Finding a Rural Trans South:

Queer Migration and Belonging in Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* (2016)

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Abstract

Meredith Russo's 2016 young adult novel *If I Was Your Girl* follows the story of Amanda Hardy, a recently transitioned 19-year-old, fleeing suburban Atlanta to live with her estranged father in rural Lambertville, Tennessee, an apocryphal space somewhere in the Appalachian foothills along Interstate 75. Twentieth- and twenty-first century queer narratives and historiographies tend to depict migrations towards urban centers, but Russo's novel envisions the opposite: a trans girl seeks anonymity in a conservative rural space where she is unknown so that she can pass as trans and live as a "normal" girl, not a queer person. This essay analyzes the different ways that Russo's novel engages with narratives of queer migration for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals while also offering a revision to that narrative for a trans person seeking to fit into cisgender and heteronormative social settings, not fleeing them for queer urban space.

Keywords

Gay and Lesbian; LGBTQ+; Queer Ruralism; Southern Literature; Transgender; US South; Young Adult.

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At the beginning of Meredith Russo's 2016 young adult (YA) novel *If I Was Your Girl*, the protagonist Amanda Hardy seems to be going in the wrong direction. Readers first meet her on a bus headed north from Smyrna, Georgia, part of the sprawl of the greater Atlanta metropolitan area, towards rural Lambertville, Tennessee. She is a senior in high school and already nineteen, whereas most incoming high-school seniors are eighteen. She is traveling to live with her father, whom she has not seen in the six years since her parents divorced.

Smyrna (and Atlanta) are real locations on a map; as is Knoxville, the destination for a young man who talks to—and flirts with—Amanda. She, however, is headed to a fictional place in the equally fictional "Hecate County," a kind of Yoknapatawpha—William Faulkner's invented Mississippian county—hidden in the hills outside of Chattanooga, part of the southern Appalachian foothills where Russo also grew up. "As the suburban sprawl of Atlanta disappeared beyond me," Amanda narrates, "I tapped my foot on the floor and chewed a lock of my newly long hair" (Russo 1). She insists that "something had to change. Because I had changed" (1), at which point the narrative flashes back to a recent incident at a mall in Smyrna. A classmate had recognized her in a changing room and screamed. That classmate's father charged in and body-slammed Amanda, leaving her with a black eye, which her fellow traveler asks her about. When Amanda is reluctant to answer, he asks, "[w]as it your boyfriend?" (2). Amanda's face flushes. This stranger on a bus has "assumed I was a girl" (2).

Amanda's "change" is her transition. She is trans and is fleeing anti-trans violence in the suburban space where she began her transition. Her "newly long hair" signifies her transition to a new person in search of a place to be herself, but despite how much her body has changed, she is still recognizable in her suburban hometown. She is leaving Atlanta to find space to be "Amanda," not "Andrew," her deadname that she also provides early in the novel during a flashback to a suicide attempt that led her to confess to a counselor, "I should have been a girl" (Russo 11), a repetition of the six words she also wrote on a questionnaire after her hospital admission for an overdose on her mother's pain medication. If these past experiences haunt her, in this scene on the bus, that past, at least briefly, disappears. A stranger who does not know her creates a story about her black eye: not that it was the result of anti-trans violence but a too-familiar result of heteronormative domestic violence. Amanda looks like a young girl trying to get away from an abusive man. Unfortunately, the bus is a liminal space between a life she is fleeing and a new life in a rural space that would not, traditionally, seem conducive to the flourishing of queer, much less trans, lives; yet, in this moment, Amanda exists as the girl she knows herself to be.

This essay assesses Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* as a powerful retelling of trans narratives, especially in non-urban spaces where queer identities are often proscribed as other and equally as often queer people are presented as on the move towards somewhere else. When we first meet Amanda, she is on the move, seeking a new start in a new environment, but unlike stories of urban queer migrations to the safe spaces of large cities, Amanda is headed to a small, bucolic, conservative mountain town. She does not originally intend this move to be permanent but only a temporary arrangement due to her recent victimization in Smyrna, where even after having transitioned, she is already known. As Amanda narrates, "I had come to Lambertville with a plan: I would keep my head down and keep quiet. I would graduate. I would go to a college as far from the South as I could. I would live" (17). From this premise, the novel confronts a number of queer myths: that out trans people cannot find safety in rural spaces, such as the apocryphal smalltown of Lambertville; that being "stealth" (or blending in, or passing, which are other terms used to describe a trans person who goes undetected as trans) is preferred for survival; that trans survival is itself far from a foregone conclusion; and that the US South is a repository for the worst possible outcomes for trans lives. Ultimately, Amanda, who seeks recognition as a girl in a binary gender system, will see beyond these myths, at least to a point. While her story offers an alternative narrative for trans inclusion, it simultaneously reasserts the exclusion of other queer lives (specifically bisexual people, gay men, and lesbians) from rural spaces. In the process, the novel crafts a counterpoint to the well-documented murder of Brandon Teena in rural Falls City, Nebraska in 1993, while also taking aim at the more regionally specific canon of Southern literature to establish a new sense of who belongs—and who can belong—in the rural South.

Historiographies of Queer Urban Migration

The myth that rural space is antithetical to queer existence saturates LGBTQ+ historiography. The core of this myth begins with an individual in a rural or semi-rural environment who feels outside of the hetero- and cis-normative expectations of US life. Their sense of difference emerges almost phenomenologically as a tension against what Adrienne Rich once called compulsory heterosexuality. They seek access to a bigger life where they can find others like themselves, so they dream of, and then eventually move to, cities known for having visible queer populations—New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans—and maybe even to so-called gayborhoods, or recognizable enclaves of queer community—Greenwich Village, the Castro, the Vieux Carré. That queer person, marked by an outsider status related in some way to sexuality and/or gender, moves towards a city where they encounter varieties of queer life that refine into the numerous identities grouped into the contemporary nomenclatures: LGBT, LGBTQ, and LGBTQIA+.

