



# **Small Town Cross Roads**

A Report by Southerners On New Ground

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*This report is dedicated to the life and work of Marco McMillian.*

## Welcome to the Country From Back Porches to Back Woods

We live in the South. We are from the sticks, the hollers, the hills, the swamps, Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Bayou, the Delta, Down East, and the coast. There are things that people have come to expect from all of these parts.

There are county fairs, lawn parties, rodeos, local softball and sometimes bowling tournaments, roadside vegetable stands with lots of produce to pick from and a can to put your money in, mom and pop hardware stores, swimming holes, front porches, and only one place to get your hair done if your mama, your tió, or your auntie doesn't cut it for you. There's Longaberger basket BINGO, gas stations with live bait, gravel roads that will throw you in a ditch if you drive down them too fast, and sand and dirt roads that turn into mud pits right quick when it rains.

There is barbeque and fried fish, potato salad and coleslaw, chitlins, grits, gumbo, and jambalaya. There are pies, and jams, and fat cakes, and other things fried and sugared and buttered until you can hardly eat them and yes there is sweet tea.

There are memories of tree lynchings, and bloody soil, and stolen land, the Trail of Tears, Sundown Towns, asphalt covered slave burial grounds and those without any markers at all. There are stories of great migrations northward to Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit.

There are abandoned lumber yards and ship yards, coal fields and coal camps, warehouses, mills, and factories. There are hunting lessons that replace some weeks of abstinence only, straight only sex-ed classes, guns allowed on school grounds as long as they're locked up in your car, and school schedules built around planting seasons. There are falling down buildings, meth-labs and closed post offices and libraries, dilapidated downtowns and more churches and military bases than you can count on two hands. There's AM talk-radio, and sometimes internet, and mostly really bad cell phone reception even on top of a hill. There is one newspaper in town and a television station with the local weather if you are lucky and have rabbit ears, tin foil, and good weather.

Amidst all that expectation there is also the unexpected.

There is mole, pho, and flan, tacos, curries, and Mesir Wat from dozens of homelands that we remember by taste and smell. There are underground country queer bars, drag shows featuring Dolly Partons and Tina Turners, and Ms. Gay Latinos being crowned in high school football stadiums. There are fiddle-offs and craft shows, emcee battles and homemade ketchup contests and poetry slams. There are multi-media storytelling projects and community agriculture programs providing employment for rural Black and Latin@ young people.

There are International Festivals and Civil Rights Commemorations and if you look hard enough there are historical markers and entire buildings telling the tale of one-room school sit-ins, challenges to bus segregation, slave resistance, and freedman communities. There are community people challenging local law enforcement compliance with 287g, school board decisions to close education institutions because they can't "afford" them, and state environmental commissions doing little to regulate the building of nuclear plants and the drilling of natural gas despite our protests. There are old folks fighting restrictive voter ID laws that affect their counties and there are young folks demanding education and infrastructure to build and sustain their economic futures.

From back porches to back woods, we navigate these spaces as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people. We are pregnant high school drop outs, sex workers, closeted and not closeted preachers, first-generation immigrants, DREAMERS, sons and daughters of slaves and sharecroppers and migrant farm workers, unemployed and underemployed college graduates living with our parents and not living with our parents, trans people hitching rides and carpooling two to four hours to the closest clinics, country dyke mamas wearing flannel and wearing heels, and high femme gay boys working at gas stations and in hospitals. We sow seeds, we work in factories, we teach young people, we volunteer at the county Fire and EMT stations, and we serve coffee at the local dinner or dive. We came up in trailer homes on cinder blocks, in old falling down farm houses sitting in fields miles away from anything, or in towns with one grocery store and what seems like half a doctor's office.

This is life in the country, on the back roads, in rural counties and small towns in the American South. There is no one rural queer experience. We come from every walk of life across this great land that is filled with both a haunting and resilient legacy.

## The Legacy of This Land

### 20 Years of Southerners On New Ground

For twenty years, Southerners On New Ground (SONG) has been working at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the South. SONG was founded in a time when the Conservative Right Wing waged a full throttle attack in the U.S. and across the globe to mobilize faith constituencies and divide communities around issues of family values by targeting poor people, women, queer people, and people of color. LGBTQ people experienced this firsthand in small towns and cities across the country as they witnessed the aggressive pushing of the “Gay Rights Are Special Rights” message that strategically aimed to pit people with different identities against one another and directly linked LGBTQ issues to civil rights. Motivated by greed, this divide and conquer tactic sought to not only drive communities apart and isolate individuals but to consolidate and centralize wealth in the hands of a few.

