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Qualitative encounters with anti-drag legislation: adaptable genre-blending policy research methods from the HBO series *We're Here*

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ABSTRACT

We're Here is an HBO reality television series that transports drag queens to rural, politically conservative, and religiously restrictive contexts across the United States. On each visit, a trio of drag artists meaningfully engage with local queer people, their families, and community members. This article is based on an analysis of the first three episodes of Season 4, which was filmed in Tennessee amid legislative efforts to ban drag performances. A "genre blending" conceptual framework is introduced herein and employed as a lens through which to present features of *We're Here* that are worthy of adaptation and methodological replication. Exemplary drag research pedagogies for policy scholars in education and other fields are highlighted. Also, potential ways to engage drag research pedagogies in qualitative policy studies are proposed – specifically, how to amplify the humanity of people whom policies are affecting, the value of being in spaces where policies are being created and implemented, and how to simultaneously engage in data collection activities while also disrupting harmful policy implementation actions in real time.

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In its four seasons, the Emmy® Award-winning HBO show *We're Here* transported drag artists to communities across the United States, mostly small towns (see Table 1). In each episode, a trio of well-known drag queens – all of whom are former *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants – traveled to shed light on the cultural contexts in which queer people and their families live. Noteworthy is that five of the seven cast members across four seasons are people of color. A central component of every episode includes a drag show in which the focal LGBTQIA+ persons and sometimes their parents are transformed into drag performers for a live show in their politically conservative, often religiously restrictive rural communities. Writers, producers, and most especially the drag performers in *We're Here* curated episodes that showcased the humanity of queer Americans and other people who reside in rural communities.

We're Here provides a nuanced window into the origins, multidimensionality, and affirming power of drag performances. It also presents a useful prism through which to design, execute, and present findings from place-based qualitative research studies.

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Table 1. *We're Here* seasons, locations, and cast.

Season	Location	Cast
1	Gettysburg, Pennsylvania Twin Falls, Idaho Branson, Missouri Farmington, New Mexico Ruston, Louisiana	Bob the Drag Queen Eureka O'Hara Shangela Laquifa Wadley
2	Spartanburg, South Carolina Temecula, California Del Rio, Texas Selma, Alabama Evansville, Indiana Watertown, South Dakota Kona, Hawaii Grand Junction, Colorado	Bob the Drag Queen Eureka O'Hara Shangela Laquifa Wadley
3	Granbury, Texas Jackson, Mississippi St. George, Utah Sussex, New Jersey Florida[+]	Bob the Drag Queen Eureka O'Hara Shangela Laquifa Wadley
4	Tennessee[+] Oklahoma[+]	Jaida Essence Hall Priyanka Latrice Royale Sasha Velour

[+]On each episode, cast members visited multiple towns in these states where anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-drag laws and policies had been recently passed.

Each episode embodies numerous features of exceptional phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and case study methods. This article amplifies these qualitative approaches and focuses specifically on the first three episodes of Season 4, which were situated in various towns across Tennessee amid politicized legislative efforts to ban drag performances. How a trio of drag queens went into dangerous places, made sense of the policy effects on queer people and communities, and helped viewers understand much more about those places beyond what they may have seen in news headlines or read on social media could be an adaptable approach for qualitative researchers who choose to study the impact of transphobic and homophobic education policies and laws (as well as anti-DEI legislation more broadly) in similar geographic contexts.

Policy studies are lopsidedly quantitative. Large numbers of them rely on statistics from state and federal government datasets. Hence, the impact of policies on people tend to be mostly understood through numbers. Qualitative policy studies usually involve analyses of documents and news sources, along with some interviews. These kinds of case studies and quantitative analyses of datasets have been useful; they have done much to reveal the effects of policies on people. Notwithstanding, the policy literature in education and other fields would benefit greatly from a more expansive range of methodological approaches. Drag queens in *We're Here* offer adaptable examples of what is possible for social scientists who endeavor to help others understand human encounters with laws and policies in Southern and rural places.

