

**WINNER OF THE NATIONAL LGBT
BAR ASSOCIATION MICHAEL
GREENBERG WRITING
COMPETITION**

**Downtowns and Diverted Dollars: How the
Metronormativity Narrative Damages Rural
Queer Political Organizing**

Cassidy C. Duckett*

I.	INTRODUCTION	2
II.	OVERVIEW	3
A.	<i>LGBTQ+ Folks in Rural Communities: The Story and the Reality</i>	4
1.	The Narrative of Metronormativity for All	4
2.	The Reality of Rural Queers	6
3.	Rural Queers Actively Organize in Their Communities	8
B.	<i>National Organizations in Urban Centers: Funding and Political Power</i>	11

* © 2021 Cassidy C. Duckett, J.D. Candidate, Temple University Beasley School of Law, 2021. The author would like to thank Leonore F. Carpenter for her excellence in teaching Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and the Law and her guidance on this Article. The author would also like to thank Temple Law Professors Theresa Glennon, Susan DeJamatt, and Debra Kroll for their invaluable advice about writing, law school, and centering humanity and integrity in one’s legal career.

C.	<i>Rural LGBTQ+ Communities and Discriminatory Laws</i>	12
III.	DISCUSSION	15
A.	<i>Perpetuating the Narrative Diverts Resources, Creating Concrete Harm</i>	15
B.	<i>The Rural Exodus Narrative Must Be Replaced with Nuanced Representation</i>	17
IV.	CONCLUSION	18

I. INTRODUCTION

A young man steps off a bus, dropping straight into the busy streets of New York City, suitcase in hand and smile spread across his face. He has escaped the oppressive confines of his rural hometown—including the wife to whom he is still married, the regional accent, and the football stardom in high school—with dreams of starring in shows on Broadway and existing as an openly gay man under a new name: Titus Andromedon.¹

The narrative of the queer rural² exodus and LGBTQ+ metronormativity³ is played out across numerous forms of media, including the fictional life of Andromedon in Netflix’s *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (at which the viewer is set up to laugh), the origin stories of real-life LGBTQ+ advocates assuring young people that it will get better,⁴ and the images perpetuated by pop stars and celebrities while

1. *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy Goes Roller Skating!* (Netflix Apr. 15, 2016).

2. The U.S. Census Bureau defines “rural” as “all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.” *Urban and Rural*, US CENSUS BUREAU, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html> (last updated Dec. 7, 2020). An urban area has a population of 50,000 or more people. *Id.* However, in terms of one’s own identification as “rural,” the term does not have a single definition that encompasses the “social and ideological categories” with which rural populations identify. Rurality is instead understood by considering a wide array of factors. Luke A. Boso, *Urban Bias, Rural Sexual Minorities, and the Courts*, 60 UCLA L. REV. 562, 570-72 (2013) (“Rural can be a place, a culture, a way of life, and even an identity . . . [F]actors such as age, class, race, and region all coalesce to ensure that there is no uniform rural experience.”).

3. This term was coined by queer theorist Judith Halberstam to “characterize this peculiar tendency to conflate the urban with visibility and sexual enlightenment that ‘reveals the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern U.S. sexual identities.’” MARY L. GRAY, *OUT IN THE COUNTRY: YOUTH, MEDIA, AND QUEER VISIBILITY* 10 (NYU Press 2009).

4. *The Conversation: The ‘It Gets Better’ Project*, ABC NEWS (Sept. 30, 2010, 7:18 AM), <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/dan-savage-project-world-news-conversation/story?id=11764984>.

supporting pro-LGBTQ+ legislation.⁵ While the assumption that cities are safe and welcoming for LGBTQ+ folks is grounded in truth for many, the narrative that all rural LGBTQ+ individuals move to cities is repetitively used by academics, courts, and popular culture, eliminating the very real existence of millions of rural queers.⁶ This story casts LGBTQ+ communities as wealthy, white, partnered, and cosmopolitan, preferring fast-paced concrete landscapes to open fields. Rural queer folks who have explicitly rejected cities or cannot migrate to them are not considered by this story—and neither are their specific needs, identities, and priorities.

Rural LGBTQ+ communities are harmed by actively discriminatory laws and lack of protections because they do not have the funding or political power to organize effectively.⁷ National LGBTQ+ rights organizations located in urban centers control much of the resources in the queer advocacy space and cater to the individuals benefitted by the metronormativity narrative: those LGBTQ-identifying residents of cities who have political power and access. The reliance on and perpetuation of the rural exodus story diverts funding from local organizing efforts, leaving rural LGBTQ+ folks subject to political powerlessness and actual, daily harm in the face of discriminatory laws.

This Article proceeds in two parts. Part II provides background on the LGBTQ+ rural exodus narrative and the control of funding by urban national rights organizations. It also describes the discriminatory laws and lack of protections for rural queer folks. Next, Part III analyzes the concrete damages of the perpetuation of the metronormativity narrative on rural queers, as important funds are diverted from local organizing efforts.

II. OVERVIEW

The narrative of metronormativity in the LGBTQ+ community supports and relies on numerous assumptions about rural queer folks. It is also reflected in how national LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations spend their dollars and resources. While rural LGBTQ+ folks live varied lives with different priorities and preferences, they also face physically and emotionally detrimental laws that threaten their rights to access the same services and spaces as non-LGBTQ-identifying individuals.