In this environment, and understanding the South to be primarily rural, SONG hit the road touring the region with a dual strategy that one, brought intersectional issues to LGBTQ communities, and two, brought LGBTQ issues to civil rights communities. This strategy simultaneously confronted the “Special Rights” message that mobilized the resentment of white people and worked to raise consciousness in the South that built an understanding of the connections between issues and oppressions.

SONG took this strategy to Southern cities and to the rural South. There was agreement on focusing on, “everything but Atlanta.” At the time, the founders thought of both Louisville and Durham as small, and they had a sense of what was and was not happening in smaller towns based on their own experiences. While chasing down incidents of violence, SONG identified folks to take on this dual strategy in rural places and small towns and began to think about how to bring together these people with others in more urban places they had connected with. This rural work was never a formal program but included films, created space for discussions about economics, and brought together gay men, rural dykes, and people of color to build community with one another.

As SONG entered a financially difficult period, Mandy Carter served as the director of the organization traveling *everywhere* across the South from tiny 50-person prides to anywhere that called: doing workshops, giving speeches, and often just having a presence maintaining the informal rural work the organization had been doing. After Hurricane Katrina in the fall of 2005, a workshop called Beyond Gay Marriage brought LGBTQ people together across the urban and rural South. From this gathering, SONG re-organized, put together a new board, and brought on co-directors, Paulina Helm-Hernandez and Caitlin Breedlove. Since then SONG has expanded to a regional staff in five states that have conducted deep listening work that has exposed more of the realities of LGBTQ people living in the rural South.

SONG continues to increase organizational capacity and the work of consciousness raising, strengthen the intersectional analysis of key leaders and organizations in the South, build strong relationships with people who could and should be allies, and do deep healing work in people of color communities. With this spirit, we renew our commitment to small town and country queers as we look for and to each other to build whole lives for those of us coming home, finding home, and making home in small towns and rural places.

## Small Town Cross Roads

### Intersectional Tools In the South

With this renewed commitment, SONG hosted the Small Town Cross Roads Summit in May of 2013 in Greensboro, NC, at the historic Beloved Community Center. The summit included leaders of the Center for Artistic Revolution (CAR), SONG, the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WVCADV), Project South (PS), Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition, West Virginia Covenant House, and Appalshop. Instead of “making the case” once again for rural organizing in the South, we focused on these goals:

- Gaining collective understanding of each organizations work, analysis, and vision for the South, particularly as it relates to organizing in small towns and rural communities
- Cross-training each other in histories of rural and small town organizing in the South
- Articulating differences between rural and urban organizing
- Building a collective working understanding of best practices for rural and small town organizing to be used (as helpful) by organizations and funders across the country

- Building the content for a collective statement with recommendations for how LGBTQ and non-LGTBQ organizations can do intersectional organizing and movement building better in small towns and rural communities
- Building relationship among a group of Southern leaders across race, class, culture, gender, and sexuality
- Strengthening SONG's new small town and rural organizing program

With these goals in mind, we used mapping tools, story sharing, analysis, brainstorming and visioning to share the best of what we know about the history of this land, the experiences we hold in our bodies, the best strategies and lessons we've learned from intersectional organizing in the rural South, and the possibilities for our collective future. We found that while our experiences are vast and diverse we are collectively facing the trials and tribulations of environmental turmoil, rapidly changing demographics, and an economic and political climate influenced by over five decades of Conservative Right Wing organizing and infrastructure building that is based on a culture of domination embedded in white supremacy and Capitalism.

## **The State of the Rural South Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

In the South the landscape has changed.

You will still find peach orchards, tobacco and peanut fields, busted pick-up trucks, and church pews made out of the local timber or covered in musty wine-colored velvet. Amidst this beatific backdrop though lies a parallel universe, one in which environmental destruction, demographic shifts, economic collapse, and a vanishing public safety net paint the landscape.

### ***Broken Patterns on the Landscape***

As in many parts of the world, the land and the water here have been devastated. We can no longer fish in the creeks behind our houses or gut a catfish without skepticism. Even though we're sure the water is making us sick, our animals sick, and our children sick--we eat or swim in the water it came from, drink and bathe in the same water, because it hurts our souls not too, because it is a part of our way of life, and because sometimes we do not have a choice.

