Our Own Images and Truths?: The Futures and Failures of the Queer Appalachia Project

By Maxwell Cloe

In August of 2020, a Washington Post *article, written by author Emma Eisenberg, convincingly alleged that popular LGBTQ+ Instagram account @queerappalachia had engaged in financial dishonesty, the unapproved use of artists' works, and an overall lack of transparency regarding their mutual aid efforts. Simply put, Queer Appalachia harmed the very same people that they claimed to represent—Appalachians who are queer, BIPOC* (black, Indigenous, [and] people of color), *working-class, and/or disabled. For all of these harms and failures, however, the Queer Appalachia Instagram account and 'zine,* Electric Dirt, *remain unique texts that challenge the metronormative and whitewashed stereotypes of Appalachia. I use theories of queer archives and contemporary understandings of race in Appalachia to explore how the Queer Appalachia Instagram account and* Electric Dirt *still provide invaluable subversions of the popular caricatures of the region. I additionally interrogate the controversy around Queer Appalachia, looking at how capitalist appropriation of mutual aid, digital blackface, and faulty metaphors of "decolonization" harmed many communities in Appalachia. My aim is not to vindicate Queer Appalachia but to highlight the group's successes and failures, salvage the important work that they have done, and hopefully provide a helpful model for future endeavors in Appalachia and beyond.*

Introduction: The Story So Far

A digital explosion rippled through Appalachia in August of 2020. Amidst national reckonings with widespread systemic violence against black people (particularly from police and the prison industrial complex), a public health crisis, and the seemingly futile electoral battle between neoliberalism and fascism, many queer Appalachians had an additional matter to confront. The massively popular Queer Appalachia Project

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(@queerappalachia on Instagram), an apparent paragon of radical left queerness and Appalachian mutual aid, was the subject of an article in the *Washington Post* by author Emma Copley Eisenberg that convincingly alleged that the group had long been engaging in artistic theft and the mishandling of mutual aid funds (Eisenberg 2020).[1] With the subsequent backing of numerous testimonies from other people that the group has harmed (such as black Appalachian artists and local harm reduction activists), it became increasingly evident that Queer Appalachia's outward image of rural pride and queer expression obscures a much more harmful interior of financial exploitation and the erasure of non-white Appalachians.

Queer Appalachia began in 2016 as a social media and 'zine project led by queer Appalachian artist Mamone, created in memoriam to the late transgender artist Bryn Kelly.[2] In the following four years, the organization amassed an Instagram following of over 270,000 followers, produced the full-color 'zine *Electric Dirt*, engaged in numerous mutual aid efforts through Venmo and PayPal, conducted a coat drive, and began a 2019 side project that engaged in opioid harm reduction and mutual aid efforts across the region.[3] Queer Appalachia marketed themselves as committed to gender, sexual, and racial liberation for black and Indigenous communities across Appalachia and the South through self-representation by marginalized Appalachians and southerners (Mamone 2017).

Eisenberg's article, "The Tale of Queer Appalachia" (2020), calls into question the sincerity of the group's apparently radical commitments. Relying on a series of both anonymous and identified testimonies about the harm experienced at the hands of Queer Appalachia and Mamone, Eisenberg (2020) compiled a series of allegations that argued that Mamone grossly mishandled many of the mutual aid funds that the group had received. According to the article, Mamone and Queer Appalachia promised grants to queer Appalachian artists that were never received, failed to seek copyright permission from the photographer of the cover art for *Electric Dirt*, and committed numerous other acts of embezzlement, dishonesty, and financial subterfuge (Eisenberg 2020).

A back-and-forth of apologies and criticisms followed the publication of the article and public testimonies against Queer Appalachia (Eisenberg 2020; Hicks 2020a, 2020b; Mase III 2020; Queer Appalachia 2020a).[4] This back-and-forth came to a head on August 7, 2020, four days after the publication of the article, when a new (now deleted) post appeared on the Instagram account urging followers to "buckle your seatbelts" because the group has been "decolonized" (Queer Appalachia [@queerappalachia] 2020c).[5] However, ten days later, many of the same people involved with the takeover lamented that Mamone had taken the account back and that Queer Appalachia was under the same leadership under which it

began.[6] As of March 2022, Queer Appalachia still has over 250,000 followers (though with zero new posts since August 2020) and continues to boast that they have been "decolonized," despite Mamone's alleged renewed control.

The Queer Appalachia Project spoke to many legitimate problems facing queer people in the region: bigotry, systemic poverty, an opioid crisis, and environmental injustice. Eisenberg (2020) sums up Queer Appalachia's importance well: "Queer and trans people living in the region have some of the country's highest rates of addiction, suicide and health problems. And some of what QA provides—emotional support, identity validation, community engagement—is important." However, the project's alleged misconduct nevertheless raises "legitimate questions" concerning how this group has harmed the queer people that they claim to center (Eisenberg 2020). This article will interrogate how the Queer Appalachia Project embodies queer Appalachian futures and failures of radical action in the region, as well as the corrupt influences of hegemonic whiteness, racism, and contemporary capitalism on supposedly anti-oppressive queer community aid efforts. My analysis of the Queer Appalachia Project, its vision, the failure of this vision, and the applications of this failure provides a nuanced look at the corrupting influences of hierarchical gatekeeping and the capitalist drive for branding on seemingly radical efforts, while also proposing how future radical actions can avoid these influences. My aim for this article is to provide a theoretical and practical framework for future groups, queer Appalachian or otherwise, looking to use digital media, crowdsourced submissions, and mutual aid in their action toward community-building and liberation.

