

# Introduction:

## Queer Ruralisms



**Ralph J. Poole and Ben Robbins**  
University of Salzburg, University of Innsbruck

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### Abstract

This special issue considers queer attachments to rural space in literature, which have often been obscured by privileging the urban in cultural depictions of queer lives. Queer studies scholarship has worked to overcome this urban bias to reveal the diversity of queer lives within rural environments. We make a new contribution to this research by exploring literary manifestations of queer ruralism in terms of narrative form and within the contexts of transmedial and transnational exchange. To illustrate these approaches, we introduce a range of recent works from the 2020s, with deep roots in American literary culture, that have contributed to the dissemination of queer rural texts. They have achieved this, first, by reframing characters' experiences within transnational contexts and, second, by engaging in cultural cross-pollination across diverse media. Here we focus on Genevieve Hudson's novel *Boys of Alabama* (2020), contemporary queer country music and music videos by Dixon Dallas, Willy Strokem, Tyler Childers, and Silas House, as well as literary precursors to these works in the fiction of JT LeRoy (Laura Albert) and Dorothy Allison. Across the work of these artists, negotiations across borders and media are used to explode the stereotypes and limiting roles associated with queer rural lives and to reinvent genres, such as the Southern Gothic or country music, in ways that centre non-normative sexual identities.

### Keywords

Rural versus Urban; Transnational; Transmedial; Southern Gothic; Country Music; Narrative Theory.

Near the end of Andrew Holleran's 1978 novel *Dancer from the Dance*, which evokes the hedonistic gay scene of 1970s New York, the narrator establishes distance between members of the metropolitan queer community and their families in the rest of the United States, a region which he names "that inscrutable past west of the Hudson [. . .] in the hills of Ohio or Virginia" (244). For the narrator, the queer population of New York has succeeded in divorcing itself completely from its rural roots. However, it would be too easy to accept this disparagement of the rural at face value as reflective of modern gay life and its embrace of the liberating possibilities of the city. The novel in fact concludes with a surprising epistolary exchange between two framing narrators, one based in the Lower East Side and the other in the Deep South, who write letters to one another with a range of camp aliases, beginning with the names "Rima the Bird Girl" and "Diane Von Furstenberg." The letter writer based in the Deep South, Von Furstenberg, describes themselves in a scene of queer rural contentment and pleasurable detachment from the urban: "I wanted a real porch, a real front yard with real live oaks and real flowers in real pots—and that is what I have now [. . .] content with the quiet pleasures of life" (253). Despite their decision to move out of the city to the South, Von Furstenberg does not wish to derail the dominant urban focus of the narrative: "That is what your novel is about in the end, you know: the city. Hot summer nights in that city" (257). It is a clear example of reluctance to talk about queer rural identity and a concomitant marginalization of non-urban narratives about queer life. As Von Furstenberg later remarks, "there were tons of men in that city who weren't on the circuit, who didn't dance, didn't cruise, didn't fall in love with Malone [the beautiful hedonistic protagonist of the novel], who stayed home and went to the country in the summer. We never saw them" (258). This observation reveals how much a focus on urban queers has hidden an abundance of alternative queer histories from view, rendering the experiences of queer people whose lives are more domestic, more rural, and perhaps less networked invisible.

The essays in this issue instead pay attention to queer attachments to rural space in literature, which have often been obscured by privileging the urban in cultural depictions of queer lives. As David Bell and Gill Valentine highlight, "much work on sexual identities and communities remains firmly located in the urban—especially the metropolitan" (113) principally due to the opportunities cities afford for anonymity, heterogeneity, and the sheer size of minority populations that gather there. Lesley Marple additionally highlights that "[r]ural queer experiences are often made invisible, are problematized, and when they are seen it is as a deviation from the norm. [. . .] Rurality is a subject that is often broached only in the interest of discussing the horrific backwoods from which some urban queers flee" (71). As we will see, queer

writing nevertheless connects rural and urban locations in complex ways through the mobility of characters and authors across diverse subcultural communities.

### Queer Rural Theories and Approaches

Queer studies scholarship has worked to overcome the urban bias to reveal the diversity of queer lives within rural environments. For example, Jack Halberstam has argued that the casting of the urban as queer people's "natural environment [. . .] occludes the lives of nonurban queers" (15), and Scott Herring, in his ground-breaking study on queer anti-urbanism, challenges the investment in the "metropolitan as the terminus of queer world making" (4) by highlighting the potential of the rural as "a premier site of queer critique against compulsory forms of urbanization" (6) instead. A number of sociological, geographical, anthropological, and literary and cultural studies approaches to queer ruralism have worked to address the general invisibility of LGBTQIA+ rural experiences in queer theory.

