

The Space and Place of Sexuality:
How Rural Lesbians and Gays Narrate Identity

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Sociology)
in The University of Michigan
2010

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To my family

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the many people in my life whose support made it possible for me to write this story. First and foremost, I could not have completed this dissertation or graduate school without the love and encouragement my family continually provides. This project would not have taken the shape it has without my wife, Jaime Brunton. Your willingness to engage in numerous conversations about the questions and issues I grapple with in my dissertation has enriched my thinking and this manuscript. Thank you for helping me celebrate the achievements and calming me through the transitions. I'm looking forward to our adventures in Nebraska! May the prairie hold good things for our family. My parents, Don and Lucy Kazyak, have done a beautiful job of recognizing my academic accomplishments alongside other important moments that have occurred in my life over the past six years. That balance has given me the ability to stay grounded, connected to my roots, and humble through this process. Thank you both for your unconditional love. I am equally grateful for the support from my brother and sister in-law, Brian Kazyak and Shannon Preston-Kazyak, and my sister and brother in-law, Alison and Jeff Weinschenk. Thank you for always being there to listen to me, for giving me advice about all things large and small, and for many fun memories as our families continue to expand. I also want to recognize Evan, Nora, and Dylan who have, in such a short time, given me much laughter and comfort. I'm looking forward to watching the people you become.

I count myself lucky to have encountered many wonderful scholars and mentors during my time in graduate school, including my committee members: Karin Marin,

Nadine Hubbs, Gayle Rubin, Margaret Somers, and Alford Young, Jr.. Their excellent insights have pushed my thinking about this work and I know their comments will continue to inform my revisions. I hope to be able to one day provide for students the intellectual and emotional support I received from these mentors. Karin Martin in particular has been an amazing mentor throughout my graduate school career. She has seen me through coursework, preliminary exams, the job market, and this dissertation – and her precise, practical, and helpful feedback have been especially helpful during all those transition moments. Moreover, she has served as a model for me with regard to how to work calmly and steadily, adapt to unexpected setbacks, and how to pursue an academic career while also building a family. Thank you for not only providing excellent intellectual insight into my work, but also for inviting me to collaborate on research. Thank you as well for sharing the many joys and sorrows I’ve witnessed during my time in graduate school, including grieving the loss of our friend, Katherine Luke.

Nadine Hubbs saw value in this project from its early stages and encouraged me to pursue it. I am thankful for how carefully she read various drafts of this manuscript as well as for organizing and including me in the “Emerging Rural, Nonmetropolitan, & Working-Class Perspectives in LGBTQ Studies” Symposium. Being able to spend that day with scholars working in similar areas was inspiring and invigorating. Margaret Somers and Alford Young, Jr. also played a critical role in ensuring the successful completion of my dissertation. Thank you both for supporting this work and for providing advice on the project itself, particularly your encouragement to grapple with the big theoretical questions. I also thank you both for conversations about navigating academia. Last but not least, I owe thanks to Gayle Rubin for introducing me to the vast

body of social science scholarship interrogating queer lives and communities and offering guidance on how to think about my own work as building on, rather than cutting down, past research.

Many other faculty members, who although did not formally serve on my dissertation committee, still offered support and advice at different stages of my graduate school career, including: Elizabeth Armstrong, Howard Kimeldorf, Michael Kennedy, Debbie Keller-Cohen, Anna Kirkland, Jayati Lal, Adela Pinch, and Pamela Smock. I have also had the benefit of learning a great deal about how to teach through my experiences teaching with PJ McGann, Terry McGinn, and Luis Steif-Yunis. In that respect, I am grateful for the opportunities to engage in dialogue about teaching offered by the Center for Research on Teaching and Learning and the Preparing Future Faculty seminar. These resources have given me confidence in myself as a teacher and continue to help me reflect on ways I might come closer to becoming like the teachers I had who made me want to go to graduate school in the first place. Specifically, I am grateful for these teachers and mentors I had during my undergraduate at Ohio University: Mary Beth Krouse, Kasia Marciniak, Christine Matley, and Debra Henderson. Cara Bergstrom-Lynch, Kristie Ford, and Gene Deerman graciously shared their graduate school experiences and advice, which helped me through the job market process. In addition to these undergraduate and graduate mentors and advisors, I owe many thanks to the men and women who were willing to be interviewed for this project. I hope I have captured the complexity that I heard in your stories. Generous financial support from the University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School, the Departments of Sociology and

Women's Studies, and the Center for the Education of Women made it possible for me to have the time to carefully listen to the stories.

Finally, this journey in graduate school was filled with many happy memories because of the wonderful people I've met during my time in Ann Arbor. I am so grateful for the members of my writing group - Laura Hirshfield, David Hutson, Zakiya Luna, Katherine Luke, Carla Pfeffer, and Kristin Scherrer. You have all done much more than provide feedback on my work, remind me of deadlines, answer late-night emails, and help to write the story I wanted to write with this dissertation. Together we created a group of friends whose support for one another I know will be sustained as we all begin to migrate out of graduate school. I also wanted to give particular thanks to our friend Katherine Luke, who appreciated the complexity and beauty of the world while still recognizing its problems and advocating for progressive social change. I miss you. I am thankful for the community that continues to celebrate Katherine's life – and Amy Hammock and Dana Levin in particular have provided comfort and the space to cry and remember Katherine this past year, and for that I am grateful. Kristin Scherrer also deserves recognition for the countless times she has offered support, hugs, fashion advice, silliness, and for being a consistent companion for watching Buffy. Finally, I consider myself lucky to have the friendship of Myra Bhatnagar, Marie Burrage, Rebecca and Clare Cecil-Karb, Nicola Curtin, Kenne Dibner, Kate Haffey, Jenn Mann, Daniela Pineda, Amanda Roth, Jonah Siegel, Jamie Small, Rachel Thompson, and Dan Willig.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Cultural narratives and popular representations of gay and lesbian sexualities are embedded in a particular geographic story. Namely, that rural areas and the Midwest are spaces where gay and lesbian sexualities are unclaimed, stunted, or destroyed and, in contrast, urban spaces are where those identities are constructed and made visible. Consider, for instance, images of “gay ghettos” (Levine 1979) in the United States like the Castro, Greenwich Village, and West Hollywood. Or, the following recent depictions of queer life in the United States: In *Small Town, Gay Bar* we follow GLBT people in a small town in Mississippi and witness the aftermath of a hate crime in a small community. In *The L Word*, we follow lesbians in Los Angeles and watch two characters migrate there from the Midwest: one who is engaged to a man but who comes out as bisexual, and another who is a butch lesbian who discovers transitioning and starts taking hormones to transition to male. In *MILK*, a recent movie depicting Harvey Milk’s gay rights activism in San Francisco, there is a scene where Harvey Milk receives a call from a young gay man in Minnesota. The young man tells Harvey that he might kill himself because his parents are going to hospitalize him. In response, Harvey implores him to get on a bus and go to the nearest big city. Similarly, the 2009 decision to permit same-sex couples the right to marry in Iowa was hailed as the “mainstreaming” of gay rights. That it was understood in this way, by both queer and mainstream presses, reflects the

sentiment that gay and lesbian sexuality is incompatible with the Midwest. In sum, across such representations and narratives, queerness is aligned with urban spaces while the rural becomes a site of horror, and of backward folks driven by moral values that condemn homosexuality.

That such ideas circulate reflects how “social life is storied” (Somers 1994, p. 614). Through narratives, people make sense of events, their life trajectories, and their relationships. At the individual level, people utilize narratives to connect different, perhaps contradictory, life experiences across time (Gergen 1994). Thus, it is through narratives that people “render themselves intelligible” (Gergen 1994, p. 186). Scholars interested in identity have, therefore, focused on the stories that people tell because it is in analyzing narratives that we can understand how people construct their identities. As Gary Alan Fine and Corey Fields (2008) assert, “narratives are often the means through which individuals engage in the self-reflexive process of identity construction” (p. 139). Narratives also work at cultural and institutional levels in a number of ways. Through storytelling, collective identities and social movements are forged (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Plummer 1995), and allies are created (Broad 2002). Focusing on gay and lesbian identities and communities, Ken Plummer (1995) notes how coming out stories were integral to building gay social worlds. He writes: “for narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear...for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, identity, their politics” (87). Along with coming out narratives, gay and lesbian activists have worked to construct publicly available sexual identities, and have utilized these identities strategically in political mobilizing (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Cutler 2003; Ghaziani 2008). That shared cultural

narratives exist is important insofar as they “provide a broad outline for the possibilities” of the self (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, p. 13). Cultural narratives are resources for individuals as they craft personal identities (Loseke 2007). While people’s understandings are often filtered through generic narrative forms (e.g., stories about progress, stories that clearly delineate villains and heroes), specific narratives grounded in particular historical moments and cultures are also important in shaping how individuals make sense of themselves.

