A Conversation between Contemporary Queer Writers for *AmLit*'s Special Issue on "Queer Ruralisms"

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Biographies

Chris Belcher is a jointly-appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies and the Writing Program at the University of Southern California (USC). In 2016, she completed her PhD in English at USC, where she wrote about class, whiteness, and the queerness of rural America across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since then, under her working name, Natalie West, she edited the acclaimed anthology *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival* (The Feminist Press, 2021). Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *LA Times*, *Catapult*, *BOMB*, *Electric Literature*, *Autostraddle*, *Public Books*, and *them*. She is broadly interested in sexual politics and sexual labor, and the history of feminist thought and activism as it intersects with both. Born and raised in West Virginia, she now lives in Los Angeles. Her debut memoir, *Pretty Baby* (Simon & Schuster/Avid Reader Press, 2022), is a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Memoir.

Carter Sickels is the author of the novel *The Prettiest Star,* published by Hub City Press, and winner of the 2021 Southern Book Prize and the Weatherford Award. *The Prettiest Star* was also selected as a Kirkus Best Book of 2020 and a Best LGBT Book of 2020 by *O Magazine*. His debut novel *The Evening Hour* (Bloomsbury, 2012), an Oregon Book Award finalist and a Lambda Literary Award finalist, was adapted into a feature film that premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. His essays and fiction have appeared in a variety of publications, including *The Atlantic*, *Oxford American*, *Poets & Writers*, *BuzzFeed*, *Joyland*, *Guernica*, *Catapult*, and *Electric Literature*. Carter is the recipient of the 2013 Lambda Literary Emerging Writer Award, and has earned fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and MacDowell. He is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at North Carolina State University.

DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.8

Chris's debut memoir, *Pretty Baby* (2022), begins where she did: in Appalachia. The book moves with her, from her hometown in rural West Virginia to coastal Los Angeles, where she began a career as a professional dominatrix to make ends meet while she earned her PhD. Her memoir is what scholars of queer rural America have called "metronormative," in the sense that it is a narrative of flight: a queer kid leaving rural America for a purportedly freer life in an urban, coastal elsewhere. And yet, the book challenges that narrative as well, showing how the (sex) life she lives in LA echoes many of the lessons in desirability, labor, misogyny, and feminine value that she learned as a teenage girl in Appalachia.

In an opposite trajectory, Carter's second novel, *The Prettiest Star* (2020), follows a young gay man, Brian Jackson, who learns of his seroconversion in the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and returns home to be with his family in his rural Ohio hometown. After living for six years in New York, Brian loses his partner, Shawn, as well as a number of friends, and returns to a family that has experienced HIV/AIDS in the way that many families in rural and middle America did: at a distance (or so they assumed), through media coverage that misled Brian's own father to believe he should be eating off separate plates and hateful campaigns waged behind pulpits, railing against a gay community thought to have lived in sin, and now paying the price. But Brian's homecoming is also punctuated by shimmering moments of compassion and care, and his hometown will be forever changed by his return.

Chris: Thank you for embarking on this conversation with me, Carter. I would like to kick off this dive into both of our "queer ruralisms" with a question about home. My home for over a decade has been Los Angeles, but I grew up in a place that feels like its opposite in almost every way: New Haven, West Virginia, a tiny town of 1,400 nestled into a bend in the Ohio River, near the place where West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio meet. Can you tell me a bit about your "home" now, and where you came from, and how the two relate?

Carter: I grew up in a small rural town in south-central Ohio—mostly pastures and fields, churches, and country roads. We had about seventy students in my high school graduating class. Football reigned and any kind of difference made you a target. It was the 1980s and early 1990s—I didn't know any gay people, certainly no trans people. After college, I moved to New York City for almost a decade, and then spent about six years in Portland, Oregon. Then, in 2015 I accepted a job at Eastern Kentucky University to teach, and a couple of years ago, I moved to Cincinnati. I never thought I'd come back to Ohio, but now I

live just a couple of hours away from where I grew up—sometimes it's very surreal.