The urban trajectory of queer life, tied to the historical rise in visible queer cultures, is most succinctly summarized in John D'Emilio's seminal 1983 essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity," at least to the extent that *queer* primarily denotes sexual orientations. D'Emilio argues that capital labor markets led to an opening up of opportunities away from a colonial and early nineteenth-century rural farm economy. Over time, American society moved towards a modern urban economy that replaced the centrality of the family and its necessary repetition to guarantee labor for financial survival. In these urbanized communities, individuals could own their own labor and engage in non-procreative sexual acts as a result. D'Emilio states the following:

> In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created the conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbian and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on sexual identity. ("Capitalism and Gay Identity" 470)

From this premise that capitalism enabled the urbanization that led to the emergence of gay and lesbian communities, he argues against what he calls "the myth of the 'eternal homosexual'" ("Capitalism and Gay Identity" 468) because only after the formation of communities in urban spaces—which he dates to post-World War II in the United States—did same-sex behavior shift to the articulation of an identity. The identity enabled a feedback loop wherein still-rural queer individuals saw themselves as related to these urban communities, which they, in turn, sought out for full self-expression.

D'Emilio's argument about a trajectory of migration for "gay" history ties into larger patterns of urbanization that have defined US social life, including patterns still present for the broader queer (not just "gay") community. From the harsh conditions of colonial farm life in the late seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth centuries, movement towards industrial city life led, by the early twentieth century, to more Americans living in urban centers than in rural settings. Even in the contemporary moment, the friction between a largely white, rural agricultural economy that covers a vast geographic area and the multi-racial, multi-ethnic space of diversified city life with enormous populations sharing relatively small geographic space defines the current red state/blue state political map of the United States. This division, legally ensconced by an antiquated electoral college system that over-represents rural voters in presidential elections and in the United States Senate, buoys the influence of red state (i.e. Republican/conservative) power over national trends in politics. Since 2020, red states with outsized conservative political power have passed extraordinary restrictions on trans people. By early 2023, restrictions on gender-affirming care for minors in states such as Florida and Arkansas have even led to stories of families leaving those states to seek out states like Minnesota and Washington that openly offer trans sanctuary.

Notably, D'Emilio's 1983 essay does not attend to trans and non-binary communities, only to "gay identity," as reflected in its title, even as contemporary trends seem to mirror the pattern his work proposed. In a 2009 interview published in *The International Socialist Review*, D'Emilio attempted to consider trans identities in the context of his original argument:

> It seems to me that the emergence in the last half century or so of transgender as an identity articulated by a social group depends on something different. It's more closely connected to the increasingly porous boundaries that have come to characterize gender roles in post-industrial capitalist societies. In the West, one can find individual transpeople in the past who "passed" successfully. But as long as gender roles were highly polarized and sharply differentiated, as they have been until the last generation or so, openly declaring oneself as a gender crosser brought great trouble and persecution. As the distance between male and female has narrowed, it has become easier for individuals to make those crossings. I say "easier" in the sense of relative to past generations, because it would be hard to claim that being trans is easy.

These comments construct the contemporary rise in trans visibility as an additional outcome of the capitalist forces that led to the creation of gay and lesbian communities and as arising after the migrations during an era of industrial capitalism that gave rise to communities based on queer sexual orientations. Accordingly, the relationship between urban spaces and trans identities proves to be more complicated than the rural-to-urban migratory patterns of gay and lesbian individuals.

In *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, Susan Stryker traces the emergence of trans identities from the nineteenth century without explicit recourse to urbanization. Citing her impression that "[i]n practice, the distinctions between what we now call 'transgender' and 'gay' or 'lesbian' were not always as meaningful [in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] as they have become since" (50), she seeks a history of transgender identity as "a movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place [i.e. assigned gender], rather than a particular destination or mode of transition" (1). She wants to define "*transgender* in its broadest possible way" (1; italics in original), and she does not explicitly link trans identities to broader queer migration patterns. She does, however, share with D'Emilio the sense that modern gay, lesbian, and transgender identities are connected to the politics of visibility for equal rights, even as such political maneuvering ascribes to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would identify as a minoritizing strategy for queer identification. To minoritize queer identities as other or outside of the mainstream inherently implicates the need for distinctively queer social space to ensure one's unfettered access to an identity, a space to learn and grow wherein one's identity is honored and affirmed.

Through the early 2000s, as the United States became increasingly embroiled in the debate over same-sex marriage, a more universalizing sense of gay and lesbian identity emerged in the national consciousness, bolstered by data from the 2010 US Census that tracked the number of self-described same-sex households, despite federal laws restricting the government from recognizing those households as equal to opposite-sex cohabitations. As reported by the Williams Institute at UCLA, significant numbers of same-sex partnerships and shared households were found in former Confederate states in the US South; urban areas may have larger numbers of queer-identified individuals, but individuals identifying as living as same-sex couples were revealed to be prevalent even in rural and red-state geographies. Then, after the Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, a new minoritizing rhetoric seemed to explode into the American consciousness: transgender rights quickly took center stage as a separate fight from the decades-long debate over same-sex marriage equality.

In *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variance*, Jack Halberstam describes this shift:

> In 2015, after functioning for at least half a century as the name for a bodily disgrace and gender absurdity, "transgender" (used as an umbrella term for gender-variant bodies) became a household word. What with debates about bathroom use and regular appearances of transgender people on TV shows and within celebrity culture, the term suddenly circulated widely, and it came to the point where not a day went by without some kind of news story on transgender people in bathrooms, in the military, in the law, in sports, in school, in fact and fiction and everything in between. Transgender thus became and remains the newest marker of exclusion and pathology to be seamlessly transitioned into a template for acceptance and tolerance. (46)

That "seamless transition" has been, perhaps, less seamless than Halberstam admits. With regard to trans histories before 2015, Halberstam explains that "[u]ntil the middle of the last century, countless transgender men and women fell between the cracks of the classifications systems designed to explain their plight and found themselves stranded in unnamable realms of embodiment" (*Trans** 4). Halberstam's interest in *Trans** is in how this political shift towards minoritizing visibility accounts for the sudden emergence of trans rights in contemporary discourse, but there are additional historical and technological factors at play.