In a qualitative field study conducted in Western North Carolina, LaToya Eaves, for instance, found queer rural culture to be rich and nuanced in its nonmetropolitan spatial scale providing "a corrective to the assumptions that urban spaces are the only utopias for LGBTQ individuals. On the contrary, with its southern and mountain culture, Asheville supports tight-knit communities that are racially, socioeconomically, and sexually diverse, while also welcoming travelers seeking respite from urban life" (149). This study is part of a seminal collection on *Queering the Countryside* (2016), which overall resonates with other recent queer critical works on ruralism, such as those of Colin Johnson—one of the co-editors of said collection—whose historical study *Just Queer Folks* deals with the history of gender non-conformity and same-sex sexual behavior in the rural United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Introducing a special issue of *American Studies* on "Homosexuals in Unexpected Places?", Johnson joins those aiming to counter the cherished cultural truism "that lesbians, gay men, and members of other sexual subcultures somehow belong in cities in a way that they don't belong in suburbs, small towns, or the rural recesses of the [. . .] hinterlands" (5). Like Asheville, other queer rural communities have also proven that the "hinterlands" can be welcoming and self-reliant spaces. The Tennessean Short Mountain is such a community, where a rural gay collective formed in the 1970s and subsequently became a hub for the globally organized group of queer neo-pagan spiritualists named the Radical Faeries (Glasby and Pendency 198). The radical faerie culture has since also sought and found sanctuaries in other places such as the Oregon town of Wolf Creek, or the commune Lavender Hill in Ithaca as documented in Larry Mitchell's novel *The*

*Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (1977), all of which attests not only to rural practices of mobility, but also to critically reflexive practices of life on settled land. Scott Lauria Morgensen in his ethnographic account asserts that “[r]adical faerie communities arose historically from deliberations on the intersections of sexuality, race, and nation within colonial histories. [. . .] In such practices, racial faerie culture produces modern sexual minorities by mediating their relation to histories of colonization” (72, 90).

From a legal perspective, Luke Boso draws attention to how courts play a key role in perpetuating urban bias “by explicitly approving the belief that sexual minorities do not belong in small towns,” and he offers suggestions “for how judges should take rural sexual minorities into account to maximize the latter’s ability to live comfortably in their homes” (562). Likewise, Bud Jerke studies judicial rhetoric regarding rural queers and finds the following: “Language from judicial proceedings and opinions demonstrates that the judiciary engages many perceptions of rural queers that affirm and reinforce stereotypes of rural as backwards and queer as urban” (260). Crucially, he outlines material consequences of discriminatory mechanisms such as “enormous deficiencies in educational resources for queer rural high school students, inadequacies in the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS for queer rural dwellers, and lack of political attention to rural queer priorities” (262). But while Jerke utilizes “queer ruralism” as a concept that demonstrates structural discrimination, we follow those who rather embrace “queer ruralism” as a term of empowerment, visibility, and creativity.

By now, many critics have countered the metronormative construction of queer subjectivities that maps the story of migration from country to town onto a rural coming-out narrative (Halberstam 36), thus problematizing stereotypical claims of rural antipathies against foreigners, deep-rooted apprehensions against non-normative sexualities, and the burdens of solitary, agronomic lives. In her ethnographical study, *Out in the Country*, Mary Gray speaks of how rural queer youths negotiate the tension between asserting queer difference and claiming status as a local. She highlights a governing private/public split and the challenge of in/visibility for coming-out efforts since “discovering a sense of one’s queer self requires three things: the privacy to explore one’s queer differences [. . .], a visible community able to recognize and return one’s queer gaze; and the safe space to express queer difference without fear of retribution” (5). The availability of internet, social media, dating apps, and popular culture streams connects young rural queers to the world beyond their immediate physical reach, and significantly reduces the former information gap that queer adolescents had to suffer from growing up in remote rural spaces. But as Gray cautions, this seeming connection to a translocal queer community also has the counter-effect of a local hypervisibility where everyone knows everything about everyone. As a result, many queer youths

prefer to remain “functionally invisible” (96), a protective behavior of not being or acting “too queer.” Especially when it comes to finding spaces for realizing sexual desire and to claim a “world-making publicness” (Warner 177), this too often remains relegated to what Michael Warner calls a “world-excluding privacy” (177) of either the openness of nature or the safety of enclosed rooms. Thus, for many rural queers, visibility may need to be governed by the urge to blend in, to belong, to be “different-but-similar” as Kelly Baker conceptualizes it (50).