I've always felt at home in cities and I've spent much of my adult life in them—the diversity, queer community, access to art, all of it makes me feel alive and safer. But I've also missed the place I came from—not so much the town itself where I grew up, but southeastern Ohio, the Appalachian part of the state, where my grandparents and most of my extended family lived, a place that had always felt like home to me. Those contradictions—feeling stifled and oppressed by a rural place, but also a profound connection—drive my fiction. In my writing I'm trying to shine a light on queerness in rural spaces, to complicate the dominant narratives around rural places and the people who live there.

How do you think growing up in rural West Virginia shaped you as a writer, or can you say more about what it's like now to leave your home in LA and visit West Virginia?

Chris: There's a growing movement of anti-intellectualism in my home state: suspicion about college professors, critical race theory, gender studies, books that might open minds. Of course, I'm seeing this as an outsider now—and the living embodiment of all of those fears! I try to keep up with left-leaning news sources from Appalachia now, in addition to the ways that mainstream journalists paint the region and its people, and while I know, rationally, that there are plenty of folks who challenge this narrative, I've also listened to right-wing talk radio on the long drives I've taken across the state when I've gone home to visit, and I know the hold that those voices have over the people who grew up like I did. The seeds of those suspicions about writers and intellectuals were there when I was younger. Much of that was structural, not as ideological as it seems today. I went to pretty severely under-resourced schools growing up, and there was that mistrust of those who were different, as you mentioned. "Writer" signaled *difference*. While my parents encouraged me to go to college—and I went to a state school in West Virginia where I *was* able to write for the first time and make that central to who I was—it wasn't until adulthood that I felt I was able to fully embrace the creative parts of myself.

As a result of that delay, and this is a product of where I'm from, it took me a long time to see writing as work. I grew up knowing work as something that's done in a hard hat and steel-toed boots, that you leave for with a lunch box, that you clock into and come home tired. It took me a while to see the time I put into writing as valuable and productive. When I go home now, this still makes me feel like an outsider, which I guess was always part of my experience there. But still, I have some kind of guilt, or shame around not

returning, as you have, to be one of those writers like those I met when I went to college, who were absolutely monumental in my formation of self. Despite it, returning is a difficult thing for me.

Speaking of returns, *Entertainment Weekly* has called *The Prettiest Star* a "brutally fresh kind of homecoming novel" (Canfield and Sollosi). Can you talk about the place that your protagonist, Brian, calls home, and why you think he was called to return?

Carter: Brian grew up in a very small town in southeastern Ohio, which is not far from the West Virginia border. It's a beautiful part of the state, replete with rolling hills and forested land, but also quite isolated. Brian came of age in the 1970s and couldn't wait to get out. He made it to New York in 1980 and found the queer and artistic life he'd been dreaming about. He discovered community, freedom, sex, joy. That's not an uncommon story. We all know—and many of us have lived—that story of the queer exodus to cities, these places that have taken us in when our own hometowns and families wouldn't. It wasn't hard for me to imagine why Brian had to leave his small, conservative town, but I also think he felt a deep, inexplicable desire to return to his first home. He returns partly because he's lost his boyfriend and so many friends to AIDS, and he's tired of the ghosts and doesn't want to be in the city. But he also misses the home where he grew up—the woods, the hills, the trees. He also wants to reconcile with his family. He wants to be seen, to be loved by them.

I've always loved homecoming stories, how the best ones dig into the uneasy, contradicting feelings people hold toward home, but I think especially for queer people, the homecoming story is so much more potentially complicated and fraught. For this story, I also wanted to tell a story about the AIDS crisis that looked at rural America and the queer men who returned to the small towns they'd once fled, to the rural communities and families who'd rejected them.

In *Pretty Baby*, you write perceptively and candidly about how difficult it was growing up queer in a rural place. In one scene, after you and your queer friends are run out of a roadside bar, you write, "I wasn't sure if it took a lover or fighter to survive being gay in the country, if you needed to take shit or give it to make it out alive. I did know that whatever it took to stay, I didn't have it. [. . .] I wanted nothing to do with it. I wanted nothing more than a way out" (Belcher 115-16). Can you talk more about how you came into your own queerness in a place that didn't offer many queer models or support, or how maybe the idea of leaving that very place was tied into your queerness?

