

DISSERTATION

BEYOND THE RAINBOW: ON RURAL QUEER RHETORIC

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND THE RAINBOW: ON RURAL QUEER RHETORIC

This dissertation introduces rural queer rhetoric as a framework that elucidates place and class as critical animators of gender, sexuality, and race in contemporary Western LGBTQ+ subject formation. By examining Chappell Roan's rural queer celebrity persona, rural trans folks' speeches in conservative U.S. state legislatures, and a rural LGBTQ+ campout's organizational rhetoric, I identify emergent worldmaking tactics that disrupt metronormative logics embedded in mainstream U.S. culture and politics. My dissertation proffers rural queer rhetoric as a theoretically valuable site of academic inquiry and provides case studies of worldmaking praxis as models for everyday application. I examine how Chappell Roan performs worldmaking through her critical performance of self as placed rural queer bricolage, how transgender rhetors in rural U.S. state governments enact worldmaking as placed political praxis through liminal performance, and how participants at an annual campout hosted by a localized LGBTQ+ advocacy organization in a rural U.S. state engage in worldmaking with/against/despite the organization's placemaking rhetorics. Through both queer rhetorical criticism and participatory critical rhetoric approaches, this project contributes to scholarly conversations on intersectional inquiry, worldmaking, and place in research through its introduction of rural queer rhetoric as a significant site of meaning-making that both exposes the ways contemporary neoliberal Western LGBTQ+ identity politics enable totalizing metronormative logics and illuminates the possibilities and limitations of rural imaginaries in their capacity to facilitate queer struggle.

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DEDICATION

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What we cannot imagine cannot come into being.

—bell hooks, *All About Love*

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Literature Review

When the White House was illuminated in rainbow lights on June 26, 2015, many Americans felt a sense of hope in the future for people with marginalized sexualities and genders in the United States.¹ In the decade since the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* to protect same-sex marriage,² distinct nationalized LGBTQ+ constituencies, organizations, and imaginaries have emerged in particular ways in U.S. politics, albeit not all in the ways Americans envisioned in 2015. By 2024, over 500 bills in U.S. state legislatures would explicitly target “LGBTQ rights,”³ and Donald J. Trump would be elected for a second term as President of the United States on a campaign that would spend nearly \$40 million on anti-trans television advertisements in a single two-week period just before the election.⁴ Even as 61% of Americans consider legalizing same-sex marriage to be “good for society,”⁵ 49% of Americans favor or strongly favor requiring “trans people to use public bathrooms that match the sex they were assigned at birth.”⁶ These discrepancies between public perception of people in same-sex relationships and trans people in the U.S. demonstrate what Elijah Adiv Edelman describes as “a core structural flaw of the LGBT paradigm” in which “the material and lived differences between sexual subjectivity and gender identity are collapsed into a single ‘community.’”⁷ The “LGBTQ+ community” as a discursive formation tends to flatten queer identities, relationships, and experiences into a singular rhetorical framework that presumes (white) cultural hegemony.⁸

In the U.S., historians often trace the formation of “LGBTQ+” as a legible movement and imagined constituency to the 1969 Stonewall Riots.⁹ While “the gay liberation organizations that arose in the aftermath of the riots believed that protection from the police would depend on their forming coalitions with other social movements, including Black Power, radical feminisms, and Third World decolonization,”¹⁰ contemporary organizations such as LGBTQ+ Resource Centers on university campuses “often perpetuate singular identity... frameworks that differentially impact queer and trans [people] of color.”¹¹ What was once a largely coalitional movement predicated upon anti-assimilationist, anti-establishment principles became a flattened capital-friendly identity marker calcified into the very oppressive systems Stonewall Rioters such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera fought to disrupt. Jasbir K. Puar argues that this neoliberal cooption of gay liberation rhetoric demonstrates her theory of homonationalism, which “operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects.”¹²

Certainly, nationalized LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations like The Trevor Project and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) serve vital roles in facilitating queer survival, such as operating a suicide hotline that Trump recently shut down.¹³ Still, their existence is symptomatic of a broader failure of the contemporary LGBTQ+ movement to address the cultural and material needs out of which these organizations emerge, losing the vision of organizations like Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), whose primary purpose according to Sylvia Rivera was to “get kids into proper housing, and to get them education, to get them off drugs.”¹⁴ Thus, the depoliticized, flattened LGBTQ+ movement that wrings its proverbial hands over Target Pride sections and Bud Light commercials continues to

abandon the most vulnerable people it purports to serve, namely those who are also people of color, Indigenous, undocumented, disabled, incarcerated, and/or poor.¹⁵

One notable absence in the imagined LGBTQ+ community is people from rural and/or conservative parts of the U.S. Scholars have written about the ways in which metronormativity regulates queer subjectivities and politics. Metronormativity refers to a prevalent myth of queer migration from rural areas to urban places that functions as “a spatial narrative within which the [queer] subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy.”¹⁶ Specifically, metronormativity serves as a critical lens that challenges “the metropolitan as the terminus of queer world making” that characterizes dominant LGBTQ+ politics.¹⁷ Ryan Lee Cartwright explains that metronormative critique reveals a “teleology that envisions the countryside—and colonial ‘peripheries’—as sites of backwardness and repression, while envisioning the cosmopolitan city of the Global North as a lighthouse of freedom and tolerance to which rural and colonized queers are obliged to move.”¹⁸ Metronormativity as a critical frame exposes, rather than diminishes, the ways that the white, middle-class vision of the city as an LGBTQ+ utopia erases the struggles that queer communities of color in urban areas face as it also leaves rural queers behind.¹⁹

In the wake of the rapid dismantling of neoliberal LGBTQ+ strongholds in policy and culture since the start of Donald Trump’s second term, I contend that U.S. queers need a different kind of politics, a direction for collective action that refuses to depend on the whims of capitalist institutions and that does not rely on consumerist individualism to succeed. In other words, rainbow identity politics is not enough. I assert that uncovering the rhetorical forces at work in rural queer imaginaries offers valuable insights into ideological struggles that do not enjoy the luxuries of respectability and work against the very state apparatuses that seek to colonize and

sanitize queer politics. I agree with Patricia Hill Collins who writes, describing the epistemological value that Black women's lived experiences bring to feminist inquiry, "theory and intellectual creativity are not the province of a select few but instead emanate from a range of people."²⁰ Similarly, I believe that we have plenty to learn from rural queer folks' rhetorics, struggles, and politics.

According to independent journalist Erin Reed, some of the most dangerous U.S. states specifically for trans people include: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah.²¹ Six of the ten most rural states in the U.S. (as of 2020) are among Reed's list.²² Still, as much as 20 percent of LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. live in rural communities, which reflects a similar proportion of the overall number of Americans who live in rural areas.²³ In short, queer²⁴ people live in rural communities at similar rates as the general population of the U.S., and yet according to the Trevor Project, those who live in rural areas and small towns face "higher levels of rejection, discrimination, and victimization" than their peers who live in urban and suburban areas.²⁵

Although the situation for queer people in rural communities is certainly dire for some, especially in light of recent anti-trans legislative pushes by the newly-reelected Trump administration, pundits have been quick to characterize rural places and people as backwards, hateful, stupid, and "deplorable."²⁶ In an *MSNBC* interview promoting his new book *White Rural Rage* alongside journalist Paul Waldman, political science professor Tom Schaller describes white people in rural U.S. communities as "the most racist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-gay geo-demographic group in the country."²⁷ While Schaller's claim may be statistically true in a sense, his sentiment extends an existing rhetorical frame of rural communities as innately

homophobic and/or transphobic and therefore ultimately to blame for a number of societal ills, certainly including the hate and violence that queer people experience in rural areas. This rhetorical characterization of rural communities as inevitably anti-queer resembles some of the narratives surrounding the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 in Wyoming, which Jude Sheerin for *BBC* describes as “a rural, conservative heartland.”²⁸ Sheerin goes on to argue that “Shepard’s murder stoked the perception of Cowboy Country and flyover states in general as a danger zone for gay people.”²⁹ This depiction of rural “flyover states” as “a danger zone” for LGBTQ+ people reflects a broader rhetorical sentiment that rural communities in the U.S. are imagined as inevitably and universally anti-queer.³⁰

The notion that rural communities in the U.S. are homogenously and ubiquitously homophobic and/or transphobic reflects what Bud W. Jerke describes as “deeply held stereotypes about the rural generally and rural queers particularly. Rural dwellers are popularly depicted as backwards—as uneducated, intolerant, and dirty—or idyllic—as innocent and safe. Such stereotypes work to marginalize and distort rural realities.”³¹ On the contrary, queer people in these “rural realities”³² live complex and full lives, some of which include resisting homophobic/transphobic hate and working toward livable futures for everyone in their communities.³³ I contend that rhetorical sites of queer resistance by people in rural communities in the U.S. offer valuable insights into the ways in which place functions rhetorically to disrupt, shape, and imagine rural queer subjectivities, experiences, and politics. I approach rural queer rhetorics through literature on intersectionality, worldmaking, and place.

With these theoretical interventions in mind, my dissertation project is guided by three key questions which correlate to my analysis chapters and seek to offer interconnected yet distinct insights into rural queer rhetoric:

1. How can place be performed rhetorically through artistic expression of rural queer worldmaking?
2. How do trans rhetors in rural, conservative state houses of government perform worldmaking as placed political praxis?
3. How does a localized LGBTQ+ advocacy organization in a rural U.S. state invoke and/or disrupt emplaced queer subjectivities through its rhetoric?

While these questions correspond with each analysis chapter, all of them point the project toward the overarching goal of illuminating the placed rhetorical work that queer people in rural communities do to imagine and orient toward livable worlds. After highlighting key entry points in the literature on intersectionality, worldmaking, and place, I approach rural queerness from three distinct scopes in my analysis chapters by examining Chappell Roan at the macro level, rural trans rhetors in conservative state governments at the meso level, and rural queer belonging and subjectivity through localized organizations at the micro level.

Literature Review

Whiteness, Place, and Class in Intersectional Inquiry

This dissertation contributes to our understanding of intersectional criticism, particularly through an emphasis on class and place as salient aspects of intersectional inquiry.

Intersectionality as a political and intellectual frame emerges from Black feminist thought in the United States. Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as an early and prominent voice in intersectional theory investigates the simultaneous forces of race and gender on Black women in her groundbreaking analysis of three Title VII cases.³⁴ In each of these cases, Crenshaw centers the unique experiences of Black women as they resist erasure through the courts' definitions of race and sex discrimination as mutually exclusive.³⁵ Crenshaw offers a charge to those taking up

intersectionality as an analytical lens, writing: “through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics.”³⁶ This call firmly situates intersectionality not only as a powerful theoretical frame for scholars to interrogate overlapping systems of oppression but also as a coalitional political project that seeks to dismantle all forms of domination, including those that queer people in rural communities experience.

Patricia Hill Collins similarly situates Black feminist thought as fundamentally emergent from and grounded in the intellectual pursuits and lived experiences of Black women in the United States as well as a “collaborative enterprise” through which to struggle against intersecting forces of domination.³⁷ Collins also offers a potent visualization of intersectionality through her “matrix of domination” in which she argues there are “few pure victims or oppressors.”³⁸ Intersectionality is more about making sense of oppression as layered and multiple from marginalized positions and less about individualized identity politics. While individual experiences may at times be idiosyncratic with others, a core tenet of intersectionality as situated in Black feminist thought is the rejection of the neoliberal individualism that bell hooks identifies as the central principle of “feminism by bourgeois women” that characterizes (white) women’s movement for liberation. hooks instead argues that “women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression.”³⁹ Put differently, intersectionality is not a proverbial cleaver with which individuals sever themselves from others to stand apart and signal their unique oppressions, but rather intersectionality is a call to move toward each other in our differences and similarities to collaboratively (and at times imperfectly) name and struggle against systems of domination which affect nearly everyone. I assert that taking an intersectional analytical lens to rural queer

rhetorics demands scholarly attention to less visible vectors of oppression such as place and class.

From its introduction to communication studies by scholars such as Lisa Flores⁴⁰ and Brenda J. Allen,⁴¹ intersectional theory continues to inform contemporary scholarship in the discipline. Remaining true to intersectionality's political and intellectual principles, Isaac West opens his essay about the rhetoric of PISSAR (People in Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms) by writing, "One of the most exciting and productive sites for queer coalitional politics may be... the linkage between the everyday concerns of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transpeople (LGBTs), and people with disabilities."⁴² Though West situates his analysis of PISSAR in rhetorics of place, space, and identity, he positions his work in conversation with intersectional scholarship in feminist and ethnic studies.⁴³ West's suggestion for expanding the theory to include crip theory/disability studies is just one of several innovative directions that communication studies scholars have taken up in exploring and imagining possibilities for intersectional work, which inspires my interrogation of whiteness, place, and class as salient intersections in experiences of rural queerness.

Additionally, Kent A. Ono discusses one possible future direction for intersectional scholarship in communication studies through his theory of contextual fields of rhetoric, which he defines as "the situating elements used to make sense of the rhetorical text, texts, intertexts, transtexts, paratexts, or even 'discourse formations' under study."⁴⁴ Through contextual fields, Ono offers an instructive way to think about intersectional criticism beyond surface-level inclusion politics by arguing that critics should invoke context in meaningful ways that shed light on the workings of power and identity in their analysis.⁴⁵ I assert that attention to contextual fields is essential in intersectional criticism, as they ground identity in its material, political

manifestations. For example, I attend to the contextual fields of whiteness, class, and place in addition to gender and sexuality as critical intersections in rural queer rhetoric to elucidate how queer people disrupt, shape, and imagine their subjectivities in rural communities. Contextual fields invoke a critical orientation to intersectional work by turning scholars toward the structural elements of identity, which certainly aligns with the ways Black feminists theorize intersectionality as a coalitional political project.⁴⁶

While many communication studies scholars have meaningfully taken up intersectional approaches to their scholarship in recent decades, Cindy Griffin and Karma Chávez offer an important reminder that these developments are only just beginning to respond to the noticeable absence of certain voices and perspectives in the discipline more broadly.⁴⁷ Intersectional scholarship in communications studies exists in a disciplinary environment defined by hegemonic forces such as whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberalism. Indeed, critical scholars who take up intersectional approaches must continue to resist the misrepresentation and cooption of their work when it challenges existing power structures. Griffin and Chávez assert that every person exists in a particular social location at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class and that “no individual is outside this paradigm, however much our scholarship has tried to deny this or to suggest that only some are ‘intersectional bodies.’”⁴⁸ I agree with Collins that “a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors,”⁴⁹ implicating even those individuals who see themselves as somehow “less intersectional” in the broader system of social hierarchies in some form or another.

In the spirit of conducting intersectional research beyond those marked as “intersectional bodies,”⁵⁰ I turn to queer communication in rural U.S. places. Since rural U.S. communities tend to be racially homogenous, queer people in those settings often are not to be considered

“intersectional.” However, I assert that an intersectional approach to the communication of queer people in rural U.S. communities could highlight the ways in which hegemonic rhetorics of whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberalism function in places outside the “metronormative”⁵¹ urban frame. This dissertation contributes to intersectional theory by attending to whiteness, place, and class as particular intersections of identity that simultaneously enable and constrain belonging in rural queer communities.⁵² This work also supports the idea that systems of domination interlock to enforce social hierarchies on multiple fronts simultaneously. For instance, even though I experience heteropatriarchy as a white queer person very differently than queer people of color, my nonconforming body still faces policing by white supremacist power structures that also discipline gender and sexuality in particular ways. Examining whiteness, place, and class as emergent “contextual fields”⁵³ of how we rhetorically imagine and experience rural communities offers valuable insights into the already complex ways queer people in the U.S. experience gender and sexuality as raced, placed, and classed.

Worldmaking as Placed Praxis

My second contribution to communication studies literature will advance an understanding of worldmaking as a placed practice as demonstrated by rural queer rhetorics of resistance. Worldmaking theory emerges in part from Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s essay “Sex in Public” where they interrogate heteronormativity as a regulatory discursive force on acceptable (read: livable) private and public lives.⁵⁴ Berlant and Warner describe worldmaking as an integral feature of queer counterpublics, asserting that “the queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. World making... is dispersed through incommensurate registers, by definition unrealizable as community or

identity.”⁵⁵ Worldmaking according to Berlant and Warner is an inherently ephemeral, fleeting practice of making life livable in all the contexts in which queer people exist, including rural communities. In a neoliberal society that demands subjective legibility through the rigid structures of cisheteronormativity, whiteness, and ableism, worldmaking embraces the infinite possibilities of imagining otherwise. Citing Berlant and Warner, Gust A. Yep further describes queer worldmaking as “the opening and creation of spaces without a map, the invention and proliferation of ideas without an unchanging and predetermined goal, and the expansion of individual freedom and collective possibilities without the constraints of suffocating identities and restrictive membership.”⁵⁶ Worldmaking as a response to rigid societal norms, imposed in part by discourse,⁵⁷ offers queer people imaginative alternatives to navigate their existence.

It is important to emphasize that queer people have engaged in worldmaking praxis long before academics began theorizing about it. Hailey N. Otis and Thomas R. Dunn note that although queer worldmaking emerges in academic literature in the late 1990s and early 2000s, “the doing of queer worldmaking is scattered across LGBT+ and queer cultures of the past and present – hidden beneath the surface or between the cracks of dominant publics and practiced and performed in ephemera of queer life.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, queer people have employed parallel yet distinct survival practices such as bricolage, or making do with “whatever materials [are] at hand.”⁵⁹ Queer people navigate their discursive and material realities by forging livable lives for themselves with bits and pieces of their worlds, even in the most dire of circumstances. For example, Karma Chávez explores “the subversive potential of performativity” through the life and death of Victoria Arellano, who was a Mexican transgender woman with HIV and who died in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody in 2007.⁶⁰ Even while sick and imprisoned in a men’s detention facility, Arellano joyfully enacted her queer reality using the

performative tools at hand, as she regularly sang and danced to Celine Dion and Mariah Carey while incarcerated.⁶¹ Although bricolage and performativity are distinct forms of queer worldmaking, they both demonstrate how worldmaking can function as queer praxis that emerges from placed realities.

However, while worldmaking offers queer and trans people like Victoria Arellano paths for survival, worldmaking is not merely a somber response to hardship and precarity. Lore/tta LeMaster articulates the healing capacities of worldmaking, writing that as “we come to process our injuries, begin the work of healing... we enact queer worlds.”⁶² Emily Krebs also envisions worldmaking as a healing force, arguing that it can provide ways of living with the desire to die for suicidal trans and queer people.⁶³ K. J. Rawson also explores transgender worldmaking possibilities in internet-based historical activism spaces.⁶⁴ In his analysis of online transgender archives, Rawson asserts that “to argue that ‘everyone is a part of history’ is an act of worldmaking and empowerment that attempts to deconstruct barriers separating the stories that are worthy of the historical record from those that are not.”⁶⁵ Indeed, worldmaking is an inventive, creative, and resistive power that queer and trans people can draw upon not only to survive but make their lives livable, not in spite of the places they exist but from the material realities they experience.

I view this power described by scholars of queer worldmaking as a rhetorical praxis and resource. The constitutive nature of worldmaking provides rural queer people with ways of imagining their everyday lives beyond the cisheteronormative rhetorical frames of legibility that society offers them. By refusing the metronormative call to flee rural communities for the promise of visible life in urban areas, rural queers assert their claim to exist illegibly in the places they call home through worldmaking praxis. Certainly, some rural queers do leave their

hometowns for a variety of reasons, but that does not mean that they can or should surrender their rural queerness to conform to (cis)hetero- or homonormative cultural expectations. The rural context in particular extends existing scholarship on queer worldmaking through its situatedness in place, as many scholars have inadvertently identified through their examinations of minoritarian public performances of disidentification,⁶⁶ gender liminality in fictional texts,⁶⁷ transgender historical activism in online spaces,⁶⁸ and queer public memory and monuments,⁶⁹ to name a few. Additionally, V. Jo Hsu “emphasizes that belonging is not stable, guaranteed, or predictable” and conceptualizes “home” as a verb in which rural queer people can constellate “stories that determine with whom, where, and how we belong.”⁷⁰ I consider worldmaking to be the rhetorical praxis with which rural queer people “constellate” placed belonging, which helps me illuminate the ways in which queer people negotiate narratives of (un)belonging in rural U.S. communities.

Rhetoric, Place, and Rurality

Another key contribution this dissertation provides to communication studies literature is an interrogation of the rural as a significant touchpoint in how we think about place and rhetoric. Rurality can be difficult to define, as it carries layered (sometimes conflicting) geographic, socioeconomic, anthropologic, cultural, political, and rhetorical meanings depending on the context of its use. The term is further complicated in the United States, as rurality and urbanity are often conflated with regional identity. For example, even though the Midwest and the South have their share of large cities, they often stand in for rurality in politics and popular culture. Carly Thomsen describes the influence of rural “geographical imaginaries” on urban places in the Midwest, writing about South Dakota specifically:

Considering that Sioux Falls is *the* city in the state—the place where people living in smaller nearby or not-so-nearby towns visit for groceries, shopping, movies, and special

occasions—[the] characterization of Sioux Falls as rural may seem surprising. Such a position, I suggest, is as informed by the culture and aesthetics of the town, as Herring might emphasize, as it is broader geographical imaginaries. “The Midwest” is understood as rural and, therefore, its urban areas are rural too—both for some of the people who live there and also for those who imagine it from afar.⁷¹

That said, though it may be too far a stretch to imagine a Midwestern city like Chicago as rural compared to Sioux Falls, as a downstate Illinoisan myself, I can say confidently that both Chicago and non-Chicago communities throughout the state rely heavily on mutually constituted, if not overt, rhetorics of the rural and the urban, and their cultural affiliations, in identity and politics.

Conversely, though states like New York and California certainly have their share of places that might be considered rural based upon metrics such as population density or economic profile, they do not necessarily carry the cultural weight that New York City and Los Angeles bear in the broader narrative representations exported from these regions. Scott Herring asserts that the closer one looks at the defining line between “rural” and “urban,”

Designating any area, population, locale, or, by proxy, person as ruralized while defining any area, population, locale, or person as urbanized starts to seem less like a descriptive act and much more like a prescriptive project. When their semantic surfaces are scratched, the terms “rural” and “urban”... appear to function more like language games... Any “urban/rural” distinction is as much context-specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and... standardizing as it is geographically verifiable.⁷²

As Herring and others emphasize, rurality and urbanity are not as simple to differentiate as they may appear on the surface, not to mention the countless suburban and exurban communities that fall somewhere between city and country. In the U.S. specifically, rurality and urbanity are also in messy conversation with electoral politics, with “blue” states and “red” states often entangled with urbanity and rurality, respectively. Census data, city limits, and economic measures only tell part of the story, one that is always already partial and value laden.

Place as a rhetorical mechanism plays an important role in shaping the experiences, perceptions, and identities of people in rural communities, particularly queer folks. Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie articulate “critical place inquiry” as “research that takes up... methodological approaches that are informed by the embeddedness of social life in and with places, and that seeks to be a form of action in responding to... globalization and neoliberalism, settler colonialism, and environmental degradation.”⁷³ The critical place perspective offers an important materialist lens through which to view the rich communicative lives of rural queer people where they are as well as the placed historical context they exist within. The critical place perspective can challenge the idea that the city is automatically what Amy L. Stone calls a “place of tolerance... like San Francisco or New York that is central in the gay imaginary, constructing the rest of the country as monolithically intolerant and inhospitable.”⁷⁴ This insistence on “the city” as a homogenous utopia where queer people will inevitably be safer reveals the rhetorical work that place does in imagining both urban and rural communities.

Additionally, Jack Halberstam theorizes queer place through the lens of postmodern geographies, writing “queer studies of sexuality and space present the opportunity for a developed understanding of the local, the nonmetropolitan... and the situated.”⁷⁵ This return to the situated and the local is echoed by E. Cram, who specifically points to the recent turn to space and place rhetoric in communication studies which “fuses symbolic and material domains with an array of critical orientations and practices.”⁷⁶ This fusion of symbolic and material, as distinct yet mutually constituting, opens possibilities to understand rural queer communication as the instrument which constructs the rural imaginary and is informed by placed material realities. I understand queer geographies to be related yet distinct from place as a rhetorical process, as

place functions primarily in the realm of the imaginary even as it is informed by material realities yet not confined by geography. Put simply, places, like borders, travel with us.⁷⁷

These placed material realities in which rural queer people live are highly politicized, particularly in the United States. To be sure, places of all kinds are embedded in political environments that come to bear on the material experiences and imaginations of people in those places. That said, the political placing of rural areas in the United States is undoubtedly connected to the cultural perceptions of (queer) people living there. For example, Appalachia is one of many politicized rural places in the United States that carries a particular cultural imaginary that impacts queer Appalachians. Pervasive stereotypes of Appalachian people as hillbillies, gunslingers, and moonshiners⁷⁸ have developed into contemporary cultural frames that situate the region as the primary engine of the opioid epidemic,⁷⁹ among other social ills.⁸⁰ This rhetorical framing of Appalachia connects to (or perhaps justifies) the widespread exploitation that Appalachians in rural areas face, including but not limited to higher poverty rates and worse health outcomes compared to their peers in urban places.⁸¹

These material discrepancies do not exist in a vacuum and in fact highlight the political necessity of framing rural (queer) people and places as backwards and in need of neoliberal (colonial) intervention.⁸² Of course, the story of Appalachian exploitation began and continues with the U.S. settler colonial project in which Congress facilitated the ethnic cleansing of Native peoples from Appalachia with the passing of the Indian Removal Act of 1830.⁸³ While white rural queer Appalachians undoubtedly face substantial hardship and exploitation, and Appalachia is hardly racially or ethnically homogenous, whiteness remains a driving mechanism in contemporary notions of place in the region as enacted by U.S. settler colonialism. Indeed,

Appalachia is a historically sedimented and complex example of a highly politicized rural place which transcends its geography in both economic and cultural imaginary senses.