My analysis takes place in three sections. The first, entitled "Queer Appalachian Futures," examines the queer vision and futures that Queer Appalachia proposed, both theoretically in their publications and practically in their concrete archival work. I argue that the Queer Appalachia Project proposed novel ways of (re)considering rural queerness and archiving that opposed hegemonic and oppressive norms of gender, sexuality, and historical memory.

The second section, "Queer Appalachian Failures," analyzes how and why Queer Appalachia failed this vision of the future that their work proposed. Along with the material harm of financial misconduct, Queer Appalachia betrayed their queer Appalachian future through the metaphorization of anti-racist and anti-colonial justice, flattening such concepts to the point of meaningless tokenization. In a similar manner, the group, through their massive popularity, ultimately constructed reductive depictions of Appalachia, acting as the same institutional gatekeepers that they malign throughout their work.

I conclude this article with a proposal of next steps, entitled "Salvaging Queer Appalachia?" Queer Appalachia's actions were certainly an incredible disappointment, but the ways in which they failed can provide invaluable lessons for current and future work in the region. The construction of a liberated queer Appalachian future depends on the ability to reflect on past harms in order to avoid them in the future. In addition to proposing multiple possibilities for rectifying financial harm and strategizing the creation of new groups, I engage in a digital humanities analysis to discuss what can be salvaged from the remnants of the Queer Appalachia Instagram account.

A final note on my subject position and intentions with this article: I am a white, southern, queer person with roots in Appalachia who does not live in Appalachia themselves. I have not personally been harmed by the Queer Appalachia Project, though many of my friends and research partners have. In the past, I have conducted research on Queer Appalachia, which informs this current writing. Though I respect and examine the good work that the group has done in the past, this article is not a vindication of their actions nor an attempt to revive their reputation in any way. I stand in solidarity with the numerous people and organizations who have been harmed by Queer Appalachia, Mamone, and others closely associated with the account. Queer Appalachia's actions are a loss and a disappointment to many LGBTQ+ networks throughout the region, but they are not and will not be the only groups doing unique and creative work. Through this article, I hope to aid all current and future queer Appalachian liberation endeavors.

Queer Appalachian Futures

Queerness is hopeful, future-facing, and concerned with the creation of networks for both social and political ends. The Queer Appalachia Project, as exemplified in their Instagram account and 'zine *Electric Dirt*, theoretically and practically embodies this optimistic futurity by directly subverting popular misconceptions of Appalachia as being wholly composed of straight white bigoted people. The radical understandings of queer archives throughout Queer Appalachia's work propose Appalachian futures in which people, communities, and knowledge are liberated from powerful and marginalizing institutions, such as the dominant media, governmental archives, and corporate entities.

In the national imagination, Appalachia is a place with no future. Images of dusty coal miners, toothless hillbillies, and die-hard racists fill popular depictions of the region, suggesting that Appalachia and Appalachians are doomed to fail from the very beginning. Such depictions of Appalachia by powerful media institutions, what historian Elizabeth Catte (2018) describes as "Trump Country piece[s]," portray the mountains and

the people who live there "as a mournful and dysfunctional 'other' who represent the darkest failures of the American Dream while seeking to prescribe how we—the presumed audience of indifferent elites—should feel about their collective fate" (23). These pessimistic images of the mountains, along with presenting an inaccurate depiction of the region, fail to consider the tolls that extractive capitalism and neoliberal policies have taken and continue to take on the region and its inhabitants.

This seemingly nonexistent future applies doubly for the LGBTQ+ people living in the region. In his book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), cultural theorist Jack Halberstam employs the term "metronormativity" to describe the supposed incompatibility between queer people and rural areas. Per metronormative narratives, queer people wishing to embody the "full expression" of their identities must "come out," not just from the proverbial "closet" but from rural areas and into urban ones (Halberstam 2005, 36). To be queer is to be urban. The LGBTQ+ people living in rural areas like much of Appalachia, according to a metronormative understanding of queerness, are either completely nonexistent or living without any hope for a fulfilling future.

