellen wasn't out yet and the mainstream media wasn't discussing queer lives, at least in a positive way, was the cohort of misfits that I called friends, who shored me up, one of the many groups of friends throughout the years to do such a thing.

So, I cannot help but reflect upon how things have changed. I ran GSAs in the schools for a number of years, but I honestly never thought I would see the day where Pride events are celebrated in our rural schools, where rainbow flags are raised, and Pride bags are given out. Yesterday, I was pleasantly surprised when the GSA advisor came up to me and said that the human rights coordinator of the board (who is my friend) sent a GSA Pride shirt to the school for me to wear. She told me that the GSA would be holding Pride activities on Friday and the advisors were wearing their shirts. I told her that if I substitute, I will wear mine also. So, I see progress.

At the same time, I have heard scoffing and seen eyes rolling from students when discussions of Pride arise, and I know that we mustn't create a picture of the experiences of queer students as all unicorns and rainbows. Because I know what those eye rolls mean, and what is likely said when the teachers aren't around. It's a new building, but it comes with old echoes. I want [queer kids] to feel safe in their environments and to believe that they are good. I want them to know there are possibilities for them to create queer futures in the rural or wherever they want to go. I hope I'm working tomorrow so I can wear my Pride shirt. (Renny. Vignette, Open Prompt)

At the beginning of this vignette, I am clearly informed by Sedgwick's quotation above. There was no education about queerness for me as a young person in the 1980's except for the education I received through homophobia from the adults and peers in my life. I then speak to the absence of media representations of queerness for my young queer self. There was no Internet, no Instagram, no Facebook to help build my queer identity. I distinctly recall that the first real iteration of gay life that I saw in the media was not until around 1994 when Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* first aired on PBS, giving me a glimpse of a gay urban life that was

about clubs, sex, and HIV/Aids in San Francisco (Reid, 1993), but spoke to little of my rural experience. My memories attached to this school space, and this rural community, are ambivalent, filled with silence, the closet, and, as Rachel wrote, attempts at belonging in a school space where I did not belong. I was struck as I was writing this vignette about what it meant to be back in the rural, back in the same school I attended as a youth, the new building, the progress, but also the old echoes, the ghosts. Like my group members' stories of territorialization, this remembered ambivalence accompanied by more recent negative encounters manifest when I step into a school. I wonder: how I am going to be treated by the students? Is someone going to call me a "fag" today, or mock me with a fake sibilant "s?" Or just look at me with distaste and not speak to me at all? Or tell their parents that I am queer, and the parents remove them from my class? — all things that have happened to me when teaching in schools in more recent years before I left for university. I realize, typically, that I am the only queer teacher in the building, and I sometimes feel guarded and want to protect myself, so I wear the "professional" mask that we spoke about earlier, where Renny disappears and "Mr. Cummings" appears; a person who can be much more impersonal, and sometimes strict, so that I can avoid being misused. I can see that the kids who have the Pride flags and GSA hats sit together for protection, because I also see the stares and sneers that they get from others, the same ones I have experienced, and like them, I felt the protection of my "misfit" friends 25 years ago, the "freaks and geeks" that Rachel lovingly refers to. And the old echoes remain in the materiality of the school space; reminders for me, the present for our students.

And, thus, I return to reflecting if whether this is the root of my not wanting to express an identity to them; if being "imperceptible' is just an excuse offered to protect myself. This brought me to reflect on how I wanted the students to feel safe as they expressed their Pride on

Friday and that, perhaps, I could assist them in this by wearing my own Pride shirt, something that I have never done in a school before.

Our group decided to take two weeks off in June for the teachers to focus on wrapping up the school year. Because we were not meeting, I wrote about what happened next in a field note and I then shared this with the group at our final meeting,

I was not working on that Friday. I was then asked to work the next Tuesday and I debated wearing the Pride shirt. I thought about it for some time, and felt I just wasn't sure if I wanted to, unsure if I knew enough about the school climate to centre myself out. So, I went the next day and didn't wear it. However, the first class I had, students had a bunch of Pride fans that someone had picked up at the store, and I thought to myself, 'Well, I should have worn my shirt!'

I was asked to go in the next day, and I decided to wear it. I was nervous because I really hadn't expressed this overt queerness before. The first thing the Administration said to me when I went in was, 'Nice shirt!' and then when I taught the students with the Pride fans, they all commented how much they liked my shirt, as well. Another student talked with me about how she planned the Pride Day the Friday before. I received no negative feedback from anyone. I came home feeling that the students who it might have benefited to see me in the shirt saw me. I just wonder if I would have worn it if it weren't for this group and the combination of students who also had Pride paraphernalia? I was also waiting for someone to ask me if I was queer, but again no one did, and I didn't volunteer it. I still didn't feel like I had to. (Renny, Field Note)

I end this discussion by not arriving at a conclusion as to whether I might ever "come out" to my future students or whether I will remain in imperceptibility. Perhaps, this is the point.

