

Introduction

In Kentucky-born novelist Silas House's keynote address at the 2014 Appalachian Studies Association Conference, he noted that his Berea College students who identify as LGBTQ feel "invisible" within Appalachia, and that they cite this feeling among their reasons for moving out of the region. In this talk, House highlighted the challenges facing LGBTQ Appalachians, particularly calling attention to recent acts of anti-LGBTQ violence and discrimination. House called for the audience (and the reader, when the talk was published in the *Journal of Appalachian Studies* the following fall) to speak up against such hate, and he explicitly called out the Appalachian studies community for remaining unacceptably silent on these issues. House's remedy, his call-to-action for the audience, is framed in terms of speech as action: "we can fight this first and foremost through talking about it, by singing about it, by writing about it, through education, science, and research, and with conversation."¹

My own preparation for that conference unearthed another case of invisibility and silence. While preparing my presentation on the young adult novels of Kentucky-native Julia Watts, I expected to find ample scholarship on Watts's 2001 novel *Finding H.F.*—a Lambda Literary Award winner, groundbreaking in its portrayal of young, queer Appalachians—and on LGBTQ Appalachian literature in general. Instead, I found only a few essays about individual authors and texts but not what I was looking for: a comprehensive study of the rich (and fairly recent, covering the last thirty to forty years) tradition of LGBTQ themes in Appalachian literature.² From that absence, that silence in the scholarship, the seed for this book was planted.

Four years later, at the 2018 Appalachian Studies Conference, House convened a session entitled "The Other in an Othered Culture: LGBTQ

Writers in Appalachia.” This session, which featured readings by House as well as other LGBTQ Appalachian writers, Carter Sickels, Jason Howard, and Savannah Sipple, focused on LGBTQ Appalachian literature as well as on the challenges facing the Appalachian queer community. During the Q&A that followed, in response to a question by writer and *Oxford American* poetry editor Rebecca Gayle Howell about the future of Appalachian letters, House became reflective, noting that “there were many years when there weren’t any gay Appalachian writers” and named Lisa Alther, Jeff Mann, and Julia Watts as groundbreaking LGBTQ Appalachian writers.³ House’s acknowledgment of these writers’ impact was heartening, yet the situation was ironic: Mann and Watts were speaking at the conference but were not invited to be part of this panel.

This irony was a reminder of my original inspiration to write this book: although we are in the midst of a flowering of LGBTQ Appalachian literature, readers might easily believe that Sipple and other emerging writers such as Mesha Maren, Jonathan Corcoran, and Rahul Mehta are the first openly queer Appalachian writers, or that House is the first novelist to focus on queer Appalachians. Yet these writers walk a road paved by many others, including Alther, Mann, and Watts, as well as Maggie Anderson, Doris Davenport, Fenton Johnson, filmmaker Beth Stephens, and, in an earlier generation, poet George Scarbrough. Undoubtedly, there were other queer Appalachian writers—about whose lives we may never know more—who felt compelled to prevent any hint of scandal about their sexuality from emerging.

What, I wondered, unites queer Appalachian authors and their works, beyond issues of sexuality and an affiliation with a region? How do these texts grow out of or diverge from the Appalachian literary tradition, or from the tradition of LGBTQ literature in the United States? What are their common preoccupations, tropes, character types, and concerns? This book is my attempt to answer those questions. In it, I trace the history of this literature, preparing us to more fully appreciate the work of these emerging writers by understanding the origin story of LGBTQ Appalachian literature and appreciating how we arrived at this moment.

Only within the past forty years, beginning with the 1976 publication of Lisa Alther’s *Kinflicks*, have openly queer Appalachian authors published works that directly address issues of sexuality. In *Doubly Erased*, I undertake a systematic inquiry into the work of LGBTQ Appalachians who are writing about LGBTQ themes and characters, focusing primarily on those writers (and one filmmaker) who produced a full-length work

between 1976 and 2016. Authors covered by this research include some of the most influential and highly regarded contemporary writers and artists in (or from) Appalachia, including poet and essayist Jeff Mann; novelists Dorothy Allison, Lisa Alther, Julia Watts, Fenton Johnson, Karen Salyer McElmurray, and Silas House; graphic memoirist Alison Bechdel; filmmaker Beth Stephens; Affrilachian poet doris davenport; and others.⁴ There are other LGBTQ Appalachian writers—including Nickole Brown, Ann Pancake, and Victor Depta—whose works could have been included here but were not due to limitations on space and time.