The narrative about geography and sexuality presented in the opening paragraphs is one such cultural narrative about gay and lesbian identities. Specifically, we might consider it an example of what Loseke (2001) calls a “formula story.” She writes:

Formula stories are narratives about types of experiences...involving distinctive types of characters...As such stories become widely acknowledged ways of interpreting and conveying experience, they can become virtual templates for how lived experience may be defined. As formula stories pervade a culture, people increasingly use them to make sense of their lives and experiences (p. 107).

Utilizing this framework to understand gay and lesbian sexualities reveals that there is a circulating formula story about the experience of being queer in rural spaces. The distinct characters in the story include the “oppressed rural gay” who must flee to the city to come out, find a queer community, and become liberated. Thus, by implicit contrast, the “liberated urban queer” who is connected to a queer community is another distinct character in this story. Following other scholars who analyze formula stories, my claim is not that the story is inaccurate (Crawley and Broad 2004; Loseke 2001). Yet it necessarily fails to capture the diversity of gays and lesbians’ lived experiences (Crawley and Broad 2004). In other words, while people use cultural formula stories in making sense of their experiences, these stories are by no means determinative of personal

identities. Donileen Loseke notes that the “relationships between personal and cultural narratives of identity are anything but straightforward” (Loseke 2007, p. 673), and thus, she underscores the need to better understand how “particular narratives migrate from one realm of social life to another,” and how narratives might be modified in such migration (p. 677). Analyzing how individuals engage with formula stories in their everyday lives is one avenue that can illuminate how narratives are modified in the migrations between cultural and personal.

Since gay and lesbian sexual identities are linked to urban spaces in cultural narratives and representations (Halberstam 2005), examining the sexual identity constructions of rural gays and lesbians can illuminate the relationship between personal and cultural levels of narrative identity and how disruptions might occur between the two levels. Individuals in rural areas have certainly experienced same-sex desire and engaged in sex with same-sex partners, but gay and lesbian sexual *identities* have been entangled with urban spaces in both cultural and personal understandings (Abraham 2009; D’Emilio 1983; Weston 1995). In other words, these narratives are not only fictional or inaccurate accounts of gay and lesbian sexualities; rather, the narratives are also reflections of lived experience. Social scientists have focused on the importance of urban space as contexts for sexual minorities to come out and find others like them, and have documented the existence of gay communities in U.S. urban locales such as New York City, San Francisco, Chicago, and Buffalo (Achilles 1967; Boyd 2003; Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio 1983; Harry and DeVall 1978; Johnson 1993; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Levine 1979, 1989; Leznoff and Westley 1956; Newton 1972; Rubin 1998; Weston 1995). Kath Weston (1995) argues that the urban/rural binary has been embedded in the very way that

people think about being gay insofar as urban space signifies the possibility to be gay or lesbian and find others, while rural space signifies oppression. She argues that this imagining resulted in numerous individuals migrating to San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s.

However, research indicates an increasing geographical diversity and visibility of gays and lesbians in both non-urban locales and the Midwest (Black et al. 2000; Gates, 2006, 2007; Rosenfeld and Kim 2005). According to analyses of the Census and the American Community Survey, Midwestern states had the largest percentage increase of same-sex couples from 2000 to 2005. Also, seventeen percent of same-sex couples live in rural areas, and there was a fifty-one percent increase in same-sex couples in rural areas from 2000 to 2007 (Gates 2006). Demographer Gary Gates attributes these increases to gays and lesbians coming out in these areas, and an increased willingness to be counted in surveys. Such evidence suggests a disruption in cultural narratives about what it means to be gay or lesbian – narratives that link those sexual identities to urban spaces. While we know *that* this is happening, little is known about *how* it is happening. In other words, given the increasing geographical diversity of gays and lesbians, work needs to be done to understand how and why the relationship between geography and sexuality is shifting in how individuals construct gay and lesbian sexual identities.

Drawing on data from sixty interviews, I provide an analysis of how rural gays and lesbians engage with the cultural narratives that link gay/lesbian identities to cities. How do cultural narratives that link urbanism and queerness matter in the everyday lives of those seemingly outside of them – gays and lesbians living in the rural Midwest? How do people construct gay and lesbian sexual identities in rural locales, and how might

these identity constructions disrupt cultural narratives about what it means to be gay or lesbian? In addition to analyzing the narratives of gays and lesbians living in rural areas, I also analyze narratives of gays and lesbians who now live in cities, but grew up in rural locales. While these interviewees seemingly reproduce the formula story about geography and sexuality insofar as they migrated to cities, I show how both groups modify components of the story as they make sense of their individual experiences. Thus, at its core, my dissertation analyzes the meanings that rural gays and lesbians – some of whom are living in rural areas and some of whom are living in cities – make about geography and how those meanings matter for the stories they tell about their sexuality. I analyze their narratives of sexual identity in order to assess how people make sense of and modify circulating cultural narratives. In doing so, I show how formula stories are both productive and constraining. I also highlight the myriad ways people construct gay and lesbian identities – in both rural and urban contexts.

Findings from this dissertation illustrate that geography continues to be important in shaping how people make sense of gay and lesbian identities. While the city is not imagined as the only place to be gay or lesbian, it is imagined (and experienced) by some as a space inhabited by certain kinds of gays and lesbians. For instance, many rural gays and lesbians distinguish between “exciting” urban and “boring” rural gays and lesbians. Narratives about what it means to be out, accepted, and visible as a gay or lesbian individual in rural areas are grounded in understandings of rural life. Specifically, I find that three understandings of rurality are salient in these narratives: being known as a good person, having ties to the community, and the close-knit nature of rural life.

Comparing the narratives of the interviewees living in rural areas to ones expressed by some of the interviewees living in cities reveals important differences. Rather than understanding all rural people to be unwelcoming or unsafe, those in rural areas think only certain rural dwellers are (e.g. “rednecks”). Likewise, those currently living in rural areas assert that bigots could live anywhere, and that, in fact, people in cities might be more able or willing to express hostility openly. Finally, while those living in cities think rural heterosexuals have a limited or stereotyped understanding of gay and lesbian identities, many of those living in rural areas think that such narrow understandings circulate more in urban environments, and that gays and lesbians have more flexibility in rural environments. In addition to differences between those living in rural areas and those living in cities, there are also differences amongst the interviewees living in cities. They differed in terms of where they think is the ideal place to live (some, ideally, wanted to migrate back to a rural area), and in terms of how they make sense of rurality (some resist the equation of rural with backward). Finally, findings from this dissertation demonstrate how meanings about gender and class are embedded in meanings about geography and thus shape the narratives about space and sexuality. Rural gays and lesbians narrate their class position vis-a-vis the binaries of rich-urban and poor-redneck. Also, the link between non-normative gender presentations and non-normative sexuality is understood differently in rural areas, illustrating the importance of relationships in achieving visibility.