There are coal mines, fracking sites, oil pipelines, and nuclear plants; sites of energy harvested and sold to the benefit not of rural people but of corporate CEOs in skyscrapers somewhere far away. Never far down the road from us are sure signs of a culture committed to forgetting its waste, trash dump sites and coal ash ponds created by this extraction of our natural wealth.

This region wears markers of environmental disasters and catastrophes of the past decade and beyond. We watched the flooding of Buffalo Creek, the coal ash sludge spill on the Clinch and Emory Rivers badly mediated by the Tennessee Valley Authority, the BP oil spill on the Gulf, Hurricane Katrina and the privatization that swept in afterwards, and the Tar Sands Spill that's being guarded around the clock. Our farmers work to produce food in fields scarred with erosion from monoculture cropping and giant industrial machinery. Entire species have vanished and, most years, drought is not a phenomenon but an expectation. This destruction has encroached on our ability to make a living, feed ourselves, or provide secure shelter.

### ***The Collapse of 'The Public' and the Economy***

As we watch our soil, the life, and the commerce that come with it wash away, we are witnessing the simultaneous eroding of our public institutions. Our post offices are being closed, our schools and our libraries are losing funding, and our public lands are being privately leased for logging, for drilling, for fracking, for profits we never see in our communities. Our communities are living in new states of normal defined by economic recession and depression. There are large geographic distances to traverse with rising gas prices and smaller tax-bases than more populated and wealthy areas that leave us to rely on chains like McDonalds for internet access, Dollar Generals for our nutritional needs, and private hospitals that can sometimes be more than an hour away.

More than a happy accident, this privatization and consolidation is the result of a 50 year battle for the spirit of Southerners organized around many a kitchen table by the fundamentalist Right calling for the elimination of shared services and infrastructure from trash collection to health care to street lights.

The collapse of the public is happening in a time when rules of "economies of scale" and "market aggregation" are being dictated by Tyson Foods Inc., Monsanto, and other global monopolies holding more wealth than some nations and with an undue amount

of power, legal and otherwise, in rural and small town communities. As we face the remnants of 70s and 80s capitalism strung out on steroids, we are left dealing with the shards of glass shaped in the form of consolidated family farms, and closed plants, mills, factories, and warehouses that have left thousands of rural people unemployed. The unemployed, their families, and the community can often no longer support the local economic infrastructure of the town. With main street store fronts closed and the disappearance and weakening of public infrastructure, people move away in search of something more than the degradation around them.

Soon, between every couple of “two stoplight blink your eyes and you’ll miss ‘em” towns there is an emerging “city” that seems to have doubled overnight with the building or expansion of an interstate exit, an amusement park, a university, community college, or a hospital. Like flies to honey, shopping centers and fast food joints get built turning idyllic countryside into the picture of 21<sup>st</sup> century rural American life. Quickly these places grow from 15,000 to 50,000 and become economic keystones for their region providing “low-skill” jobs in the service industry that pay little for part-time hours and no benefits.

In the surrounding towns that weren’t so lucky you’ll find folks commuting 30 to 90 minutes to those minimum wage jobs, to the grocery store, and the gas station. These places are seen as cultureless and uneducated because they don’t have a movie theatre, a mall, or a Starbucks. Hard-pressed for jobs, these places are sold pipe-dreams of prisons as holistic prescriptions but really they are poison pills that further stifle any hope of revival.

### *From Local to Global, the Pursuit for Revitalization*

That is of course the worst of it. The complications of growing pains of rural life demanding to morph to the economic and cultural conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and increasing urbanization have transformed what it means to be rural or small town in America.

The rural South is a region where 83% of the United States’ non-metro persistent-poverty counties lie, where only 15% of rural residents complete college, where there’s been a 15-25% loss of the under 30 population, and where nine out of ten jobs missing from the 2007 recession can be accounted to rural areas and they have yet to be recouped. These numbers reveal the hard realities of rural areas, but they are also part of a larger picture that goes beyond constituencies and geographies and tells the story of the human will for dignity, survival, and freedom.

Whether it is the quarter of young people who have moved away from small towns, or the 1.5 million Latinos that have moved into rural America since 2011, or the six million African-Americans who migrated North between 1915 and 1970, people have always moved beyond and between borders illustrating and illuminating the connections from rural to urban, from local to regional, and from national to global.

Those connections tie our destinies together as marginalized people across the world. We are being left behind without education, housing, healthcare, and other public infrastructure that cares for all of us, or governing systems that work democratically.