5. See *infra* Part II.A for a discussion of Taylor Swift's use of these images in her music video for 2019's "You Need to Calm Down."

6. See *infra* Part II.A.

7. See *infra* Part II.B.

A. *LGBTQ+ Folks in Rural Communities: The Story and the Reality*

1. The Narrative of Metronormativity for All

The story that all LGBTQ+ folks must leave rural communities to fully develop their identities and live freely rests on the idea that these communities “operate[] as America’s perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet” to be escaped.⁸ Cities are assumed to be spaces in which queer people can be visible and safe.⁹ This assumption partly stems from the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ activists fighting for assimilationist politics, such as the ability for queer people to “live and love just like everyone else,” and liberationist ideals, which sought freedom “from the confines of heterosexuality” in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰ These factions rested on uniting LGBTQ+ folks in cities to gain visibility and political power.¹¹ Political gains by queer communities in the these decades solidified urban areas as mandatory for identity formation and organization.¹²

As more individuals seek safety, visibility, and political power in cities, the “cyclical migratory loop”—and the urban norm—is strengthened.¹³ “Like-minded friends,” romantic partners, and localized LGBTQ+ protections appeal to some queer folks who then stay, make the cities their homes, and perpetuate the academic, legal, and popular media focus on the urban space as the natural home of LGBTQ+ people.¹⁴ This success story is touted by LGBTQ+ community projects, especially the “It Gets Better” campaign, which relies on the “better” as defined by its founder, Dan Savage, a wealthy, white, and educated gay man living in a big city.¹⁵ Metronormativity supports the urban queer story as visible and authentic at the expense of rural LGBTQ+ identities.¹⁶

8. GRAY, *supra* note 3, at 4.

9. *Id.* at 5.

10. *Id.* at 7.

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. Boso, *supra* note 2, at 577-78.

14. *Id.*

15. Jasbir Puar, *In the Wake of It Gets Better*, GUARDIAN (Nov. 16, 2010, 9:30 AM), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign> (“It’s beautiful and well-intended . . . [b]ut seriously, we all know it gets better a lot sooner if you are white, cisgendered, and middle class.’ . . . [P]rojects like [It Gets Better] risk producing such narrow versions of what it means to be gay, and what it means to be bullied, that for those who cannot identify with it but are nevertheless still targeted for ‘being different,’ It Gets Better might actually contribute to Making Things Worse.”).

16. GRAY, *supra* note 3, at 9-10.

The centrality of the city-based queer has led to researchers' tendency to "neglect" rural communities as sites for investigations of LGBTQ+ sexualities and gender.¹⁷ Academic studies have often taken the urban environment as home to LGBTQ+ folks for granted, causing most sexuality studies to be centered around San Francisco.¹⁸ Even research on the importance of "gay bars" in the LGBTQ+ community focuses only on the characteristics of bars in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago, which are often intertwined with gentrification and cosmopolitanism.¹⁹

Courts have also relied on the stereotypes supported by the metronormativity narrative, leading to judicial urban bias that "explicitly approv[es] the belief that sexual minorities do not belong in small towns."²⁰ Judges affected by this story have made assumptions about folks' disposable income and access to resources and have expressed their belief that family life is not a priority for these individuals.²¹ For example, in his *Lawrence v. Texas*²² dissent, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia expressed that "many American[]" families feel unsafe serving as scoutmasters, teachers, and business partners" alongside people who "openly engage in homosexual conduct."²³ Twelve years later, Justice Scalia joined Justice Samuel Alito's dissent in *Obergefell v. Hodges*,²⁴ which reiterated that "traditional marriage" is a means for procreation; further dicta regarding the "long-term ramifications" of same-sex marriage on society demonstrate that the "procreative" aspect of marriage was held equivalent to the creation of a *family*, implying that LGBTQ+

17. *Id.* at 10; Amy L. Stone, *The Geography of Research on LGBTQ Life: Why Sociologists Should Study the South, Rural Queers, and Ordinary Cities*, 12 SOC. COMPASS (2018) ("[G]eographical choices—born out of convenience or theoretical purpose—shape the approach to studying queer life and the unintentional reproduction of a middle-class, cosmopolitan universal gay subject.").

18. GRAY, *supra* note 3, at 10.

19. Greggor Mattson, *Small-City Gay Bars, Big-City Urbanism*, 19 CITY & CMTY. 76 (2020).

20. Boso, *supra* note 2, at 562.

21. *Id.* at 592-93. Judges also difficulty aligning asylum-seekers' presentation of their sexual orientations with its existence. Often required to prove that they are a sexual minority, asylum-seekers must validate their identities using "visible cultural markers" that a judge with an urban bias would recognize. *Id.* at 591-92. While domestic rural LGBTQ+ folks are not participating in the asylum process, judicial and legal confirmation of traits stereotypically associated with LGBTQ+ identity in American culture contributes to the invisibility of rural LGBTQ+ people who may not fit the stereotypes. *See id.*

22. 539 U.S. 558 (2003).

23. *Id.* at 602.