While there remains relatively little research on non-normative genders and sexualities in rural America, a number of researchers have begun to address the topic. My work builds on this literature – echoing some of its findings while also contributing

new understandings about the numerous ways that rural gays and lesbians construct sexual identities. One available framework for understanding these sexualities posits that different logics operate in rural areas, such that having sex with a same-sex partner would not entail adoption of a gay or lesbian identity. Alternatively, research focusing on rural areas in the U.S. and the U.K. finds that individuals do construct gay and lesbian identities, but do so within an isolating and intolerant context. Such work identifies the things rural gays and lesbians enjoy about rural life, including a slower pace and a connection to the outdoors, yet also notes barriers they face with regard to their sexuality, including isolation, being closeted, and a lack of a visible gay community (Boulden 2001; Coby and Welch 1997; Kirkey and Forsyth 2001; McCarthy 2000). This research suggests that “rural” and “gay” are incompatible, and that rural gays and lesbians understand other facets of their identity (e.g. “rural”) to be more important than their sexuality insofar as they are willing to tolerate living in areas where they cannot be out because they like many aspects of rural life. In other words, this research highlights characteristics of rural life that hinder constructions of gay and lesbian identities.

Yet, in his study of men in the South, John Howard (1999) stresses the importance of “queer agency” (p. 124). In reference to characterizations that comprehend small towns as facilitating such things as social isolation or religious conservatism, Howard writes: “while certainly relevant, these taxonomies focus on mainstream hegemonic forces and tend to negate queer agency.” (p. 124). Indeed, Howard illustrates how men created queer social worlds in rural contexts – and how they were able to express same-sex desire and find sexual partners *within* institutions like church, home, and work. Rather than hinder expressions of male-male desire, these spaces fostered it. As Howard

notes, participating in queer sex and social life often did not entail adopting a gay identity. Similarly, Johnson (2007) draws attention to non-metropolitan male homosocial worlds of the 1930s and how these worlds provided a space for expressions of non-normative genders and sexualities. Indeed, there were movements in the 1970s to create rural queer social worlds – and thus another important aspect of the literature addressing the relationship between space and sexuality is work that documents how the rural is imagined as an escape from the urban in both radical faerie and lesbian land movements (Bell 2000; Hennen 2008; Herring 2007). The radical faerie movement developed, in part, as a rejection of urban gay culture, and the “hypermasculine gay ‘clone’ of the 1970s” (Hennen 2008, p. 60) and lesbian land movements were an extension of the lesbian feminist movement.

Such “back-to-the-land” lesbians populate the small town in Oregon whose battle over a ballot measure denying civil rights protections to gays and lesbians was the focus of Arlene Stein’s (2001) ethnography. Stein cites the split between these lesbian “newcomers” and the locals, who “didn’t quite know what to make of the young, rather odd-looking newcomers with their funny ideas” (p. 45) as one component of why the ballot measure won across rural Oregon (though it ultimately lost at the state-wide level). More recently, Mary Gray (2009) analyzes how ties to familiarity are central in shaping queer political activism in small-towns. One example is the political mobilizing of area college students to contest a state representative’s claim that his lack of attention to LGBT issues was due to the absence of gay people in his district. Combating the logic that would displace queer into the “stranger” category and outside of rural spaces, these

students mobilized, securing 400 signatures from people demanding that their representative acknowledge that, in fact, gay people did live there.

Further, another important finding of Gray's work on rural queer youth is how they negotiate demands to be out and visible (what she calls "the politics of visibility") within the context of the "infrastructural poverty" of rural areas (2009, p. 107). She provides a rich discussion of the range of activities youth engage in to construct LGBT identities in new boundary publics – from doing drag at the local Wal-Mart, to a "queercore punk band" playing at the performance stage of a church-sponsored skate park (p. 101). Another key finding emerging from Gray's work is that "publicly disrupting normative gender expectations arguably remains just as, if not more, contentious than homoerotic desires" (p. 110).

Unlike the rural lesbians in Stein's study, the men and women with whom I talked were, by and large, not newcomers, but people with long ties to the areas in which they lived. Most had grown up in the same or neighboring towns. Among those who were implants from urban places, most were there because of partners who had such ties to the rural areas. Thus, interviewees did not express surprise at how the locals lived, but rather as locals, their attachments to rural ways of life were central to how they made sense of their gay and lesbian identities. Like Howard's work, my research documents how characteristics of rural life (as understood by people living there) *produce* rather than hinder constructions of gay and lesbian identities. Rather than privilege their rural identity over gay identity, this work illustrates how rural gays and lesbians shift cultural meanings about gay and lesbian sexualities. Rather than tolerate a hostile environment and remain closeted to enjoy small town life, the people I interviewed drew on their

attachments to small town life to construct gay and lesbian identities. My findings also echo Gray's in several ways. First, both our works illustrate the importance of being able to claim local status in rural communities. We also both find a demand in this historical moment of gay/lesbian identities to be out, proud, and visible – and find that individuals negotiate this demand within the rural importance of belonging. My work also extends Gray's assertion that non-normative gender might be more contentious than non-normative sexuality.

While similar findings run through both our works, my project also offers some unique findings and thus extends empirical knowledge about sexual minorities in rural areas. First, there are differences in how our participants negotiated what it means to be out and visible within the context of rural life, where it is important to be the same and local. The people with whom I talked negotiate these competing cultural narratives (about what it means to be gay and what it means to be rural) by understanding some ways of being gay and lesbian as uniquely urban. In contrast, they narrate what it means to be out, visible, and accepted through their understandings of rural life. While Gray found rural queer youth asserting queer identities through gay/straight alliances or doing drag at the local Wal-Mart, the people I interviewed understand such assertions as urban-based. Likewise, while both Gray and I find that rural gays and lesbians construct sexual identities in “public” rather than “private” spaces – the interviewees in my study referenced the public nature of their relationships in towns where everybody knows everybody. Further, many of the people I interviewed had an understanding that separated politics from gay/lesbian identity; activism was also seen as tied to urbanism. They also relied more on how they were treated by others in their town during face-to-

face interactions to gauge acceptance and less on how others might vote on gay rights, for instance. Finally, most of the people I talked with had lived in cities at some point in their lives, and thus engaged with narratives about urban queer identities not only from media representations, but also from through those experiences.

Such differences in our findings are, in part, because of the differences between the groups of people we studied. As Gray notes of her research participants: “Age, obligations to family, and limited economic opportunities left the rural youth I met with little choice in the matter but to stay put and make do” (2009, p. 6). Unlike her participants, the people I interviewed are older. Further, many of them had migrated to an urban place and then migrated back to a rural place. Not all the people I talked to would characterize that migration back to a rural place as compelled by obligation. Similarly, some currently living in cities ideally want to be back in rural areas. Other important demographic differences include that many of my interviewees are coupled, do not see themselves as lacking in economic resources, and likewise are not necessarily living in areas that are impoverished. Thus, I am able to address interesting class dynamics that emerge as people simultaneously understand themselves through narratives about “rich urbanites” as well as “poor rednecks.” These demographic differences arguably shape the different accounts we found. Taken together, our findings can offer understandings of the numerous ways that gays and lesbians stay put in rural areas.

In addition to contributing to knowledge about rural gays and lesbians, this work also extends previous theoretical literature that focuses on if and how queer theory and sociological theories can be synthesized in sexuality studies. Specifically, analyzing narratives and the links between cultural and personal levels of identity can allow for a

more robust use of interpretive sociological theories and queer theory in studying sexual identity. The utility of these theories has mainly been understood in terms of their ability to underscore that sexuality is socially constructed rather than essential. That there have been different categories through which same-sex sexuality has been understood throughout history emphasizes the socially constructed nature of sexuality. Likewise, that people negotiate sexual identities by making sense of sexual desires and experiences – and that there are multiple ways in which desires or acts are understood – also highlights that there is not a straightforward link between identity and acts.

My dissertation asks sexuality scholars to grapple with all the non-sexual meanings attached to sexual identity categories. Specifically, this work draws attention to the processes involved when people make sense of all the different “ways” to be gay or lesbian, or when people imagine what it might mean to be gay or lesbian. I argue for a more thorough investigation of questions like: what are the different ways that same-sex sexuality is attached to non-sexual meanings? How do people make sense of these attachments and how do meanings about sexual identities shift in their everyday lives? While constructing a gay and lesbian identity certainly entails making sense of desires, what needs more scholarly attention is how it also encompasses negotiating meanings about what it means to be gay. Thus, I argue that one important avenue for sexuality researchers is to analyze how sexual identity shapes the imaginary – the internal constructions and imaginings of who one is and who one will become. I further detail my arguments for how queer theory and sociological theories might be utilized together to address these questions in the next chapter.

