Class and Capital in LGBTQ Appalachian Literature

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Abstract

Appalachia has long been considered the "other" to the American "mainstream." However, the complexity of queer life in Appalachia is not limited to geography, but also relies upon class differences and an association with rural poverty. The intersection between queerness and socioeconomic status appears frequently in LGBTQ Appalachian literature, such as Julia Watts' *Finding H.F.*, a young adult novel, as well as Fenton Johnson's novel *Scissors, Paper, Rock* and accompanying short story "Bad Habits." In these texts, being queer and a rural Appalachian is a struggle. This paper argues that the struggle is further complicated by issues of social standing and each character's lack or acquisition of Pierre Bourdieu's economic, social, and cultural forms of capital.

Furthermore, this paper employs Jack Halberstam's theory of metronormativity to examine the urban/rural binary in these texts and the ways in which characters sometimes support but ultimately subvert the metronormative mindset, which privileges the urban over the rural by positing that queer individuals can find happiness only in the former. These Appalachian characters show that urban life does not always result in a happy ending for queer individuals and that remaining in the rural setting, despite challenges and heartaches, can be a valid choice.

Keywords

Appalachian; Capital; Class; Metronormativity; Queer; Rural; Urban.

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A dichotomy has long stood between the Appalachian environment and the rest of the United States. Though the United States is an amalgam of cultures, ethnicities, and identities, and, contrary to some popular beliefs, cannot be defined as a singular "mainstream" America, Appalachia and its people have nonetheless been held up against "mainstream American culture" as a crude and outmoded other. As Shaunna L. Scott and Stephanie McSpirit point out, "Appalachia has an 'image problem.' Working against the region are media depictions of Appalachian mountaineers as backwoods, gun-toting 'hillbillies' who shoot first and ask questions later" (42). The systemic issues that the Appalachian region has faced, including limited access to educational resources, exploitation from outside corporations, crumbling infrastructure, generational poverty, and substance use disorder, are not endemic to Appalachia alone; these same issues plague other rural areas across the United States. Similarly, as with other rural locations throughout the US, Appalachia has been continually devalued in terms of the urban/rural binary, with journalists, filmmakers, and artists conflating its popular rural imagery with graphic poverty and general misery. Until recent decades, the experiences of individuals, both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community, who have grown up or lived in Appalachian *urban* spaces have often been overlooked in literary portrayals of the region. Instead, popular media depictions of Appalachia, such as in older comic strips like Al Capp's *Li'l Abner* or the more recent autobiography *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, continually portray the region as a backwoods and heteronormative monolith, ignoring and even omitting the presence of queer individuals, especially those queer individuals who do not leave the region or otherwise become trapped in this "hopeless" rural setting.

However, the complexity of queer life in Appalachia, as well as for Appalachian natives who choose to leave the region, is not limited to geographical place and differences, but, in many cases, may rely upon differences in class and capital as well. These socioeconomic differences represent a theme that appears more than once in LGBTQ literature from or about the region, such as Julia Watts' *Finding H.F.* (2001), as well as Fenton Johnson's 1993 novel *Scissors, Paper, Rock* and the short story "Bad Habits," which Johnson wrote over twenty years later as a spin-off centered around a secondary character from *Scissors*, Nick Hardin. Watts' young adult novel, published in 2001, follows best friends H.F. and Bo as they navigate high school and queer life in a rural Kentucky town and eventually run away to find H.F.'s absent mother. Johnson's novel was originally published in 1993, while "Bad Habits" debuted in the 2019 anthology *LGBTQ Fiction and Poetry from Appalachia*. *Scissors* showcases the lives of the Hardin family, especially Raphael, as he moves away from his Kentucky hometown to create a new life

and explore his sexuality in 1980s San Francisco; in contrast, "Bad Habits" focuses on the Hardins' neighbor, Nick Handley, as he, too, comes to terms with his sexuality. Unlike Raphael, however, Nick chooses to stay in the Appalachian rural setting. These texts subvert not only a heteronormative view of Appalachia, but also what queer theorist Jack Halberstam would describe as a metronormative mindset, as their characters realize, upon outmigration from Appalachian rural settings, that the urban setting does not necessarily fulfill their expectations of liberation, convenience, and happiness. Additionally, in these texts, being queer *and* a member of rural Appalachia is a struggle for the characters; however, the struggle is further complicated by issues of class, social standing, and each character's lack *or* acquisition of various forms of capital, as the characters in these texts not only face rejection and homophobia from their communities of origin, but also encounter stigmatization because of their associations with rural poverty.