24. 576 U.S. 644, 741 (2015).

folks were inherently excluded from these units.²⁵ By placing queer folks in opposition to traditional norms of family and marriage, judges repeatedly fail to acknowledge these individuals' value in their own communities and eliminate many of their priorities and needs.²⁶

Further, the rural exodus narrative is supported by popular culture and media.²⁷ For example, Taylor Swift's 2019 music video for "You Need to Calm Down," a song intended to urge homophobes to "calm down," rested on the use of actors portraying stereotypical, low-income Appalachian trailer park residents as the enemy to LGBTQ+ celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres and RuPaul.²⁸ Depicted as toothless, white and unattractive, these individuals held misspelled, homophobic, and often religious signs while yelling at a well-dressed, diverse group of LGBTQ+ folks (and Swift).²⁹ The video relied on the belief that rural Americans, especially those who are poor and religious, drive anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, discrimination, and hostility.³⁰ Swift used the rural exodus narrative to "scapegoat" these low-income, rural residents for systemic, national LGBTQ+ discrimination.³¹ In other moments in her career, Swift has made it clear that she is from Tennessee and is proud of it, despite having been raised in suburban Pennsylvania.³²

2. The Reality of Rural Queers

While media and political movements perpetuate the notion that all rural LGBTQ+ folks leave their hometowns for urban areas, "between 2.9 [] and 3.8 million" LGBTQ+ individuals live in rural America.³³ External narratives about what their lives are like tend to cast them in "a single light of oppression and stigma" rather than acknowledging the nuance of the choices LGBTQ+ people have made to live in rural America.³⁴ Reasons

25. *Id.* at 739-41.

26. Boso, *supra* note 2, at 610-11.

27. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, WHERE WE CALL HOME: LGBT PEOPLE IN RURAL AMERICA 6 (2019), <http://www.lgbtmap.org/file/lgbt-rural-report.pdf>.

28. Logan Roper, *Taylor Swift's "You Need to Calm Down" and the Appalachian Myth*, CITIZEN TIMES (June 27, 2019, 11:45 AM), <http://www.citizentimes.com/story/opinion/2019/06/27/taylor-swifts-you-need-calm-down-and-appalachian-myth/1572788001/>.

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

32. Nick Levine, *Taylor Swift's Lover: The Struggle to Maintain Superstardom*, BBC (Aug. 21, 2019), <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20190820-taylor-swift-and-the-struggle-to-maintain-pop-superstardom>.

33. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at iii.

34. *Id.* at 6.

for choosing rural residence include closeness to family, strength of local communities, connection to the land, and a preference for a rural way of life.³⁵ Moreover, many LGBTQ+ individuals find that living in a rural community allows them to have an “anchor” with which they can develop their LGBTQ+ identity.³⁶

While urban spaces may appear inviting for rural LGBTQ+ folks because of visibility and solidarity, these neighborhoods are often fitting for only one kind of LGBTQ+ individual: the white and wealthy.³⁷ People of color are more likely to place importance on nuclear families and relatives for support in resisting broader societal racial oppression, which can be absent in an urban gay community in which racism and Eurocentric beauty standards are still present—despite the promise of acceptance through a shared LGBTQ+ identity.³⁸ Further, living in urban centers is economically difficult, especially in terms of seeking employment; metropolitan markets are home to more applicants with “better educational and training opportunities.”³⁹ These tangible economic hardships lead to staggering numbers of homeless LGBTQ+ youth in cities, many of whom left “their hometowns in hopes of greater acceptance and freedom.”⁴⁰ Marginalization based on class and race occurs despite “attempted assimilation,” resulting in many rural exodus narratives without happy endings.⁴¹

Grassroots documentarians have attempted to amplify the voices of “country queers” living in rural communities.⁴² These individuals’ shared stories of enjoying visits to New York City, but knowing that the stereotypical New York queer existence “is not what it means for [them to be queer],” preferring instead to gather with other rural LGBTQ+ folks to drink beer in flannel.⁴³ In one of these documentaries, a dairy farmer named Michael Stanitis acknowledged the difficulty in isolation from

35. *Id.* at 7.

36. *Id.* at 8.

37. See Boso, *supra* note 2, at 579-80.

38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.* at 580 n.83.

41. *Id.* at 580.

42. See *Who We Are*, COUNTRY QUEERS, <http://www.countryqueers.com/who-we-are> (last visited Apr. 14, 2020); Jared McAnany, “*Out Here*” *Documentary Connects Queer Farmers*, UNDERGROUND (Oct. 26, 2018), <http://www.psuunderground.com/2018/10/25/out-here-documentary-connects-queer-farmers/>; *Home*, INVISIBLE HIST. PROJECT, <http://invisiblehistory.org/> (last visited Apr. 14, 2020) [hereinafter *Who We Are*].

