**Queering Nowhere**

**Nolan** [00:00:09] **I identify as a black trans man. I use he/him pronouns and I'm 22... I almost forgot.**

**Danielle** [00:00:18] **That's Nolan.**

**Nolan** [00:00:20] **Before I realized I was trans, I identified as a gay woman.**

**Tess** [00:00:26] **I'm white, asexual panromantic...**

**Danielle** [00:00:30] **That's Tess.**

**Tess** [00:00:32] **...and I identify as trans non-binary and use they/them pronouns.**

**Danielle** [00:00:38] **And I'm Danielle. I'm a white, cisgender, queer woman and use she/her pronouns.**

**Danielle** [00:00:42] **The three of us are friends from the middle of nowhere: queer people from different corners of rural Virginia**.

**Danielle** [00:00:55] **When you think about small southern towns, one of the first things that comes to mind is "conservative religion." And Christian denominations - the kinds found most throughout the South - are infamous for having a queerphobic reputation. That combination of a rural, conservative, Christian environment can be hard to grow up in as a queer kid.**

**Danielle** [00:01:18] **I moved to Virginia about 12 years ago, after living in upstate New York, and I still can't get over the fact that after your name, in my small town, people always ask which church you go to. I mean, it is called the Bible Belt for a reason.**

**Nolan** [00:01:35] **My grandmother, bringing religion, told me about hell for the first time and the Bible, and I was like, "What?" And so, I freaked out and had this urge to like tell my parents like, "Hey, I'm gay." So I came out to my mom first, at eleven, and she was like, "I suspected and I love you. We can talk to the pastor tomorrow morning." I was thinking like, I'm so happy that this was her response, because I didn't know any better.**

**Danielle** [00:02:01] **Nolan has struggled with reconciling his queerness with religion throughout his life. He had even joined a Christian group in college that directed him to... a combined support group for students struggling with eating disorders and queer identity. Nolan never actually went to those meetings, but was so influenced by them that he broke up with his partner at the time and decided to be celibate. But then...**

**Nolan** [00:02:27] **I came home for the summer and I went to church, and I literally felt like I was outside of my body.**

**Nolan** [00:02:34] **I stood up in front of my church family and I'm like, "I'm gay. And this is something I've struggled with my entire life. And yes, it's a sin. But the way that you guys are treating gay people is absolutely the most hateful thing that you, as Christians, can do."**

**Nolan** [00:02:52] **And after church, everyone was coming up to me, and they're like, "I've always known, but, you know, I'm glad you made it out. This is the right thing for you." I felt that cognitive dissonance, like, "Why the fuck are they telling me this?" But I did this to myself. So, I was kind of like always going back and forth and having internal struggles. And then, now I'm accepting who I am.**

**Danielle** [00:03:13] **When I first heard this story, I thought Nolan was nuts. I could never imagine coming out to my entire church. In fact, there the ONE group from my small town that still doesn't know I'm queer... and if they do, it definitely didn't come from me!**

**Danielle** [00:03:32] **These people watch you grow up. They know your family, your family's struggles. Most rural Virginia towns are tight knit, small communities. People tend to go to the same church for years and years - if not for life.**

**Tess** [00:03:47] **I have a very large family and almost all of them live within the same stretch of a few miles. Within that same stretch was a church. People that I am related to helped build this church. And that church was, by and large, an extension of my family. And growing up in that, I connected that very closely with family and home.**

**Tess** [00:04:17] **When I think I started getting inklings of how I was, I was different. I had started having depression - what happens when you reach puberty. I started looking for the only thing that I could think of to help myself. The only thing that people around me seemed to be talking about. I started delving deep into Christianity, but trying to find my own brand of it. Around the time when I started to come to terms with my queer identity and recognize how much I had been suppressing it because of my Christian identity, I started to question it when people I knew and cared about said things that directly went against what I believed, especially in terms of my own queer identity.**

**Danielle** [00:04:57] **I'm lucky, my family is pretty accepting of me. But family can often be tense for many queer people, depending on their level of acceptance. Nolan had already come out to his parents: once as a gay woman, and recently as a trans man, but found his family's reactions differed based on his identity.**

**Nolan** [00:05:15] **Being gay is like familiar. So it's like, "Oh, you're gay. That's not natural." But trans is like, "What the fuck are you doing?" Like, it's basically like I'm mutilating my body. But, at the same time, the outcome for me personally is a million times better. Like, it's right. It just fits.**

**Danielle** [00:05:34] **Tess, on the other hand, is not out to their family about their trans identity.**

**Tess** [00:05:40] **If I had an opportunity to tell them, I don't know if I'd trust them to understand. I'd love to tell them that. I'd love for them to believe that queerness is okay. But to convince all of them? Impossible. Some of them, maybe.**

**Tess** [00:05:57] **I have a mother, a father, a little sister and an older half-brother - he is also queer... And I have told them that I am bi. I think my dad was more confused on what it meant, although I definitely think he is more intolerant of the two. With my mom, she said the words, "No parent could be happy with two gay sons." And well, that hurt a little bit. Eventually they learned to just ignore that it exists. But, it wasn't the worst possible thing... and I'm happy with that.**