This intersection between queer identity and rural poverty would behoove us to examine these texts through the lenses of different types of capital as defined in Pierre Bourdieu's "The Forms of Capital" and Jack Halberstam's theory of metronormativity. In his essay, Bourdieu describes capital as "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (280). Regardless of the several forms that it can take, capital "takes time to accumulate" (280), although the different forms of capital "[represent] the immanent structure of the social world" (280). According to Bourdieu, capital can take on three distinct forms—economic, cultural, and social (281). The first type of capital, economic, is probably the most self-explanatory of the three and the type that comes most naturally to mind whenever we think of capital. Indeed, economic capital is "immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized into the form of property rights" (281). As a result, economic capital is the most obvious and therefore most desired form.

However, as Bourdieu shows, cultural and social capital can be lucrative, too, as they may rely upon or be converted into the economic form. Cultural capital is often established through "educational qualifications" (Bourdieu 281), whereas social capital is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to [. . .] membership in a group" (Bourdieu 286). Participation in these relationships—membership in a group—may be formally recognized, as in the case of an official club, or it may be more subtle and personal (Bourdieu 286). Similarly, the expectations for these relationships may be "subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights)" (287). In Johnson's *Scissors*, *Paper*, *Rock*,

for instance, we can certainly see that Raphael's membership of the queer community in San Francisco has produced in him those feelings of kinship and empathy. As a member of that community, or group, then, Raphael also operates as a "custodian of the limits of the group [. . . and] can modify [it] by modifying the limits of legitimate exchange through some form of misalliance" (287). Such a "misalliance," as Bourdieu puts it, is seen in Raphael's interactions with his family, as well as Nick Hardin, back in Kentucky, who do not claim membership in this community. Consequently, Raphael might be seen as a representative of San Francisco's queer community to his family and the Hardins.

Throughout this article, I will use Bourdieu's three forms of capital to emphasize the characters' socioeconomic statuses and examine how those statuses affect the way these characters relate to individuals both within and outside of Appalachia, as well as the impact that socioeconomic status has upon queer identity for individuals who may also identify, whether explicitly or implicitly, as Appalachian. Additionally, the concept of metronormativity, as presented in Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*, may facilitate a deeper understanding of the intersection of queerness and rural poverty for the characters in Watts' and Johnson's works. According to Halberstam, metronormativity "reveals the conflation of 'urban' and 'visible' in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities [. . . and] the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern U.S. sexual identities" (35-36). The metronormative mindset, or worldview, essentially holds that individuals from the queer community can only attain happiness, fulfillment, and liberation in an urban setting; indeed, "[r]ural and small-town queer life is generally mythologized by urban queers as sad and lonely, or else rural queers might be thought of as 'stuck' in a place that they would leave if they only could" (Halberstam 35). While this attitude may be appealing in its simplicity and seeming obviousness, it does in fact do an injustice to many individuals who are part of both the queer and the rural (in this case, Appalachian) communities—individuals who, for all the frustrations, rejection, and bigotry that they may face in small towns, may also have very valid reasons for wanting to remain in these spaces. One such reason may be the love for one's family, as exemplified by the end of *Finding H.F.*, when H.F. chooses to remain in her rural hometown in Morgan, Kentucky, and continue living with her grandmother. Even though H.F.'s grandmother is a conservative Christian who, it is implied throughout the novel, may not be accepting of H.F.'s queerness, H.F.'s love and care for her grandmother is apparent when, in the epilogue, she turns down Bo's offer to come live with him in Lexington, Kentucky, saying, "It's tempting, but Memaw's not getting any younger, and I don't want to be too far away in case she needs me. She's always done right

by me, so I need to do right by her" (Watts 274). H.F.'s desire to stay in her Appalachian small town with its potential ongoing hostility toward her and Wendy's queer relationship, even as her childhood best friend Bo leaves to attend music school in the more urban Lexington, shows the depth of H.F.'s devotion to her family, a devotion that is just as much a part of her identity as her sexuality.

