

The Republic Of Fabulachia: Queer Visions for a Post-Coal Appalachian Future

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“Extraction in the region is not limited to extractive industries – so, its not limited to Coal, its not limited to Timber or Oil and Natural Gas... its really about, extracting labor and extracting wealth and extracting images, and it really is a 300 year history. So, I just finished my masters thesis and it was about media’s relationship to the region, and whether or not images that have



been extracted about Appalachia have had any sort of impact on how people in the region feel about themselves and their culture, like, what does that – what does that mean, what does it look like? So in doing that research it really became clear that, over 300 years, people who have been in power and who have controlled the power, in the region and outside of the region – whether it be politicians or local elites who have all the money and the influence, or the Coal Industry, or the Timber Industry – have really worked very hard, and very intentionally to create this narrative of the place and the people as being a throw away place, and a throw away people, and people who don’t really deserve to do anything other than coal mining, for instance. And so, over this 300 year history of this narrative being told over and over and over and also being recycled in times of economic upheaval, what I found was that, it really does have an impact and that impact is that people feel like all they are good for is what they are given from people who have all the power and the money.

So extraction is, more than this one industry, it’s really, it’s about extracting the power and the agency from the people, so that they feel like they don’t have that power and agency to make any sort of decisions for their life and their communities for themselves, that they have to sort of just like keep taking all of this crap that they’ve been given and settle, really settle for these extractive industries that, for at least 150 years in terms of coal, have been really harmful, really detrimental to the environment and to public health, to wealth creation and building, to community development and economic diversification. You know, it’s really sort of been, like relying on a mono-economy in this way in a place that is a sacrifice zone for the 1%, is really harmful in a lot of ways, and it sort of gets you to this point now where, you know, the coal is running out, it’s not, economical for companies to mine the coal anymore, its more costly and so they’re not gonna spend the extra money to do it, they’re gonna go where it’s cheaper. So we’re at this point now where we’re sort of left in a lurch really and our backs are against the wall and its sort of like what do we do now? We’re being left behind again by this industry that has consistently left us behind.”

Sam, 23, Berea, Kentucky



“When I think about resiliency, I think about tradition, because I think that there is a tradition of people being resilient in Appalachia, and I think queer people especially so – I mean the ones that I have known. Especially the ones that wanted to live in their home communities for most of their lives.

I’ve been really fortunate to have some older gay friends... that feel like family to me.

And just the way that I’ve seen people deal with – like, I think of one older friend of mine who’s out, and he deals with, just misunderstandings about who he is all the time. Where like these straight, pretty gruff country dudes – that he’s able to relate to because he’s so funny and he’s so effervescent and he’s a person that you’d want to know. And so then he deals with these misunderstandings and these disrespectful things that get said, or just like, heteronormative things, or misogynist things, or whatever – he’s also like a real progressive person politically – you know. So he’s dealing with all this B.S. that he encounters on a regular basis with this humor and self assurance and you know this beautiful – you know it’s a defiance! But it’s a subtle kind of defiance, you know in that it’s just, it’s a knowledge – a deep knowledge of who he is and what he’s about and what he believes. And he doesn’t let that, he’s not gonna let that be challenged, by what anyone else thinks.”

Guiding Questions and Theoretical Framework

Folklorist Henry Glassie writes “tradition is the creation of the future out of the past. A continuous process situated in the nothingness of the present, linking the vanished with the unknown, tradition is stopped, parceled, and codified by thinkers who fix upon this aspect or that, in accord with their needs or preoccupations” (2003:176). Glassie argues then, that tradition is always created out of our current desires and that the natural state of tradition is change. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin write “tradition is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past” (1984:287).

Jack Halberstam discusses the dominant historic narrative that in order to achieve queer success LGBTQA people from rural areas have only one option: escape. Halberstam terms this hegemonic assumption metronormativity, which, he writes: “reveals the conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities...While the story of coming out tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town’ is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” (2005:36).

Based in a region that holds its traditional music, crafts, folklore and knowledge as sacred – and yet also narrowly crafts the traditional in such a way that the presence of LGBTQA folks and people of color is all but invisibilized – how do young queer Appalachians interact with notions of tradition and traditionality? How do they celebrate the region’s rich traditional culture while simultaneously pushing for change? Is the simple choice (when one has the privilege of choice) to stay in the mountains as a young queer person inherently political? If a commonly assumed rural queer “tradition” is escape to an urban center, are there country queer traditions? What does it mean for a region that has historically denied the existence of queer folks, that young LGBTQ organizers are at the forefront of organizing work directed at bringing about a just economic transition to a post-coal future? And, how do queerness and legacies of labor and environmental organizing in the mountains influence young LGBTQ Appalachian organizers’ contemporary approaches to their work?

The excerpts from oral history interviews included here are a brief insight into the ways in which four young LGBTQ Appalachian leaders grapple with questions of tradition, queerness, and change as they work to create a more sustainable and inclusive future in the mountains that they love.



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Ada, 29, Whitesburg, Kentucky

“My newest leg of political work or whatnot...within rural places in my community is this stuff we’ve been picking up around the Letcher Governance Project. And the main focus of that currently, is opposing a federal prison that is supposed to be built here, under the narrative of economic development. I see our work in context of what does it mean...to have a federal prison coming to you when in all technical ways, it’s positive for our community: we get jobs, we get



sewer and water infrastructure, we get a big bunch of investment, like, what’s the negative, why wouldn’t you be for it? Even though, we of course know that the prison system is insanely messed up, insanely racialized, and that actually being a prison guard is not a good thing, and it really screws up people and families who have to be in those kinds of jobs.

I think the question continues to become – just like some of my sheros that were miners wives, or property owners, or just women in the community who were seeing what was happening, the devastating results of mining – is that like, as white people in a community who can look out and see what prisons are doing, our role and job right now to contribute to the injustice of that is to not have another one built! And so to me again, its just like, understanding who we are, understanding the system, and what our role is in that, and knowing that even if we can’t stop it that we are not a part of just letting it happen, and that there is clear public resistance to the idea that prisons should be economic development! They should not be economic development they should never even be framed in that context....I don’t even wanna participate in the idea that that is the type of investment that people here want, cause it’s not. People feel like it’s the only thing offered to them but it is not the investment that people want.”

Kenny, 24, Whitesburg, KY

I also think that being visibly queer and young and living in a community in the region that you grew up in is a political decision. And I make a lot of sacrifices, and that’s what pisses me off so damn much whenever people say like, “All the young people are leaving, and there’s no young people in this region.”



Cause its like actually, no! There’s a lot of young people that are living here and a lot of them don’t get the choice to whether they’re gonna live here or not and that’s a real thing. And I am making a choice to live in this town, where I have built community that isn’t my family, that allows me to be who I am.

And I think that, you know, being out in certain spaces is political, even just saying things. I’m a volunteer DJ on the radio station – the community radio station here, and there’s a guy that came in after me, and right after Pulse, I said something about, you know, the queer community, and I said “we” in some way – I didn’t even realize that I had like outed myself in some way. And he came in and he was like “I’m so proud of you for just sayin that.” And I was like, “What? What are you talking about?” And he said, you know, “You said this and this.” I was like “Oh yeah, I guess, yeah.”

But it was just like, ways that I didn’t even know that people are paying attention, which is kinda weird but is still – I think it’s political that I said that and, I think – I just think that being alive and existing in a world that says you should or shouldn’t be in this particular space and be this particular person at the same time – I think that that’s always political, by like saying like, fuck you! I’m here...and I’m queer...and I’m here to stay. Yeah.”