Visibility as a component of place as it functions in cultural imaginaries is also not always feasible or desirable for queer people in rural areas.⁸⁴ In her monograph on LGBTQ women in rural South Dakota and Minnesota, Thomsen articulates the ways that neoliberal “visibility politics” render rural queer women in the Midwest illegible to urban, nationalized activist movements and organizations, resulting in their alienation from these projects.⁸⁵ Additionally, Cartwright explains that some of this illegibility in the form of “white rural nonconformity” contributes to the imagining of rural places in the U.S. as “anti-idyll,” which they argue reifies whiteness, ableism, and cishetermnormativity as intersecting forces of power, violence, and oppression.⁸⁶ Expanding on both Thomsen’s and Cartwright’s insights, I view rural queer communication as a significant site of inventive, and at times illegible, placed resistance, survival, and imagination that is instructive for both queer scholarship and queer livability. I assert that understanding rural queerness as informed, yet not constrained, by geography opens opportunities to think about the rhetorical work that it does in the realm of the imagination.

Rural Queerness, Queer Rurality, and Metronormativity

Although a significant number of queer people in the United States call rural communities home (approximately one in five U.S. adults who self-identify as LGBTQ+ live in rural communities),⁸⁷ discourse about LGBTQ+ people often forwards a “metronormative” narrative – the notion that “real” queerness only exists in urban “gayborhoods.”⁸⁸ The concept of “coming out of the closet” comes from the construction of public and private sexuality as an impermeable boundary – to be understood as queer is discursively constructed as either being “out” or “not out” of the closet.⁸⁹ Contemporary conceptions of rural queerness diminish the

experience to being “stuck in the closet” and suggest that true liberation comes from fleeing the backwards countryside to be “out and proud.” In the Western metronormative frame, one cannot enact legible queer citizenship without pledging allegiance to a “gay identity” by “coming out.” While this experience is certainly liberatory for some LGBTQ+ Americans, it diminishes the variety of queer experiences to a restrictive binary: rural=not out + not queer and urban=out + queer. Kath Weston writes that “the gay imaginary is not just a dream of a freedom to ‘be gay’ that requires an urban location, but a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between rural and urban life.”⁹⁰ This dissertation responds to what Fenton Litwiller refers to as “the rural turn”⁹¹ in gender and sexuality studies by elucidating rural queerness/queer rurality as (distinct yet interrelated) rhetorical phenomena that work with, against, and despite metronormative logics that undergird contemporary LGBTQ+ politics in the U.S.

Adhering to a strict urban-rural binary fails to capture the nuances of being queer in rural America. This limited understanding of queerness enacts a neoliberal identity politic that does not account for the violence experienced by LGBTQ+ people who are “out” in “safer” urban places while also erasing the spectrum of rural queerness that often includes community, joy, and vibrance. At the same time, metronormative narratives diminish and flatten the struggles that queer people in urban communities face every day.⁹² I agree with E. Cram that rather than reifying a binary and/or hierarchical relationship between urbanity and rurality, metronormative critique instead provides a theoretical avenue for challenging assumptions about queer migration, place, and belonging.⁹³ Certainly, rural U.S. communities are often unwelcome and violent places for LGBTQ+ people, but juxtaposing rural and urban queerness as opposites or adversaries restricts the subversive potential of situated rural queer experiences and expressions. While rural U.S. American scripts appear on the surface to conflict with scripts of

metronormative queerness, queer folks in rural places navigate both rural and queer realities in inventive ways to survive and live authentically.

One intersection worth exploring to examine the possibilities of queer worldmaking is rural queerness/queer rurality. While related, I consider these terms to describe distinct units of analysis. “Rural queerness” centers the queer experiences of nonnormative genders, sexualities, and/or social arrangements in rural contexts. Rural queer people may (or may not) associate with terms like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, LGBTQ+, Two-spirit, etc. On the other hand, “queer rurality” centers the ways in which rurality itself is often already a queer orientation to power structures. Ryan Cartwright describes a particular form of rurality as “anti-idyll” which refers to the “long-standing cultural trope and social optic that produces tales of white rural nonconformity... the anti-idyll does not refer to social nonconformity itself, but to the... cultural narratives naming poor rural white communities as sites of perverse sexuality, deformed bodies, deranged minds.”⁹⁴ The lived otherness that queer rurality represents juxtaposes hegemonic identities, orientations, and relationalities that dominate respectable social life in the city or the suburb. While this dissertation explicitly centers rural queerness as its analytical frame, queer rurality implicitly informs the ways that place functions rhetorically to imbue particular ways of life with political and cultural meaning.

The defiance of both rural and queer scripts that I analyze in this dissertation opens salient opportunities for theorizing about rural queer resistance. Attending to performance specifically, I turn to Judith Butler who writes that “just as a script may be enacted in various ways... so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space.”⁹⁵ These social scripts define both an individual’s experience of identity in culture and an individual’s relationships with others. Karma Chávez writes that “exploring space as relational helps to

divulge how certain bodies get constructed in very particular contexts.”⁹⁶ If both social scripts and spaces are at least in part relationally bound, it follows that disrupting those scripts and spaces has implications for an individual’s experience of liminality as “betwixt-and-between” identities and relationships.⁹⁷ For instance, performing both rurality and queerness disrupts cultural rules about what kinds of people live in rural, conservative areas (not queers) and where queers live (the city) on the individual level as well as the idea that these two groups are diametrically opposed to each other on the relational level.

Additionally, theorizing space through queer geographies informs my understanding of rural queerness in cultural contexts. Jack Halberstam defines queer space within the frame of postmodern geographies as “the place-making practices... in which queer people engage and... [produce] queer counterpublics.”⁹⁸ In Halberstam’s view, queer people are not simply products of their cultural environments but agents of their belonging in local contexts. By definition, place-making practices in contexts such as rural communities “carry out a labor; creating maintaining, and/or shifting narratives about the places in which we live and how they produce us.”⁹⁹ Thus, I consider performances of rural queerness to be inseparable from the peculiarities of placed cultural contexts,¹⁰⁰ including those enacted in the case studies that I explore here.

The placed contexts rural queer people live in create unique tensions of (un)belonging that are idiosyncratic in important ways. Carly Thomsen explores the performative tensions of rural queerness by interrogating the politics of (in)visibility in her monograph on LGBTQ+ women in rural Minnesota and South Dakota.¹⁰¹ For Thomsen, the inclusion politics proffered by national, urban-focused initiatives such as National Coming Out Day assume that visibility is both feasible and desirable for rural queer people.¹⁰² For this reason, I consider ephemeral performances of rural queer worlds to be an opportunity not necessarily for rural queer folks to

be legible or visible, which would imply some sort of legitimacy or stability by social forces. Instead, rural queer worldmaking offers an opportunity to demonstrate that other worlds are possible, that being queer and rural, for example, is a reality that many people live every day.

Queer resistance in the contemporary U.S. context requires ongoing attention considering the persistent anti-trans rhetoric and violence that presently occupies political discourse. My approach to queer worldmaking provides a path forward for queer people in the cultural contexts they exist within, including rural U.S. communities. By examining the rhetorical contradictions and possibilities that emerge from clashes between rural and queer identity scripts in this dissertation, I articulate placed queer bricolage, liminal performance, and place-making as opportunities for worldmaking praxis that can be utilized as a tool for queer resistance in similar contexts. That said, I do not position the case studies I bring together from rural U.S. communities as directly translatable to other contexts. Instead, I offer specific insights into particular forms of rural queer worldmaking that respond to situated rhetorical exigencies and invite future scholars to similarly consider worldmaking tactics that attend to unique political conditions. Specifically, this dissertation offers noteworthy insights into the ways in which theorizing placed worldmaking in everyday life opens opportunities for rhetoricians to reimagine praxis with scholars and practitioners in performance studies as well as queer and trans studies.

Rural Queer Rhetoric in Three Case Studies

As I investigate the placed worldmaking possibilities in sites of rural queer rhetoric, it is necessary to provide a preliminary description of the guiding theoretical frame that directs this dissertation. I contend that what I identify as rural queer rhetoric emerges from places that are imagined as oppositional to metronormative queerness and shaped by particular iterations of whiteness as they intersect with class. I emphasize that placed rhetorics are imagined realities

grounded in, yet not beholden to, materiality and geography. Indeed, the imagined dichotomy of rural versus urban is not nearly as neatly segmented as metronormative narratives would imply. Carly Thomson explains that the closer one looks at these supposedly neat divisions, one discovers “the necessarily blurry boundaries between the urban and rural... [which are] as informed by... culture and aesthetics... as... broader geographical imaginaries. ‘The Midwest’ is understood as rural and, therefore, its urban areas are rural too—both for some of the people who live there and also for those who imagine it from afar.”¹⁰³

In my ascription of the rhetorics I examine in this dissertation as rural and queer, I do not mean to suggest that queer rurality/rural queerness is homogenous nor that all queer people in rural areas are the same. I also do not intend to erase the very real hardships that queer folks face in many rural/conservative places in the U.S., nor do I deny the ways that white rural communities in the U.S. have contributed to the violence and suffering of their Black and Indigenous neighbors. Rather, I seek to develop a lens through which to reveal the ways that queer rurality/rural queerness can rhetorically function to both enable and disrupt the power structures that regulate the overlapping (if at times contradictory) logics of white supremacy, cisheteronormativity, and economic and political hierarchy. I echo Cartwright that the whiteness myth that undergirds American social order “structurally disadvantage[es] communities of color for failing to meet white cisheteronormative demands. This is true for racialized subjects in the country just as it is in the city, as rural landscapes are also subjected to racialized capitalist forces.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, a thorough investigation of rural queer rhetorics as both outcomes of and responses to racialized, gendered, emplaced cultural realities can expose and disrupt logics of domination and erasure.

In this dissertation, I explore three case studies to support my conception of rural queer rhetoric as a valuable theoretical frame: (1) Chappell Roan’s public persona as a lesbian drag artist from Willard, Missouri; (2) rural transgender speakers protesting legislative attacks on gender-affirming care in their home states of Arkansas, Kentucky, and Montana; and (3) a 5-day campout hosted by a state-based 501(c)(3) LGBTQ+ rights advocacy organization in a rural, conservative U.S. state. These case studies will allow me to investigate rural queer rhetoric from different methodological and theoretical approaches.* I conduct queer rhetorical criticism in my analysis chapters on Chappell Roan and trans speakers in rural state governments. By participating in a 5-day campout with a state-based LGBTQ+ advocacy organization, I use a participatory critical rhetoric approach. These chapters also represent a wide range of analytical scopes, from Chappell Roan commanding national if not global influence as a rising “queer pop icon,”¹⁰⁵ to rural trans speakers talking back¹⁰⁶ to the state governments that sought to erase them, to an LGBTQ+ campout in the Mountain West wilderness. I again emphasize that I bring these case studies together not to suggest that these people, places, and utterances are homogenous – this rural queer rhetorical lens contains contradictions along with its resonances. Rather, I assert that each of these unique case studies provides novel insights into the ways that queer rurality/rural queerness and the undercurrents of power it might reveal are imagined rhetorically.

Chappell Roan: The Rise of the Rural Queer

“For all the queer kids in the Midwest watching right now, I see you. I understand you, because I’m one of you. And don’t ever let anyone tell you that you can’t be exactly who you want to be, bitch.”¹⁰⁷ Adorned in chainmail and fingerless gloves, rising pop and drag sensation

* I declare that I did not use generative AI in the development, analysis, or writing in any stage of this dissertation.

Chappell Roan dedicated her Best New Artist award at the 2024 MTV Video Music Awards to a community often overlooked by national LGBTQ+ movements: rural queers.¹⁰⁸ While Chappell Roan is certainly not the only queer artist to command international attention, her rise to fame as an unapologetic queer woman and drag artist from Willard, Missouri, is unparalleled, especially in a political era defined by anti-queer rhetoric and violence. Introducing herself at her 2024 Coachella performance as “‘your favorite artist's favorite artist’ and ‘your dream girl's dream girl’ in a nod to drag artist Sasha Colby,”¹⁰⁹ Chappell’s public persona is decidedly unabashed and bold.

Chappell Roan’s explosion into the public eye directly corresponds with her assertion of a rural queer ethos, largely through the figure of the Midwest Princess. Her performances as a drag artist as well as a vocalist serve as a salient cultural and political disruption of dominant narratives that define queerness and rurality as antithetical and mutually exclusive. In an interview with Trevor Ault on *ABC News*, Chappell states:

I love where I came from... I think a lot of people on the coasts... put all Midwesterners in one type of category. But there are drag queens, there are people who are trans, there are massive queer communities that are just kind of hidden away in these teeny tiny towns, and I feel like that’s who my real community is... All the people who maybe aren’t allowed to be out and proud all the time.¹¹⁰

By both naming and claiming rural queer communities as hers, Chappell opens salient opportunities for her massive public audience to challenge normative rhetorics about both rural life and queer people.

Examining Chappell Roan’s performances offer valuable insights into the role of place in worldmaking as rural queer resistance. Specifically, I contend that Chappell’s performance as a drag artist connects place and worldmaking through a tactic of queer bricolage, which “describ[es] a craftsperson who inventively fashions new objects using only tools and materials

‘at-hand.’”¹¹¹ Thinking about Chappell Roan’s worldmaking as bricolage opens a theoretical opportunity to ground her performances in place. In other words, the raw materials that Chappell Roan uses to craft worlds otherwise come from her grounded, material experiences growing up in Willard, Missouri, as well as her time dreaming about and eventually moving to Los Angeles, California.¹¹² The realm of the rhetorical imaginary has its roots in place. Chappell’s references to the Midwest and her rural queer ethos travel with her as she performs, distinguishing place as grounded in but distinct from geography.¹¹³

Additionally, Chappell Roan’s public presence illuminates the dynamics of both race and class in addition to gender and sexuality as components of intersectional visibility.¹¹⁴ Specifically, Chappell’s worldmaking performances highlight the complex components of whiteness as not only situated in her gender and sexuality but also her placed rurality. By taking up Kent A. Ono’s contextual fields of rhetoric as intersectional criticism,¹¹⁵ I assert that Chappell’s public persona both upholds and disrupts whiteness as it regulates the place and class dynamics inherent to her rural queerness. Through intersectional inquiry, I interrogate how whiteness becomes (in)visible¹¹⁶ in relation to place, class, gender, and sexuality through Chappell Roan’s worldmaking rhetoric.

In Chapter 2, I examine Chappell Roan’s public presence as a rural queer woman and drag artist to answer the following question: **How can place be performed rhetorically through artistic expression of rural queer worldmaking?** To answer this question, I analyze Chappell’s public presence through her performative outputs as a group of texts, namely her live shows, social media presence, and interviews. Since Chappell’s release of her music video for “HOT TO GO!” from her debut album *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess* on August 23, 2023, seems to punctuate her rise to fame. For this reason, I selected texts starting from that date.

I concluded my collection of texts with her Grammys performance on February 2, 2025. Since performing at the Grammys represents one of the highest honors a musician can earn in the United States, I consider this date to reflect the end of her ascent to popular recognition. By conducting intersectional criticism of these texts, I elucidate the ways in which Chappell Roan enacts rural queer worldmaking rhetorics on a macro-level public stage through her performance of placed queer bricolage. Ultimately, I argue that Chappell Roan employs placed queer bricolage through her critical performativity of self to engage in generative rhetorical disruption of hegemonic identity scripts and to orient her audiences toward worlds otherwise.

Trans Liminal Performance as Worldmaking in Rural U.S. Places

On January 20, 2025, the day of Donald Trump's second Presidential Inauguration, he signed executive orders declaring that "the U.S. government will recognize only two sexes, male and female,"¹¹⁷ making one of his administration's priorities of effectively eradicating transgender people abundantly clear. This executive order follows a long list of legislative actions taken by state governments against trans and queer existence in recent years, with 2024 alone seeing 533 distinct anti-LGBTQ+ proposed in state governments across the U.S.¹¹⁸ As legislative horrors against trans people continue to unfold each day under the Trump administration, finding tangible paths for resistance becomes increasingly exigent for queer survival. With these dire circumstances in mind, particularly for those trans and queer people who are not protected from executive orders by their home states, I turn to performances of disruption by rural trans people in conservative states to answer the following question: **How do trans rhetors in rural, conservative state houses of government perform worldmaking as placed political praxis?**

In Chapter 3, I argue that liminal performance as a worldmaking tactic disrupts repressive social hierarchies by calling forth a rhetorical collectivity to witness the farce of rigid identity binaries and to imagine worlds otherwise. My texts include speeches given by transgender people in rural U.S. states: Emma Curtis in Kentucky, Zooey Zephyr in Montana, and Justin Sarlo in Arkansas. These trans rhetors in rural U.S. state governments exemplify the possibilities of liminal performance by asserting their corporeal presence, attending to their own cultural contexts, and reclaiming humanity through relationality. This chapter extends Loretta LeMaster's scholarship on liminality and Erin Rand's scholarship on rhetorical collectivity by theorizing liminal performance as a practice in which the rhetor enacts a world with their audience that exists beyond the totalizing logics of violent social hierarchies.¹¹⁹ As a distinct rhetorical form, Emma's, Zooey's, and Justin's liminal performances actualize worldmaking theory as queer political praxis.

While people of color and Indigenous queer people live in rural communities around the U.S., whiteness shapes rural imaginaries in particular ways. I establish my thinking on whiteness as a placed rhetorical mechanism through Thomas K. Nakayama's and Robert L. Krizek's theorizing, specifically in their understanding of whiteness as an "invisible center."¹²⁰ In the United States, whiteness functions as a cultural default. As a white person, I never have to clarify that I am European American – by the very nature of my whiteness, I am assumed to belong in the U.S. However, the fact that whiteness is unmarked in the U.S. does not mean that it functions in the same ways across intersections of social stratification such as gender, sexuality, class, and, as I articulate throughout this project, place. Cartwright articulates how the rural idyll works rhetorically in public imaginaries to obscure the ways that "whiteness itself functions as a 'consolation prize'" for nonnormative rural white people.¹²¹ Cartwright explains further that even

though poor rural whites were historically promised legal superiority over people of color, “white supremacy could not guarantee individuals’ economic success or material goods beyond the value of white identity itself.”¹²² Thus, *placed* whiteness regulates rural identity in salient yet elusive ways, which I interrogate from an intersectional perspective as I examine Zooey’s, Justin’s, and Emma’s liminal performances of rural queerness in their speeches.

Organizational Rhetoric as Placemaking at Rural LGBTQ+ Campout

As unthinkable atrocities against a number of marginalized communities, namely queer and trans people around the U.S., continue to define Donald Trump’s second term as President, strengthening relational bonds and protecting each other in all the places we call home has become essential for our survival. LeMaster emphasizes the need for trans and queer relationality in a country where national movements and organizations, even well-meaning ones like National Coming Out Day,¹²³ increasingly erase and fail some of the most vulnerable queer folks, many of which live and love in rural communities throughout the U.S.¹²⁴ Since rural queer people are not already assumed to belong in national organizations and movements in certain ways, I seek to answer the following question: **How does a localized LGBTQ+ advocacy organization in a rural U.S. state invoke and/or disrupt emplaced queer subjectivities through its rhetoric?**

To ascertain how this organization invokes and/or disrupts embodied subjectivities as well as emplaced narratives of belonging, I examine the organization’s messaging through both its text-based and field-based rhetorical artifacts in Chapter 4. Specifically, I analyze its website, Instagram, and Facebook pages along with physical materials I obtained at Campout.

Additionally, I participated in the 5-day campout event as a camper to physically immerse myself in the organizations rhetorical processes. I investigate the campout’s organizational rhetoric using a *participatory critical rhetoric* approach, which Michael Middleton et al. describe as “a

set of research practices that bring qualitative methods of data collection... into the process of rhetorical criticism... to account for the rhetoric of the everyday... and to open space for critics to analyze, participate with, and contribute to an emancipatory form of critique.”¹²⁵ By experiencing rhetoric in the field, Kathleen M. de Onís asserts that “these *in situ* practices require that we leave our manuscripts, lecture halls, and seminar tables to interact with communities beyond academia... [and allow] matters of public concern to feel present and may move us to become more invested in these causes, both academically and politically.”¹²⁶ By “being there” at the campout, I was able to experience the ways the organization’s rhetoric moves and is moved by me as a camper, allowing me to ascertain the ways the organization directs rural queer subjectivities.¹²⁷ Ultimately, I argue that rural queer worlds¹²⁸ emerged from the rhetorical collisions between the organization’s top-down placemaking efforts and campers’ bottom-up place-making realities.

On Rural Queer Worldmaking

In Chapter 5, I synthesize the ways in which this dissertation exposes metronormative logics inherent in Western LGBTQ+ politics and offers rural queer worldmaking rhetoric as a framework to understand how queer folks in rural communities create and orient towards livable worlds. Through Chappell Roan’s placed queer bricolage, rural transgender activists’ liminal performances in state legislatures, and Campout participants’ place-making efforts serve as exemplars of rural queer worldmaking tactics. Chapter 5 also identifies key interdisciplinary contributions this dissertation makes to rhetorical studies as well as gender and sexuality studies literature, namely in its interrogations of rurality and whiteness in intersectional inquiry, the vital role place plays in worldmaking praxis, and the ways rural queerness both challenges and is shaped by metronormative narratives about queer identity, being, and belonging. Lastly, this

project places rural queer worldmaking in complicated context and conversation with Western LGBTQ+ history, discourse, and politics.

In this dissertation, I identify what I consider to be five defining features of rural queer worldmaking rhetorics: (1) relationality, (2) placed storytelling, (3) collective witnessing, (4) coalition-building, and (5) grassroots meaning-making. *Relationality* refers to the embeddedness of rural queer worldmaking in placed social contexts. *Placed storytelling* describes the ways in which place both enables and constrains the cultural narratives available to the rural queer rhetors throughout this dissertation. *Collective witnessing* refers to the ways that the rural queer worldmaking rhetorics in this project orient audiences toward possible worlds beyond the ideological constraints imposed by both anti-trans and anti-queer messages as well as metronormative LGBTQ+ politics. *Coalition-building*, or forming group ties across difference to facilitate collective action, emerges from each case study as a central aspect of rural queer worldmaking rhetorics. Finally, *grassroots meaning-making* refers to the ways in which rural queer worldmaking rhetorics resist and/or repurpose dominant narratives about identity and belonging. Though these features are not exclusive to rural queer worldmaking, they each serve as salient theoretical throughlines across case studies that work together to support the academic and practical contributions of this project.

CHAPTER 2

The Rise of the Midwest Princess:

Chappell Roan's Critical Performativity of Self as Placed Queer Bricolage

Chappell Roan took the pop music industry by storm with the release of her debut studio album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*, on September 22, 2023, and her hit single “Good Luck, Babe!” on April 5, 2024. Artists such as Mitski, Charli XCX, Billie Eilish, Lady Gaga, and even Elton John have “sung her praises,” according to *Rolling Stone*.¹²⁹ The lesbian drag artist from Willard, Missouri, was nominated for six Grammy Awards in 2025, ultimately winning the award for Best New Artist.¹³⁰ With powerhouse vocals, gut-wrenching yet playful storytelling, and costumes ranging from kitschy prom queen to bedazzled cowgirl to Joan of Arc, Chappell Roan's bold persona screams camp. Chappell Roan is certainly not the only popular queer artist from a rural place, nor is she the only drag performer who utilizes Western imagery or country music in her work. However, her particular constellation¹³¹ of cultural tools to create and embody her Midwest Princess celebrity persona responds aptly to a number of rhetorical exigencies which make her presence noteworthy.

I argue that Chappell Roan employs placed queer bricolage through critical performativity to engage in generative rhetorical disruption of hegemonic identity scripts and to orient her audiences toward worlds otherwise. Specifically, Chappell engages placed queer bricolage by enacting the Midwest Princess figure, performing white trash femininity, and embracing her femme lesbian sexuality. My scholarly attention to Chappell Roan's rhetorical influence opens opportunities to consider the performative possibilities of the coalitional self as a site of worldmaking through placed queer bricolage. Drawing upon her rural queerness as a guiding logic for her performative disruptions, my analysis of Chappell Roan reveals critical

intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, and place which offer significant interventions in rhetorical theories of worldmaking. Specifically, I consider Chappell's performance of her celebrity persona to model queer bricolage as a mechanism of worldmaking her "self" toward what Aimee Carrillo Rowe calls a "coalitional subject."¹³² I contend that Chappell Roan performatively enacts worlds otherwise by building and embodying a coalitional self, using the available cultural tools to position herself as "one who chooses marginality, not as a site of abjection, but as one of radical critique that refuses assimilation, even as she negotiates with power."¹³³ To support my argument, I situate Chappell Roan's disruptions of white femininity and hetero/homonormative sexuality through her rural queerness at the theoretical intersections of the coalitional self as critical performativity and placed queer bricolage as worldmaking praxis.

Critical Performativity and Placed Queer Bricolage as Worldmaking Praxis

Chappell Roan's critical performativity of self as coalitional serves as a rhetorical counterweight to the contemporary cultural forces of white femininity, hetero/homonormativity, and polite neoliberal politics in her subjective rejections. In the contemporary neoliberal West, a critical axis of political struggle is situated upon rhetorical formations of subjectivity, namely the individualist self.¹³⁴ I have written elsewhere that "subjectification is an incredibly salient yet elusive rhetorical process that takes up one's very sense of self as its conduit for reinforcing systems of oppression and violence."¹³⁵ In other words, uncritical status quo subjectivities, or perhaps selves that are legible as subjectivities at all, often function to advance colonial, white supremacist, and heteropatriarchal norms. Even the very concept of an individual in the classical liberal sense supports capitalist frameworks that rhetorically sever people from their communities. Aimee Carrillo Rowe contends that in understanding subject positions within

oppressive systems as singular in nature, “individualized notions of location undermine agency by positioning the scholar/ critic/ activist as always already belonging to a group, failing to call attention to the ways subjects negotiate the hegemonic hailings and/or counterhegemonic affiliations that she per/forms.”¹³⁶ On the contrary, status quo subjectivities rely on a stable sense of self that does not disrupt the logics of social hierarchy, domination, and oppression.