There needs to be space for teachers who are out to their students, as well as teachers who do not desire to proclaim an identity, or teachers like Bera who are not yet allowed to be fully out to their students. We still need to find ways to celebrate ourselves, however, because as Bera and I have both noted, there is a shame that can become attached to our queer bodies, that makes us question "Am I enough?" for the students in our classrooms, rather than a focus on the way in which our imperceptibility is read in the classroom, and the work we do to queer the classroom space, through our lessons, the posters on the wall, honorifics, and the way we present our gender and sexuality to our students. Personally, I still love being imperceptible, disrupting the binary, and that people might look at me and wonder, who is this person? Ferfolja (2014) posits a similar conclusion. For the participants in her study, "Silence is complex…it is not imposed, but is considered, negotiated, and used for the teacher's personal and professional advantage. In many ways, silence enables power." (p. 44) However, I still want to take the pressure off other queer people, like Bera, when the silence is imposed, who want to be "out," but cannot. I want to remove the shame that continually reterritorializes us. I do not want us to forget about those "in the closet" or the "imperceptible." Jenna brought up an excellent point about possible missed connections with queer people who are not out. She said,

> There's a lot of people in town... that my senses are like, 'They're queer!' but they're really closeted if they are. Like it's almost like there's a generation that… if they're not speaking of their experiences, I wonder why? I'm like, 'What have you learned about not saying things?' and I think about some people like, 'What's your story? You're a really prominent person in town. I would love to know more about your story.' (Jenna, Interview)

Is the generation that Jenna speaks of an older generation who have experienced extreme homophobia and unacceptance in the past, like Adèle's uncle, and is this why they choose not to speak? Those territorializing ghosts do not leave them either. Again, I return to my own wonderings if whether being imperceptible or in the closet is fear-based. I would argue that it may be for some, but there is also freedom in not having to identify in any concrete way. Of course, the double-edged sword here is that we lose the imperceptible rural queer story, something I did not want to do and why I included this section, and as Jenna says, we also may miss people in the community who we might build relationships with, who might want relationships with us too.

This section was also important to include because it is a prime example of how the research assemblage led me to new becomings. This has been demonstrated throughout this writing in all of our cases. Deleuze and Guattari state that lines of articulation and lines of flight can lead to territorialization or deterritorialization. The discussion my group members had about Pride month and being out felt territorializing to me because it made me question my own stance on imperceptibility, leading me to feel shame. However, I wish to end where the last chapter left off — with celebration. By writing the above vignettes and working through this with the group, I did arrive at a place where I could leave the shame behind and think about how to celebrate the queer activist and deterritorializing work that I do in schools, whether I proclaim an identity or not. For me, this knowledge was enough to deterritorialize myself from an internalized queer shame. This exemplifies the power of the collective group and how the groups' stories did lead group members on "lines of flight." We shared many stories of territorialization and in many cases were able to either rewrite those stories or support each other in the realization that this was common to how queer people are treated, removing the trouble from within ourselves and

interrogating a society that territorializes. This was work. As I wrote above, "There is always work for the queer to do; to free oneself from a tightly wound web of shame." After I shared this, Jenna would exclaim, "I just resonate so much with how there's always work for us to do. There's just so much work of unweaving and untangling what's shameful, and how do I work through that and process this?" (Jenna, Discussion, On Being Seen) To return to our quilt metaphor, yes, we must always unweave what we have been woven into, a deterritorialization, to create a new tapestry, new queer worlds of our own making. We all worked to deconstruct our trauma, offering possibilities for celebration; our individual stories of celebration and joy, those utopic moments, brought the group a collective joy, and a sense of utopia was created in our group assemblage in the present.

To end, my hope is that the stories told in this dissertation remind each group member, and the reader, that despite the many challenges of being a queer teacher in a rural community, our queerness, as Rachel once wrote, is our "superpower." We are strong and persevere through many re/territorializing encounters, we attempt to challenge norms in our communities and schools, and we seek to create lives in the rural that are complete. I end with the words of Gilbert and Gray (2020) who echo the same sentiments,

> …queer and trans sexualities and genders are our superpowers (not only our liabilities)… Such an orientation could shift the focus on gender and sexuality as a set of problems to manage towards a utopic vision of education as spaces of hospitality and welcome. This would not mean that we need to reframe our experiences, or see the light where there is none, rather it would mean embracing all that it means to be an LGBTIQ+ educator — the unhappy histories, complexities, choices, obstacles and moments of joy that shape our experiences… (p. 4)

Part 4. Conclusion

Chapter 16. A Community of Quilters

In thinking about the best way to wrap up a project such as this, I know that I cannot end with a "Recommendations" section, as this study cannot be generalizable to other rural queers given the group size, and even within our own group, although there are many common experiences, we each have had our own unique lines of articulation and lines of flight within the rural space. By the same token, I do not feel it necessary to provide a summary of the main findings of this project in a conventional way. Rather, there have been two important threads that have been woven throughout this dissertation. The first is a new materialist philosophy that has informed the data analysis technique by way of searching the data for moments where our queerness has been territorialized, deterritorialized or reterritorialized (our past becomings in the rural), and the second was a Deleuzo-Guattarian methodology that has also charted the ways in which we have affected each other in our research assemblage (our becomings in the group). Thus, I want to end by highlighting these two points with the hopes that future researchers will find both the methodology and philosophical orientation ones that they might also consider beneficial in their own studies. To do this, I will explore how I wanted to set up the final group session and then examine some of the data that resulted from this session.