As Halberstam points out, "[g]ay men and lesbians from rural settings tend not to be artists and writers in [. . .] great numbers, and so most of the coming-out stories that we read are written by people from cities or suburbs" (41). The narrative of metronormativity has perhaps been easily perpetuated by such underrepresentation of queer rural voices in literature; however, the divide between rural and urban spaces, and our expectations for each space, which Halberstam describes at length in the chapter "The Brandon Archive" from *In a Queer Time and Place* (22-46), may in fact lend some insight into Watts' and Johnson's texts. For example, *Scissors*' Nick Handley sees Raphael as worldly and sexually liberated because of Raphael's life and experiences in urban San Francisco, while he, a Kentucky tobacco farmer, remains steadfastly in the closet. Moreover, in Watts' novel, H.F. and Bo spend much of the first half of the book decrying their rural upbringing. H.F. demonstrates shame over her perceived ignorance of the world outside rural Appalachia as she encounters the social and economic capital of the Cook family and the cultural capital of Dee, Laney, and Chantal, three friends in urban Atlanta. Equally, Bo doubts his ability to earn a scholarship to attend music school because of his upbringing in rural poverty. However, the characters in these texts initially appear to support but ultimately subvert metronormative attitudes. Raphael challenges Nick's belief that life in an urban environment is superior to that in a rural setting for queer individuals, as he has not seen anything that Nick has not also seen, but he has simply seen "more of it" (Johnson, *Scissors* 155). H.F. and Bo likewise begin to perceive themselves and their Appalachian upbringings differently by the latter half of Watts' novel—if not as something wholly positive, then at least in a neutral light and not as something that will hold them back from happiness or success.

The issues of class, capital, and metronormative expectations are evident almost immediately at the beginning of Watts' *Finding H.F.*, as H.F. brings up the subject of her mother, a high school dropout who abandoned H.F. soon after she was born: "Unlike Momma, I fully intend to graduate from high school" (Watts 18). Though it appears to be a simple statement at first glance, H.F.'s remark reveals not only a sense of shame and disappointment in her mother, but also a desire to accrue the cultural capital that comes from formal education (Bourdieu 281). When she talks about the popular and well-to-do students at school, or "the cheerleaders and jocks and the people

who walk around and every step they take says, *My daddy has money, and you don't even know who your daddy is*" (Watts 18), H.F. also introduces the issue of economic capital, and how her lack of such capital leads to discrimination and judgment from her classmates. However, she tries to downplay this issue, saying that it is not the "money thing" (19) that so profoundly affects her social standing, but the fact that "the popular kids know I'm different. Different on the inside" (19). Although the difference that H.F. references here relates to her sexuality, which does affect her social standing at school, her lack of economic and cultural capital further complicates her struggle to fit in with her peers.

Even Bo, H.F.'s best friend, struggles with being doubly different and a complicated otherness because of his sexuality and social standing. We see this when he talks about the music scholarship to the University of Kentucky, which he seems to believe he has little hope of winning: "There's lots of competition for them scholarships [. . .] people from all over the state who've had lots better music teachers than some sissy little piece of white trash from Morgan County" (Watts 33). With this remark, Bo confronts two reasons for his inability to fit into his hometown: first, he is gay, and second, he comes from a poor family. H.F. reinforces this point later in the novel as she fights the urge to tell him, "*[t]ell that to the boys on the football team who bust your head every chance they get, not just because you're a faggot but because you're a white trash faggot*" (196-97). Being different, deviating from societal norms in any way, is hard; but it is not just that H.F. and Bo are gay or that they are situated on the lower rungs of the social ladder—the full, complicated struggle of Watts' characters lies in the fact that they are *both*. As we can see in the previous two excerpts from Watts' novel, H.F. and Bo are ostracized by their peers because of their queerness and defiance of heteronormative demands and expectations, but their ostracization does not stop there. These characters are additionally othered and isolated because of their poverty—their lack of economic capital.

