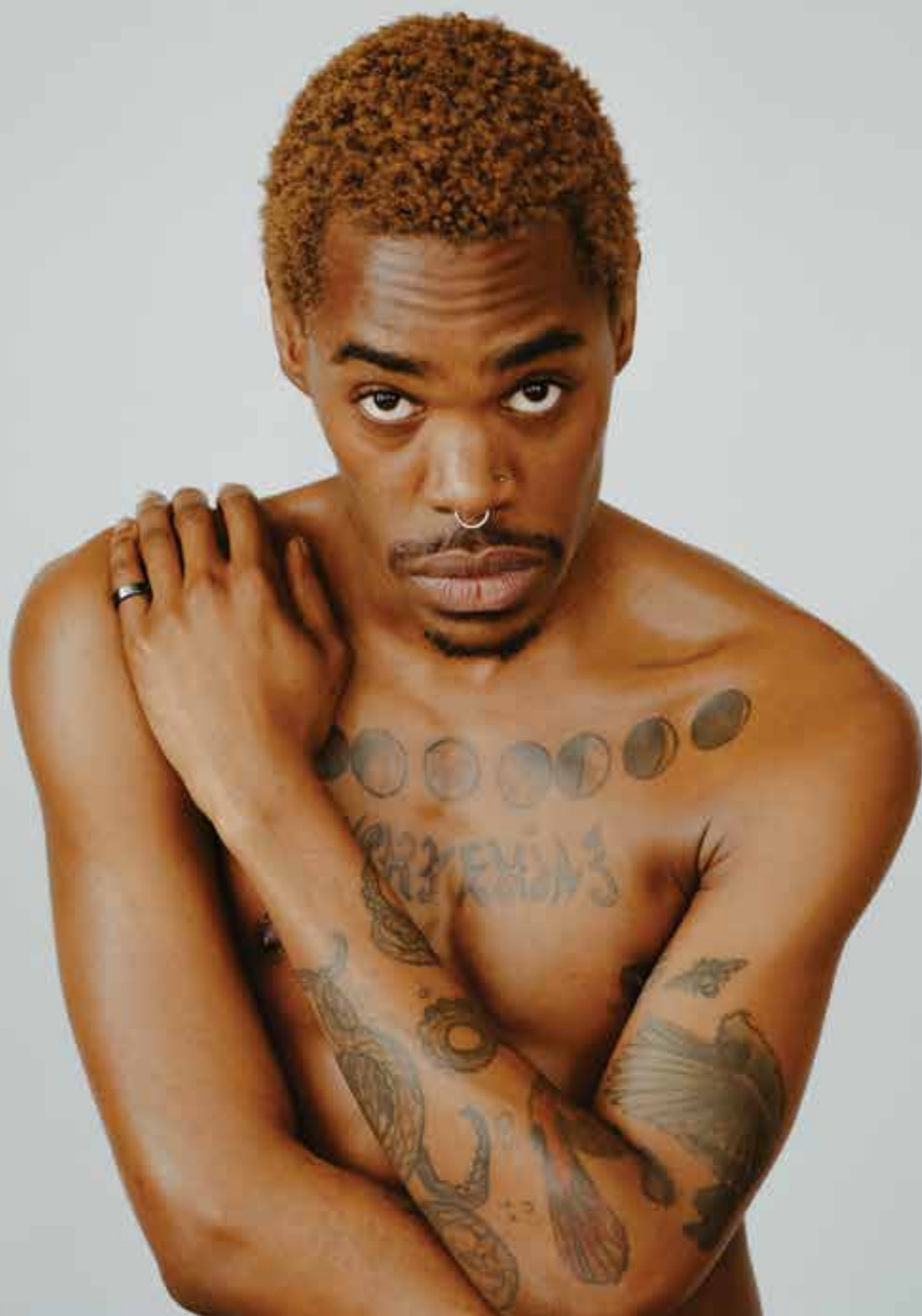


QUEER KY





1 in 7 people living with HIV don't know they are infected.

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- ☐ Never tested for HIV?
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- ☐ Injected drugs or shared needles or supplies?
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Queer Kentucky is a diverse LGBTQ+ run non-profit based in Louisville, Kentucky working to bolster and enhance Queer culture and health through storytelling, education and action.

Through our storytelling approach, we give visibility and celebrate the lives of LGBTQ+ people in the great Bluegrass State. Visibility alone is life-saving. Queer Kentucky actively works with organizations and businesses on their inclusivity efforts that enhance the well-being of their employees.

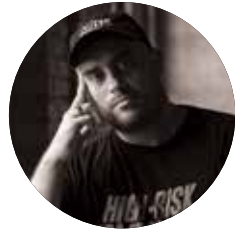
Dedication

To every queer person struggling and all those
that have succumbed to their struggles.
Please know, you aren't alone.

And to the thriving LGBTQ+ people and allies
working to enhance the lives of our community.

We see you fighting and we're standing with you.

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Queer Kentucky
900 East Main Street
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Spencer Jenkins *he/him*
Founder, Executive Director



Sarah Gardiner *she/her*
Editor-in-Chief



Bearykah Shaw *they/them*
Portrait Photographer



Andy Aliaga-Mendoza *she/her/ella*
Illustrator



Sophia Lee *she/they*
Cover Story Writer

Minda Honey *she/her*, L. Hart *she/they*
Contributing Editors

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from Spencer

Never did I think Queer Kentucky would grow to where it is now. If you've been with us since day one, you know that it started out as a "Humans of New York" style blog and social media account. I took photos of queer friends around town with my Polaroid camera, posted them, and wrote a little blurb about what it was like to be queer in Kentucky.

The stories of my queer peers were unique and eye-opening. Each person's narrative proved that Kentucky's queer community was large and for the most part, thriving. Not only did their stories help educate the public as our readership increased, but their stories also taught me aspects about my community that I never knew. This "little hobby," as many people used to call it, brought me to the best group of queer friends I could have ever asked for.

Eventually, we grew into a full-blown online publication with hundreds of thousands of readers. My dream of quitting a 9-5 corporate cube nightmare was coming true. I took a leap of faith and put all my energy into Queer Kentucky. I was called irresponsible by many, but I wasn't scared of failing. My gut told me this was going to work and no one on Earth was going to stop me. Not even my invested mentors telling me to "be smart about this."

Throughout the last five years of my life I have sacrificed, sobbed, broken down, almost quit, and endured traumatic homophobic and transphobic experiences while building Queer Kentucky into what it is today, and it was worth every second. Despite the negative experiences this nonprofit has brought me, it has also lifted me up.

I've become secure in my own queerness. I have learned to love myself more. I don't take my privilege for granted. I've become more professional and know how to have a conversation with an opposing side without beating the shit out of them. Even after all of my own personal sacrifices and stress building Queer Kentucky, nothing compares to the amount of visibility we've created for LGBTQ+ people. Our publication is read throughout the world. The world knows that Kentucky isn't fucking around and that our resilient community will survive.

Thank you for supporting us, and thank you for reading.

Love always,
Spencer Jenkins, Founder and Executive Director



from Sarah

Dear Readers,

I began working with Queer Kentucky 5 years ago as one of the organization's first writers and editors. Even in those early days, when we sat around dreaming of what QKY could become, a physical publication was always on the list. Fast forward nearly half a decade, and here it is: the very first Queer Kentucky Print Edition.

In this issue, we focused on health and health equity within our communities. As the publication unfolded, so too did our definition of the topic. More than just mental or physical, health can mean legal rights, resources, and information. It can mean stories of addictions suffered and overcome, of sex work and its impact, of first traumas and the lasting scars they leave behind. It can even mean art.

It was through this exploration that we chose pieces that showcased the diversity of the topic itself within the queer community. Weaving together stories from past and present, half of the works are selections from our archives while the other half are new features from wonderful Kentucky artists. The submissions of articles, photography, and poetry has shown us the beautiful talent that exists in our community.

Thank you: to everyone who took the time to send us your work, to all of our sponsors, readers, and support staff.

It has been an honor and a privilege to serve as Editor-in-Chief for this kickoff Issue. These stories are near and dear to our hearts, so I hope you enjoy them as much as we do.

Love Endlessly,
Sarah Gardiner, Editor-in-Chief



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THE CROP ROTATION OF LOVE AND HATE

BELLE TOWNSEND *she/they*

I come from yellow wildflowers and Southern Baptist churches,
where love grows with nothing prompting it,
and hate twice as quickly.

My roots lie under the bluegrass and in loose soil,
soil so loose that it gets in between my toes
when I step off of the porch.
I take off my sandals to clean them,
and I wonder how anything so natural could be so dirty.

My home is a land of barbecue and potlucks,
where you bring food no matter whose home you're going to.
Here, we don't accept showing up
without a crock-pot full of mac and cheese or peach cobbler.
There are plenty of other forms of love to reject after all.

I come from the Ohio Valley, the Ohio River meandering through,
is of the most polluted bodies of water in America.

I understand its yearning to be clean.

How can we wash our hands of our sins when the water is dirty too?

I woke up to birds chirping and warm chocolate soy milk,
fell asleep to thoughts I would never admit to having,
sneakily saw pictures of forbidden hands holding each other,
and wished for something so tender.

Kentucky, you
palpable humidity, warm sunshine, and melting popsicle summer,
corn maze, homemade apple cider, and hay bale haunted house autumn,
can't nobody drive, unpaved side road, and big ol' boots winter,
dewy mornings, more humidity, and die and start over again spring.

You beautiful dichotomy
of southern hospitality and religious bigotry.
You only ever wanted to be quiet,
with sunsets that touch the horizon
like real lovers do,
sprouting yellow kisses around every highway,
growing love with nothing prompting,
and hate twice as quickly.

TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

HANNAH L DRAKE she/her
TO BE TRUE TO YOURSELF IS THE
HIGHEST FORM OF SELF-LOVE

I am a naturally private person.

I would consider myself an introvert. Many people do not know this about me because of the nature of my work. I am often seen with a microphone in hand, under a spotlight speaking truth to power. But writing is a singular and lonely profession. I spend many nights, similar to this night, alone in my bedroom, typing, researching, reading, and typing some more, trying to speak truth to injustice in the world.

A few years ago, my poem *Formation* went viral. I never imagined in a million years that anything I wrote would reach the masses, but it did, and I was overjoyed. I had been writing for over 20 years, and just like that, God took me from obscurity to fame. Messages poured in from all over the world. God did exactly what God promised to do and what I prayed for and enlarged my territory.

While many people would embrace this newfound fame, I met it with apprehension as I discovered people that I did not know were scouring through my social media, commenting on things I had posted years ago. I immediately understood this was my new life. People that I had never met wanted to know me, experience me, be in contact with me. This was a unique experience for me. In my mind, I was just Hannah. Hannah, with a lot to say.

I had served years as an administrative assistant to someone who had the spotlight on them. I welcomed the back, the shadows. I even wrote a novel called *Views from the Back Pew*, the back pew being significant because it was where I always sat- hidden, obscured, in the cut. I remember once this woman came up to me as I was sitting on the back pew, and she asked, "Are you, Hannah?" And I said, "Yes, I am. How did you know I was Hannah?" She said, "I was looking for you, and someone told me she has braids, and she is always sitting on the back pew."

My brand was being made. I was the woman that loved to be hidden.

But true to form when you have a purpose in life, some things can no longer be hidden. And I knew my destiny and where God was taking me could no longer be hidden. And I left my job.

Then *Formation* happened, and the spotlight was on my life.

People were digging, searching, looking. But I was just me. Hannah. Quiet... Secluded... Private. I was quiet outwardly, but inwardly I KNEW, I had something to say. And my art started to change. My voice began to change. I wrote, and people listened. Finally, I was heard.

I used my voice to amplify issues impacting Black people. However, I would see issues that impacted LGBTQ people and thought, "Hannah, you should say something." I didn't. I was silent. Someone else would be the voice, and I would amplify them. I didn't have to be the person.

And it gnawed at me. It bothered me. Hannah, you are lying to yourself.

And I was.

I called my mom, and mom knows her child, and she told me one thing, "To thine own self be true."

BETRUE TO ME! Please don't lie to yourself, Hannah, because the worst kind of liar is someone that lies to themselves. And finally, I was in this space as Hannah on my own terms. Hannah that wanted to be the Hannah she wanted to be. The Hannah she should have ALWAYS been but didn't understand or hid it. I was finally able to be Hannah with no permission needed.

I was done hiding. Done pretending. But still, I was silent. Until I asked myself is your silence for privacy, or is your silence to hide?

I knew the answer.

I was being silent because of fear. But I am fully grown and ready to live my life, fully as me. Truth be told, if I had this freedom years ago, my entire life would have been different.

I write this today as a Black woman that identifies as a lesbian.

I write this today as someone that is part of the LGBTQ community.

I write this as a woman willing to stand in her truth, not knowing the fallout of speaking her truth but ready to deal with speaking her truth.

I write this as a woman, a Black woman, ready to live and ready to love.

TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

LASTING EFFECTS

ADDRESSING RURAL SEX EDUCATION

HEADMISTRESS SHAYLAN CLARK,

24 (she/they), is a Black filmmaker from Harlan, Kentucky. She is a 2020 Graduate of Berea College with a BA in Communication, focusing on Broadcast Journalism. She is passionate about film-making and raising awareness about issues that affect the people of Appalachia. She is the director of a documentary that discusses Black Lung disease called Dying Breed, in partnership with Appalachian Media Institute. Her second film discussed the lack of sexual education in rural communities, in partnership with All Access EKY. Shaylan has also worked with the community theater project Higher Ground since 2014, helping to gather stories, create scripts, and portray complex Appalachian characters. Shaylan aims to educate others in creative ways, and have a positive impact on her community.

(CW: mentions of youth sexual violence, teen pregnancy, lack of consent, policing black bodies)

It's a Monday morning in 2012, and I am a Freshman at Harlan County High School. I'm hysterical, ashamed about what I did over the weekend. Everyone had to know, which left me no other choice. I head toward the office of the school counselor, a white man, to process what happened. I was afraid of what people would say about it--about me. The whole school was probably talking by now. I hesitated, but the school counselor assured me that his office was a "safe space" and that he would help in any way he could. I believed him, so I looked this man dead in the eyes and said, "I gave someone a blow job at a party on an abandoned strip mine. I think everyone knows."

He sat with the information for a second, then asked, "Why do you think everyone knows?"

I told him that I might have given the blow job in the back of a pick-up truck. Anyone walking by could have easily seen us. To make matters worse, I didn't know that you're not actually supposed to blow on it, and that's exactly what I did. I was completely humiliated and certain people were going to make fun of me. He paused again. I could tell by his facial expressions that he was not equipped to deal with this kind of problem. The pause felt like it lasted forever. Finally, he assured me that people would forget about it in a week and sent me to class. Weeks went by and the counselor was right. Everyone forgot. I continued going to parties and began

to understand that my peers were equally as horny, confused, and inexperienced as I was. We were all just figuring it out with little to no sexual guidance from the adults who called themselves guides.

Growing up as a young Black woman in rural Eastern Kentucky, to say that my journey to sexual liberation has been challenging is, to say the least. I was fortunate to have a mother who made me feel comfortable approaching her with questions about sex. However, I watched several of my classmates experience pregnancy and childbirth before graduating high school, without the same support. I knew that in order to start on this journey I would have to first understand my body. That required inclusive and comprehensive sexual education. Even though I had an understanding parent, I cannot recall a single class that covered reproductive health, birth control, or consent in the Harlan County public education curriculum.

The many uses of birth control

There are many reasons for someone to take birth control that have nothing to do with being sexually active. I was put on birth control my freshman year of high school after being diagnosed with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS). According to the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, PCOS affects Women of Color more frequently and more severely than white women. I PCOS impacted me in all the ways that studies have shown it impacts Black women, and the only treatment I received was birth control. Birth control does help, but after years of living with it, I've learned that there were several other options that could have helped me manage what was happening to my body. Black women also have higher rates of hirsutism (excess hair growth) as well as a higher rate of infertility. Yet, Black women have less access to fertility treatments.

It's not surprising that Black women receive less treatment for reproductive health, but it is disappointing to see those of us who are most vulnerable are still struggling to access the care that we need because of the color of our skin. Birth control can regulate your period, balance your hormones, help prevent ovarian cancer and

even help treat acne. It helped with my period cramps, regulated my period, and helped with acne. I felt lucky to have access to it as a teen, and I wanted my friends to know about it. So I encouraged my friends to talk to their parents and get on birth control, but I quickly learned that transparency about sex and reproductive health was not as easy for them. Not only did my peers lack guided communication, but they also lacked access to the resources.

The nearest hospital in Harlan County is a 45-minute drive away. Many people do not have cars, and there is no public transportation system. In rural areas, young people have little to no access to reproductive health resources such as birth and lack inclusive sexual education.

Growing up I felt like our state was setting us up to fail. The "Abstinence Only" sexual education model was not working; and it was obvious that it had not worked in the past. I knew a girl who became pregnant in the 8th grade, and in high school there were pregnancy scares every other day.

Abortion support should be accessible.

Back in those days, I was known to be an advocate for abortion. My friends would come to me for information, resources, and education. My best friend during Freshman year was dating and sexually active but was not on birth control. I begged her to talk to her mom, but she was too afraid of what her mom would think.