The emphasis on difference within the rural echoes Julie Keller and Michael Bell’s call for a plural rural sexual approach that not only encompasses sexually and otherwise marginalized groups, but also takes into account the perspectives of mobilities such as re- and immigration (514-16). Recent queer-, trans-, and xenophobic pushbacks in the United States notwithstanding, the turn to political conservatism, especially in rural areas, has nevertheless “not stopped minorities from speaking up or moving in” (Hagstrom 160), thus asserting the rural as their rightful home as “spaces of otherness and belonging” (Mhurchú 413).

This special issue makes a new contribution to this scholarship through an original focus on literary manifestations of queer ruralism in terms of narrative form and within the contexts of transmedial and transnational exchange. First of all, it explores the particular narrative structures and textual features that have been used to depict queer rural life across the literature of the Americas. In particular, the essays in this issue consider how queer rural literature challenges the travel narrative of metronormativity that “demands a predetermined flight to the city” (Herring 15). Queer rural literature instead traces journeys undertaken by subjects who resist or ignore the pull of the urban. Across these works, one can also observe the recurrence of a range of narrative structures, tropes, and conventions that writers of queer rural experience appear particularly attracted to, such as the use of “romantic pastoral conventions within the homosexual literary imagination” (Shuttleton 123) or evocations of rural “homotextual space” in which characters “flee oppressive space by seeking out the marginal space of the open countryside” (Stockinger 143).

The essays in this issue additionally explore how queer rural texts travel across borders creating connections between global non-urban communities. The forms of migration contained in this literature link diverse rural environments at national and international scales. Finally, we investigate the relation of literary depictions of queer ruralism to those found in other media, including music, visual art, and digital platforms and consider whether these interactions with other media are characterized by adaptation, allusion, homage, or parody. Throughout the issue, we do not wish to universalize

queer rural identity, and we are therefore careful to consider how experiences in rural environments may differ for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary communities, as well as to take into account how intersecting categories of identity, such as gender, race, class, or age, shape the lives of rural queers. Within such an intersectional framework, it is crucial to recognize the diverse relationships queer people have with rural space, as explored in a rich body of literature that may, on the one hand, embrace “plural rural sexualities [as] liberating utopia” (Keller and Bell 518) or, on the other hand, address the sometimes dire, lonely, and even violent realities of queer rural lives.

What we hope to offer here is something of an alternative queer literary history that foregrounds the rural. Indeed, queer rural histories have not only been concealed in literary texts, but the role of rural spaces in producing important works of queer literature has often been overlooked in conventional accounts of writers’ lives. In fact, rural environments have played a crucial role in the creative activities and interpersonal relationships of many canonical U.S. queer writers. To give but one example, partly on the basis of their transatlantic novels, writers such as Henry James, James Baldwin, and Patricia Highsmith have been closely associated with narratives of queer flight to international metropolises, most frequently Paris, in texts such as James’s *The Ambassadors* (1903), Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), and Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955). Despite these associations with Paris, and although the French capital city afforded these writers freedoms at certain points in their lives, they all ultimately spent their final years in rural enclaves: James in Lamb House in Rye, East Sussex, England; Baldwin in St. Paul de Vence in Provence, southern France; and Patricia Highsmith in a “bunker” construction she commissioned an architect to build in a village near Locarno, Switzerland. Reflecting these lived realities, we would like to shed light on the role rural environments have played in the lives of queer writers, both widely known and critically neglected, and identify communities that have particularly given rise to the production of literature on the theme of queer non-urbanism.

### **Queer Rural Literature at Transnational and Transmedial Scales**

To illustrate these new avenues of inquiry, we would like to introduce a number of recent works from the 2020s, with deep roots in American literary culture, that have contributed to the dissemination of queer rural texts. They have achieved this, first, by reframing characters’ experiences within transnational contexts and, second, by engaging in cultural cross-pollination across diverse media. In striking commonalities, these negotiations across borders and media are used to explode the stereotypes and limiting roles associated with queer rural lives and to reinvent genres, such as the Southern Gothic or country music, in ways that centre non-normative sexual identities.