Writing in response to the upswing in draconian laws that attempt to re-subjugate LGBTQ+ lives back to periods in which sodomy and cross-dressing were both legally proscribed, in June 2023 Hugh Ryan constructed a simplified history for *Slate* that connects D'Emilio's urbanization to the emergence of a broad and inclusive contemporary LGBTQ+ community. Ryan summarizes queer history first by drawing on D'Emilio:

> In the 19th century, America went from a country where 8 percent of people lived in cities to one where 40 percent of people lived in cities. In these new American urban meccas, the separations between men and women broke down. People who were "normally" gendered but desired people of the same sex—people who had been rather invisible before—began to find one another in greater and greater numbers, and recognize themselves as a community. Soon, these people would be categorized as their own thing—homosexuals—and any sign of homo*social* behavior, which had been so celebrated before, became an indicator of hidden homosexuality.

He then adds to the history of the formation of "homosexual" communities that "transsexuality and intersexuality" also began to separate from the concept of "inversion," leading to the advent of the "queer" community as understood and articulated with the abbreviation LGBTQ+ today:

> This new L-G-B-T organization of sexuality and gender held true for most of the 20th century, until around about the 1990s, when a second great reorganization began, this time thanks to the internet. Like urbanization, the internet allowed individuals to find one another around less visible and less understood aspects of desire, sexuality, and gender. Like urbanization, the internet changed what ideas we could access and what people we could model ourselves on. Like urbanization, the internet is changing our concept of queerness.

Ryan effectively roots the contemporary proliferation of LGBTQ+ identities and the ever-diversifying acronym used to contain the queer community ("queer" in this instance meaning a coalition of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations) in the history of urban migration, which allows for such visibilities to emerge. His history accepts the premise that queerness stems from (and benefits from) a migration pattern from rural to urban, which implies that even queer identifications in contemporary rural spaces are fundamentally manifestations of urban-based minority identity categorization, the consequence of political efforts to make queerness visible in varied forms.

The problem is that this history still structures queer identities as external to rural space and as only finding annunciation in rural spaces through the interconnectedness of the world wide web; or, to put it another way, first came the chicken (urbanization), then came the egg (the internet). From this perspective, queer individuals are still rare and isolated phenomena when they emerge in rural spaces. According to this logic, they must seek communal connections far from their native ground if they want to find others like themselves.

Narratives of Queer Displacement

One can survey queer fiction from the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to see how the myth of urban migration is operative in queer narratives. Beebo Brinker, the eponymous heroine of Ann Bannon's iconic lesbian pulp novel from 1962, is too uncomfortably mannish even for farm life in Wisconsin, so she moves to Greenwich Village where she encounters a wide variety of lesbian identities. Michael "Mouse" Tolliver, one of the ensemble cast of Armistead Maupin's celebrated *Tales of the City* series (1978-2014), flees the orange groves of his upbringing near Orlando, Florida for the decadent bohemia of San Francisco, where he can bar hop until he finds just the right kind of gay man for his tastes on any given night (notably, in the seventh installment in the series, *Michael Tolliver Lives*, from 2007, Mouse returns to Florida with his husband and encounters a thriving gay community there that did not seem to exist when he escaped to California in the 1970s). Dorian Greene, a minor character from John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), keeps an agreeable distance from his family in Nebraska by hosting lavish parties in his adopted New Orleans, paid for with the promise he will not return home.

Even up to the present moment, the mystique of the migration narrative holds. Writing in early June 2023, the Mississippi-based social commentator Jesse Yancy published on his blog a celebration of stories like Dorian's, in this case to honor the start of Pride month. Yancy recounts how Ignatius Reilly and his mother, Irene, have stepped into a bar in the French Quarter, where Irene notices a foppish man in a stylish jacket. When she comments on it, Dorian responds, “I don’t mind telling you it cost a fortune. I found it in a dear little shop in the Village” (Kennedy). Seeing in Dorian far too urbane a character to be from “the village” or any other provincial place, Irene replies, “[y]ou don’t look like you are from the country” (Kennedy). He corrects her, “I meant Greenwich Village in New York, sweetie,” then compliments her hat (Kennedy). The humor of the exchange stems from the idea that certain modes of queer identity could not possibly be from “the village,” but only from “the Village,” though later we find out that Dorian is not from a village but “out there in the wheat” in Nebraska, which he describes as follows: “I can’t tell you how depressing it all was. Grant Wood romanticized it, if anything. Went East for college and then came here. Oh, New Orleans is such freedom” (Kennedy). Yancy specifically quotes from this exchange to praise that freedom, commenting that “[y]es, Dorian found freedom in beautiful, decadent New Orleans, as have so many thousands of gays from the hinterlands.” That freedom is, however, bankrolled by Dorian’s family, who apparently pay him not to come home. Notably, many queer urban migration narratives from the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are predominantly white and focus on middle-class protagonists who are usually less self-aware than Dorian of their privilege.

The fundamental sense of non-urban space being anti-queer carries into recent twenty-first century narratives, too. Two YA novels by Becky Albertalli, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) and *Leah on the Offbeat* (2018), narrate gay and bisexual experiences for high school-aged students in the same suburban Atlanta sprawl that Russo has her protagonist, Amanda, flee. Albertalli creates her own fictional space—Shady Creek—and with rare exceptions does not name specific locations in the greater Atlanta metropolitan area. Simon Spier comes from an upper-middle-class, two-parent home and has an older sister away at a private college in the northeast as well as a younger sister who secretly practices with her rock band; Leah Burke lives in the same wealthy, mostly white suburb but is from a one-parent home (her mother is divorced) and feels very class-conscious about her mother’s working-class status.