So she didn't. She became pregnant that same year. If only my school and friend's parents knew how many times I helped my friends plan trips to abortion clinics. Or how many times I went with my friends to the nurse's office because they were terrified of asking for a pregnancy test. Adults need to understand the danger that comes with shaming young people for having sex. I had friends who were trying D.I.Y. abortion processes and remedies because they couldn't talk to their parents, who refused to acknowledge they were sexually active. I felt bad that my friends didn't have an adult at home to talk to about reproductive health. My mom didn't have that growing up, but she decided to break that cycle with me.



Now, I am the Headmistress of Sexy Sex Ed, a workshop series that uses visual and performance art and open dialogue amongst other popular education methods to compel people of all ages to discuss sexual health. I am the first-ever paid employee of a volunteer-based organization. Being a part of this team has not only given me a platform to fight for what I believe in, but it has also given me the opportunity to make the changes I want to see in my community. I knew when I became an educator that I wanted to be a resource for young people in my community, I knew what it was like to grow up without that guidance.

I knew that when they grew up they would face the same challenges I did. My team and I have been working tirelessly to raise funds in order to continue this work and come up with virtual ways to share information and make resources accessible to rural communities. When the pandemic began, Sexy Sex Ed sent out over 1,000 condoms and emergency contraceptives to people in need through the mail to make sure that people could stay safe during the lock-down.

We have over a dozen educators throughout the region, with most of us identifying as queer. Sexy Sex-Ed has allowed us to be who we are and do the work we are passionate about in the communities that we love.

I wish the education system knew how much we needed them to be who they said they were... teachers and guides. It's hard to imagine they didn't know what was going on. Kids were having whole-ass kids in middle school, and we were

taught ignorance, to just go on about our lives like it was normal. That is not normal, that is a cry for help. I was a high school student, just a kid myself, helping my friends plan how to get an abortion without their parents finding out. This shit is not okay! There is no logical reason for our education system to keep withholding life-saving information from the people who need it most.

All of these experiences are how I know that the work we do is needed. Just like me, young girls are forced to be hyper-aware of their bodies instead of being taught about reproductive health. The youth need us. They need support and understanding. Shaming them only stops them from seeking help or coming forward. We cannot continue to fail our youth. They deserve better, and so did we.

Read the entire story on queerkentucky.com



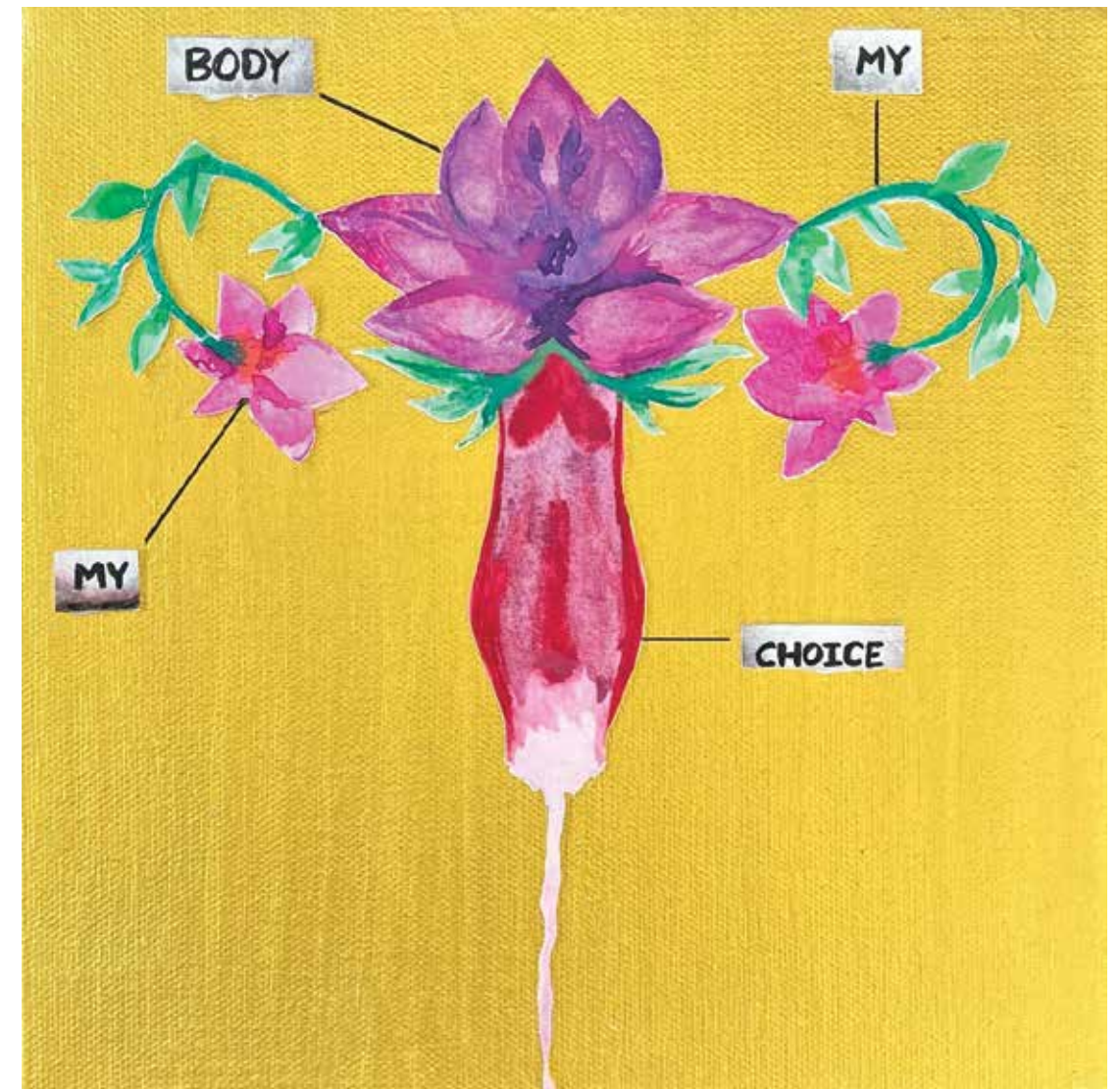
PRISM is a somatic and cartographic project that aims to amplify the work of Black, Brown, and Indigenous Kentuckians who are also Queer, Trans, 2-Spirit, and Non-binary. Five storytellers across the state used their bodies and lived

experiences as maps to explore concepts of gender expansiveness, self-possession, and culture revitalization in the midst of historical and ongoing genocidal campaigns against our right to create a legacy. PRISM is an energetic footprint in the form of prose, poetry, visual art and the personal narrative. Each side of this pentahedronic force is an emblem of liberation in the active tense.

Prism artwork by Austin Smith, editor of Prism (they/them).



artwork by Juniper Moon Folk Art



"My Body My Choice"

JESSICA HILL *she/her*



"iScream"
DAVID WELKER *he/him*



"Pieces - Shower"
CHRISTOPHER BURKHARDT *he/him*



SEX WORK & THE CITY

ETHAN PAUL *(they/them)*



Every time the elevator doors opened at The New School dorm building on 15th St & 1st Ave, my olfactory nerves were hit with the scent of dozens of strains of weed. Always a reliable source of debauchery, the 12-story STUY building served as temporary home for a bunch of art school kids whose Northern star was anything but studying. If the course assignments included intoxication, many of us would have had straight A's. Tonight a few of us freshmen were lubricating our social hour with bong rips and Four Lokos (pre-caffiene exodus), soundtracked by that unfortunate early 2010s artifact of egregious dubstep drops. Even the dubstep would pale in comparison to the lurid shit I had planned for the post-midnight hours.

Those hazy nights in the East Village took the edge off my vague guilt over the \$37,000 a year education I was mostly ignoring. Any anxiety caused by this detour from my goals quickly faded, becoming indiscernible as I daydreamed about my future and entertained delusions of the present. The majority of my classmates were hardly plagued by concerns of stability or comfort, many coddled by a privileged upbringing and newly-available trust funds. My burgeoning substance use served a similar purpose, a Novocaine that blunted my creeping feelings of doubt and difference.

Though I was by no definition a product of poverty, I lacked the assuredness of many of my peers whose upbringing assuaged any potential concerns of fiscal self-responsibility. In moments like these, though surrounded by other people, my inner narrative was like the hypnotic choruses of so many catchy pop songs, a constant reminder of the fear and sadness in my head, a violent and interminable river of self-criticism. Was fleeing Louisville two weeks after my eighteenth birthday the right choice? Was a decent-paying job going to materialize for me soon? Was I creatively skilled enough to compete with my classmates and would that be enough to make a life for myself? Why was I getting fucked up every night and avoiding the education I wanted to pursue? Was my drug use a problem or just the hallmark of an art school freshman?

But then again, making it here was not so easy or simple. I'd had difficulty finding a job, caught in a Catch-22 of employers who demanded NYC

“FOLLOW THE RULES
AND AVOID THE COMMON
NARRATIVE OF
GETTING STRUNG OUT.”

experience but wouldn't give me a chance to attain it. Applications went unnoticed or declined as my bank account went negative. I was at a loss. As a queer person coming of age in 2010, I fancied myself to be sexually enlightened. I felt that queer sex was a radical act worthy of celebration, an act of joy, a work of art which I performed with love and passion. I believed that sex was inherently beautiful, a transformative dance to be viewed with unwavering positivity. By extension, I saw sex work as an opportunity to support myself and feel powerful as I came of age in circumstances that felt uncertain and lonely.

I began escorting regularly soon after I moved to the city, at first as a way to make extra money. Soon it became a necessity. So, yet again, I brushed off the heavy gravity of a smoke session to leave my friends so I could make some money. I hugged goodbyes to the others cramped in Brandon's tiny dorm room, offering a vague explanation of “I'm going to hang out with a friend,” my lack of specificity betraying the supposed sex positivity I'd tried to manifest for myself. This was not missed by Brian, who cast shade onto my departure, his disdain and concern for my activities unspoken much like my plans for the evening.

It was 10 p.m. and the night was as young as me. I hopped in a cab traveling downtown to Battery Park. After losing myself for a few minutes in a motion blur of yellow, blue, and green city lights,

the cab deposited me at a bougie high-rise condo building adjacent to 1 Police Plaza. The proximity did nothing to dispel my plans for the evening. I walked down the drab concrete path past the Italian restaurant downstairs, the gamey scent of sewage and algae from the Hudson River wafting toward my nostrils. Walking through a pair of automatic double doors, I greeted the doorman with a curt hello and took the elevator up several floors. Manhattan doormen are famed for their discretion; this one would not betray any suspicion of my activities whether he was aware of them or not. Somewhere around the tenth floor I exited the elevator and walked briskly down the featureless tan carpeted hallway, one of many similar corridors that would blur and blend in my memory.

Arriving to my destination for the evening, I pressed the ubiquitous black doorbell below my date's apartment number. After a few expectant seconds he cracked the door a few inches.

Recognition softened his eyes and he opened it further to welcome me in. After a few introductory hellos and how are yous, I took my black Diesel tennis shoes off and joined him on the couch. We made small talk, conversing about his television production job in Queens and my less-than-enthusiastic studies. Men of this type loved to hear about my education; it made them feel more justified in the evening's damage to their bank account. This John had found me on the escorting website Rent Boy, which would later meet its demise when SESA/FOSTA* was signed into law. At the time I was barely legal, thin enough to count my ribs, and still had an air of confidence and carelessness possessed by a person who had not yet experienced the bulk of their trauma. I was a prime cut on this particular meat market. Though my profits and prospects would decrease as my years and substance use grew, for now I was making more money by the hour than I would ever make in my life. The payout was my North star, and on nights like these I endured these old men and their objectification with money always on my mind. It helped that the majority of my clients were kind enough. Most were caring, generous, and even sweet. But despite my efforts to cultivate a sense of empowerment in my logical, conscious mind, each one of these encounters and their

aftermath were poisoned with a pulsing sense of shame and disgust for both myself and my suitors. But fueled by the promise of \$250 an hour and a couple of eightballs of cocaine and the man before me transformed into something bearable, if not a vision of beauty. It was my job to make him feel that way, anyway.

For now, I looked good on the outside, but my life was a house of cards that grew as high as one of the skyscrapers on every block. Every meal I ate, every train ride, every bundle of dope was paid for by men with more stability, capital, and value than me, though we had similarly plentiful amounts of delusion. Sex positive: "an attitude towards human sexuality that regards all consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable, encouraging sexual pleasure and experimentation." That sounded good, and it made sense to my logical mind, but as I tried harder and harder to fit myself into the enlightened box of sexual liberation, I fell lower and lower into an abyss of depression, drug use, and despondency. Each ad I posted became more and more desperate, and so did each bag of drugs I consumed. My desire to fuck for money as a creative, liberated person quickly collapsed into a series of mechanical steps devoid of happiness and self-respect. Each transactional sex act followed a vector of fuck, cum, money, drugs. Every night I worked filled me with more exhaustion and cynicism and self-hatred. The playful and radiant queerness that impassioned me in early adulthood was melting into a smoldering black wax of loneliness and guilt. It dripped down my body, covering me until I felt like one of the figures at Madame Tussaud's, lit in a spotlight in settings of glamor, but devoid of motion or life. I knew logically that sex work had the potential for revolutionary empowerment, but I lost sight of my fine print — I missed the prerequisite unwavering sense of love and respect for myself.

One day I woke up and realized that my life had become a hurricane of self-destruction. In my naivety I believed that I could simply show up to my life each day with an assumption of happiness and success, and that the key to these golden things was free and entitled. I had no understanding of karma, of cause and effect, of sewing and reaping, of working hard and then

enjoying the fruits of my labor. I had even less understanding that this work was also necessary on an internal level. I dismissed the singular importance of self-actualization and the central life work of healing from wounds inflicted not only on me but on generations of my ancestors. With so little understanding of who and why I was, I was painfully unprepared for work which demanded an inner garden well tended to. With hindsight it is no surprise that my foray into sex work was ultimately the antithesis of empowering. Instead I opened myself up to harm, abuse, and trauma. I ultimately learned that our external liberation is dependent on our internal liberation; before you share your beauty with the world you must be assured of it, and capable of defending yourself from the people and things that wish to take it from you.

Despite all this, I realize that my years of sex work were fraught with privilege. I, unlike many other queer folks, initially made a choice to engage in sex work on my terms, online and off the streets (though, like substance use for many people including myself, it eventually overtook my ability to control it). For many queer folks, this is the story from the beginning. We are forced into sex work and sex trafficked at a much higher rate than straight people. For many of us who initially use our own agency in choosing to become sex workers, we engage in it as a means to combat extreme food and housing insecurity or as a means to escape abuse, neglect, or poverty. The sex work industry in Lexington and the rest of the Commonwealth has never been painted with an illusion of glitz or a mythology of glamour afforded to "high class" sex workers who serve millionaire clients in lavish homes or clubs in big cities. But in a stifled and oppressive culture of denial, even those of us who have avoided the dangers of street sex work through the privilege of internet access are under attack. After Congress passed SESA/FOSTA in 2018, law enforcement agencies closed down many of the big online platforms for advertising sex work, forcing many at-risk queers to return to street sex work instead of advertising their services behind the comfort and safety of a computer screen.

I know that I am happy and privileged to have found other employment, and let's be real — I've

long since aged out of sex work anyway. Despite my assumptions, that life was not for me. But those of us who still depend on sex work are desperately in need of legal protections and are often left without recourse when faced with rape, sexual assault, theft, or customers who don't disclose sexually-transmitted infections. Those of us who use substances for enjoyment or to socialize or out of necessity need much more robust harm reduction and supportive services. And our brothers, sisters, and siblings who have faced incarceration as a result of their job need our support now and as we fight for abolition. All of these changes necessitate a framework of compassion as we uplift each other and encourage young queer folks to have respect and love for themselves and a sense of stewardship and knowledge regarding our bodies and health.