Many positive examples of queer homesteading in rural areas notwithstanding, there are exciting new works that continue—albeit in creatively new and challenging ways—to speak of the difficulties of overcoming shame and coming out of the closet within such a setting, attesting to a lingering presence/absence of LGBTQIA+ people “in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictated that heterosexuality is the only way to be” (Brown 1). Genevieve Hudson’s 2020 Southern Gothic novel *Boys of Alabama* is a case in point, highlighting the lasting effects of queer rural experiences of isolation and intolerance in a cultural climate that is dominated by straight white toxic masculinity. The novel is set in the American Deep South of small-town Alabama, where ultranationalist political leaders unite with evangelical Christians in scapegoating queers. The narrator Max, a hypersensitive gay teenage boy from Germany, who has recently resettled to Alabama is still mourning the loss of his great first love, Nils, who died of leukemia. Max has a spiritual gift of reawakening dead animals and plants that he hates and tries to hide because it makes him different. In his struggle to fit in, he engages both with the violently homophobic boys of his football team, and the village’s queer outcast Pan, with whom he falls in love and who cherishes Max’s supernatural powers. Through the lens of his liberal, atheist German upbringing, the narrator strains to claim his place as outsider amidst a predominantly but not exclusively queerphobic Southern rural community. Hudson is an outspokenly queer Alabama native, and brings to the open what earlier queer writers of the Southern Gothic tradition such as Truman Capote and Carson McCullers mostly only alluded to. The strategic feat of framing Deep Southern ruralism through the eyes, language, and emotions of a gifted (or “cursed,” as he claims himself [125]) German boy highlights the strangeness of the experience as a transnational negotiation: While Max’s mother tries to stay true to her secular European pedagogical ideals and fears for her son’s safety and sanity, his father is more accommodating and very proud of Max’s seemingly successful adaptation process. And whereas Max is intrigued by the local bonding mechanisms ritualized through sport, politics, and religion, he is equally enthralled by Pan, the rebellious, gender-fluid Puerto Rican boy, the town’s “witch.” In the course of his mental and corporeal ordeals, Max experiences brainwashing in his Christian private school called God’s Way, being groomed by the local “new-born” judge running for governor, and being raped by one of his football mates, the judge’s closeted son. Max has nightmares in which “he saw thousands of bodies, purple-skinned and starved, rise from the red Alabama clay and climb down from the trees. Their arms had been tattooed with numbers like the concentration camps in Germany. The bodies filled the entire town. [. . .] Max wanted to run from the bodies, but they were everywhere” (257). The novel does not conflate the horrors of the Holocaust

and those of the Jim Crow South, but Max's perception marks the lingering sentiments and effects of racism, xenophobia, and queerphobia across time and space. This is, above all, a novel of survival and love in a rural setting that seems too hostile to allow for non-heteronormative desires to thrive. And yet, that is exactly what happens for Max—and for the readers—against all odds. In the end, Max resists the coercive power of the rural community's heterosexual matrix and is not willing to self-destructively give in to what Alexis Annes and Meredith Redlin have called "effeminophobia" (279). Instead, he embraces queerness along with his strange gift and his feelings for Pan.

In a similarly expansive fashion to contemporary works of queer rural literature, recent examples of pop country music have become part of a wide-ranging transmedial dialogue on the relationship between rural culture and its diverse audiences. Country is a genre frequently associated with rural, white, working-class producers and audiences; new artists have made use of queer personas to interrogate the heteronormative roles of singer and addressee typically sustained in these works. For example, Dixon Dallas is a queer country music alter ego created by Daniel Jacob Hill, a singer, rapper, and metal vocalist from Alabama, who was born in the early 1990s. He has moved through a series of musical personae in his career, including Jake Hill, Lil Tra\$h, and ur pretty, and across the diverse genres of alternative rock, rap, indie-pop, and metal. His music has placed a consistent emphasis on queer-inclusive lyrics, but his 2023 song "Good Lookin'" (Dallas) gained increased attention when it went viral on TikTok, in part due to listeners being shocked by its explicit sexual lyrics. In the song, Dallas addresses his male lover in an erotic romance, which makes use of gay slang for sex and sexual roles, such as "bussy" and "Daddy" ("Good Lookin'"). It is particularly the chorus that has sparked polarized reactions, in which Dallas sings about being passive in gay sex, provocatively using the language of cowboys (Dallas's signature look is a stetson and a sleeveless vest) in a graphically queer context: "He's bouncing off my booty cheeks, I love the way he rides" ("Good Lookin'").