Simon, a nerdy but nonetheless popular kid with a strong friend group, clearly expresses his understanding that his being gay will not lead to his parents disowning him, nor any family tension for that matter, but he fears coming out partially because he knows that to do so will change how people relate to him. He fears the minoritizing capacity of a non-heteronormative identity because he wants to maintain his status as just a “normal” high school kid until he leaves for college. He intends, of course, to attend NYU. He also fears his location, even in the suburbs. He explains this fear in one of his many internal monologues about coming out as gay:

> Maybe it would be different if we lived in New York, but I don’t know

> how to be gay in Georgia. We're right outside of Atlanta, so I know it could be worse. But Shady Creek isn't exactly a progressive paradise. At school, there are one or two guys who are out, and people definitely give them crap. Not like violent crap. But the word "fag" isn't exactly uncommon. And I guess there are a few lesbians and bisexual girls, but I think it's different for girls. Maybe it's easier. (Albertalli, *Simon* 21)

His presumptions about the experience of queerness for women-identified individuals aside, his comments about his suburban space structure it as a middle-ground between the frightening conservative rural areas surrounding Atlanta and the progressive, accepting urban space within its city limits. When he is outed via social media, he does encounter significant bullying—always with words, never physical assaults—which demonstrate to him that his school's "zero tolerance bullying policy is enforced about as strictly as the freaking dress code" (Albertalli, *Simon* 191), which is to say that it is not enforced at all beyond moral support from teachers and friends. Despite his privilege, being identified as gay makes him stand out and makes his life more difficult.

Russo addresses the same sense of non-belonging for students presumed to be gay, only in the rural space of Lambertville the bullying that Simon mentions in passing is amplified to deadly ends. When Amanda arrives at her new school, she is read as a cisgender woman whose looks appeal immediately to two guys, Parker and Grant. Grant originally tries to play wingman for his friend Parker and hits on Amanda on Parker's behalf before falling for her himself. After a house party later in her first weeks in Lambertville, Amanda finds on the mantel above the fireplace photos of Grant and another boy, Tommy, whom she has not encountered yet in town or at school. When Amanda asks who this person is, one of her new friends, Layla, answers, "[s]ome kid Grant new back in the day [. . .] They were pretty inseparable, I remember" (Russo 57). Anna, the religious member of the friend group, recalls that Tommy's family went to her church, but she did not befriend Tommy, explaining, "[h]e always seemed really sad, but my parents wouldn't let me talk to him. Bad influence" (58). Layla interjects that she heard Tommy was really sick, "like terminal" (58), forcing his family to move away. Parker then jokes, "[y]ou talking about Tommy? Grant's little gay boyfriend? [. . .] I heard his mom went full psycho, killed the dad and little Tom-Tom with a shotgun" (58). At this point, Grant tells everyone to stop talking about it.

Later, Amanda follows Grant out of the party and to a quiet place by a lake in the woods. Alone together, Grant reveals that "[t]his was Tommy's old hideway [. . .] We used to come out here, when his folks fought or when somebody screwed with him at school" (Russo 68). Recognizing Grant's reluctance to say the rest, Amanda asks him what happened to Tommy. All Grant can say aloud is "[h]e died," but when Amanda asks if he committed suicide or was killed by someone else, Grant declares, "If people drive you to something [. . .] then it's their responsibility" (68). Grant may blame Tommy's suicide on others, but in the context of rural Lambertville, the implication is that the perception of being gay will lead to bullying and ostracism that makes life untenable. Without an option for geographic relocation, the other option for escape is self-harm.

Amanda is mortified by Tommy's story, but she also realizes that Grant, though a jock and friends with guys like Parker, is not a bully. He was willing to be Tommy's friend, for which he is still teased despite that teasing having pushed Tommy to take his own life. Such a rejection of male homosexuality lands hard on Amanda, not least because at no point does the novel confirm whether Tommy was gay or just perceived to be. Amanda, in finding herself falling for Grant, begins to worry about her own secret, though she also emphatically denies that she is homosexual. She may be a trans woman, but her sexual orientation is heterosexual. She is a woman who wants to love and be loved by a man, even if she cannot have children of her own with him.

This sense of her trans identity is addressed explicitly in the novel and in deleted chapters from its original draft that are included in the reader's guide materials at the back of the paperback edition of the book. In a flashback to three years prior to the main story, Amanda recalls her first appointment with a psychologist after her own suicide attempt. The doctor asks her, "[w]hen you wrote 'I should have been a girl,' did you mean that you're afraid to come out as gay, or embarrassed that you want to wear women's clothes?" (Russo 30). Neither, it turns out, as Amanda explains, "I don't think God actually cares about that kind of thing, and I think I could deal with just being gay or whatever. It feels wrong that I'm a boy, though" (30). She even explains that having a man love her as a boy or man terrifies her. She is a woman and needs people, including intimate partners, to relate to her as one. Also, in another "Deleted Scene," Amanda recounts her experience four years prior to arriving in Lambertville when, after being harassed at school for the perception that she was a gay boy, she found herself in a secret relationship with Jamie, the captain of the football team. That relationship did not work out because Amanda knew that Jamie, a closeted homosexual, wanted her as a boy, not as a girl. Her desire was for cisgender heteronormativity, not queer coming out. Notably, Jamie warns her about coming out as gay: "Then when you actually announce to the world that you're a fairy they'll upgrade from beating the shit out of you to trying to kill you" (294). As with Simon's concerns in Albertalli's novel and Tommy's experiences in Lambertville, such comments implicate that a great deal of fear and the threat of violence looms over being openly, identifiably gay outside of progressive urban areas.

The specter of violence does not hang so heavily over the women-identified queer characters, though both Chloe, a lesbian, and Bee, her bisexual ex, struggle in rural Lambertville. Amanda first befriends Bee when they are put together in an art class that has no teacher so, instead, hide out behind the school smoking weed. Very early in their friendship, Bee confesses that she is bisexual and that she and Chloe are secretly dating. Amanda thinks to herself, "I wondered if anyone else knew about Chloe. I doubted it; she was a little masculine, of course, but that didn't necessarily mean anything, and it didn't seem like anyone was out and proud at Lambertville High" (Russo 45). Amanda also recalls seeing Bee and Chloe together at a football game on what she realizes, after Bee's confession, was a date, but their spending time together socially does not otherwise out either Bee or Chloe, whereas Grant's having befriended Tommy leads to teasing even after Tommy's death. Chloe and Bee break up shortly after Bee's confession about their secret relationship because, according to Bee, Chloe was falling in love too quickly (a common stereotype in depictions of lesbian relationships), whereas Bee was only interested in sex (an equally common stereotype of bisexuality).