When these contemporary LGBTQ Appalachian authors and their works are placed in dialogue, common patterns, tropes, and themes emerge. LGBTQ Appalachian literature derives many of its themes—land, family, food, and social justice—from the Appalachian literary tradition. Yet a set of preoccupations is common to this literature as well: a focus on visibility and seeing, a persistent concern with silences, a love of place that figures the land both as refuge and threat, metaphors of flying and flying creatures, and representations of food linked to both love of family and loss of family connections. Moreover, these writers describe feeling voiceless in an already voiceless region, being outsiders-yet-insiders in a marginalized and stereotyped culture. The content of this literature—the controversial topics (treatment of Appalachians with AIDS, religion wielded as a weapon against LGBTQ Appalachians) and references to queer sexuality—made these texts less likely to be taught in Appalachian studies classes, discussed at conferences, or written about in journals. These authors and their work have been *doubly erased*: disregarded within the literature of the United States because they're Appalachian (“regionalists,” “local color,” etc.) and overlooked (or excluded from) the Appalachian literary tradition because they are queer.

The erasure of these Appalachian writers also exemplifies the invisibility of queer Appalachians and other rural queer people within popular representations of homosexuality in the US. Such representations are primarily dominated by images of urban, white, largely upper-middle-class queer subjects, a phenomenon that queer theorist Jack Halberstam has dubbed “metronormativity.”⁵ In Halberstam's 2005 study *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, he chronicles the elision of rural queer populations within representations of US queer lives: “Until recently, small towns were considered hostile to queers and urban areas were cast as the queer's natural environment. . . . While there is plenty of truth to this division between urban and small-town life, between

hetero-familial cultures and queer creative and sexual cultures, the division also occludes the lives of nonurban queers.”⁶ Halberstam further argues that this occlusion has shaped the development both of LGBTQ literature in the United States and of queer identity, in the sense that many queer youth first seek models for their sexuality in the pages of a novel. Halberstam (referencing the work of historian Will Fellows) notes that “queers from rural settings are not well represented in the literature that has been so much a hallmark of twentieth-century gay identity. . . . Little of this literature has anything at all to say about rural life, and most of it ties homosexual encounters to the rhythms of the city.”⁷ Although this observation might be true of US literature overall, LGBTQ Appalachian literature has demonstrated a consistent focus on rural queer lives.

Regarding my terminology, throughout this book I will use “LGBTQ” or “queer” to describe people whose cultural and sexual practices diverge from heteronormativity. In adopting this terminology, I am indebted to Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, coauthors of the 2013 book *Art and Queer Culture*, who wrote, in explaining their use of the word queer, “We have chosen the term ‘queer’ in the knowledge that no single word can accommodate the sheer expanse of cultural practices that oppose normative heterosexuality. In its shifting connotation from everyday parlance to phobic epithet to defiant self-identification, ‘queer’ offers more generous rewards than any simple inventory of sexual practices or erotic object choices.”⁸ My intent is not to exclude other identities (which are sometimes represented by additional letters or symbols) but rather to pitch a big tent in which a variety of nonheteronormative practices can reside. My thinking was also shaped by a presentation by Judith Butler at the 1995 School of Criticism and Theory, in which Butler outlined their forthcoming book, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997). Butler’s discussion of the changing valance of the word “queer”—its shifting power to wound or seduce or describe—shifted my understanding of the term and its rhetorical and descriptive power.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a few key texts within Appalachian studies began to acknowledge the existence of queer Appalachians, making them visible within the scholarship. Although lesbian and gay studies arose as an interdisciplinary academic discipline in the US in the 1970s–’80s, it was incorporated much more slowly into Appalachian studies, beginning with Kate Black and Marc A. Rhorer’s 1994 presentation at the Appalachian Studies Conference (published as the 1995 essay “Out in the Mountains: Exploring Lesbian and Gay Lives”). As Black and Rhorer described the