To begin, the first thing I wanted us all to do in our last session was to compose one final vignette where we each explored what we felt were the main themes that were written about and discussed over our time together. Thinking about the quilt metaphor that had been brought up many times, as well as the Deleuzo-Guattarian methodologies of other collaborative studies, and an autoethnographic methodology, where the individual's autobiographical story is important but then becomes part of a much bigger collective story, I thought that we might all compose an

individual written piece that explored what each person felt were the main themes that arose in the group. Thus, I gave the group members the following prompt, ***"Create a written picture or pictures of what the life of a rural queer teacher/community member looks like, based upon what everyone has talked about throughout these sessions. Please include the big themes that have come up and resonated with you during our time together."*** I then elaborated on this prompt, returning to the quilt metaphor.

> The picture that you each create, that I create, that we create individually, becomes our individual perceptions of rural queer life, which is generated from the themes that we discussed. So, each story then becomes like a section of a tapestry or a quilt (Hello, the quilt! I can't get rid of the quilt). I thought, 'What if we each had our own piece of a queer quilt?' and then I thought, 'Gosh, I wish we were all quilters and we could actually do that and then have something tangible!' But we aren't quilters and we're not in the same area either, so then I thought, 'Okay, we have these individual written pieces and then, when they're brought together, they become our collective picture [a VwO] of some of the aspects of rural queer life.' (Renny, Discussion, Open Prompt)

Everyone agreed to do this. I thought that because the method for this project was a writing and discussion group that we should also end by writing and discussing. And thus, our last session would be the sharing of our thematic vignettes, a discussion of each one, and then ending with a discussion of the benefits of the group. To address this last point I asked everyone to also think about how the process of sharing, listening, and responding affected each person.

I will first explore some of the themes that were discussed concerning the benefits of the group. This, of course, speaks to the importance and relevance of the methodology and method. But, most importantly, it speaks to the relationships that we built throughout our time with each

other in the group; queer relationships (those sideways communities) that we all spoke about needing in our rural communities. This is exemplified in something Jenna said in her final vignette, "Even though I feel like I am sometimes riding the roller coaster alone because I am on the single rider line, does not mean that the coaster isn't filled with others in different buckets." (Jenna, Thematic Vignette, Thematic Session) Talking about buckets reminded me of how each of us were in our "Zoom boxes" spread out over two provinces, and how we were able to affect each other. Each individual was only one part of this project, but we all worked to affect each other in this research assemblage. Everyone on the roller coaster seemed like they were in separate boxes, but we were all taking the same ride together.

With this in mind, I will end with each of the quilt pieces that we composed; pieces of the whole of our queer rural quilt, which when read together should remind the reader of the analysis that has preceded this conclusion (If I have been successful)! Indeed, these vignettes served as an initial skeleton for thinking of the themes of this study, and is a testament, again, to the collective nature of this methodology.

A concern that I have had as the "researcher" is that my influence on a study that I have named a collaboration would be too great, and, therefore, throughout I have tried to point out when I have exerted a large influence over the group. Of course, I must also acknowledge that I am the one piecing this dissertation together. As Lenz Taguchi and Palmer (2013) suggests my researcher "cut" is all over the group members' data. However, if one looks at this project as the piecing together of a quilt, a crafting, of sorts, the collaboration does indeed become a defining feature of the study. Without my group members stories, discussion, and analysis this project would not be as "rich and thick" as it is. It is for this reason that I have attempted to include so much of their voices throughout the *Findings* sections of this dissertation. I, therefore, want to

conclude with our voices where we each revisit the many territorializations, reterritorializations and deterritorializations that have made up our rural queer experience. However, this "conclusion" should not be viewed as an ending, but one of many rhizomatic possibilities as we all move forward. For this project, the quilt will remain unfinished; the queers on this queer roller coaster have more (rural) hills and valleys to explore.

Our Sideways Community: The Benefits of this Group

I asked participants to reflect upon the benefits of the writing and discussion groups at the end of our final session which I will explore presently, however, within this discussion it was also possible to chart some of each group member's becomings from the beginning of the interviews until the end of the focus groups. I'll explore each of them briefly now.

For Rachel, she observed that her final vignette reflected how she had changed through the writing and discussion process and that she was in a completely different headspace than she was before she started the project. She continued that her mental health had improved as she came to realize she was not the problem! She also said that she came to an awareness that we can celebrate ourselves and that the schools are lucky to have her/us. She said the group helped her arrive at both conclusions.

Bera said that the group helped them want to continue in their activism. They said they were going to be a member of a Union committee in the fall about what queer teachers need in their schools and that they might have been hesitant to join if it were not for this group. They also enjoyed making new friends who shared many common experiences.

Adèle also said that she changed a great deal since the beginning of the project. She said that the group helped her to connect both of her identities together and she did not see them as separate boxes now; "I see myself as a queer Acadian now." (Adèle, Discussion, Thematic

Session) For me, I could really see these changes happening to Adèle throughout our sessions. She said that she was able to learn more about herself by listening to the experiences of each of us. She also said that each group member brought her to new understandings. She explained how Rachel taught her new vocabulary, that Bera gave her new knowledge about gender non-conforming identities, and that Jenna and she seemed to share many of the same feelings and questions. Bera was visibly moved when Adèle spoke of the impact that they had on her. Bera's eyes opened wide, and I could see them mouth the word, "Wow!" (They were muted). Indeed, as we talked about the benefits of the group many of us were emotional.