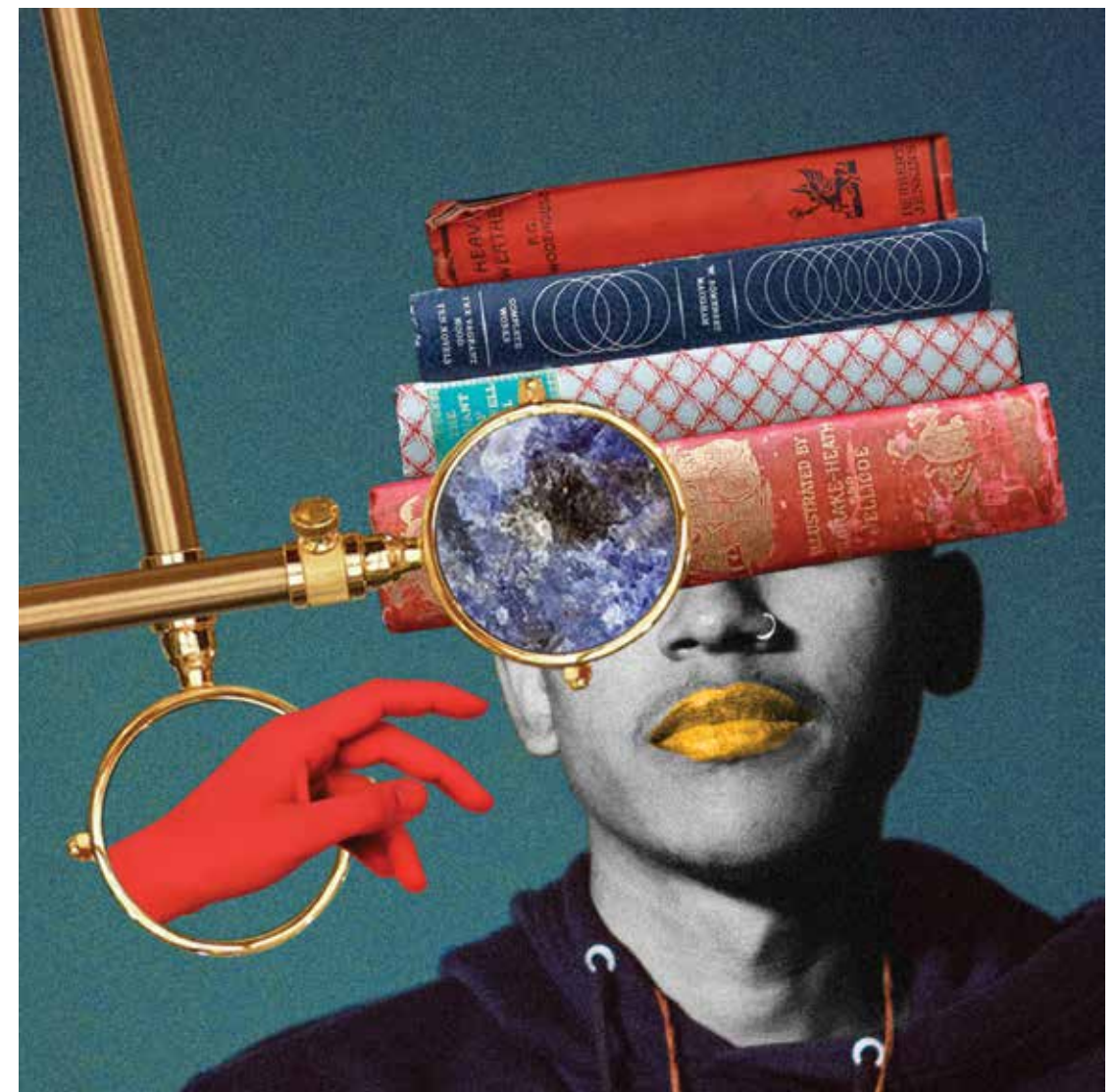
**2018's Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and the Fight Against Online Sex Trafficking Act.*



photo by Rebecca Blankenship (she/her)



"clownbreak"
SIERRA DURBIN *they/them*



"Pieces - Your Name"
CHRISTOPHER BURKHARDT *he/him*

SO YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT SLEEPING WITH A TRANS MAN

ADRIAN SILBERNAGEL *he/him*



Whether you've been dating for a while, or just started talking on a hookup app, there are a few things that you should be aware of before hopping in the sheets with a trans man.

For starters, if you've never had sex with this person before, don't assume you will (or won't) be compatible. Trans men are men. Our bodies are male bodies. You might be super sexually compatible with him, or you might not be. In this way, he's really no different from any cis man (non-trans man) that you're considering sleeping with.

Not all trans bodies are alike. We may have had top surgery, lower surgery, neither, or both. So don't assume that just because he is trans, that he has an "extra hole." If he does have an extra hole, don't assume that he likes to use it for sex. Receiving/being penetrated might trigger his gender dysphoria: feelings of discomfort or distress around the perceived mismatch between his sex and gender. Or maybe not! He might be a loud and proud bottom, who thoroughly enjoys using all of his holes for sex. Or he might prefer to top/dom, using mental and/or physical means of sexual dominance. He may use a prosthetic dick, his own junk (which often changes as a result of testosterone) or other means to penetrate his partner. The key thing to remember is, regardless of what surgeries we have had or not had, every trans body is different from the next, and so are every trans man's feelings about their respective body parts.

By now you might be wondering, how do I figure out what he's got going on, and whether or not I'm into it? The same way he figures out what

you're into, and whether he's into you: through communication and consent. This doesn't have to be a formal, sit-down, serious conversation. It can be fun, flirty, and organic. It can happen in person, on the phone, or over text. It can happen both before and during sex. If you're cis and he is trans, allow him to take the lead. He will bring it up in his own time, and in his own way. If it's a hookup situation, chances are he has already made it known what he's into. If you're dating, he might be taking it a bit more slowly, testing the waters and making sure that he can trust that you are open-minded, respectful, and not transphobic.

When he is ready to talk about it, be ready to listen and ask questions. This will show him that you aren't making assumptions about him or his preferences, and that you respect him as a person—as opposed to seeing him as a fetish. (Note: if you're both into kink, and he is into being fetishized, then have at it—assuming you're both consenting adults. Just make sure you aren't fetishizing sex with trans men in general, or thinking about sex with trans men as a category of kink. This is disrespectful and dehumanizing to trans people.)

Ask him if there is anything you should avoid doing or saying during sex that might trigger dysphoria. He might not want to be touched in certain ways or in certain places. He might want you to talk about certain body parts or sex acts in certain ways, and not others. Don't assume that you need to make certain accommodations—again, every trans man is different. But do make sure you've created space for him to voice any triggers he does have, and assure him that if you do or say something that makes him uncomfortable/dysphoric during sex, to tell you.

And finally, be open-minded, responsive, and willing to learn and get creative. This is the key to all good sex: at least in this trans man's opinion.

The Tea in Ritual

ARIELLE CLARK *she/her*

The exhaustion of existence weighs heavily on us Black folk. It is not the mere act of existence that is debilitating to us, our ancestors, and our descendants. It is not the occupation of our beautiful, multifaceted bodies that makes us weary. Rather, what makes us tiresome, what makes us ache down to the very marrow in our stress-whipped bones, is our existence in white supremacy. It is the racism, the white hate for Black being and doing, that keeps our jaws clenched, our shoulders tight, and our necks aching. We carry not only the weight of our ancestors' pain (just as they carried the weight of theirs upon their own whip-scarred backs), but the heaviness of our own dissension, the burden of revolutions we are forced to fight, the heft of occupying for space in a world not meant for us.

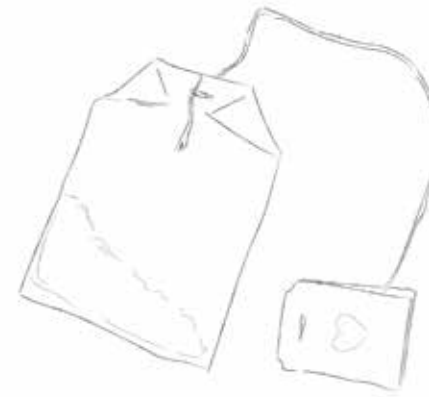
And we heal just as intensely as we fight.

We dance, talk, laugh. We talk to our ancestors and go to therapy. We rap, sing, write. We talk and we scream.

But what about those quieter moments? What about the juncture of silence? What can we do to ease our restless spirits and soothe our muscles that burn from carrying so much? What can we do to nourish our inner deities and outer bodies?

Might I suggest, perhaps, a cup of tea?

I've become a tea enthusiast over the past few years through owning and founding Sis Got Tea, Louisville's first Black-owned, woman-owned, LGBTQ-owned tea café. I went from a McDonald's sweet tea type of gal to a person who has a catalog of teas in her home. "From sweet to earthy to bitter to smoky to herbal. I've got it all." Over the time that I've delved into the realm of this multidisciplinary drink, I've learned that tea is not only for oral enjoyment, but also for healing, grieving, celebrating, and for looking inward. I've learned that tea is both an outer and inner experience. So let me take you through the steps of the tea in *ritual*.



Step 1: Select the tea you wish to drink.

What do you desire in this moment? Not just in taste, but also in spirit? What do your body and soul crave? What do you need? What will guide you?

Spread your tea around you. Close your eyes. In the silence of your surroundings, listen to your tea and yourself.

Do you need something to ground you? Try a black, earthy tea such as Assam.

Do you need something to give you a new perspective? Try lapsang souchong, a smoky tea that tastes like a campfire, like something you've never ingested before.

Do you desire peace and serenity? A light green tea will calm your spirit.

Do you yearn for a blank slate, an opportunity to create whatever you wish? I recommend a white tea, which has a taste so delicate that you can craft it to whatever you crave.

Perhaps you are feeling more complex. You may need many things at this moment, and multiple desires are valid. We are complicated beings. So is tea.

Most tea comes from a single plant, the *Camilla sinensis*. From this adaptable plant come hundreds of varieties of tea. To create these varieties the plant needs different things in different increments – soil, water, sunlight, oxidation, and fermentation. Like you, my friend. You are a single being that needs so many things to bloom in so many ways. Add what you need – assorted herbs, various sweeteners, etc. You too are an entity that needs abounding things to grow and bloom and become.

Step 2: Heat the water to the appropriate temperature.

With as clear of a mind as you can muster, begin heating your water. Use this opportunity to empty your brain as much as possible. Focus on the water. Breathe deeply. Feel your lungs fill with air, and exhale slowly. Release the tension from your body, muscle by muscle. You deserve to relax. You deserve to rest. You deserve to be, just like water does.

If the water is too cool, you will not get the full flavor and experience of your tea. If the water is too hot, the tea will become bitter. The key to a delicious cup of tea is water.

Now you are the tea and the water. Find balance in your anger and your calmness. It is valid to be angry. It is valid to be calm. It is valid to be in-between, just like our brains are in-between shades of black and white. Brains are grey matter, aren't they? So stop thinking in absolutes. You cannot brew with ice-cold water or boiling hot water.



Step 3: Select your drinking vessel.

How will you deliver this medicine to your body? Just like you are not limited to societal standards and arbitrary ideals, you are not limited to cups. Drink from a bowl. Drink from a saucer. Drink directly from the pitcher. Just as we exist outside of the white imagination, tea can be enjoyed from a vessel outside of the expected cup or mug. Your existence is revolutionary.

Step 4: Measure out your tea, and place it into your drinking vessel.

As you measure your tea, think about what energy you require in this moment. Do you need space to grieve? Do you yearn for a moment to be angry? Are you longing for peace? As you pour your tea blend, pour the energy as well. You drink what you sow. Isn't that how the saying goes?

Notice the leaves, the branches, and the buds. All the pieces of the plant, if brewed individually, make for a weak cup of tea. But together they make a strong and complex brew. Like the leaves, branches, and buds, millions of atoms and ancestral lines came together to create you. You are unique. You are fearfully, wonderfully, and intentionally made.



Step 5: Pour the heated water over your tea blend.

As the water slowly fills your vessel, watch how the tea reacts. Some teas, like oolong, blooms, and unravels; the leaves flowering as it steeps. Other teas, like gunpowder, unfurls from its tightly-rolled form. Watch the tea respond. How are you responding to this ritual? Are you blooming or are you unfurling?

Step 6: Steep for an appropriate amount of time.

All tea creates liquor, a term for the liquid that results when steeping tea. Liquor comes in many shades. Look into the liquor. Study the colors. Study the bits of tea that fall through your strainer, that land in the bottom of your vessel. What are you willing to let fall away? Remember how colorful and beautiful you are, just like the liquor.

Step 7: Sip and enjoy thoroughly.

Let this be a multi-sensory experience. Taste your brew. Take in not only the flavors that dance across your tongue but also the warmth that travels down your throat as you drink. Once you feel the liquor settle in your stomach, close your eyes. Feel the energy you put into your tea and water move through your body. Do you feel the warmth crawling through your blood?

Listen to your body. Listen to how it reacts. Did your stomach rumble? Did you swallow harshly? Give your body the attention it deserves and answer accordingly. Should you slow down your drinking? Should you soothe your stomach? Your body will tell you. Sip with intention.

Step 8: Dispose of the steeped tea blend.

The Earth has graciously given us Camilla sinesis, and we shall return it to them. Did you know most tea can be composted?

Remember, in time, we will return to our ancestors just as we were birthed from them. This reunion will be beautiful. Stories will be told. Laughs will be shared. Lessons will be taught. Let the tea return to Earth to do the same. And let it, like us, create more tea, and more beauty for future generations.

You have journeyed through the 't' in ritual, from start to finish. Let tea be a conduit of peace, serenity, healing, and relaxation. Tea is powerful, multifaceted, beautiful. Just like you.

artwork by Andy Aliaga-Mendoza



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2022 LEGISLATION ATTACKS LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN KENTUCKY. NATIONWIDE

MICHAEL GARTON *he/him*

There's an old saying in Kentucky politics, that, "No life, liberty, or property is safe when the General Assembly is in session." Many in the LGBTQ+ community are feeling that to be even more true this year—an election year.

All in the past year, the Kentucky legislature has passed a new law prohibiting trans students from participating in school sports, the Louisville Metro Fairness Ordinance is facing a new legal challenge, and Texas has targeted families, categorically labeling parents of transgender youth as "abusers".

One common thread between these three actions is that none of them are responding to anything that has happened, only events that could happen.

Targeting Student-Athletes

In March, state representatives and senators in Frankfort passed a new law to limit youth and young adults from playing sports on the team aligned best with their gender identity. Despite the governor's veto, it was easily overridden and became law this summer.

Senate Bill 83 (SB83) specifically allows only middle, high school, and collegiate student-athletes to play on girls' sports teams if their original, unedited birth certificate identifies them as female.

"All [my child] was doing was asking the world to see him the way he saw himself," said State Senator Karen Berg (D-Jefferson) when she took

to the floor of the Kentucky, speaking on her transgender son coming out.

"On purpose, you are excluding these children and it goes to their hearts, and it hurts their parents' souls," she continued.

If a student does not have a birth certificate, a student may also submit an affidavit concerning their assigned sex at birth, signed by a licensed medical professional.

That restriction does not apply to coed or boys' teams.

Many find a few things puzzling about this new law in Kentucky.

First, the sponsor of the legislation could not identify one student in our state who lost the opportunity to play sports under current policy. Current school sports policies do not expressly prohibit students from playing on the sports team that aligns best with their gender identity.

"I asked a question [in committee] where a woman has been denied an award or achievement because of participation by transgender male, and the witness couldn't cite one example," said State Senator Reggie Thomas (D-Lexington), "so, we don't have a problem to correct here. We have to admit that."

Second, SB83 conflicts with NCAA policies that allow student-athletes to play on the team aligned with their gender identity. There are requirements for a student to qualify if they are transgender, but the NCAA still allows them to play if they meet those qualifications.

Third, every version of this law that has passed in any other state is currently facing a legal challenge. That means Kentucky will have to

spend taxpayer dollars to defend this new law before knowing whether it is likely to withstand any constitutional challenge.

"We know the bills that have passed that are similar are federally enjoined. We know that. We know there's litigation," said state senator David Yates (D-Jefferson). "So we know if we pass this, it's going to be litigated. Is that fiscally responsible?"

A picture is worth 1000... lawsuits?

Louisville Metro first passed the county-wide Fairness Ordinance in 1999. The ordinance specifically prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity for housing, public accommodation, and employment. It also prohibits businesses from refusing to serve the public on the same basis or advertise that they do not serve anyone based on those criteria. That second part of the ordinance is what a local wedding photographer is contesting as an affront to her religious beliefs.

In August, a federal judge ruled in favor of a Louisville photographer who challenged the possibility that she would be investigated or fined for a violation of the Fairness Ordinance in Louisville Metro. Chelsey Nelson filed the suit in fear that Louisville Metro could force businesses to take same-sex wedding assignment—that has yet to happen to anyone.

U.S. District Court Judge Benjamin Beaton blocked the City from enforcing the ordinance against Nelson, citing the Kentucky Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which prohibits state and local governments from creating a "substantial burden" without the government

showing a compelling governmental interest in limiting acts motivated by a person's religious beliefs.

This is the second time Nelson has sought Court action relating to the Louisville Metro Fairness Ordinance. Both actions have been financed by the Alliance Defending Freedom, a national right-wing organization that raises tens of millions of dollars each year to file lawsuits hoping to restrict the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

Former Mayor Greg Fischer had indicated that the city planned to appeal the ruling.

Investigating Innocent Texas Families

Although not in Kentucky yet, a series of actions by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton has given families of trans youth a lot to be concerned about.

In February, Paxton released a non-binding opinion that certain gender-affirming medical treatment was equal to child abuse.

Abbott then called on citizens across Texas to report families of Trans youth to child protective services, seeking to label those parents "abusers" if they were found to use gender-related medical treatment, any of which would require the authorization of a medical professional.

Abbot also ordered the Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) to investigate both the parents of children who seek gender-affirming medical care as well as the facilities that provide that care.

Following that order, DFPS ordered at least nine investigations into specific Texas families for child abuse. No trans youth or adult has claimed their parents abused them by seeking gender affirming medical treatment.

The investigations were halted by a Texas judge, but subsequently resumed after the Texas Supreme Court affirmed the actions of Abbot and Paxton. For those families being investigated their future is unclear.

It is not terribly surprising to see radical solutions to problems that don't exist in an

election year. What is unusual is the degree these individuals seeking legislative and legal action for hypothetical situations that anyone has yet to complain about.

They found zero students who weren't able to compete because of a trans student athlete on their team. The photographer was never investigated or cited for violating the Fairness Ordinance.

However, the ramifications are widespread. Real students will not be able to play sports in middle school, high school or possible college. Real families in Texas are being investigated, having to hire lawyers, and go to Court over treatment prescribed by a doctor. What phantom crisis our political leaders will find to "solve" next is anyone's guess.