The song was followed by a series of reaction videos on TikTok, in which listeners appear variously shocked, baffled, or amused by the lyrics. Dallas shared one of these videos as a reel on his Instagram page with the caption "Dixon Dallas is for the people." The video shows young people's entertained or horrified responses to the song being played at a dance hall full of Mormon college students in which straight couples line dance. The person filming the video laughs uproariously throughout, and we see a mixture of responses, largely negative: A man leaves the dance floor covering his ears to block out the sound; another exclaims "Why!?" and indicates that they should cut the track; and a woman at the edge of the hall looks directly at the camera and loudly asks, with a smile, "I hate it [. . .] Why did you do this?" The "shock" generated,



or manufactured, by the song appears to be related to the ways in which it challenges audience expectations, namely that the rural identities expressed in country music are antithetical to direct, graphic expressions of queerness (an incompatibility we would not associate with various strains of electronic music, for example). And Dallas clearly welcomes the shocked engagement with his music as he gleefully shares these ostensibly negative responses to his music. Dallas's work has also led to imitators, who the singer has called "copycats," but insists "there's only one Dixon Dallas" ("Dixon Dallas Explains"). These include the subtly named Willy Strokem, the gay country persona of Alex Anderson, vocalist of the Midwestern pop-punk band Brooklane. In the lyrics to his 2023 song "My Hole" (a clip of which Brooklane posted to TikTok with the caption "Move over Dixon Dallas, Willy Strokem is coming for you"), Strokem also makes use of cowboy imagery, but, more graphically, includes lines such as "[t]hese old country roads lead you to my back door," "[i]t's time to take this cowboy for a ride," and "[t]onight's going to be a hell of a rodeo, when I let him stretch my hole." Significantly, though, beyond the performative queerness of the Dixon Dallas and Willy Strokem personae, there seems to be no suggestion that either Hill or Anderson are themselves gay.

These types of gay cultural personae have literary forebears, who have similarly taken advantage of urban interest in queer rural sex to make waves in the publishing, film, and music industries. In the 1990s, the author Laura Albert, a woman in her thirties from Brooklyn, invented the literary persona of JT LeRoy, a West Virginian teenage boy who is prostituted by his mother to men and then escapes to San Francisco, where he lives a life of sex work and addiction before turning to writing after a stint in therapy, publishing his first novel *Sarah* (2000) at just 20 years of age. The novel focuses on the lives of the gender-ambiguous "pavement princesses" (LeRoy 1) who are pimped out at a West Virginia truck stop. Albert published a number of these "semi-autobiographical" works as LeRoy in the early 2000s, and managed to convince the alternative cultural establishment that he was real through solely communicating by phone or email or convincing a female family member to appear occasionally in public as the writer in a blonde wig and sunglasses. The work of "LeRoy" appeared in prominent literary journals, the fictional author contributed material for musicians including Marilyn Manson, Courtney Love, and Liz Phair, and the filmmaker Asia Argento adapted LeRoy's novel *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001) as a movie in 2004. Albert circulated an invented story of abuse and queer flight from the rural South among coastal cultural elites and gained considerable financial rewards in the process. Here we should bear in mind John Howard's call to not "allow smug urban condescension to displace homophobic violence onto the hinterlands," as he critiqued the equation of the countryside with "timeless hostility to queers"

(102) in cultural works such as Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and the Annie Proulx story (1997) on which it was based.