These are not just rural problems but global problems. Our communities cannot afford to see these problems as anything but the extension of systems of dominance and domination that have defined race, economics, and borders by slavery, genocide, and displacement of Native American and African peoples for generations.

*“My part of rural America [Kentucky] is a colony, like every other part of rural America. Almost the whole landscape of this country – from the exhausted cotton fields of the plantation South...to the strip mines of Appalachia – is in the power of an absentee economy, once national and now increasingly international, that is without limit in its greed and without mercy in its exploitation of land and people.” Wendell Berry*

The experts refer to our towns as “failed communities” and our countries around the world as “failed states,” but we know that we are being left behind not by our own failures but by colonial economies that have enacted destruction and disaster in the pursuit of profit. The real failure lies in the destruction of our land, the elimination of public space for public discourse, the dismantling of a social safety net, and the protection and masking of global corporations from accountability by public institutions. As People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER) remind us in [Towards Land, Work, and Power](#), “Around the globe whenever and wherever capitalism emerged, peasant have resisted the process.” We know that in that historical tradition of resistance and resilience that we must seek to transform these systems of domination to revitalize our communities from the rural to the global.

## The Sugarshack and The Chute We Are Here

*"I thought I was the only gay person in the world for a long time"  
-Lovett (Franklin County, MS)*

As rural America has been figuratively isolated and separated from the rest of the country and the world so have rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people from the rainbow filled beacons of New York City, Miami, Atlanta, and San Francisco. The National media would have us think that queer country people do not exist. When we do it is only for the convenience of a headline describing some heinous hate crime explained in gory detail or strings of youth suicides blamed on conservative and "backward" small town thinking. We have to look no further than the media coverage of Matthew Sheppard, Marco McMillian, and countless others to confirm this. Outside of the news, we have more media exposure to gay life than in past decades, but the narratives are mostly limited to metropolitan, class-privileged, white, mostly male and gender-conforming stereotypes that are stifling and do not represent the wholeness of our identities, our realities or our desires. Country queers who are poor, people of color, and/or gender non-conforming, are rendered invisible.

Non-traditional media offers limited solutions to this invisibility.

*"I see 20 year old queers online making friends and exploring and being sure of themselves and **I think of the 20 year old queers I don't see because they're stuck in little villages like mine** and they probably don't know they're queer, haven't decided they're trans, don't know what transitioning is because everyone around them is straight and cis and normal and overbearingly looking over these kids' shoulders and shaming any glimpse of who they really are until they tuck it all inside and live like they're dead waiting for an answer to save them." -girlsperhour*

Google Searches for "queer rural gay South country" and any combination or variety of those words too often leads to reviews of academic books, heavily-worded and theorized dissertations, and news articles and op-eds from people who do not live queer rural Southern lives. There are some blogs that haven't been updated since 2011, some bits of articles that seem to conflate "rural" with "Southern," and not a whole lot that distinguishes them as two separate things. If we do happen to stumble upon something even remotely country and queer the odds of it being by or speaking to people of color, to poor people, to immigrants, to transgender and gender non-conforming people, to disabled people are slim to none. It seems impossible that in the era of the "google moment" finding ourselves would be so difficult.

At the Small Town Crossroads Summit, SONG Co-Director Caitlin Breedlove charged us to challenge this google moment to "...look for the spaces of real contradictions...[because] *we know* that in many of these/our places we exist but there is either little infrastructure or it is invisible."

It is from our lived experiences that we know that Census statistics that say there are no same-sex couples in places like Franklin County, Mississippi, are wrong. If our experiences are not enough to convince the rest of America that we exist then documentation from The Williams Institute, the folks over at Daily Yonder, and the makers of *Small Town Gay Bar* should surely show them the light, should surely show them that we are here.

## Terrified Heterosexuals Challenges of Everybody Knows Everybody Towns

*"This place that I love may not love me back."  
-Shorlette Ammons (SONG)*

Living in a place where it even *seems* like you're the only gay can be daunting. You will find LGBT and queers walking a life with different approaches. Some of us are protected from the flags and signals of stereotypes and walk around freely without people second guessing that we might have "sugar in our britches," while others of us intentionally mark and document our bodies with haircuts, clothing, make up, mannerisms and swag that say, "Here I am, look at me, see me."