genesis of their project, they focused on the silence about this issue: “The idea for this project began when Marc wanted to do a research paper on lesbians and gays in Appalachia and asked Kate, curator of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Collection, about prior research on the subject. Kate said, ‘There isn’t anything.’”⁹ For “Out in the Mountains,” Black and Rhorer interviewed gay and lesbian Appalachians about “coming out experiences, homophobia, AIDS-phobia, and community building.”¹⁰ Several themes emerged: participants’ feelings of isolation, fears of job loss or physical violence, and internalization of the homophobia that surrounds them. Black and Rhorer found that “while everyone readily identified themselves as gay or lesbian, we found that many people seemed to avoid directly addressing their Appalachian identities.”¹¹ This same dilemma—how to reconcile one’s queer and Appalachian identities—is a consistent theme for later writers.

Danny Miller’s “Homosexuality in Appalachian Literature,” a talk presented at the 1996 Appalachian Studies Conference, is the earliest foray into LGBTQ themes within Appalachian literary studies.¹² Acknowledging Black and Rhorer’s essay, Miller echoes their criticism of the scholarly silence about “gays and lesbians in Appalachia” but notes that “their existence has been acknowledged in the fiction of the region for several years.”¹³ Miller goes on to examine the portrayals of gay characters in five Appalachian novels (including Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*), thus making queer characters in Appalachian literature visible for readers (or scholars) who have overlooked or ignored them: “I hope that the foregoing discussion shows that homosexual characters in an Appalachian setting are a part of the fiction of the region and that literature at least admits their existence, in various personifications.”¹⁴

Three years after Miller’s presentation, in 1999, Jeff Mann published “Stonewall and Matewan: Some Thoughts on Gay Life in Appalachia,” an essay in which Mann describes the balancing act for those who embrace their identities as both Appalachians and members of the LGBTQ community. Mann echoes Black and Rhorer’s interview subjects in describing his early feelings of isolation as a gay teen in Appalachia, then his later rejection of Appalachian identity and relocation to an urban area. However, living outside of Appalachia led Mann to a realization: “I was an Appalachian.” Mann describes himself and other Appalachian gays and lesbians as “balancing gay or lesbian and Appalachian identities,” acknowledging, “It’s taken me twenty years to achieve some kind of reasonable equilibrium.”¹⁵ Mann hopes that the increased visibility of queer

Appalachians will lead to greater understanding: “In the face of such honesty and courage, opinions shift: the newly-made friend or coworker is less likely to hate, the gay adolescent less likely to contemplate suicide in the face of Antarctic isolation.”¹⁶

In the same year that Mann’s “Stonewall and Matewan” was published, a documentary gave voice to queer young people in Appalachia, highlighting the danger and condemnation they face. *Through Their Eyes: Stories of Gays and Lesbians in the Mountains* (dir. Burke, Caudill, Cupp, and Rowlette) was produced by Appalshop (an arts and education center in Kentucky) and “was made by and features lesbians and gays living in Harlan and Perry Counties in Kentucky.”¹⁷ This short film comprises interviews with young queer Appalachians (and one older man). In the voices of these young people, we hear about their coming-out experiences with family and friends, their endurance of oppression and violence, and their desire for acceptance. One young man tells of his mother holding a loaded gun to his head because, as she said, “I would rather see you dead and know that you were in Hell than see you living a life of this sick sin,” and a young woman describes the time period when her sisters “beat the hell out of me for three years thinking they could beat it out of me, that I’d like men afterwards.” Yet most of the young people express their determination to stay in their home counties, find partners, and make lives there. In Kate Black’s review of the film, she describes its message of activism and inclusion: “They aim to expose their own reality—and the heinous deeds of their communities—while simultaneously affirming their sense of place and their right to be a part of it.”¹⁸