Albert's writing as LeRoy created shock value in a similar way to Dallas and Strokem, playing on outsiders' prurient interest in, but also general ignorance of, queer rural sex. The queer West Virginian writer Ann Pancake has pointed out that LeRoy's fiction had little impact in Appalachia itself "because there's precious little in his work that's Appalachian" (37), highlighting a lack of authentic dialect, a failure to evoke a sense of place, and a reliance on stereotypes of "oversexed, violent, grotesque white trash hillbilly caricatures" (38). Indeed, Pancake was incredulous that any reader could consider this to be an authentic portrayal of West Virginia after she read LeRoy's work before Albert was exposed as the author. Pancake goes on to argue that belief in the LeRoy ruse was only possible for readers who do not understand rural Southern culture or Appalachia, and the novel pandered to the distance and prejudicial ignorance of reviewers, consumers, and collaborators in creative industries on the basis of their "urban provincialism," which she describes as "the condition of many urban middle-class and upper-class people, especially those on the coasts, who assume that because they live in these urban centers, they are automatically more knowledgeable than other Americans about almost everything, including the rural" (44). She suggests that authenticity and fantasy "can cohabit credibly only in certain 'worlds'" (41) due to a lack of knowledge about them, one of these worlds being Appalachia. To such worlds we might add the "queer rural," as the personae of LeRoy, Dallas, and Strokem all seem to use limited awareness of queer rural identities to titillate consumers and maintain their credibility.

What alternatives are there to these personae in queer rural literature and music, which do not take advantage of the apparent dissonance of queerness and ruralism in order to shock audiences? The 2023 country song "In Your Love," written and performed by the country, bluegrass, and folk singer Tyler Childers, offers something of a retort to the work of Dallas and Strokem. While Childers is not himself gay, the video to the song stars a gay couple called Matthew and Jasper, played by out Hollywood actors Colton Hayes and James Scully, and was written by the queer Kentuckian novelist and current Poet Laureate of the state Silas House. The lyrics to this love song are universal enough to be inclusive of straight and queer desire. The video itself portrays a gay relationship between two coal miners in 1950s rural Appalachia (Childers). When they are caught kissing in the bushes after a shift by a colleague, one of the two is violently beaten, perhaps providing another example of rural "effeminophobia," as it is the less conventionally masculine man who is the victim of the violence. After this, they move into a house with agricultural land, which they tend together. The isolation of the house

demonstrates the capacity of the rural to also function as protection for queer lives through distance from social contact. (This presentation of queer space was also reflected in episode three, titled “Long, Long Time,” of the 2023 post-apocalyptic drama series *The Last of Us*, in which a romance develops between two men in an isolated compound protected from the zombie-like creatures beyond the barbed-wire fences.) At the end of the video, one of the partners dies of black lung disease, leaving the surviving one to stay in their home until old age, in which his memories of his deceased lover are triggered by his intimate relationship to the land and the plant life that thrives there (the video ends with the old man holding a four-leaf clover [Childers]).

The song and video present not only a synergy of music, visual culture, and literary craft in the evocation of queer rural life, but also an impulse to recover histories that have been erased or hidden from view. As House said in a statement about the project, “[a]s a gay teenager who loved country music, I could have never imagined seeing myself in a video. That visibility matters. There have always been LGBTQ people in rural places, and finally we’re seeing that portrayed in a country music video” (DeSantis). Another central aim of the “In Your Love” project was to challenge limiting portrayals of queer rural life by ensuring, as House describes, that “the house and the people looked realistic for the time period instead of the stereotypes of country people that have become so ingrained in the public consciousness” as “[t]oo often simplistic notions are pushed about both rural and LGBTQ people” (DeSantis). House achieved this authenticity in part by basing the appearances of Matthew and Jasper on a photograph of his own uncle and grandfather, who were Kentucky coal miners (Powers). Such projects contribute to overcoming the invisibility of queer rural experiences, which has been furthered through either a privileging of the urban in queer imaginaries or an investment in keeping the queer and the rural separate from one another to police desire (evidenced by the mixed reaction the video has attracted on social media, including repeatedly being attacked for being “woke” [Crabtree]).

The “In Your Love” video contributes to shifting narratives about queer rural lives away from stereotypical associations with deadly violence and flight. House has additionally commented that “[y]ou rarely see LGBT people in rural settings in a positive way. You often see them getting murdered there, or escaping from there, but that’s it” (Powers). The writer Dorothy Allison, who hails from South Carolina, has similarly railed against stigmatizing representations of rural, working-class, Southern characters in literature. She plays with these negative portrayals in the story “Monkeybites” from her 1988 collection *Trash*. The story ironizes stereotypes about queer rural identity through exaggeration in a Southern Gothic tale, a recurring genre in her writing (see Bailey). It explores a lesbian romance between two students