43. *Elandria*. 34. *Knoxville/Powell, TN.*, COUNTRY QUEERS (Aug. 2013), <http://www.countryqueers.com/2013/11/09/6-elandria-34-knoxvillepowell-tn/> [<http://web.archive.org/web/20200926061206/https://countryqueers.com/elandria-34-knoxvillepowell-tn/>].

fellow LGBTQ+ folks but made an express choice not to live in “an urban, gay bubble.”⁴⁴ He stated, “It’s not interesting to me[.] I’m not interested in hanging out in clubs anymore. There’s a lot to be gained from living rurally.”⁴⁵

The difficulty of feeling a pull between two identities—queer *and* rural—may be a product of what information one could access about being part of the LGBTQ+ community, such as shows like *Will & Grace*.⁴⁶ The vision of a gay man, for example, as a flamboyant, effeminate urbanite produced more isolation for gay men in search of their rural, queer identity.⁴⁷

The rural exodus narrative also discounts LGBTQ+ individuals who have no choice in their location.⁴⁸ The ability to move frequently depends on access to education, financial flexibility, and a lack of familial obligations.⁴⁹ Those queer folks who must stay in their rural hometowns face the consequences of lack of privilege, increased visibility, and isolation as more educated and wealthy LGBTQ+ people move away to urban centers.⁵⁰

3. Rural Queers Actively Organize in Their Communities

In addition to merely existing in rural America, queer folks actively organize in their communities—but are limited by funding and geography.⁵¹ Despite being perceived as “lost causes” by some blue-state LGBTQ+ supporters,⁵² battles over LGBTQ+ rights in rural areas have been supported by local organizing, including advocacy chapters of statewide organizations.⁵³ LGBTQ+ folks are more likely than non-LGBTQ+ people to participate in organizing and direct action, but efforts

44. Lori Rotenberk, *Raise the Flag High: Queer Farming in Rural America*, MODERN FARMER (Jan. 22, 2015), <http://modernfarmer.com/2015/01/raise-flag-high-queer-farming-rural-america/>.

45. *Id.*

46. Katherine Schweighofer, *Rethinking the Closet: Queer Life in Rural Geographies*, in QUEERING THE COUNTRYSIDE: NEW FRONTIERS IN RURAL QUEER STUDIES 223, 234 (Mary L. Gray et al eds., 2016).

47. *Id.*

48. Boso, *supra* note 2, at 580-81.

49. *Id.*

50. *Id.* See *infra* Part II.C for a discussion of the harmful laws to which rural queers are subjected.

51. Emily Cañas, *Queer Intersectional Organizations in the Southern United States* (Dec. 11, 2017) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with Loyola Marymount University).

52. GRAY, *supra* note 3, at 178 (noting that those deeming Kentucky’s 2004 same-sex marriage ban lived in “progressive” states that had banned these unions years before).

53. See, e.g., *id.* at 177-78.

in rural areas are more difficult because of physical distance, relatively low populations, and lack of community centers.⁵⁴

For example, Southerners on New Ground (SONG) is a regional LGBTQ+ liberation movement focused on “grassroots organizing . . . and linking social movements,” like bail reform efforts and immigration advocacy.⁵⁵ The group focuses on recruiting members who are people of color, working class, and rural LGBTQ-identifying⁵⁶ and operates in the South in an effort to give the choice to all southern LGBTQ+ people to return to their rightful homes safely and with dignity.⁵⁷ SONG brings together southern LGBTQ+ organizers to build a strong regional organizing infrastructure and holds small retreats about intersectional issues in small towns and rural places.⁵⁸ Its STAY Project aims to counteract the rural exodus narrative by encouraging LGBTQ+ youth to stay in their communities and organize against queer discrimination.⁵⁹

However, national rights fundraising dollars are not typically directed to grassroots, rural-based LGBTQ+ organizations like SONG. After the huge success of the Black Mama’s Bailout Campaign, which was the brainchild of former SONG director Mary Hooks and freed hundreds of black women from prisons across the United States, foundations with white leaders “pour[ed] millions of dollars into their own [grant] campaigns” about bail reform rather than routing the money to Hooks and her organization.⁶⁰ SONG was then offered an “opportunity” to teach a white-run group that received a grant about how to use it, even though the recipient organizations did not have the same trusting relationships with other grassroots organizations on the ground.⁶¹ While the bail reform

54. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 65-66.

55. *Our Mission, Vision & History*, SONG, <http://southernersonnewground.org/who-we-are/vision-mission-history/> (last visited Apr. 30, 2020) [hereinafter *Our Mission*].

56. *Id.*

57. *Why the South?*, SONG, <https://southernersonnewground.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/09/SONG-Why-the-South.pdf> (last visited Apr. 30, 2020) (“[W]hile the South is a physical geography of white supremacy and poverty . . . it is also more than that. It is a place of redemption and hope for many . . . Being Southerners On New Ground means loving hard histories, giving thanks, making visionary space, listening, analyzing, organizing, being kin, seeking wholeness and realizing there is no liberation in isolation.”).

58. *Our Mission*, *supra* note 55.

59. Robin Happel, *The Next Generation of Southern Organizing*, NATION (Aug. 17, 2018), <http://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-next-generation-of-southern-organizing/>.

60. Vanessa Daniel, Opinion, *Philanthropists Bench Women of Color, the MVPs of Social Change*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 19, 2019), <http://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/19/opinion/philanthropy-black-women.html>.