Literature review

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed a bill in March 2023 that largely banned drag performances on public property throughout the state and in locations where "adult

cabaret entertainment" could be viewed by non-adult persons (Tracz, 2024). The bill went on to specify that the first offense would result in a Class A misdemeanor, and subsequent offenses would be charged as Class E felonies. "Adult cabaret" was defined as gatherings and spaces that featured "topless dancers, go-go dancers, exotic dancers, strippers, male or female impersonators, or similar entertainers" (TENN. CODE ANN. § 7-51-1401, 2021). The bill was ultimately deemed an unconstitutional violation of free and expressive speech. However, numerous local anti-drag ordinances and policies were created and implemented throughout Tennessee. This was part of a larger movement, mostly in states located across the American South (e.g., Arkansas, Florida, and South Carolina), that aimed to legislatively ban drag performances. Attacks on drag emerged in the aftermath of other anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation in Tennessee, including House Bill 3 and Senate Bill 228, which outlawed the participation of transgender youth on sports teams in schools. It also followed Tennessee House Bill 1182 and Senate Bill 1224, which required public and private buildings to post notices at their entrances if they allowed persons across genders to use the same bathrooms.

Jones (2025) conducted a rigorous analysis of 1,054 anti-LGBTQIA+ state-level bills submitted across the U.S. between January 2018 and December 2023. Findings show that earlier bills focused on school-sponsored sports, bathrooms, and transgender youth in K-12 schools, primarily in Republican-led states. But over time, Jones observed that legislation spread to Democratic-led states, to higher education institutions, and "expanded in number, frequency, size, and punitive reach" (p. 69). During that same timeframe, there was also an increase in the number and intensity of legislative bills aiming to outlaw drag performances. American Civil Liberties Union (2025) data show that 17 bills seeking to legislatively restrict drag performers were introduced in 10 states within the first four months of 2025; there were five separate anti-drag bills in West Virginia that year. An Institute for Strategic Dialogue report (Martiny & Lawrence, 2023) shows that anti-drag activities across the U.S. were not only legislative, they also were attitudinal (as evidenced by content posts and engagement on social and digital media) and behaviorally violent (as evidenced by harassing threats, vandalism, verbal and physical assault, and doxxing of drag artists and performance venues). Moreover, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and GLAAD reported that between June 2022 and April 2023, there were 356 reported incidents of anti-LGBTQ+ extremism in the U.S., 138 of which targeted drag events and performers (ADL, 2023).

These recent attacks on drag are not new. Tracz (2024) traces laws and policies back to the mid-1800s that aimed to punish persons who publicly wore clothing that seemingly misaligned with their sex, and then chronicles centuries of subsequent legal attempts to suppress drag performances. Similarly, Redburn (2022) catalogues legal attempts to ban so-called "cross dressing" (largely meaning men dressing in wigs and women's clothing) in the U.S. dating back to policies enacted in St. Louis, Missouri in 1843. But accordingly, between 1963 and 1986, "criminal defendants began to successfully undermine cross-dressing bans in a range of cities, from New York and Los Angeles to Toledo and Champaign-Urbana. Hoping to challenge their arrests, these defendants argued that anti-cross-dressing laws were facially unconstitutional" (p. 681).

Satta's (2023) law review article concludes that "virtually any law aimed specifically at restricting, suppressing, or banning drag performances violates the First Amendment" (p. 95). This is consistent with other scholars' legal interpretations (Cerrentano, 2023;

Harvard Law Review, 2024; Redburn, 2022; Ries, 2023; Timmer, 2024; Tracz, 2024). Notwithstanding, Birenbaum (2023) notes that "obscenity tests" (what is obscene or sexually explicit, who gets to determine what constitutes obscenity, and determinations of the harms of obscene statements and content) expose drag performances to tremendous legal subjectivity. Cerrentano notes that anti-drag legislation is largely based on unsubstantiated, homophobic, and transphobic claims that performers engage in sexually explicit acts in the presence of children.

Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH), an experience during which drag artists read books to kids (mostly at public libraries and in schools), has been met with tremendous outrage from conservatives (Barriage et al., 2021; Condren, 2018; Coste, 2024; Radis et al., 2022). This resistance has not been isolated to the American South or even to the United States. Scholars also note a range of DQSH oppositional efforts in schools and libraries throughout the United Kingdom (Ellis, 2022), Canada (Kabatay, 2024), Australia (Kermode & Phillips, 2025), Sweden (Engström et al., 2024), and Germany (Moody, 2023). In addition, a report by Squirrell and Davey (2023) highlights additional public disapprovals of DQSH and other drag activities in France, Ireland, Finland, Switzerland, and other European countries. The resistance sometimes turns violent. For example, in March 2024, a Canadian library received a bomb threat in response to a DQSH event it was scheduled to host; the event was canceled and the library was closed (Law, 2024).

One study found that the hypervisibility of DQSH events often compelled librarians and drag queens to behave even more carefully than they do in other performance settings (Kitzie et al., 2022). In their survey of parents and caregivers who experienced DQSH events firsthand with their children, Radis et al. found that more than 86% of the respondents indicated that they enjoyed the program and would recommend it to a friend, 72% reported that their kids enjoyed the programming, and 65% deemed it age appropriate. Ironically, an analysis of 103 picture books read to children at DQSH events found that characters in those texts were mostly white, cisgender, heterosexual and able-bodied, not LGBTQIA+ (Barriage et al., 2025).

In addition, Anderson's (2024) study of public libraries in North Carolina found that DQSH events were incredibly rare and that when they occurred, content on gender and sexuality were suppressed – meaning, drag performers were engaging content that was not sexually obscene or otherwise focused on exposing kids to books that most parents and other adults would find inappropriate. Noteworthy is that librarians and teachers are almost always present at DQSH events – no credible published evidence exists to confirm that those professionals sit idly by as drag performers read sexually-explicit or sexually-suggestive content to children. It is clear, then, that the mere presence of drag queens in contexts where kids are present is what is being opposed. Despite there being far too little evidence to confirm that artists and performers behave pornographically or otherwise inappropriately during DQSH events, Shenton's (2023) analysis of social media discourse reveals pervasive misinformation and disinformation that raised serious concerns among parents about the exposure of their children to queerness. This is consistent with findings presented in another study (Davis & Kettrey, 2022) that analyzed 1,658 comments posted to four ideologically divergent Reddit communities.

Acknowledging the often overlooked intersectionality of racism, homophobia, and transphobia in scholarship pertaining to drag, Deppe (2024) notes how drag itself has long been an act of intersectional resistance among Black performers in Michigan,

Illinois, and Indiana. Another study (Balint et al., 2025) found that drag performers used their platforms to advocate on behalf of themselves and inclusively for other queer people. Huff's (2021) study focuses less on resistance, but more on how drag performances led to community building and the cultivation of supportive subcultures for queer people in Mississippi. In addition, Kammerer and Michelson (2022) describe the ways that drag performers mobilized voters for the 2020 U.S. presidential election. They argue, "drag, by its very existence, is political" (p. 655). This all coheres with Kammerer, Michelson, and Harrison's (2025) call for political science (and presumably other academic fields and disciplines) to take drag more seriously because of its engagement, activism, protest, and community building possibilities.

There have been additional oppositional activities in support of drag performers. For instance, Fairfield (2024) studied a Memphis-based LGBTQ+ nonprofit community theater's approach to resisting anti-drag legislation in the state of Tennessee through litigation and various organizing activities. Robbins (2024) highlights how Season 15 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a reality competition television show, leveraged its platform to call attention to anti-drag legislation and policies across the nation and to raise money for the ACLU Drag Defense Fund.

In "Shantay You Stay: Keeping Kids at Drag Shows," an article published in the *Journal of Law and Policy*, Harris (2024) chronicles historical narratives about the LGBTQIA+ community in general and drag performers in particular. Harris also shows how homophobic and transphobic attitudes co-mingle with conservative politics and policymaking.

> Groomers. Pedofiles. Sexual predators. All these words and phrases represent an age-old campaign by conservatives and right-wing politicians to persecute the LGBTQ+ community and stoke an unfounded fear amongst their base that LGBTQ+ people are harmful to children. In recent years, conservatives have focused these narratives on specific subsets of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly drag artists and performers. This has resulted in a significant backlash against the drag community in the form of protests, violence, and criminalization of drag performers. (p. 123)

In response to this, Harris advocates for exposing youth to drag and LGBTQIA+ history and culture, as well as reforms that reverse unconstitutional policies that outlaw drag performances. In many ways, Season 4 of *We're Here* offers a powerful response to Harris' call.