Performances of self do not exist in a vacuum – sociologist Erving Goffman defines performance as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.”¹³⁷ While self-performativity to some extent serves a critical role in an internal sense of identity, expressions of self are social phenomena in that even our psychic realities are predicated upon the validation of ourselves by others. All these performances are shaped by and reinforce social hierarchies which are inherently political. The part I am supposed to play as a white person who was assigned female at birth (AFAB) necessitates a worldview in which my very sense of who I am and what I should do demands the negation of undesirable characteristics that are assigned to unruly subjects and non-subjects. White girls are supposed to be pleasant, grateful, always pretty and clean, never loud, sexually ignorant and chaste, and always oriented toward men and family. Even if she gets a degree or has her own career, nice white girls are ultimately supposed to strive for a healthy, pure, middle-class lifestyle complete with 2.5 children and a spotless kitchen of her own.¹³⁸ But what about those of us who fail at white womanhood? Or worse, what about those of us who fail on purpose?

Choice feminism tells us that the uncritical performance of the ready-made self is harmless, that we should support all (white) women in whatever life paths they take. On the contrary, Rachel Thwaites writes that “choice feminism... encourages neoliberal values of individualism and consumerism, while downplaying the need for political and collective action

against systematic inequalities.”¹³⁹ If our performances of self determine and validate our realities as natural and normal, and status quo subjectivities uphold oppressive social hierarchies, it follows that critical self-performativity opens opportunities to disrupt normative subjectivities and perhaps allows us who critically perform our selves to orient our witnesses of self toward different social arrangements and material realities. André Spicer et al. define critical performativity as “active and subversive intervention into... discourses and practices... that involves an affirmative stance, an ethic of care, a pragmatic orientation, engagement with potentialities, and striving for a normative[†] orientation.”¹⁴⁰ By performing a self that is critical by rejecting the capital-friendly subjectivities proffered to us by hegemonic discourses and structures, Chappell Roan opens generative possibilities for disrupting oppressive rhetorical frameworks that erase the most vulnerable among us.

Critical performativity responds to Judith Butler’s theorizing of gender and sexuality as performances embedded in social, cultural, and political institutions. Specifically, Butler argues that “the ‘naming’ of sex is an act of domination and compulsion, an institutionalized performative that both creates and legislates social reality by requiring the discursive/perceptual construction of bodies in accord with principles of sexual difference.”¹⁴¹ For instance, the day I was born, the doctor’s labeling of my infant form as “female” began a lifelong process of assimilating me into a performative structure of gender and sexuality which was then reinforced by my parents’ performances of white Christian heterosexuality, my friends’ performances of “girl” which was different from “boy,” and media performances of girlhood (the animated *Barbie* movies were some of my childhood favorites). Identity “scripts”¹⁴² are enforced and reenforced

[†] Importantly, Spicer et al. use the word “normative” not as in normalized or dominant but rather use the term in the philosophical/ethical sense in which critical action in organizations is intentional and oriented toward/against norms “patterns of interaction and talk, our sense of self, the bodies of knowledge and skills we use, and everyday patterns of sharing resources between people.”

by various performances of self: the ways we dress ourselves, the ways we speak, the jobs we have, the people we love.

I consider Chappell Roan's critical performativity of her coalitional self to be a noteworthy disruption of metronormativity, white femininity, and hetero/homonormativity. Additionally, her "active and subversive intervention" into existing "discourses and practices"¹⁴³ is made generative by Chappell's performance of self as coalitional. In contrast to the self as individualistic and stable, Aimee Carrillo Rowe asserts that feminist "alliances are conceptualized around the 'we' as we make claims to belonging. This is not to suggest that the 'I' disappears, but rather, that the 'i' is multiple, shifting, and contingent upon the relational."¹⁴⁴ Similarly, Chappell Roan situates her celebrity persona in relationality and orients her audiences toward political action. For example, when asked who inspires her at the 2025 Grammys, Chappell responded: "I mean honestly, the trans girls, just like they show up with fashion, they show up with makeup, they show up with performance, music. I'm inspired by drag queens, like it's really the heart of the queer community is like why I am here."¹⁴⁵ Chappell's critical performativity orients her audiences toward shared political struggles by speaking out against ICE, condemning Israel's genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, and illuminating legislative attempts to erase trans and queer people, especially those in the Midwest and South. By rhetorically coupling her presentation of self with her political advocacy and fundraising for organizations that support trans people, she critically performs a self that is coalitional.¹⁴⁶

I contend that Chappell Roan employs placed queer bricolage as the particular rhetorical mechanism that she uses to construct her critical performativity of self as coalitional, modeling possibilities for her audiences to imagine worlds otherwise. Thomas R. Dunn describes "queer bricolage" as "a form of tactical and ephemeral memory rhetoric...for those on the margins to

reappropriate existent culture...to ‘make do’ with what... culture and discourse provide.”¹⁴⁷

Additionally, I use “placed” to situate Chappell Roan’s queer bricolage in a particular sociopolitical and material context and to indicate the rhetorical nature of place. John A. Agnew writes that “the term place carries with it not only the meaning of spatial location but also those of social position and moral order.”¹⁴⁸ The cultural tools at Chappell Roan’s disposal are imbued in social and material particularities that determine their availability and efficacy – the way she imagines and represents her Midwest Princess persona is dependent on her lived experiences growing up in Southwest Missouri. In her resistance to totalizing normative identity scripts, Chappell Roan crafts her disruptive celebrity persona by picking up a wide range of rhetorical resources to construct her placed coalitional self.

One salient example of Chappell’s placed queer bricolage is her use of clown imagery in her artwork. Chappell Roan takes up the clown in multiple forms across her artistry, from the pale white foundation that characterizes many of her drag looks to the costuming of her backup dancers and musicians at the 2025 Grammys appearing on stage in full clown costume.¹⁴⁹ Visually, clown imagery harken back to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of medieval carnivalesque, which functioned to make the normal absurd and the absurd normal through caricatures like a court jester.¹⁵⁰ While a visual analysis of Chappell Roan’s use of the carnivalesque would warrant attention on its own, her commentary on the reasons why she employs clown imagery in her artistry demonstrates her use of placed queer bricolage. *Gay Times* reports that in an interview on Hulu’s *Face of Music*, Chappell explained her use of white foundation and clown elements in her drag:

There’s a reason why I do the white face. I grew up in a place where there wasn’t a lot of gay people that were out and proud and safe...There were a few people – mostly boys in my high school – that would call gay people clowns. They would be like, “Oh, they are so loud, and they dress up obnoxiously, and they just have to be the centre [sic] of

attention; they're like clowns"...So I started doing white makeup because I was like, "If you're going to call me a clown, then I'm going to be the best clown you've ever seen, and it's going to be undeniable that I'm gay, and there's nothing wrong with that." And you know what? No one calls me a clown anymore.¹⁵¹

By reclaiming what used to be an insult from her classmates in Missouri, Chappell repurposes the cultural resources available to her in crafting her drag persona while also using aesthetic exaggeration, a key principle of the carnivalesque as a cultural function, to expose the normalized social hierarchies at work that contribute to the ostracization and violence that queer folks in rural communities often face.

Chappell Roan's critical performance of her coalitional self through placed queer bricolage offers valuable theoretical insights into the possibilities of worldmaking as a mechanism of disrupting subjectification rhetorics.¹⁵² By not only imagining herself otherwise but performing a self that is contingent on community and multiplicity, Chappell brings new queer worlds to life in places like the Midwest that metronormative discourses leave behind. Chappell's patchwork of her rural queer self exposes both the absurdity of rigid social roles and the rhetorical agency that comes with carving her own path. This analysis reveals the largely untapped interdisciplinary theoretical insights that rural queer frameworks offer as well as the value of critical performativity and placed queer bricolage to intersectional rhetorical inquiry and worldmaking praxis.

I approach this analysis through the lens of queer rhetorical criticism by "tak[ing] aim at identity categories and the effects of such categories" and "render[ing] identity permanently open and contestable" as a significant site of rhetorical action.¹⁵³ Queer criticism centers subjectivity as its unit of analysis and considers it to be indicative of the rhetorical devices at work in a given social, cultural, and/or political situation. Additionally, I take up Ono's "contextual fields" of rhetoric as "the situating elements used to make sense of the rhetorical text, texts, intertexts,

transtexts, paratexts, or even ‘discourse formations’ under study” which “includes the mediating factors that help elucidate or animate particular aspects of textual meaning, influence, eventfulness, or force.”¹⁵⁴ Guided by the methodological principles of queer intersectional criticism outlined by Slagle and Ono, I weave together noteworthy threads of Chappell Roan’s artistry and public address as well as their relevant “contextual fields” to make my case for her rhetorical impact.

Crafting the Midwest Princess: A “Femininomenon”

Chappell Roan’s performance of the (rural queer) Midwest Princess is not static nor stable – rather, its multiplicity is informed by the placed realities she grapples with and sifts through to imagine and craft her reality against exclusionary metronormative logics. On the cover of her debut studio album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*, Chappell stares intensely into the camera, a tumble of bright red curls encircling her powder-white face, cheap-looking rhinestones bedecking her blue prom dress, plastic tiara, and eye makeup. Chappell sits facing away from what appears to be a backstage vanity complete with a trifold mirror and littered with glittery accessories and trinkets. What has become her signature exaggerated beauty queen style blends her drag artistry with a kind of maximalist forlorn nostalgia for a time and place long past or never to be. The Midwest Princess seems stuck in her dressing room, forever preparing for a performance she may never give. Her persona does not come ready-made from a box, nor does it include a team of professionals ready to primp and prime her for the stage. Perhaps like the Midwest Princess she embodies, Chappell Roan positions herself in front of the vanity to continually craft and adjust her image using secondhand tools – the only ones she has.

While the album cover alone communicates much of Chappell Roan’s vision of her Midwest Princess persona, other images from the shoot by photographer Ryan Clemens reveal

additional glimpses of the world Chappell builds through her artistry. In the shot that would become the back cover for the album, Chappell looks into a green handheld mirror and touches her face while she sits in front of her vanity, which is filled with a menagerie of beauty products, hair accessories, and trinkets in shades of pink, green, and gold, punctuated occasionally by the same turquoise her dress is made of. The shot that would become an alternate CD cover shows Chappell smiling and gazing off to one side of the frame while she holds an oversized silver trophy and bouquet of what appears to be silk and tulle. One photo that stands out from this shoot is of Chappell bedecked in her turquoise gown raising one arm to apply deodorant and staring directly into the camera.¹⁵⁵ Though not an official album cover, this shot cheekily ruptures the pageant queen fantasy by reminding the audience that the Midwest Princess is, in fact, a person who sweats, has body odor, and has to work to achieve feminine beauty standards. In a way, the deodorant stick situates the Midwest Princess in a particular time, place, and body.

The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess was inspired by David Bowie's 1972 studio album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, and Chappell has confirmed that her drag persona leans heavily on Bowie's Ziggy Stardust character.¹⁵⁶ Ziggy was "an omnisexual alien rock star...[who was] destroyed by his own excesses and by his fans...[and who] laid out a visionary direction for pop music, setting a new standard for rock & roll theatricality while delivering [Bowie's] synthetic ideal with campy sex appeal and raw power."¹⁵⁷ In key ways, the Midwest Princess Chappell Roan depicts draws from Ziggy's style – the bright reddish orange hair contrasted with pale white face makeup and the flashy costuming (Chappell's one-shoulder turquoise gown echoes a Ziggy costume from 1973) come to mind. While Ziggy is an otherworldly being sent to Earth with the divine purpose of saving it from an impending disaster, the Midwest Princess appears confined to the in-between space of her

dressings room, the beauty queen who perhaps once was or never will be. Still, Chappell's use of Ziggy as an inspiration for her work highlights one thread of her bricolage as she rhetorically weaves queer history and popular culture into her imagining of the Midwest Princess.

The Midwest Princess is brought to life in Chappell Roan's music video for the song "HOT TO GO!" which opens with text that reads "We brought the Hot To Go Dance to Springfield, Missouri. We taught the dance to drag queens, fans...and my Grandparents."¹⁵⁸ Chappell is then shown in a sparkly royal blue leotard instructing her grandparents how to do the choreography to the song at their house in Springfield. She then appears to instruct fans and drag queens on the choreography, singing out the letters for "HOT TO GO!" The song track begins as images from Springfield flash across the screen, including the marquee for the Gillioz Theatre, a herd of cows, an old-school Sinclair gas station, and signage for Route 66. Several scenes and various Chappell costumes that recur throughout the video are introduced as the first verse begins. Chappell appears in cowboy boots to ride on the back of a motorcycle, she dances in front of the World's Largest Fork in her sparkly blue leotard, she wears a flowy pink dress at a monster truck rally, and she stomps across a mini golf course wearing green pumps and butterfly clips in her hair. She appears in front of the local Andy's Frozen Custard in a cheerleading uniform, she sits on a set of bleachers, and she dances with two drag queens (sans audience) on the Gillioz stage. She also dances with her grandparents for a few frames, visually and relationally indicating the seemingly contradictory aspects of her lived experience that inform the pieces of her patchworked self.

In direct opposition to Ziggy, the mysterious alien rock star from somewhere in outer space, Chappell Roan comes from a particular place here on Earth: Willard, Missouri. Willard is a small town just a few miles northwest of Springfield, which is a mid-size city built on a plateau

nestled in the Ozark Mountains and which serves as the metropolitan center of Southwest Missouri. The city is known for its historic ties to the birth of Route 66 and is often referred to as “the buckle on the Bible Belt.”¹⁵⁹ As someone who lived in Springfield for six years while pursuing degrees at Missouri State University, I can attest that the city’s culture is heavily influenced by the Assemblies of God and Baptist Bible Fellowship International denominations of Christianity that are headquartered there. Springfield is also home to two private Christian universities: Evangel University and Drury University. Certainly, there are queer people in Springfield and Willard, but the cultural, political, and historical context in which Chappell grew up was likely hostile to most forms of nonconformity, particularly those of the gender and sexual varieties. Still, the placed conditions of Chappell’s upbringing greatly inform her performance of self in her artistry in direct opposition to metronormative narratives about queer belonging.

At first glance, Springfield appears to function as a vibrant Americana backdrop for Chappell Roan’s “HOT TO GO!” music video. Upon further inspection, the Midwest Princess seems scattered across the video’s scenes, appearing in front of different audiences (or lack thereof in the case of the Gillioz) with a range of costumes from a cheerleading uniform to flowy feminine dresses to a glittery leotard. In some scenes, Chappell dances happily to her cheerleading-inspired song about her sexual interest in a woman.¹⁶⁰ In others, she appears frustrated and perhaps a little angry, particularly as she stomps across the mini golf course. Multiple versions of Chappell seem to compete for center stage – is the Midwest Princess the cheerleader, the monster truck enthusiast, the girl next door, the drag queen, the biker, the dutiful granddaughter? Is she all of them, none of them, or something else? By bringing these versions of the Midwest Princess into tension with rural imagery and queer desire, Chappell rhetorically communicates a sense of self that is both inspired by and in complicated relationship with

Springfield itself. The central figure of the Midwest Princess as emergent from Springfield's complex cultural dynamics in Chappell Roan's persona demonstrates her use of placed queer bricolage to critically perform her coalitional self.

Another example of Chappell's use of place as a critical storytelling element in her queer bricolage is the music video for her song "Pink Pony Club." Chappell again picks up pieces of her lived experience to rhetorically constellate her queerness with cultural symbols that typically signal a more conservative framework. The opening scene of the music video is dim and dark with a shadowy skull filling the backdrop of a neon "Pink Pony Club" title shot. As Chappell walks onstage in a run-down bar full of tough-looking bikers in her sparkly cowgirl hat and sequin-bedecked outfit, she looks withdrawn. As she begins to sing the opening verse, she looks tentatively around an unseen audience: "I know you wanted me to stay, but I can't ignore the crazy visions of me in LA, and I heard that there's a special place, where boys and girls can all be queens every single day."¹⁶¹ Chappell's description of her dreams of visiting the LA gay scene come into sharp contrast with the dreary setting and her frightened countenance. As she finishes the verse and starts into the first pre-chorus, she begins to move more freely, singing: "I'm having wicked dreams of leaving Tennessee, hear Santa Monica, I swear it's calling me, won't make my mama proud, it's gonna cause a scene, she sees her baby girl, I know she's gonna scream God, what have you done? You're a pink pony girl and you dance at the club, oh mama, I'm just having fun on the stage in my heels, it's where I belong."¹⁶² She continues to dance as she moves into the chorus as the scene is cut with shots of shadowy bar-goers, perhaps replicating the hostility she may have felt growing up in Missouri while trying to pursue her dreams of being a performer.

As the song progresses, Chappell begins to move through the crowd at the dive bar, singing “Pink Pony Club I’m gonna keep on dancing at the Pink Pony Club I’m gonna keep on dancing down in West Hollywood I’m gonna keep on dancing at the Pink Pony Club, Pink Pony Club.” Again calling back to the gayborhood in West Hollywood, Chappell contrasts the colorful description of her “Pink Pony Club” with the drab bar. However, as the song progresses, a drag queen appears on stage playing the guitar, and one of the bikers hands Chappell a dollar tip, which is a common practice at drag performances. As she sings the line “Don’t think I’ve left you all behind, still love you and Tennessee, you’re always on my mind. And mama, every Saturday I can hear your southern drawl a thousand miles away,”¹⁶³ she looks pensively around the dive bar. Chappell then moves back up to the stage as glitter begins to fall and lights flash to the beat, cutting between the bikers watching her and scenes of what appear to be the West Hollywood “Pink Pony Club” she imagines. In some shots, the bikers can be seen dancing with drag queens and leather daddies as Chappell joins them, sporting her cowgirl boots. As the song comes to a close, Chappell again looks around the dive bar, disappointed with her confrontation with the reality that she is not actually dancing in the “Pink Pony Club.”

The music video for “Pink Pony Club” showcases Chappell Roan’s use of place in her queer bricolage in subtle yet salient ways. Lyrically, she contrasts her Pink Pony Club in West Hollywood with Tennessee, writing about her longing to be somewhere that “boys and girls can all be queens every single day.”¹⁶⁴ At the same time, she retains her cowgirl hat and boots throughout the video and openly longs for her home. In her imagining of the dive bar as the Pink Pony Club, she envisions the bikers in her audience joining her, the queens, and the daddies to dance together. Chappell does not imagine a world completely separate from the one she is in – rather, her Pink Pony Club is an amalgamation of people and place which come together to

inform who she envisions herself to be. She does not speak disparagingly of Tennessee or depict the bikers as inherently hostile to her. Instead, she wants them in her Pink Pony Club, too. The Pink Pony Club demonstrates the rhetorical nature of place as in part an imagined reality, a set of social arrangements that are informed by geography and materiality but that move with us and are moved by us.¹⁶⁵

From incorporating clown imagery into her signature looks to dreaming about a Pink Pony Club in her bedazzled cowgirl outfit, Chappell Roan blends the cultural resources on hand in her bricolage of self. She does not abandon the placed elements of her lived experience growing up in Missouri but rather situates them in productive tension with her desires to be in queer community. In her 2025 Grammys performance of “Pink Pony Club,” her bricolage of these placed elements come into clear view. Chappell appears on stage atop a giant pink plastic horse, and the dancers and musicians on stage with her wear clown makeup and exaggerated country/cowboy/farmer attire. Chappell Roan’s embodiment of placed queer bricolage by critically performing her coalitional self as the Midwest Princess enables her to imagine and create worlds where “boys and girls can all be queens every single day,” whether they are in West Hollywood, Tennessee, or someplace beyond.

She’s a “Super Graphic Ultra Modern Girl:”

Performing White Trash Femininity in a Tradwife Era

Chappell Roan also engages placed queer bricolage by critically performing white trash femininity. Chappell Roan’s tacky, exaggerated take on womanhood as her guiding aesthetic serves as a critical counterweight to a popular culture landscape increasingly saturated with conservative ideals of femininity. From the rise in popularity of tradwives on TikTok to the near meteoric ascent of Charlie Kirk’s widow Erika to a position of political power,¹⁶⁶ Republican

Barbies have emerged in full force as mascots for traditional femininity.¹⁶⁷ These women represent what appears to be one side of a race to capture Gen Z's fractured cultural imaginary, which speaks to the unprecedented gender split in the cohort's politics.¹⁶⁸ This shift toward conservative femininity in mainstream popular culture is perhaps almost comically well-encapsulated by *The New York Times*' recent scandal regarding an op-ed headline as documented by *Abortion* author Jessica Valenti: "Did Women Ruin the Workplace? And can conservative feminism fix it?"¹⁶⁹ Valenti's post on *X* includes screenshots of the original headline compared with the revised version, which now reads "Did Liberal Feminism Ruin the Workplace? And if so, can conservative feminism fix it?"¹⁷⁰ These cultural and political circumstances provide important context in analyzing the rhetorical exigencies to which Chappell Roan responds, namely the rapidly narrowing definition of successful white femininity.

White femininity as both an aesthetic and dominant cultural logic has taken shape in many forms over the course of U.S. history, and its manifestations are intimately intertwined with place and class. Katerina Deliovsky traces key phases of "idealized representations of 'white' femininity... within the context of European colonialism and imperialism" as personified by the Victorian-era Virgin Mary and her influence on the figure of the Southern Belle.¹⁷¹ Deliovsky identifies the aesthetic traits that persist as cultural signifiers of (white) "'normative femininity,' or patriarchy's portrait: tall, thin, blonde, young, and *middle class*."¹⁷² While traditionally European/Anglo-Saxon features like blonde hair and blue eyes continue to dominate Western beauty norms (and continue to be associated with conservative and fascist movements), Deliovsky also points out that "self-regulating and policing regimes of patriarchally defined beauty" and "women's participation in the cultural demands of perpetual physical improvement and transformation" reveal a critical element of white femininity: labor.¹⁷³ The work of striving

toward ideal selfhood through physical maintenance of desirable (white feminine) features under the guise of “self-care” exposes the moral logics inherent in these habitual self-improvement activities: regular hair appointments to hide dark roots, extensive skincare routines and spa treatments, tanning bed appointments, arduous Pilates classes and “healthy” eating, to name a few, are good, noble, morally-correct practices which constitute ideal white femininity. Add a few kids, a husband, and a kitchen full of matching (always clean) beige or white accessories and the tradwife formula is complete. Chappell’s approach to her own white femininity challenges the frictionless, effortless aesthetic of the contemporary tradwife.

Chappell Roan visually builds upon the messy, unpolished femininity established by the Midwest Princess persona on the album cover in the opening scene of her music video for “My Kink is Karma,” which depicts her smoking a cigarette, sitting on a sloppily packed suitcase, wearing cowgirl boots and leopard-print miniskirt. As the scene progresses, her bright blue eyeshadow bleeds into her running mascara, and her curly red hair gets tangled in the various clips that adorn it. The video then shows Chappell sitting on the curb amidst a disorganized pile of her belongings against a background of tall grass. As a man continues to throw Chappell’s belongings out of the house, the camera zooms in on her face covered in glitter with one bra strap hanging off her shoulder. A later scene in the video shows Chappell in a plastic pool filled with rubber ducks. She dons a white bikini top with red hearts, bright blue glittery drag makeup, long acrylic nails, and hot pink extensions while she eats cheese puffs and drinks from a soda can. These gendered and classed artifacts signal “the role of place and associated materialities (built environment, climate, living conditions, etc.) in the constitution and manifestations of social life,”¹⁷⁴ showing how Chappell’s classed performance of white trash femininity contributes to her placed queer bricolage.

While Chappell incorporates kitschy femininity into multiple iterations of her drag performances and styling, these specific scenes challenge a white femininity that is neat, clean, pure, and wealthy. Her use of a vibrant color palette replete with teal, hot pink, red, sparkles, and leopard print call forth a “working girl” aesthetic akin to the “the town tramp” who inspired Dolly Parton’s iconic look. Dolly described this woman as adorned in “makeup, red nails, red high heels, and tight clothes” and referred to her “the prettiest thing I’d ever seen.”¹⁷⁵ Both Chappell and Dolly portray a classed white femininity that serves as a critical counterweight to tradwife femininity, one that ultimately fails in polite society – Dolly recalls that the townsfolk in her community would say of the “town tramp” that “she ain’t nothing but trash.”¹⁷⁶ Like Dolly, Chappell centers trashy “failed” femininity in her persona by embracing the mess. Eating cheese puffs, smoking cigarettes, and crying away her glitter and mascara paints a notably different picture than the skinny Lululemon-wearing tradwife who only eats organic, keeps her body pure of nasty substances like tobacco, always strives to improve all aspects of herself for her husband and her children, and, perhaps most importantly, does not work outside the home.

Chappell’s performance of her messy white femininity, like Dolly’s inspiration from the “town tramp,” illuminates an integral mechanism always at work but rarely addressed in normative visions of womanhood as imagined by mainstream conservative tradwifery. Cheese puffs and cigarettes, among other aspects of Chappell’s persona, signal a working-class white trash femininity that I argue serves as a critical counterweight to the contemporary dominance of conservative imaginaries of womanhood. Like Dolly, by embracing classed white femininity, Chappell disrupts gendered and raced respectability structures in ways that people of color cannot access. John Hartigan, Jr., writes that the “white trash” label “marks white people who are rupturing decorums associated with whiteness.”¹⁷⁷ Chappell’s white trash femininity reveals the

class doxa at work in respectable white womanhood. While “white trash” is often levied against unruly white subjects “by those in power (either cultural power like Northerners or political power like bourgeois Southerners)...to call white people back ‘in’ to respectability and responsibility,”¹⁷⁸ Chappell wields class markers as tools in building her persona, thus performing a critical disruption of classed, placed white feminine respectability politics.