61. *Id.*

grants for other organizations were in the millions, SONG's budget is about \$500,000 per year.⁶²

Some rural LGBTQ+ groups cannot actively engage in politics as much as desired because of lack of support by national groups; their homegrown fundraisers risk costing more than they would raise.⁶³ For example, the Mountain Queers Club in rural Oregon had its first Pride event in 2019 after being able to only fund a single dance in years prior.⁶⁴ In general, the groups find themselves forced to support national efforts that do not align with their own interests, such as formal equality litigation, to gain support from national LGBTQ+ organizations.⁶⁵ Rather than follow priorities of national impact litigation or legislative advocacy groups, rural LGBTQ+ individuals might be required to work on basic education about LGBTQ+ communities and people in areas with extremely conservative social and political landscapes.⁶⁶ Moreover, they may prioritize advocacy for needs outside of the LGBTQ+ organizing space, such as “economic security, quality education, public transportation, and adequate health care”—challenges that may be more present in rural communities than in urban centers.⁶⁷

The story of metronormativity also excludes accepting or adaptive rural communities from conversations about LGBTQ+ issues.⁶⁸ While queer folks are less visible outside of cities, support for LGBTQ+ people exists in rural America, and the “majority of rural residents . . . support” legal and policy protections for queer communities.⁶⁹ People of color, women, and younger rural individuals particularly support pro-LGBTQ+ policies,⁷⁰ despite being less likely to have a close friend or family member who is gay, lesbian, or transgender.⁷¹ However, this support does not

62. Patrick Saunders, *Left Out in the South: National Funding Foundations Leaving Southern LGBT Nonprofits High and Dry*, GEORGIA VOICE (Mar. 14, 2014), <http://thegavoice.com/news/georgia/left-south-national-funding-foundations-leaving-southern-lgbt-nonprofits-high-dry/>.

63. GRAY, *supra* note 3, at 180.

64. Andrew Jankowski, *In Rural Oregon, Pride Organizers Are Fighting for Recognition—From Their Hometowns and the LGBTQ Community at Large*, WILLAMETTE WK. (June 12, 2019), <http://www.wweek.com/culture/2019/06/12/in-rural-oregon-pride-organizers-are-fighting-for-recognition-from-their-hometowns-and-the-lgbtq-community-at-large/>.

65. GRAY, *supra* note 3, at 180 (noting that rural LGBTQ+ organizers supported marriage equality because it was the political work of the time, not necessarily because it was their top priority); see MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 66.

66. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 66.

67. *Id.*

68. *See id.* at vi.

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.* at 50.

71. *Id.* at 51.

translate into legal protections for queer communities; rural states are less likely to have LGBTQ+ protections, including nondiscrimination laws, and are more likely to have discriminatory laws like religious exemptions.⁷²

B. National Organizations in Urban Centers: Funding and Political Power

National LGBTQ+ rights organizations in the United States are clustered in major metropolitan areas, like the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) in New York City,⁷³ National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) in San Francisco,⁷⁴ and Human Rights Campaign (HRC) in Washington, D.C.⁷⁵ “[T]he top 20 recipients of worldwide LGBTQ+ grant funding received a total of \$44.0 million” in 2018; sixteen of these recipients were located in just six major U.S. cities, with the other four in foreign metropolitan areas.⁷⁶

A large swath of LGBTQ+ advocacy dollars are used for litigation and educational and communications campaigns supporting formal equality and policy work.⁷⁷ For example, while not involved in impact litigation, HRC uses tens of millions of dollars annually to support “legislative and other policy reform.”⁷⁸ It provided the viral red equality sign for social media during the 2013 Supreme Court marriage equality battles—earning it brand recognition nationally and an association with the litigation—but did not contribute directly to the cases.⁷⁹

Most of the massively funded LGBTQ+ advocacy groups located in urban centers do not do any direct client work at all.⁸⁰ The LGBTQ+ organizations that do prioritize providing direct individual client services rather than policy reform are “dramatically less well-funded than their . . .

72. *Id.* at 50. See *infra* Part II.C for a discussion of the vulnerabilities faced by rural queers remaining in their communities.

73. *Home*, GLAAD, <http://www.glaad.org/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2020).

74. *Home*, NAT’L CTR. LESBIAN RTS, <http://www.nclrights.org/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2020).

75. *Home*, HUM. RTS. CAMPAIGN, <http://www.hrc.org/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2020).

76. FUNDERS FOR LGBTQ ISSUES, 2018 TRACKING REPORT 7 (2020) [hereinafter 2018 TRACKING REPORT].

77. Leonore F. Carpenter, *The Next Phase: Positioning the Post-Obergefell LGBT Rights Movement to Bridge the Gap Between Formal and Lived Equality*, 13 STAN. J. CIV. RTS. & C.L. 255, 260-63 (2017).

78. *Id.* at 262.

79. Ryan Lee, *Human Rights Campaign is the Kardashian of the LGBT Movement*, GEORGIA VOICE (May 12, 2014, 6:38 PM), <http://thegavoice.com/outspoken/sometimes-y/ryan-lee-human-rights-campaign-kardashian-lgbt-movement/>.