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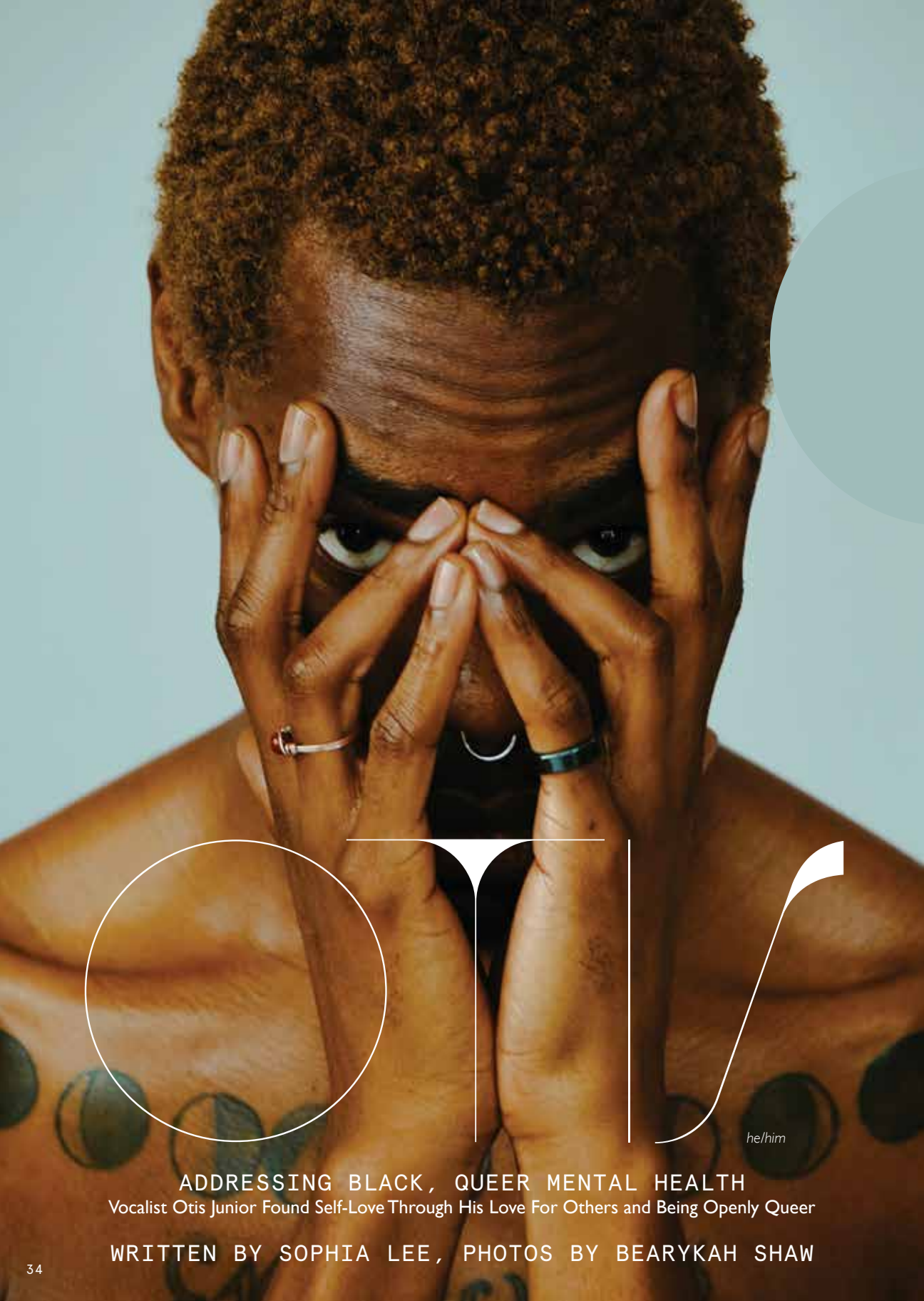
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I'm in a
state of
mind
I'm finding
kind of
hard to
believe

Lyrics from
"Don't Get
Caught"

At 25 years old, Otis Junior never thought that he'd be taking on a record deal and embarking upon a life changing musical journey. Junior grew up in a Black family with two older sisters.

Originally born in North Carolina, his family relocated to Louisville when he was nine for better opportunities and possibilities. He awkwardly dated women throughout middle and high school. And though he deeply invested his emotions into these relationships, he always knew something felt queer about them.

At the age of 17, he and his best friend formed a hip-hop duo. He said that discovering and creating hip-hop (for fun) with his best friend gave him space to flourish and explore creatively.

"Music was definitely something I wanted to do but, I just was not ready for it at the time, mentally," Junior said. "I look back on it now and laugh because we weren't on any kind of serious path then. At that time for me, writing and singing was more of a secret for myself. I loved to do it, but I had to make sure nobody was around first."

Unable to escape the pressures of life, Junior accepted an opportunity for a minority scholarship to attend college at the University of Kentucky, where he did one semester for psychology, but left due to an overall poor experience.

"I'm not a person who is anti-higher education necessarily but, in an environment where I was not being represented in any sort of way, it just didn't feel like the place for me," Junior said.

The process to keep up with his scholarship was ridiculously meticulous and daunting, which left him completely drained. He soon gave up on all of it completely. Even his social life was hindered within this predominantly white campus and he struggled to find groups and places to fit into. All these stressors are what led him to realize that schooling just wasn't for him, and he returned home to Louisville to figure out what would be next.

One night, as he played around and sung to himself, his sister stumbled upon him, she acknowledged the melodious rhythm she had overheard, and then took it upon herself to sign him up for his first ever open mic night. He performed two songs: No Diggity by Blackstreet and Dr. Dre and a song by Amy Winehouse. During one of the few open mic nights he played, Junior met local music producer, Dr. Dundiff, around December 2015. The two immediately began working together, and created amazing hits, including *Me Vs. Me*, *Reaching*, and *The 1*. A music career took off so quickly that Junior barely had time to catch his breath.

"I am so super introverted that I am almost always in my own world wherever I am," Junior said. "It wasn't my first time performing in life because I had done theater and chorus before, despite being a very shy and introverted person. So, the aspect of performing wasn't the most foreign thing to me, but I can only remember thinking about making sure that I gave the performance that I intended and that I conveyed what I intended. It was something that I had been working on for a long time and had been doing for fun privately. I just wanted to make sure it was good."

Junior said that he felt that music was his natural calling, but for a long time, he didn't think that he deserved success. In February 2016, he and Dr. Dundiff finalized a record deal from Germany, where he had a growing fanbase. During this time, he formed his current band, The Jesse Lees. The band slowly took shape and developed their sound, which they describe as "psychedelic rock, soul, and hip-hop." Junior has been putting all his emotions into something "new new," as he phrased it, for his fans that he hopes will showcase his most true and queer self.

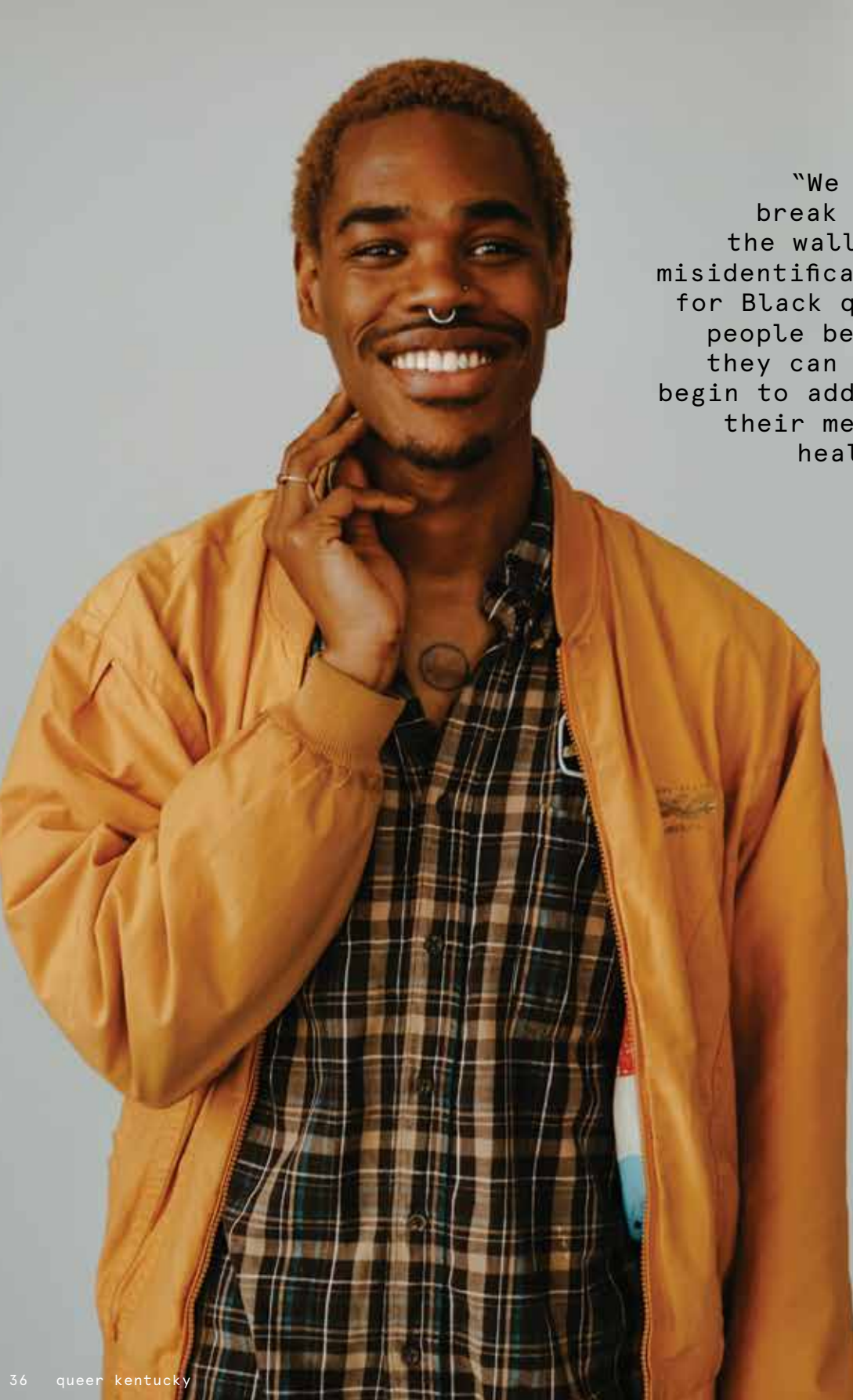
"I really struggled with avoiding imposter syndrome for a while because I just couldn't really view myself as a professional musician," he said. "Everything up until now has felt very reactive."

Although this will be his first solo project, he is not quite prepared to articulate exactly what it is yet. Junior has struggled over the years to understand how everything has somehow fallen into place around him. He is currently working

ADDRESSING BLACK, QUEER MENTAL HEALTH

Vocalist Otis Junior Found Self-Love Through His Love For Others and Being Openly Queer

WRITTEN BY SOPHIA LEE, PHOTOS BY BEARYKAH SHAW



"We must break down the walls of misidentification for Black queer people before they can even begin to address their mental health."



for WFPK, a 24-hour listener-supported, noncommercial radio station in Louisville. He signs off every show by saying, "tell someone that you love that you love them, and don't forget to tell yourself."

Loving himself by taking care of mind and body has now become one of Juniors saving graces, but this wasn't always the case.

"Meditation has remained one of the biggest things that I can lean on for stability," he said.

"Exercising has really become a bigger one for me as well. I've noticed how different my mental state becomes once I'm breaking a sweat versus sitting sedentary. I can see my mind following suit."

Ashley Ertel, LCSW, of The Delta Group, fell into queer community and client care through various social networks and personal connections. Ertel provides affordable sessions to her clients so she may operate through a lens of support, not finances. In Kentucky, Ertel has found that Black queer communities are constantly living in fear.

"Their day-to-day looks like 'How can I get this thing [my dreams] accomplished but also be safe,'" she said. "I help my clients become future focused, not crisis driven. You cannot operate if you have a value of honesty but are unable to live within that fully because you must hide this part of yourself."

Over the years, Junior's professional career has intensified his anxiety. He felt a tremendous lack of satisfaction from past projects because none of them were self-started, intentional pursuits. Junior struggled with finding his sense of self.

"I just sort of hated myself," he said. "I just felt like, 'well, I'm not good enough for this. I'm not worth anything so why do I deserve these things?'"

Despite the severe weight he started taking on mentally, he continued moving forward with his music. Early in his career, he said he experienced nausea before shows, and explained it as a “bodily reaction to uncertainty.”

Junior was very avoidant as an artist and said he was never sure of himself as a person. This created a ton of pressure and confusion for him, which eventually put him deep into the throes of some of his worse depressive episodes. The worst symptom of his anxiety was inaction—sitting and thinking about doing something all day but never being able to do it.

Junior’s battle with anxiety and depression was a long, treacherous one but he had supportive and loving friends and family that he used their love as a blueprint on how to love himself.

Junior explained this love through the words of RuPaul. She always says, “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?”

Though he understood the importance of self-love, he’d surrounded himself with relationships that mirrored what that love should look like, he couldn’t grapple with how exactly to give that type of love to himself.

Kamaria Batiste, LPCA, at Intuitive Insights Counseling Services, has been continuously educating and working to familiarize herself with the complications of anxiety and importance of self-love for five years. Batiste specializes in trauma and trauma resilient care for her patients. She operates through a lens of transparency and vulnerability so that her clients feel seen and can connect with her more easily.

“Learn how to tune into your needs,” she said. “Don’t be afraid because it is necessary to get the need met and find whatever it is that makes sense to help with whatever you’re trying to do. There are spaces for you and your specific needs. Whatever they may be. It doesn’t need to look like traditional therapy. Know your needs and

be okay with seeking them out. And don’t put pressure on yourself to figure those things out either. Be okay with yourself until you can find the thing that works best for you.”

In early winter 2019, Junior finally realized his needs. He and a group of his close friends took a trip to Nashville to see Noname, an American rapper, poet, and record producer from Chicago. Noname specializes in neo-soul and hip-hop recited in poetic style. She is an outspoken activist whose following consists of radical individuals mirroring herself.

Junior said that something within him changed during that trip. He felt an overwhelming sense of welcome, acceptance, and community when he was introduced to a group of Black queer people at the concert.

“There was so much love, and the energy was just...I felt more comfortable than I had ever felt in any setting before,” he said.

When he returned home, Junior immediately made a Tinder profile, which allowed him to come out to himself first. He later came out publicly at the end of June that year through a very nonchalant Instagram post that allowed him to grow comfortable with himself throughout the rest of the year.

“Alright, let’s make this quick/clear: queer [as fuck],” the post said. “If you’re looking for someone to judge, judge your mother. Happy Pride. It’s still June, right?”

Junior always had a supportive queer community around him, but the social conditioning he suffered through for years completely blocked him from living out his queer experience. Once he finally allowed himself to be free publicly, he was able to find love in his current partner of two years.

“The trip made me realize that I’m not a super weird person that needs to be ‘fixed,’” he said.

Batiste believes that therapists can do more for Black queer mental health issues by getting in touch with their more spiritual side as this has helped her to better understand the holistic person and go beyond the surface.

“Something I’ve noticed is that almost all queer people feel unseen to some degree, but the Black subculture is even worse. People tend to

blanket queer people and think they go through the same things, but this is completely untrue. Therapists need to understand generational trauma and how conditioning is passed down. Let’s get to a place where we can identify what we’re feeling, validate what we’re feeling, and FEEL what we’re feeling. Then channel those through healthy outlets. Who are YOU? Not what your trauma tried to make you into.”

Through finding this love and acceptance for both him and his partner, he was able to learn how to check in with himself. He knew that he’d never treat anyone how he’d once treated himself.

Junior added the more he’s learned to love himself, the more he’s brought so much love and good fortune into his life. Awareness has helped him overcome depression, but more than anything, it’s been meditation that’s helped as it recenters and grounds him through those tough moments.

Although he, like most of us, still struggles with mental health, he’s learned how to channel darker times into healthy expulsions of emotion. At 31-years-old, this spicy Aries finally said he feels that now is the beginning of his life and he’s the one leading the rhythm.

“Everyone grows up with their own trauma, which is an idea that has become more normalized with time,”

Junior said. “But, I do feel like the traumas within the queer community aren’t looked at in the same way. I’ve closed a lot of doors of my identity just based on witnessing how others in society move. If I grew up in a naturally more affirming environment, I’m sure I would have less mental hurdles to pass.”

Ervina Desaussure, MAMFT, family therapist at Metropolitan Mental and Sexual Health Center, said there is a dual identity role in daily life, where Black queer people are seen as Black but may not necessarily see them as queer.

“Black therapists don’t understand queerness,” she said. “Queer therapists don’t necessarily

know how to address race.”

She added that there are not nearly enough therapists in the state of Kentucky that focus on or understand these issues and believes it to be necessary for all therapists to undergo training for both race and queerness in a way that intersects and shows the trauma connections between both, historically. Desaussure has a message to all Black queer individuals struggling with these issues:

“Don’t quit. Hold your therapist accountable. If they list that they work with racial and queer issues, then hold them to that. The client shouldn’t have to teach the therapist. The therapist should be responsible for going out and getting that knowledge for themselves.”

Junior himself is a resilient individual. He uses his music career to advocate and empower Black queer individuals. Junior’s existence alone is proof that Black queer individuals are beautiful, strong people that matter.

“There are things that Black people are told and queer people are told that need to be broken down. “Society conditions us to view both through a very toxic lens. The more I learn about my Blackness and queerness, I understand how untrue and dangerous the stereotypes are. Seeing Black queer people for who they truly are is paramount in addressing their mental health.”