These metronormative constructions of queerness additionally compound with homogenizing narratives of race in Appalachia to construct a version of the region that is not only wholly straight but wholly white as well. In *Blacks in Appalachia* (1985), activist and historian Edward Cabbell argues that myths of "Black invisibility" in Appalachia perpetuate the popular imagination of the region as filled entirely with backwards and bigoted white hillbillies (Turner and Cabbell 1985). These racial myths erase the agency of black Appalachians, suggesting that they either do not exist or exist solely in isolation and pain. In this way, the metronormative narratives that construct a flattened view of gender and sexuality in Appalachia additionally intersect with and exacerbate the erasure of racial minorities in the region, constructing black queer Appalachians as a triply "neglected minority" (Turner and Cabbell 1985, 3).[7]

Metronormative narratives rely on narrow and historically inaccurate constructions of queer life in rural areas. As the work of rural queer historians shows, LGBTQ+ people have lived and flourished in rural spaces for decades. Historian John Howard writes in *Men Like That* (1999) that gay men in Mississippi made and remade queer worlds of "like-minded souls" in which they could express themselves and their desires outside of the perception of straight people who wished to harm them (xiv). Metronormative narratives that insist that oppression and pain are the only characteristics that define LGBTQ+ life in rural areas simply do not account for the nuances of how rural queer people navigate and express their identities in the different spaces they occupy.

Much like how the gay men that Howard (1999) discusses made and remade their surroundings to create spaces of flourishing, so, too, does the Queer Appalachia Project make and remake the queer Appalachian *past* to imagine an Appalachian *future* in which repressive metronormative narratives no longer hinder the lives of queer Appalachians. Performance theorist José Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), famously remarks that queerness is the "rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). By advancing novel understandings of gender, sexuality, and desire, queerness provides a blueprint for others to reconstruct the past and future in a way that forefronts care and resistance to oppressive systems of heteronormativity. The Queer Appalachia Project envisions these novel pasts and futures through their distinct approach to queer archiving. In the introduction to *Electric Dirt*, which acts as the group's manifesto, Queer Appalachia proposes that liberation for LGBTQ+ Appalachians requires new conceptions of queer and Appalachian history, specifically the history that appears in "official" archives connected to governmental or corporate institutions. The introduction explains that for precarious cultures and networks, "there is often a gatekeeper. An archivist, sociologist, anthropologist, or historian" who decides "who or what is omitted from history" (Mamone 2017, 4). Queer Appalachia thus positions themselves and their work as an alternative to conventional, institutional methods of historical archiving.

The Instagram account and *Electric Dirt* operate in tandem as a multiplatform, highly accessible archive of queer Appalachian experiences and histories. By existing simultaneously in digital and physical formats, the Queer Appalachia archive is able to document both small moments of LGBTQ+ Appalachian life—such as a snapshot or a brief video—as well as long-form essays, photo series, interviews, and art exhibitions that are not as easy to host on social media. In "Myths and Electricity," a chapter in the anthology *Y'all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia*, I argue that the assemblage of *Electric Dirt*, the Instagram posts, and the various comments and tags on these posts create "a highly mobile, adaptable, and constantly changing site of queer objects and emotions" (Cloe 2022, 126). Moreover, because both the 'zine and the Instagram account consist largely of self-selected submissions from LGBTQ+ Appalachians and southerners, the decision of what is included and omitted is not being made by an institutional gatekeeper at a government or private archive who is beholden to the moral and political convictions of the dominant power structure. For example, a January 3, 2020, post on the group's Instagram account shows four scantily clad LGBTQ+ people (some Appalachians, some non-Appalachian southerners) posing outside of a Waffle House smothered in maple syrup and waffles. Along with challenging

metronormative understandings of Appalachian sexuality, gender, and race, this post and many like it depict an instance of queer Appalachian love, friendship, and eroticism (Queer Appalachia [@queerappalachia] 2020a). Queer Appalachia's emotive, multi-platform archive thus works within the queer tradition of what critical theorist Ann Cvetkovich has called an "archive of feelings" (2003), with ephemeral queer feelings appearing in the photos, videos, comments, and tags of the account. This archive of contemporary queer emotion creates a queer world within Appalachia that provides other LGBTQ+ people in the region with the ability to see and learn from one another while also preserving their experiences for future generations. This is not to say, of course, that *no* archival gatekeeping occurs. Mamone and the occasional guest curator selected which images were the best fit for the Instagram account or *Electric Dirt*, a singular approach that I address in the following section.

Along with documenting the experiences and feelings of contemporary queer Appalachian people, Queer Appalachia also *queers* the historical Appalachian archive by rereading and reappropriating aspects of Appalachian history and bringing this history into the folds of the queer world constructed by various LGBTQ+ Appalachian people and networks. One such example of this historical intervention is *Electric Dirt*'s "Foxfire Section," which collaborates with the Foxfire Foundation, the publisher of the best-selling series of magazines that are a popular archive of Appalachian art, cooking, and outdoorsmanship. Along with these magazines, the Foxfire Foundation operates physical archives that seek "to preserve the diverse traditions of Southern Appalachia" (Foxfire Foundation 2020). In the introductory essay to the "Foxfire Section" of *Electric Dirt*, TJ Smith, the executive director of the Foxfire Foundation, draws parallels between and notes the intersections of Appalachian and queer experiences (Smith 2017). He explains that, after being approached by the editors of *Electric Dirt*, "I immediately connected the experience of Southern Appalachian community to the experience of the LGBTQ community . . . really to all communities who feel maligned and misrepresented, misunderstood and castigated," suggesting that queer people and Appalachians (queer Appalachians particularly) face similar otherizing narratives on a national level (Smith 2017, 106). The counter to these otherizing narratives, Smith asserts, begins with a dive into the historical archives of Appalachia, like *Foxfire*, in order to make its "scope broadened and . . . more inclusive," thus transforming historical and popular constructions of the region (Smith 2017, 107).