80. Carpenter, *supra* note 77, at 260.

counterparts.”⁸¹ Unlike HRC’s annual revenue of \$37 million in 2014–2015, a Maryland-based free direct legal services organization’s was only \$230,000.⁸² In 2018, direct services accounted for just 19% of funded LGBTQ+ strategies nationally, while advocacy accounted for 42%—totaling more than \$87 million.⁸³

National and state-based LGBTQ+ organizations have marginalized local LGBTQ+ organizing efforts by withholding investment in them.⁸⁴ “Rural states receive 72 cents to each [grant] dollar received by urban states” for LGBTQ+ issues and advocacy.⁸⁵ Organizations funnel resources to cities even if those same organizations have placed rural LGBTQ+ folks in the spotlight for fundraising efforts. For example, a rural Oregonian LGBTQ+ advocacy group publicly criticized HRC for inviting its leaders to speak at fundraisers before directing funds raised to nearby urban communities with established LGBTQ+ support, not to rural areas where queer folks feel “invisible.”⁸⁶ Fittingly, on the “Oregon” page of its website, HRC prompts the viewer to “discover how [they] can get involved” by directing them to the *Portland* Steering Committee.⁸⁷ The disparity is even more dire for the South: in 2014, for every dollar of domestic LGBTQ+ funding in the United States, the South received at most 4 cents.⁸⁸ While funds for LGBTQ+ communities in the South increased by 28% in 2018,⁸⁹ more than half of the surge in funding over the past few years can be attributed to the philanthropic efforts made after the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida.⁹⁰

C. Rural LGBTQ+ Communities and Discriminatory Laws

Rural states are much less likely than urban states to have protections for their LGBTQ+ communities and far more likely to have actively

81. *Id.* at 263.

82. *Id.*

83. 2018 TRACKING REPORT, *supra* note 76, at 11.

84. *See* GRAY, *supra* note 3, at 178.

85. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 66.

86. Jankowski, *supra* note 64.

87. *Oregon*, HUM. RTS. CAMPAIGN, <http://www.hrc.org/local-issues/Oregon> (last visited Apr. 3, 2020).

88. FUNDERS FOR LGBTQ ISSUES, OUT IN THE SOUTH: PART ONE: FOUNDATION FUNDING FOR LGBTQ ISSUES IN THE U.S. SOUTH 1 (2014).

89. *Id.* at 16.

90. FUNDERS FOR LGBTQ ISSUES, OUT IN THE SOUTH: AN UPDATE ON FOUNDATION FUNDING FOR LGBTQ ISSUES IN THE U.S. SOUTH 1 (2018) [hereinafter OUT IN THE SOUTH: AN UPDATE].

instituted harmful and discriminatory laws.⁹¹ The South and the Midwest, where the majority of the LGBTQ+ community lives in the United States and which are heavily rural, have the fewest protections for queer folks.⁹² For example, the representatives in Tennessee proposed eight anti-LGBTQ+ laws in 2019, deemed the “Slate of Hate” by HRC.⁹³ “Ten days into the 2020 legislative session,”⁹⁴ the Republican governor signed a bill into law that allows child welfare organizations to refuse fostering and adoptions to LGBTQ+ families based on religious objections.⁹⁵ Because of fewer resources, challenging social landscapes, and physical distance among community members, rural queer folks have less political power and fewer representatives to challenge these discriminatory laws.⁹⁶ Additionally, using legal recourse to prevent discrimination is far more difficult without the ability to politically organize in large numbers.⁹⁷ In Tennessee, the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP) lobbies against the numerous anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced in the state each year.⁹⁸ HRC has stated that it is “proud to stand alongside [TEP] and coalition partners to fight back against the growing slate of hate,”⁹⁹ but TEP receives “no national financial support for [its] legislative efforts.”¹⁰⁰ It aimed to raise just \$2,500 from community members for its statewide organizing in 2019.¹⁰¹ It raised \$3,640.¹⁰²

Both lack of LGBTQ+ protections and actively harmful and discriminatory laws cause concrete harms in terms of employment, economic security, health, and social acceptance.¹⁰³ In some states, businesses, business owners, and staff members have the power to reject

91. *Id.*

92. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 59-60 (noting that the South is home to “nearly half of all people living in rural America” and that 11 of 12 Midwestern states are majority rural).

93. Hope Jackson, *Tennessee’s Slate of Hate Continues with More Anti-LGBTQ Bills to Fight*, HUM. RTS. CAMPAIGN (Feb. 24, 2020), <http://www.hrc.org/blog/tennessees-slate-of-hate-continues-with-more-anti-lgbtq-bills-to-fight>.

94. *Id.*

95. Nick Morrow, *SHAMEFUL: Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee Signs Harmful Anti-LGBTQ Child Welfare Bill*, HUM. RTS. CAMPAIGN (Jan. 24, 2020), <http://www.hrc.org/blog/shameful-tennessee-gov-bill-lee-signs-harmful-anti-lgbtq-child-welfare-bill>.

96. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 64.

97. *Id.*

98. *Homegrown Victory*, TENNESSEE EQUAL. PROJECT, http://www.tnep.org/homegrown_victory (last visited Mar. 30, 2020).