Earlier generations of queer folks—both in Appalachia and nationwide—faced these same obstacles, as well as job discrimination, police harassment, and threat of imprisonment or institutionalization. As Craig M. Loftin describes in *Masked Voices: Gay Men and Lesbians in Cold War America*, anti-homosexual rhetoric geared up in the late 1940s and peaked in the 1950s, as “investigations of homosexuals under national security auspices allowed McCarthyites to bolster claims that their political opponents were ‘soft’ on communism, thus jeopardizing national security.”¹⁹ Yet Loftin describes gay people responding with “adaptation and resilience,” passing as heterosexual and thus donning a metaphorical mask, which “provided gay people with the necessary security that *allowed* them to consciously identify as homosexual and participate in a subaltern, camouflaged gay public sphere.”²⁰

A key example of such masking—and of the careful, gradual removal of this mask—within Appalachian literary circles is the career of novelist Silas House. Over the past decade (2012–2022) within Appalachian literature and Appalachian studies, queer themes have been made safe for discussion in large part because of House and his work. House has occupied a unique position within LGBTQ Appalachian literature, in that when he first became celebrated for his writing—most notably for his first novel, *New York Times* bestselling *Clay's Quilt* (2001)—his subject matter fell squarely within the confines of traditional Appalachian themes, and House himself had not yet publicly identified as a gay man.²¹ In *Clay's Quilt*, protagonist Clay Sizemore comes to terms with the long-ago murder of his mother in a novel that addresses themes of family ties, domestic violence, the redemptive value of music, and the lingering fault lines in the Appalachian economy. Scholar Emily Satterwhite notes that the novel “reiterates major touchstones of Appalachian fiction, including coal mining (Clay’s occupation), fiddling . . . , quilting, boozing, gambling, squirrel hunting, clogging, gospel singing, and Pentecostal religion.”²² In the two decades since the publication of *Clay's Quilt*, House has become a central figure in Appalachian literature and in Appalachian studies more generally; numerous awards, appointments, keynote addresses, and other acknowledgments have cemented his establishment position.

Thus, House had secured a distinguished literary reputation and an influential position within the Appalachian literary and scholarly communities before he began to write about LGBTQ issues and before he came out as gay. In a 2018 interview, House notes that he came out at age thirty-four; that would have been in about 2005 or so.²³ Even as this topic—LGBTQ issues—emerged in his writing, House often rhetorically distanced this material from its queer subject matter. For example, House has stated that his 2012 play *This Is My Heart for You* was inspired by, among other events from the summer of 2011, an incident in Hazard, Kentucky, when two young men were kicked out of a community pool for “acting gay.”²⁴ Yet House maintained in a January 2014 interview that “this is not so much a ‘gay play’ as it is a commentary on how Americans have lost the ability to have a civil conversation with one another about political and social issues.”²⁵ Later that same spring, in March 2014, House’s Appalachian Studies keynote focused on LGBTQ issues, but the talk was framed in such a way that House’s frequent uses of the first-person plural, “us” and “we,” grouped him with fellow Appalachians or fellow academics,

not fellow people who identify as queer, such as when House asks his audience, “Why do we quietly accept that this treatment is all right for members of the queer community?”²⁶

The fact that House was a member of that queer community was not a secret: in an August 2014 interview, writer Jason Howard referred to House as “both my partner and an incredible writer.”²⁷ However, House continued to be discreet about this issue as it related to him personally. In a September 2015 NPR interview about his perspectives on the Kim Davis case in Rowan County, Kentucky, House was identified simply as “novelist Silas House, who grew up in the region. He is a professor at Eastern Kentucky’s Berea College.”²⁸ There is no acknowledgment, in either host Steve Inskeep’s questions or House’s answers, that House might have a personal stake in this case other than as a Kentuckian interested in issues of fairness. When Inskeep, as part of his last question, noted that “it sounds like you disagree with Kim Davis’ views in this case,” House replied, “I just believe that what she’s doing, I personally disagree with.” House did not volunteer (nor was he obliged to do so) that he and his partner had themselves successfully applied for a marriage license earlier that summer in another Kentucky county.²⁹