Jenna confirmed my own assessment of her throughout the analysis and said that she felt really disconnected before the group and with much emotion she told us that she had been "going through such a grief period with the idea of losing my marriage, and I kind of felt like this is like a little found family to me." (Jenna, Discussion, Thematic Session) This made me cry! She said that the group also made her think about the complexities of being queer in the rural space, and that each group member made her think differently. She agreed with Adèle that Bera made her think about being genderqueer in the rural and that Rachel's words also resonated with her. She also said that she liked how I leaned towards analysis, and she wanted to do this further.

And for me, I felt a real sense of joy after each session ended which has continued, as I have been fortunate to sit and craft this paper for the past two years since the last focus group.

This brings me to the benefits of the group for the group members. For me, there was no point doing this study if it could not be beneficial to everyone participating. In fact, my mission of countering deficit queer discourses also overlapped with how this research process should be a "joyful" experience for all of us. In *The Joys of Autoethnography: Possibilities for*

Communication Research, Tony E. Adams (2012) writes that there are six related joys of autoethnography. They include,

A) Writing through pain, confusion, anger and uncertainty.

B) Illuminating nuances of cultural phenomena.

C) Creating accessible and engaging texts.

D) Generating insider knowledge.

E) Reclaiming a voice on a taboo, silenced topic.

F) Making life better. (p. 181)

Using my group members' feedback I will speak to these points. Group members spoke in detail about the community that we created together. Bera, Jenna, Adèle, and I all brought up how beneficial having this community was. Jenna said that she now had her own little "found family" which, returning to the *Our Community Stories* section, was something that she said she was really searching for. She also said that because I had created this community, she wanted to create her own little community of queer folks. Bera also said that it was great to have a group that understood queer people and Adèle said it was a wonderful place to go to talk where people could be open and honest. It was in our own little sideways community that we were able to "generate insider knowledge" (Adams, 2012) about queer topics that we could all relate to and understand. This was one of my main goals for the project. As I said in the methods section, I wanted this to be a positive experience for the group members whereby a sense of community might be established that extended beyond the scope of the research. Teachers are regularly provided opportunities for networking: through professional development, conferences, Professional Learning Communities, and the like, but in my experience, rarely do queer-identified teachers have the opportunity to come together to discuss their schools and

communities, and this was important to me. It should also be noted that we are all still friends and have had a follow-up Zoom get-together, are on an email list, and in a Facebook group, and that three of us met in a local park for the afternoon in Nova Scotia last summer.

The next benefit that we discussed was how the community we established enabled us to trust each other. I mentioned that I thought we felt comfortable with each other, and Bera and Adèle both said that a safety piece was created where they felt safe to share. Adèle said that I helped create this feeling of safety because I was a participant in the group. She said, "The fact that you also wrote something vulnerable about yourself each time, didn't make us feel like lab rats. It made us feel like… it was safe to share here." (Adèle, Discussion, Thematic Session) This, of course, speaks to the power of the methodology, and how it was my intent to create this kind of atmosphere within the group so that it was more egalitarian in nature. The feeling of safety that was established allowed us all to be vulnerable with each other and we commented how wonderful it was for us to share our feelings with the group. Before Rachel began to share her final vignette for this session, she beautifully exclaimed about her writing pieces, "They're all in the same document, so now all the feelings take a long time to load." (Rachel, Discussion, Thematic Session). Bera and I both pointed out how the safety created a space where we could write about our feelings, which, for Bera, was exemplified in their writing of poetry. They explained that they had not written poetry in a long time and that they must feel it is a safe space in order to write and share poetry with people. On writing poetry, Bera said,

> There's a safety piece to it, there's a thinking piece to it, that has to be in place before that can flow. And for a long time, that's been blocked up, and I think this group unblocked that flow for me again, which, that means a lot to me. (Bera, Discussion, Thematic Session)

This group created the safety component to release the "flow" in Bera; perhaps the affective flow, which allowed them to feel and be vulnerable without feeling censored. Bera's beautiful point about finding their poetic voice also speaks to a "reclaiming of a voice," where they were able to write about topics that usually they are told they must be silent about (Adams, 2012).

Jenna observed how we became vulnerable very quickly, and upon reflection, we were vulnerable from the very beginning when we wrote the very personal object stories to introduce ourselves. Both Jenna and Adèle also lovingly said that the way I set up the interviews and focus groups also fostered the sense that we could be vulnerable. This vulnerability enabled us to "write through" those affective feelings of "pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty" (Adams, 2012) that came to us in the form of territorializing ghosts.