So far, the HBO reality television series has been the centerpiece of a published media review (Banks, 2022) and at least one master's thesis (Pizzini, 2024). The show received a prestigious Peabody Award in 2023. In its announcement, the Peabody governing board deemed it, "a form of artistic protest." In this article, I insist that *We're Here* also qualifies as a legitimate form of qualitative inquiry, as it shows how education researchers, public policy scholars, and social scientists can similarly engage in academically-defensible protest through humanizing place-based methods involving LGBTQIA+ youth and other people experiencing marginalization in geographically, religiously, and legislatively oppressive contexts. It also pushes some longstanding, unnecessarily segregated approaches to qualitative inquiry.

Conceptual framework

Across seasons, *We're Here* cast members employed a range of methods as they traveled from one small American town to another. Their inquiries extended far beyond

sit-down interviews with individuals or focus groups. In many ways, they engaged in "genre blending," a concept that I am debuting in this article. Drag art usually entails an abundance of makeup. Contestants in *RuPaul's Drag Race* devote tremendous effort to meticulously blending their makeup. They paint in complex, fascinating ways—no one ever relies on a single color, presents the same face on every episode, or brings a messy patchwork of painted mugs to the runway. Narrative blending is similarly evidenced in each episode of *We're Here*. Some of this is attributable to the producers and editors, but the seven drag queens also deserve credit for asking the right questions, establishing deep rapport, and blending what they were hearing from others with what they were witnessing for themselves in the contexts they were visiting. Blends also surely included sprinkles of what they knew from their own firsthand lived experiences to be true about homophobia, transphobia, bullying, family and community rejection, and religious oppression. Their offerings were ultimately beautifully blended, expertly gathered insights from queer residents in rural places.

My genre blending concept also is a deliberate nod to "gender bending," which entails contesting binary notions of gender via various representation choices (Egner & Maloney, 2016). Drag performances themselves entail considerable gender bending. At most drag shows, audiences anticipate, suspect, or know for sure that performers are fluidly embodying and portraying expansive expressions of gender – it is an inescapable feature of the artform. On each episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, contestants spend time out of drag as they rehearse performances, sew and glue outfits, paint their faces, and interact with each other in the workroom. Presentations of gender follow them as they transition onto the main stage. This is one of many ways that gender bending occurs on that show and in other performance settings. I consider genre blending to be an intentional toggling of presentation approaches. In *We're Here*, cast members are sometimes in drag, sometimes not. And much like gender bending, they blend elements of documentary with entertaining drag shows, brave disruptions of homophobia and transphobia, and policy advocacy. In one moment, the show is one thing, then it transitions into another, ultimately resulting in complexly blended episodes that push the boundaries of what typically occurs within the parameters of a single television show.

Genre blending, as I am conceptualizing it here, also disrupts segregated boundaries that have long been employed in qualitative research studies. Creswell and Poth (2025) present five common qualitative inquiry approaches: phenomenology, narrative research, ethnography, case study, and grounded theory. More often than not, these approaches are used in standalone fashions; each has its own well-developed literature, guides, and standards. *We're Here* obviously qualifies as phenomenology, the approach that I use most often in my qualitative work. The phenomenological approach focuses on understanding and describing the "lived experiences" of people who have endured a similar phenomenon or been exposed to a common set of conditions (Creswell & Poth; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Vagle, 2024). In Season 4 of *We're Here*, the phenomenon was being a queer person in Tennessee, a state that had recently passed anti-drag legislation. More acutely, it was also the experience of residing in communities where local-level ordinances led to the cancelation of Pride Month festivities and drag performances. Moustakas (1994) explained that a phenomenological account gets inside the experience of a person or group of people and describes what

participants experienced, how they experienced it, and their sensemaking regarding various effects relative to the phenomenon. The researcher and readers of a phenomenological study should be able to say, "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne 1989, p. 46).