Yet only two years later, in a 2017 profile of House in *Spectrum South: The Voice of the Queer South*, he was being identified as “gay novelist Silas House” and “arguably the most prolific gay novelist in Appalachia.”³⁰ In multiple interviews leading up to the release of his 2018 novel *Southernmost*, House discussed the challenges he faced in coming out and his long process of reconciling his sexuality with his religious faith.³¹ By the 2018 ASA Conference, House was chairing a panel of LGBTQ Appalachian writers. And in House’s June 2018 op-ed in the *New York Times*, “The Masterpiece Decision Isn’t Harmless,” House writes from the perspective of a member of the queer community, enumerating the many forms of legalized discrimination against queer people in the US and describing his 2015 wedding, in which he and his husband were married by a judge only “five days after the Supreme Court gave us that right,” not waiting to be married in his church “because we didn’t want to wait the three weeks it took for the banns to be published; we were too afraid the right would somehow be snatched from us.”³²

These details are relevant because House’s careful self-positioning and his strategies for “coming out” as a queer Appalachian writer demonstrate the high stakes for an Appalachian writer—even now, even one who is a prominent, respected figure like House—whose life and work represent

stigmatized identities. In other words, House surely took such care, so precisely executed strategies that enabled the mainstreaming of queerness within Appalachian literature and Appalachian studies, because he felt that such care was necessary. By the 2012 premier of his play *This Is My Heart for You*, House had a solid reputation among national literary circles and had become an establishment figure within the Appalachian studies community: among the signs of House's prominence were his selection in 2004 to complete famed Kentucky writer James Still's unfinished second novel (*Chinaberry*, published in 2011) and his 2010 appointment as NEH Chair in Appalachian Studies at Berea College. Yet events have demonstrated that queerness is a risky topic even for an esteemed writer like House: leading up to *This Is My Heart's* 2012 premiere, House "received hate mail and death threats about my 'gay play.'"³³ In gradually introducing queer content into his work, House both demonstrates the need for this measured and diplomatic response and illustrates why earlier writers perhaps didn't develop the mainstream reputation they might have under other, less stigmatizing circumstances. Today, House uses his position within the Appalachian studies community to advocate for LGBTQ issues and similarly uses his position within the broader literary establishment to advocate for Appalachians.³⁴ Examining the evolution of House's career has shown us how hard House had to work to achieve this balance. Earlier queer Appalachian writers—especially from previous generations—would have felt the personal and professional impact that Loftin discussed in *Masked Voices*, and they would have suffered from the stigma, or carefully masked, or both.

A consequence of the kind of careful masking that LGBTQ Appalachians and some LGBTQ Appalachian authors have practiced is a sparse early literary history of queer writers, especially within Appalachia. In chapter 1, "The Elders of LGBTQ Appalachian Literature," we go in search of those writers, examining the life and work of three Appalachian writers who serve as points on the spectrum of openness. Tennessee poet George Scarbrough published poems about gay sexuality and came out in the 1990s, near the end of his life. Georgia poet and novelist Byron Herbert Reece never came out, although both his published work and his personal letters reveal positive portrayals of homosexuality (a rarity for the 1950s) as well as Reece's engagement in national conversations about gay literature. Finally, Kentuckian James Still, often called the "Dean of Appalachian Literature," adamantly denied being gay, but his friendships and his correspondence reveal a man comfortable with people of a range of sexualities and who

was alert to society's biases. For all three, a closer reading of their work within this context reveals another (perhaps masked?) layer of meaning.

Beginning with Lisa Alther's 1976 novel *Kinflicks*, issues of queer sexuality began to be more directly addressed within Appalachian literature, and chapter 2, "The Conversation Begins: Landmark Texts and Trailblazing Authors," provides a chronological overview of the key texts of contemporary LGBTQ Appalachian literature and introduces the authors who did this important work. Many of these texts were notable firsts, like Fenton Johnson's 1993 novel *Scissors, Paper, Rock*—the first novel to address the AIDS crisis in Appalachia—or doris davenport's 1995 poetry collection *Soque Street Poems*: within davenport's portrait of her Affrilachian community in north Georgia are glimpses of queer Affrilachian relationships. From *Kinflicks* through Silas House's 2018 novel, *Southernmost*, this chapter explores the history—and critical reception—of the texts that opened Appalachian literature to LGBTQ themes, characters, and concerns.