Similar queer rereadings of Appalachian history appear throughout the Instagram account as well. For example, a post made on September 13, 2019, shows a short video from 1984 of Appalachian blues musician Algia Mae Hinton playing a blues tune while buck dancing, a type of folk dance

originated by black North Carolinians (Queer Appalachia [@queerappalachia] 2019). While this video makes no explicit reference to queerness, its very inclusion in the Queer Appalachia Instagram account folds this artist and her artistry into the queer Appalachian world that the group and other queer Appalachian people have constructed, particularly the queer Appalachians of similar racial and geographic backgrounds to Hinton, who is a black woman from the foothills of North Carolina. For LGBTQ+ people in the region, possibly lacking in historical examples to help guide their own identity formation, this provides an opportunity to look to the many historical Appalachians throughout the Instagram account to form their own sense of identity and culture. Moreover, the highly accessible nature of this social media account means that the numerous queer Appalachian people who follow the account can discover various aspects of their region's cultures. The Instagram account, like *Electric Dirt*, opens the Appalachian archive and archival process to an immensely larger audience than the archives housed in governmental and corporate institutions allow. The queer world that they have constructed thus extends beyond the happenings of the present and recent past; it includes countless moments and cultures in Appalachian history, ripe for marginalized networks in the region to explore and reappropriate.

Muñoz (2009) writes that queer action "frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity" (1). Queer work in the past and present informs the future. Through the various (re)constructions of queer Appalachian historical archives, Queer Appalachia's multi-platform approach to archiving creates a multitude of interlocking queer Appalachian worlds with unique and shared histories. Bolstered by an anti-capitalist, anti-oppressive ethos of concrete mutual aid work, these virtual and physical worlds upend dominant metronormative notions that queerness and rurality are incompatible. In the place of these notions, Queer Appalachia's archive demonstrates that LGBTQ+ people are loving, creating, and often flourishing in the region, and have been for many years. From these past and present worlds, a future begins to materialize. This future embodies many of the efforts that Queer Appalachia lays out in the introduction to *Electric Dirt*: freedom of communal and self-expression for all queer Appalachians, the dismantling of systemic oppressions and metronormativity, and the increased emphasis on affect and mutual care (Mamone 2017).

Queer Appalachian Failures

As Eisenberg's (2020) article and the countless testimonies from queer Appalachians and numerous others outside of the region indicate, however, the Queer Appalachia Project fell short of the radical future of LGBTQ+ liberation that they envisioned through their Instagram account and *Electric*

Dirt. Queer Appalachia's collapse was not a random event stemming from a group simply unable to handle their rapid popularity and influence. Rather, Queer Appalachia betrayed their original imagination of queer Appalachian futures through a multitude of concrete and identifiable means, all of which work to reinforce the material and theoretical oppression of the marginalized Appalachians whose concerns the group claimed to have at heart.

The most immediately harmful of Queer Appalachia's actions is their alleged mismanagement of mutual aid funds meant to help queer Appalachians in precarious positions. As Eisenberg (2020) explains in the *Washington Post* article, Queer Appalachia collected thousands of dollars from individual donors for opioid harm reduction resources and other community relief efforts and yet has not provided any form of receipt or financial accountability. At the same time, Mamone purchased a new truck, with "every bell and whistle," in 2019, again with "no transparency" as to the origin of the truck's funding, the implication being that Mamone used mutual aid money for their own personal gain (Eisenberg 2020). In mid-August of 2020, Mamone posted a lengthy rebuttal to the *Washington Post* article on Queer Appalachia's website (Queer Appalachia 2020a). In this rebuttal, Mamone claimed that the truck was paid for exclusively with their monthly disability payments and that mutual aid money was used exclusively "to help people" (Queer Appalachia 2020a). However, this rebuttal contains no official financial statements and was removed from the website within a month. A following statement on the website states that "financial statements" are expected by December 2020/January 2021 (Queer Appalachia 2020b). As of July 2021, no such statements had emerged, and the website now contains no mentions of any financial statements whatsoever. Mutual aid as a practice, including the version espoused by Queer Appalachia, often relies on communal care in a way that rejects notions of capitalist profit-seeking. Queer Appalachia acknowledges this rejection in the introduction to *Electric Dirt*, in which they explain that providing mutual aid grants and free space for mutual aid organizations to advertise their work is an effort to avoid "furthering capitalism" (Mamone 2017, 4). To take such mutual aid funds and seemingly divert them into personal luxury items does not just deny care to many who need it—such an action subverts the entire ethos of mutual aid work and transforms Queer Appalachia from a site of radical, anti-capitalist action into a distorted version of capitalist means of production.