Despite this, the places we live often deny that we exist or just simply don't want to acknowledge what is in their own backyards. The common, "wisdom seems to be that gays, like unicorns or dragons, are living over the next pine-covered hill, out of sight and out of mind." Conversations about queers remain just below the surface confirming what everybody knows and what nobody wants to say. We talk in code to maintain the narrative of small towns as places that uphold values of friendliness, of community, of "we're all in this together." We say, "Oh I wouldn't be seen on that side of town," when we don't want to talk about the unwritten rules that different races shouldn't mingle. We say, "Oh it's a pity about those folks down by the river," when we don't want to take responsibility for the poor and homeless in our communities. To speak outside of this code renders you an outsider that is not valuable to the political and social fabric of a place.

The narrative of small town life is woven with narratives of identities entrenched in what John Howard, author of Men Like That, calls "complicated belief systems" and rural networks that facilitate access to jobs, housing, health care, and financial and spiritual survival. These narratives and networks are created, taught, and facilitated by the centers of political and social life in a small town, the church and the school. Held side by side, these two institutions are often the judge, the jury, and the executioners who determine the legitimacy and authenticity of individuals and groups of people in places where those characteristics equal your social capital. The ferocious combination of churches and education institutions enabling and enacting cultures of silence, and the values that uphold and reinforce who is worthy of belonging is one of the biggest obstacles to rural LGBTQ people.

Rural queers face many of the same predicaments and challenges of our urban counterparts, but they are often magnified by this social economy of small places. Small town and country life is defined by networks and cultures of familiarity and kinship offered to those seen as an "authentic" part of whatever insider culture has been created in a particular place. In the South this has been defined by white and Christian supremacy deeply invested in promoting whiteness, standards of morality, and norms of gender and sexuality as measures of an authentic and acceptable culture. This insider culture which breeds conditions of violence, isolation, silence, criminalization and poverty has created mass exile of small town and rural Southern Black gender non-conforming bodies into urban areas both in and out of the South.

In a region and country that has demonized Black people and Black masculinity, it is no surprise that this exodus is largely made of Black masculine women, effeminate men, and transgender people who become special targets of hostility and violence for breaking the "norms" of dominant insider culture. Many have flocked to magnet cities such as Atlanta, GA, not only for their economic survival but for the critical connection to a community of other Black gender non-conforming people. Like Black gender non-conforming people, queers, immigrants, and people of color in small towns and rural places challenge the narrative of who is worth belonging to a place and must lay their rightful claim to their survival, to receiving adequate housing, health care, and secure employment, combating isolation, finding and accessing other queer people, dignified places of worship and spiritual practice. We know that without supporting communities to confront the history and current reality of racism and white supremacy, there can be no reconciliation and no BeLoved community for LGBTQ people of Color.

## Reconciliation & Redemption

### Our Political and Spiritual Imperatives

*"Without reconciliation and redemption we only have opposing sides."*

*-Suzanne Pharr (SONG)*

Our calling at SONG is not to leave our people behind. We will not leave behind the thousands of LGBT and queer people living in the rural South, those who have left the rural South, and those who want to return to the rural South. We believe in the vision of *BeLoved Community* built on the value of the wealth of mutuality and a vision of justice that affirms our differences, our identities, and our legacies. We believe in BeLoved Community that values us as LGB, trans, and queer people, as people of color, as disabled, as poor, and as immigrants. We believe in the transformative power of this concept cultivated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Grace Lee Boggs, Joyce and Nelson Johnson, and others. The tradition of BeLoved Community calls for the right and the freedom to make home in the places that we choose, in which we see each other as whole people, and in which we understand our fates as connected. The task of building BeLoved Community that provides safety and dignity in the context of a national and international economy and social infrastructure that does not support or protect all of its people is a challenge, but we believe in its possibility and that our political and spiritual imperatives lead us towards this.

# Catalysts & Incubators

## Strategies for Building BeLoved Community

*"We are looking for the ones who are looking for us"*

In a time where major mainstream news outlets like USA Today are asking headlining questions like, "As more move to the city, does rural America still matter?" We answer with an emphatic, yes, rural America matters! At the Small Town Crossroads Summit we lifted up that there is a need now more than ever to work in the rural South, especially among rural people of color and rural queers who are *shifting narrow definitions of who is country*.

We named that isolation is a primary condition of our lives in small town and rural communities, that as queer people we long for our wholeness and our worth to be affirmed, and to be connected to one another and to the community at large. We named that the methods to building BeLoved Community must meet the conditions of our lives and cannot be solely informed by urban people or urban practices. While we always learn from urban strategies, we identified that they often do more harm than good in our rural work. We also identified that "rural people are not our enemies." We understand that we have been strategically pitted against one another and that we must work to transform narratives, theologies, ideologies and the institutions that uphold these ideas. Sharing our collective experiences affirmed much of what we already knew: that people are the best experts of their lives, and that small town and rural people are the best people to do small town and rural organizing.