Following that, in chapter three, I describe the methods I used to collect the data on

which this dissertation is based, and the processes of analyzing that data. The empirical findings appear in chapters four, five, six, and seven. Chapter four examines the different ways that interviewees make sense of gay and lesbian identities as a way to analyze the narratives about those sexualities that circulate at the cultural level. This chapter demonstrates how geographic binaries are at work in understandings of gay and lesbian identities, which indicates that sexual categories are attached to non-sexual meanings. In chapter five, I analyze the personal narratives of sexual identity for those individuals living in rural locales, focusing on understandings about what it means to them to be out, visible, and accepted as gay or lesbian. Drawing on understandings about rural life and people, gays and lesbians in these locales construct sexual identities that are often framed in opposition to cultural narratives about what it means to be gay, and are instead grounded in specific rules and logics of rural life. Chapter six focuses on the interviewees living in cities, and asks if and how cultural narratives get modified in their sexual identity constructions. Finally, in chapter seven, I examine how meanings surrounding geography, class, gender, and sexuality are intertwined. In the concluding chapter, I discuss some of the implications and tensions at work in how rural gays and lesbians make sense of their identities.

Chapter 2

Theorizing the Imaginary in Studies of Sexuality & Identity: Analyzing the Link Between Culture and Individual

Social scientists have investigated how sexual identity is constructed and developed vis-à-vis negotiating meanings about desire, bodies, and sexual experiences (Troiden 1979; Simon and Gagnon 1986; Epstein 1991; Chodorow 1994; Bem 1996; Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000; Diamond 1998, 2003), how social context shapes the labels individuals use to describe their sexual desires and experiences (Rust 1993; Bereket and Adam 2006), and how sexual identity matters politically in terms of community building and social movement organizing (Plummer 1995; Bernstein 1997; Stein 1997; Armstrong 2002). In the past two decades, sociologists have also spent much time assessing the methodological and epistemological tensions between queer theory and sociology, the way that queer theory dismantles the potential for identity-based political movements, and the degree to which queer theory radically alters or merely repeats sociological insights. Indeed, with regard to the last assessment, much of the previous scholarship discusses interpretive sociology and queer theory, and focuses on how these theoretical traditions characterize sexual identity.

In this chapter, I propose an analysis that extends previous literature on the utility of interpretive sociology and queer theory for studies of sexuality and identity. First, I consider how pragmatic approaches within interpretive sociology provide tools to focus on the internal “imaginings” and not only the external “doings” of individuals in the

social world. Pragmatism asserts that individuals internally construct a sense of self and operate in their everyday life with a sense of who they are and who they will become, and that this sense of self has the capacity to be coherent. Second, I assess how queer theory provides tools to focus on how power works by organizing difference, and how sexual identity categories take on meanings beyond sexual desires and behaviors. I argue that utilizing the insights that sexual categories are attached to other meanings, such as what it means to be urban or a parent, and that individuals construct an internal sense of self of who they are and who they will be, allows for an analysis of how sexual identity shapes the imaginary – the internal constructions and imaginings of who one is and who one will become. I demonstrate how an attention to the ways in which sexuality shapes the imaginary can enrich empirical research on identity constructions of sexual minorities. While I highlight how this approach has informed my dissertation research and analyses specifically, I also think this approach can be useful for other empirical projects. In this way, my aim in highlighting these insights from pragmatism and queer theory is not only to extend previous literature regarding interpretive sociology and queer theory, but also to offer a discussion of how these insights may be utilized in empirical research. In what follows, I outline the previous debates about interpretive sociology and queer theory as a way to illustrate how what I propose extends these discussions. I address the insights from pragmatism and queer theory that allow for an approach that asks how sexuality informs the internal imaginary.

Debates on the Place of Queer Theory and Interpretive Sociology

Much sociological theoretical debate in the past two decades has focused on the degree to which postmodern theories challenge the way that interpretive sociological

approaches, such as pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, study the social world and identity (Calhoun 1994; Hall 1996; Maines 1996; Cerulo 1997; Dunn 1997; Callero 2003; Kerr 2008). Questions about identity prove particularly salient for sociologists of gender and sexuality who provide a rich debate on the place of interpretive sociological approaches and postmodern approaches, namely queer theory, in studying sexual identity (Epstein 1994; Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994, 1996; Stein and Plummer 1994; Gamson 1995, 2000; Edwards 1998; Chodorow 1999; Green 2002, 2007; Moloney and Fenstermaker 2002; Irvine 2003; Plummer 2003; Valocchi 2005; Brickell 2006; Crawley and Broad 2008; Moon 2008). Indeed, queer theory holds a vexing and contradictory place for sociologists. While some sociologists critique queer theory for over-emphasizing the social realm (Chodorow 1999), others critique it for its inability to adequately address the social (Green 2002). Still others focus on the methodological and epistemological tensions between queer theory and interpretive sociology (Gamson 2000; Green 2007), as well as the political ramifications of queer politics for identity-based social movements (Gamson 1995). Likewise, some sociologists critique queer theory for positing a notion of sexual identity as performative and for highlighting the incoherency between sexual identity, desires, and behaviors (Edwards 1998; Plummer 2003), while others applaud queer theory for these very insights (Valocchi 2005). Yet further still, some sociologists assert that interpretive sociology in fact theorized sexual identity as performative and incoherent long before the rise of queer theory (Moloney and Fenstermaker 2002; Irvine 2003).

Thus, while queer theory was once characterized as a radical critique and alteration of interpretive sociological accounts of sexual identity, it is more recently

assessed as having much in common with analyses put forth by interpretive sociologists, particularly Goffman and symbolic interactionism. In other words, these debates foreground the external and performative characterization of identity, and that gender and sexual identity are done in interactions. The debates also highlight the fluid and incoherent characterization of sexual identity, and the discrepancies that can exist between claimed sexual identity, desires, and sexual behaviors. My aim here is to extend understandings of how interpretive sociology and queer theory might be utilized in empirical investigations of sexuality and identity. To that end, I highlight how pragmatism within interpretive sociology emphasizes the internal and imaginative components of identity and can thus extend the focus beyond the external doings. While pragmatist and symbolic interactionist approaches have generally been collapsed in prior discussions, I illustrate how pragmatism opens up questions about how individuals internally imagine who they are and who they will become, and posits the capacity for coherency in this internal imaginary. Further, queer theory emphasizes how power operates by organizing difference and how sexual categories shape more than understandings surrounding sexual desires, sexual behaviors, or sexual subjectivities. Taken together, I assert that these traditions open up the ability to address the ways in which sexual identity shapes how individuals imagine who they are and who they can or will be. While sociologists have aimed to theorize the coherency of sexual identity (Simon and Gagnon 1986; Epstein 1991; Chodorow 1994; Green 2008), my concern here is not with the construction of sexual identity in and of itself, or how people make meanings about their bodies or sexual desires or behaviors in such a way that corresponds with their claimed sexual identity. Rather, I illustrate how utilizing insights from

interpretive sociology and queer theory allows for an approach that asks how sexual identity matters for how individuals imagine who they are and who they might be.

The Internal Imaginary and Power Shaping the Binaries Operating In It

Many scholars point to Goffman's theories to underscore how interpretive sociological accounts conceptualized the self as fluid and performative prior to the emergence of queer theory, and thus why interpretive sociology should remain central for sociologists studying sexuality and identity. Indeed, gender and sexuality theorists have extended Goffman's theories to more adequately address the importance of gender to presentations of self and how gender and sexuality are "done" (West and Zimmerman 1987; Rupp and Taylor 2003). While I agree that interpretive sociology remains important for sociologists of sexuality, I argue that the Goffman-inspired framework of "doing" needs to be extended, particularly to enrich understandings of the identities of "unmarked" sexual minorities (Brekhus 1998). Here, I analyze how an attention to pragmatism within interpretive sociology, out of which Goffman's work emerged, with its focus on the internal and the capacity for coherency in conceptualizations of the self, can provide such an extension. I argue that a pragmatic focus on the internal constructions and the "imaginings" of the self can provide an additional component to analyze beyond the external realm of "doings." Also, while much of the lure of Goffman lies in his emphasis on fluidity and the shifting nature of presentations of self, I argue that a pragmatic focus on the capacity for coherency can enrich such analyses. While scholars have addressed how individuals construct an internal and coherent sense of sexual identity, in terms of sexual desire or scripts used to navigate erotic experiences (Simon and Gagnon 1986; Epstein 1991; Green 2008), my aim in highlighting the

internal constructions of self and capacity for coherency lies elsewhere. Specifically, I argue that coupling pragmatic insights with those from queer theory that conceptualize the ways in which sexual categories inform more than erotic practices allows for questions about how sexuality matters for the construction of the (non-sexual) self, the internal imaginings of who one is and will be.