Material financial misconduct is not the only harm Queer Appalachia has caused, however. Along with the allegations of financial manipulation, a particularly troubling accusation made in the *Washington Post* article is the group's removal of comments made by queer black Appalachians criticizing anti-black content (Eisenberg 2020). The article explains that Shane

Hicks, a black transgender man from Asheville, North Carolina, "routinely left comments on QA posts criticizing content that he saw as anti-black or excluding of people of color. But his critical comments were quickly deleted, he says" (Eisenberg 2020). As I mention in "Myths and Electricity," the comments section of Instagram posts contributes an additional dimension of the communal "feelings that are almost entirely unique to the social media archival format" (Cloe 2022, 127). The comments section in each post is a site of tagging others, sharing stories, making critical remarks, or providing more information about a topic or event. Comments provide an invaluable capacity for community involvement with other queer Appalachian people; the feelings within the comments section, even negative ones, are worth documenting and preserving just as much as the images and videos on the account. Queer Appalachia additionally deleted numerous posts providing context and outside perspectives, especially in the comments, on the controversy. As of April 2021, no posts from after the *Washington Post* article (Eisenberg 2020) remain. Anyone new to the group or unfamiliar with the controversy and takeover is incapable of knowing Queer Appalachia's harmful actions from accessing their account. To decide that certain posts and comments, especially critical ones from black Appalachians, should not appear in this archive is to act as a gatekeeper in a manner similar to the institutional gatekeepers that the introduction to *Electric Dirt* maligns. By deleting the comments and contextualizing posts of queer black Appalachians, Mamone and Queer Appalachia are not only continuing the myth of black invisibility in the region; they are actively expanding it.

Another aspect of the group's counterproductive approach to racial politics is their metaphorization of racial liberation, particularly following the back-and-forth "takeovers" in August of 2020. These changes in ownership of the account began with a takeover from, per the Instagram account's biography section, a "Black radical activist." Moreover, the account changed its name from "Queer Appalachia" to "Decolonized QA," indicating a significant change from the harmful anti-black actions before the takeover. As mentioned in the introduction, however, multiple sources involved in the takeover confirmed that Mamone reclaimed ownership of the account ten days later. In the months following Mamone's apparent reclamation of the account and deletion of past posts, they continued to insist that Queer Appalachia is "decolonized" and in the hands of the "Black radical activist." As of May 2021, the Instagram account no longer states that the group is under activist control. However, a statement on the group's website states that they are undergoing a change "into Black & Indigenous leadership" (Queer Appalachia 2021) but with no concrete evidence of this change. By posing as a black activist for many months and continuing to suggest that black leadership is on the way, Mamone is engaging in "digital

blackface" (Jackson 2014), as Mamone is not black, and the account has made no indication that a black person has any control over the operation of the group. By twisting black identities to gain social clout and exonerate accusations of racism, Mamone and Queer Appalachia strip agency away from black LGBTQ+ Appalachians, betraying the future of liberation and self-representation established in their work.

Additionally, along with being an outright falsehood, Queer Appalachia's continued use of the "decolonized" label illustrates a notable problem in many white-led radical organizations working toward liberation: the dismissal of decolonization as a material and deeply unsettling process. In their essay "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor" (2012), Indigenous studies scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang explain that many white-led institutions like schools, governments, and nonprofits use the language of "decolonization" to signal a progressive diversification of the group's aims and to highlight "an awareness of the significance of Indigenous and decolonizing theorizations" (2). This metaphorization, however, works in service of settler-colonial domination instead of against it. Using decolonization as a metaphor, per Tuck and Yang (2012), "recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" by divorcing the term from the definition put forth by Indigenous people—the complete, material destruction of the colony and the return of Indigenous sovereignty (3). By continuing to refer to the group as "Decolonized QA" despite being led by the same white person who was accused of financial misconduct and racism, Mamone and Queer Appalachia attempt to bypass these accusations using the superficial metaphor of decolonization that Tuck and Yang (2012) describe. In doing so, Mamone and Queer Appalachia create a flattened, hollowed depiction of decolonization and Indigenous liberation—a remarkable similarity to the flattened depictions of rural queer liberation that metronormative narratives espouse.[8]

Narrow and unchallenged representations of race, gender, sexuality, and rurality—endemic to metronormative narratives—also explain one of the major overarching problems leading to Queer Appalachia's controversy. Queer Appalachia, regardless of their original intent, became the dominant and nearly singular voice of LGBTQ+ Appalachian people and cultures in the popular imagination. In "Lessons for the Long Term," gay Appalachian writer Rachel Casiano Hernandez argues that Queer Appalachia gained popularity in part because of the convenience that the group offered: "the convenience of a central hub or the 'convenience' of a flattened narrative of a singular queer Appalachia" (Hernandez 2022, 136). Though the group initially sought to highlight the countless multi-faceted voices of queerness in Appalachia by providing a space for LGBTQ+ Appalachians to "define our Appalachia with our own images and truths," that space quickly

became under the control of an individual entity with their own biases and perspectives on what it means to be a queer Appalachian (Mamone 2017, 4). Even the name "Queer Appalachia" itself suggests a singular, united queer culture in Appalachia of which the group is the primary arbiter. Appalachian historian Elizabeth Catte explains in *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* (2018) that anti-Appalachian narratives (including metronormativity) engage in a "longstanding pattern of presenting Appalachia as a monolithic 'other America'" (22). Queer Appalachia's insistence on controlling certain narratives and silencing others, while simultaneously becoming the most popular online representation of queerness in the region, ultimately works to reinforce the idea that Appalachia is a monolithic region without competing perspectives and multi-faceted identities.