We all felt empowered by the group. I mentioned how I often felt like "I was on a high" after each session and that I found the group empowering. Rachel explored how she felt "apologetic" at the beginning of our time together and had moved to feeling "powerful" by the end. Jenna felt "opened back up" and would participate in the video discussing queer identities in her school, and Bera made plans for continued activist work in their community in the following school year. I must infer that Adèle also felt empowered by the end of these sessions, given that she felt both her queer and Acadian identities had merged. She had such a strong sense of her Acadian identity, as she demonstrated throughout, but did not want to be a queer "token" in her community or school. By the end of these sessions, she worried less about being a token and was more concerned with being an activist teacher who was there to support her students. She said before this study she would have considered herself only a cultural activist but now wanted to push for more recognition of queerness within the Acadian community.

I also think it essential that before one can feel empowered one must first deterritorialize, and that a key to deterritorialization is found in the ability to heal oneself, with the help of others. Therefore, Jenna, Rachel and I all brought up the "healing power," or the therapeutic nature of the group intra-action. Indeed, in discussing the benefits of writing circles, Si Transken (2005) wrote about how the writing group can be therapeutic for the members during the writing phase and through the discussions.

Lastly, the writing and sharing itself was described as a powerful medium with which to generate information about rural queer educator lives. I spoke about how I enjoyed the writing and sharing together, the connections that were found between the stories, and how similar themes arose within our stories. Adèle, Bera and Rachel also recognized how our stories resonated with each other. Bera even recognized the similar phrases that have been told to each of us in attempts to territorialize (Lightning rods!), and Rachel said, "Hearing the similar experiences, I think, indicates that it's not about us as individuals, it shows that this is systemic." (Rachel, Discussion, Thematic Session) This is extremely important. It is the systemic structures of cisheteronormativity and how queers are treated that is the trouble, and not any trouble that is placed inside us. All of our stories suggest this, our collection of stories, which also validates the Deleuzo-Guattarian methodology of moving beyond the individual to show the possibilities inherent within the collective — the Voice without Organs (VwO). These collective realizations speak to how together we were able to "illuminate nuances of cultural phenomena" (Adams, 2012) that individually we may not have come to understand on our own.

With that said, a large criticism that might be leveled against this project from scholars of the Deleuzo-Guattarian persuasion, is that the autobiographical narratives continue to create a subject and a stable sense of self, rooted in the past, and retold in the present. However, Deleuze

and Guattari (1987) discuss how conversation can create the possibilities for deterritorialization, which always demonstrates an unstable self capable of change. Indeed, this is what collaborative writing does, as Stewart Riddle (2018) argues,

> Some of what we felt came from ourselves, but some from others, and how we felt in our bodies in the room with those other people writing then came out in our writing. How much of what we wrote can we then claim to be our own? When we wrote about loss, found ourselves weeping softly, were those tears all our own or had we — in that space and place of meeting and connection and openness to the other and to writing what came — inhabited something of these others? Our emotional and written responses were surely a tangled mix of experiences from our own lives and resonances of, attunements to, others in that collaborative writing space. (p. 122)

In the end, through the production and discussion of each of our narratives, we told our own stories, but we were also informed by each other, becoming other than we were, and the result was a collectivity of "accessible and engaging texts" (Adams, 2012) that exemplified the many ways we have been territorialized as rural queer community members but also the ways that we have deterritorialized and might deterritorialize our selves.

Transken (2005) describes this as writing "we didn't get to compose somewhere along the way because we were not allowed to bring a pen, didn't know to bring a pen, or were too afraid to declare our inner thoughts." (p. 162) She also views this work as a talking back or "a type of counter-judiciary," (p. 162) where the collective can make its own judgment upon a world that might not always be just. Jeanne Perreault & Marlene Kadar (2005) characterize this as "writing-as-resistance" or a "mode of expression, crucial to a complex web of literary and

political practices in which the explicit presence of the subjected person (in voice, image, text) exposes and challenges oppression, trauma, and cultural norms." (p. 5)

This quotation speaks to the final and, I think, most important point from Adams' *The Joys of Autoethnography,* which is "making life better," for both the autoethnographers and the reader. As a way of resistance, on a cultural level, this project is full of queer utopian memory which seeks to counter an amnesia of rural queer experiences. On the individual level, empowerment and resistance were my ultimate goals as it was my hope that we would be able to see how we have been interpellated and also how we have agency (Perreault & Kadar, 2005, p. 5). Put another way, I hoped we would be able to recognize how we have been territorialized and how we might continue resisting through deterritorializations. I am hoping this agency continues for us all, and that the reader might join us on these lines of flight, as we continue to reflect upon our lives in, perhaps, different ways than we have before, and that we all use the knowledge produced through these encounters to continue to, as Crawford (2008) states, "…take apart our own habits and territories..." (p. 39), as we work towards freedom. This work is, therefore, not finished. As we go back to our homes and schools, Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the Devil's Weed plant feels appropriate:

> Go first to your old plant and watch carefully the watercourse made by the rain. By now the rain must have carried the seeds far away. Watch the crevices made by the runoff, and from them determine the direction of the flow. Then find the plant that is growing at the farthest point from your plant. All the devil's weed plants that are growing in between are yours. Later… you can extend the size of your territory by following the watercourse from each point along the way. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 11)

In this study, five rural queer teachers from five rural communities in two provinces expanded their territory and intermingled their roots (or stems in rhizomatic thought), arriving at multiple connections and potential new ways of being and becoming that they each take back to their own communities and schools, where the potentiality for deterritorialization has no bounds.