I’m
the prey
to every
predatory
thought
I just pray,
every day,
that I don’t
get caught

Lyrics from
“Don’t Get Caught”

Yeah I
feel like
sometimes
somebody’s
after me
And this
fight of life
is just me
versus me

Lyrics from
“Me Vs. Me”

PRONOUNS 101

SARAH GARDINER
she/her

Pronouns matter. Apart from name, they are the main way we address other humans in conversation, thought, and identity. So understanding them and getting them right is vital.

Let's start by defining the concept. Pronouns are the words we use when referring to another person. The three sets you will hear most often are:

The feminine: she/her/hers

The non-binary/gendered:
singular they/them/theirs

The masculine: he/him/his

While other sets exist, these are the ones by far most utilized in everyday language. The feminine and masculine are the most commonly used because of the ingrained binary that American society has faced prior, but it can be harmful to guess pronouns. If you have not been expressly told someone's gender, do not assume it. Instead, try introducing yourself and your own pronouns so they feel comfortable doing the same.

The singular "they" (which has a long history of non-gendered use within the English language, dating back to the 1400's and used by authors like Jane Austen and Shakespeare) is the most commonly adopted gender-neutral noun, though others do exist. We already use "they" in everyday language. Think of the phrases: "Who do they think they are?" or "You showed them!" We use this language daily, so we have all the skills already. We just need to learn to use them.

Learning new pronouns when your brain has been wired to the binary normative of feminine and masculine can take practice, but learning and growing are an important part of our community and being a human in general. Don't be afraid to mess up — messing up is part of life. As long as you learn from mistakes, get better, try harder, and be more considerate. And, if you find yourself in a situation where you have been corrected, thank the person for informing you and proceed from there.

Pronouns are some of the most fundamental ways we can be good allies and considerate humans. To respect someone's pronouns is to respect them, their experience, and their identity. Pronouns can evolve as well, both situationally and because of the fluidity of gender. Respecting pronouns is one the simplest, easiest, and most fundamental ways to show respect and consideration for others.

Listen and respect when someone tells you how to refer to them and understand that they owe you no explanation if their pronouns or identity do shift. Believe and respect what people tell you. It is not for you to question. It is not yours to decide. What people say about who they are is valid. No questions asked.

Since this article was first published in 2018, pronoun usage has evolved exponentially—both in terms of widespread adoption and our knowledge of gendered languages. It's become common for pronouns to be listed on social media profiles, email signatures, and name tags, and introductions will often come with preferred identifiers.

"Hi, my name is Sarah—she/her/hers."

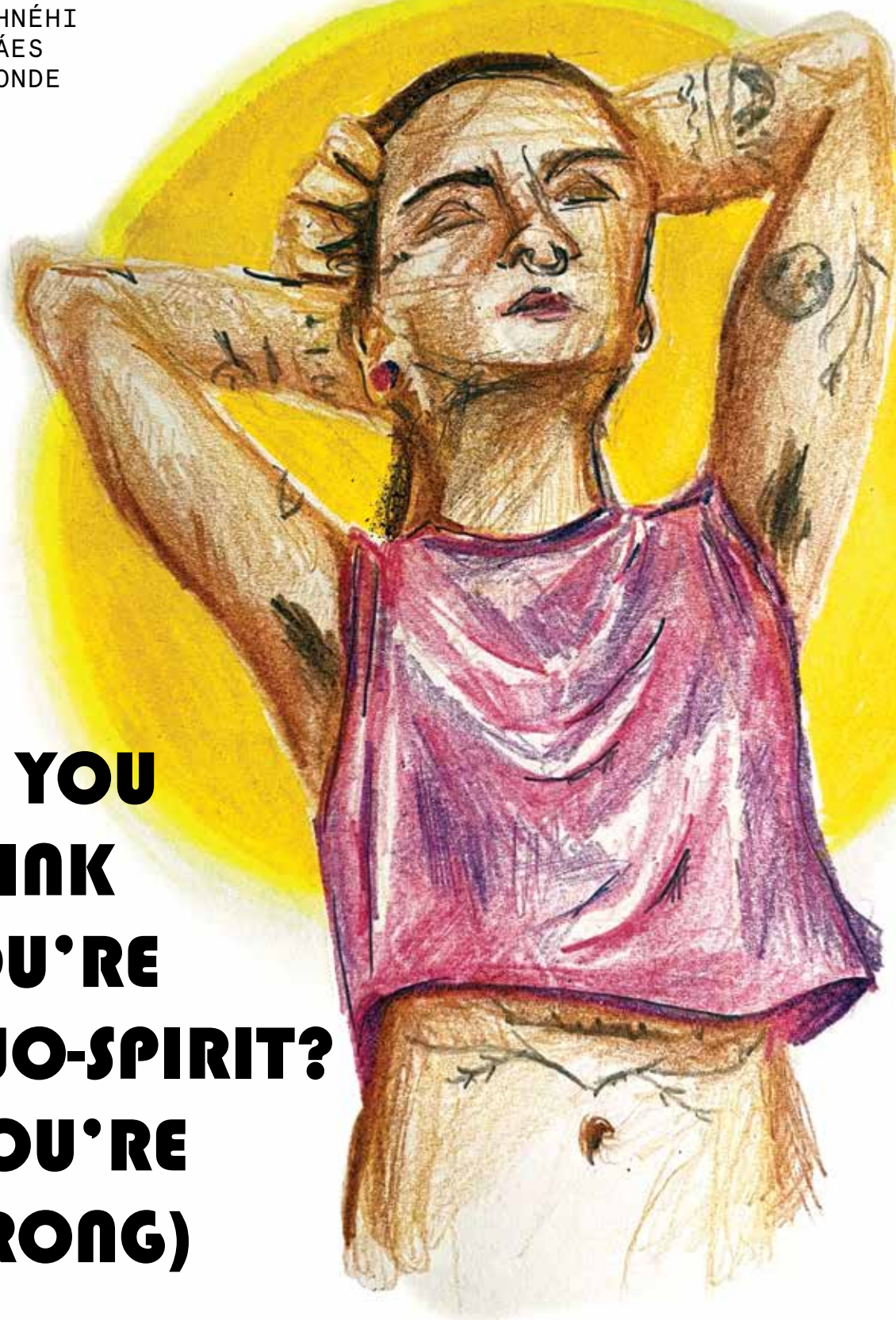
Multi-pronoun usage has also become more common, such as "She/They," "He/Them," or any other combinations for which a person identifies. These can mean different things for different people, but it is often a way of expressing comfort with fluidity on the gender spectrum.

The more current widespread knowledge of gender identities and pronoun acceptance would have amazed my 2018 self when I first drafted this article. We have grown so much in the past four years, but just like any progress, there is still a far way to go. As we continue to learn and evolve, the core of solution remains the same: be kind, be respectful, and be open to education from those willing to teach you more about themselves.



artwork by Andy Aliaga-Mendoza

SO YOU THINK YOU'RE TWO-SPIRIT? (YOU'RE WRONG)



Although I truly wish it came as a surprise, the trend of Non-Natives referring to themselves as Two-Spirit remains a festering sore on the underbelly of the queer community. We live in an era where it's uncouth to police another queer person's identity, to tell them that the way they navigate their own queerness in this cis/heterosexist world is harmful, and in most cases, I agree with this position.

It is a truth very unfamiliar to queer white people, and to the white community at large, that there are identities, practices, religions, and philosophies in this world that are "closed" to non community members. To many white people, there is a hyperfocus on the idea that this means they will never be able to "sit at the cool kids' table," so to speak, and although that isn't necessarily true, it misses the point of what it means when a practice or identity is closed. Far too much energy is spent "debating" whether or not closed practices and cultures even exist, which is a very poorly veiled attempt at dismissing the concerns and lived experiences of marginalized groups, particularly BIPOC, so that colonizers can continue to, well, colonize.

Closed identities and practices are, rather simply put, closed to people who have not been initiated, accepted, or otherwise born into a particular community or cultural group from where those practices originate. There are many contributing factors as to why a practice may be closed, including everything from colonial resistance, occult secrecy, hereditary power, or even simply a long history of being threatened and stolen from. All of this is to say, Native cultures, identities, and spirituality are closed in many different aspects, largely due to the violent history of colonialism literally legally banning our cultural practices*. However, many of our identities and philosophies are closed to Non-Natives simply because Non-Natives live outside of the complex webs of social roles, values, beliefs, and systems of knowing and living that have taken lifetimes to build and understand.

Being Two-Spirit is one example of such a closed societal role, an identity that is closed indefinitely to Non-Natives.

It is impossible to define Two-Spirit in a singular sentence, or in a simplified way that

would only strip such a purposefully nuanced and flexible term of all its power. Even to call Two-Spirit inherently queer would be a gross misunderstanding of all the ways the identity can manifest and be understood by the people who belong to it.

The term itself is attributed to an Anishnaabe elder Myra Laraméc during the LGBTQ Native American conference in 1990. She herself is accredited with receiving the term "Two-Spirit" in a dream. The term arose as a direct translation of the Anishinaabemowin term 'niizh manidoowag', literally meaning two spirits, and was purposefully designed to be a term that any Native who wished to connect with a historicity of gender and sexual abundance could use, as the terms "gay," "lesbian" and even "transgender" are largely inadequate for many Native peoples. The idea of queerness and the division of sexuality from gender are foreign concepts to many peoples Indigenous to this continent, but unfortunately, colonialism has done everything in its power to destroy our original conceptions and the names that once flowed so easily to describe Native gender and sexual abundance. Two-Spirit was forged almost as a standby, until Natives from communities all over Indian Country could reclaim the words that have belonged to them long before whiteness tried to remove them from our throats.

In addition to the fact that Two-Spirit arose as a reclamation of a sea of gender and sexual identities that settlers have consistently abhorred, the term also empowered whole generations of Native youth and elders alike to reclaim the powerful roles Two-Spirituality afforded them in their traditional societies. In direct contrast to the modern, rightful rejection of toxic gender roles in white society, the reconnection to traditional gender roles has been necessary, particularly in the case of empowering Two-Spirit members of our communities.

Native identities, even simply tribal belonging, comes with a role, a duty to your Nation, community, family, clan, and ancestors. Being Native, and more importantly saying you're Native, is not just an identity to wear or throw into conversation; it comes with a history and a purpose of belonging. Being Native is something you do and something you are born into. One

could even say that to be born Native is to be born into circles of kinship, each requiring their own tending-to, a network of responsibilities that do not come lightly, although they do come beautifully.

For Non-Natives to identify with the term Two-Spirit because they feel as if there is a masculine and feminine spirit inside of them is to hyper-generalize one of many understandings of Two-Spirit, and to boil it down to an all too superficial interpretation of the text. If the word you are looking for is bi-gender, dual-gender, or genderfluid, those already exist without a history of being stolen. Non-Natives using that term so freely for themselves is honestly disgusting, degrading, and insulting when our traditions have been banned, when we have been whipped, imprisoned and murdered for something as simple as praying in our language. An identity that was forged out of resisting the violence of colonialism being used by the very colonialists themselves on these lands is absolutely infuriating. To claim Two-Spirituality as a Non-Native is the direct equivalent to claiming you belong to an Indigenous community when you do not. Don't Elizabeth Warren your way through queer spaces.

I do definitely sympathize with the longing of many white queers to connect their queerness and gender abundance to a history that isn't based in violence and opposition. I do believe in the power of these things, and the need to find spirituality in sexual and gender abundance. However, it is not our fault that Christian colonialism along with other violent forces in Europe worked to undo and erase traditional roles and identities relevant to white cultures, and you do not get to piggyback off of our suffering and our hard work. It's a difficult, long, and frightening process to dig into history to find traditional identities, but we have and are doing that work, so do it for yourself instead of profiting off the labour of Indigenous peoples.

Also remember that tradition starts somewhere, and just because you lack a traditional or historical term, doesn't mean the terms used now are any less valid or powerful. You can create your own traditions and be the start of a new chapter in history at any time, and I believe that is very much happening within the queer community in this very moment. Be the bearer

of a torch of queer tradition that generations of queer youth will be proud to carry, one that isn't marred by appropriation and perpetuation of colonial violence. Be the ancestors you have always wished for.

On another note in the same vein, retire that ratty dream catcher, bury the sage and sweetgrass you bought, retire smudge sticks, and get the hell out of sweat lodges. Reach into the vast history of European spiritualities to either revive or construct your own spiritual practices. Ours belong to us and would be much better off without white hands endangering our medicines and misinterpreting our ceremonies.

As always, thank you for taking the time to read this piece, and let these words sit with you until they become second nature in your mind.

NIÁ:WEN TÁNON SKÉN:NEN KÉNHAK!

**In the late 1800's the federal government adopted the Code of Indian Offenses, which among many other policies, punished Natives practicing traditional spiritualities on reservations by whipping, withholding food rations, and even imprisonment. It wasn't until the 1970's that a religious freedom act was passed for Indigenous peoples in the U.S.*



"Amayi / By the Water"

DIIKAHNÉHI AKWIRÁES DELARONDE *they/them*

I'M THE GIRL WHO'S F**KING YOUR HUSBAND

ANYA LEE *she/her*

Despite being someone who publicly announced they once threw up on a man while sucking dick (and has routinely told that story as an ice breaker) some of you may think there's nothing I won't share or say. An open book, with open legs, and an open heart (read: throat) always seemed to be the concept people had of me, with backhanded "brave" comments being thrown at me since the first moment I walked into a PacSun and left with turquoise blue hoochie shorts that my balls were constantly sliding out of if I so much as briskly walked: but get this, guys—I experience shame, and there are definitely some things I sit on.

Things I don't want people to know. Things that are hard to discuss, hard to bring up, hard to digest, because they involve my participation directly. And I always mull over saying these things, because I don't want to be judged for them, or risk having something out there that will degrade my stock in a future scenario, with some future partner, who couldn't possibly see themselves with someone who'd do this... But, as a writer, I owe it to myself (and the readers who endlessly validate my delusions of grandeur) to be candid. To be real. To be raw.

And in doing so, I bring you here today to say: I'm the girl who's fucking your boyfriend.

There are a thousand different variations of this story, different ways I can word that sentence, but the fact is, I'm a covetous whore, and in certain

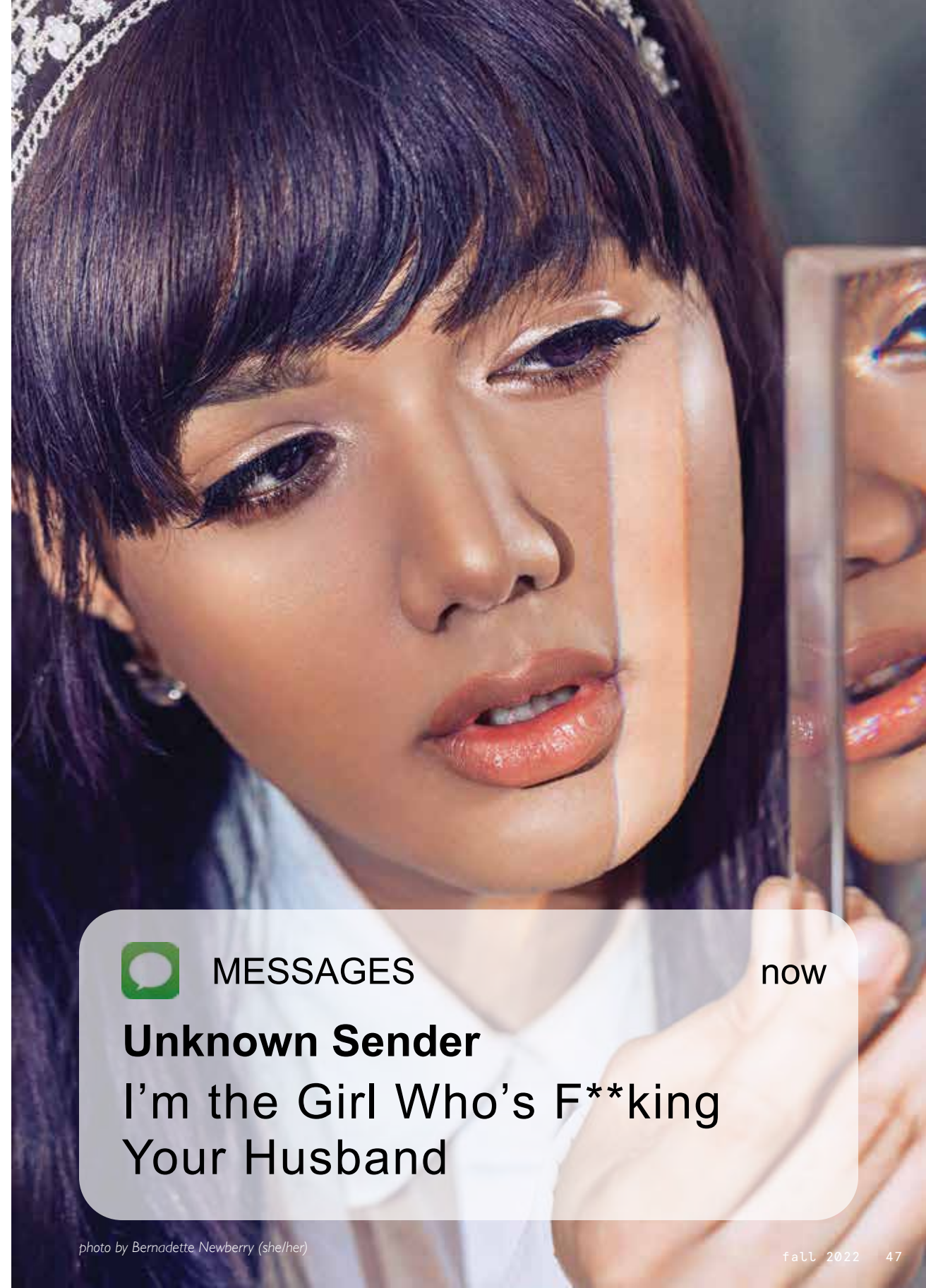
contexts deserve my hands cut off. And the worst part, is in these scenarios, in these terrible things I've done, there wasn't much guilt. There was selfishness. There was greed—maybe even resentment, for those around me who had what seemed picturesque. Happy, and perhaps, because of the ugliness or darkness in my own withering heart, I wanted to trample upon it... and even if that wasn't the goal, it was certainly the outcome.