99. Jackson, *supra* note 93.

100. TENNESSEE EQUAL. PROJECT, *supra* note 98.

101. *Id.*

102. *Id.*

103. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 55.

providing services to LGBTQ+ folks based on religious objections.¹⁰⁴ Employers may also refuse to hire queer individuals, leaving them jobless in areas that do not have many opportunities for long-term employment.¹⁰⁵ Healthcare providers also may explicitly discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly transgender folks, causing “significant and negative impacts on physical, emotional, and mental health.”¹⁰⁶ For LGBTQ+ people in one of the forty-five isolated communities in the country with only a Catholic hospital in their geographic region, denial of care based on religious objection is a frightening possibility.¹⁰⁷ The mere expectation of discrimination has caused one in five LGBTQ+ adults to avoid seeking healthcare at all, leaving them much “more likely to experience worse health.”¹⁰⁸ In employment, healthcare, housing, and basic public accommodations, rural queers facing discrimination have fewer alternatives than those in urban states “to find a doctor, home, or job.”¹⁰⁹

For those rural queer folks facing job, housing, or healthcare loss because of discrimination, access to LGBTQ-competent or nondiscriminatory social services is also difficult to achieve.¹¹⁰ Many of these services in rural communities are provided by religiously-affiliated organizations, such as local churches that give informal help to community members or host free health screenings.¹¹¹ Left with community organizations that exclude LGBTQ+ individuals and no LGBTQ-specific spaces, rural queer individuals face isolation, lack of access to support services, and loss of community.¹¹²

Religious exemption laws and legal bias create massive obstacles for LGBTQ+ people seeking public or private benefits from local organizations.¹¹³ These laws thrive in rural areas where church is central to community and senses of “solidarity” and “self-reliance.”¹¹⁴ In rural communities, marriage, which is often connected to “childrearing” and creating a “traditional family formation” with traditionally masculine and

104. *Id.* at 38.

105. *Id.* at 29.

106. *Id.* at 42-43.

107. *Id.* at 45.

108. *Id.* at 43.

109. *Id.* at iv.

110. *Id.* at v, 72.

111. *Id.* at 18.

112. *Id.* at 17-18.

113. *Id.* at 13.

114. Luke A. Boso, *Rural Resentment and LGBTQ Equality*, 71 FLA. L. REV. 919, 948-50 (2019).

feminine roles filled by two opposite-sex parents, represents “morally-sanctioned . . . [and] perform[ative] heterosexuality” condoned by religion.¹¹⁵ LGBTQ+ folks who cannot participate in this narrative and are rejected from their faith communities report deep pain and loss.¹¹⁶

III. DISCUSSION

The repetition of the narrative that all LGBTQ+ folks flee their rural hometowns to live in the city directly damages rural queer populations by diverting resources away from their organization efforts. Faced with limitations on funding and political power, rural LGBTQ+ groups cannot battle discriminatory and non-protective laws in their states. The media, national rights organizations, and courts must improve their understanding and depiction of rural queer folks to better protect and serve them and their families.

A. *Perpetuating the Narrative Diverts Resources, Creating Concrete Harm*

By eliminating the existence of rural queer communities through the perpetuation of the metronormativity story, the important reality of these individuals’ lives and priorities, as well as their potential organizing power, is lost. LGBTQ+ folks in rural areas have specific needs and issues that should be amplified and elevated as part of the stories told about queer populations in the United States. In choosing to remain in a rural area or being forced to do so, many rural queer people develop and rely on strong connections to family, the land, and the “rural way of life”¹¹⁷ that are important in shaping their political priorities. The cosmopolitan, urban narrative alienates a wide swath of LGBTQ+ individuals, including those who may risk leaving their hometowns for the city only to feel isolated or in danger because of race and class discrimination.¹¹⁸ This creates a limbo for individuals who are conditioned to see the urban as the safest place for LGBTQ+ communities—which is often true—but do not feel that the identity presented matches their own understanding of their queerness.¹¹⁹

National rights organizations with million-dollar annual budgets benefit from the narrative by propping up the efforts and achievements of localized LGBTQ+ organizing—without cycling funds back to the

115. *Id.* at 953-54.

116. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 17.

117. *Id.* at 7.

118. *See supra* notes 37-41 and accompanying text.

119. *See supra* notes 42-47 and accompanying text.

organizations¹²⁰ or truly funding their work in a meaningful way.¹²¹ More localized efforts like SONG, TEP, and the Oregon-based Human Dignity Coalition fight local LGBTQ+ battles and create spaces for queer folks on miniscule budgets while some national organizations appropriate their work,¹²² do not contribute any funding to it despite “stand[ing] alongside” it publicly,¹²³ and use the rural queer groups as puppets for fundraising.¹²⁴ The narrative that the white, wealthy, and cosmopolitan LGBTQ+ individual is thriving in the city after escaping their rural hometown puts money into coffers of the organizations located where those white, wealthy, and cosmopolitan individuals now live—urban centers. The rural queer folks who may not fit the metronormative narrative may not have the same resources and priorities as urban national rights organization supporters, leaving them less important to the organizations looking to boost brand recognition and funding.