Goffman and “Doing” Identity

Most prominent in the 1960’s in response to the dominant paradigms of functionalism and structuralism, the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism posits an understanding that social systems are constituted and reproduced in personal interactions (Fine 1993). Blumer (1969) and Goffman are perhaps the two theorists most commonly associated with this approach (Baert 1998).¹ Important to this theoretical tradition is the notion that one’s sense of self is produced in relation to others, an insight whose roots are in classical pragmatism, particularly the works of Mead. Unlike Williams, Dewey, and Peirce, all of whom emphasized the internal, mental, and felt aspect of the self, Mead (1934) brought these theories to bear in the external world. Like Mead, Goffman was also concerned with theorizing this external world of social

¹ Here it is important to note that Goffman himself did not necessarily agree with his work being subsumed under the label of “symbolic interactionism” (Verhoeven 1993). Goffman understood social organization, rather than the individual per se, to be the central focus of his work (Verhoeven 1993: 323). However, Goffman’s work has proved to be seminal in the symbolic interactionist “face” of social psychology (House 1977, 1995; Howard 2000; Stryker 2001) and has also been extended to understand gender and sexual identities.

interactions and the presentation of self in interactions. Goffman (1959) posits that in any interaction, people give off impressions, both verbal and nonverbal. Other people read and interpret these impressions and through this process, people reach a consensus about the structure of the interaction and about each other. Thus, individuals in the social world (“performers”) strive to give an impression that is taken seriously or believed by others (“audience”) (1959: 17). The “heartfelt feelings” or an individual’s sense of sincerity does not have any bearing on the performance. Rather, Goffman focuses solely on how individuals work to manage impressions of themselves in social interactions (1959: 71).² Indeed, Goffman asserts that the self is “a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it” (1959: 181). In other words, Goffman centers on what people *do* in interactions, in order to illustrate how these doings produce the self and identity. Since it is through interactions that identity is produced, identity can be fluid and shift from one interaction to the next. Goffman (1963) further analyzes impression management, specifically the management of stigmatized attributes. Here, Goffman is interested in how individuals consciously manage and negotiate interactions in such a way that their discreditable attributes do not become known. Again, throughout his works, Goffman focuses on the external doings of individuals and how identity is produced in interactions through those doings.

² This focus makes sense given Goffman’s aims. Ironically, while one of the major criticisms of symbolic interactionism has been its emphasis only on agency (Fine 1993), Goffman, himself, asserts a view that “the individual does [not] do much of the constructing” (Verhoeven 1993: 324).

Along with theories of the self and impression management, Goffman (1976, 1987) also provides an account of gender, which subsequent sociologists of gender and sexuality have critiqued and expanded. Goffman argues that gender, like the self, cannot be understood as internal, essential, or natural. Rather, he proposes that gender difference is established in interactions. Extending his discussion of the impressions given off in interactions, Goffman explains that men and women are socialized to give off different impressions. Moreover, while the impressions men are socialized to give off work to establish their authority, the ones women are socialized to give off work to undermine it. Goffman argues that although men and women are socialized to give off different gendered impressions, the display of gender in interactions is voluntary.

Goffman's theories of the self in interaction have been debated, critiqued, and expanded upon on a number of grounds. First, scholars have critiqued and expanded Goffman's theories of gender. West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of "doing gender" shares Goffman's theory of gender as something that is not inside an individual that is then expressed in interactions, but rather as something that is produced or accomplished in social interactions. In an important critique and extension of Goffman, West and Zimmerman argue that these "doings" are not voluntary, but mandated and enforced by way of the threat of punishment if one fails to "do" gender properly. Second, scholars critique Goffman's conceptualization of individuals as actors who are solely rational and self-interested, and who attempt to maximize their success in each social arena by managing their impressions in interactions (see Baert 1998 for discussions of this critique). Third, scholars critique Goffman's conceptualization that a shared understanding of stigmatized attributes exists (Kusow 2004). Fourth, scholars critique

Goffman's focus on external presentations because it obscures internal processes (Lyman and Scott 1975; Williams 1998; Archer 2000; Manning 2005). This critique is especially crucial for thinking about sexual identity and has not been fully explored in the literature assessing queer theory's relation to interpretive sociology.

To be sure, the insight of "doing" identity has been a productive one for understanding gender and sexual identities, and it is this Goffman-inspired framework that scholars point to when highlighting the similarities between queer theory and interpretive sociology in understanding gender and sexuality as fluid and performative. However, I contend that this paradigm of "doing" can be enriched by focusing on what I call the "imagining," the internal construction of self or ideas about who one is and who one will be. I want to underscore that my argument is *not* that Goffman-inspired accounts of "doing" identity are incorrect, but that there are additional aspects of identity that a framework that focuses on external performances cannot adequately address. In other words, I argue for an expansion of accounts of identity beyond the "doing" paradigm, not a dismissal of that approach. Moreover, I also want to be clear that my argument is not that the internal represents something more real or true or authentic than the external. My aim is to discuss how attention to the internal imaginary – to how individuals construct a sense of who they are and will be – can be utilized in empirical investigations of sexuality and identity. I now turn to how reviving a pragmatist approach, one that is often collapsed with symbolic interactions under the umbrella of interpretive sociological approaches in previous discussions, can provide tools to address the internal aspects of the self and identity.

Pragmatism and "Imagining" Identity

The philosophical tradition of pragmatism emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Influenced by evolutionary thinking, pragmatism's assertion that individuals have the capacity for thought and awareness of the self provided the initial groundwork for a sociological investigation of identity (Baert 2005; Gross 2007). Here, I focus on William James (1905), C.H. Cooley (1902), and contemporary scholar Norbert Wiley (1994, 2006) to illustrate how the pragmatist framework centers on the internal components of the construction of self, and as such can extend a focus on external doings. While Goffman and pragmatism share the conceptualization of the self being constructed in relation to others and in interactions, pragmatism differs in its centering on the internal processes of what happens in interactions, rather than solely on what individuals do. Further, while Goffman focuses on the production of self in each interaction, pragmatism centers on the capacity to synthesize manifestations of the self across interactions.

James (1905) posits a notion of the self that is embedded in the social world, internally constructed, and coherent. The self is social insofar as it emerges from and is shaped by experiences and recognition from others. In this way, James asserts that a person has "as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him" (1905, p. 294), and hence Goffman's extension to ask how selves are produced and presented in interactions. Yet, importantly for this discussion, James highlights different components of the self. Specifically, James distinguishes between the "me" -- the part that arises through experiences and interaction in the social world -- and the "I," the part that recognizes and judges the multiple manifestations of "me." By distinguishing the "I" from the "me," James points to the internal processes and judgments that are part of the

construction of self. James argues that individuals function in everyday life with a sense of “I” – a sense of who they are; he writes that “each of us is animated by a direct feeling of regard for his own pure principle of individual existence” (1905, p. 318). This sense of “I” is not a “mere appearance,” but rather is a deep, common sense conviction that is felt (1905, p. 337). In other words, while the construction of self encompasses interactions in the social world and recognition from others, it also entails internal processes of thinking about who one is.