H.F.'s lack of economic and cultural capital, as well as her awareness of that lack, is highlighted in her interactions with newcomer Wendy Cook. In the novel's third chapter, H.F. arrives in study hall and has her first real interaction with Wendy, a new student from Scranton, Pennsylvania, and H.F.'s as yet unrequited crush. Although the girls commiserate over their inability to fit in with the popular or "normal" kids at the school, H.F. still carries an internal monologue of insecurity and self-deprecation (Watts 62-67). While Wendy discusses her hometown and the stereotypical expectations of hospitality she had held for the small town of Morgan, H.F. tells the reader that she suddenly "can't stop thinking about Wendy being a college professor's daughter from up North. She's too good for this dried-up little coal-mining town, and since I can count on two hands the times I've been outside this town, that must mean

she's too good for me" (64). Although she manages to summon the courage to invite Wendy over to her grandmother's house for dinner sometime, H.F. still questions herself: "*Shut up, H.F.*, I'm telling myself even as I talk. You don't want this college professor's daughter over at your tacky little house, picking at her pinto beans and staring slack-jawed at all the egg dioramas" (67). It does not matter that Wendy finds H.F. charming and worthy of friendship, nor that Wendy herself does not have a college degree; because of her parents and her former residency in a more urban area, Wendy possesses a level of economic and cultural capital that H.F. can only dream of at this time in her life when living in a rural town.

Watts reinforces this discrepancy between the girls' relative levels of capital a few chapters later, when H.F. spends the night at Wendy's house. Upon her arrival at the Cook home, H.F. notices the hundreds of books that Wendy's parents have crammed onto shelves and scattered across the floor (Watts 90-91). Astounded, she tells Wendy that Wendy's family has more books than the county library (91); but when Wendy responds, "[n]ot that that's saying much," H.F. becomes newly self-conscious about the smallness of her world (91), or in other words, the limitations that her lack of capital has imposed upon her. As H.F. notes, this particular room in the Cooks' home is devoid of the fine, opulent furniture that she had imagined the family would own (91); yet the books continue to strike her as significant and foreign items, as her observation of them is tied, perhaps symbolically, to the ideal of education—and more specifically to the fact that Wendy's parents have college degrees and her father is an English professor. However, H.F.'s observations of the Cooks' residence is not confined to cultural capital, nor to what they *actually* possess. When she questions Wendy about the absence of a television in the home, for example, Wendy answers in a lighthearted way, saying that her family is strange because they prefer conversation over entertainment (95). H.F. then reflects to herself that "I've never thought about people not having a TV not because they were too poor to buy one, but because they just plain didn't want one" (95). In her world, the absence of a television, arguably one of the most common technological staples in modern homes, could be directly attributed to a lack of money or economic capital; yet the fact that the Cooks do not own a television by their own *choice* is a foreign concept to H.F. Ironically, the absence of this material possession in the Cooks' home (of their own accord) shows H.F. the ability and power to make choices for oneself through the acquisition of capital and reminds her once again of her own lack of both cultural and economic capital. This lack of capital (especially cultural) continues to impact the way H.F. perceives herself and her queerness as she privileges the urban setting—or, at least, the urban experiences of others—over her own rural upbringing and her consequent lack of exposure

to queer literature and culture. In light of Wendy's love of reading books of which H.F. has never heard, for instance, H.F. refers to Bo and herself as "illiterate hicks" (71), fusing small-town slang with stereotypical notions of rural individuals as backward and uneducated, even after she has mentioned her appreciation for "book-learning" and her desire to finish high school (18). Similarly, in *Pushing On: Appalachian Resiliency in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People*, "[A] gay West Virginian reminds us that Appalachians are well-versed with stigma: 'They've been looked down upon themselves, you know, 'hillbillies' and things like that'" (Kline 34). H.F. is certainly aware of this stigma and demonstrates further self-deprecation after she and Bo have left home and she stands in a gay bookstore in Atlanta with Laney, scanning the spines for familiar names but finding only a few. H.F.'s lack of exposure not only to wider literary options in general, but to queer literature in particular, causes her to feel shame, as shown in the following exchange between her and Laney:

> "What's the matter, H.F.? Never seen naked women before?" Laney is laughing.
> "Not [. . .] not in a book like this."
> She grins. "Well, I guess y'all don't have a queer bookstore down in Hooterville, do you?" (Watts 229)