Chris: I came into my queerness in the ways I think many folks growing up in isolating places do: through pop culture. I was coming of age in the late

1990s, early 2000s, so the portals to queerness that I had available to me were pre-Internet-as-we-know-it and not exactly the best representations, but they mattered a lot to me: MTV's *The Real World*, daytime talk shows like *Jerry Springer*, the few movies I'm sure I'd now find to be highly problematic, like 1992's *Ladybugs* about a boy who dressed up as a girl to play on a failing girls' soccer team, and 1985's *Just One of the Guys*, in which a high-school girl masquerades as a boy to be taken seriously as a high school journalist. These aren't exactly positive queer representations, made by and for queer viewers, but I took what I needed from them. They were lifelines to worlds where people could do gender and sexuality differently than what I saw around me. When I first read José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification—his way of understanding how folks with minoritarian identities exist within majority culture, not always by creating or even accessing subculture and fringe cultures, but by taking mainstream culture and transforming it for themselves—it really resonated with my experiences of queerness growing up (Muñoz). This is why these recent movements to ban books and stifle queer speech and cultural production in many places across the country are terrifying on the one hand, in their movement toward Christofascism, but on the other hand, I know that they can never truly stifle us. The kids and teens who need those portals to queerness will find them, one way or another. We are resilient, even though we shouldn't have to be.

Carter: All of this resonates so much with me. Queers are experts at existing and surviving in that kind of liminal space you talk about—and creating identities and finding representation wherever we can, even when we may not yet have the language or understanding for it. When I was a kid and a teen, there weren't any books with openly queer characters, at least none that I came across. But I remember being obsessed with S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967). I think I found something in that book about tender masculinity and alternative families (there are no parents, just a crew of boys) that spoke to me in ways that I didn't yet understand. Like many queer kids, I learned about the world, and about myself, through books, discovering these possibilities for other ways of living. And now, as you point out, it's no surprise that, tied into all the anti-trans and anti-queer legislation, we're seeing this organized effort by conservatives to ban books, to stifle ideas and free speech. It is terrifying and deeply damaging. But I do believe they'll fail—they can't stop us from thinking or creating, or existing.

Chris: I actually want to dig into those organized efforts to stifle queerness, but first I'd like to talk about the *disorganized* efforts to do the same: the homophobia, racism, and misogyny that were simply in the air I breathed

throughout my early life. I write about it in *Pretty Baby*, and Brian experiences it firsthand in *The Prettiest Star*. It may not seem like it, since that's such a presence in the book, but it was really difficult for me to write about these hard parts of growing up in Appalachia. I felt like I was betraying the place that raised me, or airing dirty laundry, as my grandma would have said. In *The Prettiest Star*, Brian faces extreme forms of homophobia, and fear of HIV/AIDS, when he returns to his rural Ohio hometown. Could you speak a bit about your experiences representing the problems of Appalachia for a readership that might come to your work with negative stereotypes and assumptions of their own about the people who live there?

Carter: I probably struggled more with questions about representing Appalachia, especially around questions of my insider/outsider status, with my debut novel *The Evening Hour* (2012). It's set in the coalfields of West Virginia—where I've never lived—and looks at the opioid epidemic, rural poverty and its ties to extraction companies, homophobia, and violence and intimacy between men. I experienced some anxiety writing and sharing that story, but ultimately I think it's critical that writers don't gloss over or romanticize the more difficult realities. Part of a writer's job is to pay close attention and to bring the reader inside, as close as possible. Intention also matters—to not sensationalize poverty, for example, but write the place and characters with complexity and nuance.

I do hope my books reach a wide cross-section of readers, but I'm especially writing for that queer person who grew up or lives in Appalachia or in another rural place and needs to see their life represented and recognized, who needs to feel seen. With *The Prettiest Star*, it sometimes felt challenging to write about the community and family's homophobia, especially since I was also writing from the point of view of one homophobic character, Brian's mother. I had to step into her shoes, to develop her as a vulnerable and empathetic person, but not justify or excuse her bad behavior. For inspiration, I turned to many of my literary queer influences who write so intimately about their lives or take the readers into these uncomfortable spaces, many of them nonfiction writers: Paul Lisicky, Melissa Febos, James Baldwin. Dorothy Allison, of course, writes about rural queerness and exposes familial homophobia and violent misogyny. She says—and I think of this as the gospel of Dorothy Allison—that you have to tell the hard stories, you have to write what scares the shit out of you.