My first experience with a man was exactly under that context. It was my last summer before college, and my friend's boyfriend was getting a little too curious. And fully knowing that was someone she was involved with, I became greedy. I had never dated—I had never even touched another person, honestly, and having turned 18 I felt I had an obligation to break my loneliness and become as experienced as those around me...

And after a dramatic next day (because I snitched immediately), my life followed this trend. I gained some new sense of fucked up validation, and my undiagnosed Borderline Personality Disorder was flaring way the fuck up—the concept that someone would desire someone as insignificant, as flawed, as inhuman (and dysphoric) as me, that they'd break taboos of their perceived orientation just to risk it with me? It gave me some nasty validation. It scratched an itch I didn't know I had, a desire to be important, even if it was in such a disgusting way.

So people's husbands—people's boyfriends, their fathers. It didn't matter. I consumed them until I was full, only to be emptied again by morning and frenzied with why. Riddled with self-disgust, I carried on with indifference towards my actions, myself, and what I was doing. I had been in people's homes, beds, cars: I had been in classes with girls who's boyfriends I had slept with, feeling terrible sensations in my stomach each day I saw them: and at some point, I tried to avoid this trend and didn't really analyze the metrics of cheating. I only considered that I was getting what I immediately wanted, and not why that was just what was coming my way. Why was I so magnetizing to cheaters, and why did they feel safe enough to just... throw it all away?

As a transwoman, I'm marginalized. I'm not worth a lot in the society that's built right now—I'm the first to be silenced, ridiculed, and reduced. I



MESSAGES

now

Unknown Sender

I'm the Girl Who's Fking Your Husband**

photo by Bernadette Newberry (she/her)

have to try twice as hard to be pretty, and the recognition I get is always cut in half by the fact that, no matter how hard I attempt to be other than, I was born a man. And because of my low stature, men believed that I was easy to use and discard. The less proximity I had to humanity, the easier I was to compartmentalize as a fantasy. They already had a human at home, a real person with needs and complications they were harming: but me? There was no harm in picking me. And because of my twinkling, narcissistic desire to be a flower admired by all, I ignored the fact that I was less moonflower, and more devil's trumpet: I was fucking poisonous.

Reality hit me like a brick to the head one morning as I got an email from someone's wife, asking about the contents of her husband's hard drive: it was loaded with nudes of me, videos, photos—someone I had slept with prior (who's favorite form of dehumanizing me was asking me not to talk and to immediately get on my knees) who continued to interact with me post marriage. She appealed to my sympathies, heartbroken, grief stricken. I told her what she wanted to know, and soon her husband was in my DMs, begging me not to ruin his life—and it was... Appealing to do so, but instead I just assured him it would be fine, as if it was my place to determine that. And it was!

They're still together, and he probably still cheats.

I didn't touch another woman's husband or boyfriend or whatever for most of my adult life after that. But obviously, if that was forever, I wouldn't have some story like this on my

mind, would I? It was the past summer, and some woman's husband or another came to me after a lot of extensive loneliness on my end. I was dejected, fully into my BPD diagnosis (and had very creatively ostracized and harmed a person who cared for me as a result of being untreated for so long), had relapsed on self harm, alienated my friends with isolative and insane behavior, and

wanted anyone, literally anyone, to pretend they cared about me.

I began to pursue this dialogue, this idea to compartmentalize this—I wasn't a real person, and I wasn't meant to be, and the space I was made to exist in for long, the things that kept happening and the people who kept pursuing me, out of a sea of single people, were always partnered with someone because of the Lana del Rey-coded delusion that I was meant to be the other woman. If I could toss aside my own desires for care, for affection, for the real idea of being with another person and being of value (things that seem impossible even now), I could attain happiness. If I just tossed away the idea I was deserving of more, and kept in my place of secret affections and meetings and scheduled times of sneaking away and sneaky interactions, then I could long for nothing; and it left me in the worst state I've been in mentally in my life.

And I did it again to myself, and again—corrupting my mental state with concepts of inhumanity. Letting people express desire of me they have to hide, that becomes fixation, each time leaving me feeling more detached from who I thought I could be and who reality consistently tells me I am. My relationship with my body isn't the same. My relationships with people aren't either. I know the secret sides of people, including myself, and I know what people do when they're desperate, when they're selfish.

And perhaps you, a reader, have cheated. Maybe you've been cheated on, maybe both. Did you stay, did you leave? What did you risk, and what was lost? Was it worth anything to begin with? I find myself wishing I didn't exist in a space of playing with hand-me-downs, but with what I've done and seen, is happiness through others an actual possibility? Can you really be with another person, honestly, and not be deceived? Is it simply a part of life? As I find myself yet again pursuing the concepts of love and trust in another person, who's arms I find myself in peacefully, what awaits me? Can we really just run and pursue love, thoughtlessly, and succeed, or must we be wary of every step, praying it's not the one where we trip and find ourselves extending a hand to no one, or worse, finding the person you're looking for has already taken someone else's hand behind you?

artwork by Matthew McDole (he/him)



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LIFE ON THE MARGINS OF MEDICINE

ADRIAN SILBERNAGEL *he/him*

This story is the result of collaboration between Queer Kentucky and Cervical Cancer Awareness & Prevention (CCAP). CCAP Across The Map, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that works to decrease the global rate of cervical cancer through providing cervical health education and increasing access to HPV vaccines and diagnostic screening measures in under-resourced areas around the world.

When I went in for my hysterectomy consultation, I had a cisgender female friend accompany me. The nurse loudly misgendered me in the waiting room (per usual) calling out “Miss Adrian Silbernagel.”

My friend stood up first, as we had discussed, and I trailed behind her, posing as the supportive boyfriend. When we got to the exam room the nurse stopped me. “You’ll wait in the hall for this part, hon. Patient confidentiality.” My cheeks burned as I explained to her that I was the patient. She looked royally confused. I spelled it out for her: I am a trans man; I still have my original plumbing, and I’m here for my hysterectomy consultation.

Embarrassed and flustered, she pushed a plastic cup into my hands and instructed me to go to the bathroom down the hall and give a urine sample. I walked quickly with my head down. A group of women in scrubs whispered and stared at me as I passed by them.

Medical settings are a minefield for trans people. You never know what microaggressions will occur (Misgendering? Inappropriate questions? Gawking? Displays of annoyance, confusion, anger?) or where those microaggressions will

occur (At registration? In the waiting room? On the exam table?). And unless you hit the jackpot and find a competent, affirming provider, it’s a minefield you’ll navigate your entire life – no matter how well you “pass” in other contexts.

At the doctor’s office, everything is on display – if not your body, then your medical history – and having a beard and a vagina tends to be a dead giveaway.

But ignorance and implicit bias are not the only barriers to adequate care. There is also hate-fueled medical negligence and malpractice: medical professionals who refuse to treat trans people due “religious or moral objections” or worse, medical professionals who intentionally harm trans people. A lack of options coupled with desperation to alleviate dysphoria makes trans people highly susceptible to malpractice. This nearly happened to me, when I visited a surgeon who was the only one offering top surgery for trans men at that time in the city where I lived.

There were definitely red flags at the initial consultation, but I was so desperate for relief from my chest dysphoria that I overlooked them. When I called to schedule my surgery date, I was



informed that there would be no anesthesiologist fee, because they would not be putting me under. Both my partner and my therapist strongly encouraged me to seek a second opinion. I did, and the second surgeon I visited was mortified to learn that this surgery was being performed on patients who were conscious.

A year later, the first surgeon was arrested for showing up drunk to surgery, and soon after that accounts came out from multiple trans men whose top surgery he had botched.

A lack of established, accessible information regarding our health and medical needs is another barrier to healthcare trans people face. Vital studies have shown that trans people are at a higher risk for certain cancers, including cervical cancer, due to the health, economic, and personal disparities we face as a community.

In my experience, the trans community is aware of this, but only vaguely, through hearsay or anecdotal evidence. The conversations I've been privy to around the risk for cervical cancer, both in online and in-person communities, typically yield more questions than answers:

- Does hormone replacement therapy (HRT) cause cervical cancer?
- Are my chances of getting cervical cancer still greater than a cis woman's if I go for regular screenings?
- Do I need to have a hysterectomy if I'm going to take testosterone (T)?
- How soon after going on T should I have a hysterectomy?
- Will I still have to go for screenings after surgery?

Most of us know that we "should" be getting routine screenings (a measure which, in addition to getting vaccinated for HPV, helps prevent 93% of cervical cancer cases) but we dread the thought of it, and we don't know enough about the risks to make an informed decision.

By the time I had my hysterectomy at age 32, I probably should have had at least 17 pelvic exams: one pre-op, one post-op, and one every year upon turning 18. But for me, the intense dysphoria and panic attacks that these exams triggered (one of which resulted in me passing

out on the exam table) just didn't seem worth it, and so for most of my adult life, I avoided that aspect of my healthcare completely.

While transgender support groups are generally careful to state that they cannot provide medical advice, the fact is trans folks get medical advice from each other all the time. What else are we to do when there are little to no long-term studies on trans health, when there are no readily available comprehensive resources for prevention, and when just last year 50% of trans people in the US reported experiencing mistreatment by a medical provider?

It should come as no surprise that "...transgender men are significantly less likely to access cervical cancer screenings than non-transgender women, despite the fact that 92% of transgender men have not had their cervixes removed."

We are also 10 times more likely to have an inadequate diagnostic Pap smear test than cis women. Trans women who have had lower surgery (surgeries to create a vagina and possibly a cervix) also have a small risk of developing cervical cancer. But no recommendations exist for this except to "talk to your healthcare provider."

The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn the court case Roe v. Wade, a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Court ruled that the Constitution conferred the right to choose to have an abortion, poses yet another barrier to healthcare for trans people.

As abominable as this development is, it doesn't feel too shocking: having our bodily autonomy negated and not being able to access medically necessary treatments is all we know in the trans community. Still, as our collective situation worsens, medical professionals are in dire need of education around transgender health, and trans-specific sensitivity trainings that aim to combat bias and prevent microaggressions. More than ever, it's a matter of life and death.

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ÅNGEL 004

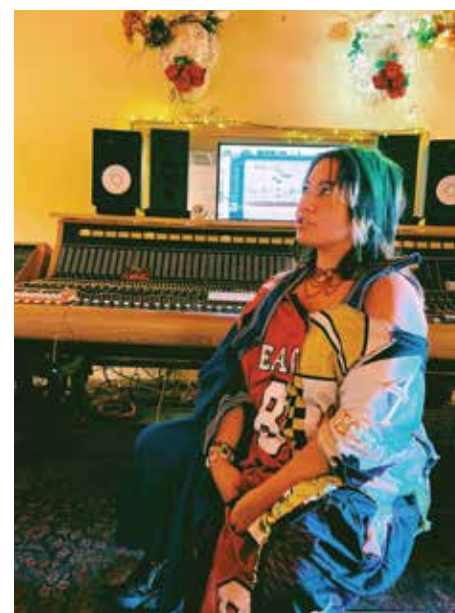
ÅNGEL 004 is an up and coming music producer and DJ from Louisville, KY. ÅNGEL 004 is known for their blend of house, techno, hip hop and pop sounds both in the studio and on the DJ decks.

Close community, nature, fashion, and authenticity weave their way through ÅNGEL 004's lyrics and songwriting.

story by Aaron Thomas | photos by Bearykah Shaw

"I've always been producing music, and had two full length albums by the time I was 17. I don't share them much because they're a bit premature comparatively. I took a bit of a lull for a while, then the Covid quarantine happened. I was locked up in my house searching for my meaning, so I started DJing and writing music again out of desperation with the encouragement and guidance of my partner."

"I'm leaning on people and other artists to inform me of my journey. I am a mirror of the love other people give to me. For me, the existence of ÅNGEL 004 is all about being around artists, being around people who are expressive, being around people who are supportive and then giving that back to people whenever I can."



"I think the beautiful thing about my artistic identity is that it is a community built thing."

"I've always felt very connected to my mother even though I didn't really know her. Everyone in my family says I have her witty, badass attitude. I am her. She was 18 when she had me and 21 when she passed, so I'm always trying to have fun for her. I'm very motherly myself. I'm called mom in my household of queer artists."



A DRAG QUEEN'S QUICK GUIDE TO NOT BEING A DUMMY AT THE DRAG SHOW

SYDNI HAMPTON they/them

There's a time and a place for having fun. That time and that place is when the overture starts at your local drag bar. There's music, dancing lights and probably a drag queen performing something from the Dua Lipa catalog of certified BOPS. It's easy to get lost in it all. BUT WAIT – You have a sudden urge to get on stage with the performer during their number? You've had three too many and you've gone full Aunt Stacey at the Florida Georgia Line concert? Now you're being escorted out of the club, the DJ is making fun of you on the mic and you can't find your GBF who brought you here?

Don't worry, babes, that won't happen to you. I will guide you through how to behave and keep your wits at The Drag Show. We all like to unwind and have a good time but there are inappropriate ways of participating as an audience member at a show like this. I'll encourage you to get loosey without getting too goosey.



First, let's talk about what we DO want to see at a drag show, from the performer's perspective.



A drink in your hand, be it a cocktail or mocktail.

There's an old adage that goes, "the more you drink, the prettier we look," and this is a fact. If you drink enough, I'll actually BE Shania Twain on stage and we'll both be better for it. Additionally, this means you've been supporting the bar, and that means our bartenders are happy and those bartenders are our best friends.



Hootin' and Hollerin'.

The sound of an audience living for you and your gig sounds an awful lot like clapping, the sound of a few loud whistles and a couple "ICON!" "LEGEND!" "STAR!" So if you're really living for it, please make it known. Even if you're not, clap. Everyone who gets on stage has a lot of bravery to do so, and your applause tells them they belong there, or at least fuels their delusion that they do.



Cash-ola. Cointhotas. BILLS, baby.

There's few hobbies more expensive than drag. Running a non profit illegal big cat sanctuary, collecting Franklin Mint and a coke habit. And some of these girls do both. So for the sake of my drag and my expansive Franklin Mint collection, if you see me with a wig on, assume I'm begging for money.



You having a damn good time!

This can look like a lot of things. Shouting the lyrics to "Misery Business" while Gilda Wabbit does a Lara Croft-ian dodge roll or throwing money on the stage in awe of Diana Rae and Uhstel H Valentine kicking, splitting and buckin' the HOUSE DOWN to a Megan Thee Stallion medley. It can look like you taking photos and videos and posting them on your socials and tagging the performers.

Ultimately, drag shows are for you to be ENTERTAINED while the people performing for you are getting APPRECIATED for the work and time they put in to present it all to you.

Now, for the things we DO NOT want to see...

I'd like to point out that all of these behaviors I've seen from both sober folks and drunk folks. A drag show is a great place to see gender expression, learn a little about queer folks in your community, have a gay ol' time and be yourself. It's all achievable by following my guidelines above, I do it every weekend that I'm out watching the show if I'm not in it, and I'm doing it with a belly full of Raspberry White Claws and Saltwater Woody's Rum. I believe in you!



Never, under ANY circumstance, get on the stage unless expressly asked to do so by the performer.

There's many reasons for this. With my wigs, for example, I have a 30-40 degree cone of vision at times. So if you come up just beyond my peripherals, you risk bodily harm if I am dancing around on stage and you sneak up on me. Some drag queens will do kicks and jump splits. They're best seen from your seat, not a stiletto in your eye. So for your safety, don't. Also, the performers have spent literally anywhere from \$100 to \$2000+ to present to you a look and they only have 3-5 minutes to show you the look and give you a performance. You being up there uninvited only takes away from the performance and that is selfish. You are not the star of the show. No one paid a cover to see you, diva. Siddown.



Please, do not put your money in your mouth when tipping the performers.

For obvious reasons. Please visit CDC.gov if you have additional questions about why this is literally so stupid.



Don't occupy the space where the line forms to tip.

Every venue where there are drag shows there will be tip lines. Or convenient places to tip performers. The way I see it, if you are in that line, you better have money and it better be for me.



Don't assume a performer is a man or a woman.

There are drag queens who were assigned female at birth. There are drag queens who are cis-gender men. There's drag queens that are trans-women. There's non-binary performers. What I'm getting at, don't make assumptions. The best way to remedy this is to just call us beautiful. Example: Instead of, "HE'S so beautiful" try "Beautiful, you are so great and stunning. I love your wig! Here's a dollar." See? Easy!