Chloe later comes out to Amanda when she and Amanda go to a corn maze together at Halloween. Amanda pointedly does not bring up to Chloe that she knows about her and Bee, but Chloe wants to talk about it, lightly cajoling Amanda's reticence about Bee not having joined them: "You really aren't going to ask?" (Russo 149). Once she breaks the seal on her silence—Amanda is the second person, after Bee, to whom Chloe has come out—she explains that she is "not used to talking about it" (149) and adds the following:

> We didn't have the internet or anything on the farm when I was little. It was just me, my parents, my brothers, the animals, and the farmhands. There was no place I could've learned about people like me. I thought I was the only one in the whole world when I was little. (149-50)

When Amanda eventually talks to Bee about the breakup a few days later, Bee does not share Chloe's sense that Lambertville has no other queers. In fact, Bee insists such assumptions are a statistical impossibility:

> So there's about seven thousand, four hundred people in Lambertville, and queer people represent about ten percent of the population. That's, what, seven hundred and forty people right there. Let's assume women are an even half of that, and you can assume there are three hundred ninety bisexual or lesbian women in this town. (163-64)

Amanda thinks “[t]hat seems high,” but Bee declares that the only reason her calculation “seems high [is] because queer people in the South are addicted to the closet” (164). Neither Bee nor Chloe cites fears of anti-queer violence for the basis of their assumptions, even as their perspectives are at odds: Chloe thinks her being queer is rare; Bee thinks queer people are common but just hiding their identities. Bee also presumes that half of her ten-percent calculation are bisexual and lesbian women. Does she mean the other half are bisexual and gay men? Or do her statistics include the possibility of trans identities?

The answer to the latter question seems to be no. Bee’s comments prompt Amanda to come out to her as “transsexual,” though Amanda also tells Bee that the better term is “trans people” after Bee clumsily uses the word “transgendered” (Russo 168). Bee admits her surprise: “I’ve never met anybody like you,” to which Amanda responds, “[m]ost people haven’t [. . .] or at least they don’t know they have” (168). Amanda constructs a different kind of closet with her response. Bee believes gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are afraid to come out but do exist, even in towns like Lambertville, in relatively high numbers. Amanda implies that trans people like her may very well be truly rare, but they also may simply prefer not to be identifiable as trans. Like Amanda, they may blend in as cisgender, since recognizable queerness is the opposite of their goal.

Amanda then goes so far as to introduce Bee to her trans mentor, Virginia, who stops in Lambertville on her way back to Atlanta from Knoxville. The three even go to a gay bar together in Chattanooga, though the novel shows them on the road leaving Lambertville before flashing forward to the next morning with no commentary at all about their adventures at the bar itself. However, something has gone awry. At their next encounter, Bee is angry at Amanda because, despite whatever queer kinship they may have felt leaving Lambertville and going to a gay bar together, Amanda clearly fits in with the popular kids at school. She is, according to Bee, “gorgeous,” whereas Bee believes herself to be overweight and unattractive (Russo 169). Bee’s animosity boils over at homecoming when she drunkenly makes a scene while Amanda is being announced as homecoming queen. Bee yells at Amanda that “[y]ou’ve convinced yourself and everybody else that you’re this perfect, demure girl next door when you could be so much more” (219). Then Bee takes the stage to out Chloe as a lesbian and Amanda as trans, loudly proclaiming the following:

> Look at our beautiful homecoming queen. Ain’t she sweet? Ain’t she beautiful? She’s livin’ the dream, right? I bet a lot of you guys’ve thought about her in the shower. Smart, pretty, but not pushy or intimidating . . .

> she's everything this fucked-up place wants a girl to be [. . .] But guys, guess what: She's a *he*! (222)

Realizing the danger Bee has exposed her to, Amanda rushes away from the dance and, inadvertently, towards a violent encounter with Parker, enraged that he had been attracted to Amanda while unaware that she is trans.

Bee's anger seems to stem from her sense that fitting in is not a desirable option for queer people, who by their nature should escape the conventions and provincialism of small towns like Lambertville. Thus, she outs Chloe and Amanda to force them to be seen as queer. That outing exposes Amanda to violence. The fact that Russo chose to have a bisexual character be the voice for this kind of queer rage plays to negative stereotypes of bisexuality as deceptive and bisexual people as untrustworthy. Russo's depiction of bisexuality is problematic; her focus is trans identity, and, generally, her depictions of gay, lesbian, and bi characters can seem ungenerous to readers seeking affirming representations of LGB identities. In this regard, Russo's novel serves as a reminder that using the term queer to signify a unified or interwoven coalition (or community) of LGBTQ+ people may be more politically aspirational than grounded in actual experiences from LGBTQ+ lives.

A more nuanced depiction of bisexuality is Becky Albertalli's *Leah on the Offbeat*, which, as mentioned earlier, is set in the same suburban Atlanta sprawl where Amanda's story begins. Leah Burke has the same body-positivity issues as Bee from *If I Was Your Girl*. Leah also exhibits frustrations with Simon's seemingly perfect coming-out experience as well as jealousy for his relationship with Bram Greenfield, who comes out alongside Simon and remains Simon's doting boyfriend a year after the events of *Simon v. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. Leah's path to coming out as bisexual also has to go through Abby, Leah's crush who is dating their mutual friend Nick. However, Abby admits to Leah that she is also bisexual, which leads to discussions in the novel about the differing ways to be bisexual (Leah cannot believe Abby is bisexual because she seems so perfect and pretty and has an adoring boyfriend). Nonetheless, Leah does not out others to express her frustrations, nor does she flee suburban Atlanta for the east coast, as Simon and Bram will for college. She can only afford to attend the University of Georgia in nearby Athens, about an hour from home. She and Abby begin a relationship and become roommates. Her story ends happily even as she stays in the South, albeit in a trendy college town and coming from the suburbs. The more rural environment of Lambertville apparently does not offer Bee such possibilities.