**Nolan** [00:06:30] **There was a certain age where I would do everything with my dad, like I would help him work on his car, and we would go fishing, and like all this stuff. And then it was like, a certain age, where it just stopped. Anything that I did, it was attributed to just me being a tomboy, until I got to that age where it's like, it's not cute. And then it was like, "Oh, it's because of your gayness." But they never accepted me being like trans. If my dad had been more accepting, and then I would have come out as like his son, and we still would've had that closeness.**

**Danielle** [00:07:02] **It took me until my second year of college to realize my own queer identity. I hadn't realized that I had inadvertently absorbed years and years of microaggressions. As a kid, you often don't realize that people just expect straightness to be everyone's default or the "norm." I certainly would have found myself sooner had I viewed sexuality as a discovery or journey, instead of something to conform to. And I know I'm not alone in this.**

**Nolan** [00:07:31] **I kind of just started out as this black kid who had understandings of gender and how things are supposed to go, but never feeling comfortable in that at all. And like, I grew up and I was being told so many times, like, "Girls don't do this. You need to wear these things..." Literally down to how I freakin' walk. And so not only did I have internalized misogyny and sexism, but also a lot of internalized transphobia before I even knew I was trans.**

**Danielle** [00:08:00] **Both Tess and Nolan told me that queer representation and exposure outside of family can be life changing, but sometimes that's hard to find if you don't befriend the right people in your small town.**

**Tess** [00:08:13] **I think when I started to realize at least aspects of my queer identity was later on in high school. I started learning more about different identities and I started talking to other queer people about, "Hey, I'm experiencing these things and I'm not sure what they mean..."**

**Tess** [00:08:29] **When I got further away from my home, where I could explore those things that I had been questioning for a while. You know how in rural towns, if there's news, it spreads. If I did anything out of the ordinary, other people would know - especially in church.**

**Tess** [00:08:43] **When I was more with like-minded queer people, I was able to finally shed the final layers of doubt and insecurity and... allowed me to realize that no matter what they may say about religion, I am what I am. I think that's mostly what made it such a long journey, because I was constantly thinking that, "No, that can't be me."**

**Danielle** [00:09:11] **Representation and connecting with other queer people is important in self discovery. Tess and I had a hard enough time finding the right fit of a queer community, and we're white. Nolan had an extra layer of difficulty finding acceptance and community as a queer person of color.**

**Danielle** [00:09:28] **After the COVID-19 pandemic arrived and quarantine started, I called Nolan to ask about how race impacted his experiences.**

**Nolan** [00:09:36] **Difference never came up because, like the whiteness was so suffocating that it forced a lot of people to not bring up those things.**

**Nolan** [00:09:44] **So it took a lot of me getting angry, like taking people saying like, "Oh, you're you're so white," or like "You're not like other black people," as a compliment, and then realizing that that's really offensive, and then getting angry for me to realize that I was literally just a pawn in white, heteronormativity, and racism.**

**Nolan** [00:10:05] **Queerness feels very white if you're not around queer POC, because of so many different factors. Just having that layered oppression, like in my parents perspective, I'm a black woman, so when you add this gay shit on top of it, let alone transness now, it's like, why would you want anything else for your life? Like you already have it hard. And when you have all of that in your head, growing up as a gay or trans person, and your family is giving you all of this religious and cultural shit like, you just think that there's something wrong with you.**

**Nolan** [00:10:39] **The second thing I would say is definitely representation, because when you look at a lot of gay pride, it's a bunch of white people. That's what you see everywhere. It's kind of just like this idea of like, "Oh, that's for white people."**

**Nolan** [00:10:55] **It's like they have so much privilege that they don't see the nuances of what it means to live in scarcity mode all the time. They demonize what it means to be black, like they're not able to see the nuances that put my culture or my family in that position to have to think like that. So it's hard to find solidarity with white queer people sometimes when they're not able to see the struggle or have a similar struggle.**

**Danielle** [00:11:24] **Growing up, I hated rural Virginia. But... now that I'm away... I feel a strange attachment to it. It took me a while - not only because I was trying to figure out my own identity, but because I was ignoring a lot about the identity of the place I grew up.**

**Tess** [00:11:43] **But I don't think there's something specifically about being rural that makes you queerphobic, besides just more queerphobic churches being there, more people who are just cling closely to certain traditions.**

**Danielle** [00:11:56] **Yes: there's a lot about the rural south that isn't queer friendly. Nolan, Tess, and I can all attest to that. But we also each have unique experiences and relationships with our hometowns - that queer people from larger cities might not. In some ways, it's unique to be queer AND from a rural place.**

**Tess** [00:12:18] **I mean, queerness has always been in every space at some point, but the acceptance of queerness has not. Ruralness and queerness aren't opposites in any way.**