Sprinkle Sparkle

A PODCAST

Sprinkle Sparkle celebrates Black women and people of marginalized genders prioritizing pleasure as an act of defiance. Host Nubia Bennett builds each conversation about a simple question:

How did you center your own pleasure today?

"Black women have not been asked how they're taking care of themselves. I think we're doing a better job of asking each other."

— Nubia Bennett

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COVID

A Reflection from March 14, 2020
SARAH GARDINER

Illness isn't a foreign concept to queer people. The HIV epidemic of the 1980's showed us just how quickly a community can be torn apart, how easily a government can turn a blind eye to the suffering of its citizens, and how vital it is for those affected to stick together. Epidemic is in our cultural DNA.

And yet, here we are, still at risk and still on the outskirts of aid in a time of crisis. Between our jobs, healthcare, and our financial security, the queer community teeters on the edge of being left behind by America once again. Add in the fact that queer people are more likely to smoke, drink heavily, and use drugs than our straight counterparts, our risk for more serious health issues grow—all while many of us go without easy or affordable access to healthcare.

We are a community of artists and entrepreneurs, service workers and the self-employed. When small business and non-corporate jobs begin to close, queer people are directly affected. Most of us queer people in Kentucky don't have a salary or benefits or a 401k that we are now fretting over, because Lord knows most of us won't be retiring. While many Americans are wringing their hands over the dipping DOW, we turn to social media asking for jobs, for help, for anyone to hear our call. We aren't worried about our stocks. We are worried about survival.

With the Coronavirus outbreak now officially a pandemic, the community's response has been so classically queer that it's almost comforting to know that some things will never change. First there were the memes—because we learned young that sometimes the only way to survive is with a callous joke and a good read.

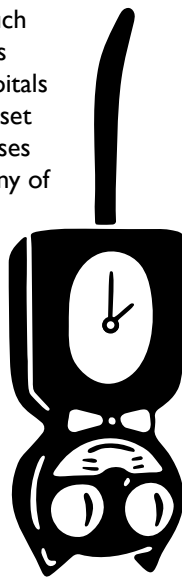
Next came the fear. The Facebook posts, the Instagram stories, the callout tweets all showed that the tide had shifted. People started to get worried, and worry spreads like wildfire.

And yet, in the most lovely and queer final turn, last came the community. Social media became a place of hope (a crazy sentence to write in 2020). Fundraisers are being set up, virtual hangouts and workshops are on the rise, but more than anything, people are standing up and reminding each other that we are not alone.

In many ways, these responses remind me of some of my favorite stories from the 80's HIV crisis. When the healthcare system and the Reagan Administration turned their back on the sick, the community stepped up and did what they had to do—what we've always had to do—take care of ourselves. When medication was federally restricted, groups set up Buyers Clubs to smuggle in life-saving drugs from countries without such restrictions. When HIV+ patients were turned away from the hospitals out of fear, private houses were set up to serve as clinics. These houses were run by fellow queers—many of them lesbians and healthcare workers—and were often the only place where the sick could find safe and inclusive help.

If one of us is in need, we are all in need.

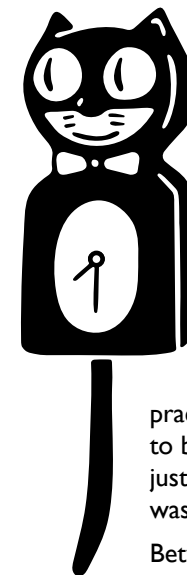
In a time of crisis, look to those building communities rather than those stoking difference. If social media gets overwhelming, mute those spreading the negative and turn toward those making the best out of a shitty situation. If you're in isolation and get lonely, find one of the AMAZING queer groups popping up for virtual connection. Most of all, if you are hungry or in need or afraid, reach out. There are a lot of queer hands ready to help you up.



MONKEYPOX

A Reflection from September 15, 2022
SPENCER JENKINS

When John Doe (name kept anonymous) noticed his swollen lymph nodes, fever and headache, he suspected that he contracted a sexually transmitted infection (STI). He decided to head to the Specialty Clinic in Jefferson County for an



STI screening. The Specialty Clinic is available to anyone seeking confidential counseling, testing, and treatment of STIs.

Thinking he would receive a positive syphilis test result, Doe was ready to take care of the infection and move on. However, a new virus infected his body — monkeypox.

“Once my rapid syphilis test came back negative the nurse practitioner and I both knew it had to be monkeypox.” Doe said. “I was just kind of shocked because I just wasn't sure how I got it.”

Between June and August of 2022, the country saw monkeypox cases rise, particularly within men who have sex with men.

According to the Center for Disease Control, people with monkeypox in the current outbreak generally report having close, sustained physical contact with other people who have monkeypox. While many of those affected in the current global outbreaks are gay, bisexual, or other men who have sex with men, anyone who has been in close contact with someone who has monkeypox can get the illness.

One thing as queer people that we have always faced, is stigma. With the AIDS Crisis we were blamed for bringing on our own demise for the “sinful” lives we led. History was repeating itself with monkeypox.

Conservatives and homophobes alike were running with the “pervert queer” narrative, like

we could ever be hurt more than we were hurt during the AIDS Crisis.

For example, conservative commentator, Bethany S. Mandel said in a now deleted tweet, “The number of people lined up in masks outside to get a vaccine for a virus they'd only get by having sex with strangers.”

Along with good ole' nostalgic conservative homophobia, queer folks were also experiencing another 80's vintage throwback: Lack of medical care, vaccines, testing and basic communication about monkeypox.

In Kentucky, specifically Jefferson County, things felt very backwards. Louisville Metro Public Health officials spoke to LGBTQ+ leaders in July about obtaining the first batch of vaccines in Jefferson County. Since the county only received about 540 doses of vaccines, LMPH said they decided to divide them up amongst Primary Care Physicians (PCPs) within Louisville that already serve “high risk” populations.

There were NO community vaccine events at this time due to the stockpile shortage, LMPH officials said. Also, only people that have a PCP that were sent the vaccines will be able to receive it and they must meet specific criteria. There is no “waitlist” to get on within LMPH to get the vaccine.

No one was given a list of PCPs with the vaccine and all of the heavy lifting and research fell on the shoulders of Queer people to find vaccines.

During all of the summer of 2022, Queer folks mobilized and demanded help with monkeypox. We didn't sit around waiting for help. We abstained from sex, we created vax events with community partners, we did the work no one else wanted to do just like in the 80s and 90s. And just like that, monkeypox cases lowered.

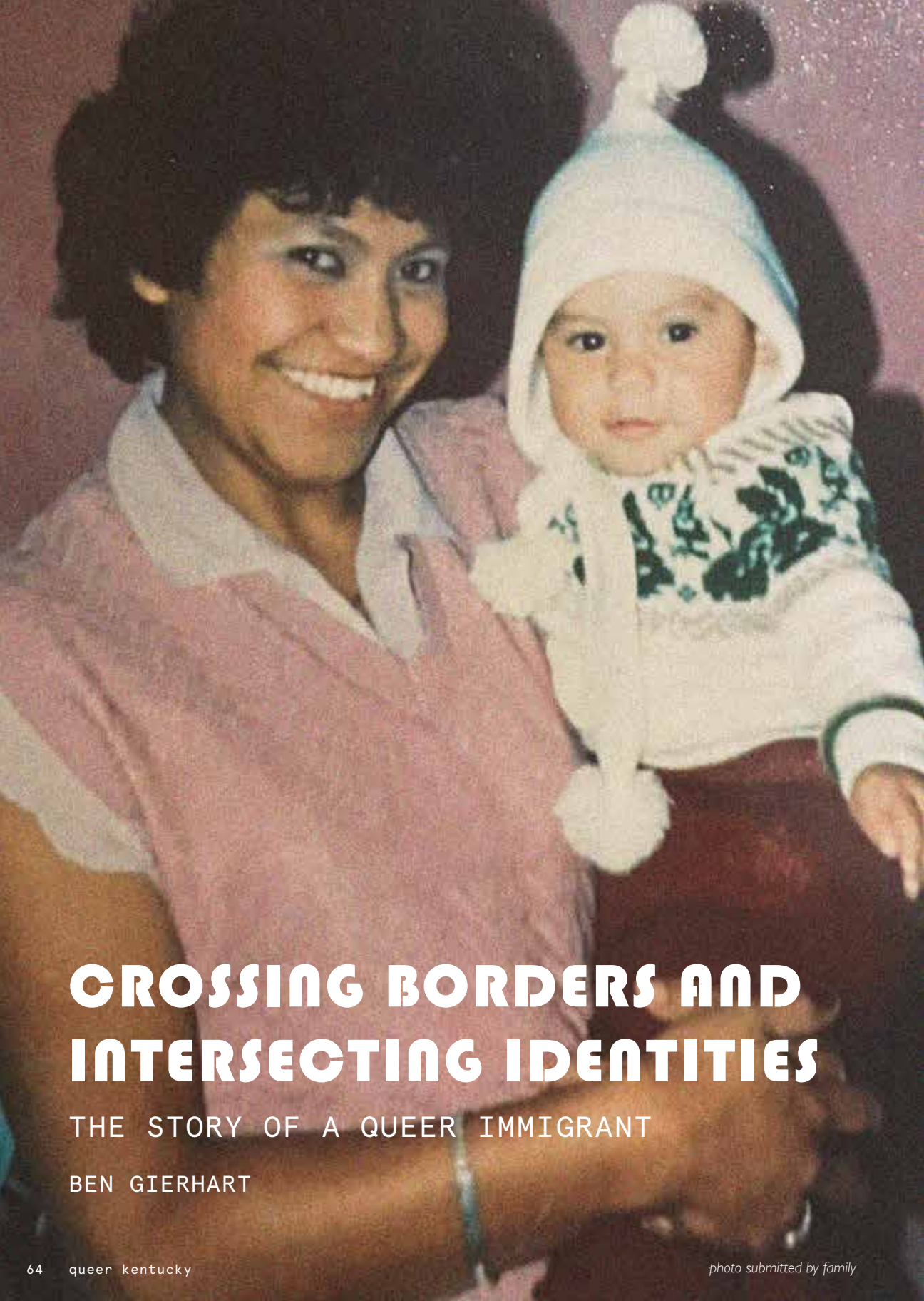
As of October 2022, Kentucky health data reports 1-3 new cases each week. Go to www.queerkentucky.com for information on what monkeypox is and how to get vaccinated.



"Bloody Sirene"
SIRENE *she/her*



"baby"
SIERRA DURBIN *they/them*



CROSSING BORDERS AND INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

THE STORY OF A QUEER IMMIGRANT

BEN GIERHART

For many in the queer community, it can feel like a constant struggle to be seen and heard—to even exist. Seemingly, the more a queer identity intersects with the identities represented within other marginalized communities, the greater the magnitude of that struggle. This dynamic is almost certainly no truer than it is with queer immigrants who must fight to be visible on at least two major battlefronts at the forefront of American politics. It's difficult to even know where to begin finding people whose stories deserve to be amplified.

"Unfortunately, I don't think I can be of help. According to our team, we have not - to their memory - had any individuals asking us to connect them to LGBTQ+ services, and the Office of Globalization does not offer any services specifically tailored to the LGBTQ+ community."

Louisville's Office for Globalization

This was the response from Louisville's Office for Globalization, whose mission is partly to assist with any human and/or social needs of recent immigrants to the area. The sharing of this statement isn't to diminish the important work that the office does but to underscore the severity of stigma that many queer immigrants face.

How does one put their best foot forward in beginning a new life in a foreign country when one does not feel comfortable sharing their queer identity with someone who is ostensibly there to help, when institutions often do not offer specific services to queer people?

Sassa Rivera is the digital communications liaison for La Casita Center, a non-profit organization that accompanies those navigating the immigration process in Louisville, KY and surrounding areas. La Casita is one of the few organizations in the area that offers these services with the queer community in mind.

"La Casita is one of the only organizations that uses gender-inclusive language in Spanish," they said. "We have staff members and board members who are queer that lead us, but because we are founded within the Latina women's movement—which has grassroots and pillars in all we work in—LGBTQ issues and movements have always been a part of it."

Since La Casita's inception, the team there connects and/or offers individuals with legal services, queer-friendly asylum, general affirmation of queer and gender identity, and more. "We've hosted a Latinx* Pride since 2017 as well, which has been an annual celebration of just specifically Latinx queer folks within our community," said Rivera.

Rivera explains that all conversations with people who bring their prospective cases to La Casita begin with practical matters, something resembling Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: "... We also make sure to see if they are hungry, if they have clothes on their back for the weather, if they have a place to stay at night. Do they feel safe? Where are they living?"

From there, the conversation grows, eventually and hopefully blossoming into trust. As Rivera puts it, "The biggest thing with everything within our work is making sure they trust us. And if they don't trust us, we're not going to hear their story."

Queer Kentucky was able to hear one such story, shared now with the permission of Luis Salazar who was born in Mexico and now lives in Louisville.

"Well, this is going to go a little bit into my mom's story more than mine to start it off, if that's OK," says Salazar. There is a sense of care in his words, not just searching for permission for how to begin his account but also for the very words to construct it—as though the wrong ones may not be suitable for a structure intended to stand indefinitely.

Salazar explains that his mother came from a background where women were not allowed to go to school. "When she turned 21 or 22, that's when she learned to read and write," says Salazar to underscore his point.

Salazar was born just a year or so later



and remembers the conditions of the home he lived in at the time: “We didn’t have running water. Our small, little house didn’t have doors. It had literal sheets and blankets to shield us from the cold and stuff.”

Searching for a better life for herself and her son, Salazar’s mother began the process of crossing the border illegally through the aid of a coyote—for those unfamiliar, this is a colloquialism referring to a person who assists in the smuggling of people across the U.S.-Mexican border, usually at a significant cost and in dangerous conditions.

“She left me behind with her sister to take care of me... [her crossing] was a horrible experience... crossing the desert... the rivers... my mom didn’t know how to swim or anything like that,” he said. “But also the experience of a 24-year-old woman crossing with a bunch of men... She was actually held captive in a hotel for several months while they continued to try and get more money from us.”

Eventually, Salazar’s mother did make it to the U.S. At three years old, Salazar got so sick that his aunt felt that she had to get him to his mother “because if I passed away, or something happened, it would be on [my mother].”

A friend of his mother’s who had crossed the border legally came back to Mexico, disguised Salazar, and took him back across the border illegally with her. “It was under the cover of her daughter,” Salazar explains. “And because I was the same age [as the daughter], I guess whoever was in control of immigration didn’t think anything about it. I was asleep, and it was just a little kid sleeping in the backseat of her car.”

Salazar described the subsequent years as living under a “big, dark secret.” “I did not talk about it, we did not tell teachers, we did not tell anyone,” he says. According to Salazar, at the time of his schooling, there were not many questions

asked about his documentation. “The only thing that I remember having a hard time with was trying to get a driver’s license for my mom. For a long time, we were driving without a license, eventually we somehow managed fake IDs and licenses... but if we ran into situations like traffic stops, we would always park the car and then walk home.”

As Salazar grew older, he began to realize he was gay. Now in his late 30s, he grew up in the 90s, during and after the AIDS epidemic.

“I was constantly making sure I did not do anything that a kid would do... scream... run... I was not allowed that. As far as the gay thing goes, coming from AIDS... everything in my life told me not to talk. It was another thing that I didn’t tell anyone.”

After high school, continuing his education was not an option—that would require elaborate forgeries that he did not have access to. Employment was often a ticking time bomb, where luck and the kindness of his managers and coworkers got him by until they didn’t. Authentic relationships weren’t possible either.

“I was constantly in fear of admitting anything. I wasn’t even allowed to drive. I went from the age of 16 to 33, driving without a license. It was that constant fear that pushed everything.... Like thinking of marrying a woman so I could start the process of becoming a citizen,” he said.

In 2006, however, Salazar did meet his eventual husband. Through him, Salazar met someone who could introduce him to gay culture but also help him begin the citizenship process. That was only part of what changed things for him though.

“One of the best things that happened for me was DACA [Deferred Action of Childhood



Arrivals]. Through Obama, I was able to find a job and work legally. I was also finally able to drive a car legally.

So there’s already that security of being able to do things legally.”

Most importantly, through the legalization of gay marriage, Salazar was finally able to enshrine his relationship legally as well as receive legal citizenship, but not without a lot of work first.

“We had to provide a lot of paperwork, a lot of pictures, a lot of proof that it was a real that we had been together so long...” Salazar said. “I mean, hundreds and hundreds. By the end, it was a thick, thick book.”

In one of the final stages of this process, Salazar had to return to Mexico. “It was one of the scariest things I’ve ever had to do. Going from Louisville, Kentucky back to Mexico for the first time since I was three was scary.”

“During that trip, my mom [who had also received American citizenship through marriage] and [my husband] came with me, and we stayed in a hotel for over a week. I had interviews. I had physicals done there. Everything, just questions after questions, injections, pictures, stripping, checking for tattoos on my body... my Spanish isn’t very good anymore... Even though they knew I spoke English, they would not speak to me in English... and there was this constant fear... if I give the wrong answer, am I going to pass?”

Salazar recalls seeing people leave their interviews crying because they’ve just been denied citizenship, so he dreaded the real possibility. Despite his fears, however, and not without some small hiccups along the way, Salazar did obtain, finally, his citizenship after this ordeal. He was denied a traditional naturalization ceremony due to the pandemic, but he remembers feeling content nonetheless.