Further, James discusses the capacity for the “I” to be coherent. Despite the fact that individuals have multiple experiences and thus multiple social selves, the “I” reflects not only the internal recognition of those selves, but also the synthesis of them. In discussing the “I,” James writes that it is “exactly like any one of our other perceptions of sameness among phenomena. It is a conclusion grounded either on the resemblance in a fundamental respect, or on the continuity before the mind, of the phenomena compared” (1905, p. 334). The “phenomena” that the “I” perceives, in this case, is the “me,” the multiple social selves that exist in the social world. Thus, the internal sense of self entails constructing a sense of how the “me”s are similar across different social contexts. Therefore, James reflects a pragmatic framework because he argues that individuals live day-to-day with a sense of themselves, a sense that has the capacity for coherency insofar as it synthesizes the multiple selves across interactions and experiences.

Similarly, Cooley (1902) proposes a characterization of the self that is wholly constructed through interactions and experiences in the social world, yet underscores the internal processes of that construction. Cooley theorizes that the “social self” is “simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes

as its own” (1902: 179). Since it is drawn from communicative life, the “I” or the self does not exist apart from others or society; he asserts that “there is no sense of ‘I’...without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they” (1902: 182). Cooley’s characterization of the “looking-glass self” illustrates his emphasis on the internal and imaginative processes involved in the construction of the self. He outlines the three elements of the looking-glass self: first, we imagine how we appear to another person; second, we imagine how that person might judge this appearance; and third, we feel something based on that imagining (p. 184). In this way, Cooley draws attention to how individuals internally imagine who they are based on how they think others see them, as well as to how this internal imagining rests on feeling and thinking. Utilizing pragmatism to ask how individuals construct this sense of self, the “I,” and how individuals internally imagine who they are, can thus provide an additional layer of analysis beyond focusing only on what individuals do or present in interactions.

Wiley (1994) advocates reviving and expanding the pragmatist framework. Synthesizing Peirce’s “I-you” and Mead’s “I-me,” Wiley argues that the “I-me-you,” or the “past-present-future” triad structures the self. Wiley focuses on how constructions of the self can synthesize temporal spheres and be presently-oriented, past-oriented, and future-oriented. To be able to imagine oneself in the future assumes a constant process of internal interpretation insofar as constructions of the self entail negotiating the questions “who am I?” and “who will I be?” (p. 144). Wiley (2006) further underscores the pragmatic focus on the inner dimensions of the self, particularly its speech. Constructions of the self entail internal dialogue, internal imaginings of who one is and who one will be. Wiley finds the claim that the structure of the self is universal appealing

insofar as it provides the basis to transcend particular identities (1994, p. 145). In contrast, I argue that utilizing a pragmatic understanding of the self as having an internal component and capacity for coherency in fact allows for the possibility to theorize the specific content of the imaginary and to ask how particular identities, such as sexuality, shape an individual's sense of who they are and who they can or will be.

Interrogating the imaginary of identity, the internal "I," the ideas that individuals construct about who they are and will be, provides sociologists with an additional layer to analyze beyond what people do in social interactions. Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests there is merit to the pragmatic assertions that individuals operate in their everyday life with a sense of who they are, and that there exists the capacity for coherency across social situations (Somers and Gibson 1994; Erickson 1995; Vinitzky-Seroussi and Zussman 1996; Holstein and Gubrium 1998, 2000; Zussman 2005). Thus, my aim is to discuss specifically how scholars might utilize pragmatic insights in studies of sexuality and identity. Utilizing a pragmatic framework opens up questions about how individuals internally imagine and construct ideas about who they are and who they will or can be; further, coupling this pragmatic concern with insights from queer theory provides for an analysis of how sexuality matters for these constructions. In this way, rather than analyzing sexual identity in and of itself and asking how individuals construct meaning around bodies, desires, or sexual acts,³ pragmatism and queer theory provides insights to assess how sexual identity informs the ideas that individuals construct about

³ Which is not to suggest that such analyses are incorrect or unimportant, but given my aim, I am interested in proposing how interpretive sociology and queer theory provide for an extension of such investigations.

who they are and will be. While a pragmatic framework opens up questions of the internal imaginary, queer theory provides useful tools for analyzing the importance of sexuality in shaping the imaginary. Specifically, queer theory allows for an understanding of how power operates in the construction of difference in the imaginary, and how sexual categories shape more than just erotic subjectivities and lives.

Queer Theory and Sexual Categories Shaping Meanings Beyond the Sexual

If queer theory is not a theory of the self but is useful to understanding selves (Green 2007, p. 43), then I offer an extension of how queer theory can be utilized in empirical studies of identity. Others have focused on the importance of queer theory for illustrating the incoherency between sexual identity, desire, and sexual acts (Valocchi 2005), or for studying the production and regulation of sexualities at the level of institutions or policies (Green 2007; Moon 2008). Here, I offer a different analysis. Specifically, I highlight two insights from queer theory in order to discuss how these can be utilized in empirical studies of identity: first, the conceptualization of power as operating productively and through the organization of difference; and second, the illustration that sexual categories do not merely organize bodies, erotic practices, and sexual identities, but also become embedded in other meanings and categories. Thus, given that individuals construct a sense of self about who they are and will become, and that sexual categories inform more than just the meanings of bodies or sexual behaviors, queer theory and pragmatism open up questions about how sexuality informs how individuals imagine and internally construct ideas about who they are and who they can or will become (beyond their sexual identities or lives).

Influenced by French poststructuralist thought, queer theory emerged in the late 1980s with a powerful critique of and challenge to the understanding of sexual identity as an essential or coherent entity (Seidman 1996; Weedon 1997; Turner 2000). Queer theory highlights the incoherency between sex, gender, desire, and sexual behavior, and the inability for heterosexual or homosexual identity categories to capture the multiplicities of desires or behaviors (Jagose 1996). Such positions lead some sociologists to assert that queer theory's focus on destabilizing sexual identities runs counter to a sociological concern with the construction of sexual identities (Edwards 1998; Green 2002), especially in terms of the construction of coherent sexual identities (Simon and Gagnon 1986; Epstein 1991). Yet others underscore the similarities between interpretive sociology and queer theory in theorizing sexual identities as fluid and multiple, and assert that sociologists, in fact, should be more attuned to these instabilities (Valocchi 2005). I argue that queer theory has more to offer sociologists of sexuality than illustrating the incoherency of sexual identity. Below, I discuss the queer theory view of power, the homo/hetero binary, and how that binary informs more than erotic life and subjectivities.

Foucault (1977, 1978) articulates a post-structuralist account of how power operates. Foucault provides a counter to the view that power is something wholly repressive or something that certain people hold while others do not. Rather, power is capillary, disciplinary, productive, and works to inform subjectivity. Drawing on Bentham's notion of the panopticon in modern prisons and the idea that even when there is no watchman, prisoners internalize the feeling of being watched and monitor themselves, Foucault (1978) argues that power is experienced in day-to-day life as a

disciplinary force, as a force to which individuals subject themselves and through which individuals come to think about themselves. In this way, Foucault argues that power is not wholly repressive but, in fact, productively shapes how people think about themselves. To illustrate the productive nature of power as well as how power operates through discourse, Foucault (1978) utilizes the example of sexual categories. Disproving the repressive hypothesis that Victorians were silent and repressed on the topic of sexuality, Foucault argues that there was actually an “incitement to discourse,” a proliferation of discussions around sexuality (1978, p. 12). Sex was thought to reveal the truth of who one was; in particular, Foucault notes sexological discourses of the nineteenth century served to make the homosexual a personage with “a past, a history and an adolescence, a personality, a life style” (1978, p. 43). This is not to say that individuals did not engage in same-sex sexual acts prior to the “invention of the homosexual” or that the category invented same-sex desire or sexual acts, but rather that the discursive category worked to insist that individuals understand such desires or acts as reflecting the truth of who they were, as marking them as a distinct kind of person with a distinct kind of sexuality. Extending this insight, queer theorists critique sexual identity categories as the products of power that serve to discipline and regulate bodies, acts, desires, and behaviors, albeit even under the name of pride or liberation (Butler 1991; Durber 2006).

Utilizing a Foucauldian view of power as productive and discursive, queer theorists are especially concerned with how power operates in the construction of the homosexual-heterosexual binary. Queer theorists assert that heterosexuality only has meaning and coherency in opposition to homosexuality (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1990;

Fuss 1991). Since power operates through discourse and the organization of difference, queer theorists work to expose how the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality rely on one another for meaning and stability. Sedgwick argues that while heterosexual and homosexual are presented as “symmetrical binary oppositions,” their relation is, in fact, one that is “more unsettled” (1990, p. 9) for the following three reasons:

First, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A” (1990, pp. 9-10).