Inasmuch as *We're Here* delivered deep phenomenological understandings of the essence of queer people's shared experiences in legislatively and religiously restrictive rural contexts, it also blended the four other aforementioned qualitative inquiry approaches. In their widely-adopted textbook, Creswell and Poth (2025) explain that narrative analyses involve collecting stories and cohering them into plot lines. Impressively, individual narratives are given ample time and space to develop within each episode of *We're Here*. Consequently, important aspects of each individual queer person's life and journey are showcased, while simultaneously placed in conversation with other people's narratives in ways that ultimately tell cohesive stories. *We're Here* is a television show. Hence, most anthropologists would likely and rightly argue that the emersion was not long or deep enough to qualify as ethnography. But incontestably, it has praiseworthy ethnographic features, as evidenced by the cast members actually visiting the sites of their inquiries, walking around, as well as talking with the focal queer people, their family members, and strangers in each episode. Even if it was a quick capture, episodes provide meaningful glimpses into the culture of every town the drag queens visited. Perhaps to varying degrees, it is possible for viewers to experience a sense of "being there," which is one of many powerful features of good ethnographies.

Straightforwardly, *We're Here* employs what very much resembles case study methods. Across all seasons, every episode offers a bounded exploration of a single place, mostly showcasing lots of casual conversations and formal interviews, sometimes weaving in discoveries about the local histories. The first trio of episodes in Season 4 went further, as the drag queens relied on documents – specifically, local ordinances and state policies, as well as news stories – to complicate their analyses of how anti-drag legislative activities were affecting queer people across Tennessee. Their qualitative explorations were both time and place bound, which is highly recommended in case study research (Yin, 2018). Ultimately, a grounded theory about queer people's lives in rural contexts could absolutely emerge from a disciplined viewing and rewatching of all episodes across all four seasons of *We're Here*.

To be sure, the five common approaches that Creswell and Poth (2025) present are sometimes combined. But again, they are more often executed as discrete approaches. Rarely does a project blend all five approaches (or what I am referring to as genres). It was television producers and directors, not academicians or research methodologists who delivered an HBO reality television series with adaptable features that could inform and improve qualitative studies that aim to understand how homophobic, transphobic, and otherwise oppressive environments and policies affect people.

Methods

For this article, I chose the three specific episodes of *We're Here* that were focused on anti-drag policies in Tennessee (Season 4, Episodes 1–3). I watched each episode three times. First, I watched as a fan of the show; not for analytic purposes. In so

doing, I saw the adaptive possibilities that are later described in this article. In the second watching, I engaged in extensive notetaking while starting and stopping segments. I also simultaneously recorded the audio, which my iPhone automatically transcribed. When watching the trio of episodes for a third time, I paid closer attention to expressions, B-roll, and background moments that I may have inadvertently overlooked during previous viewings. After systematically analyzing my watch notes and transcripts from the three episodes, I developed a trio of categorical groupings that showcase the television show's genre-bending features as well as its adaptive possibilities. Because they have the potential to teach policy researchers in education and other fields, I describe them below as exemplary drag research pedagogies.

Limitations

I did not originally conceive of this as an academic project. There never were and still are no clear research questions that guided my inquiry or analysis. I was simply watching an HBO reality television series and got inspired as I saw qualitative excellence on full display. I am not trained to analyze television shows. Surely, there are formal methods involved in doing so, most likely in the cinematic arts and media studies literatures. I, instead, approached this as a qualitative purist – meaning, what I saw inspired my analytic sensemaking. Like drag artists, I chose to paint here what I believe to be the most compelling presentation of my ideas. I share herein the prism through which I made interpretive and potentially adaptive sense of how Jaida Essence Hall, Priyanka, and Sasha Velour pursued qualitative insights into how anti-drag policies were affecting queer people in Tennessee. A different social scientist or media studies expert who employs more formal and rigid methods would surely see something different. Yet, arguably, my proximity to the contexts shown in *We're Here* poised me to see things that other analysts from different places and life experiences may have overlooked.

Positionality statement

The inaugural episode of *We're Here* resonated powerfully with me. I was mesmerized and immediately captured. Places the seven drag performers visited across all four seasons were deeply familiar – they felt like home. I grew up in Thomasville, a small town in South Georgia. As is the case in communities featured in the series, religion (specifically Christianity) is a dominant cultural feature of the place in which I was born and raised, the town in which most of my family still lives. As a youngster, I did not personally know anyone there who was not Christian – in fact, most people routinely went to church and were judged if they did not. Both of my parents are very religious. My father was a pastor in the A.M.E. Church for more than four decades. Hence, Christianity has always been a significant aspect of my life, including now.