In the beginning and on the surface, Queer Appalachia appeared to be a welcome organization in the wake of mass mythologizing about the region. Certainly, their archival work and mutual aid efforts have shifted narratives and concretely laid the foundation for a new queer future, the "structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (1) that Muñoz (2009) observes. By using desire, care, and a rejection of oppressive and homogenizing structures—like systemic racism, heteronormativity, and metronormativity—queer organizing and action can bend the arc of the future toward liberation for all. However, Queer Appalachia's actions reject these commitments to care and liberation, the very same commitments proposed and approached within *Electric Dirt* and their Instagram account. By misusing mutual aid funds and acting identically to the institutional gatekeepers that they critique, Queer Appalachia constructs an incredibly narrow understanding of queerness, radical action, and what it means to be "Appalachian." Their continued insistence on masquerading as a racial liberation and decolonization group further highlights the shallowness of their understanding of identity. Sexuality, gender, race, and geographic identities, for the group, are not categories that influence the material conditions of people and their communities. Rather, Queer Appalachia treats these identifiers as hollow signifiers, a way to avoid criticism and gain capital.

Conclusion: Salvaging Queer Appalachia?

Queer Appalachia's actions are, in a word, a failure—a failure of radical political action, a failure of queer archiving, a failure of Appalachian community aid. While not the proverbial end of the world—radical LGBTQ+ people and other networks in precarious social positions have been working toward exceptional Appalachian futures for decades—the collapse of Queer Appalachia nevertheless lands a disheartening blow to countless people and groups inside and outside of the region. However, as Muñoz (2009)

optimistically notes, "within failure we can locate a kernel of potentiality" (173). Failure provides the opportunity for reflection on the errors of past actions, refinement of current methods, and the consideration of how to move forward. The failure of Queer Appalachia thus acts as a complex text for novel analysis of queer Appalachian futures. Using the example set by Queer Appalachia, we can begin to sketch out how to repair the harm they caused and what the next steps will be for those working toward queer liberation in the region.

Just as the most immediately harmful of Queer Appalachia's actions are the material mismanagement of funds and denial of such funds to Appalachians in precarious positions, so, too, must the most immediate and necessary actions in response to the group's failure address this financial misconduct. One particularly obvious solution does not require much theorization: reparations to those directly denied money by Queer Appalachia, particularly those who are black and Indigenous Appalachians. If the *Washington Post*'s convincing allegations (Eisenberg 2020) as well as the numerous allegations from other individuals are true, then Mamone and Queer Appalachia possess a substantial amount of money that does not belong to them, as it was either meant for another party in need or was acquired under false pretenses of mutual aid. Whether through "official" channels such as legal action or more "guerilla" avenues like mass-commenting on Instagram posts, digital awareness campaigns, or targeted efforts to contact Mamone directly, the first step in addressing Queer Appalachia's failure necessitates the return of the money taken through dishonest means.

The next concern involves the group itself: What will happen to the Instagram account and mutual aid efforts? With over 250,000 followers on Instagram, the Queer Appalachia account provides a significant platform that can quickly reach an immense audience, making archival and mutual aid efforts all the easier to bolster. One potential means of making use of the account's platform in an uplifting manner would thus be the transfer of power from Mamone's singular control to a more collectivized approach to management. A horizontal approach to direction, in which a defined group of LGBTQ+ Appalachians (embodying the myriad race and disability groups that make up the Appalachian working class) or a rotating set of LGBTQ+ Appalachians collectively guide the harm reduction efforts, the mutual aid work, and the curation of the Instagram account, would hopefully begin to work through many of the issues regarding financial opacity and abuses of power. This horizontal approach would necessarily need to consider the constant input from those within the region, either through Instagram comments, emails, or other community vocalizations, and should continually strive to make changes where appropriate. Numerous mutual aid groups around the world, such as Food Not Bombs, operate

on such models and could act as a methodological foundation for potential future Queer Appalachia efforts.[9] Importantly, such a transformation would still not be "decolonization." As Tuck and Yang explain, citing the work of Frantz Fanon, "decolonization will require a change in the order of the world" that consists of the abolition of property ownership and certain social hierarchies that serve as the foundation for most of Western society (Tuck and Yang 2012, 2; Fanon 1963). To refer to any new form of Queer Appalachia as "decolonized," even if under the leadership of anti-colonial people and networks, would be a reduction of the term into the type of metaphor that Tuck and Yang (2012) warn against. Nevertheless, such changes would result in a Queer Appalachia Project that more accurately and effectively reflects the desires and experiences of LGBTQ+ Appalachians.