“And so it was all worth it. And I was just happy,” he said. “I remember kind of crying a little bit at the end and walking away from it and being like, ‘I want this to be done. I want this chapter to finally be done... I don’t have to worry anymore.’”

There are so many people with stories like that of Salazar, and it is our responsibility as a queer community—and as a human community—to

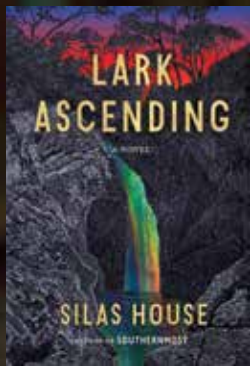


work to acknowledge that experience and make it a little easier. Sassa Rivera from La Casita describes the reality for queer immigrants best.

“Migration is a human right,” they said. “Individuals are able to transfer across borders. A lot of folks who are LGBTQ hide that identity from themselves or their parents because of immigration processes... trans immigrants are often put into a prison that assigns to their gender at birth, and so they don’t feel safe, or they’re HIV positive and they’re not looking to find those services because they now have to worry about their legal ramifications, which is basically where the government has the biggest stronghold... Despite all of this, people feel safer doing this than going back or staying home. And there’s a very harsh reality that I think our government needs to recognize: making sure that anyone who crosses our border, regardless of how they do it, has the right to stay and live without fear.”

**Queer Kentucky acknowledges the complicated usage of the word Latinx and that not all Spanish speakers are comfortable with it or other variants, such as Latine. As Sassa Rivera from La Casita puts it: “The ‘x’ in Latinx isn’t removing language. It’s a placeholder. It’s honoring the fact that there is harm done, but we also don’t know the solution... it’s also to honor the fact that I can be myself in my original language of Spanish in my original culture and know that I’m not betrayed. Which is a real big part, especially for folks who had to find themselves within the two identities [of queer and Latinx].” In this spirit – as well as for journalistic consistency – Queer Kentucky will use the word Latinx in this piece.*

SILAS HOUSE WEAVES HOPE THROUGHOUT THE PAGES OF HIS NEW DYSTOPIAN NOVEL, LARK ASCENDING



"I've burned,
and that's
what I wish
for all of you.
To burn with
anger, desire,
joy, sorrow.
All of it."

Lark Ascending



"I love and respect the entire LGBTQ+ community," Harlow said. "To me it's a no-brainer, but until everyone acts like it's a no-brainer, there's still work to do. This won't be the last time I use my platform to show and voice my stance and support. I will use every chance I get to support this community and urge everyone to follow suit."

JACK HARLOW

*Thanks for your contributions to
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"This training should be required for any workplace associated with State Government."



"This was really helpful for me to attend. I regard myself as an ally however it is on us to continue to educate ourselves. This presentation was so informative and I wish it were a requirement for life!"

soulcycle

"Our oldest kid has shared that they see themselves as non-binary. Having these types of sessions are so great because it gives us as parents better understanding and education so we can better support our amazing kid."

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Rural Kentuckian, Lane Rogers *(he/him)*, made big as an adult entertainer, now adds UK Wildcat to résumé

Read the full story by Sophia Lee on queerkentucky.com

photo by Leo Foo (he/him)

QUEER KY



FINDING HOME THROUGH THE FOG OF GO-GO BOYS AND DISCO BALLS

SPENCER JENKINS

It's go-go boy night at the local bar and as I enter, I suddenly feel like an anxious little kid again. Swarms of men crowd the space and rub up against each other (and me) as they shimmy toward the bartenders. Shy and unnerved, I cling to my good friend, Paris, who came with me. I never leave home without an emotional support lesbian. As a 33-year-old man, I clearly can't hide behind my mother's legs like I did as a 6-year-old at family reunions. But a shot of Tito's or Makers — that's the next best thing.

I feel like I don't relate with most of the gay men around me, glowing underneath the rainbow lights and disco ball. I want to, but I can't help but feel like I don't fit in. Some smile at me, I smile back. Most ask me how my LGBTQ+ advocacy work is going because my personal and professional identity are wrapped up into one. Some meet eyes with me, but we both quickly look away because of a one-off Grindr or Sniffies encounter. I order a stiff drink from the muscled bartender

that I just know finds me annoying.

I watch the crowd dance, laugh, and grind while they shove dollars into the jockstrap of an oiled up circuit boy on stage. "I want to join the dance floor, but this invisible barrier of fear prevents me from doing so," I think to myself. "I'll see if Paris wants me to buy her another drink."

An excuse to get myself another, obviously.

"Never forget to bring the lesbian security blanket," I think to myself while half-convincingly cutting up with my pillow princess pal. After we giggle and the less-than-heartfelt smirk fades from my face, I silently begin gazing around the room, not sure what to do next.

I pull out my phone and start scrolling through Instagram and Twitter, acting like I'm too busy and too good for those around me. I order another double vodka soda. I cling to Paris in hopes she will take care of me when I black out. I promise her (and myself) that I've got a handle on the

drinking situation. However, the drinks increase like I'm practicing my multiplication tables, and they slip down my throat faster and faster each round.

The anxiety from the fear of coming off as awkward, creepy and ugly in a place where I'm choosing to only pay attention to male perfection, is the same familiar anxiety of being put on the "skins" team in middle school sports: vulnerable to criticism and jokes from the cisgender male identity.

If you're 30 or older, you may remember "shirts and skins" to distinguish sports teams growing up. I always begged the universe to make me a shirt because I was self-conscious of the gut that plopped over my tight briefs and the body hair that grew in a little too soon.

For me, taking my shirt off during a game of shirts and skins soccer or football is the same feeling as walking into a gay bar fully clothed. Unlike the field, bars have booze, party favors, and the occasional bathroom rendezvous to make me feel less and less vulnerable as the night moves forward.

And, in some ways, I know I have it easier than more marginalized community members. At the end of the day, I'm still a white cisgendered man navigating mostly white-dominated spaces.

Yes, I can navigate most spaces without systemic discrimination, but fitting in with acceptance on the surface is one thing I have; feeling like I belong ... that's another story.

"I'll find the smokers," I think to myself. "The smokers are always inviting people. I'll pretend I don't have a lighter for my Newports and that's how I'll strike up a conversation."

I grab another double vodka soda on the way to the patio from another muscled crop-top wearing bartender. He glares at me like he's about to cut me off. See? I haven't had too many drinks here yet. He doesn't know about the shots I took at home to take the edge off.

I find a nearly blacked-out twink on the patio that I used to work with in my early 20s and I breathe a sigh of relief. I know we have much to catch up on — and suddenly, here's my chance to connect with another gay man at the bar. That's what we're supposed to do, right? We catch up with what

we're doing currently and get nostalgic about years passed while chain-smoking. I look at Paris for reassurance. She looks worried.

... And that's the last thing I remember.

I woke up on Paris' couch deep in the next day's afternoon. Panic sets in. You know the feeling. My pants are wet, and I don't know if it's from the rain or if I had pissed myself. I blame it on the rain. Thankfully, I passed the phone-wallet-keys check. Lord knows, there have been many times I haven't been so lucky.

I feel waves of anxiety. It's not anxiety about fitting in with the "normal" and/or "cool gays" I had aspired to connect with the night before, but a different anxiety. It's regret, shame, remorse, embarrassment, and on and on.

I breathe out a rueful "Fuuuuuck." I've now given people legitimate reasons to not enjoy my company. I ask Paris not to tell me how sloppy I was. I'm a walking fulfilled prophecy — my insecurities were confirmed by my own drunken indiscretion.

The wildest thing about this is that I'm a repeat offender. Not only has this happened several times in 2022, but I started this chaos in my gayby days. The same pattern of anxiety mixed with booze made my early 20s a blur. Once, I sobered up from heroin.

Maybe a few times. Who's counting?

"I didn't have a problem with drinking though," I assured everyone. Before I knew it, I found myself injecting dope again while drinking too. I was only 27. A DUI, the death of a friend, the loss of family trust and the increasing likelihood of my impending death led me to rehab, again.

I got clean and sober. Bravo, me.

Slowly, but surely, my greatest obsession kicked in. I was going to be normal. I was going to walk into the gay bars, drink casually with friends, and enjoy the life of a non-alcoholic drinker. "I've been sober long enough," I'd tell myself. "I can totally drink in moderation and go back to my former stomping grounds and reconnect with the 'scene.'" However, by the time I'm on my fourth or fifth double, I know I had failed with my objective of drinking socially. Eventually the bartender cuts me off, and that's why I eventually stop for the evening.

It doesn't matter though I'll do better next time I go out! I got this. Maybe the bar was too small with little to nothing to do other than drink, and that's how I lost control. Next time I'll go to the drag club. Surely I won't black out there; there is so much entertainment! But guess what? I got cut off from the bartenders there, too.

I kept pushing it. I pushed myself into spaces and substance filled situations and cloudy sex dens that I knew were toxic. I forced myself to connect with men I knew I wouldn't have more than surface-level relationships with. My impulse to fit in with scenes I knew from media like the original Queer as Folk, circuit gays on Instagram and drunken drag brunches everywhere overtook self-care.

If I'm being hella honest with y'all, there isn't one substance I can think of that I haven't tried just to fit in and feel a sense of place. I've been with the drunks, the tweakers, the junkies and the stoners. None of it ever felt like home—just placeholders until I could force myself into the next clique.

How did I get here again? Why did I think I could safely stray from my sobriety? I am an addict and an alcoholic in every sense. Now, at 33, I am back to working on sobriety one day at a time. If there is one thing sobriety does—other than make you extra horny because your dick actually works—it creates a sense of clarity through reflection and healthy community involvement.

I'm lucky to have a sober community surrounding me with love and support. We read each other from time to time, but we're a bunch of recovering drunks and junkies, so it's all good fun. This is where I fit in. What I've been looking for my entire life—Queer people that have the same problems I do and embrace their queerest of queer traits and flaws.

I think this is always where I've wanted to be but never accepted this for myself. We are Queers that don't often subscribe to the status-quo of "normal gay scenes," for lack of a better phrase. We have created spaces and communities so we can thrive where we are comfortable. I never want to forget that again.

Now, please don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with connecting with stereotypical gay spaces. People should exist where they connect and where they feel happy. Personally, I've learned

that these spaces are rarely for me. And that's alright.

I cannot speak for everyone who drinks and uses substances, but I know I cannot be an authentic person and build authentic relationships when I am under the influence. It just isn't possible for me.

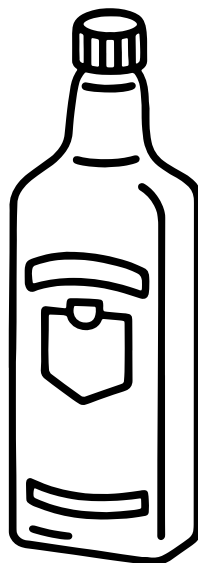
Data on the rates of substance abuse in gay and transgender populations are sparse. The Center for American Progress estimates that between 20 percent to 30 percent of gay and transgender people abuse substances, compared to about 9 percent of the general population.

The Queer community has a substance abuse problem that not enough people are talking about. Either because we don't like to paint our community in a bad light, or many of us partake in the party and are too ashamed (or out of it) to speak up. Normalizing and bringing visibility to this issue is crucial.

Visibility is life-saving. We are living in a post-Purdue Pharma OxyContin world. We are living in an alcohol- and meth-riddled community. These are BIG FACTS. They are ugly, but they are real. If we don't start talking about this more, we will lose more lives. Some won't die, but we will lose them to isolation in cloudy rooms where the time of day is rarely known and the creeping rot takes hold.

Today, I am choosing life. A life that suits me with the least amount of self-judgment.

One of my best Judys once told me, "I really enjoy Spencer more without a drink in his hand." Maybe that should've been all the validation I needed. Maybe I didn't need validation from a "cool gay" after all.



THE LESSER-KNOWN PIONEER:

Lige Clarke and The Queer Legacy Left Behind

BY BRANDON COOPER *hel/him*

It was just two months since the United States was plunged into World War II. Temperatures were below zero in the hollers of East Kentucky and, while a nation mourned, James and Corinne Clarke of Cave Branch Hollow in Hindman, Kentucky, welcomed a son to the world. Elijah 'Lige' Clarke would live out his days as a leader in the Gay Rights Movement – one deeply ahead of his time.

Lige Clarke and his partner Jack Nicols, Union Square, 1972

Who was Lige Clarke?

After graduating from Eastern Kentucky University, Clarke joined the United States Army. By the 1960s, he was working in the U.S. Army's Chief of Staff's office at the Pentagon and held nine different security clearances (the lowest of which, he'd brag, being Top Secret). Clarke worked a highly sensitive government post while actively protesting the U.S. at a time when very real, physical and professional consequences could occur.

Clarke and his partner, David Nichols met in Washington, D.C. at a gay bar called "The Hideaway."

Through their activism and other queer networking, Clarke and Nichols quickly grew to gay stardom amongst urban queer communities. Clarke joined a small group of Mattachine Society members in Washington, D.C. -- one of the first nationwide groups for LGBTQ people that began during the "homophile" movement of the 1950s. The D.C. chapter staged the first openly gay picket in front of the White House on April 17, 1965 (four years before the Stonewall Uprising). Clarke allegedly hand-painted nine of the ten signs displayed at the protest, and his activism was only just beginning.

The Activist & Writer

In the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy stoked mass fear and paranoia about gangs of gays taking over the American government from within – the lavender scare. The outcome? Mass firings of gays and lesbians from government jobs, enraged hatred towards difference, and angry queers. Clarke and his network took action.

Despite taking some of the greatest risk of his protesting peers, Clarke was often accused of "not being serious enough about his activism." Perhaps much of this discontentment in the early queer movements held for Clarke was rooted in their lack of understanding of his Appalachian foundations.

Discounting labels and 'cornering,' when asked what his sexual preference was, Clarke simply stated, "My preference is for Jack Nichols."

Clarke's queer identity, and his persona overall, was largely influenced by his Appalachian upbringing. Clarke often rejected the idea of marriage and had concern for his cohorts' incessance on equality. For Clarke, liberation for queers would come only "when society in general became sexually liberated." Discounting labels and 'cornering,' when asked what his sexual preference was, Clarke simply stated, "My preference is for Jack Nichols."

It was his understanding of society, and patience for progress, that allowed Clarke to speak and write emphatically about social and political happenings in the queer community. In the book, *I Have More Fun with you Than Anybody*, co-authored by his partner, Jack Nichols, Clarke and Nichols allude to the inefficacy of extremism – from any side of a battle: "right-wingers, we know, are only slightly more demented than left-wingers."

Clarke was proud of Appalachia, proud of his home, and proud to share it. He was said to have used his 'hillbillyness' strategically, leaning into the stereotypes held about Appalachians.

He was temperate – reserved.

A co-founder of, *GAY*, the Nation's first LGBTQ newspaper, Clarke used his "lived beliefs" to take on large social and political issues while centering his work around personal identities.

A Legacy Continues

Now, 80 years since Clarke's birth, Lora Smith, chief strategy officer for the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, and Baylen Campbell, director of community impact for Invest Appalachia, co-founded the Lige Clarke Liberation Fund to memorialize and continue Clarke's legacy. The fund, an arm of the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, will share the work and ideas of the "lesser-known pioneer," Campbell said.

Smith added that she is optimistic about the future for queer Appalachians. Growing up in Southeastern Kentucky, many queer folks were told their only option would be to get out. "Now... folks [her] age and younger [are] returning to the mountains to live and build better communities." Which is exactly why building the infrastructure – social and physical – for queer people to succeed and thrive in Appalachia is so important.

The need for queer people in Appalachia is broad, Campbell explained.

"It is important to build support and infrastructure for long-term stability for queer Appalachians," he said making a nod to Clarke's dedication to community-centric solutions. "He never stopped coming home – never."

The work Smith, Campbell, and Clarke's nephew,

Eric Rhein, are doing is particularly important given the recent attacks on queer people in conservative areas like Appalachian Kentucky.

Queer people in Appalachia have notably stood up for their communities – even when their communities disparaged them. Smith described this as "modeling a different type of acceptance and compassion – giving people the empathy that maybe you yourself were not shown – is a special part of the queer Appalachian community."

Political, social, and economic solutions require perspective and understanding.

The fund's first group of grantees was announced in Hazard at the Big Idea Fest in the fall of 2022. Funds of \$5,000 was dispersed for flood relief to queer farmers, Holliday Farms. The STAY Project: Appalachian LoveFest received \$1,500 for its music and art festival for youth in Harlan, Kentucky. The fund also provided Pikeville Pride \$1,000 to support their local efforts.

"It's important to us to ground the fund in Lige's legacy as a means to acknowledge that queer and trans folks have always been a part of mountain communities and there are queer and trans people in Appalachia's future," Smith said. "We want to support fostering, developing, and promoting queer leadership within regional nonprofits, support the creation of queer spaces, art and media, and provide queer youth with financial and other resources to seek educational and personal development opportunities that they might not otherwise have access to."

Political, social, and economic solutions require perspective and understanding – they require that all stakeholders have a seat at the table. For many queer Appalachians, the resources they need to build their seats are simply lacking. The Lige Clarke Liberation Fund honors a pioneer of the gay rights movement – a son of Appalachia – and carries his legacy on to build the strong, liberated Appalachian communities Clarke envisioned.



Cofounders of Lige Clarke Liberation Fund: Baylen Campbell (top, he/him), Director of Community Impact for Invest Appalachia. Lora Smith (top, she/her), Chief Strategy Officer for the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky.



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