Part 5. Our Rural Queer Quilt

Chapter 17: The Thematic Vignettes[27]

Jenna

I've been thinking a lot about community and those spaces. I have never truly felt like I had a gaggle of gays or a community of queers that I cultivated myself. I've had small pockets of queer people in my life, each playing a vital role to me: I've had besties who also were LGBTQ; I had a couple friends when I was married; I had student to teacher profound experiences; I've got my social media following who sometimes feels like a family; most of my therapists are also queer; and finally, I've had this fabulous writing group. The ideas of community and belonging we have been exploring have brought up a lot of curiosities in me. If you are feeling like belonging is integral to a community, isn't that community, by design, based upon exclusionary practices? If I feel the need to perform in the LGBTQ community, isn't that just exchanging one social script for another?

Maybe I have been so engrained in my life to search. It's like I've been playing hide-and-go-seek my whole existence. I am ready just to be! Be discovered. Be explored. Be myself. I am worthy of my space, just as I am. Not exactly ever "read" correctly but who does that fall upon, the person to change or society to see more variety in the human experience. I am learning to be the enigma that I am, very comfortable in my gender identity as female but express my gender identity in more masculine ways. I am very much queer and sexually curious but my expression of that comes across very straight-white-suburban soccer mom. What I am trying to grapple with

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[27] These vignettes appear in the order that we shared them. I shared my vignette last and spoke last when discussing the benefits of the group. I did so because I did not want to influence the group with any of my thoughts until I had heard from the other group members.

is why does my inside not match my outside? Why is there a disconnect between identity and expression? Is it engrained societal oppression towards 2SLGBTQ folks? Is it my comfort zone holding me back? Recently, I have been following more queer content on social media. This has brought me part inspiration, part confusion. Do I want to be this version I see, or do I want to be with this type of person? I have tried to change up my clothing, to be seen as more queer. The problem with that is others see me but when I look in the mirror I lose myself. I am choosing to see me; to work with what I've got.

Perhaps, living in the rural space has influenced my understanding of what being queer means. I don't see a variety of representation and often many other members of the queer community also go unnoticed. We don't necessarily have meeting spaces or opportunities to show our diversity. Maybe because of these invisibility cloaks, I feel the need and pressure to make myself more highly visible than I would if I lived in a bigger city. As an educator in a queer rural space, I think it is often lost on me that just my "out" existence has a profound impact on the lives of students. Representation matters so much. I often think that kids seeing me as I am — open, vulnerable, confused — is maybe more of a gift to my students than if I was secure in all aspects of my identities.

I am so grateful to work in a province and Center for Education where I can promote queer content, wear my LGBTQ shirts and run a GSA. Have I completely melded the human me and the teacher me? Not yet! Would I be completely accepted? Perhaps not, but things are shifting. I have hope for the future. I have seen kids under Grade 5 using [diverse] pronouns, my former student who identifies as trans is in his last year of education, kids are coming out more, staff are making an effort to be more inclusive. This journey is certainly not linear, I can guarantee it is not straight. It has twists, turns, triumphs and tragedies. I am on one hell of a

ride. Even though I feel like I am sometimes riding the roller coaster alone because I am on the single rider line does not mean that the coaster isn't filled with others in different buckets. Those that rode this coaster before and those who will ride it to come.

Adèle

For me, it might be a bit different because I became a teacher before realizing I was more than just an ally to the 2SLGTBQAAI+ community so it has taken me a while to understand how one affects the other. To be honest, I'm still trying to figure it out because I didn't realize how often these two identities interact with each other. I became a teacher because I often saw teachers block students' voices and not allow them to create spaces for themselves. Originally, my concern was more on a cultural identity level because I had the experience of having teachers who blocked us at every turn and then to have a teacher push us to defend ourselves. I wanted to be like her for my students. I became a teacher and found myself in the school system, always in a rural setting because that's where I was used to being, and I felt that I understood the student experience to be able to reach them. I had so many hopes and dreams to then find myself at my third school because I wasn't fitting in for different reasons.[28] I am now at a school where I fit in, but I have lived hardships and don't know if the minor offenses that happen frequently are impacting how long I may remain in the career.

My coworkers aren't bombarded with the responsibility of being an "expert" for every different identity that exists in our schools. I get asked to help my coworkers write report card comments that respect students' pronouns and interrupted before, during and after classes to discuss how to address certain topics with 'certain students' who have openly expressed their

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[28] This was the first time Adèle mentioned being at a third school and not fitting in!

gender or sexual identities. Why are we seen as experts when we're living it ourselves? To realize who I was, I had to do research and I made mistakes, but I was learning; I'm still learning so by no means am I an expert. Why can't they do their own research too?

My experiences in this small religious town have made me experience being outed while always checking if it's safe to return home and be myself freely. For so long, I tried not to show any affection at all in public because I didn't like the stares and comments from the public. I'm still worried every time I get a new group of kids since I don't know if they will make me feel uncomfortable. After the first week with them, I'm fine because I have created that bond with my students that allows them to be themselves and for myself to be seen as well. The stress of judgement dissipates until parent-teacher conferences in the fall when it returns because now, I need to know if I will have issues with parents for reasons that aren't academic. I don't deserve to have this added stress because I can't change that aspect of me, nor would I want to change anything about it but, it can become problematic in my work setting. These problems can occur at any moment, and it will never be within my control. I have been extremely lucky to not have experienced too many negative incidents because I acknowledge that it can be worse for others.