Chappell Roan also violates dominant norms of white femininity in the ways she infuses her class background into her performance of self. Two incidents in particular highlight the ways she disrupts gendered white respectability: an altercation with a member of the paparazzi and her speech at the 2024 Grammys. At the September 11, 2024, MTV Video Music Awards black carpet, Chappell confronted a photographer who she alleges yelled at her and was rude to her at a Grammys event.¹⁷⁹ In a USA Today article covering the incident, Jay Stahl mentions “her struggles with fame before and after she catapulted into the pop culture stratosphere” and how she is “outspoken with fans about how her bipolar II symptoms have interfered with her career as well as her ability to regulate her emotions and response to success.”¹⁸⁰ This association of her demands for accountability and better treatment from paparazzi with her bipolar II diagnosis rhetorically diminishes her actions to those of a hysterical, unbalanced woman, signaling her failure to adhere to norms of white femininity. In calling out what she considered to be inappropriate treatment, Chappell breaks from the gendered and raced expectations of docility as a white woman in her performance of class particularly.

Jennifer Musial notices a similar pattern in her analysis of Britney Spears’ white femininity – when Britney “failed” to rise above her rural Southern working-class roots in her ascent to stardom, she faced “racialized class disgust” in response to her “trashiness (e.g., smoking in a bikini, son reaching for cigarette pack, Christmas light bulbs around plants in

July).”¹⁸¹ However, when Britney was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, Musial notes that “what were once derided as incidents of ‘trashy’ behavior were likely manic episodes exacerbated by Hollywood celebrity culture. Spears’s recovery was met with sympathy and, once again, the public cheered her on.”¹⁸² Like Britney, the ascription of Chappell’s mental health diagnosis as the reason for her altercation with the photographer serves as an attempt to rhetorically manage her unruly white trash femininity and to ultimately remove her agency in standing up for herself. After all, respectable middle- and upper-class white women are supposed to endure mistreatment with docility and grace. The facts that Britney and Chappell are both from working-class families and grew up in the South and Midwest (respectively) emerge from between the lines of the disciplinary rhetoric levied against them for “failing” at white femininity.

Chappell continues to disrupt the norms of white womanhood in a TikTok responding to some of the backlash she received for calling out what she describes as “creepy behavior.”¹⁸³ In the video, she asserts:

I don’t care that it’s normal, I don’t care that this crazy type of behavior comes with the job... I don’t want whatever the fuck you think you’re supposed to be entitled to whenever you see a celebrity. I don’t give a fuck if you think it’s selfish of me to say no for a photo... that’s not normal that’s weird. It’s weird how people think that you know a person just cause you see them online and you listen to the art they make... I’m allowed to say no.¹⁸⁴

By confronting the expectations of (white) women to accept abuse with a smile, Chappell demystifies the illusion of celebrity while delineating her celebrity persona as a performance. Additionally, Chappell’s assertion of her agency disrupts what Brittney Cooper calls the “mythic nature of white female vulnerability” that has historically functioned to frame Black men as violent criminals and Black women as angry and unruly.¹⁸⁵ While Chappell’s whiteness certainly enables her celebrity performance in particular ways, her white trash femininity disrupts racialized logics of womanhood in her refusal to accept mistreatment in the music industry as

inherent, natural, and normal. This aspect of Chappell's persona reflects, if covertly, her rejection of dominant expectations for white (celebrity) womanhood, which are always already placed and classed, in her tapestry of self.¹⁸⁶

Furthermore, Chappell's acceptance speech at the 2024 Grammys demonstrates her embodiment of white trash femininity through her testimony about the financial hardships she faced after being dropped by her first label: "I was signed as a minor, [and] when I got dropped I had zero job experience under my belt. And like most people I had a difficult time finding a job during the pandemic and could not afford health insurance...It was so devastating to feel so committed to my art and feel so betrayed by the system. I was so dehumanized not to have health insurance."¹⁸⁷ In sharing her own story, Chappell calls attention to the economic injustices that artists face in the music industry. She closed her speech by speaking directly to those in power: "Labels, we got you, but do you got us?"¹⁸⁸ By using her platform to identify systemic injustices and to demand better treatment, Chappell again disrupts respectable white femininity by "talk[ing] back"¹⁸⁹ to power structures that would otherwise benefit from her complicity, demonstrating her active construction of her coalitional self against oppressive systems.

Finally, no analysis of Chappell's performance of femininity would be complete without an examination of her drag artistry. Amy Harris writes for *The Conversation* that

[Chappell's] drag leans into hyper femininity, at times toying with beauty ideals and elements of "ugliness" and trash. She performs with beautifully painted, soft facial and physical features and couples the visuals with hyper feminine movement. But you'll notice a cigarette butt caught in her hair, or she's wearing a massive nose prosthetic, or all parts of her visible skin are painted a deathly grey. While Roan's drag celebrates and plays up femininity and feminine beauty, she firmly holds a middle finger up at those same societal ideals and expectations.¹⁹⁰

Coupled with her white trash aesthetic, Chappell's hyperfeminine drag both critiques and celebrates womanhood in ways that challenge dominant gender norms which squarely place

performances of femininity within the confines of the male gaze.¹⁹¹ In a qualitative study of drag performers, Justine Egner and Patricia Maloney find that “drag performers understand themselves as subversive for audience members and, by extension, against mainstream society. At times they are even subversive to themselves, often finding new understandings of themselves and their gender identity through performing.”¹⁹² Similarly to Egner and Maloney’s findings, regardless of the performer’s gender out of drag, Chappell asserts in her song “Pink Pony Club” that “boys and girls can all be queens every single day,”¹⁹³ demonstrating both the generative and subversive potential in drag performance. Additionally, while the “My Kink is Karma” music video depicts Chappell being kicked out of what is presumed to be an ex-boyfriend’s house, the relationships with women she describes and depicts in her performances also signal her refusal of a key commandment of white femininity in her bricolage of self: compulsory heterosexuality.¹⁹⁴

It’s “Casual:” Embracing Femme Lesbian Sexuality Through the Feminine Grotesque

Chappell Roan’s enactment of the Midwest Princess and critical performance of white trash femininity as placed queer bricolage are enhanced by her embrace of femme lesbian sexuality through the feminine grotesque. As she openly explores and expresses her sexuality in her work, Chappell commits another sin against white femininity, disrupting its grip on popular culture: rejecting male/masculine centrality. Chappell Roan’s romantic and sexual relationships with women are a defining feature of her storytelling and performative style. Several tracks on *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess* describe women love interests, including “Red Wine Supernova” and “Super Graphic Ultra Modern Girl.”¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, Chappell’s recent singles “The Subway,” “The Giver,” and “Good Luck, Babe!” lyrically lean even more into the complexities of her relationships with women.¹⁹⁶ Specifically, “Good Luck, Babe!” recounts a relationship Chappell had with a woman who ultimately chose to be with a man, calling attention

to the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality on women.¹⁹⁷ White women and AFAB people who experience queer desire and/or “who do not conform to or are not complicit in the reproduction of whiteness are disciplined for being traitors to their gender and race.”¹⁹⁸ White femininity demands “a commitment to racial and sexual loyalty.”¹⁹⁹ In her overt sexual and romantic attraction to women, Chappell Roan betrays white femininity’s innate compulsory heterosexuality.

At the same time, Chappell Roan’s lesbian desires do not neatly map onto homonormative rules of engagement for a femme. Eliza Garwood describes homonormativity as “the normalisation and ‘hierarchisation’ of certain forms of homosexuality over others, particularly privileging (but not limited to) the gay or lesbian, cisgender, middle-class, white, western, ablebodied, monogamous, family oriented, married couple.”²⁰⁰ Additionally, Diego Lasio et al. specify that “homonormativity is therefore an effect and a condition of the viability of heteronormativity, using the politics of passing as straight...and gender normalization”²⁰¹ to approximate digestible queerness to the status quo. Homonormativity rewards sexual and gender arrangements that most closely mirror (cis)heterosexual ideals, such as a white cisgender butch lesbian being in a monogamous relationship with a white cisgender femme lesbian, reinscribing same-sex desire onto the gender binary. Lyrics such as “I like (I like) what you like (What you like) Long hair (no bra) It’s my type (That’s right)” and “I need A super graphic ultra-modern girl like me” indicate Chappell Roan’s attraction to femme lesbians “like her,” refusing a homonormative butch-femme gender binary in her performance of self.²⁰²

Chappell also couples her femininity with her lesbian desires visually in her music video for her hit single “The Subway.”²⁰³ Set in what appears to be New York City, “The Subway” features place as a character in the world Chappell Roan creates. The video opens on a busy city

street where a clump of faux red hair tumbles along a dirty sidewalk. The shot shifts to Chappell walking through the crowd completely immersed in a mess of floor-length red hair. Her face peeks out just for a moment, showing her gazing down the street at a figure similarly covered head to toe with long green hair. At this point in the video, the lyrics come in: “I saw your green hair, beauty mark next to your mouth There, on the subway, I nearly had a breakdown” and Chappell begins to chase after the green-haired figure through the busy streets who eventually gets on the subway before Chappell can catch up. The scene shifts to Chappell sans floor-length hair in a subway car looking around, seeing glimpses of green. As the chorus proceeds, the scene shifts again to Chappell laying prone completely covered in curly red hair with rats climbing through it, oscillating back and forth between the scene of her in the subway car. Eventually, Chappell is also dragged behind a yellow cab by her long hair, literally strung along by a vehicle (and a metronormative fantasy) strongly associated with New York City.

The visual exaggeration of long hair, typically a signifier of youthful femininity, does significant rhetorical work in the video, playing with the boundaries of normative white feminine gender and sexuality. Kimberlee Pérez writes that “hair, like race, is not often marked or theorized on nonblack bodies. Yet hair—all hair—is political. Is raced. Is relational. The performativity of hair, then, is similar to, and with, the performativity of race.”²⁰⁴ It follows, of course, that hair is also gendered in particular ways and plays a crucial role in how white femininity is constructed and maintained. Starkly contrasting the cleanliness and purity of normative white womanhood,²⁰⁵ Chappell’s long messy tangled hair, at times a site of nesting rats in the music video, resists consumption in its embrace of the feminine grotesque. Danae Ioannou describes the grotesque as it operates within Negative Aesthetics as “the distortion of the body, the signs of decay, [and] the disgusting truth of bodily characteristics such as hair, scars,

fluids etc.”²⁰⁶ Chappell’s dual use of hair as a signifier of her and her love interest’s femininity as well as resistance to the male gaze in her formation of self.

While “The Subway” offers a critique of compulsory heterosexuality, it also resists homonormativity in particular ways. On the gendered dynamics of lesbian sexuality in contemporary consumer culture, Jack Halberstam writes that

The butch... gets cast as anachronistic, as the failure of femininity... But the butch lesbian is a failure not only in contemporary queer renderings of desire; she stands in for failure in consumer culture writ large because her masculinity becomes a block to heteronormative male desire. While feminine lesbians, of the variety imagined within a hetero-pornographic imagination, are deployed in advertising culture to sell everything from beer to insurance policies, the masculine lesbian proves an anathema to consumer culture.²⁰⁷

Halberstam’s assertion that lesbian femininity is taken up by mainstream culture’s “hetero-pornographic imagination”²⁰⁸ reflects Rotem Avgar’s claim that dominant perceptions of lesbian sexuality are informed by “the perception that mainstream lesbian porn reflects men’s fantasies of girl-on-girl interaction rather than ‘authentic’ lesbian sexuality.”²⁰⁹ Chappell Roan’s artistic expression of her lesbian desires in addition to her white trash femininity disrupts “desirable” arrangements for queer women by embracing and performing the grotesque. In “The Subway,” Chappell’s feminine grotesquery reaches new heights when she rides a bicycle through city streets with her long hair full of trash drags behind her on the pavement. This scene is cut with clips of Chappell dancing in a subway car among what appears to be diverse crowd of queer women and drag queens emulating a dance club environment that might be found in New York City.[‡]

Chappell Roan’s rejection of both compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian homonormativity comes to a head in one of the closing shots of “The Subway” in which

[‡] One of the dancers in the video at around the time stamp 2:23 can even be seen wearing a snapback with the word “Trash” written in pink across the front.

Chappell is shown climbing a skyscraper-sized tower of green hair and looking over the city as the song comes to a close. Rather than playing into hetero/homonormative scripts about lesbian femininity, Chappell embraces and reframes what Danae Ioannou describes as “misogynistic disgust” at the feminine body, writing that “through sexuality, femininity is connected to disgust, fear, and desire.”²¹⁰ In connecting the grotesque to her lesbian femininity through the visuals of hair and trash, Chappell Roan resists the “hetero-pornographic imagination”²¹¹ while orienting her desires toward the object of disgust in “The Subway:” the feminine green-haired monster. The centrality of symbols like the yellow cab, skyscrapers and city sidewalks, and of course the subway itself as mechanisms for Chappell Roan’s storytelling showcase her use of placed queer bricolage.

By situating the feminine grotesque in New York City to explore her sexuality, Chappell Roan subtly connects her lesbian desire with the urban, ostensibly a more open and accepting place for her to do so. Instead, her unresolved longing for the green-haired monster leaves her alone and afraid, literally holding on for dear life above the city at the end of the music video. Perhaps the dance party in the subway car was merely an idealistic vision of that promised metronormative queer world that does not really exist, at least not for people like Chappell. Being in the big city did not save her from experiencing the yearning and heartbreak of her forbidden love for a woman. *Rolling Stone* recounts Chappell Roan’s closing statements from her victory speech following her “Best New Artist” win at the 2024 MTV Video Music Awards: “I dedicate this to all the drag artists who inspire me, and I dedicate this to queer and trans people who fuel pop...And for all the queer kids in the Midwest watching right now, I see you. I understand you, because I’m one of you. And don’t ever let anyone tell you that you can’t be exactly who you want to be, bitch.”²¹² Even as Chappell expresses her love for places like West

Hollywood and Manhattan, she still considers herself to be a queer kid from the Midwest. By critically performing placed queer bricolage, Chappell Roan imagines herself beyond the limits of metronormativity, opening new possibilities for enacting queer worlds built by all the places we carry with us.

My Kink is Coalition: Implications and Future Directions

Chappell Roan's placed bricolage of self is perhaps best distilled by one of her more popular pieces of merchandise: a camouflage baseball cap with the words "Midwest Princess" embroidered in orange across the front.²¹³ Using a pattern often associated with U.S. masculine rurality, Chappell once again repurposes a cultural tool on hand to situate her queer femininity someplace it does not belong. At the same time, in contrast to metronormative appeals to take up neoliberal purity politics and homonormative identities, Chappell Roan critically performs her persona as principally embedded in the Midwest, not contrary to it. In essence, Chappell models critical performativity through her celebrity persona using placed queer bricolage to imagine herself as an artistic patchwork of cultural resources that brings elements of self together that are otherwise considered to be discursive contradictions.

Interestingly, through symbols like her "Midwest Princess" hat, Chappell Roan's performance of self as placed bricolage offers a critical framework to not only reject binary subjectivities but to explicitly name and disrupt the ways in which those very subject formations cause harm to those who dare to not conform. Chappell's coalitional self does not exist externally to power structures but rather exposes the self's constitutive valence within them. Chappell Roan effectively shatters the top-down binaries imposed by both conservative and liberal metronormative discourses about queer identity. By attending to Chappell's rural queerness as a framework through which to examine her critical performativity of placed bricolage, this

analysis provides a grounded approach to intersectional queer rhetorical criticism. One key contribution this chapter makes to worldmaking theory is by illuminating placed queer bricolage as a particular tactic. While examples of queer bricolage can be found in a variety of contexts in which marginalized queer folks use “whatever is at hand”²¹⁴ to generate possible worlds, I assert that placed queer bricolage situates worldmaking praxis in particular cultural contexts from which imagining otherwise draws its potential materials. Understanding worldmaking as queer bricolage allows for critical inquiry into rural queer rhetoric, for example, as it combats a flattened, metronormative, neoliberal interpretation of LGBTQ+ identity by centering cultural, placed specificity into its framework.

Additionally, conceptualizing worldmaking through placed queer bricolage weaves rhetorical possibility into the quotidian, banal rhetorical fabrics of everyday life. Queer bricolage offers both critics and rhetors a way of thinking about intersectional inquiry and praxis that responds to lived experiences, material realities, and worlds otherwise. As rural queerness does not often lend itself toward cohesive, visible cultural narratives, it can serve as a valuable site of research into queer bricolage as rhetorical worldmaking praxis. By theorizing bricolage from a critical place perspective, I elucidate the cultural and material formations at work in the development of rural queer subjectivities that disrupt hegemonic Western metronormative identity binaries. Scholars and practitioners alike can benefit from thinking differently about their selves as permanent and stable, which is a necessary requirement to unsettle the continuity of the political and rhetorical systems that benefit from stagnant, essentialized subjects. Through modeling placed bricolage, Chappell Roan shows her audiences that they, too, can sift through the rhetorical resources on hand to critically perform selves and communities that subvert rigid

social hierarchies and open new possibilities for coalition-building across difference, particularly in places like the Midwest.

Certainly, Chappell Roan is constrained in particular ways by her subjectivities as a white queer woman as well as her newfound proximity to powerful figures and institutions. Still, Chappell's consistent support of trans communities, Palestinian liberation, and the abolishment of ICE²¹⁵ linked with her critiques of the limited political options presented by a bipartisan government point to her commitment to building coalition with her platform, even when it is not ideologically neat or pure. In June 2024, Chappell once again inspired controversy for turning down an offer to perform at the White House's Pride celebration. Dressed as the Statue of Liberty at the 2024 New York City Governor's Ball Music Festival, Chappell stated to the crowd:

I am in drag of the biggest queen of all...But in case you had forgotten what's etched on my pretty little toes, 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free'... That means freedom in trans rights...That means freedom in women's rights... It especially means freedom for all oppressed people in occupied territories.²¹⁶

While her comments at the Governor's Ball received cheers from the crowd and praise on social media, she was ultimately criticized for refusing to endorse Kamala Harris for President. At the time, Matt Laviates reported for *NBC News* that Chappell was not comfortable endorsing a candidate for president "because there are 'problems on both sides.'" Some critics slammed her for the 'both sides' comment in particular, pointing to widespread differences between Republican and Democratic policy positions on LGBTQ issues. Others called her a 'closet Republican.'²¹⁷ This accusation is particularly weighty considering Chappell Roan's uncle Darin Chappell is an elected Republican state representative in her home state of Missouri.²¹⁸

Chappell Roan's refusal to endorse Kamala Harris for President in 2024 and the subsequent backlash reveals a political purity test that she ostensibly failed. In a TikTok video response about her refusal to endorse Kamala Harris, Chappell explained that in her mind:

Endorsing and voting are completely different... like obviously fuck the policies of the right but also fuck some of the policies on the left, that's why I can't endorse... because there is no way I can stand behind some of the left's completely transphobic and completely genocidal views... fuck Trump for fucking real but fuck some of the shit that has gone down in the Democratic Party that has failed people like me and you. And more so Palestine and more so every marginalized community in the world. So no... I'm not gonna settle for what the options that are in front of me. And you're not gonna make me feel bad for that. So yeah I'm voting for fucking Kamala but I'm not settling for what has been offered... If someone is publicly endorsing a political figure that doesn't even mean that they're gonna fucking vote for them... Actions speak louder than words... I'm critiquing both sides cause they're both so fucked up.²¹⁹

By offering this nuanced response to public criticism directly, Chappell meaningfully disrupts yet another social binary: neoliberal bipartisan politics. In situating her placed, bricolaged self in coalition with vulnerable communities and against political power structures, Chappell Roan expresses relational solidarity and orients her audiences toward collective struggles for justice through coalition-building.²²⁰

Instead of “settling”²²¹ for the options in front of her, remaining silent, or taking a centrist position, Chappell Roan has seemingly put her money and her platform where her mouth is in support of coalitional, rather than bipartisan, politics. Her Midwest Princess Project “has distributed funds to six LGBTQ+ organizations in three cities: The Center and The Ali Forney Center in New York City; the Trans Wellness Center and TransLatin@ Coalition in Los Angeles; and the GLO Center and The Center Project in Missouri.”²²² According to the project's official website, “These local organizations support the LGBTQ+ community and provide specific programming and resources for trans youth. Representatives from each organization joined Chappell for the Visions and Damsels & Other Dangerous Things Pop-Up Shows and will

receive donations from the money raised.”²²³ By putting these organizations in conversation with one another through the monetary support of the Midwest Princess Project, Chappell communicates solidarity among different trans communities across the country while supporting the specific goals of each organization in their respective places (rather than subsuming them all under one metronormative umbrella). In her celebration of all the places and people that shape her rural queer self, in all their complexities, controversies, and contradictions, Chappell Roan offers an artful coalitional reimagining what it means to be Midwestern, and perhaps what it means to be American, on a global stage.

CHAPTER 3

“For the First Time in My Life, I Wish I Was Not a Kentuckian:”

Trans Liminal Performance as Worldmaking in Rural U.S. Places

On March 17, 2023, a group of around 150 students at Waterloo High School (WHS) in Waterloo, Illinois, staged a protest against trans students in their school using the restroom that aligns with their genders.²²⁴ Like many queer folks from rural communities, my feelings about my hometown are complicated. On one hand, leaving Waterloo allowed me to experience other worlds and ways of being beyond small-town life. On the other, I cannot ignore the ways in which Waterloo shaped my (queer) identity, even if I did not know it when I lived there. Waterloo is certainly no queer utopia; the demonstration at WHS reflects the rejection of transness built into the cultural norms of Waterloo writ large. At the same time, Waterloo is as much a part of my identity as my queerness. My existence between these identities informs my interest in the possibilities for queer resistance in rural places, especially those forms enacted by trans people.

Like the students who were targeted in my hometown, trans people in rural communities, many of which are in “red” states, across the United States are at risk. The Movement Advancement Project lists 12 states that have “Negative Laws” which refers to laws that “specifically target LGBTQ people and/or restrict access to rights, services, or programs.”²²⁵ The states that are considered “Negative Law” states include Arkansas, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee.²²⁶ Nearly half of these “Negative Law” states are also in the list of the top 10 most rural U.S. states.²²⁷ While homophobia and transphobia permeate in all kinds of communities across the United States, such as in my hometown in Illinois, I contend that MAP’s data illuminates the

high stakes in trans folks' survivability in rural U.S. communities. This increase in anti-trans rhetoric and violence in the United States, especially in rural communities, demonstrates an ongoing need for queer people to forge paths of rhetorical resistance to these overt attempts to erase our trans siblings. In response to this dire need, I theorize liminal performance as a distinct form of queer worldmaking and queer resistance. Queerness squirms under demands to be pinned down. "Queer" and "Queer Theory" are terms that carry particular political histories, ones that have, at times, erased transgender people and transness.²²⁸ In this chapter, I take up the term "queerness, instead of being a possessed sexual identity ascribed to lesbian, gay, or bisexual people...as an existential orientation, as a relation to power."²²⁹ This chapter turns toward trans rhetors to lead, as they always have, the fight against queer eradication in all its forms.²³⁰

In thinking about how trans people in particular teach us how to combat oppressive forces using these rhetorical tactics, I analyze three speeches given by transgender people in rural U.S. states: Emma Curtis in Kentucky, Zooey Zephyr in Montana, and Justin Sarlo in Arkansas. While I articulate liminality as a worldmaking tactic for queer resistance broadly, I highlight these specific instances of trans utterances in rural places because these speakers all respond to a contemporary widespread political movement among conservative states to use the law to target trans people in particular.²³¹ I turn to these speakers not to equate transness with queerness but to place their performances at the forefront of a coalitional queer politic and elucidate a tactic[§] for resistance as they disrupt the scripts of belonging that seek to erase them. Emma Curtis is a transgender woman from Kentucky who was a candidate for the Kentucky State House of

[§] I consider the worldmaking tactics that I discuss throughout this chapter to align with Chela Sandoval's theorizing about tactical subjectivities as political orientations that "den[y] any one ideology as the final answer" as well as retain "the capacity to de- and recenter, given the forms of power to be moved" (58). In other words, worldmaking tactics, like tactical subjectivities, function as critical interventions against ideological essentialism and as meaningful ruptures to the social order in the interest of demonstrating ways of being and imagining beyond rigid identity scripts.

Representatives. On her campaign website, she writes, “I’m a lifelong Kentuckian. I grew up on a tobacco farm that had been in my family for three generations. I’m... just somebody who cares about Kentucky.”²³² Emma was recently elected to the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Council in her home state.²³³ Zooey Zephyr is an elected official representing Montana’s 100th district in the state’s House of Representatives. Her campaign website states, in part, “I am a progressive, bisexual trans woman, and I am running for office... to fight for social & economic justice.”²³⁴ Justin Sarlo is a transgender man from Arkansas. According to The Yarn, a platform for local storytellers, Justin is “a Little Rock native who... has been involved in many charities including PFLAG New Hampshire and Renegades for a Cause (as a founding member).”²³⁵ These speakers offer models of queer resistance through their liminal performances.

By anchoring this analysis in a particular political context, I recognize the potential for theoretical slippage into thinking about queer worldmaking as solely reactionary to state violence and erasure. Indeed, to diminish queer worlds as only responsive to institutions of power inadvertently affirm those structures’ existence as *a priori*, natural, and permanent.²³⁶ Instead, I elucidate the generative possibilities for queer worldmaking that emerge from the rhetorical clashes between rural trans people and the governing bodies that seek to do them and their communities harm. While the liminal performances of rural queerness/queer rurality I bring together in this chapter are not *merely* reactive to the metronormative logics they disrupt, I consider one of many critical outcomes of their worldmaking praxis to be its apt response to the rhetorical and material exigencies that presently threaten many of our trans siblings in rural U.S. communities.