There were no known drag performers in Thomasville. If anyone there did drag, they did so someplace else or deeply underground. I also did not know any out queer people there. Undoubtedly, Thomasville had gay boys and men. I was one of them when I lived there. The Christian ethos and expectations of the place compelled us to remain closeted. I remember calling my mama in summer 2010, the day after I proposed to the man who is now my husband. We shared our good news with her

and jokingly said we were planning to have our big, fabulous wedding in Thomasville. There was a moment of hilarious silence on the phone. Even though my mama absolutely loves and supports us, we all knew there was no way that two men would be able to marry there. No way. It was understood. The unspoken, universally recognized heterosexist, homophobic, and transphobic norms that govern towns like mine is another aspect of *We're Here* that I found so fascinating, so reminiscent.

Like me, Little Richard is from Georgia. On the day he died, I published an essay titled, "The Little Richard Neither I Nor Little Richard Wanted To Be" (Harper, 2020). In it, I talked about how flamboyantly feminine the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee was, yet because of his Christianity, he struggled for a long time with being gay and out. I remembered feeling that way until my early 30s. I also confessed that I found Little Richard's femininity scary; I did not want to be that kind of Black gay man. My recent work with Oscar Patrón helped me understand how much of the femmephobia about Little Richard, other queer men, and myself that I had internalized was attributable to growing up in Thomasville (see Patrón & Harper, 2025). Having now lived in Philadelphia and Los Angeles for the past 18 years, I fully recognize and acknowledge that femmephobia is pervasive in big cities, too. But the situatedness of it in *We're Here* was much more proximal to my own experience.

Exemplifying drag research pedagogies

We're Here could teach policy researchers in education and other fields how to amplify the humanity of people whom policies are affecting, the value of being in spaces where policies are being created and implemented, and how to simultaneously engage in data collection activities while also disrupting harmful policy implementation actions. Each of these features of the HBO reality television series is worthy of adaptation and methodological replication. I describe in this section how this trio of exemplary drag research pedagogies were evidenced in the three episodes situated in Tennessee amid state-level actions that restricted drag performances.

Amplifying humanity

Policy studies tend to focus more on the policies than on the people who live with their consequences. Even when effects are documented, they typically are done so quantitatively. This often sterilizes impact and fails to evoke compassion among voters, legislators, and others. The Season 3 cast of *We're Here* devoted plenty of time to showcasing anti-drag legislative activities. Viewers could watch the episodes and get a sufficiently adequate sense of why the policies were made, what they said and did not say, and how they were being implemented. The show included enough of that. But its most powerful feature is the manner in which the people who live with those policies are humanized. They are not presented merely as residents whose realities are collapsed into percentages. Case study features of the show not only focus on the places, but also the individuals in those contexts. Its phenomenological dimensions offer viewers a window into the essence of queer people's shared experiences during a time that pride month activities and drag performances were being legislatively banned.

"It makes me worry for the people who live here," one *We're Here* cast member noted. "When this is your day-to-day reality, it takes such a toll on you, makes you feel so alone." The show brilliantly captured many of those day-to-day realities in Tennessee and the toll it was taking on LGBTQIA+ persons. It is plausible that more humanistic presentations of policy effects could help homophobic and transphobic people more deeply understand the devastation that is being experienced. Maybe if researchers did more to ensure that queer people are seen, not hidden, in culturally and religiously restrictive contexts, their lives would be given the consideration they deserve during policymaking and policy implementation processes.