We acknowledged that the "politics of visibility" are different for rural queer people than for urban queer people, but that must not deter us from working towards the visibility of the collective and that we can use organizational resources to "take a hit" in ways that individuals are often not able to do. We confirmed that the strategies in which people feel they are authentically part of a democratic process and they are indispensable are the most viable to combat isolation, heal, and build not just individual power but collective power, and BeLoved Community. We spoke to our ongoing rural challenges and recognized the scrappy, resourceful nature of our communities and the opportunities available in small town and rural communities that may not be possible elsewhere.

As we brainstormed, our dreams of the possibilities of organizing in rural communities seemed endless and we were fueled by Appalshop and SONG's own Ada Smith who declared, "...there's a lot of space to do whatever the hell you want...if there's nothing there then we need to make it!" The following were identified at the summit as key strategies in the fight to take back and reclaim the rural South.

### *Intersectionality*

As Suzanne Pharr reminded us, intersectional organizing has always been the primary method in SONG's work. In rural towns where there are few options to avoid the people and places we disagree with, intersectional organizing becomes one of our greatest assets to overcoming hurdles of political and religious difference of "the majority." We must use intersectionality to increase visibility and connection to one another and to show up for one another outside of our "own" struggles. This requires organizing that brings diverse people together, has broad appeal and involvement, and works to transform both the cultural and political status quo that supports unjust power and does not align with our vision of BeLoved Community.

### *Political Education for Movement Leadership*

As we are force fed education that functions like a Model-T production line and pigeon-holes young people into jobs that meet the sustenance of Capitalism at the expense of community resiliency, we must provide another model.

Our models of education must incubate leadership that build and grow skills to analyze, confront, and build power to make strategic interventions in our communities around both systems and culture. Our organizations have used tools such as workshops, organizing schools, and movement universities that utilize participatory education, popular education and political education. These hybrid models should not be used in isolation and can provide opportunities to connect to leaders and organizations across issues and geographies.

## *Media & Communications Work*

Small town and rural communities provide opportunities that are not always available in bigger cities -- from frequent practice of on-air camera interviewing with local television stations to town-wide newspapers that can turn the political tide of a community with a single article and a personal relationship with a reporter. We see the development of media and communications work as an essential strategy to lifting the visibility of the collective not only in rural places but across the South.

This work should be cross-organizational and involve all levels of organizations from staff to membership and include

- deep and wide building of infrastructure that includes materials, tools and trainings
- collective development of intersectional frames and messages that have the potential to shift narratives locally, regionally, and nationally
- creation of our own media that connects us to one another and builds our skills

## *Lightning Rods and Catalysts*

In early 2013 the 334 person coal camp town of Vicco, KY, became the smallest place in the country to pass a Fairness Ordinance for LGBTQ people. The news spread like wildfire and managed to make an appearance on The Colbert Report even though Vicco Mayor Johnny Cummings was reported to say he didn't understand why it was such a big deal. After the passing of the ordinance and the media blitz, small towns from across the country have contacted Cummings and Vicco asking how they too can pass Fairness Ordinances.

While policies can never single-handedly change a town, they can become openings to engage in broader dialog and break the coded talk of small towns. What Vicco has shown us is that finding the havens, enclaves, and cracks of light can be strategic when we take risks to shift cultures of silence across a region if we use them as "lightning rod" moments to catalyze action.

## *Building A Revival*

We need spaces to gather, strategize and revive. We witnessed this first hand at Creating Change 2013 in Atlanta, GA, at a session organized by SONG called "Queering Small Spaces." With over 60 people in attendance and many moved to tears, we heard over and over again that rural queer people need more room to talk about rural queer life. At the summit, Rasha Abdulhadi of Project South reflected on that moment, "[It] felt like a revival. People were at the intersection of identity and place -- and [it] felt like the opposite of what we constantly hear, that New York is the center of innovation,..." Participants acknowledged that most of our counties and towns, "[are] not going to have a half million dollar LGBTQ center," but that we need the resources and opportunities to discuss the places that we do connect and build community whether it's the local Waffle House, the Target, or a high school parking lot.