Geographies of Trans Lives

Only rarely do positively portrayed trans characters appear in twentieth-century fiction. The most notable, Anna Madrigal from *Tales of the City*, follows the rural to urban migration paradigm: she grew up in a brothel in rural Winnemucca, Nevada, before migrating to San Francisco with a detour to Denmark for her surgical transition. She is also proudly a "garden variety landlady" (Maupin, *Tales* 69) without an ostensible past in the first novel in the series, wherein there are many hints at her secret trans identity even though it is not openly revealed. She seems to want to come from nowhere and have no history. The major hints in the novel stem mostly from interactions with a private detective hired to find out who she really is.

The twenty-first century has seen a proliferation of trans narratives, many of which engage with the myth of urban queer migration in their own ways. The gender-shifting protagonist from Andrea Lawlor's *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (2017) lives in Iowa City, a major college town known for its liberality, although still ensconced in conservative Midwestern farm country, but she moves to coastal cities and otherwise never inhabits truly rural spaces outside of bastions of acceptance with visible queer communities (camping at a lesbian music festival, staying with a partner in Providence, Rhode Island). Her ability literally to morph from one gender to the other at will allows her to enter gay and lesbian spaces, though she rarely enters explicitly trans spaces. Both Reese and Ames (Amy/James) from Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* (2021) grew up in the suburbs of Madison, Wisconsin, Ames as a star baseball player who preferred to cross-dress, Reese idolizing soccer moms whose lives she envied. Both move to New York, the main setting for the novel save for flashbacks to their places of origin to which neither wishes to return. Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) reverses this typical spatial trajectory. Maria Griffiths moves from New York to rural Nevada after a break-up to restart her life. Once there, she notices James Hanson, whom Maria recognizes as trans even as James has not realized it yet himself. Binnie's novel makes literal the idea of queer identities in urban spaces creating opportunities for LGBTQ+ identities to emerge in non-urban places. James does not encounter the word trans in an online forum; he encounters an actual trans person relocating to Star City to promote his own coming out.

Most critical works in trans studies engage with trans identities through the lens of intersectionality, not geography—trans studies scholars have traditionally been more invested in how, say, race impacts gender identity and expression, not where trans people live nor what migration patterns, if any, they might follow. Nonetheless, implicit geographies of trans lives do surface. In *Transgender History*, Stryker discusses the Stonewall Uprising in New York City in 1969 but also lesser-known riots, led mainly by trans people, in Philadelphia, San Francisco, and other urban centers with trans populations. This history is set into narrative motion in such films as

Roland Emmerich's much-maligned 2015 *Stonewall*, where a dreamy, blonde, all-American white teenager from the rural heartland arrives in New York after being thrown out by his parents. Boringly cisgender, he encounters in New York a vibrant, multi-ethnic group of drag queens and cross-dressing sex workers. The implications are that queerness which emerges from rural spaces is fundamentally cis-normative whereas trans and non-binary queer expressions are strictly urban. Season one of *Pose*, a 2018 television series that fictionalized elements from the 1991 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, offers a Black version of the same trajectory. Damon, a gay male from the rust belt in Pennsylvania, is thrown out of his house when his parents discover that his effeminacy is part of his closeted gay identity. In New York, he is taken in by Blanca in her newly formed "House of Evangelista" where Damon meets a multi-ethnic group of drag performers and trans women, all of whom have backstories firmly rooted in the five boroughs.

Stryker also discusses Virginia Price, a pre-Stonewall trans activist who founded the magazine *Transvestia*, which circulated through the mail to a variety of individuals spread across the United States. As with the internet allowing queer individuals in rural environments to access information on queer identities away from urban centers, the circulation of Price's magazine suggests that trans individuals live in the hinterlands, not just in urban centers, even as their histories remain otherwise invisible. Amanda's trans mentor, whom she meets at a support group in Atlanta, is named Virginia, a nod to the real Virginia Price, who is sometimes credited for first coining the term "transgender." The Virginia in the novel comes in person to visit Amanda in Lambertville, but even as Amanda is happy to see her, she insists that Virginia not use "the t-word" and help Amanda stay "stealth" (Russo 176).

C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* focuses primarily on how the categorization of Black bodies during enslavement and after is intimately connected to the formation of trans identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the ways Snorton explores this intersectionality is by discussing newspaper coverage in the 1950s of Black trans individuals in rural Florida and Mississippi whose outings led to coverage in the Black press, often with a sense of awe about these apparitions of non-normative bodies. In *Histories of the Transgender Child*, Julian Gill-Peterson focuses primarily on the medical history of trans surgical procedures, a history often fraught with racial prejudices and efforts to enforce surgical normalization on otherwise non-binary and intersex bodies. To tell this history, Gill-Peterson incidentally reveals a kind of migration wherein individuals experiencing gender dysphoria seek out medical centers, such as Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Maryland, for treatments unavailable in hospitals closer to home. One story that stands out is that of a patient known only as

Bernard, “a textile worker in his late twenties” who, in 1938, “journeyed from Alabama to Baltimore complaining vaguely of a ‘congenital malformation’” (84). Bernard was drawn to the clinic at Johns Hopkins after reading about it in “*Sexology Magazine*, [which] like many other popular sources of information on sex in the 1930s, would have been a productive relay point between the trans reading public and institutional medicine, reaching as remote a location as small-town Alabama” (85). Gill-Peterson is implicitly locating “the trans reading public” in places like “small-town Alabama,” not New York or Los Angeles. Access to “institutional medicine” would, therefore, require at least a temporary migration; it is not explored whether post-surgical trans individuals returned to small towns.