By prioritizing the urban centers and *one* version of queer identity, national rights organizations divert crucial funding from organizing that could more effectively combat discriminatory, dangerous laws. The numerous religious exemption laws in rural states create concrete physical and emotional health issues for LGBTQ+ populations¹²⁵ who have numerous barriers in organizing, including low funding and geographical distance.¹²⁶ The horrors of these laws are touted on national organizations’ websites, without any actual dollars funneled to combatting them.¹²⁷ Some of these concrete harms have effectively been avoided by grassroots organizations, such as TEP’s work to defeat discriminatory laws in Tennessee.¹²⁸ Like SONG’s creation of an infrastructure for intersectional liberation across the South, TEP and other localized efforts *have* relationships, best practices, and knowledge of their LGBTQ+ neighbors’ actual priorities and needs. They have demonstrated expertise in their regions and areas that could be immensely useful in implementing protections for LGBTQ+ communities. National rights organizations would better serve millions of queer Americans by more purposely allotting funds to these smaller, rural organizations and listening to what

120. See Daniel, *supra* note 60; Jankowski, *supra* note 64.

121. See *supra* notes 96-102 and accompanying text.

122. See Daniel, *supra* note 60.

123. See Jackson, *supra* note 93.

124. See Jankowski, *supra* note 64.

125. See *supra* Part II.C.

126. See *supra* Part II.A.3.

127. Jackson, *supra* note 93; TENNESSEE EQUAL. PROJECT, *supra* note 98.

128. TENNESSEE EQUAL. PROJECT, *supra* note 98.

they need, not the other way around. This work begins both in the way funds are dispersed and by being more conscious about whose story is being told.

B. The Rural Exodus Narrative Must Be Replaced with Nuanced Representation

The media depiction of the white, wealthy, urban queer individual should be replaced with more nuanced representations of LGBTQ+ life in the United States to better serve these individuals and the rural communities in which they live. In addition to contributing to better allocation of LGBTQ+ advocacy funding, a modernized, more varied account of LGBTQ+ folks' stories and paths would reduce the invisibility and alienation from the community that some queer individuals experience when seeing their identities clumsily approximated in the media. Those "country queers"¹²⁹ whose lives do not align with those of cosmopolitan queer folks may find comfort in witnessing stories of fellow rural LGBTQ+ individuals, which may allow for a further comfort in sharing one's identity with neighbors, friends, and family. Those community members, having seen rural queer stories in the media, may in turn better understand their LGBTQ+ neighbors and recognize their particular priorities and needs.

This progress in mainstream media representation of queer folks' lives must be reflected in judges' consideration of LGBTQ+ folks before them. The biases that many judges hold regarding queer communities and family priorities can be shifted as the stories of millions of rural LGBTQ+ folks are told. Impact litigators do this work through choosing particular, family-oriented plaintiffs for major LGBTQ+ rights cases, such as in *Obergefell*.¹³⁰ The shift of the lens not just to wholesome, monogamous LGBTQ+ family units but to *rural* wholesome, monogamous LGBTQ+ families may allow judges to better see the person in front of them for the priorities and issues they have, not just for being a member of a community about which the judge has preconceived notions. While this shift still depends on the existence of the traditional family as ideal, it is one step closer to defeating the judicial assumption that LGBTQ+ and family values stand in opposition.

The nuance of the rural experience is also lost in the perpetuation of the narrative, as rural communities have the capability to be far more

129. See *Who We Are*, *supra* note 42.

130. See 576 U.S. 644 (2015).

accepting, supportive, and diverse than the narrative demonstrates. With the evidence that women, younger people, and people of color in rural areas are more supportive of LGBTQ+ rights,¹³¹ these communities have the opportunity to grow in their understanding of their queer neighbors and how to best support them. This potential for growth and change is distinctly absent in representations like Swift's, in which the low-income, rural Appalachians work and move as the uneducated, religious mass she envisions as the enemy.¹³² While the discriminatory laws and threats to physical and emotional safety of rural areas certainly exist because of some of queer folks' rural neighbors, the narrative must also be updated to reveal a more modern, less stereotypical version of the rural areas where many of these folks have chosen to live and where they have strong bonds with community, family, and the land. It is a disservice to their choice and identity as "country queers"¹³³ to paint their rural homes in only a singular light of rigidity, oppression, and ignorance.

IV. CONCLUSION

The metronormativity narrative suggests that all LGBTQ+ folks flee their small, suffocating rural hometowns to thrive in urban centers with other members of the queer community. This story is absolutely true for many, as cities can provide visibility, safety, and social connections to a huge number of LGBTQ+ folks. However, the myth of an entire rural exodus leaves out millions of queer individuals who have chosen or have been forced to remain in rural areas with their own priorities and needs. National rights organizations focusing on the one version of the queer American story benefit from the narrative and directly harm local grassroots LGBTQ+ efforts by withholding support from them.

The stories that are told in the media, by judges, and by academic studies must be modernized to better serve the rural queer communities in need of support, recognition, and protection in the face of discriminatory laws. There are already local organizations doing the work on the ground in small towns and rural counties across the United States who should not only be quoted by a national rights organization when a harmful bill is about to be signed by a homophobic governor. Telling more stories of rural LGBTQ+ life, recognizing the distinct political needs of those rural queer communities, and supporting them via direct funding can counteract the

131. MOVEMENT ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, *supra* note 27, at 50.

132. Roper, *supra* note 28.

133. See *Who We Are*, *supra* note 42.

difficulty they face in political action and in protecting themselves from harm.