In this exchange, we can see H.F.'s realization of her limited knowledge of queer literature, a form of cultural capital. We can also see the good-natured though hurtful disdain that Laney demonstrates in return as she refers to H.F.'s rural hometown as "Hooterville." A few moments later, as she is processing the exchange, H.F. goes on to defend herself to Laney, even while she admits her shame at this lack of cultural capital: "'I need to read more. I'm downright ashamed of how ignorant I am. Except for homework, I ain't cracked a book since I read my way through all the Nancy Drew books in the Morgan Elementary School Library" (Watts 232-33). With the mention of "homework," H.F. once again references her commitment to her education and the accrual of cultural capital; yet within this new and urban space, even that commitment is not enough to bolster her confidence or to propel her beyond the limiting consciousness of her lower-class standing. It may be, in fact, that the contrast between her rural identity and experience, and this foreign urban space, only heightens that consciousness for H.F. and causes her, as Halberstam suggests (37), to devalue her life back in rural Morgan. Furthermore, it may cause her to view her experiences and relationships in her hometown as insignificant or inferior to everything that worldlier individuals like Laney, Dee, and Chantal, or more educated people like the Cooks, can see and learn in the city.

Unlike H.F., however, Bo no longer submits so easily to the metronormative mindset, nor does he let his relative lack of capital prevent him from dreaming of bettering himself. A little over halfway through the novel, the two teenagers arrive in Atlanta, just in time for rush-hour traffic (Watts 191). The congestion on the roadway gives them time to observe their surroundings, which are quite different from their home back in Morgan. At one point, they move past a hotel that, according to H.F., "must have 20 stories" (Watts 195). The two of them guess the price of a night in the upscale facility, with Bo declaring, "Well, someday I'm gonna stay in a hotel like that. I'll wake up in the mornin' and order eggs Benedict from room service. I don't know for sure what eggs Benedict is, but I reckon I'll find out" (196). Bo is similar to H.F. in that he readily acknowledges his lack of worldly experience, but unlike her, he does not allow it to define his worldview or limit his capacity to dream—at least, not in this moment. When H.F. responds with cynicism, telling Bo that "They don't build them hotels for people like you and me" (196), once again demonstrating her constant awareness of her socioeconomic status, he calls her "the most negative person I ever met in my life. There ain't a thing to stop me from bein' one of them people loungin' around in that there hotel. This is America" (196). With his dreams of a wealthier, and more sophisticated, lifestyle, Bo, at first glance, seems to uphold the value that metronormative thinking places on urban spaces; however, this is a far cry from earlier in the novel, when he shared H.F.'s fatalistic worldview, bemoaning the competitive nature of the UK scholarship and the seeming unlikeliness for him to win it (33). In this way, Bo may actually subvert the concept of metronormativity to some extent, as he no longer views himself as a "sad and lonely" queer or "'stuck'" in a dangerous, homophobic setting because of his rural and lower-class origins (Halberstam 36). Though he still expresses a longing to leave his rural hometown, he is no longer confined by his lack of social and cultural capital; in fact, he has stated his plans to accrue these forms of capital, despite his upbringing in rural poverty, and make a life in which he can pursue his dreams of music school and find happiness and liberation in ways that are meaningful to him.

Issues of class and capital also figure prominently in Fenton Johnson's short story "Bad Habits," as the author uses color and visual contrast in one of the story's scenes to show the discrepancy of capital between Nick Handley, a single, twenty-six-year-old man and closeted homosexual, and his older unmarried sister Frances, a nurse and the owner of the farm that Nick oversees. In this scene, Nick and the men he has hired to help him around the farm are sitting around a tree stump, playing a card game and smoking cigarettes (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 94-95), when Frances shows up unexpectedly "in her hospital whites, picking her way across the mud, and behind her, this scarlet

BMW" ("Bad Habits" 95). Indeed, her pristine work uniform stands in stark opposition to the "muck" (96) and tobacco stains (97) of her brother's world—a world that she owns. From these details in Johnson's text, we can infer that Nick's role, in which he and the other men do the manual labor around the farm, is associated with crude and dirty imagery.