This spirit of revival must be connected to our stories of resiliency. Like queer people everywhere, rural queers face a type of isolation that can force us to take our desires to the grave without ever uttering a word. As resourced organizations, we have a responsibility to create entry points for our stories to be shared with one another that can help us heal, maintain our wholeness, and combat the isolation of the soul and the spirit. We vision this work happening through collaborative multi-media arts and culture projects.

## *Collective Resourcing & Wealth Redistribution*

While all of our organizations at the Summit are at least minimally resourced, we recognize that we face various challenges related to funding depending on our size, the states we work in, and the primary focus of our work. Challenges include limited staff size and time, the breadth of the area we can impact, and the sustainability of our organizations. We face an already tough financial climate. In 2011 the LGBTQ movement spent \$123 Million. The South saw less than 3% of those private foundation dollars even though the region holds one-third of the U.S. population. Even more startling is that only .05% of it went to rural work (need source from Ada).

The current culture of non-profit 501c3 structures required for private foundation funding means much of the best rural intersectional organizing receives zero of these dollars. We are inspired by the work of the Trans Justice Funding Project and their call for wealth-redistribution that reaches beyond 501c3 structures. We need new Southern models of resourcing that support local, grassroots intersectional queer organizing.

## *Incubating and Fortifying Cultures of Resiliency*

Small town queers are seeking and practicing ways to transform space, place, histories, and stories. We are doing this through 'head nod' culture that affirms that we see one another, small town gay bars that encourage multi-racial and multi-generational bonding, and gathering when we can even if it is under the veil of school diversity clubs or the aisles of Target and Walmart.

We cannot ignore the state of our spirits and souls in a time when we are facing isolation and attacks on our humanity. There is a rising generation of queers and allies who are building on the legacy of elders and who are refusing to accept rhetoric that condemns us all to hell, separates us from our children and young people, and tells us that we do not belong. If we incubate and fortify this culture of resiliency, if we ask and answer hard questions, if we are willing to be transformed by the work of social justice movement, if we are positioned to see and practice nonviolent conflict as a vehicle to BeLoved Community then we can meet the needs of the present with the beliefs and solutions to shape the future.

The Small Town Crossroads Summit affirmed what we've learned over SONG's history. We have seen the need to build on the strategies that we know and we must continue to work to innovate new methods that build the safety and leadership needed to confront power. Our location in a region distraught with silencing and criminalization of queer, Black, and brown bodies means that we must create more space for building BeLoved Community. At SONG, we believe this moment calls for four strategies

- Leadership development through political and popular education
- Base building
- Coalition and alliance building
- Cultural and community organizing

Our emerging program, **Small Town South**, will focus on building the leadership and skills of rural and small town LGBTQ people to determine the future of their lives and their communities. Our program will use these four strategies motivated by our vision and our values to *build and amplify* the permanent, flexible, and resourced infrastructure the rural and small town South needs to *connect* us across identity, organization, and geography.

## **Moving Beyond Exile**

### **Towards a Culture of Mutuality**

*“We have been wrong to believe that competition invariably results in triumph of the best. Divided, body and soul, man and woman, producer and consumer, nature and technology, city and country are thrown into competition with one another. And none of these competitions is ever resolved in the triumph of one competitor, but only in the exhaustion of both.”*

The strategies that came out of the Small Town Crossroads summit align with what SONG has learned after 20 years of intersectional organizing in the South. We must build, amplify, and connect with a practice of interdependency and mutual aid that recalls the best parts of our Southern rural culture and challenges us to confront the worst parts rooted in racism, transphobia, homophobia, sexism, ableism, and classism.

SONG is poised to be one of the few organizations that understands and sees the reason to invest in queer rural grassroots organizing. Our legacy across the region positions us to do the "hard work"- organizing with rural people living in fear and isolation to transform our communities into more vibrant, inclusive, and innovative spaces so that the *entire* South can demand a future that reflects our realities.

We see the promise of the transformation of rural life that is resilient, creative, and in the vision of BeLoved Community that connects the destinies of all marginalized people. That vision calls for a renewed understanding of our interdependency of rural, suburban, and urban. It is a call to create a culture that builds on the power of human relationship and mutuality for our collective survival that is defined outside of profit-driven market economies. As we search for the ways to build culture of BeLoved Community, we follow the global and Southern call for liberatory governance practices, education that nourishes us and decolonizes our minds, dignity, belonging, and the right to *be* in any of the places we have come to call home regardless of the latitude or longitude you'll find on a map.