In this way, the sexual categories of homosexual and heterosexual do not reflect real and distinct sexual beings, but rather these discursive categories constitute sexual subjectivities. It is through these categories that individuals come to think about themselves and their erotic desires, sexual acts, and bodies. Further, that the binary between homosexual and heterosexual is continually unstable and open for contestation means that there is always the possibility to blur, to destabilize, to “queer” this binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Highlighting the way that sexual categories discursively constitute rather merely reflect sexual subjectivities, and the incoherency of the elements that sexual identity supposedly entailed, like sex-gender-desire-bodily acts, opened up possibilities to destabilize those categories (Sedgwick 1993). In other words, the fact that, for instance, heterosexuals do queer things with their bodies, their desires are not necessarily heterosexual, and that everyone has potential to engage in queer sexual practices is liberating – not because it values or liberates a specific sexual minority

group (i.e. gays and lesbians), but because it destabilizes sexuality and sexual meanings (Halperin 1995).

Yet importantly, queer theory does not only discuss the homo-hetero binary for the work it does in shaping, structuring, and constituting how people understand their desire or erotic practices. Additionally, queer theory asserts that this binary actually shapes much more than just erotic lives, sexual bodies, or sexual subjectivities. Indeed, the homosexual/heterosexual binary informs non-sexual categories and meanings as well. Sedgwick (1990) explains some of the cultural categories affected by the homosexual/heterosexual binary, including:

Secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, discipline/terrorism, canonic/noncanonic, wholeness/decadence, urbane/provincial, domestic/foreign, health/illness, same/different, active/passive, in/out, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, utopia/apocalypse, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntariness/addiction (1990, p. 11).

Sedgwick also illustrates how sexual identity is meant to encapsulate an individual's procreative choice insofar as heterosexual assumes choosing to be procreative and homosexual assumes choosing not to be (1993, p. 7). In other words, homosexuality and heterosexuality do not just constitute sexual identity or regulate how individuals understand their desires or sexual behaviors. Rather, these terms inform what it means, for instance, to be a citizen, urban, or a parent. Thus, power operates not only in the sexual categories through which sexual subjectivities are constituted, but also in how those categories are embedded in non-sexual categories. Queer theory highlights how sexuality becomes attached to other cultural meanings and acts as a principle of social organization.

Scholars have further analyzed how the homosexuality/heterosexuality binary informs cultural meanings and categories beyond the erotic, including time and adulthood (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005), geographical space (Weston 1998; Halberstam 2005), love (Johnson 2005), parenthood (Sedgwick 1991), race (Somerville 2000) and personhood (Butler 2004). The insight that sexual categories shape much more than just erotic desires or behaviors can be used by sociologists to analyze if and how sexual identity is embedded in constructions of the self and identity beyond sexual lives. Because the categories homosexual-heterosexual inform more than just erotic life, and because the self and identity are constructed and imagined internally, sociologists can ask questions about how sexuality informs how people makes sense of who they are and who they can become in arenas outside of the sexual. While some have focused on the possibility of disrupting how gender and sexual identity are done by analyzing drag as a way to illustrate that all gender identities are performances and thus could be performed differently (Newton 1972; Butler 1990; Rupp and Taylor 2003; Shapiro 2007), or on how the norms surrounding gender and sexuality can be disrupted (Butler 2004), my aim is to propose an additional facet that sociologists of sexuality can analyze. Namely, I propose an analysis of how sexuality informs constructions of self, ideas about who one is and who one will be. This process cannot be understood only by analyzing external actions or presentations of self. Sociologists might ask how an investment in a sexual identity category shapes how one understands herself and who she might become. How does sexuality shape how individuals imagine their lives beyond the sexual or erotic lives? What does being gay, for instance, mean for an individual and how does he imagine what his (non-sexual) life might entail as a gay man? Does identifying as queer, gay, or

lesbian open up possibilities that were once seen as unimaginable, not only in terms of what one can do with one's body or the desires one can have, but in terms of who one be in one's life? Likewise, does investment in those identity categories foreclose possibilities that were once seen as imaginable? Again, these questions would aim to address possibilities beyond, for instance, how one understands their desires or what one might do with their bodies. I discuss below how such questions can be useful in two empirical avenues of investigation.

Thus far I have argued for the need to interrogate what an individual internally imagines about who they are and who they might become, in addition to what an individual externally does in social interactions; the pragmatist framework allows for such an interrogation. I have also argued for the need to interrogate how differences are constructed in the internal imaginary, particularly how sexual categories become attached to non-sexual meanings and categories; the queer theoretical framework allows for such an interrogation. My aim in doing so is not only to extend previous assessments of how interpretive sociology and queer theory can be used in studies of sexuality and identity, but also to provide a discussion of how an attention to the imaginary can enrich empirical investigations. So, why is there a need to separate what people *do* in social interactions from what they *think* or *imagine* about who they are? When analyzing the imaginary, how would an attention to *power operating by organizing difference and sexual categories shaping more than erotic life* help? How would being attuned to the ways in which sexuality shapes the imaginings individuals construct about who they are and who they can become enrich empirical research on sexuality and identity?

If sociologists argue for the need to analyze “unmarked identities in marked spaces” (Brekhus 1998, 2003), so as to not fetishize or exoticize those most visible, then I argue for the need to focus on the internal imaginary to enrich such analyses. In other words, we need to be thoughtful about not just *what* we analyze (i.e.: non-visible or “mundane” sexual minorities or those outside of “gay ghettos”) but also *how* we analyze. I contend this requires an approach that focuses on the internal imaginings an individual constructs about who they are and who they will be and on how sexuality informs this imaginary, in addition to the external presentations or doings of an individual in interactions. This will call our attention to the ability of sexual minorities to re-imagine how sexual identity is attached to other categories – in this case, such that being non-heterosexual is no longer embedded in understandings of being urban in individuals’ imaginaries. Utilizing insights from pragmatism and queer theory can enrich understandings of the process of re-imagining and how disruptions occur in how sexuality is attached to other meanings. Moreover, asking how sexuality informs the imaginary can shed light on how negotiating sexual identity entails not only a process of making sense of sexual desires or behaviors, but importantly, it also entails making sense of who one can be and imagining an identity and life beyond sexual ones.

My goal in this discussion has been to extend previous discussions assessing queer theory and interpretive sociology. While a general consensus exists that queer theory and interpretive sociology can both be useful for sociologists of sexuality, here I have offered an analysis that extends understandings of how both might be utilized. Specifically, while some of the previous literature focuses on Goffman to highlight the presentation and fluidity of self in interpretive sociology, I have highlighted how

pragmatism can expand this focus on the external in studying identity. Pragmatism turns our focus to the internal imaginary, the ideas individuals construct about who they are and will be, and the capacity for coherency in this imaginary. As such, pragmatism opens up questions about how people internally imagine who they are and who they can become, in addition to their external actions or behaviors. Looking only at what is expressed or performed has the potential to isolate sexuality from other aspects of social life and other identities, and to privilege certain ways of “doing.” Further, I have underscored two insights from queer theory about power constructing and organizing difference, and about sexual categories shaping more than meanings surrounding desires or sexual behaviors. Taken together, utilizing both pragmatic and queer insights can open up questions of interest for studies of identity. Sociologists can draw from pragmatism and queer theory to ask empirical questions about how sexual identity informs internal imaginings, the ideas people construct about who they are and will become.