Frances' role, on the other hand, whereby she carries out what is implied to be a more stable and respectable job as a nurse, is tied to a more ambiguous symbolism. Although the imagery of white evokes ideas of purity or innocence, which Johnson later reiterates when he refers to her as "clean and white as the angel of God" (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 96), the scarlet car may suggest themes of transgression or worldliness on Frances' part, especially when Paul Carter, one of the laborers and Nick's secret lover, suggests that she obtained the car from "[s]ome sugar daddy" (96). When Frances informs Paul that she is borrowing the car from Lexington realtor George Sikes, whom she treated for a sprained wrist, it is implied that Frances is responsible for breaking up George's marriage:

> "I'm curious as to what his wife would say to that offer," Paul Carter says.
>
> "He's getting a divorce," Frances says.
>
> "And here's his nurse to help make it final," Paul Carter says. (96)

Of course, we could view these visual differences as mere differences of personality or character between the siblings; however, the repeated mentions of the "mud" (95) or "muck" (96) of the farm—Nick's place of employment—and the whiteness of Frances' work uniform tie these images to the specific type of work in which each of them is involved. Of the two jobs, Frances' work in the medical field seems to hold privilege over Nick's manual labor. Moreover, as Frances tells Nick and the other men, she treated George Sikes, a realtor from Lexington, for a sprained wrist and believes she has found an opportunity to sell the farm (96), revealing that, of the two siblings, she has more of a head for the financial side of things.

Frances' new goal becomes a source of contention between her and Nick, who, unlike her, has no desire to leave the farm and move to a city; yet the difference in class and capital for the two siblings has ensured that the playing field between them is unequal. As Frances tells Nick, the farm is hers (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 96) and to do with as she pleases. Even Nick realizes this: "[T]welve years older than [him], she had the job and the salary and the nest egg to buy out the farm and so allow their mother to keep up appearances through her long and expensive dying" (96). Though Nick works hard himself, it is Frances' job as a nurse—a job that, unlike his, required her to go to school and further her education—that has yielded more economic

and cultural capital. Frances' financial situation is significantly better than her brother's and has thus given her more power and opportunity in her life.

Despite the uneven playing field, however, Frances desires to share some of this power and opportunity with her younger brother. When Nick later snaps at her to "lay off of me," she tells him, "I'm not laying *on* you. I'm just trying to help you break a bad habit, which in this particular case is farming" (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 99). With this remark, Frances reveals her true assessment of Nick's job as a farmer and his desire to keep living in the country—namely, that they are holding him back from happiness and fulfillment. As she says, "I don't want to sit around watching my brother growing old alone. Why would a woman take up with a man with no money and four hundred acres of knobs dragging him down?" (100). Though she seemingly fails (or neglects) to realize that her brother is not attracted to women, Frances nonetheless moves toward a metronormative mindset as she privileges the ideal of the city and the opportunities she believes it can afford over the lonely, unmarried lives that she and Nick have made for themselves in this rural setting.

Despite his sister's pleas, Nick continues to resist her reasoning and, in fact, subverts this metronormative attitude. According to her logic, Nick would be far more satisfied if he were to move to the city, as he would hypothetically be freer to express himself and openly act upon his sexual desires. However, in a later scene, Johnson offers readers a glimpse into Nick's thoughts, wherein Nick reflects upon his adolescent guilt over his first sexual encounter with Paul Carter (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 101). At that young age, he had contemplated suicide, but once his father died, he had to take over the farm, a monumental task that, ironically, prevented him from killing himself because it gave him no time to think further about doing it (101). He reasons that in an urban setting "this would change" and that, yes, he would be free in the city, "free as a jaybird, nothing to live for but himself" (101). While this remark and imagery seem to support the mindset of metronormativity and its ideals of happiness and liberation for individuals like Nick, within the same sentence he turns the concept sharply on its head: "Any job he found [. . .] would turn him loose at five o'clock, free as a jaybird, nothing to live for but himself, *nothing but time and conscience on his hands [. . .] he is afraid of himself*" (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 101; my emphasis). The freedom, the life without demands, that the city could theoretically offer Nick would only leave him back in that dark place of self-loathing and despair, as the typical forty-hour workweek associated with more mainstream office jobs would leave him too much time with his thoughts, and too much opportunity to ruminate on his sexual identity—an identity with which he has never come to terms and about which he still carries immense shame. Frances is right when she suggests that the farm is holding him back; it is holding him back from the most self-destructive and self-harming act

he could possibly commit. The farm has become Nick's coping mechanism, a twisted sort of refuge. While the denial and constant activity of the farm may not be the healthiest way for him to relate to his sexuality, this rural setting, with all its hardships and demands, has kept him alive from his adolescence until now. In this sustenance he has found in farming, Nick's desire to remain in the country certainly subverts metronormative expectations, as he shows it to be more than a desire, but also a true *need* for his own safety, to stay within the rural setting.