You also write the hard stories in *Pretty Baby*, and since this is a memoir, you're making yourself even more vulnerable. You're writing about sex work, class, and academia, and about growing up queer in West Virginia and all the shame that came with that. I would love to hear you talk more about how you

negotiated being vulnerable on the page with the work of examining these issues with such clarity and complexity, or can you say more about how you reconciled telling these stories with your fear around "airing dirty laundry?"

Chris: In order to do that thing you describe—to live by the gospel of Dorothy Allison and write what scared the shit out of me—I had to forget about the reader until I finished a draft. I know that probably sounds terrible coming from a writer who feels a responsibility to the often-maligned community she's representing, but I think honesty sometimes requires the quieting of an anticipated response so that you can hear the truth of your own experience. And the truth of my experience doesn't always reflect so well on that community. I've also received emails from some people from my past—like my high-school guidance counselor, some acquaintances from my teenage years—who have told me that they had no idea I was experiencing the kinds of violence I experienced as a teenager, and if they had, they would have done more to stop it. That's a testament to how confined we are to our own perspectives—how we are living in our own stories—and our stories don't represent everyone who moves through them. That makes the question of representation all the more difficult. It has meant a lot to me to receive those emails.

But I think it's crucial if you're going to take on the responsibility of holding a mirror up to your community to depict it for what it is to also hold the same mirror up to yourself. In *Pretty Baby*, I wrote about the ways that I too am implicated in the harms that were done in the place where I grew up. For instance, I wrote about bullying another queer girl in my high school before I came out. It's something I'm ashamed of, but that shame is mine to hold and to reveal if I want to write an honest story. I imagine that representation must get even more complicated when writing fiction, as you don't really have the option to hold that mirror up to yourself.

If you'll allow me to dip into the queer theory archive, *The Prettiest Star* had me thinking a lot about Jack Halberstam's 2005 book *In a Queer Time and Place*, particularly the ways he follows Michel Foucault's "Friendship as a Way of Life" toward the claim that queerness is, primarily, an "alternative temporality" that allows queers to imagine futures according to logics that lie outside of the markers of a heteronormative "good life"—birth, marriage, reproduction, death—a life that Brian's parents expected him to live. Halberstam claims that these alternative temporalities emerged most obviously in cultural productions related to HIV/AIDS. Brian, like other queer men you mention, returned home to the place he once fled, when he knew that he was dying, when that future he could imagine for himself was cut short. Could you speak about the relationship Brian has to both place and *time*, and perhaps how the two intersect?

Carter: Oh, please do dip—and I love that you're bringing Halberstam into the conversation. His work was formative for me, especially that book, in which he also writes about the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and trans embodiment in rural spaces.

My character Brian lived in that alternative temporality in New York, living a queer life outside of those heteronormative markers you mention. It was a time of love, sex, community, and art—and he was living and envisioning a future for himself, which is cut short by AIDS, as it was for so many queer men and for the larger queer community. Brian goes back to his small town, very much a heteronormative space, but that space is ruptured—expanded—when Brian's best friend Annie, a queer woman, comes from New York to help take care of him. There is also a gay man, Andrew, who never left the area and joins their little group, and they're carrying each other through. Brian builds a community of caretakers, which also includes some members of his biological family.

As I'm thinking about how this intersects with time, I'll turn back to Halberstam, who says about the effect of AIDS on temporality, "The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now" (2). When he's home, Brian uses a video camera to record himself, and his chapters are constructed as video diaries. He knows he's dying—there is that terrible clock—but at the same time, he emphasizes the present. In these videos, he's speaking to the viewer—the reader—in present tense. Sometimes he's talking about his boyfriend, his memories of New York, while he's in the space of his childhood home, which was where he first began to recognize his queerness. Maybe this is one way that he's able to hold onto that queer temporality and also queer the home?

Chris: When I was younger, and I'm guessing it was similar for you, as you mentioned *Boys Don't Cry*, queerness and rural America were decidedly marked by tragedy: the killings of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard were at the center of a story about rural America as a hostile place for queers, and those queers who didn't or couldn't leave the country were presumed, by many, to lead lives of sadness and danger. I feel like there was a moment, perhaps in a post-hate crimes legislation, pre-Trump America, when it felt right to challenge those narratives and reclaim the country for queers. I felt some of that when I read *The Prettiest Star*, particularly in that community of care that rose up around Brian, to hold him upon his return to southern Ohio. Do you think, given all the anti-trans and "don't say gay" legislation that's sweeping conservative state legislatures, that that time is over? That it's more difficult to imagine communities of care rising up within and around queer

folks in rural America today?