The consolidation of power and the flattening of complex narratives will not miraculously disappear, even with a change in leadership, however. Queer Appalachia's digital actions have historically relied on the convenience of Instagram as a pre-established platform, with tools for tagging, commenting, and sharing readily available. Like Hernandez (2022), however, digital historian Cait McKinney notes in her book *Information Activism* (2020) that such conveniences have their downsides, such as the way in which Instagram encourages endless scrolling, "merely scratch[ing] the surface of what's available" in archives outside of social media (216). As a result of this quick and endless scrolling, the depth, context, and effect of queer history is often overlooked by many members of the audience, thus contributing to the flattening of queer Appalachian histories and cultures. In addition to the site's flattened convenience, the individualistic nature of Instagram accounts lends itself to similarly individualistic control over accounts, even those that seemingly represent a collective effort. Moreover, the increasing influence of branding and marketing on Instagram specifically, and social media as a whole, encourages actions more in line with contemporary capitalism than radical queer conceptions of community and archives. Recent updates in Instagram's posting algorithms prioritize accounts that provide a good or service for sale, reducing the posting capacity and reach of accounts uninterested in constructing a brand (Instagram [blog] 2020). It is very likely that truly radical forms of queer archiving could not exist on hyper-visible corporate websites; that is certainly the case now. If one of the major issues plaguing the Queer Appalachia Project is the reduction of queer action into a capitalist brand, Instagram's current trajectory would only lead to more of such problems. Future efforts to create digital queer archives of Appalachian experiences and cultures may not be able to exist on a social media platform without conforming to the countless standards of that corporate institution.

Alternatively, it is possible that a transition away from social media could still allow for Queer Appalachia to retain the large platform of their Instagram account. One possible model for the Queer Appalachia Instagram account could follow the example set by the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). McKinney (2020) explains that the LHA often posts digitized artifacts from their collections onto Instagram, including "detailed captions that contain dates, full names of everyone pictured, and full histories that contextualize events," a much-needed inclusion of context often overlooked on social media (199). This Instagram, McKinney (2020) explains, operates within the archives' "long-standing practice of using media to make materials accessible for those who are unable to visit New York" (208), making the Instagram an endeavor of accessibility as well as archiving. As it currently stands, the Instagram account is the main hub of the Queer Appalachia Project, with the website being a peripheral space for announcements and a few links to articles. A potential new Queer Appalachia would reverse this hierarchy. The website could serve as a central hub of activist work, crowdsourced archives, and other such activities; the Instagram could thus serve as the public face of the group, posting a curated selection of interesting posts and important announcements. Such an arrangement would ideally preserve the accessibility of social media while also centering a project that is more archivally deep.

In either case, the existence of the Queer Appalachia Project does not preclude the possibility for numerous other digital and physical projects on queerness in the region. Though queer people across Appalachia can find meaningful solidarity in shared forms of oppression, the region is also incredibly multi-faceted, varying from state-to-state, county-to-county, and "holler-to-holler." So, while digital and physical projects that encapsulate the whole of the region can emphasize invaluable solidarity, some of the most important projects will be those contained within specific communities. For example, the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ Heritage Project is operated collaboratively by Roanoke College and various community organizations specifically within the region and environs.[10] By working within and documenting the cultures of a specific geographic area, such projects are more capable of incorporating local people and institutions, making the impact of archival and harm reduction efforts more direct and tangible. The positive aspects of Queer Appalachia's work—hypertextual connections to other people and groups, crowdsourced submissions, and a mix of physical and digital documentation—can and should continue into these novel projects, creating numerous networks of projects, harm reduction efforts, and community documentation. At the same time, future groups and projects need to vehemently avoid the negative aspects of Queer Appalachia—singular control, financial opacity, and the metaphorization

of liberation. Ultimately, along with centering mutual aid and the voices of precarious networks in the region, these future LGBTQ+ Appalachian projects will thrive by emphasizing collaboration and transparency. With effort and a vision for the future, these projects can last longer and more responsibly than Queer Appalachia could.

Regardless of what happens to Queer Appalachia, the archive and archival networks that they've established through *Electric Dirt* and the Instagram page remain. In these archives and the other archives to which they connect, thousands of images, words, videos, and feelings document the experiences of queer Appalachian people to an extent that no other archive can claim. To lose these archives and their contents would be a disservice to the work of countless LGBTQ+ Appalachians who helped put this archive together, as well as the historical documentation of these already precarious voices. So, secondary to the reparations, alterations in leadership, reconsideration of organizational strategy, and the creation of new projects could be a concerted effort to thoroughly document and preserve the archive that Queer Appalachia has assembled.