Understanding policymaking in context also necessitates the humanizing of people who do homophobic and transphobic things. *We're Here* helps viewers understand how harmful beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are byproducts of longstanding cultural and religious norms. Specifically, they show how otherwise seemingly good people have been socialized into homophobia and transphobia. At an early moment during their time in Tennessee, Sasha advised, "We can't jump to any judgements, we're keeping an open mind." She talked about being from a place in Illinois that was a lot like Murfreesboro. Priyanka then reflected on being from a place where no one ever talked about being gay. It was clear that the drag queens were not giving people a pass for the homophobic and transphobic policies that had been recently passed in the state. Yet, firsthand familiarity helped them make sense of why the majority of residents and conservative lawmakers thought those policies were good and right. Policy researchers could benefit from qualitative engagement with conservatives and highly religious persons to more deeply understand the undercurrents of their resistance and the sustainers of their oppressive logics. *We're Here* teaches scholars how to do this without villainizing conservative and religious persons, by amplifying their humanity, too.

The very design of the entire HBO reality television series – not just the three episodes in Tennessee – brilliantly make the point that the focal queer persons in each episode are humans deserving of love, acceptance, safety, support, freedoms, and legislative justice. The policy literature in education and other fields often fails to do this, and therefore does too little to help the people whom policies harm. Meeting the people, spending time in their homes, walking around town with them, accompanying them to municipal buildings, and preparing them for drag shows enabled Jaida, Priyanka, and Sasha to understand the Tennessee residents as humans. They were not simply interviewees on a television show. One noteworthy example was their engagement with Norm, a queer man who was born and lived in Murfreesboro for 45 years. He also had been a drag performer for two decades. Norm noted that he ran for county mayor "to say there are people like me here." Someone shot a bullet through his house. "How can you navigate a life when you're always on guard," Sasha asked. "My sense is that the queer community is surviving here by hiding and keeping their heads down." There is a chance that Sasha and her castmates would not have understood this so deeply had they not spent in-person time with Norm at his home where gunfire could have ended his life.

Being in policymaking sites

For an array of reasons, many policy scholars write about places they have never been. The *We're Here* Season 4 queens actually went to Tennessee. They did not

attempt to understand anti-drag policies from afar. Instead, they were there as policy was being created, implemented, and contested. Within 24 hours of arriving, someone yelled out "faggot" as the queens walked down the street. They acknowledged that the men who attacked them with homophobic slurs "might have guns." Reportedly, the threats of violence felt more palpable than they were comfortable with or accustomed to. Nevertheless, the trio of drag queens recognized how being in the policy implementation context could deepen their understandings of queer people's ordinary experiences. The B-roll included shots of a confederate monument erected in 2011, as well as images of residents looking at the drag queens with disgust as they put up pride month flyers around town. It did not deter their inquiry or prevent them from capturing the experiences that they were there to capture.

At one point, Jaida, Priyanka, and Sasha went to the Tennessee State Capitol dressed in full drag. Beforehand, there was footage of the producers informing the queens of an alert received about the possibility of their arrest. They went anyway. "I feel like a rebel, but at the same time I'm scared as hell," Jaida confessed. Priyanka, who is Canadian, added this:

> I am almost certain that I would get kicked out the country if I got arrested. But to inspire one person to live out and proud is worth it for me. And I am definitely relying on the power of drag to take me through this.

Ultimately, they were not arrested. Being in the Capitol that day afforded them the opportunity to hear firsthand what some defenders of anti-drag policies were saying. Afterwards, they engaged with a conservative father and his daughter – the drag queens were confident in their stances, but not disrespectful or combative. It seemed that being there deepened their knowledge about not only the policies themselves, but also the homophobic and transphobic logics that undergirded them. It is possible that this could have been achieved on some level by watching video recordings and analyzing transcripts of legislative hearings. But undoubtedly, being there helped them feel what was happening in powerful ways.

Simultaneous inquiry and real-time reciprocity

Scholars often conduct research under the illusion of objectivity. But truth is, each of us brings biases and perspectives that inform the questions we craft, whose voices we seek out and privilege, and how we interpret our findings. Although they are not researchers, the three drag queens who went to Tennessee seemed to understand this. They could have approached the show by simply conducting on-camera interviews with local LGBTQIA+ persons and their families, without inserting themselves in any way throughout the inquiry process. Doing so would have likely weakened the power of their discoveries. More problematically, they would have gone into and taken from communities that had been harmed by recent policymaking activities as well as longstanding homophobic and transphobic cultures. They got the footage they needed for the reality television show, but they also gave back to those persons and communities while they were there.