Nearly a century after Bernard’s migration, Samantha Allen went looking for the queer people who stay in their small towns and in conservative areas for her 2019 travelogue *Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States*. Traveling from Utah to Texas, Indiana, Tennessee, and Georgia, she documents a range of queer lives, including those of many trans and non-binary individuals, primarily in college towns and cities but still in states generally considered hostile to openly queer lives. A trans woman herself, Allen seems to be writing directly to Russo when she declares, “[i]f the dominant LGBT narrative of the twentieth century was a gay boy in the country buying a one-way bus ticket to the Big Apple, the untold story of the twenty-first is the queer girl in Tennessee who stays put” (9). This declaration could almost be a description of Amanda Hardy, except Amanda is specifically trans, not generally “queer,” and does not stay put. She actively moves to Tennessee from the hustle and bustle of suburban Smyrna and its proximity to Atlanta’s diversified and openly queer spaces. In Smyrna, she faced violence and felt too known to thrive. Moving in with her father in Lambertville was her best option to escape Smyrna, even as it placed her in a rural setting that, upon her arrival at least, terrifies her until she begins making friends.

The urban-to-rural geography in Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* best engages with Amanda’s motives for her rural migration, particularly in how Halberstam explicates the narratives that emerged concerning the murder of Brandon Teena. However, if Halberstam criticizes how those narratives—specifically the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* and the film *Boys Don’t Cry*—engage in projects of stabilization, rationalization, and trivialization to delegitimize trans identities, Russo reconstructs the trajectory of rural migration to point towards positive, openly trans outcomes. Halberstam does not offer a definition of “transgender” so much as an explanation of how it “proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside of categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition” (*In* *a Queer Time* 48). Amanda Hardy wants to be seen as a woman, despite how often her internal monologue reminds readers that she was assigned male at birth and how hyper-aware she is of her body as an object of the male gaze, though she can never determine whether that gaze is desirous or skeptical. Halberstam continues to argue that "[t]ransgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds" (48). Indeed, Amanda is fully aware of the artificial construction of her gender markers as a woman, but she does not want to be perceived as an effeminate homosexual, like Tommy or other gay-identified individuals visible even in their absence by the specter of violence and the closet. Nor does she want to be perceived as what Halberstam calls a "failed [boy]" (*In A Queer Time* 54). She wants Grant and others to treat her like a "normal" teenage girl, even as she anticipates their discovering her trans identity.

Amanda takes synthetic hormones and is already nineteen, as during what would have been her senior year in Smyrna she was undergoing surgical transition, including bottom and top surgeries. She avoids discussing that missing year and or explaining the gap to any of her friends—Layla, Chloe, Bee, Anna, or Grant—but as her relationship with Grant develops, she feels extraordinary anxiety about his finding out her secret. So, despite her desire to remain stealth, she writes Grant a letter explaining her transition and including her deadname. When she gives it to him, he burns it. He claims that just knowing she was willing to share her past was all that mattered to him, but, as with Bee's insistence she had never met anyone like Amanda (namely a trans person), it is likely that Grant had not imagined Amanda's secret was that she transitioned. As with the unnamed man flirting with Amanda on the bus in the opening scene of the novel, Grant likely envisions a haunted past of bad familial relationships or abusive boyfriends from whom Amanda has fled. His actions put Amanda in a bind. She fears what Imogen Binnie describes in *Nevada* as a trope in trans narratives, especially on television and in film, specifically "that [trans women] are all psychos with big hair who trick straight men into having sex with them. On television. Gross" (18). But if Amanda does not want to be perceived as deceptive, she also wants to be related to as a woman, placing her into the double-bind of presumed duplicitousness into which many non-trans people too readily perceive trans lives.

Possibly the most famous historical example of the negative outcomes associated with trans passing is the story of Brandon Teena. Halberstam details at length in *In a Queer Time and Place* how his story is always already narrativized away from an understanding of Brandon's actual motives to a historiography wherein his body is a site of contestation and debate, even from beyond the grave. Still, Halberstam hypothesizes that Brandon chose to flee urban

Lincoln, Nebraska for the rural Falls City "[to pull] off a credible presentation as male" (*In a Queer Time* 43) because in such settings "[h]is plans were better served by the daily routine of life in a small town where most people lived far apart, asked few questions, and kept their opinions to themselves" (*In a Queer Time* 70). In that setting, Brandon began dating a local girl, Lana Tisdel, only to be discovered as passing while trans by two men who then raped and ultimately murdered him under what appears to be a desire to protect Lana (and Falls City) from Brandon's "deception." On the one hand, Brandon's death seems directly related to him being discovered as trans. On the other hand, gender matters, and John Lotter and Tim Nissen, Brandon's murderers, may have had other motives in maintaining cisgender stability via the erasure of trans life. Halberstam argues heavily for the latter: Brandon's rape, especially as depicted in the film *Boys Don't Cry*, was intended to reinscribe Brandon's womanhood through violence and, thus, re-stabilize the gender categories his discovery disturbed. Their subsequent murder of Brandon may have resulted from their desire to silence Brandon after he reported the rape to the police. The rape, more than the murder, is the site of what Halberstam calls "the project of stabilization" (*In a Queer Time* 54) to erase trans identity (even as it is the murder than ended Brandon's trans life).[1]

Amanda, a trans woman, can partially be read through the lens of the historiography surrounding Brandon's death. Like Brandon, Amanda passes while trans in a rural setting which is presented as antithetical to LGB life, much less trans identity. When Bee outs her, Amanda faces Grant's shock, which she perceives as repulsion. Fearing a possible violent rejection, she flees the homecoming dance on foot where she encounters the real danger: Parker follows her in his truck and attempts to rape her in the woods on the side of the road. As an act of anti-trans violence—Parker punches Amanda hard in the face to subdue her—this moment appears to be the sum of all trans fears of violence, more evidence for why trans people need to stay in populated, relatively queer-friendly urban spaces.