Carter: I hope it's not over. I think we always need to challenge the reductive narrative that queers living in rural areas are doomed, and, at the same time, we can't look away from the horror we're witnessing right now—the fascist, anti-trans legislation in Republican-led states and the intense transphobia that's being spewed regularly, not only on Fox and all over social media, but in editorials in the *New York Times*.

I think this also comes back to this issue of representation and the need to tell more queer and rural stories. When I was kid, I remember watching this episode of *Oprah* about Mike Sisco, a gay, HIV-positive man who was kicked out of the swimming pool in a town in West Virginia, and this was one of the seeds for writing *The Prettiest Star*. I remember the shame I felt watching the episode—everyone in the audience viewed him as a monster and didn't care that he was sick, and some of them wanted him to die. I was learning that to be queer was to die young, or to live a lonely life in which you were shunned by family members or your community. But, now, looking back, I also think this episode stuck with me for another reason—it was the first time I'd ever seen a gay man who lived in a town like mine, who wasn't wealthy or living in a city, on television. He went on the *Oprah* show, with his sisters sitting next to him in support, in front of millions of people, to declare that, as a gay man with AIDS, his life had value.

I was in my early twenties when Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena were murdered, and those stories reiterated the narrative that so many of us already knew, that to be queer in a rural place could only end in a violent death. I remember going to see *Boys Don't Cry* when I was living in New York, years before I came out as trans, and how the film undid me. I felt this mix of dread but also a kind of excitement because it was the first time I'd ever seen a trans-masc character on the screen, someone who looked like me or who I wanted to look like. But at the same time, it was horrific—another story about what happens to trans and queer people, especially if you're in rural America.

I think most queer and trans people are experiencing this intense undercurrent of fear and anxiety right now: what is next? Especially if you're living in a red state. But that's why I think it's so important to keep telling these stories. Queer and trans people have always been in rural places—with all different levels of visibility and hiddenness—and often living full lives, creating homes and communities and families and collective spaces. And, in response to this onslaught of transphobia, there is major resistance all across rural America. I'd love for more LGBTQ+ organizations and communities in more liberal states or cities to understand this, and offer more help and resources to the queer and trans activists living in rural America who are fighting every

day. For people interested in learning more about queer and rural existence, please check out the work of my friend Rae Garringer—they started the oral history project Country Queers almost a decade ago. It's now a fantastic podcast that gives a much-needed platform to queer and trans people living in rural America.

Chris: I agree—those of us who have the privilege to tell our stories, we have a responsibility to counter the narratives that queer kids everywhere, but especially in Red states, are hearing about themselves in the media and, I'm sure, in their schools and churches, and even their own families. When I was coming out, the gay marriage debate was being waged all around me, and I'll be forever marked by the adults in my life talking about my civil rights—my right to love and be loved in the same way as those around me—as if I weren't right there, absorbing all of it. Every time an anti-trans bill passes, my heart breaks for the queer and trans kids, especially in rural America where they have fewer allies and resources, who must understand, like I did then, that the elimination of trans people is understood by many in this country to be a desirable outcome of their politics, that the suppression of trans lives is at very least a political strategy, that there are those who would rather see them die than help them live. What else are we to do but tell our stories, to show those kids that we are out here living, and they will live too.

My hope is that, despite the efforts on the right to suppress queerness and transness in public life, kids will find oral histories like Country Queers, now that these kinds of projects have moved out of academic libraries and into the podcast sphere. I'm heartened by the thought that if I was able to drive a few towns over, rent gay movies from Blockbuster, and watch them with the volume low at midnight when my parents were sleeping, that queer kids today can access these kinds of stories on their phones, with their headphones on. The mission of the Country Queers project is to decrease isolation by pushing back against the notion that the only way for queer people to find happiness is to flee for a city. And to tell a diverse set of stories about small-town queer life, across race, class, age, ability, gender identity, and religion. I could have used that as a kid, and I'm grateful to those creatives who make these stories available for rural queer kids today.

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