at a college in Florida. The narrator is studying anthropology but considering a switch to biology and so spends a year working in a laboratory that keeps rats and monkeys. Her lover Toni is a literature major, and the two of them have sex in front of the monkey cage, in a scene that invokes Southern Gothic tropes of obsession and perversion: “She inched my jeans down over my butt until I was whining like a monkey strapped to a metal table. [. . .] I started to scream and the monkeys in the wall cages screamed with me” (Allison 85). Toni is invested in the narrator’s stories of the working-class, rural South and asks her to repeatedly tell her about her experience of being bitten by a monkey as a child at a fishing camp. In the dialogue between the lovers about literature of the rural South, Toni believes the narrator should exoticize herself to establish her place in the violent, transgressive lineage of Southern literature, othering her with the line “you southern dirt-country types are all alike,” and arguing that she should cynically mine her background for literary success: “Shit, girl, it’s just too much, too Southern Gothic—catfish and monkeys and chewed-off fingers. Throw in a little red dirt and chicken feathers, a little incest and shotgun shells, and you could join the literary tradition” (Allison 87). The story engages with the process of trying to find a space for queer rural identity in literature, but the cost of this may be to perpetuate stereotypes, something that Allison’s exaggeration of Gothic tropes to frame queer sex both participates in and questions.

However, Allison also suggests that literary and cultural forms can be re-signified to incorporate queer rural desires in ways that preserve their authenticity. In another scene in the lab, after she breaks off her relationship with Toni, the narrator gets drunk on Pabst Blue Ribbon and serenades the monkeys in the cage: “I’d sit up on one of the tables and entertain the monkeys with rock and roll punctuated with burps. I sang the love songs the loudest, emphasizing the female pronouns by slapping the table” (Allison 90). In a similar move to an artist like Dixon Dallas, the narrator confounds heteronormative expectations within a particular musical genre and inhabits the position of a rock singer serenading a female lover. For Allison, such cross-identifications can be a means of connecting with one’s background even from a position of remove. Allison now lives in California, and in the preface to *Trash*, written in 2002, she talks about how networks of rural Southerners may be sustained through music: “[T]hese days I feel like there is a nation of us—displaced southerners and children of the working class. We listen to Steve Earle, Mary J. Blige, and k.d.lang” (xvi). Finding one’s place within art, whether country music, rock ‘n’ roll, or the Southern Gothic, as a queer rural artist requires challenging stereotypes and actively situating one’s experiences within established narratives or genres.

The essays in this volume approach the topic from a diversity of

intersectional, transmedial, and transnational perspectives to consider how creative traditions have been reinvented to accommodate the experiences of queer rural identities. The first two essays in this volume offer alternatives to the metronormative narrative, taking into account categories of sexuality, gender, and class. Phillip Gordon's article, "Finding a Rural Trans South: Queer Migration and Belonging in Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* (2016)," studies the reversal of the traditional queer migration narrative in Russo's young adult novel: In this text, a young trans woman, who has recently transitioned, moves from Atlanta to live with her father in rural Lambertville to escape the violence she has experienced in the suburbs of the Georgian state capital. Here, a queer character seeks out the anonymity of rural space, where she hopes she will not be recognized as trans. Gordon discusses the different historical investments trans people have had in rural environments, and how Russo presents a counterpoint to the violence and marginalization generally presumed to accompany trans lives in the rural United States.

In "Class and Capital in LGBTQ Appalachian Literature," Kristen LeFevers demonstrates how the work of the writers Julia Watts and Fenton Johnson also challenges metronormative narratives by showing that queer migration to urban space is not synonymous with liberation and happiness, and that remaining in a rural environment may still be a legitimate choice for many queer people. She additionally illustrates how the lives of queer people in Appalachia, as explored in these literary works, are complicated not just by their sexual or gender identities, but also by their socioeconomic status, on account of which they may face stigmatization from insiders and outsiders.

In keeping with this issue's focus on overcoming stereotypes, H. J. E. Champion's essay on "Queer Rural Landscapes: New England Farmers and Masculinity in the Midwest" analyzes how limiting gender roles have been questioned in queer rural narratives by nineteenth-century women writers. She shows how the enclosed New England garden appended to the domestic space has often been allied to traditional feminine representations of the "True Woman." She goes on to trace how these connections were challenged by several short stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, who explored masculinized female labor through portrayals of the female farmer, and Willa Cather, who penned incipient versions of the "New Woman" within the unbounded landscape of the Midwest. Champion thereby challenges the presumption that the modern "New Woman" is a quintessentially urban figure and offers a queer interpretation of her gender and spatial transgressions.