Another of Johnson's characters, Raphael Hardin, complicates metronormative expectations in the novel *Scissors, Paper, Rock*. In the book's chapter of the same name, Raphael has returned to his family's home in Kentucky, after years in San Francisco. Though he has recently been diagnosed with HIV, he has yet to disclose it to his family and instead spends the greater part of this chapter reflecting upon his first time away from his small hometown and the way in which he feels out of place amongst his relatives now. In fact, it was Raphael's mother, Rose Ella, who urged him to go to California in the first place (Johnson, *Scissors* 141). Similar to Frances in "Bad Habits," she privileged the idea of the city over that of the small town, at least for her son, as she told her husband, "[i]t's no place for this one [Raphael] around here" (*Scissors* 141).

That reality of otherness has always held true for Raphael, but it is exacerbated now by his years in an urban setting and the social capital that he accrued as a member of the community of queer friends that he found in San Francisco, as "[e]ach passing year [he] grew more distant from these parties, as he grew away from this place" (Johnson, *Scissors* 141). The passage of time and the increasing experience that he has gained within an urban space sets him apart from his relatives. Johnson also goes on to describe Raphael's clothing style as distinctive from that of his brothers and father and says that "[a]mong these country men he *was* the city boy, in city clothes and city ways [. . .] as out of place as he himself had once been on city streets" (141). There is no mention of Raphael's financial situation in this chapter; Johnson does not make it clear that Raphael is any wealthier, economically, than his family after his time spent on the West Coast. Nevertheless, he is defined by a sense of otherness in relation to his relatives, whether by Rose Ella calling him "city boy" (140–41), his brother Joe Ray addressing him (and their sister Elizabeth) as "you Californians" (145), or his father Tom proclaiming that Raphael came back from the city as "a damned hippie" (141). What Johnson *does* make clear in these characters' perceptions of Raphael is that he is different, not just by nature or personality (as Rose Ella implied when she said that the small town was no place for him [141]), but due to his life in the city and his membership of the queer community. In this way, Raphael has experiences that his biological family do not share, and it is not only his queer identity, but also the social

capital he has accrued as a result of his urban life, that makes him different from them.

At the other end of that spectrum, however, Nick Handley shares a similar sense of otherness when he and Frances arrive at the Hardins' dinner party. Although the two siblings were distinguished from one another by the nature of their respective jobs and the discrepancy between each of their accrual of capital in "Bad Habits," *Scissors, Paper, Rock* shows both Nick and Frances residing near the bottom of the community's social ladder as they show up in Nick's "battered farm truck" (*Scissors* 145)—a far cry from the BMW that Frances borrowed from George Sikes in Johnson's previous text ("Bad Habits" 95-96)—and Tom accuses them of coming just for a free meal (*Scissors* 145). Though she is not nearly as direct as her husband, even Rose Ella others them as she expresses pity "for them out there on that poor little farm" (*Scissors* 137). Rose Ella may not possess the level of social capital that Raphael does, but her comment here seems to suggest that she and her family hold more economic capital, at the least, than the Handleys. Similar to her remarks about Raphael being a city boy, Rose Ella's sympathy effectively places Nick and Frances as outsiders amongst the rest of the Hardin family and guests.

Once again, Johnson draws distinct contrasts between characters to reveal issues of class and capital in the text; however, unlike "Bad Habits," in which he uses that contrast to distinguish the Handley siblings from one another, he uses it ultimately to highlight the similarities between Nick and Raphael and subvert the metronormative mindset. As events in the chapter continue to unfold and Nick and Raphael interact, Johnson presents the former man as the lonely farmer, who has spent years repressing his sexuality in the rural setting (*Scissors* 146, 167-68), and the latter as the worldly, experienced man who is, for all intents and purposes, comfortable with himself and his sexuality (168), even if he has not yet formally come out to his family. As representative figures of rural and urban environments, Nick and Raphael seem to support metronormative attitudes; yet, as Johnson shows, they share more similarities than one would think at first glance. For example, Raphael observes Nick upon his and Frances' arrival at the dinner party and is "struck by a newer, deeper sense of recognition [. . . He] knew this apartness" (146). For all his urban experience and the social capital that it has yielded him, Raphael can relate directly to Nick, a man who seems to lack such capital at this moment in the text.