The Instagram account poses a challenge to potential archivists. As Mamone's past actions have shown, no post is permanent, and any post can be quickly deleted, making documentation near-impossible. Furthermore, there is no guarantee of Instagram's longevity. Changes in the market, digital censorship laws, or future technology could render the entire site and its contents completely unavailable. These sorts of precarious digital projects are far from uncommon. Digital humanities scholar Amy Earhart (2012) explains, in a video called "Recovering the Recovered Text," that many digital humanities projects, especially those concerned with marginalized groups' perspectives and histories, are "living dead and have not been updated for years," are incredibly inaccessible, or are completely gone—erased by technological obsolescence, neglect, or a lack of resources. The loss of these archives is a loss of invaluable historical texts. However, as information studies scholar Travis Wagner argues in "Reeling Backward: The Haptics of a Medium and the Queerness of Obsolescence" (2018), "the latent failings of obsolescence spur an awareness of what new and modern technologies should be doing, while also denoting what any respective format did not do"—that lost exhibitions should not be a point of despair, but rather a reminder of the ephemerality of queer artifacts and the care that must go into preserving these artifacts (73). At the same time, the loss of these posts and comments could also be a predictor of the loss of more substantial documents and collections, such as the entirety of the digital social media archive, without proper care. A final, potential project would thus be, as Earhart (2012) suggests, to "focus on acquiring artifacts" such as previously lost posts and comments and to "work with short-term

preservation strategies to stop immediate loss" of current texts currently on the Instagram account.

Queer Appalachia's failures are not unique to the group nor the region, as they appear in spaces and groups, queer or otherwise, across the country. What *is* unique to many queer people and to Appalachia is the rich history of using past failures to envision new futures for those within the region—futures that not only include the voices of precarious groups but also create the conditions for the eventual collective destruction of their precarity and the implementation of a liberated existence. Though Queer Appalachia failed their vision and the vision of countless other Appalachian people, they are not the first and certainly not the last group to engage in radical queer action in the region. Moreover, their highly public failure remains as an invaluable vessel of lessons, feelings, and warnings for queer Appalachians of all backgrounds to reference in their endeavors. Through a constant, and often imperfect, process of construction, failure, reflection, and implementation of something novel, truly queer and anti-oppressive Appalachian groups can continue to make even more changes that ripple throughout the region, reflecting the immense multiplicity of identities that color the mountains.

Notes

1. I will refer to the Queer Appalachia Project as "Queer Appalachia." "Mutual aid" is a term with a long and rich history, and thus many different definitions. For this article, I will rely on the definition of mutual aid provided by queer activist and scholar Dean Spade. Spade (2020) defines mutual aid as "a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions . . . by actually building new social relations that are more survivable" (136). These "new social relations," per Spade (2020, 136) and many mutual aid practitioners, emerge from understandings of care and community that are inherently anti-capitalist and anti-oppressive.

2. 'Zines, short for "magazines," are self-published, often handmade independent magazines that are usually distributed through subcultural groups. 'Zines grew in popularity in the late twentieth century with the rise of do-it-yourself punk and riot grrrl subcultures (University of Texas Libraries 2021).

3. The Kickstarter campaign for this side project collected over $30,000 in crowdsourced donations (Keith 2019).

4. The first apology appeared on a now deleted Instagram post. The post displayed black text over a photograph of a mountain. The text read:

> The WP magazine article failed to add a disclaimer that the writer of that article which came out today is connected to an ex of mine. The writer (who isn't from Appalachia) is a known harasser in my community. For the last year, she's been harassing me, my family, and others involved in QA with aggressive and misleading questions. This article isn't about Queer Appalachia, ultimately, it's a poorly written hit piece that sees disorganization and my mental illness and reframes it into immorality. It's full of inaccuracies and stretching, and I find myself surprised how it was even published. (Queer Appalachia [@queerappalachia] 2020b)

Though the possible connection between Eisenberg and an ex-partner of Mamone casts some doubt onto Eisenberg's journalistic integrity, it does not negate the numerous testimonies within the article (Eisenberg 2020). Moreover, Mamone provided no evidence of this claim, and the post has since been deleted.

5. The image on the post displays a black fist on a yellow background with all-caps black text that reads: "QA Decolonized: Queer Appalachia is officially under new management/ this platform has been taken by force/your demands for de-platforming have been heard/ please be patient/and don't forget to buckle your seatbelts" (Queer Appalachia 2020b).

6. One such post came from Shane Hicks, the transgender Appalachian man mentioned in Eisenberg's (2020) article. This post displays black text on a white background, which reads: "Update re: @queerappalachia/TLDR: The founder of QA (Mamone) relinquished the account to @afrolachian_radical a week ago. However, the founder has recently taken the account back. Mamone has spent years defrauding folks and using Black folks as leverage" (Hicks 2020a).

7. Indigenous and non-white Latinx Appalachians are also rendered invisible by these myths of a white Appalachia, though their invisibility often operates differently than that of black Appalachians.

8. Queer Appalachia additionally made a post the day before the release of Eisenberg's (2020) article, in which they announced that the account would shift into a platform for reparations for Indigenous Appalachians, taking the form of free housing for Indigenous people in the region under the banner of "land back." Once the article released, however, Mamone quickly deleted this post, and the account has posted nothing regarding the reparations since the post. This quickly abandoned attempt further highlights the shallow relationship to decolonization that Queer Appalachia and similar white-led organizations often exhibit.

9. See https://foodnotbombs.net/new_site/.

10. See https://lgbthistory.pages.roanoke.edu/.

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