In this chapter, I argue that performing liminality as a form of queer worldmaking praxis opens critical paths for resistance to oppression and erasure by calling forth a rhetorical

collectivity to witness the farce of rigid identity binaries. Specifically, I contend that rhetors like those I highlight in this chapter can utilize liminal performances to invoke a collectivity of witnesses by asserting their embodied presence, attending to their cultural contexts, and reclaiming humanity through relationality. This chapter extends Lore/itta LeMaster's scholarship on liminality and Erin Rand's scholarship on rhetorical collectivity by theorizing liminal performance as a practice in which the rhetor enacts a world with their audience that exists beyond the totalizing logics of violent social hierarchies.²³⁷ Thus, liminality is not only something the rhetor *is*, such as a person who lives between identity scripts of rurality and queerness, but also something they *create* – a generative disruption in which the rhetor makes a case to be *seen*. I approach this analysis first from literature in queer rhetorical criticism, worldmaking and liminality, and rural queerness. Then, I engage with speeches given by Emma, Zooey, and Justin through the lens of queer rhetorical criticism. Finally, I discuss the implications and limitations of my argument and indicate a path forward in future scholarship in liminal performance as a necessary politic of queer worldmaking.

Liminal Performance as Worldmaking in Action

Worldmaking is a practice of queer imagination, of bringing realities that exist beyond the constraints of the “normal” into being. An early conception of queer worldmaking emerges from Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's foundational work “Sex in Public.”²³⁸ Drawing from their groundwork, Gust A. Yep explains that “queer world-making is the opening and creation of spaces without a map, the invention and proliferation of ideas without an unchanging and predetermined goal, and the expansion of individual freedom and collective possibilities.”²³⁹ In essence, worldmaking can be understood as the everyday resistance that is queerly enacted by

people who dare to transcend the boundaries forced upon them by cissexist, heteronormative constructs by imagining limitless futures on their own terms.

As a distinctly queer enterprise, worldmaking is messy,²⁴⁰ ephemeral,²⁴¹ and often paradoxical.²⁴² Worldmaking requires the suspension of “reality” constructed by increasingly dire material conditions for the imagination of possible futures. It is comprised of fleeting moments and glimpses of utopia that drive queer resistance.²⁴³ With the persistence of violence against trans people in contemporary society, worldmaking in its various forms responds to and subverts the cruelties of the day. One such anti-trans cruelty is what V. Jo Hsu theorizes as the rendering of trans, gender nonconforming (TGNC) people into the “monstrous non/image.”²⁴⁴ This non/image requires no referent, yet it elicits violence against trans people not for what they do but for the idea of their existence.

While worldmaking often serves as a response to anti-queer violence, scholars also highlight how queer and trans people engage in diverse generative worldmaking practices. Worldmaking performances are present in digital archives and video campaigns,²⁴⁵ trans relationalities,²⁴⁶ and queer auto/ethnography.²⁴⁷ Specifically, Gutierrez-Perez calls for performances of auto/ethnography as queer of color worldmaking to create a bridge to community advocacy and civic engagement.²⁴⁸ In a time where anti-trans rhetoric drives conservative platforms and policies, mobilizing worldmaking toward coalitional political action becomes increasingly necessary. One such worldmaking tactic that productively disrupts anti-trans spaces like conservative state governments is liminal performance.

I understand liminal performance to be a rhetorical tactic of queer worldmaking that disrupts and demystifies exclusionary identity categories in its forging of an otherworldly experience between a rhetor and a collectivity of witnesses. While some kinds of worldmaking

orient subjects toward themselves (perhaps through texts) or communities (perhaps through archives) in their imagining, liminal performance orients a rhetor toward a collectivity, a temporary audience, to create new worlds. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner explains liminality as “a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states.”²⁴⁹ Loren March elaborates that “liminality as a concept brings together queer ways of thinking through unboundedness, spillage, fluidity, multiplicity... as well as the relations of power and regulation that seek their stability or closure.”²⁵⁰ While liminality serves as a theoretical guide for “thinking through” queer multiplicities, I consider liminal performance to be a particular rhetorical form that emerges but is distinct from similar concepts that March mentions.²⁵¹

Liminal performance describes a tactic in which a rhetor sets up shop in the in-betweens with the purpose of disrupting and drawing attention to institutions that seek stability through ignoring, excluding, or eliminating people who do not fit neatly into rigid social hierarchies. Border epistemologies like those identified by Gloria Anzaldúa inform my theorizing of liminal performance. Specifically, Markéta Riebová describes Anzaldúa’s notion of “*Nepantla*” as a “liminal space/state of in-betweenness” as well as “a space where two seemingly opposing views must be negotiated and synthesized... [and] a space of change and transition which leads to new perspectives, knowledge and skills.”²⁵² This in-betweenness functions at the level of the rhetor who performs liminality by enacting supposedly contradictory identities, such as queerness and rurality, and at the level of their relationship with a momentary collectivity as their audience, giving liminal performance a particular shape and direction.

My conception of liminal performance as queer worldmaking connects Lore/tta LeMaster’s argument that “a [liminal] text can actively resist moments of normalization”²⁵³ with

Erin Rand's theorizing of collectivity, or a "temporary constitution of a group through synchronized action."²⁵⁴ LeMaster argues that texts such as *Let the Right One In* offer audiences a fictionalized experience of gender liminality through the figure of the vampire.²⁵⁵ I agree with LeMaster's premise that liminality is a resource for queer resistance in literature,²⁵⁶ and I further argue that a collectivity that emerges from liminal performance can similarly offer audiences a productive experience of liminality.²⁵⁷ This experience functions as a particular form of worldmaking in which a collectivity of witnesses is momentarily oriented toward a rhetor who offers a vision of existence beyond the totalizing logics of social hierarchies.

Liminal Performance as Worldmaking through Collectivity

I approach this analysis through the lens of queer rhetorical criticism as imagined by R. Anthony Slagle and Kent A. Ono. In a broad sense, Slagle asserts that queer criticism "take[s] aim at identity categories and the effects of such categories" and "render[s] identity permanently open and contestable" as a significant site of political action.²⁵⁸ In other words, queer criticism as a methodology centers subjectivity as its unit of analysis and considers it to be revelatory of the rhetorical mechanisms at work in a given political, social, and/or cultural situation. Additionally, I take up Ono's contextual fields of rhetoric as my specific approach to this analysis. Ono defines a "contextual field" as "the situating elements used to make sense of the rhetorical text, texts, intertexts, transtexts, paratexts, or even 'discourse formations' under study" which "includes the mediating factors that help elucidate or animate particular aspects of textual meaning, influence, eventfulness, or force."²⁵⁹ Guided by the principles outlined by Slagle and Ono, I bring together moments of public address and their relevant "contextual fields"²⁶⁰ that respond to a particular political exigency in the U.S. and illuminate liminal performance as a rhetorical tactic deployed by, but not exclusive to, trans folks in rural places.

I also weave my own experiences with rural queerness/queer rurality throughout this chapter, placing them in critical conversation with the liminal performances I assemble here. While I take up queer rhetorical criticism as my approach, I strive to perform reflexivity by “deeply reading” my “multiple cultural, political, [and] ideological situatedness” in this work.²⁶¹ My relationships to queer, trans, and rural as identity formations are both interrelated and complicated. I consider my hometown, Waterloo, Illinois, to be culturally rural due to its long economic history of agricultural production and relatively low population density.²⁶² However, Waterloo’s close proximity to St. Louis and statistical integration into the Greater St. Louis Metropolitan area complicates its rural status.²⁶³ Furthermore, Monroe County, Illinois, is one of the wealthiest counties in the state and has not faced the same levels of systemic economic depression that characterizes a significant number of rural places in the U.S.²⁶⁴ The fact that both sides of my family come from working class backgrounds does not diminish the material privileges I benefitted from growing up in Waterloo, namely the well-funded, high-quality public school district I attended.²⁶⁵

My relationships to queer and trans are similarly complex. While some would place my nonbinary gender identity under the trans umbrella,²⁶⁶ I rarely call myself trans, largely due to the fact that I am not rendered politically trans in the same ways that many trans folks, particularly trans women of color, are. I most often refer to myself as queer, as this term reflects both the multiplicity of gender and sexuality I experience and my political orientations to power.²⁶⁷ Queer, trans, and rural reflect particular historical and political trajectories and are operationalized differently depending on who uses them. However, rural queerness/queer rurality describes aspects of my lived experience that I find useful, one of which is the ongoing struggle

to make sense of myself and my relationship to the place I come from.²⁶⁸ This very struggle led me to resonate with the stories that Emma, Zooey, and Justin tell.

My analysis expands the scholarly conversation about queer worldmaking, positing liminal performance as a distinct rhetorical tactic as emergent from my examination of speeches by rural transgender people in conservative U.S. states. I argue that liminal performance as a rhetorical tactic offers salient possibilities for embodied queer resistance in its creation of a collectivity of witnesses. The rhetors I analyze accomplish this by asserting their embodied presence, attending to their cultural contexts, and reclaiming humanity through relationality. Each of these rhetorical moves exposes the inherent contradictions of oppositional identity scripts, such as rurality and queerness, in their failure to erase the people who exist “betwixt and between” them.²⁶⁹ These moves also orient a rhetorical collectivity toward possible worlds beyond totalizing logics of rigid social binaries.

Asserting Embodied Presence

Asserting embodied presence can be a powerful enactment of liminal performance, especially for people excluded and erased by oppositional identity scripts. Existing as embodied, living contradictions to binaries of belonging, Emma, Justin, and Zooey assert their embodied presence as transgender people in rural places, namely in state governments that deny their existence. Emma Curtis’s disruptive presence in the Kentucky House of Representatives in the face of proposed anti-trans legislation serves as her liminal performance by occupying space where she belongs as a Kentuckian but not as a transgender woman. On March 16, 2023, she gave a speech responding to Kentucky’s House Bill 470²⁷⁰ in which she states, in part, “You have heard from detransitioners who have experienced horrible things... You have not heard from a single Kentucky detransitioner except for right now. I detransitioned.”²⁷¹ By pointing out her

positionality in contrast with out-of-state detransitioners, Emma asserts her right to speak on these issues as both a transgender woman and a Kentuckian. She continues: “I detransitioned when I was 18 years old because I was ashamed, I was scared... I did not detransition because I am not a woman... After I detransitioned, I attempted suicide.”²⁷² Emma’s liminal performance of her supposedly oppositional identities orients her audience toward herself as living proof Kentuckian trans women are real. Even for just a moment, Emma’s presence invites a collectivity to see a different world, dispelling the myths of tidy normative social life that the Kentucky House of Representatives seek to maintain in the service of their erasure of trans people in their state.

To enact a worldmaking rhetoric as a transgender person in a rural U.S. place, which is constructed by scripts of whiteness, heteronormativity, and cissexism, is to enact a politic of disruption. Emma’s presence in the Kentucky House of Representatives in a hostile environment for trans people serves as a rupture to the space, especially in the context of the story she tells about her attempt to take her life after detransitioning. Sara Ahmed writes that “being ‘out of place’ is also to create disorientation in others: the body of color might disturb the picture—and to do so simply as a result of being in spaces that are lived as white.”²⁷³ While Ahmed specifically attends to whiteness as a mechanism of spatial power, I borrow Ahmed’s phrase to describe spaces that are not only “lived as” white but also as cisgender and heterosexual. That said, the very presence of trans people like Emma not only in rural places but also in spaces of governance that are “lived as” anti-trans resists hegemony in meaningful queer ways, especially in the current temporal and spatial moment in which Emma speaks. This move is especially powerful as Emma disrupts the Kentucky House of Representatives by orienting her audience

away from the logics of eradication that the legislature uses to make their government a space “lived as” transphobic.²⁷⁴

Similarly to Emma, Justin’s embodied presence in the Arkansas House of Representatives in the face of proposed transphobic legislation – specifically, Arkansas House Bill 1570 titled “Save Adolescents From Experimentation (SAFE) Act”²⁷⁵ – serves as liminal performance in his occupation of space where he belongs as an Arkansas resident but does not belong as a transgender man. Justin’s presence as an adult transgender man in the Arkansas House of Representatives directly contradicts AR HB 1570 which argues that gender-affirming care is “unnecessary.”²⁷⁶ In his address to the Arkansas General Assembly on March 22, 2021, Justin Sarlo explains, “I was born... under the name Sandy K. Sarlo and the gender ‘female.’ When I was 8 years old, Senator, I told my parents that God had made a big mistake. To be fair to my parents, the year was 1963. Their reaction was to send me to ballet lessons and put me in more dresses.”²⁷⁷

Justin’s existence violates the state of Arkansas’ perception of transgender people in their state. In essence, Justin’s embodiment is itself a contradiction in Arkansas since by law, gender-affirming care for transgender people is “unnecessary.” Justin’s body exists in the liminal, in the impossible, as he performs what being transgender is like in Arkansas and troubles the “positionalities and worldviews”²⁷⁸ of fellow Arkansans in the process – a University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture report states that “in the 2010 Census, 19 percent of the U.S. population was rural compared with 44 percent for Arkansas.”²⁷⁹ With nearly half of its population living in rural communities, Arkansas ranks 6th as the most rural state in the United States.²⁸⁰ This context matters in the conversation about the state’s culture and how it conflicts with perceived values about trans people like Justin. His liminal performance speaks back to a

collectivity of Arkansans and asserts that his very presence dismantles the totalizing logics that the state government attempts to impose on Arkansas culture, an environment in which Justin is not supposed to exist, yet does nevertheless.

Zooey's performance of liminality differs from Emma's and Justin's as she not only violates norms by being openly transgender in her community but also serves as an elected government official in the Montana House of Representatives and actively fights for her own survival in addition to the survival of her constituents. Judith Butler reflects on queer survival: "we are, as a community, subjected to violence... we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies."²⁸¹ In essence, Zooey performs the liminal in her assertion of trans survival by existing in the "social vulnerability" of politics as a transgender elected official. She occupies the space of vulnerability and power simultaneously, as she is a lawmaker but is also targeted by legislation in her state, evidenced by her involvement with Montana Senate Bill 99 titled the "Youth Health Protection Act."²⁸² Zooey's role as a lawmaker adds another layer to her embodied liminal performance.

MT SB 99 was originally proposed in January 2023 as "an act... prohibiting certain medical and surgical treatments to treat minors with gender dysphoria; prohibiting public funds, programs, property, and employees from being used for these treatments."²⁸³ In reference to bills like MT SB 99, Zooey stated, "I hope the next time there's an invocation, when you bow your heads in prayer, you see the blood on your hands."²⁸⁴ In her response to attacks on her and her constituents' well-being, Zooey rhetorically connects her body to the actions of her colleagues in the Montana House of Representatives by claiming that they will have "blood on [their] hands," invoking the violence that transgender people face every day.²⁸⁵ Zooey's powerful words, which led to her ejection from the Montana House of Representatives, are not hyperbolic, as the

Movement Advancement Project lists Montana as an especially dangerous “Negative Law” state.²⁸⁶ Along with Emma and Justin, Zooey enacts liminal performance in an embodied sense as she resists transphobic legislation that actively targets her existence by occupying space in a government that actively tries to erase her.

Attending to the embodied presence of these trans speakers allows us to consider the material ways in which liminal performance operates as a political worldmaking tactic in its capacity to call forth a collectivity to witness other worlds. As LeMaster articulates, “A queer body is a liminal body, betwixt and between, without allegiance to any one camp over another.”²⁸⁷ Put differently, experiences of nonconformity are often already liminal; few spaces in society are carved out for those of us who do not fit nicely into respectable genders and/or sexualities, let alone in places of power. Rather than accepting that we do not belong, effectively ensuring our own erasure, we can instead draw upon the possibilities that liminal performance affords us by asserting our physical presence and disrupting spaces that are “lived as” anti-queer and inviting our audiences to witness the farce of rigid social binaries.²⁸⁸

When I visit Waterloo, I feel a strange tension brought forth by my embodied presence. The place and people that raised me, the origins of my being, are infused into my soul (if such a thing exists). Being there (inside the old red brick café, beside the endless fields of corn and soy, under the pavilion at the fairgrounds) is difficult because I attribute so much of me, including my queerness, to a community that sees me as an outsider now. In many ways, I am an outsider – I am not the same person who moved away at 18. My gender nonconforming, disabled body clashes with the spaces I visit in Waterloo that are “lived as” (cis)heterosexual and the fearmongering *Fox News* messages about queer academics like myself that saturate many Monroe County residents’ media diets. I first encountered Emma’s, Justin’s, and Zooey’s

speeches online shortly after the anti-trans demonstrations took place at WHS in 2023, and through their bearing witness of their shared yet unique struggles with the places they live, I felt a sense of hope I previously thought impossible. Though my hometown and experiences are certainly not exactly the same as theirs, their liminal performances brought me into a collectivity, one that shares a strong love for these places that hate us. Perhaps we are driven by an impossible dream that maybe these places may learn to love us back.

Attending to Cultural Contexts

In addition to asserting embodied presence, attending to specific (often shifting and paradoxical) cultural contexts is often a significant component of liminal performance. Emma, Justin, and Zoey engage in liminal performance by attending to situated queerness within their cultural contexts by speaking to their experiences as transgender people in rural U.S. places. The speakers invite a more dynamic, complex reading of rurality than proffered by some metronormative narratives about trans people in “red” places. In the words of Emma Curtis, “To any trans kid out here watching... This is not how your government should work... There are people here every day fighting for you to be seen as you are, to be respected, to be loved, and to have a place in this Commonwealth.”²⁸⁹ Emma asserts that trans kids in Kentucky have every right to exist in their rural communities as they are by paving the way for imagining a different world beyond the oppositional scripts of anti-queer rurality and metronormative queerness.

Emma’s words indicate that even amidst her own hardships, she still held on to her identity as both a Kentuckian and a transgender woman. She concludes, “I am honest to God, so embarrassed. Ashamed. And for the first time in my life, I wish I was not a Kentuckian.”²⁹⁰ The fact that she had pride in Kentucky, with all its complexities, until government officials began targeting trans kids shows that Emma conceptualizes herself in a particular way that rejects the

metronormative demands of her to forsake her red home state and asserts that her rural identity is not separate from her experience as a trans person. In coopting a space of violence and oppression to speak directly to “trans kid[s]” in her state, Emma directs her audience’s attention to the vulnerable people who would be harmed by the legislature’s policies, making the case that they are not enemies of Kentucky but rather the very people who form the fabric of its culture.

In thinking about liminal performances like Emma’s, I return to the ways in which rural queerness challenges metronormative LGBTQ+ politics in the United States. Carly Thomsen contends that queerness in rural places challenges “the most taken-for-granted idea among LGBTQ rights supporters: the inherent (personal and social) value of being ‘out, loud, and proud,’ an assumption that informs advocates’ reliance on... visibility politics and discourses.”²⁹¹ Emma, Justin, and Zooey all gave public addresses in highly visible ways which are not necessarily accessible, safe, or desirable for queer people in rural U.S. communities. They are all “out” and openly discuss their trans identities in their speeches. However, this does not necessarily conflict with Thomsen’s conception of (in)visibility but rather affirms it in the context of rural places.²⁹²

Trans people in rural places, like Zooey for instance, can be and often are visibly queer in the sense that they are read by people in their communities as different even if their transness/queerness is not articulated in a way that would conflict with their rural existence. Zooey recalls a conversation with a constituent on the campaign trail, “She started breaking down... her trans grandson had moved out of the state and wasn’t coming back... she said... ‘please try to make this state safe enough so my grandbaby can come home.’”²⁹³ This poignant plea from Zooey’s constituent to “make this state safe enough” for her grandson shows that rural communities and queer identities are not inherently incompatible; rather, they emerge from the

cultural contexts and relationalities in which trans people exist. Thomsen explains that queer people in rural places “are illegible not to rural people but to urban people; self-identified liberals, progressives, and leftists; and gay rights groups.”²⁹⁴ Zooey’s (il)legibility** to her constituent as a trans woman did not impede her ability to connect with her neighbor over important issues for queer people in Montana, exposing the sham of the state legislature’s eradictory logics about queer and trans people as enemies of rural life.

By drawing attention to their rurality without diminishing their transness, Emma, Justin, and Zooey assert rather than reject their cultural ties to queerness in their performances of liminality. These rhetors are visible figures, but their continued investment in rural, conservative, “red” communities problematizes the neoliberal assumption that the best places for queer people are in “blue,” urban places. Their (in)visible (il)legibility in both rural cissexist, heteronormative scripts and queer metronormative scripts is precisely the foundation for their subversive liminal performances. I argue that this crucial connection between culture and queerness extends LeMaster’s conception of liminality as “moments of resistance to assimilation, essentialism, privacy, and heteronormativity”²⁹⁵ as these speakers enact cultural specificity in queer politics via liminal performance and offer their audiences a vision of a world that exists beyond social hierarchies.

Waterloo has a long history of supporting performing arts in the community – from the Monroe Actors Stage Company to the Waterloo Municipal Band to the well-funded arts programs in the schools, Waterloo is a decidedly musical and theatrical place.²⁹⁶ For many queer kids like myself, the arts were a space where we could play with identity, expression, and

** I use the parenthetical form of (il)legibility here to indicate the layered, almost paradoxical nature of queer (in)visibility in rural communities. As Thomsen explores in depth, the ways in which rural queer folks belong are often idiosyncratic with broader narratives about “being out and proud.” Zooey’s constituent did not immediately recognize her as a trans woman yet still pled with her as a fellow Montanan to help bring her grandson home.

belonging in ways beyond the limits of small-town life. My senior year of high school, the Performance in the Round group on the speech team performed *The Laramie Project*, a theatrical rendition of interviews conducted by members of the Tectonic Theater Project after the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming.²⁹⁷ While I was not part of the cast that year, as I was competing in individual events, I regularly attended my teammates' rehearsals and performances. While neither our school nor our community demonstrated any sort of overt support for LGBTQ+ people in the ways we may associate with being "out and proud," my team's production of *The Laramie Project* functioned as a kind of culturally-specific liminal performance. While my hometown is almost 1,000 miles from Laramie, we felt – and performed – a resonance with Matt's story as told by his neighbors, family members, and friends.

Reclaiming Humanity Through Relationality

Performing liminality can also involve a reclaiming of humanity. While queer folks are routinely excluded and erased through violent scripts of monstrosity, these speakers teach us how their humanity may be reclaimed and reworked through the enactment of queer relationality. While asserting their embodied presence and attending to situated queerness, Emma, Justin, and Zooey engage in liminal performance by insisting on the inherent value of their humanity through their relationships.²⁹⁸ Justin embodies relationality as he asserts his humanity by sharing stories that speak to distinctly trans experiences. He reflects, "I tried very hard to conform to who I wasn't. But... I couldn't take it anymore. I can't describe to you the pain a transgender person goes through... At 22, I stepped in front of a dump truck, just hoping to God it would end it all."²⁹⁹ Justin's attempt to take his own life shows how thinking of himself as a monster was unbearable for him. Justin's vulnerability establishes a relationality with his audience that allows him to make a case for imagining otherwise.

Additionally, acceptance by his family indicates Justin's reclaiming of his humanity while being trans in Arkansas. He states:

I eventually got married, had 2 children. And when they were grown, they came to me one day and said... "Mom, if you wanna transition, we fully support you." So at the age of 55, I came out... God didn't make a mistake. God made me the way I am so that I can understand, and help, and mentor these kids, because I don't want any of them to ever, ever go through what I did.³⁰⁰

Justin enacts what LeMaster calls trans relationality, which "refers to queer bonds that enact queer worlds through exploring the dialectic tension between the individual and the institutional."³⁰¹ By speaking to his own experience being a transgender man in Arkansas, Justin calls upon his *relational* locations to forge queer orientations to others that push against institutions which otherwise erase him, both in his recounting of his experiences with his family as well as in his call to a collectivity to witness his reality.

Bringing the trans community to light in a place of governance that regularly commits violence against them, Justin publicly asserts his humanity as a transgender man by showing how he lived beyond seeing himself as a monster to the point of attempting suicide. He does not ignore the monstrous image of himself – rather, he reckons with it and affirms his humanity through his ties to his family and his ties to the trans community in his home state, wielding what Shadee Abdi and Bernadette Marie Calafell call the "power of liminality and the possibility of queer utopias."³⁰² This existence between the monstrous and the human shows Justin's liminal performance as resistance to the monstrous non/image while enacting relationality. Justin reclaims his humanity not by giving into narratives that would banish his transness as to the realm of the imaginary for manipulation by anti-trans actors but rather by embracing his embodied ambiguity through relationality. Justin refuses to diminish his transness while expressing empathy for trans kids in Arkansas, inviting his audience to do the same.

Zooey also calls upon relationality in her performance of liminality by enacting her transness as an elected official in the Montana House of Representatives and forging spaces of coalitional belonging. She states, “What we are really seeing here, both... in this building, and across the country as well is when... marginalized groups are attacked by legislation... whether they are on trans health care, whether they’re on Indigenous rights, whether they’re gun laws.”³⁰³ Here, Zooey is calling upon or “hailing” a coalition of her constituents in the space between legible societal scripts.³⁰⁴ By grouping trans health care, Indigenous rights, and gun control together as common targets for oppressive legislation, Zooey calls forth a coalitional relationship among people who are not supposed to get along, let alone exist, in rural communities.

Importantly, Zooey rhetorically situates this impossible coalition against government entities that enact legislation that causes shared harm, stating, “Those in power aren’t content with just passing those hateful, harmful bills. What they are demanding is silence, and we will not be complicit in our eradication.”³⁰⁵ Zooey’s assertion that she and her constituents “will not be complicit in our eradication” speaks to powerful resistance in the creation of a proverbial “we” that crafts a new space for possibility between rural and queer identities. Lisa Flores argues that “a discursive space can be opened through a rhetoric of difference which allows a marginalized group to reverse existing and external definitions and to create their own definitions.”³⁰⁶ This crafting of a coalitional space in the gaps between legible identities via relationality is a feature of Zooey’s liminal performance that transcends the divisions between Montanans that allows her to direct a collectivity toward a common goal: resistance to eradication by their government.