Michael H. Feinberg also considers the queer renegotiation of relationships to rural space during the nineteenth century in his essay "Beyond the Imperial Metropole: Queer Anglophone Representations of the Haitian Revolution." In a transnational approach, Feinberg studies both textual

and visual representations of the Revolution in the work of the white, U.S. and British writers Leonara Sansay and Marcus Rainsford. Using queer theories of the deformative, Feinberg shows how both writers came to associate the disruption and disaggregation of revolutionary change in Saint-Domingue/Haiti with an alluring queer desire to flee the metropolitan norms of empire, and the attendant patriarchal and white supremacist social order, in the pursuit of alternative intimacies.

The intermedial focus continues in Laura Handl's essay, "Queer Southern Place-Making in *A Dirty South Manifesto* (2020)," which considers the relationship between queer rural literature and music. Handl focuses on the recent manifesto of scholar and writer L. H. Stallings, a text that challenges the prescribed action of queer flight from the rural in metronormative narratives and the one-dimensional othering of the South as an irredeemably hostile place. In contrast, Handl shows how Stallings's text imagines queer futures in the region through the genre of Dirty South hip-hop, deploying this subcultural medium to advocate for social transformation and sexual resistance. For Handl, the genres of the manifesto and hip-hop can interrogate dominant views of the South (as white, heteronormative, and hostile to queers) and offer a queer alternative to hegemonic linear narratives of progress.

Joshua Parker also considers the temporalities of literature in his essay "Queer Rural Space in Early Twenty-First Century American Narrative." Parker begins by reflecting on how rural space is associated with the cyclical patterns of agriculture, and therefore the queering of rural space may involve a disruption of those cycles. He sees such disruptions reflected in the work of contemporary writers of queer rural lives—George Hodgman, Ocean Vuong, and Louis Ceci—whose fiction introduces discontinuity and sexual diversity into the normative storyworlds often bound up with rural environments. Parker suggests that these authors draw upon a range of common queer rural narrative techniques (such as the listing of landscape features to disrupt causality or the use of plural first-person narration to situate the rural self in community) to bring authenticity to experiences that have often been hidden in queer literary history.

The issue concludes with an exchange between two queer U.S. rural writers: Chris Belcher, author of the memoir *Pretty Baby* (2022), finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Memoir, and Carter Sickels, author of the novel *The Prettiest Star* (2020), winner of the 2021 Southern Book Prize and the Weatherford Award. In a wide-ranging discussion, they discuss their own experiences of movement between rural and urban environments, the ways in which their writing both reinforces and questions queer metronormative narratives of flight, the representations of queer rural identities in different media, and the relationships they are trying to cultivate with different urban

and rural readerships through their work.

### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> While the Highsmith novel is set predominantly in rural Italy and Rome, the protagonist Tom Ripley repeatedly expresses his ultimate desire to go to Paris, with or without the queer object of his obsession, Dickie Greenleaf.

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**Biographies**

**Ralph J. Poole** is an American-German researcher who teaches as Professor of American Studies at the University of Salzburg, Austria. He taught at the University of Munich, Germany, at Fatih University in Istanbul, Turkey, and was a research scholar at CUNY's Center for Advanced Studies in Theater Arts in Manhattan. His book publications include a study on performing bodies in the Avant-Garde theater tradition, a book on satirical and autoethnographical "cannibal" texts, a collection of essays on "dangerous masculinities", and another collection on "queer Turkey". He is currently researching the Austrian *Heimatfilm* from a trans-European and genderqueer perspective. His research interests include gender and queer studies, popular culture, and transnational American studies.

**Ben Robbins** is a senior postdoctoral researcher in the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck and project leader of "Networked Narratives: Queer Exile Literature from 1900 to 1969," which is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). He is the author of *Faulkner's Hollywood Novels: Women between Page and Screen* (University of Virginia Press, August 2024). His work in the research areas of gender and queer studies, modernism, popular culture, and the digital humanities has appeared in the *Journal of Screenwriting*, the *Faulkner Journal*, *Genre*, *Studies in American Culture*, and in the edited collections *Hipster Culture* and *Digitizing Faulkner*. He has been a visiting research fellow at the EHESS in Paris and the Huntington Library in California.