Being a part of the 2SLGBTQIAA+ community comes with many positive experiences as well, because while it can be draining to be responsible with the information students share with you, it's also an extreme honor to be a safe place for them. It's important that I'm there to make sure that the Pride flag is flown during our school celebrations and to teach activities that inform students of other perspectives different from their own. My presence is a reminder to be informed and to watch your words but also to not be afraid of making mistakes so we can all learn together in a safe space. This burden is mine, and while at times, I struggle to

handle it all, I accept it proudly because it is mine. This town might not be ready for me being a teacher in its community but, one day, it will be as if it was always that way. Those will be the memorable years of my career.

Rachel

Being queer in rural communities is a study in *deliberate action*. It's the living practice of intentionality. We choose to fly our flags and find each other, to find our *family*, in spaces marked by tradition, bloodline, the ways things have "always" been. We choose to live here; despite being marked as not belonging. So, we find each other, we gather, and we *make* belonging. We reject the status quo and disrupt its narrative. Yes, these woods and their creatures and their hidden, mossy paths are part of who I am too; yes, these rivers and these bays, these inlets and harbours, they speak to me too; yes, this community — messy and imperfect — is *mine*. It is *ours*. Yes, we are changing it. We're making it better: more diverse, more vibrant, more dynamic.

Being queer in rural schools requires the same mindfulness, the same present and deliberate intentionality. We choose to lead challenging conversations, sharing our vulnerabilities with our students or colleagues; we choose to fly our colours and push for equitable schools. We're leaders, whether or not we're ever called on to hold such power. We speak with care and deliberation in all that we do, measuring day-by-day what we have to give, and giving that much — and sometimes more. We bring that same dynamic, transformative energy to our school communities — and this time, we don't just do it for ourselves or for our love of these rural spaces we call home. We *give* to the community by shepherding vulnerable students to safety. We place ourselves in the line of fire so that children can be safe and valued and cherished, so that they — the next generation of queer members of our communities — can

burn as brightly as they like, wherever they like. We do what we do so that they can call this place *home* — its forests and rivers, yes, but also its quiet towns that hope for more prosperous times — just like we do.

At the end of this, I feel stronger than I did the first time we sat down to speak and write. I feel braver and bolder, settled in my own skin. I feel… powerful. A student emailed me this week thanking me for just *existing*, for showing her that queer folks can be married and happy. By choosing to be myself, by choosing to be visible — that's it! Not direct action, but by *existing* — I've helped build a sense of belonging and *hope* for at least one student. I've pricked a hole in the narrative that queer folks must suffer and be miserable; I've revealed just how flimsy the status quo is, like cellophane stretched over the sharp and glittering edges of the clarity with which I live my life. Just like that, it's in tatters. Just like that, I've lifted someone up.

I've chosen to live and work here, and while the wilds would have always called me to rural spaces, just like the need to do more, *help* more, has called me to teaching, I could have chosen differently. But I've been shaped here into the strongest, clearest version of myself, and that vision, the core of my self, solidifies each day. My roots grow deeper. This place is in my bones. And I — I am in its marrow too. Not a ghost today, but a heartbeat, a pulse, and most of all a promise, that I'll be here tomorrow too. That *we'll* be here forever.

Bera

Quilt Piece #1

I'm thumbing through the permission forms for the upcoming Health classes on adolescence. A handwritten note on one catches my eye, "My child may participate in these classes as long as there are no mention of gays or people like that." It feels like a punch to the gut. I bent over

backwards to accommodate these parents. We've worked through various challenges their child

has had this year. Do they not know I'm queer? It's not like I hide it. Do they mean to be nasty? I

thought we had a good relationship.

Quilt Piece #2

"This isn't a good time."
It never is.
"You're a lightning rod."
I don't hide who I am.
"This would be divisive."
I am the problem.
"You did this the wrong way."
I did it at all.
"It's a process."
Maybe I'll give up if they wait long enough.
"It's not age appropriate."
I have to hide, even though no one else has to.
"Community standards."
People like me don't belong here.

Quilt Piece #3

"Can I ask you a question?" she asks, looking around furtively to see who is nearby. "What does
"queer" mean?"
I look around, checking to see if any students are in earshot, and if the staff who are, are safe,
before I answer.

Quilt Piece #4

Had I been
Who I am
When I was
Where I was
When I began
To teach,
I would not be
Where I am.
But,
Am I now
Where I am
Precisely because

I was not then
Who I am now,
Which started me on the path
To here?