Additionally, Zooey’s ejection from the Montana House of Representatives following her aforementioned “blood on your hands” comment regarding MT SB 99 highlights the governing

body's resistance to what they see as her monstrous presence and words as a transgender elected official.³⁰⁷ Her continued efforts to fight for her constituents after her expulsion from the House by working in the hallway, a literal space between the rooms where governing happens, further highlights the ways that trans people forge their own paths for survival.³⁰⁸ By calling upon her community in this instance of being treated by the Montana House as an unruly monster who does not deserve to speak, Zooey exists between her monstrous non/image and her connection to Montanans, particularly those who are queer and trans, and instead demands a discursive space of belonging for herself and her constituents. Like Emma's assertion that "[trans people] aren't statistics, these are people, and I am a person sitting before you,"³⁰⁹ Zooey refuses the diminishing of trans suicide to numbers on a page, easy to set aside and forget about. Both Emma and Zooey force the legislators in front of them to reckon with their attempts to push them into the shadows as amorphous, monstrous non/images.

Reclaiming humanity through relationality speaks to the coalitional possibilities of liminal performance. Loren March reflects that "liminality might shift us... towards a politics of relationality that is rooted in our being in the world, and speaks to... shared responsibilities towards one another."³¹⁰ In this analysis, I illuminate the ways that engaging in liminal performance allows us to ground ourselves not in rigid identity scripts (such as metronormative queerness or cissexist, heteronormative rurality) but rather in our liminal relationships with each other. Rendering trans people monstrous implies an existence of loneliness, of isolation; (monstrous) relationality creates togetherness, a united (if imperfect and temporary) collectivity against erasure.³¹¹ Those of us who dare to wield the power of liminality against forces of oppression and violence can craft spaces of relationality where we are monstrously human, embracing our illegibility while engaging in radical care for others.

When I think about Waterloo and queer relationality, I am oddly reminded of the quilting ladies from the church I was raised in. To be sure, there are many ways that growing up Southern Baptist impacted me negatively, yet the critic in me cannot refuse the curious, layered social formations that I witnessed at church. Once a week, a group of middle-aged to older women would get together in the church basement and quilt together. These women would exchange fabrics, share tips, and, of course, yap about the various goings-on in the community. Each quilt was a unique masterpiece, made of scraps and elbow grease, to be given away to loved ones or neighbors in need. (Even though many of those same women would likely kick “those homosexuals” out of their church, it seems rather ironic that their craft is reminiscent of the form the NAMES Project AIDS took in the 1980s: the Memorial Quilt.) Like a quilt, perhaps the most beautiful, poignant patchworks of self and community emerge from the most impossible of circumstances through the practice of repurposing the very materials that others discard. Perhaps to perform liminally is to set up shop in those relational and rhetorical gaps, to pick up those pieces of identity from all the communities in which we live and work, to build something new from the scraps left behind.

Implications and Limitations of Liminal Performance

When I reflect on my identity as a queer person from Waterloo, Illinois, I feel the rough edges of conflicting narratives about my existence. No matter where I am, whether it is in urban Colorado or rural Illinois, I feel like a stranger and at home all at once. In Colorado, I engage with a community of queer people who experience a lot of the same things that I do. At the same time, I miss the people who raised me – my neighbors, teachers, church family, classmates – some of whom now pretend they do not recognize me. Going home is bittersweet. Anti-trans demonstrations like the one that took place at my alma mater show that the community that

brought me up does not want me. Still, I do not know that I will ever stop loving (and at times hating) the place I grew up.

This feeling of not quite belonging anywhere is one that I share with countless queer people who grew up in rural U.S. communities. The script of metronormative queerness that tells us to hate where we come from and to announce our multiplicity of identities which mark us as outsiders is simply not livable in parts of the United States.³¹² At the same time, the script of rurality that denies my humanity because I do not fit nicely into a gender category also fails me. Rural queers, like many others, often exist “betwixt-and-between,”³¹³ but I contend that creating liminality through performance and harnessing our collective power to resist normative identity scripts that define us and our relationships with others can function as tangible rhetorical tactics for disrupting those exclusionary logics. Learning from the performative disruptions of transgender people like Emma, Zooey, and Justin in such a precarious political moment in rural U.S. communities can offer queer people a rhetorical path forward in imagining and enacting liminal worlds of belonging akin to Hsu’s concept of “homing” which “emphasizes that belonging is not stable, guaranteed, or predictable. Instead, [homing] approaches home as a constellation of stories that determine with whom, where, and how we belong.”³¹⁴

That said, performing liminality in spaces of oppression can be an incredibly risky endeavor, especially for Black trans people and trans people of color. Public address as a form of resistance is a privilege that countless trans people, among others, cannot access. Additionally, relying on those trans folks who are willing and able to engage in liminal performance as resistance via public address, like Emma, Zooey, and Justin, could be considered an unfair expectation. Furthermore, scholars such as Karma R. Chávez warn against the politics of inclusion in rhetorical studies, which certainly applies to visibility politics latent in public

address scholarship such as this chapter.³¹⁵ Additionally, J. Logan Smilges argues that treating speech as the sole path for resistive performance is not only ableist but theoretically negligent, as queer silence also serves important rhetorical purposes.³¹⁶ To be sure, liminal performance can be enacted as resistance in a variety of contexts within and beyond traditional speeches. That said, resistance efforts at times must respond to particular political exigencies like the legislative ones that Emma, Zooey, and Justin face as trans people in rural U.S. communities.

My inclusion of Emma and Zooey in this analysis also pose interesting questions about the limits of their worldmaking as elected officials themselves: can queer and trans people disrupt processes of state violence from within government structures? Do trans elected officials already run the risk of cooption by the state given a presumed threshold of legibility (namely through their whiteness) required to be elected in the first place? What do Emma's and Zooey's liminal performances gain and/or lose by their status as agents of the state, or do they forfeit liminality entirely in their election to public office? I imagine the answers to these questions are varied and complex, and they constitute part of an important emerging conversation in the U.S. about representation, identity politics, and trans elected officials.³¹⁷ While I cannot portend all the possible answers to these questions in this chapter, I hope it elicits future conversations about the limits and possibilities of particular forms of worldmaking praxis, particularly as they relate to organizing, civic action, and community engagement.

Trans and queer people live in all sorts of liminal spaces every day, and we can harness that power of disrupting normative scripts of acceptable existence. Indeed, while liminality is inherent to some of our experiences as queer people, speakers like Emma, Zooey, and Justin show how performing liminality to disrupt systems of oppression that attempt to erase us by calling forth a collectivity to witness the violent deceit of social binaries can open endless

rhetorical possibilities for resistance. This act of witnessing extends Erin Rand's theorizing on rhetorical collectivities,³¹⁸ demonstrating that orientation toward a performance can generate a collective experience of liminality. Following Rand's lead, I assert that future scholarship in rhetorical studies should continue examining quotidian performances of queer worldmaking as models of praxis in everyday life. The subversive potential of liminal performance does not require that we resist oppression in identical ways, nor does it need perfect harmony among different groups. Rather, the opposite is true. LeMaster elaborates that "liminality refers to an in-between positionality where the margins of difference are blurred... in ways that scripted interactions are rendered seemingly unstable or inarticulate."³¹⁹ In fact, these unstable bonds with identity and with each other may offer more generative possibilities for resistance than institutionalized activist efforts. Liminal performance is predicated on the different bodies, cultural contexts, and relationalities in which queer people exist, even as we learn the practice of forging ephemeral collectivities from trans teachers in specific places like rural communities in "red" states.

The situation in the United States is dire – journalist Erin Reed considers over half of U.S. states to have moderate to high risk to trans people.³²⁰ Furthermore, according to the FBI's Annual Crime Report, anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes based on gender identity increased by 32.9% between 2022 and 2023.³²¹ While resistance to this hate through tactics such as liminal performance is worthy of study, the exigency remains for action against anti-trans rhetoric in all 50 U.S. states and around the world. Further scholarship should investigate both the limits and the possibilities of public address for queer resistance by examining other instances of liminal performance as well as other forms of worldmaking. I contend that rural queerness is one such site of research that lends itself toward liminality, but it is certainly not the only one.

Additionally, anti-trans rhetorics and policies need to be challenged by anyone who considers themselves allies. I agree with bell hooks that we “do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression.”³²² Trans folks should not solely carry the burden of proving their humanity and asserting their dignity. By thinking through the ways in which all kinds of people resist violence and hate, we can imagine possible futures where we can all survive and belong in the places that we call home.

CHAPTER 4

Organizational Rhetoric as Place-making/Placemaking at Rural LGBTQ+ Campout

On June 6, 2023, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) declared a state of emergency in the U.S. for LGBTQ+ people.³²³ On that day, Hannah Schoenbaum reported for *PBS News* that the organization published a guidebook that “provides information about filing complaints for civil rights violations and points to resources for financing moves and finding employment, particularly in the 17 states with a trifecta of Democratic leadership in both legislative chambers and the governor’s office.”³²⁴ Certainly, the 2023 spike and subsequent explosion of anti-trans and anti-queer legislation and rhetoric poses real dangers for those living in “Negative Law” states, which I examine further elsewhere in this dissertation.³²⁵ I return to the HRC’s emergency declaration to expose a different rhetorical dynamic at work that assumes a particular kind of relationship between place and community that dangerously fails to account for the ways in which rural queer folks struggle not only to survive but also to carve out spaces to share resources, joy, pain, power, and possibility.

For the HRC to suggest that survival depends solely on queer folks’ ability to flee from their homes and communities for the alleged safety of states with “a trifecta of Democratic leadership” reveals a metronormative partisan logic that upholds harmful binaries about rural queer life and that disregards the economic, physical, emotional, political, and logistical constraints on those who cannot simply escape erasure by moving to a blue state. For example, as a person who made the move from Missouri to Colorado for graduate school, I can attest that the overwhelming sentiment among many of my loved ones was one of relief: “thank god you’re moving to a blue state, it will be so much safer for you there.” To be sure, Colorado has more legal protections for me than Missouri does, but it is also astronomically more expensive to live

here. Am I truly “safer” if my housing, food, and healthcare are significantly more unaffordable? Even if gender-affirming care is protected in Colorado, would my insurance plan cover it? Would I have the time off from work at a new employer to pursue a treatment or a surgery? What happens when I cannot lean on my support network, most of which is now hundreds of miles away? These questions do not even cover the specific hostilities that queer people of color might face in a “blue” (white, wealthy, libertarian) place like Colorado.

Furthermore, the rhetorical association between safety and Democratic states obscures the complexities of both place and queerness as interrelated, embedded cultural phenomena. Elijah Adiv Edelman critiques the essentializing rhetorics that undergird many mainstream LGBTQ+ organizations and movements, writing that “this logic underlies the mainstream LGBT disregard of immigrant rights, sex worker rights, and the incarcerated as, specifically, not issues for queer persons. For LGBT organizations to support these marginal bodies would otherwise limit the capacity of ‘queer’ to be worthy of state-sanctioned recognition.”³²⁶ The idea that queer folks unilaterally desire and benefit from relocation to blue states similarly contributes to the extractive LGBTQ+ politics and erases the placed specificities that govern rural queer folks’ desires and needs.

The question that guides this dissertation chapter, then, is one that attempts to respond to this problem: **how does a localized LGBTQ+ advocacy organization in a rural U.S. state invoke and/or disrupt placed queer subjectivities through its rhetoric?** To answer this question, I turned to the field: an LGBTQ+ campout in a rural U.S. state. State Equality Project (SEP) is a pseudonym for a state-based 501(c)(3) LGBTQ+ rights advocacy organization in a rural, conservative U.S. state in the Mountain West region.^{††} One of this organization’s key

^{††} I use pseudonyms for people, places, and events throughout this chapter for the organization’s safety. Any similarities to real people, places, and events are coincidental and unintentional.

annual fundraising events is a 5-day LGBTQ+ summer camping event, which will be referred to simply as Campout throughout the chapter. Over the span of multiple decades, Campout has grown to include an average of 400–500 campers each year according to their website. Over the course of the 5-day Campout, campers can participate in a wide variety of events ranging from standard outdoor activities (e.g. bird watching and hiking) to more adult-themed activities (i.e., naughty trivia, drag bingo, and kink information sessions). Campout also offers music and standup performances throughout the event. SEP maintains a website and social media presence related to Campout and their other advocacy work.

Informed by my experience attending Campout as a participant, I argue that queer worlds³²⁷ emerged from the rhetorical collisions between SEP's *organizational* top-down placemaking efforts and Campout's *relational* bottom-up place-making realities. While nationalized LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations and movements rely on the rhetorical *absence* of place (and its complicated relationships with class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability) to build and maintain “good queer”³²⁸ subjectivities, localized LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations like SEP appear to invoke a placed *presence*, especially through events like Campout. This analysis indicates the centrality of place as a rhetorical mechanism in organizational subjectification processes, particularly in its capacity to “challenge sedimented [and essentialized] Western understandings of both organizing and subjectivities.”³²⁹ By examining the (present/absent) rhetorical role of place in theorizing organizational subject formation at Campout, I reveal the possibilities for imagining queer worlds that emerge from the relational negotiations that mediate the self and the organization.

Organizational Rhetoric as Placemaking

The last site of worldmaking I interrogate in this dissertation is organizational rhetoric. Organizational rhetoric as a theoretical tool emerges from critical approaches to organizational communication. Dennis K. Mumby conceptualizes organizations through a critical approach as significant facilitators of identity formation and collective action within broader systems of power.³³⁰ Mumby also posits that the ways organizations imbue the communicative relations that constitute them with particular situations to power in part by shaping the interests and desires of organization members through narrative.³³¹ The stories that organizations tell not only situate their members toward specific ways of thinking about their roles in them – they also orient those who interact with their rhetoric toward specific (placed) subjectivities.³³²

Organizational rhetoric as a subjectification process responds to organizational identity (OI) theory, or “the psychological attachment that an individual feels to a social collective (i.e., an organization, a team, a professional community),”³³³ from the critical paradigm. Jenna N. Hanchey and Peter R. Jensen define

organizational subjectification as a lens that can attend to the processual nature of subject formation under inequitable organizational and cultural conditions as they are imbricated in the rhetorical fabric of organizational life. We view the fabric of organizing as an inherently rhetorical process, and... all aspects of organizing are in some way rhetorical accomplishments.³³⁴

OI theory interrogates how an organization orients its members toward itself (i.e., what kind of employee should I be?), whereas subjectification asks how an organization orients its members toward power (i.e., what kind of person should I be?).

Organizations as rhetorical entities utilize a wide variety of processes to invoke particular subjectivities from its members. Joshua P. Ewalt identifies one such mechanism in the organizational rhetoric of the Land Institute’s Prairie Festival: placemaking, or “the various

processes through which objects, plants, animals, humans, buildings and other phenomena become organized into a constellation of materials.”³³⁵ Such arrangements are rhetorical – sitting in my sister’s garden among the symphony of colors and smells of flora punctuated by the summer sounds of frogs and cicadas affects me differently than the neatly manicured landscaping of the university campus I work at. The rhetorical formation of place by organizations, according to Ewalt, “operates as an organizational strategy that works on material histories... [and] functions to solicit re-definitions of self in relation to an organizational target.”³³⁶ I contend that another outcome of this redefining of self not only implicates subjects toward organizational ends, but also toward the structures of power they function within.

As organizations use placemaking to “solicit re-definitions of self,”³³⁷ they create and maintain particular realities/worlds. If relationships among subjects and places are rhetorically managed by organizations, organizational rhetoric as a placemaking process also suggests an openness to negotiation by those very subjects and places. Loretta LeMaster suggests that one form of worldmaking, trans relationality, “enact[s] queer worlds through exploring the dialectic tension between the individual and the institutional.”³³⁸ I further contend that through organizing, subjects have the potential to enact worlds that either maintain or disrupt the status quo proffered by placemaking organizational rhetorics. As Ewalt explains, organizations create realities through their rhetorical regulation of subject and place toward particular ends, but not all organizing efforts function in the same way, nor do they all have the same goals. Thus, I investigate the ways in which organizations invoke and/or disrupt embodied, emplaced rural queer subjectivities through placemaking rhetorics as well as the worldmaking potential that rural queer people enact with/against/despite the organization’s messaging.

Participatory Critical Rhetoric: Field and Text

To ascertain how SEP invokes and/or disrupts rural queer subjectivities at Campout and how Campout participants create rural queer worlds, I examined the organization's messaging through both its text-based and field-based rhetorical artifacts. Specifically, I analyzed SEP's website, Instagram, and Facebook pages along with physical materials I obtained at Campout. Additionally, I participated in the 5-day Campout event as a camper to physically immerse myself in SEP's rhetorical processes. I investigated Campout's organizational rhetoric using a *participatory critical rhetoric* approach, which Michael Middleton et al. describe as "a set of research practices that bring qualitative methods of data collection... into the process of rhetorical criticism... to account for the rhetoric of the everyday... and to open space for critics to analyze, participate with, and contribute to an emancipatory form of critique."³³⁹ By experiencing rhetoric in the field, Kathleen M. de Onís asserts that "these *in situ* practices require that we leave our manuscripts, lecture halls, and seminar tables to interact with communities beyond academia... [and allow] matters of public concern to feel present and may move us to become more invested in these causes, both academically and politically."³⁴⁰ By "being there" at Campout, I was able to experience the ways SEP's rhetoric moves and is moved by me as a camper.³⁴¹

Admittedly, attending Campout pushed me out of my comfort zone for a couple of reasons that are relevant to this study. First, Campout was the first time that I ever slept in a tent. Second, Campout was one of the first LGBTQ+ events that I attended, and it was the first overnight LGBTQ+ event that I experienced. As a queer person from a small town in southern Illinois, my exposure to LGBTQ+ spaces is relatively limited, an experience I share with a number of queer folks from rural communities. I have attended a handful of drag shows and have gone to a gay bar or two in the past, but I assumed that my exposure to LGBTQ+ spaces was

lower than the average Campout attendee. These aspects of my perspective and (lack of) experience allowed me to encounter Campout and be moved by SEP's rhetorics in a unique way. By recording my first impressions of and preparations for Campout, I illuminate important elements of SEP's organizational rhetoric as text and as field.

I took preliminary notes on SEP's textual online presence before I attended Campout. I also briefly recorded my experiences and reflections as I prepared for Campout. Then, I took detailed handwritten field notes as I participated in Campout over the course of 5 days. I split my field notes into two main parts: (1) thick description of my observations and interactions throughout each day and (2) daily reflections on my experiences at Campout. I did not use any recording devices to create my field notes – I handwrote all field notes and anonymized any interactions I recorded for the privacy and safety of Campout participants. I constructed my field notes about SEP's rhetorical practices from my perspective as a camper only. No private identifiable information was collected from my fellow campers. Upon returning home from Campout, I converted my field notes into narrative form, following Ewalt's³⁴² and Simonson's³⁴³ leads to construct *scenes* that elucidate the embodied and emplaced rhetorical processes at work at Campout. From these scenes, I identified some resonant rhetorical threads through which I can answer my research question.

Framing Campout: SEP's Online Presence

SEP maintains an active online presence through their website and social media accounts, and they have dedicated pages and posts for Campout specifically. The home page for SEP's website contains a relatively simple design with links to information about the organization, ways to support their programming, and upcoming events. Interestingly, a certain sense of place is immediately apparent through SEP's integration of Mountain West natural imagery into its

logo and throughout its website. The visual connection between SEP's advocacy work and its state's landscape indicates a strong rhetorical bond between place and the organization's identity, on the surface at least. SEP's Instagram is more infographic-oriented than its website, with several of its posts relating to upcoming fundraisers, local events, and political advocacy work with the state government. Still, the posts that promote SEP's merchandise maintain symbols and imagery of the Mountain West, with one post in particular containing a model sporting a new item with the wilderness as their background.

I spent the most time with SEP's Campout section of their website in preparation for my trip. Campout has its own rainbow-and-nature-themed logo, which greets visitors to the page. Below the logo, images of previous years' Campout are present, showing a group of around 15 campers surrounding a bonfire with rainbow lights decorating the trees in the background. SEP describes Campout on its homepage as "a friendly, safe, LGBTQ-affirming environment" and explains that the annual event has served as a vital SEP fundraising opportunity for several decades. The homepage also includes photos of the many performers scheduled to entertain campers throughout the event as well as the logos of several local sponsors. These images are accompanied by links to tickets and registration, volunteering, site map and agenda, and participation policies, all of which I pored over extensively in the weeks leading up to my participation in Campout.

Setting the Scene: Campout's Layout

Campout took place on national park land in the Mountain West region in the state that SEP operates in. The road that led me to Campout from the state highway was not paved and was probably too rough for my beat-up 2009 Toyota with front-wheel drive. As I (slowly) made my way across the picturesque plains of the national park, I spotted the main campsite about a mile

ahead of the turnoff and was immediately surprised by the distance it covered. I was informed at check-in that RVs, trailers, and tents would likely line the entire road by the weekend. The campsite was organized by noise level with the rowdiest areas marked at the very end of the camp road with zones marked for less noise progressively back toward the highway. The main camp with the kitchen, showers, SEP registration tent, medical tent, and main stage were located near the center of camp in the “party zone.” I knew when planning for Campout that I would be living outside for five days, but the reality of the wilderness set in quickly as I took in the main camp complete with porta potties and tent showers upon arriving. There was no indoor plumbing to be found, and everything that required power ran on generators. Where just days prior there were rolling plains and open skies emerged Campout, an ephemeral city in the Mountain West wilderness.

This chapter’s analysis proceeds in the form of three scenes that illustrate a noteworthy rhetorical struggle over rural queer subjectivity, belonging, and place at SEP’s Campout. These scenes ground my interrogation of the queer worlds that emerge from tensions between place-making and placemaking as organizational rhetorics. The figure of the mountain man, the practice of storytelling, and the material configurations of Campout reveal the ways that place informs SEP’s organizational efforts to rhetorically shape not only ideal member identities but also desirable forms of rural queer being, belonging, and subjectivity. These scenes suggest that SEP’s organizational meaning-making process at Campout is value-laden, iterative, polysemous, and, ultimately, rhetorical in nature.

Scenes from Campout

Scene 1: Remembering Mountain Men Queerly

One of the first things I noticed about the attendees at Campout was their nearly ubiquitous embodiment of all things Western: cowboy hats, boots, imagery, etc. I spoke to several fellow campers throughout the week about their relationships to Western iconography – as an outsider to this part of the country, I tended to associate cowboys with rodeos, country music, and conservatism and was a little surprised to see all the Western garb. Even contemporary imaginations of rural Western states depict this region as violently homophobic through prominent sites of cultural memory such as *Brokeback Mountain* and the 1999 murder of Matthew Shepard. While many of the conversations I had on this subject were interesting, one performance in particular illuminates the complicated relationship between the West as imagined by figures such as John Gast in his *American Progress* depicting 19th century manifest destiny propaganda and the West as documented by one William Drummond Stewart.

One night after supper at Campout, a solo performer emerged on the main stage in a 19th century trapper's costume bearing a feather pen and parchment. Upon entering the stage, it was apparent that this performance would be quite unlike the drag cabaret, comedy show, and karaoke that occupied the stage at other points during the week. An SEP organizer introduced this character as William Drummond Stewart, a Scottish nobleman who traveled the West as a fur trader during the 1830s and 1840s. The organizer explained that the performer would be enacting correspondence from Stewart to a friend in Scotland about his experiences in the New World. This correspondence is documented in William Benemann's *Men in Eden: William Drummond Stewart and Same-Sex Desire in the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade*.³⁴⁴ The letter that the performer read primarily recounted Stewart's relationship with a "mountain man" who served as his

companion during his travels. When the performer began “writing” his letter, the campsite was still bustling with the after-dinner crowd with a decent audience keeping their seats from the meal with others milling around, some chatting farther away from the stage. As the performance went on and the stories described in the letter intensified, those distracted by chatting or cleaning up after the meal gradually shifted their attention to the main stage. The performer used his voice to animate the words in the letter, painting the story with emotions ranging from childlike wonder to poignant despair. The performance was also punctuated by gusts of wind off the mountains and open plains that kept watch over the camp, imbuing Stewart’s letter with a sense of place, inviting the audience to imagine this letter being written on this same land nearly 200 years ago.

The performance revealed a fascinating dynamic between SEP and Campout as entangled yet distinct placed rhetorical entities in a particular historical context. In setting the scene for understanding the life of William Drummond Stewart as a “free trapper,” Benemann explains that “the liminal space” of the 19th century fur trade in the Rocky Mountains was “a place where many men accommodated themselves to having sex with other men. Some men remained celibate, of course, and some entered temporary or long-term unions... with [Native] women, but for many ‘the Grecian Vice’ was an alternative that was embraced.”³⁴⁵ In stark contrast to the rigid gender norms common throughout the U.S. in the 19th century, Benemann documents “a wide range of gender-variant behaviors” among the Native American peoples that trappers such as Stewart engaged with throughout the Mountain West region.³⁴⁶ Benemann “illuminate[s] what Stewart might have experienced and... reconstruct[s] the ways that those manifestations of same-sex desire among Native Americans that Stewart and his colleagues observed — or, more accurately, that they *perceived* — molded their view of the Rocky Mountains as a haven for men

who were sexually attracted to other men.”³⁴⁷ The performance of this historical milieu at Campout rhetorically connects campers to a shared cowboy past, one that infuses the present (and perhaps the future) with a particular imagining of the American West that suggests a sacred, timeless relationship between the “Mountain Men” and the wilderness itself.