In addition to attending the legislative session in full drag and engaging with local residents, the queens also went to the city hall building in Murfreesboro to get a permit to host pride month activities. After being given the runaround and unclear,

inconsistent articulations of what the policy was, they were able to submit the event permit application. Cameras showed the doors to the planning office being closed and locked immediately thereafter. They did this on behalf of the people. But in so doing, they also experienced firsthand what it was like for queer people there to navigate nasty encounters with city government employees and frustratingly murky policy implementation.

Jaida, Priyanka, and Sasha read the policy documents they received in context, as opposed to reviewing them from afar like many policy analysts often do. They did not file an open records request and wait for documents to be sent to them via postal service or email – they repeatedly went to City Hall, retrieved the ordinances, and read them in real time. They discovered that the policies were very vague, purposely confusing, and highly subjective based on which law enforcement officer showed up to police drag performances. They asked on-the-spot questions about their discoveries, which is not something that policy researchers typically do. Their review of an "indecency" ordinance, for instance, revealed that only the city manager or the police chief could determine if something qualified as indecent. This was just one of many examples that showed the seemingly deliberate complicity of city government in making things unnecessarily and unfairly complicated for residents. Policy scholars could intervene in similar ways as they attempt to understand the effects of legislation on people. It could deepen their analyses, while simultaneously affording them opportunities to ensure that the people they are surveying or interviewing receive the justice they deserve right then and there, as opposed to months or years later when findings are published in a research report or peer-reviewed policy journal. Local queer residents had done much to push back against legislative efforts, but it seemed to help when a trio of well-known drag celebrities and a crew from HBO showed up to point out the flaws and harms of local policymaking and policy implementation activities.

In part because of their efforts, pride festivities were approved, but only indoors. Also, no drag performances were allowed. "I'm so mad for the people who live here," was Priyanka's response upon learning this news. "Shut up and just take it then, because that's all we can get," is how she felt in the moment." B-roll showed the defeat that Priyanka and others felt. This is important because greater commitment to doing more swiftly ensued. Again, believers of objectivity in research would surely argue that such feelings contaminate and otherwise compromise data interpretation. The drag queens confirmed something different: it is possible to hear directly from people how policies affect them and to read secondhand reports of those effects, while also experiencing versions of it for oneself. This deepens and strengthens, not weakens the analysts' understandings of policy effects – joys and wins, as well as disappointing losses and harms. There is a chance that if Priyanka and the others only engaged from afar, they would not have gotten angry. Consequently, the absence of anger and other powerful emotions might not have compelled them to do all they could with the intelligence they were gathering during their inquiry activities in Tennessee.

Conclusion

Am I really insisting that there is something for researchers, including highly respected policy experts, to learn from drag queens on a television show? Yes. It seems

important to timestamp the era in which this article was written: during a scary moment in American history in which diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts are being legislatively banned by state legislators and the federal government, as well as through executive orders signed by U.S. President Donald Trump and members of his administration. Consequently, decades-long DEI policies that protect LGBTQIA+ people, women, and people of color are being reversed. Also, funding for programs, offices, and culture centers is being catastrophically cut in K-12 schools, higher education institutions, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and corporations. Chief diversity officers and other DEI professionals are being fired, not because of wrongdoing, but because of hateful partisan politics.

Anti-drag laws in Tennessee and elsewhere were being introduced with increased frequency during the same time that state-level efforts to ban Critical Race Theory and DEI in educational institutions began to multiply. In lots of ways, the attacks on drag performers is alarmingly similar to anti-DEI movement activities. Much of the stress and the harmful effects of anti-drag legislation came about not because drag artists were introducing children to indecent content during Drag Queen Story Hour events or at artists' performances in public venues where kids were present. Instead, it was a blend of conservative politics, homophobia, and transphobia that led to a waste of taxpayers' dollars in what in most places was ultimately deemed an unconstitutional assault on drag performers' free and expressive speech rights. More consequently, it cruelly placed at risk people's careers, physical safety, and psychological wellness. These times call for scholars, including those who study education and public policies, to do more of what Bob, Eureka, Shangela, Jaida, Priyanka, Latrice, and Sasha did in the four seasons of *We're Here*, especially during their time in Tennessee.

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