Quilt Piece #5

A class where
Everyone calls me "He".
A hand goes up.
"Grandma?!"
A pause
Then laughter
Cut off abruptly
When I express
My deep appreciation
For being honoured.
Being seen

Quilt Piece #6

I often feel
Invisibled.
My queerness
Is not an add-on
It is integral to who I am.
How I move
How I speak
How I see
And to throttle it in the classroom
Is to leave a hole
In who I am
To my students

Quilt Piece #7

We've had recurrent bouts of doorbell harassment, to the point where the local police encouraged us to mount security cameras. Students have been pulled out of public school entirely rather than have them in my classroom. I've received direct orders from senior administration as to what I can and cannot say in the classroom. This flag is a hell of a lot more than just a recognition of Pride month, it is statement of existence. It tells my "quiblings" who see it that they DO have a place here. They do NOT have to leave the community to live authentically. It is a big "Fuck you!" to the cishet supremacists.

Quilt Piece #8

Being queer
In the classroom
Is walking a tightrope
That wavers
And shifts
From day to day

Am I showing so much queer
That I'll be censured?

Am I showing enough queer
That those who are looking will see?

Am I pushing too hard,
Leading to backlash?

Am I not pushing hard enough?
Progress is not made.

Movement is so slow.
"Be patient!" I'm told.
And all the while
Queer kids fly through,
Unacknowledged
Unsupported
Unknown
Unseen
Unable
To BE

Renny[29]

What does it mean to be queer in the rural?

For each of us queer life is very different yet so similar.
Our stories speak to each other, calling forth other stories,
Other times, places and moments,
That even if we haven't experienced, we still understand.

For most of us, queerness in the rural is about searching.
The search for the "right" identity,
The terminology that speaks best for who we are.
The search for the right community,
The right school,
The place to call home.
The search for other queers to build that home, community and school with.

Sometimes this search involves leaving.
Leaving childhood homes behind.
Leaving those little communities that we grew up in
Where we used to belong.
Or did we?
We take those dichotomous memories
And tuck ourselves in with them
On those cold, country nights,
Or we lock them away
In old trunks
And replace them with
The warm embraces of our queer partners,

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[29] This 'poem' was a line of flight from Bera's poetry writing, of course.

Our queer kin.

We can create new communities elsewhere,
In adjacent communities
Where we spread our queerness
Throughout.
And in the schools
With our Pride shirts, bags and flags
But also with our very presence.
We can create sideways communities,
Protecting each other from the ghosts
That seek to harm us
And traditions of the past
That didn't include us.

For some of us, the school becomes a refuge,
A real community.
But often it is a space of continual negotiation
And walls that exceed the physical space of the building.
Walls reinforced by cisheteronormativity and homophobia.
Walls that are so strong and tall that they are impossible to climb
Or dig under, to free ourselves.
We encounter them in policies,
Both present and absent
Which can be equally damaging,
That tell us we must not speak who we are.
By bad administrators
Who may speak diversity
But who do not put it into action.
By parents
Who have the power to shut us down,
To stop any queer professional development
Or queering of our classrooms
Who will protect their kids
Against queerness
Against us…

And so, we chip away at this impenetrable wall
Through our activism.
Through our being in these spaces.
Despite the pressures to conform
We bring in queer presenters,
Queer books and queer posters.
We crush gender norms.
By wearing and presenting in the
Way that *feels* right for us.

We challenge the status quo
And champion human rights
Fighting against the isms
And bringing intersectional perspectives
To our students and school spaces.

There is Pride in this work
But there is also burden.
Yes, it is work!
And sometimes it feels like we shoulder it all.
We need our allies
To pick up that chisel
To work away at the cracks
With us.

Because sometimes we cannot do it any longer.
We need a reprieve
And time to rest.
Sometimes the policy, the staff, the parents, the community
cause the bricks we have broken
To be squarely pushed down upon our heads.
We feel unsafe
And fear that something worse might happen
We step away
And take time to heal.

And throughout the struggle
To put ourselves together,
To find our authentic queer selves
In a world that made us
Question our being.
We might find ourselves still asking,
"Am I enough?" "Am I queer enough?"
"Am I enough for my students?"
Do I need to be more vocal?
More out? More…? More…?
Until we remember our students
And think about how we might be
Just what they need.
Until our partners hug us and tell us
We are perfectly queer.
Until we spend a day with our queer and straight kin groups:
Gardening,
Playing Dungeons and Dragons,
In Pride groups,
In flats on the beach,

And driving down perfect country roads,
That we realize that we are good.
We are loved.
In all our monstrous failure
Which we can and must celebrate.
A celebration of where and with whom
We will never be accepted
Because we don't want that kind of acceptance
If it means fragmenting ourselves.
Those moments where we can sit back
And say:
"These are my people. And this is my home."
Or perhaps,
"I haven't found home yet, but I know what it looks like."

For most of us this home is likely not in a city.
We like the rural and that's why we're here.
The big Pride parades do not call us to the city.
Urban queer culture is not rural queer culture.
The city — often conceived of as the home of queer folk —
And yet the rural belongs to us, as well.
It does not just belong to our straight neighbours
It's always been ours too.

It's just now we don't all have to hide
Or run away.
There have been many societal changes
That have made open queer lives
Possible.
And for our young queer people
With their Tik Tok and YouTube educations,
Where they will learn more about queer possibilities
Than they ever will in their schools,
And teach us about us too.
I can only guess that rural queer culture
Will continue to expand,
With already connected rural queer young people
Who share their rural stories of community, struggles
Despair and love…
As we have in this group.

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