Scene 2: Narrating Rural Queerness through Storytelling

I spent several hours throughout Campout sitting with fellow campers and listening to stories of Campouts past. One storyteller I spoke to a few times was an older gay man who had attended Campout for several decades. For the purposes of this scene, I will call this person Sandy. I met Sandy at main camp while sitting around chatting with fellow campers. At some point or another, Sandy began to tell the group a story about a man he met at Campout many years ago. For clarity’s sake, I will refer to this character in Sandy’s story as Jack. Sandy recounted seeing Jack at multiple Campouts before – Jack usually kept to himself most days. One day, Sandy decided to speak with Jack, who frequently wore skirts around camp. Sandy learned that Jack lived his life as a straight man in the rural Mountain West and that Campout was the one time of year that he could “truly be himself.” Sandy eventually stopped seeing Jack attend but claimed that he was the main reason that Sandy kept coming back each year.

Sandy also told a story about one Campout when a group of campers, all gay men at the time, decided to hike to some remote falls nearby. Once they arrived, nearly all the men stripped down to swim, and Sandy described a feeling of freedom he had never felt before. Suddenly, they heard other voices from the other side of the falls. The naked men began to panic, as they were afraid of the retributions should they be witnessed by outsiders. As the voices neared, Sandy realized they were women’s voices. A group of lesbians in the area had come to the falls seeking the very freedom the gay men sought on their hike. Sandy recalled the joy and relief the

men felt when they realized who the other visitors were, calling the spontaneous gathering “magical – we’re family, ya know?” The last story that Sandy told was not one that he himself witnessed but had heard over the years from one of the first Campouts to take place in this state. The Campouts of yesteryear did not have registration tents or drag shows or brunches. Rather, the Campout Sandy described a group of around a dozen gay men who met up in the Mountain West wilderness, parked their trucks in a circle, and tuned their radios to the same station. Inside the circle of trucks, the men held a dance that would eventually evolve over the years into a Campout that would host hundreds of LGBTQ+ folks from around the country.

The layered, intertwined stories that form the fabric of Campout’s rhetorical history seem to inform how campers view themselves and their community. Even though I was an outsider in many ways, Sandy’s stories about Campouts past as an escape from everyday life and as a place of freedom and belonging allowed me to remember the past with him in a way. Many returning campers like Sandy make Campout a priority every year, sometimes traveling from thousands of miles away to participate. Each year, old stories are remembered and new ones are formed, imbuing Campout with a sense of place beyond the pressures of everyday life. For many, like the cowboys of yore, Campout is their true home. While the physical location of Campout may vary slightly year to year, these stories take up the Mountain West wilderness as a beloved character as critical to Campout’s placed memory as the original dozen or so gay men with their trucks or the lesbians at the falls.

Scene 3: Negotiating Campout’s Identity

The third scene coheres less around a particular temporal moment and more around the spatial flows of Campout as mediated by SEP’s textual presence. As a first-time camper, I was primed for Campout through the online materials provided by SEP on their website, including

but not limited to a map of the campsite, photos from past Campouts, sponsor logos, previews of camp performances, an agenda of events throughout the week, and participation policies. My first stop when I arrived at Campout was the SEP registration tent at the main camp. I was greeted by some of the organizers who I would interact with regularly throughout the event. I was given a wristband and welcome bag with SEP's logo on it. The welcome bag contained printed versions of several documents I had encountered online prior to arriving. I also purchased a shirt with SEP's logo in rainbow print.

The main campsite seemed to be SEP's nucleus where we gathered for meals, performances, activities, and updates on the political situation in the Mountain West. Attendees were (usually) clothed at main camp activities that usually wrapped up by around 9 pm each evening. The main camp's activities as they existed both on the schedule and physically were punctuated by late night events held at a labelled adjacent site that I will call the Summit for the purposes of this scene. The Summit was marked as the "party zone" on the map and was at nearly the opposite end of Campout from SEP's main camp. Activities at the Summit were marked on the Campout agenda as "18+" and "***EXPLICIT." As I walked the dirt road up to the Summit on my second morning at Campout, I immediately noticed a difference from SEP's main camp. The Summit was constructed of smaller campsites usually put together by informal groups from Campouts past. The campsites were decorated with all things rainbow, including one display with mannequins donning a menagerie of vibrant wigs. My favorite display was a trailer lit up with rainbow neon lights (one of them identifying the vehicle as the "Gay Bar"), a stolen street sign that read "No alcoholic beverages or loud music," and cowboy boots with a cactus pattern worked into the leather. Many of the Summit campsites were guarded at night by the ATVs that would crawl along the open plains during the day, some of which flew rainbow flags.

One of these groups at the Summit called themselves the “Party Platoon” and bedecked their campsite with imitation Boy Scouts décor. The Party Platoon also hosted one of the Summit’s parties and wore matching imitation Scouts outfits (with shorts that I imagine were shorter than would be Scouts’ regulation, of course). Admittedly, I was nervous to attend the Party Platoon’s Underwear Party at the Summit. I was one of perhaps a half-dozen people out of several hundred at Campout who were not gay men. I met one trans woman and a handful of AFAB folks like myself. However, upon arriving to the Underwear Party, I started to see people I recognized from activities at the main camp and from my volunteering shifts in the kitchen, many of whom were members of the Party Platoon. They welcomed me and were glad that I was there, easing some of the initial discomfort I felt.

Bedecked in their matching cheeky Scouts uniforms, the Party Platoon served drinks, built a bonfire, played music, and even handed out flashing rainbow lights to those of us on the makeshift dance floor. I danced and laughed with my new friends late into the evening, even as some of them seemed to lose items of clothing throughout the night. As some of my friends began to split off to meet up with lovers or go to sleep, I returned to my tent, walking back through the main site. As I made my way to my tent under the silent twinkling lights of the Milky Way, I remembered an observation one of my friends made at the Underwear Party: “it seems like the main camp is [SEP] and the [Summit] is [Campout].” Even though most of the attendees at the Underwear Party had also regularly participated in events at the main camp, including some of the SEP organizers, this statement struck me as true. The main camp never felt particularly oppressive to me, but it was different to be at the Summit somehow.

After attending the Party Platoon’s Underwear Party, the tensions between SEP and Campout as rhetorical entities became apparent. Several repeat Campout attendees pointed out to

me throughout the week that SEP as an advocacy organization emerged from Campout, which existed for several years prior to the formation of SEP. Although I was not privy to the details, it was clear to me that there were rifts among Campout's attendees, some of whom had previously served on various boards and committees with both SEP and Campout. As with most organizing efforts, there was disagreement among the ranks about a wide range of decisions. My impression was that some of the older campers thought that SEP was overreaching in its efforts to sanitize Campout for consumption by broader audiences. Many seemed disgruntled by the financial demands of Campout imposed by SEP for an event that in the past relied on a mixture of self-sufficiency and resource sharing, not meal tickets and registration fees. On the other side, some SEP organizers were frustrated by some of the elder campers' resistance to change, particularly since SEP has been responsible in recent years for preventing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation to be passed in the state. It appeared that the older campers were somewhat resentful of SEP's takeover of the event while SEP organizers were frustrated that members of the older generation were dragging their heels on expanding Campout to support their political advocacy and visibility efforts in municipal and state governments. These tensions were felt physically as well as conversationally through the spatial dynamics of Campout.

SEP versus Campout: Place-making and Placemaking Collide

These three scenes indicate a complex relationship between Campout and SEP as distinct yet interconnected rhetorical entities locked in a struggle to shape rural queer memory, identity, and belonging in the Mountain West through place making. Alan A. Lew describes a continuum among different forms of place making, distinguishing between the iterations of the term "placemaking" and "place-making." Lew considers "placemaking" to be a "top-down professional design effort" by developers, government entities, and tourism professionals to

“influence people’s behavior and shape their perceptions of a place,” which Lew considers to be a practice that “has been a part of the urban planning, architecture, and landscape architecture fields since at least the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution... when many of the capital cities of Europe were re-made into symbols of the nation-state.”³⁴⁸ On the opposite pole of the continuum, Lew describes “place-making” as “organic, bottom-up processes, whereby places are claimed and shaped through everyday, and often mundane, social practices.”³⁴⁹ Lew also includes a category of “mixed place makings” that occupies the gray, middle area of the continuum that describes collaborative efforts among communities and entities such as NGOs.³⁵⁰

While I find Lew’s distinction between top-down placemaking and bottom-up place-making to be helpful, I consider the dialectic tensions about place, subjectivity, and belonging at Campout not to neatly fit into these categories but instead to elucidate a struggle for meaning between SEP’s placemaking and Campout’s place-making rhetorics. Furthermore, the historical and political context from which SEP emerged as an extension of Campout adds a layer of complexity to the rhetorical dynamics at work. Through storytelling and shared experience over time, Campout engages in a more organic place-making by “imprint[ing] its values, perceptions, memories, and traditions on a landscape and giv[ing] meaning to geographic space.”³⁵¹ By telling stories like the truck dance and the waterfall in addition to embodying those traditions by hosting annual dance parties and hikes to the falls, Campout imbues the Mountain West landscape with a particular cultural reality that is shaped by the shared experiences of campers themselves. Comradery, survival, and belonging emerge as values that keep campers coming back to Campout year after year, decade after decade. The living memory of Campout is resurrected every year through these activities as newcomers like myself are brought into its world through these culturally-embedded shared experiences. Even though I was not present for

the original dance or trip to the falls, the retelling and reliving of these stories by campers serves as an invitation to remember and carry on the spirit of Campout as an oasis for rural queer folks in the Mountain West. The struggle to survive in the wilderness together functions as an escape from the struggle to survive in communities, workplaces, and homes that may diminish or even reject our right to live and love authentically.

On the other hand, SEP seems to practice a more top-down placemaking approach. Through its online presence, programming, merchandise, and management of physical space at Campout, SEP “contains strong elements of modern, cosmopolitan, and professional design and marketing influences.”³⁵² The very fact that I as a complete outsider to Campout was able to find information about it online through SEP’s marketing indicates a consumer-oriented experience. By visually, symbolically, and physically connecting Campout to SEP’s fundraising and advocacy efforts, SEP invokes a different kind of belonging that feels more akin to corporate social responsibility than organic community-building. I do not intend to situate SEP’s placemaking efforts as inherently oppositional or antagonistic to Campout’s place-making – rather, I hope to illuminate the multiple, layered rhetorical dynamics of these entities at work in order to better understand the relationships among subjectivity, place, and belonging as they influence rural queerness in the Mountain West.

First, a critical examination of placemaking/place-making would be negligent without interrogating the notable absence of Indigenous people in the stories of both SEP and Campout aside from brief mentions made by the performer of William Drummond Stewart’s letter. Even then, it seemed as though the Indigenous characters served mostly as a part of the backdrop for the main plot: Stewart’s journey of sexual exploration. (While Stewart’s partner Antoine Clement was allegedly Cree on his mother’s side,³⁵³ the performance made little mention of this beyond

situating opportunities for sexual “deviance” in Indigenous lands and with Indigenous people.) I had a couple of conversations throughout Campout about the context for such activities being predicated on the ethnic cleansing and mass murder of Indigenous peoples by the United States government, but they were mostly absent from the mythos of the event writ large. Therefore, colonization and whiteness are integral to the formation of both Campout and SEP as well as the subjectivities and communities they invoke, even as they use traditionally Indigenous practices of storytelling to “carry out a labor; creating, maintaining, and/or shifting narratives about the places in which we live and how they produce us and us them.”³⁵⁴

SEP and Campout as entangled mechanisms of placemaking/place-making rhetorics reveal a salient dynamic in the creation and maintenance of rural queer community, particularly who belongs in that community, how that community functions, and what that community represents. While SEP is a localized LGBTQ+ advocacy group, its presentation of queer subjectivity appears to emulate principles of belonging that many nationalized organizations uphold. Through its programming, consumer model for participants, and physical separation of the main camp from the Summit, SEP attempts to fold campers into its interpretation of rural queerness that is generally unoffensive to a broader audience. Specific events such as a blood donation drive, a safe sex booth, the William Drummond Stewart performance, an estate planning session, and a talk about LGBTQ+ advocacy in the region seem relatively banal on the surface, and in many ways they are. However, put together and in contrast to the events at the Summit, they reveal a particular rhetorical *modus operandi*: one that invokes a “good queer” subjectivity that neatly aligns with nationalized LGBTQ+ movements.³⁵⁵

For instance, SEP’s programming and placemaking expose its preferred worldview about (rural) queer subjectivity. On the surface, a blood donation drive and a booth with condoms and

testing seem innocuous and even helpful resources for campers. However, the presence of these particular resources at SEP's main camp also reflect what Jeffrey A. Bennett refers to as "constructing queer identity through representations of diseased and undisciplined sexuality" through which "the state mobilizes rhetorics... that queer people are perhaps the most abject Other in the United States."³⁵⁶ Furthermore, Daniel Joloy asserts that "as large segments of queer populations have adopted the normativity attached to marriage, monogamy and romantic love, those who continue to engage in sexual behaviour deemed deviant and transgressive – such as condomless sex, orgies and chemsex – are being met with increased stigma, rejection and discrimination, including among gay people."³⁵⁷ Are these resources simply present to support campers, or do they perhaps imply SEP's assumption that it needs to "clean up after" the nefarious activities at the Summit?

Additionally, events like estate planning and requests for donations from the campers to support SEP's political advocacy work indicate its assumption that campers have an estate to plan and money to donate in addition to Campout registration fees and meal tickets. As a single poor graduate student, I had neither an estate to plan nor extra money to give beyond what I had already spent to get there. There was an opportunity to write letters to queer youth in the Mountain West, but SEP provided very few, if any, alternatives to donation. There were no official conversations about volunteer networks, mentorship opportunities, or mutual aid funds. In the eyes of SEP, it seemed as though Campout was more akin to a fundraising tourist experience rather than a practice of placed community-building. The marketing, activities, and assumptions made by SEP at times seem to situate campers as consumers rather than practitioners of good queerness.

On the other hand, the rhetorical realities called forth by Campout as its own entity paint a slightly different picture. The parties hosted at the Summit and the stories told by campers themselves elicit a Campout built on relationships and belonging. Conversations with people who remembered my name and who were willing to bring me into the fold of Campout's oral history felt meaningful and authentic. I was welcomed, remembered, and appreciated by my fellow campers for who I was and what I contributed to the community by volunteering in the kitchen, and I genuinely looked forward to seeing my new friends every morning at breakfast. Dancing, eating, and talking together forged strong if ephemeral bonds of connectedness based upon communicating our shared experiences, many of which revolved around the struggles of being queer in rural places hostile to us. If SEP's rhetorical world was built upon its stage and in its programming, Campout's rhetorical world was built in the line for the shower, in the outdoor kitchen while preparing the evening meal, on the walks to and from the Summit. The mundane and banal, the unofficial conversations, the unceremonious spilling of tea around a campfire formed the fabric of Campout's rhetorical reality.

At times pushing against SEP's officiality and relative sterility, Campout's world was built upon messy queer relationalities, which Ryan M. Lescure describes as

individual or constellated forms and instances of communication that tend to be understood by society at large as being marginal or unremarkable. Sometimes they are thought to have nothing to do with communication. Sometimes they are not perceived at all. Queer relationalities are difficult to describe and are sometimes unknown, even by those who have experienced them or are experiencing them, because they are not often considered to be "valid" or "tangible" forms of communication within heteronormative cultural frameworks of interpretation.³⁵⁸

The unremarkable instances of communication and engagement that took place between (and sometimes instead of) SEP's official programming formed the fabric of Campout's (rural) queer relationality. The gossip and drama, substance usage, and messy hookups that SEP attempted to

manage and mitigate seemed to be precisely what made Campout special. The very spontaneity and lack of structure that defined Campout appeared at times to frustrate SEP organizers who had a schedule to keep.

These layered, complicated, sometimes contradictory worlds proffered by SEP and Campout encapsulate precisely what Lore/ta LeMaster considers to be “the queer bond [that] enacts queer worlds through exploring individual-institutional dialectic tensions.”³⁵⁹ In this case, SEP represents the institutional, the non-specific state-based LGBTQ+ advocacy organization that largely mimics the logics, assumptions, and practices of a nationalized organization. Campout, then, represents the unofficial gatherings, the particular relationships among particular people in a particular place, the messy and ephemeral exchanges that emerge and dissipate as quickly as a windy summer rainstorm in the mountains. Sharing resources, stories, and tents together enact the queer bonds that donating money simply cannot replicate. I doubt that the opportunity to enact those queer bonds would even exist without the very tensions, clashes, and layers that emerge from the rhetorical interactions between SEP and Campout.

What Makes a Place Queer? What Makes a Queer World?

My assessment of SEP and Campout as complex, interconnected yet distinct rhetorical worlds reveals a complicated dynamic between organizational placemaking and quotidian, communal place-making as they enable and constrain queer subjectivities. In a political context where/when nationalized LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations like the Human Rights Campaign declare a state of emergency and suggest that queer folks should flee their homes and communities, identifying sites of queer belonging and survival is truly a matter of life and death. I do not seek to diminish or discount advocacy work that organizations like the HRC and SEP do – instead, my goal is to elucidate the ways in which these organizations rhetorically shape placed

queer subjectivities and how these subjectivities indicate particular cultural logics about rural queerness.

As Campout demonstrates, queer folks can and do enact worlds and relationalities otherwise through bottom-up place-making with, against, and despite the top-down placemaking that some LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations, intentionally or not, engage in. Perhaps these organizations exist to set the proverbial stage for queer folks to decide for themselves whether and how much they buy into the world enacted by the official or whether they will instead choose the unofficial, to meet discreetly backstage or perhaps to tear the stage down altogether for their own purposes. Crucially, queer worlds and engagements will not look the same every time, and some are better served by certain interactions with organizations than others. The common thread among queer relationalities is the existence of bottom-up worldmaking with, against, and/or instead of the realities proposed by institutions and organizations.

In thinking about the queer worlds that emerged from the rhetorical clashes between Campout's place-making and SEP's placemaking efforts, I cannot ignore the ways in which similar dynamics revealed themselves upon my return to the academic world after my time at camp. Similarly to SEP, the Colorado State University Communication Studies Department's textual presence online inevitably shaped the ways I would experience it when I first arrived to the program. The layout of the website, the language it uses, and the photos it incorporates offer a curated, placed vision of who CSU graduate students in Communication Studies are. This vision is then enacted by policies as well as people, faculty, staff, and students alike striving for the world its rhetoric creates. Through its trademark red brick, mountain imagery, and CSU branding, Communication Studies "imprints its values, perceptions, memories, and traditions on a landscape and gives meaning to geographic space."³⁶⁰ That meaning is mutually reinforced by

the broader political and material contexts of CSU, Fort Collins, and Colorado that constitute its rhetorical and cultural formation.

Akin to Campout's ephemerality, graduate students are tourists in academic departments. We pass through them for a limited time, and we are expected to adhere to gendered, raced, classed, emplaced spoken and unspoken norms set forth by graduate manuals, syllabi, and faculty. We are not supposed to put down roots here – we are eventually expected to go away, taking our opinions and relationships with us, leaving our publications behind, and keeping the organization intact to endure unchanged, unmoved by us. However, we bring the places and cultures we come from with us, too. In forging relationships, in bringing ourselves with us to connect with others, we engage in place-making through “organic, bottom-up processes, whereby places are claimed and shaped through everyday, and often mundane, social practices.”³⁶¹ In those fleeting banal moments chatting between classes, writing together on the weekends, and sharing resources with each other, we generate queer worlds and selves that rub up against the vision of the ideal graduate student who never complains,³⁶² always reads for class, never misses deadlines, and, most importantly, never threatens the hierarchy or reputation of the department. The department tries to consume us, passing us through its system, picking us apart for the aspects of us that generate value, extracting our publications and labor for its fuel, expelling whatever is left of us when our funding elapses.

What remains, what forms the fabric of a queer place, of a queer academy, are people and their stories. Like the Campout participants, we put down relational roots, even if we physically move on to another place. We establish whisper networks, we support each other, and we share resources. We share a love for learning, for teaching, and for each other, building a place where we belong in the peripheries of the academy. We perform the place Communication Studies

envisions through our performances of “academic drag”³⁶³ in classrooms, meetings, and conferences, and we create infinite worlds in the spaces between. Like SEP attempted to manage Campout’s messiness, perhaps Communication Studies attempts to manage graduate students’ more undesirable qualities through its placemaking rhetoric. Like Campout participants, graduate students talk and write back,³⁶⁴ repurposing Communication Studies’ rhetorical materials at hand toward our own ends, enacting ephemeral places “betwixt and between”³⁶⁵ the tensions and clashes with the department. In Hanchey and Jensen’s words, academic departments and graduate students “continuously [make] sense of themselves through their relations to one another.”³⁶⁶ Similarly, relations between placemaking and place-making rhetorics reveal possibilities for queer worldmaking with and against organizations.

This case study contributes to theorizing about organizational rhetoric as subjectification by demonstrating how the rhetorical collisions between SEP’s placemaking and Campout’s place-making suggest that “organizations and their members... continuously [make] sense of themselves through their relations to one another.”³⁶⁷ I contend that queer worlds, like queer bonds,³⁶⁸ emerge from the places where people rub up against the realities and subjectivities that organizations deem desirable. SEP provided me with the information for Campout and offered a particular vision for what my experience would be, but the queer bonds I made at Campout were largely due to the place-making efforts of the campers themselves with/beyond/against SEP’s official events and programming. From cowboy hats and Mountain Men to the stories of the falls and the first dance to the parties at the Summit, Campout serves as an illuminating case study in the ways that queer worlds, bonds, and selves are forged from the cultural materials on hand, particularly when at least some of those materials come from an organization like SEP. The queer

worlds we imagined and enacted at Campout were not without their flaws and were certainly not free from SEP's rhetorical influence, but they were undoubtedly ours – you just had to be there.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s took the lives of over 100,000 people in the U.S. from 1981 through 1990 and became the second leading cause of death among men aged 25 to 44 by 1989.³⁶⁹ In 1991, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that nearly 60% of AIDS deaths “occurred among homosexual/bisexual men.”³⁷⁰ Social stigma associated with the AIDS epidemic would have a lasting impact on not only gay and bisexual men but also transgender women, particularly trans women of color.³⁷¹ Some of the most prominent examples of public advocacy for government intervention in the AIDS crisis at the time emerged in New York through the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), in Denver with the eventual creation of the National Association of People With AIDS (NAPWA), and in San Francisco through a wide range of publications and marches.³⁷² A lesser-known instance of organizing efforts to raise awareness and combat stigma associated with the disease occurred in 1989 in Springfield, Missouri.

Theatre students at Missouri State University (then Southwest Missouri State University, also known as SMSU) decided to perform *The Normal Heart* by Larry Kramer, which details the stories of gay men struggling to survive the early years of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s.³⁷³ The play’s production at SMSU “immediately generated controversy with widescale protests and calls for the University to be defunded.”³⁷⁴ Springfield state Representative Jean Dixon and her group Citizens Demanding Standards “argued the play’s promotion of homosexuality went against the community’s deeply conservative and religious morals.”³⁷⁵ Dixon even published an op-ed in the *Springfield News-Leader* claiming the play “presents the perversion of homosexuality as though it were ‘normal.’”³⁷⁶ While the production’s opening

night would seemingly pass without incident, the house of one of the play's supporters, SMSU student Brad Evans, was burnt down during the show – an incident that would garner national attention and a phone call from real estate tycoon Donald Trump.³⁷⁷

The 1989 SMSU *Normal Heart* incident is rarely remembered in dominant narratives surrounding the AIDS epidemic, nor does it show up in mainstream contemporary Western LGBTQ+ discourses. Still, this history punctuates the story of my alma mater's Department of Theatre and Dance – the very department that actor John Goodman graduated from only 14 years earlier in 1975.³⁷⁸ My goal in bringing stories like this and others together in this dissertation is to illuminate the people and places beyond those rhetorically animated by prevailing metronormative narratives about rural queerness. Additionally, I show that these stories are not sequestered from the efforts for LGBTQ+ rights in urban places by organizations such as ACT UP/Queer Nation, NAPWA, HRC, GLAAD, and The Trevor Project. Rather, I illuminate the placed rhetorical work that queer people in rural U.S. communities do to imagine and orient toward worlds otherwise, worlds that are always already in complicated conversation with Western LGBTQ+ politics. In fact, I contend that the liberatory potential of rural queer rhetoric emerges from those very resonances, clashes, oppositions, and combinations that queer people in rural places craft from a range of cultural resources, including those proffered by dominant LGBTQ+ discourses.

This dissertation exposes the metronormative undercurrents at work in contemporary Western LGBTQ+ politics and offers rural queer rhetoric as a critical counterweight to the respectable queer subjectivities that have become deeply embedded in neoliberal cultural institutions. Chappell Roan's queer bricolage, rural transgender activists' liminal performances, and Campout participants' place-making provide valuable insights into the study and practice of

rural queer worldmaking. In this chapter, I synthesize rural queer worldmaking as the project's key theoretical throughline and discuss its defining features as they emerge from each analysis chapter. Then, I expand upon the overarching interdisciplinary contributions that this project makes to rhetorical studies as well as gender and sexuality studies literature. Furthermore, this project situates rural queer worldmaking in conversation and coalition with anti-fascist decolonial struggles in the U.S. and beyond. Lastly, I speculate possible implications for queer and feminist praxis as well as offer closing thoughts and future directions on the work that this dissertation lays the foundation for.

Features of Rural Queer Worldmaking

While this dissertation offers rural queer rhetoric as a novel theoretical frame through which to examine the ways place and class regulate gender, sexuality, and race in contemporary Western LGBTQ+ discourses, the key theoretical throughline that emerges from this dissertation and that helps me answer the questions I put forth in Chapter 1 is *rural queer worldmaking*. From the case studies I analyze in this dissertation, I consider rural queer worldmaking rhetorics to describe utterances, performances, and discursive formations that may include, through both form and content, the features of (1) relationality, (2) placed storytelling, (3) collective witnessing, (4) coalition-building, and (5) grassroots meaning-making. The specific rural queer worldmaking tactics I identify in Chappell Roan's placed queer bricolage, Campout participants' place-making, and Emma, Justin, and Zooey's liminal performances share these features in distinct ways, which I explicate in the following paragraphs.