Whereas Halberstam argues that Brandon's rape was intended to reinscribe womanhood on his trans body, Amanda's gender identity alters the relationality between her and Parker in this attempted rape scene. Parker had originally been attracted to Amanda, who started dating Grant instead. Now, he is violently angry at what he considers her deception and insists, "[y]ou made me look like a dickhead for months, and now you don't got Grant to look out for you. You don't get to play hard to get anymore" (Russo 230-31). As he moves to assault her, he adds, "[y]ou coulda had this the easy way. Now, let's see how close you are to the real thing" (231). Parker does not intend to inscribe Amanda's womanhood via sexual violence. Instead, his motives seem to be his closeted homosexuality that has previously emerged in his crude jokes about Tommy. Terrified that his initial attraction is indicative of homosexual desire, he wants to force Amanda into submissive womanhood via male sexual violence to reassert his own masculinity. As with Lotter and Nissen's project of stabilization, wherein they force womanhood on Brandon, Parker wants to stabilize the conditions under which his own masculinity is secure. But the shift from violence directed at a trans-masculine person to violence directed at a trans-feminine person must be taken into account in these otherwise similar stories.

The other alteration in this scene is the outcome. Just as Parker pulls Amanda into the woods, Amanda hears someone saying, "I knew you were a creep," at which point "[a] beam of light landed on us, revealing Chloe's silhouette holding a rifle at Parker's back" (Russo 232). Brandon Teena, as well as two other people, were executed by Lotter and Nissen in Falls City in 1993. In the fictional Lambertville, Amanda's friends come to rescue her. Though they might have been shocked to discover she is trans, they do not feel the repulsion or hate she presumed they did. Even Grant comes to check on Amanda at home later that evening, at which point Amanda's father runs Grant off under the belief that he, not Parker, had attempted to hurt his daughter. His efforts to protect Amanda mark the first time he has treated her not as a son who needs to fight his own battles, but as his daughter who needs a father to make sure boys have honorable intentions.

In response to these events, Amanda contemplates another suicide attempt and seeks shelter back in Smyrna for Thanksgiving with her mom and Virginia. While there, she submits her application to NYU, but after Thanksgiving, she comes back to Lambertville to finish her senior year. She does not know what her future with Grant holds except that they are at least friends if not currently dating. He makes a point of telling her that he has done some research trying to understand "transsexuals," even as he is no surer of their future together than Amanda is. She has other friends in Lambertville as well, Chloe and Layla, who seem willing to continue treating her as one of the girls. The novel concludes with Amanda's determination that "I wasn't sorry I existed anymore. I deserved to live. I deserved to find love. I knew now—I believed, now—that I deserved to be loved" (Russo 273). This realization was enabled by the rural space of Lambertville and her experiences there, because of—not despite—her being visible as trans in that space.

The Southern Canon and the Trans South

Finally, Russo's revision of place in trans narratives does not only engage with other trans and queer texts. She uses *If I Was Your Girl* to make a comment on the relationship of new trans narratives to established canons, in her case the canon of Southern literature represented by key writers of the Southern

Renascence. First, when she attends Grant's football practice, reluctantly fulfilling the role of girlfriend even as she and Grant are not yet officially dating, she buries her head in "my *Catalogue of American Fiction* textbook" (Russo 75). She is reading Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," about which she notes, "I immediately hated the old woman in the story, though it was pretty obvious I was supposed to" (75). Even before the recent surge in bans on LGBTQ+ books in schools, it should go without saying that catalogues of American fiction do not regularly include trans narratives. Russo seems to envision her novel helping to change that.

More movingly, Amanda has a flashback to before her parents' divorce when she, still known as Andrew, wrote a story in school about what she wanted to be when she grew up. The story depicts Andrew driving in a magic car to the future where "he" encounters "his" future self as a successful scientist, who also happens to be a woman. Andrew's teacher encouraged her to show the story to her parents. Excited by the praise, Andrew rushed home to show the story to her father, who, in his own excitement, exclaimed before even reading it, "I bet you'll be the next [William] Faulkner" (62). As her father reads the story, his excitement changes to anger. He frowns and demands Andrew tell him the story is a "joke, right?" (63). When Andrew refuses to agree with his trivialization, her father grabs her arm and insists, "[y]ou need to tell me this was a joke" (63). When Andrew continues to refuse, he coldly explains, "[s]on [. . .] I want you to have a good life. Boys who really think the things in your story are confused. They don't have good lives. So you're not one of those boys" (63). Deeply scarred by the insinuation, Andrew gives in to her father's demands.

Later, as Amanda, she manages to repudiate the incident and the implication that "the next Faulkner" could not be "one of those boys." While waiting for Virginia to arrive for her visit, Amanda sits in an aptly named diner, reading a novel assigned for class. The scene, the opening for chapter 20, reads thus:

> Virginia was late.
>
> I sat at the bar in the Sartoris Diner and read *Absalom, Absalom!* for class, trying to figure out which character disgusted me the most. (174)

Sartoris is the name of the family featured in Faulkner's first Yoknapatawpha novel, *Flags in the Dust* (originally published as *Sartoris* in 1929). The opening pages of that novel introduce the character Aunt Jenny Du Pre: "Jenny" is short for Virginia. The reference adds an additional layer of meaning to Russo's choice of Virginia as the name for Amanda's trans mentor. The name is not only an allusion to an icon of trans history, Virginia Price, but also a nod to the opening scene of Faulkner's first foray into his celebrated creation of a fictional county. Amanda is probably remembering her father's comment about her being the next Faulkner until he realized her story was about being trans. Russo, as a novelist, is clearing the stage for her own story, a trans story, that she is not afraid to put in conversation with the greatest writing from the US South.

If I Was Your Girl engages with a broad range of queer historiographies and narratives, as well as the canon of Southern literature. It participates in discussions embedded in trans studies and advances representations of trans identity in narrative form as part of an emerging genre of explicitly trans literature that is both part of other canons and a canon all its own. As such, it takes its proverbial stand as an important work at a critical juncture in LGBTQ+ history when diverse and complex trans stories need to be told.

Notes

[1] Death is often what erases trans identity, especially as coroners, whether through legal requirement or just prejudicial practice, often re-inscribe birth certificate gender on a trans body on a death certificate and family members often de-trans the bodies of deceased trans loved ones (see, for example, the death of Leelah Alcorn). So it is important to qualify that the rape, in this case, erases trans identity, not the murder as usually it would be the latter when that erasure begins/occurs.

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Biography

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