Each of the subsequent chapters examines a different thread running through contemporary LGBTQ Appalachian literature. Chapter 3, "Visibility and Seeing: Photography in LGBTQ Appalachian Literature," explores this literature's preoccupation with seeing and being seen, frequently through imagery of photography or filming in such texts as *Kinflicks*, the poetry of Maggie Anderson, the essays of Carter Sickels, and others. Of course, within a Western philosophical tradition in which seeing is equated with understanding, these textual explorations of sight serve as inquiries into how we understand ourselves as well as others. In Alison Bechdel's popular graphic novel *Fun Home*, for example, Bechdel situates the issue of photography within epistemological dilemmas of how we can truly know our loved ones or ourselves.

Chapter 4, "Silences and Storytelling in LGBTQ Appalachian Literature," focuses on images of secret-keeping and silencing, including how questions of "voice," coming out, and staying in the closet have been framed within contemporary LGBTQ Appalachian literature. This analysis includes an overview of the early conversations within Appalachian studies about HIV and AIDS, one of the most prominent examples of a topic seemingly too taboo to discuss. The chapter's focus on silences and stories—in all their tangled complexity—includes those within Johnson's *Scissors, Paper, Rock*: silences about protagonist Raphael Hardin's HIV infection as well as the stories recounted by the Hardin family. In *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven* by Karen Salyer McElmurray, profound silences mark the alienation of gay man Andrew Wallen from his mother Ruth Blue Wal-

len, and dueling radio stations—one broadcasting popular music and the other hymns—signal the alienation of a young Ruth Blue from her father. Finally, through an examination of doris davenport’s twin poetry collections *Soque Street Poems* (1995) and *madness like morning glories* (2005) whose individual poems are written in the voices of community members, we see the influence of the oral storytelling tradition as davenport gives voice to her Affrilachian home community and to queer Affrilachians.

Another key element of the work of many Appalachian authors is love of place, whether that place is the natural world or Appalachia’s urban spaces. In chapter 5, “HomePlaceBody: The Pleasures and Perils of the Physical World,” I examine how LGBTQ Appalachian authors Carter Sickels, Jeff Mann, and doris davenport—plus West Virginia-born filmmaker Beth Stephens—frame the Appalachian landscape as a refuge or liken it to the contours of a lover’s body. However, as this chapter discusses, these texts often highlight the ways in which home is not always welcoming and not always safe; the chapter explores the portrayal of rural queerness as a logical impossibility within American culture, thus further othering queer residents of Appalachia. Other authors, such as Julia Watts, Karen Salyer McElmurray, and Lisa Alther, reveal the complexities of “Love of Place” for queer Appalachians, and make visible the complications and darker undercurrents of rural and urban Appalachian spaces. Finally, the chapter also explores, especially in the poetry of Jeff Mann and of doris davenport, the Appalachian landscape’s embodiment of not only the beauty but also the vulnerabilities of the physical body. In fact, davenport’s role as a performance poet makes her work particularly challenging to analyze on the page: the presence of davenport’s physical body and her vocal delivery of the poetry are crucial, she has argued, for the appropriate “reading” of her work.³⁵ (The appendix includes links to videos of a few of davenport’s readings and performances.)

Although these authors celebrate the beauty and pleasures of the physical world—the joys inherent in our homes, homeplaces, and bodies—they also seek transcendence of that world, rising above it through images of flight and symbolically conquering it through eating. Chapter 6, “Flight and Food: Transcending Life and Death in LGBTQ Appalachian Literature,” examines the ways these authors move beyond the limitations of the material world. Both food and flight—including images of birds and other winged creatures—have deep symbolic ties to the transcendence of life’s perils: freedom from enslavement, freedom from famine, freedom from death. McElmurray, through the winged things in *Strange*

Birds, and Alther, through the motherless birds in *Kinflicks*, explore our mutual yearning to rise above the boredom, pain, and struggle that yoke us to our physical existence. Others of these authors—especially Mann, Watts, and Johnson—explore the transcendence available through not flight but food, including Johnson’s illustration, in *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, of the way that food helps us overcome the strictures of what can and cannot be spoken. Throughout, these authors explore the permeable boundaries between body and spirit, between this world and the next, and remind us of the pleasures and hazards inherent in all that makes us human.