However, as we see several pages later, the primary difference between Raphael and Nick is not necessarily that one is more urban and the other is more rural, or that one possesses social capital and the other possesses none, but that Raphael has simply accrued *more* of that capital. Take their subsequent conversation, for instance, when Nick says, "I'll bet you seen it all" (Johnson,

Scissors 159), and Raphael responds that he has seen "Nothing you don't see here in Jessup County. Just different, *and more of it*" (159; my emphasis). When he admonishes Nick not to believe that the same things don't happen in their Kentucky hometown, Nick tells him, "I know that. I know that myself" (159). With this admission, Nick once again subverts the ideals of metronormativity, as he shows that rural queer individuals can, indeed, participate in sexual encounters and possess their own unique experiences, affirming Halberstam's observation that "we might find that rural and small-town environments nurture elaborate sexual cultures even while sustaining surface social and political conformity" (35). Moreover, Raphael deflates the idealized image of the happy urban queer to some extent. He shows that his social capital is not the result of seeing and experiencing things that Nick, a rural gay man, has not or cannot, but simply of seeing and experiencing *more* of those things. Similarly, Jeff Mann, a professor at Virginia Tech, writes of his youthful migration from West Virginia to Washington, D.C. as follows: "I taught at George Washington University during the fall semester of 1985, was dismayed by the coldness of the faculty, the mercenary obsessions of city dwellers [. . .] The gay world had disappointed me, so I returned to the only place I knew" (10). Similar to Raphael, Mann had subscribed to the metronormative belief that migrating to a larger urban space outside his Appalachian region would be his only chance at happiness and liberation, only to be disappointed by the materialism and prejudice against rurality that he encountered in the city. In Raphael's case, it is illness, rather than disappointment, that has brought him back to his rural hometown; even so, he still does not necessarily demolish the metronormative mindset, since Johnson continues to refer to him as the "man of experience" (*Scissors* 167-68). Despite that "experience," and his accrual of cultural capital as a result, Raphael nevertheless shares the same rural Appalachian background and upbringing as Nick—after this conversation, he and Nick still manage to strip that mindset of some of its luster as they show that rural and urban queer individuals may have more in common than one might initially assume, though the urban queer may ultimately possess more experience and social capital than their rural counterpart.

Johnson's and Watts' characters reveal the complex struggle of being queer *and* rural Appalachian and how these intersecting identities are further complicated by issues of social standing and the burden of metronormative beliefs. Queer identity is often fraught with difficulty and stigma, but in combination with an Appalachian upbringing or identity, the individual's struggle may be complicated by social class and the lack or acquisition of capital. H.F. and Bo show how lower levels of economic or social capital can further ostracize queer individuals in the rural community, when these individuals may already be dealing with the stigmatization of their sexuality;

Nick and Frances additionally show that class differences and discrepancies of capital can occur even in the closest of family relationships. Even so, some of the characters examined in this essay also subvert the expectations of the metronormative mindset. Indeed, Bo illustrates the ability to aspire toward a more fulfilling life in the city, even as he breaks free of the perception of himself as an unhappy rural queer. Raphael shows that, despite the social capital that he has accrued, life in an urban setting can challenge a rural queer's perception of themselves and their identities, as in H.F.'s case. It can also lead to further, rather than diminished, social and mental isolation, as Johnson implies it might have done for Nick had the "Bad Habits" protagonist migrated to the city. These texts, with the complex socioeconomic dynamics and sexual identities of their characters, subvert metronormative beliefs through their suggestion that urban life is not always the antidote for the suffering of rural queers and that remaining in the rural setting, despite its challenges and heartaches, is often a valid choice.

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Biography

Kristen LeFevers is a graduate teaching associate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She earned her MA in English at Marshall University in her home state of West Virginia, where she taught courses in first-year composition and Appalachian literature. Her research interests include Appalachian culture, language, and foodways, and she has presented her work on the region's dialects and identities at several events, including the Appalachian Studies Association Conference. She is currently studying for her PhD in English with a concentration in Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics and serves as a PhD representative for the Graduate Students of English.