## **ABOUT SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND**

SONG is a home for LGBTQ liberation across all lines of race, class, abilities, age, culture, gender, and sexuality in the South. We build, sustain, and connect a southern regional base of LGBTQ people in order to transform the region through strategic projects and campaigns developed in response to the current conditions in our communities. SONG builds this movement through leadership development, intersectional analysis, and organizing.

*Special thanks to the New World Foundation for the resourcing of the Small Town Crossroads Summit and this Report, the Beloved Community Center staff in Greensboro, NC, for always graciously hosting us, to the participants of the summit for bravely sharing their experiences, hard lessons, and minds, and to country queers everywhere who hold a little piece of land in their hearts wherever they call home.*

For more information, visit [www.southernersonnewground.org](http://www.southernersonnewground.org).

## ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILES

### **Appalshop** [www.appalshop.org](http://www.appalshop.org)

Appalshop is a non-profit multi-disciplinary arts and education center in the heart of Appalachia producing original films, video, theater, music and spoken-word recordings, radio, photography, multimedia, and books. Appalshop is dedicated to the proposition that the world is immeasurably enriched when local cultures garner the resources, including new technologies, to tell their own stories and to listen to the unique stories of others.

### **Center for Artistic Revolution** [www.artisticrevolution.org](http://www.artisticrevolution.org)

The Center for Artistic Revolution, **CAR**, was founded in Little Rock, Arkansas in 2003 by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer Arkansans (LGBTQ) and their straight allies who believe that all people should have equitable access to fair treatment, a democratic political process, and economic and environmental justice. **CAR** works with a holistic combination of progressive education, organizing skills, advocacy, and creative/cultural work in order to create a fair Arkansas that values all of its residents.

### **Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition** [www.mssafeschools.org](http://www.mssafeschools.org)

The Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition is a collaboration of people and organizations who believe that no student should ever feel too afraid to go to school. The coalition works to ensure that all students have a safe learning environment by protecting students' constitutional rights, ending homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and all forms of discrimination, and fostering acceptance of students regardless of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity through public education and advocacy.

### **Project South** [www.projectsouth.org](http://www.projectsouth.org)

Founded in 1986, Project South has developed thousands of leaders within communities directly affected by racism and economic injustice in order to build social movements to eliminate poverty. For over 25 years, Project South has used popular education techniques as an organizing tool to build a base of skilled leadership that directly challenges racism and poverty at the roots. Project South builds communications capacities among low-income families of color and provides multiple mechanisms to shift public dialogue on local, regional, and national levels.

### **West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence** [www.wvcadv.org](http://www.wvcadv.org)

The mission of the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence is to end personal and institutional violence in the lives of women, children and men. WVCADV works to transform social, cultural, and political attitudes **through public awareness, policy development, community organizing, education and advocacy** in ways that promote values of respect, mutuality, accountability and non-violence in local, statewide, national and global communities.

### **West Virginia Covenant House** [www.wvcovenanthouse.org](http://www.wvcovenanthouse.org)

Covenant House of West Virginia is dedicated to working for justice by offering direct services for people in need while creating social change through advocacy and education. Covenant House is dedicated to social justice through our efforts to eradicate hunger, homelessness, and poverty. Our diverse faith, cultural, and belief traditions unite us in reaching out to those in need, irrespective of race, class, gender, religion, creed, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, disability, or national origin.

# SOURCES AND RESOURCES

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<http://ruralstrategies.org>

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<http://countryqueers.wordpress.com>

### Daily Yonder

“Job Loss Concentrated in Rural,” Bill Bishop, June 10, 2013:

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### Funders For LGBTQ Issues

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### Girls Per Hour

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### National Public Radio

“Great Migration: The African-American Exodus North,” September 13, 2010:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129827444>

### National Rural Assembly

<http://ruralassembly.org>

### **Rural Family Economic Success Network**

“Estimated Net New Rural/Mixed Rural Residents by State”

<http://rufes.org/2013/03/18/estimated-net-new-hispanic-ruralmixed-rural-residents-by-state/>

### **Rural Organizing Project**

<http://rop.net>

### **Small Town Gay Bar**

<http://smalltowngaybar.com/>

### **The Colbert Report**

“People Who Are Destroying America – Johnny Cummings,” August 14, 2013:

<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/428601/august-14-2013/people-who-are-destroying-america---johnny-cummings>

### **The Williams Institute**

<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu>

### **Trans Justice Funding Project**

<http://www.transjusticefundingproject.org/what-we-do/>

### **USA Today**

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