The first feature that animates the rural queer worldmaking rhetorics I examine in this dissertation is *relationality*. In places without social infrastructure for experiencing community, such as gay bars/clubs, belonging emerges from the bona fide queer ties that form in basements,

alleys, streets, classrooms, parking lots, shelters, gas stations, jail cells, public transit, and food pantries, to name but a few. The relationships that queer folks forge in the most impossible of circumstances are not exclusive to rural queer worldmaking practices but are certainly a feature evident across the case studies in this project. Chappell Roan critically performs her rural queer self through the relationships with her family in Southwest Missouri as well as the trans and queer communities she frequently aligns with. Emma, Justin, and Zooey all speak directly to/on their family members, friends, and neighbors at some points in their speeches, situating their activist efforts in community. The relationships we formed with each other as participants in Campout felt, in some ways, more real than the roles SEP thought we were meant to play. Ultimately, rural queer worlds are undoubtedly forged in, sometimes messy and imperfect, relationship with others.

This project demonstrates that relationality is not merely a feature of rural queer worldmaking – it is also an important place where rhetorical action occurs. Rhetoric’s relationality is a central yet frequently overlooked facet of its function in social life as well as its theoretical renderings in Western contexts. Rhetoricians often extract the rhetor and/or the text as the active agent of persuasion, leaving the audience as a passive, often absent, receptor of messages. Instead, scholars of Indigenous and queer rhetorics identify rhetoric’s relationality as necessary turn in the discipline’s orientation away from Western colonial ways of thinking. Specifically, Shawn Wilson contends that, while certainly not monolithic, “the shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality (relationships do not merely *shape* reality, they *are* reality).”³⁷⁹ Additionally, theorists of race and rhetoric as well as queer worldmaking identify relationality as a vital source of possibility for imagining realities, and therefore the discipline, otherwise.³⁸⁰

The second feature that defines rural queer worldmaking is *placed storytelling*. Place shows up not only as containers for the stories that are told in each case study but also as a main character in this dissertation's analysis chapters. Chappell Roan invokes the characters of each place she incorporates throughout her work, with New York City starring as a green-haired monster, Springfield featured as the Americana girl-next-door/cheerleader, and West Hollywood cast as the bedazzled Pink Pony Club. Emma, Justin, and Zooey each center Kentucky, Arkansas, and Montana (respectively) in their own life stories as trans folks. The various meanings that Campout participants gave to the Mountain West wilderness we occupied formed the very fabric of the rural queer worlds that were born from their placed storytelling. Throughout each case study, place both enables and constrains the narrative opportunities available to each rhetor, opening new opportunities for imagining the ways in which rural queer folks make sense of and craft their rhetorical worlds as agents of their stories in all their complexity and messiness.

The third feature I identify in rural queer worldmaking is *collective witnessing*. In a 1791 speech to the House of Commons, English abolitionist William Wilberforce allegedly stated, regarding the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, "you may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say you did not know." As Wilberforce succinctly stated, the act of witnessing is inherently relational, potentially leaving both the witnesser and the witnessed forever altered by the encounter. Megan Poole suggests that witnessing "resists the static nature of observation and instead opens up the relational processes involved in rhetorically being with others."³⁸¹ Additionally, in their essay exploring white folks' participation in 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, Roberta Chevrette and Aaron Hess articulate a theory of interracial witnessing distinct from performative white allyship that often results in Black pain, suffering, and death becoming spectacles for consumption at a distance.³⁸² Instead, they argue "that protests can

produce shifts in participants' cognitive feelings and racialized emotions... by producing intersubjective opportunities for participants to see and be seen and to hear and be heard... allow[ing] attendees to feel, move, act, and react together against racial injustices.”³⁸³ In other words, white protesters demonstrated a capacity to act collectively across difference without “eras[ing] specific racialized experiences.”³⁸⁴

Similarly, the collective witnessing at work in rural queer worldmaking exposes the limits of binary political subjectivities under neoliberalism, reorients rhetorical action toward relationality, and offers generative opportunities for praxis. Collective witnessing opposes the individualist Western LGBTQ+ identity politics that are rooted in consumption and ideological purity. Chappell Roan regularly uses her platform to direct attention and resources toward vulnerable communities that she does not necessarily belong to but values nonetheless.³⁸⁵ Emma, Zoey, and Justin serve as witnesses of the devastating impacts that anti-trans legislation has on themselves and their neighbors in their respective states, orienting their audiences toward people instead of the political specters that conservatives often generate to incite fear of and violence against queer and trans people in rural places. Campout participants witnessed both the past and present of their worldmaking through sharing stories from prior years as well as the day-to-day challenges and joys that come along with surviving together in the wilderness.

The fourth rural queer worldmaking feature that emerges from this dissertation is *coalition-building*. As I explain in Chapter 1, building coalitions to enact change is a central component of several social movements in the U.S., particularly early gay and lesbian liberation efforts as well as Black and postcolonial feminisms. While not exclusive to rural queer worldmaking, coalition-building messages are apparent throughout this project. Chappell Roan situates her very sense of self along with her platform in coalition with the communities that

motivate and value her. Her cause does not require ideological purity nor the eradication of difference, but rather a united commitment to resist oppression in its various forms. In Chapter 3, Zooley specifically identifies the struggle against eradication that trans people in Montana share with their Indigenous neighbors, for instance.³⁸⁶ In Chapter 4, it was clear from the story that Sandy shared about a previous Campout when a group of gay men happened upon a group of lesbians in the wilderness that the two groups could reach across difference in that moment to experience joy together without infringing on the other group's autonomy. Coalition-building as a prominent component of the rural queer worldmaking rhetorics that I examine in this project contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about intersectionality not as a vehicle for individualized identity politics but rather as a theoretical frame that enables collective action across difference.

The fifth feature that animates rural queer worldmaking is *grassroots meaning-making*. In the last decade, several prominent liberal politicians and celebrities in the U.S. have both covertly and overtly associated rurality with conservatism and MAGA, accusing rural places of the homophobia, racism, misogyny, and xenophobia they affiliate with Donald Trump, a born-and-raised Long Islander. While these assumptions about rural places in the U.S. are not entirely baseless, they rhetorically preclude people, including queer folks, in rural communities from belonging in the Democratic mission. For example, Hillary Clinton's "basket of deplorables"³⁸⁷ comment during her 2016 Presidential campaign painted a clear picture of the kinds of people that she imagines living in rural places and red states, though evidence suggests that Donald Trump's victory can largely be attributed to the "small city vote" rather than a so-called "rural revolt" that some mainstream media outlets blamed for the election's outcome.³⁸⁸

Another instance of dominant anti-rural sentiment in popular culture is Taylor Swift's music video for her song "You Need To Calm Down."³⁸⁹ The video opens with Taylor waking up in full glam inside what appears to be a gawdy pink trailer. As the video progresses, colorful trailers bedecked in rainbow flags emerge in the rolling hills of a nondescript countryside. Popular queer celebrities such as Adore Delano, Ellen DeGeneres, Hannah Hart, Johnathan Van Ness, Laverne Cox, RuPaul, and Todrick Hall make cameos throughout the video, and Taylor also references the national LGBTQ+ advocacy organization GLAAD.³⁹⁰ Partway through the video, the fabulous cast of colorful queers face off against a group of people (some of them missing teeth) adorned in flannel, American flags, and misspelled signs that read, among other things, "Adam + Eve Not Adam + Steve," "Get A Brain Morans [*sic*]," and "Homasekualty is Sin! [*sic*]."³⁹¹ Taylor's invocation of the country bumpkin, redneck, backwoods hillbilly trope as antithetical to her perfect rainbow community serves as a microcosm of a broader truth: rural queers and "deplorables"³⁹² do not belong in her movement.

Even if absent from Taylor Swift's vision of queer community, as of 2019, approximately 3 million LGBTQ+ people live in rural communities in the U.S., which reflects nearly 20 percent of the total LGBTQ+ population.³⁹³ Additionally, as this dissertation suggests, queer people in rural communities engage in grassroots meaning-making against the essentialized identities that prominent liberal and conservative pundits impose upon their constituents in their attempts to galvanize voters into culture wars. Chappell Roan refused to be captured by either major political party and instead spoke directly to her audiences about the issues at hand, encouraging her fans to think critically and make their own decisions while remaining transparent about her stance on the 2024 election.³⁹⁴ Emma, Zooey, and Justin refused to disparage their transness or their rurality, making their own meaning "betwixt and between"³⁹⁵ the identity scripts available to

them. Campout participants found belonging both with and against SEP's organizational rhetoric about desirable rural queerness. These features of rural queer worldmaking offer valuable theoretical insights to the disciplines of rhetorical and gender and sexuality studies.

Lessons for the Literature

This dissertation suggests a number of lessons for the literature in rhetorical studies and gender and sexuality studies. First, my rural queer rhetoric framework contributes to theorizing on intersectionality by demonstrating the ways in which place and class regulate whiteness as well as gender and sexuality. This project responds to Chávez and Griffin's call for queer and feminist rhetorical theorizing to move away from the notion that only some bodies are intersectional and toward the reality that all bodies are implicated in the "matrix of domination."³⁹⁶ Though white supremacist ideology impacts white people differently than people of color, it takes for granted the assumption that "poor rural white communities [are] sites of perverse sexuality, deformed bodies, deranged minds,"³⁹⁷ which certainly impacts people from/in rural places, particularly those who are queer. Whiteness remains a rhetorical and cultural institution that demands total compliance and punishes nonconformity ruthlessly.³⁹⁸ From an intersectional perspective, this project reveals how whiteness regulates rural queerness in particular ways, especially when white rural queer folks expose the totalizing, violent logics inherent to American capitalism, corporatism, and imperial colonialism.

Furthermore, this dissertation demonstrates the generative methodological capacities of intersectional and queer rhetorical criticism via Ono's "contextual fields"³⁹⁹ and Slagle's consideration of identity as "permanently open and contestable."⁴⁰⁰ By refusing to take for granted the stability of whiteness, queerness, and rurality, this project paves the way for future innovations in methodological and theoretical imagining in rhetorical studies. My rural queer

worldmaking rhetorical framework not only indicates the limitless possibilities for rural queer folks to craft livable worlds – it also suggests to the rhetorical studies discipline that perhaps some of its underlying assumptions about eloquence, influence, and knowledge creation are similarly “open and contestable.”⁴⁰¹ In other words, maybe some of us “deplorables”⁴⁰² from places rendered undesirable by metronormative discourses can teach the discipline a few things beyond “manuscripts, lecture halls, and seminar tables.”⁴⁰³ Perhaps a critical eye toward the *places*, in addition to the topics or the authors, we consider academically valuable could invite a deeper reflexivity into the work we do as rhetoricians.⁴⁰⁴

This dissertation offers but one of countless places to turn in rhetorical studies beyond the ivory tower’s podium, so to speak. Noor Ghazal Aswad and Matthew Houdek assert that “there is a growing movement, desire, and awareness across the epistemic South, the undercommons, and beyond for... ‘a world where many worlds fit.’”⁴⁰⁵ While I hesitate to suggest that the rural queer people and communities included in this dissertation should be considered as part of the “epistemic South,”⁴⁰⁶ as they sometimes benefit from and are legible to the imperial core in which they are contained in important ways, I contend that perhaps this project reveals possibilities for rural queer “otherwise ways of meaning- and sense-making that exceed prevailing disciplinary frameworks and... that [exist] beyond the edges of the settler colonial, anti-Black world, and its limited imaginaries.”⁴⁰⁷ Perhaps further scholarship on queer rurality, such as participatory critical rhetorical work in Appalachia, could open further possibilities for theorizing place with/against/despite the metronormative epistemological walls of the academy.

Second, this dissertation contributes to theorizing about worldmaking, namely how place necessarily influences, limits, and gives life to queer worlds. Even the worldmaking that scholars have identified in archives and cyberspace is informed by the physical and digital places that

contain them.⁴⁰⁸ If worlds are crafted by the cultural, material, and relational resources on hand, it follows that placed realities, values, and assumptions are deeply embedded in rhetorical worldmaking processes. This project extends Hsu's theorizing about "homing" as the rhetorical practice of constellating placed "stories that determine with whom, where, and how we belong" into the realm of rural queer worldmaking.⁴⁰⁹ Chappell Roan's placed bricolage, Campout's grassroots place-making practices, and Emma, Justin, and Zooey's liminal performances, though not directly translatable to the trans and queer Asian American rhetorics that Hsu discusses, similarly indicate that rural queer belonging and subjectivity are "not stable, guaranteed, or predictable" and rather are crafted, imagined, and negotiated through worldmaking.⁴¹⁰ I also contend that rural queer worldmaking largely emerges from what LeMaster describes as the "nonnormative relating" that forms the "the queer world as comprised of individual subjects in community" that together make sense of their realities with/against/despite metronormative political and cultural institutions.⁴¹¹

Also, my theorizing about rural queer worldmaking offers practical implications for praxis in everyday life. By highlighting the quotidian rhetorical tactics used by rural queer folks in different contexts, this dissertation extends what Thomas Nakayama and Charles Morris describe as the "queer worldmaking [that] takes place in all kinds of places, at all different times, involving all kinds of people... It is not a strategic plan, organized by anyone, but a bottom-up engagement with the everyday."⁴¹² Placed queer bricolage, liminal performance, and grassroots place-making are not only tactics ripe for further academic theorizing in rhetorical studies, performance studies, and gender and sexuality studies – they are also examples of worldmaking practices that can, and are, taken up by regular folks in daily life. We all have the capacity to

make the worlds we want to live in together, and this project elucidates but a few places we can turn for inspiration to do so.

Finally, this project invites further theorizing about rural queerness and/or queer rurality as they challenge and are informed by metronormative narratives. This dissertation extends Thomsen's theorizing of "the *spatially* contingent nature of gender and sexuality"⁴¹³ by highlighting the *placed* rhetorical contingencies that shape whiteness, class, gender, and sexuality. As Thomsen challenges the "visibility foundations of... metronormative logics,"⁴¹⁴ I challenge the presumed rhetorical *placelessness* at work in contemporary metronormative Western LGBTQ+ subjectivity and politics. By explicitly taking a critical place⁴¹⁵ approach to rural queer worldmaking, this dissertation disrupts what Cram describes as the "metronormative imagination of the city as an all-encompassing queer destination of cultural belonging."⁴¹⁶ This project complicates metronormative queer belonging narratives by illuminating the rich worldmaking work that queer folks in/from rural places do to survive.

Moreover, as I explain in Chapter 1, I consider rural queerness and queer rurality to describe distinct yet interrelated theoretical lenses. This dissertation primarily deals with rural queerness, as each case study includes people and organizations in rural places who identify in some way or another with the LGBTQ+ label. Though queer rurality shows up covertly throughout the project in some ways, I attend to it far less frequently than I do rural queerness. Still, this distinction provides a path forward in thinking about queer rurality, or the notion that rurality itself is always already queer, more intentionally in future projects. For instance, I imagine that a closer look at West Virginian singer-songwriter Sierra Ferrell's performance of Appalachian femininity in her artistry may yield fruitful insights into queer rurality. Unlike Chappell Roan, whose lesbian identity features heavily in her discography, Sierra Ferrell

primarily writes about her romantic encounters with men and has not publicly indicated any history with queer identity or relationships. Still, I wonder if Sierra's lyrics, costuming, and musical style disrupt metronormative narratives about life in Appalachia through the lens of queer rurality, perhaps offering novel insights to the contours of the cultural and political mythos about rural America that permeates contemporary U.S. politics and, at times, negatively impacts people in rural places.⁴¹⁷

Closing Thoughts and Future Directions

Fascism, Neoliberalism, and the State of LGBTQ+ Politics in the U.S.

Through my examination of rural queer worldmaking rhetorics, this dissertation exposes not only the current state of metronormative LGBTQ+ identity politics in the United States specifically but also the limits of Western neoliberalism broadly. In 2026, as the U.S. imperial superpower freefalls openly into fascism,⁴¹⁸ goes to war in Iran,⁴¹⁹ and rapidly approaches the event horizon of multi-system collapse (if it has not already passed),⁴²⁰ critics and pundits alike continue to place the blame on the Trump administration and the MAGA voter base.⁴²¹ I consider this assessment to be ahistorical in its failure to capture the ways in which the U.S. political class writ large regularly facilitates disaster toward its own nefarious ends, often misdirecting blame to an imagined rural America that serves as a scapegoat.⁴²² As millions of Americans, in both rural and urban places, face the horrors of their SNAP and ACA benefits being cut while the National Guard and ICE terrorize communities of color in several U.S. cities, Democratic leaders continue to fail to meaningfully oppose the regime.

Similarly, Western neoliberal identity politics have, at the very least, failed to meaningfully combat fascist sentiments in the United States. Instead, contemporary Western LGBTQ+ politics as one axis of American neoliberalism contributes to the success of fascist

rhetorics in the United States and necessitates the rhetorical formation of what I have referred to elsewhere as Good Queers and Bad Queers.⁴²³ Good Queers embark on a unilateral mission of self-discovery by coming out of the closet, moving to the big city,⁴²⁴ buying rainbow merchandise from Target to wear at June pride events, celebrating gay politicians like Pete Buttigieg, and, of course, voting blue no matter who. Good Queers' journey in many ways emulates Western narratives of conquering the frontier, manifesting their destinies of self-actualization via neoliberal identity politics and, more importantly, consumption. Bad Queers are the unspoken juxtaposition of digestible neoliberal LGBTQ+ identity politics. Bad Queers include people who are poor, trans, Black, Indigenous, disabled, undocumented, unhoused, unemployed, and uneducated, to name a few. Bad Queers are often disruptive, politically incorrect, criminals, and addicts. In many ways, rural queer people are also Bad Queers.

Rurality, Western imagery, masculinity, and conservative politics go back a long way in American political history.⁴²⁵ While Teddy Roosevelt's relatively progressive take on his form of cowboy politics would be rather idiosyncratic to today's Republican party, the cowboy imaginary would remain salient over a century later. However, the mythos of the American cowboy fails to capture the complex, rich histories associated with the working class in the United States. Evidence suggests that "real" cowboys and other laborers throughout U.S. history were notably less heterosexual and white than the mascot of conservative politics would have Republican voters believe.⁴²⁶ Even in the face of evidence of rural queer existence from cultural touchpoints like the murders of Matthew Shephard and Brandon Teena and the commercial success of *Brokeback Mountain*, exposure to these truths ultimately fail to dismantle the myth of the stoic, ultra-masculine conservative cowboy.

The rhetorical opposite of the cowboy conservative has evolved into contemporary U.S. political culture as the blue-haired liberal.⁴²⁷ In the American zeitgeist, the (white) woke, queer, blue-haired social justice warrior/Starbucks barista encapsulates the sins of modernity and cosmopolitanism that its opposite, the stoic, rugged, old-fashioned cowboy conservative, needs to exist. In reality, both reactionary caricatures fuel a deeper neoliberal identity rhetoric: that urbanity and rurality are neatly transposable onto liberal and conservative political realities. Put simply, the conservative cowboy and the blue-haired liberal serve as the rhetorical shorthand for the (alleged) ongoing existential struggle for American identity. The totalizing logic that fuels these competing imaginaries is a simple one: consumption.

Like the major political parties in the United States, striving toward conservative and liberal identities are questions not of ideology or party membership as they perhaps were in their past forms. Political action has transformed over time to political signaling through consumption. Good (neoliberal) Queers purchase their pride merchandise from Target, just as conservatives save up for their F150s and Ariat boots. Capitalism shapes liberal and conservative subjectivities alike. Rather than marketing to existing constituencies, consumption dictates political subjectivities to protect the interests of capital. For example, Subaru famously linked their brand and the outdoors with lesbian identity to boost sales in the early 1990s, leading to a long-lasting rhetorical association between their cars and queerness.⁴²⁸ When consumption is the primary mechanism for politics, identity, and belonging, the inability to consume becomes an inability to exist, at least in the American political imaginary. Neoliberalism at its core uplifts fascism because it relies on the language of capital. Neoliberal identity politics function as controlled opposition within a fascist rhetorical framework that needs an enemy to fuel its crisis economy. When Good Queers accept their place within that framework instead of rejecting its premise

altogether, they legitimize their own caricatures under fascist ideology. The rural (Bad Queer) framework I synthesize in this dissertation could offer a critical disruption of the totalizing neoliberal subjectivities that fascist rhetorics in the U.S. do to “trans, queer, migrant, people of color, and disabled bodies that are used to metabolize grievance into authoritarian control.”⁴²⁹

On Rhetoric’s Relationality and Rural Queer Abolitionism

I agree with Dana Cloud that rhetorical studies has a pathos problem.⁴³⁰ Western epistemology, specifically its emphasis on Cartesianism, has effectively severed the mind from the body, thinking from feeling, pathos from logos and ethos, and has given these things gender.⁴³¹ This enduring epistemological paradigm infects the ways we think and write about rhetoric, namely its centrality in Western styles of public address by white men.⁴³² This critique of the discipline is far from new, but it remains necessary. One epistemological intervention that rural queer worldmaking offers to the discipline is on rhetoric’s relationality.

Rural queer rhetoric as an intersectional analytical framework contributes to the ongoing turn toward relationality in rhetorical and performance studies. From Chappell Roan’s critical performance of self as coalitional to Emma, Zooey, and Justin’s liminal performances as witnessing to Campout’s place-making rhetorics, rural queerness emerges primarily from relationality. This relationality disrupts Western LGBTQ+ narratives of essentialized, depoliticized, decontextualized identity categories as primarily products for consumption. Thinking beyond capital-friendly, marketable rainbow politics, which increasingly soften queer expression and experience into neat and orderly rows of respectability, requires a decoupling of self from consumption and production. Instead, by turning to place and class as animators of race, gender, sexuality, my grounded theorizing of rural queer rhetoric in the United States situates the self, and all the worlds we imagine, in relationality.

This dissertation contributes to the fields of rhetorical studies, performance studies, and gender and sexuality studies in its introduction of rural queerness as a fecund framework for intersectional analysis of rhetoric's relationality. This project also provides key insights into the ways we can think about queer worldmaking and critical place inquiry in rhetorical studies. Through my particular theoretical interventions into placed queer bricolage, liminal performance, and placemaking/place-making, I provide a solid foundation for taking up specific tactics for organizers and artists to engage worldmaking praxis. Scholars and practitioners alike can take up the theories and practices I identify to answer my call to rural queer abolitionism.

In accordance with bell hooks' assertion that we need not "share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression,"⁴³³ I call on fellow rural queers to join the struggle for abolition by building coalition across difference. Black studies scholar and political scientist Barnor Hesse theorizes eight white identities as they emerge in relation to white supremacy: white supremacy, white voyeurism, white privilege, white benefit, white confessional, white critical, white traitor, and white abolitionist.⁴³⁴ Hesse considers a white abolitionist to be committed to "changing institutions, dismantling whiteness, and not allowing whiteness to reassert itself."⁴³⁵ As rural queers, particularly those of us who are white, our struggle is not the same as Black or Indigenous struggle, but our orientation against state violence should be the same. Building coalition is necessarily complicated, difficult, and uncomfortable at times. In fact, I imagine that more often than not, our family members, friends, and neighbors in rural places make it frustrating to build coalition with them. Some of them will disown us entirely and/or enthusiastically join state efforts to eradicate us. We may never see the fruits of our labor come to term, and some of us will die in the fight. Our purpose and principles must remain.

White supremacy, fascist colonialism, American imperial capitalism, and trans- and queerphobia are interlocked social structures, both materially and rhetorically. Any action that leaves these institutions intact, particularly for personal or professional gain, necessarily contradicts abolitionist principles. Totalizing rhetorics of subjectivity, success, and failure, both in personal and political senses, replicate Western colonial logics. Each of us has our role to play in an abolitionist ecosystem, and we each must act in accordance with our abilities and resources.⁴³⁶ We must choose solidarity, even when others do not choose us. When we know better, we must do better. We must be vigilant against promises from organizations and individuals that they have our best interests in mind, that they have all the answers, that they will use our pronouns and publish our work in journals, if only we would be a little more professional, a little more civil.⁴³⁷ We can haunt the structures, be in them but not of them, and use them to direct power toward abolitionist ends.⁴³⁸

Future conversation, scholarship, and action on rural queer abolitionism should interrogate the cultural and rhetorical formations that emerge from particular places. One key limitation of this dissertation is my decision to subsume rural queerness/queer rurality in the United States into a singular framework. U.S. rural queerness/queer rurality in Appalachia is undoubtedly different from the Great Lakes region which is still different from the Southwestern region, and so on. Additionally, my conceptions of rural queerness/queer rurality emerge from my own limited perspective as a white, educated, Western queer.⁴³⁹ This dissertation should serve as a starting point for, not the final word on, future conversation on rural queerness/queer rurality. I welcome critique and debate on any aspect of this dissertation, as I believe that knowledge emerges from open dialogue and the struggle for shared understanding rather than disciplinary epistemological territorialism. This project has generated more questions than

answers on rural queer rhetoric, and I plan to continue learning more on this subject and others in my efforts to build relationships and coalitions across difference. Ultimately, I hope this dissertation serves to help myself and those who engage with my writing imagine and perform abolitionist rural queer worlds otherwise, together.

Notes

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¹¹ Roman Christiaens and Chelsea E. Noble, “Insiders, Outsiders, and Dangerous Waters: Homonormative Whiteness in LGBTQ+ Resource Centers,” in *Queerness as Doing in Higher Education: Narrating the Insider/Outsider Paradox as LGBTQ+ Scholars and Practitioners*, edited by Jesus Cisneros, T.J. Jourian, Ryan A. Miller, and Antonio Duran (New York: Routledge, 2023), 98.

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