In the case of my dissertation data, using queer theory and sociological theories in this manner can help illuminate the links between cultural and personal levels of identity. Take, for instance, the following quote from Lisa: “somehow I kept those two things separate – [that] it would be really nice to be able to share my life with another woman, but that wasn't the same as—being a lesbian.” Her quote, echoing others I heard while doing interviews, illustrates how sexual identity categories shape not only how people understand their bodies or desires, but also how people imagine who they are and what their lives will be like. For Lisa, that imagining was this: “I think I looked at it as lesbians were women who had lives that were so hidden away and so unacceptable to

other people and even dangerous, that they had decided to do something that was so unacceptable to other people, that it must be bad.” My interest, thus, is in interrogating what those “other things” are – in other words, how people imagine what gay or lesbian identities mean. This is an important aspect to look at when analyzing identity constructions because it helps us see how gay/lesbian identity is constructed at a personal level vis-à-vis negotiating these cultural narratives wherein gay/lesbian categories mean more than simply who you have sex with or partner with. Of course, as we see in the following chapter, there are multiple narratives circulating at the cultural level about what it means to be gay or lesbian. Insights from queer theory help us analyze this component. In this project, I am most interested in those narratives about gay/lesbian identities that are embedded in geographic meanings. Understanding what cultural narratives are circulating and how other binaries are at work in those narratives will then help in understanding how that re-organization might happen on a personal level. In order to understand how cultural narratives shift we need to understand where individuals start from – and also pay attention to what “re-organization” or “disruption” seems most important to them. Insights from pragmatism can allow us to do just that.

Sexual identity categories shape more than desires or bodies – they are given cultural meaning and significance vis-à-vis their attachments to other cultural binaries. Queer theory is thus an important theory insofar as it allows us to be aware of those binaries and the way that meaning is co-constructed. Further, we also see that as people make sense of their sexual identity, they are also constructing a sense of who they are and will be (what kind of person, what they will do in life, where they will live, what their lives will be like). This helps illustrate some key theoretical points that I have stressed in

this chapter. First, that individuals have the capacity to (and do) construct a sense of self that entails an internal imagining of who one is and will be. These are processes that may or may not be connected to what individuals “do” or “present.” Thus, pragmatism is a necessary theory to utilize in empirical research on sexual identity insofar as it allows us to theorize those internal imaginings. Second, that sexual identity categories shape this imagining about who one is and will be; when individuals make sense of their sexuality they are not only making sense of their desires or bodies, but also making sense of what their lives will be like or who they are. Thus, pragmatism allows us to make sense of the fact that individuals construct an imagined internal sense of self, and queer theory helps us to make sense of how that internal imagining is shaped by various binaries. We can then see how binaries operating at the cultural level might be disrupted at the individual level.

Chapter 3

Methods

The data presented in the following chapters come from sixty in-depth, semi-structured interviews that I conducted with rural gays and lesbians. Half (thirty) of these individuals were currently living in rural locales and thirty had grown up in rural locales and were currently living in urban locales. Below, I sketch the details of how I recruited and further describe the sample, the interview process, and how I coded and analyzed the interview data.

Recruitment

I recruited participants using a variety of techniques in both LGBT-specific and general venues. I placed a request for interviews in national and state-wide gay and lesbian publications in Michigan and Illinois (including *Between the Lines*, *Lesbian Connection*, *What Helen Heard*), as well as in newsletters of LGBT state-wide organizations (including Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Washtenaw Rainbow Action Project (WRAP)), advertising on Internet sites (Craigslist) and LGBT university list-servs (including University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University, Michigan State University, Illinois State University). I also recruited participants through snowball sampling. The announcement asked for individuals who identify as “gay” or “lesbian” and who either are currently living or had grown up in a “small town, the country, or a rural area.” Along with a description of these eligibility

requirements, the announcement noted that participants would be compensated \$25 and that the interviews were confidential.

The majority of participants were recruited through publications, Internet sites, and list-serves that were affiliated with gay and lesbian organizations (e.g. *Lesbian Connection*, *Between the Lines*, *Out & About Illinois*, PFLAG newsletters). Specifically, fifteen individuals contacted me after seeing my announcement in state-wide LGBT-affiliated publications or websites of state-wide LGBT-affiliated organizations (PFLAG, WRAP, *Out & About Illinois*, Gay and Lesbian Association of Decatur Illinois). Another nineteen individuals were recruited through an announcement in *Lesbian Connection*, an international lesbian publication, and three responded to an announcement in universities' LGBT list-serves. However, six individuals were recruited through Craigslist, a non-LGBT affiliated Internet site. A total of sixteen individuals contacted me after hearing about the study from a friend or family member.

That my recruitment materials specifically requested individuals who identified as gay or lesbian and that I advertised primarily through LGBT media and organizations underscores a limitation of this research. Given this recruitment method, I did not interview individuals who may have experienced same-sex desires or engaged in sex with a same-sex partner without identifying as gay or lesbian or having a connection to LGBT media or organizations. Thus, I am unable to address alternative ways that these experiences might be understood in rural areas. This limitation was underscored by one person who contacted me, after seeing my announcement in an LGBT organization's newsletter, with a concern that I, like other researchers, would not come in contact with what s/he described as "discreet" individuals. However, given that one of my

overarching goals of this project was to understand the link between cultural and personal narratives of sexual identity – in other words, to understand how cultural narratives about gay and lesbian identity were negotiated and potentially disrupted – my recruitment methods did allow me to investigate this by finding people who somehow connected themselves to the label of “gay” or “lesbian.” This goal also dictated my decision to recruit for only people who identified as “gay” or “lesbian,” rather than also recruiting for people who identified as, for instance, “bisexual” or “transgender” or “queer,” another limitation of this sample. Certainly, one way that people modify cultural narratives about identity categories said to capture same-sex or non-normative sexualities is by rejecting those categories entirely and identifying their experiences through a different category. Given my sample, I cannot address these processes. I can, however, address how people make sense of what gay and lesbian identities mean – and how geography, class, and gender shape those meanings – and how the meanings that people create challenge culturally circulating narratives.

Interview format and reflection on process

When people contacted me, nearly all of them asked questions about my background and why I was interested in the topic. Some were concerned initially with confidentiality. I conducted the majority of the interviews in person and thirteen over the phone. All but three of the interviews were audio-recorded. Many of the in-person interviews took place in the homes of the participants. I also met people at libraries, parks, and coffee shops. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview schedule that covered questions about experiences in rural and urban areas, experiences coming out as gay or lesbian, experiences with gay and lesbian events, culture, or

organizations, and day-to-day experiences as a gay or lesbian individual. Because I was most interested in individuals' daily experiences and understandings, I often asked questions that emerged from the flow of the interview. I ended the interview by asking interviewees why they wanted to or agreed to participate in the interview, and their responses often proved to be very rich and telling. A lot of people expressed wanting to participate to add more diversity to public understandings of gays and lesbians. Others also said that the interview had helped them express the real value they saw in living in rural or small towns. Some volunteered simply because they thought I would have trouble finding people. If they had not already asked, people generally also ended by asking about my background or about how their experiences fit with what else I had been hearing. Thus, while the part of the interview process that was taped was an average of an hour and twenty minutes, often the whole process took upwards of two hours, especially for those who had me in their homes because the conversation often continued beyond the formal interview. At the end of each interview, I wrote notes about the process and any details or stories I found particularly interesting.

Throughout the interview process, I approached the interviews as interactions in which knowledge production was on-going and co-created. In other words, I did not think of the interviews as simply reading a survey questionnaire face-to-face. Given this approach, I continually reflected on how my own location and social background shaped the interview and analysis process – in terms of both how I was making sense of interviewees' stories and which stories they were sharing with me. In my interview with Robert, for example, he had said a little about his experiences in queer urban communities, some of which were negative. When I asked him follow-up questions, he

first wanted to confirm that I, too, was gay, and then seemed more comfortable in sharing additional details since, as he put it, “you understand that in that community.” Another interesting thing that came up while doing the interviews is the fact that some individuals seemed to think I wanted to hear a particular story from them. For instance, Tara kept stressing throughout the interview that she was boring and that I would not be able to get anything good from her. While her reiterations, in fact, became useful in my analysis as I discuss in Chapter 4, it was interesting to me insofar it seems she had an idea about what kind of stories I would want from her – exciting ones, apparently. Her comments also seemed to suggest that she had no negative stories to tell me about living in a small town – something other interviewees mentioned as well. Anna, who had migrated to an urban area after growing up in a rural area, seemed resistant to my questions about what it was like for her to make that migration. In my mind, these questions were trying to get at how and the degree to which she made distinctions between urban/rural people and places. She said, “if what you're getting at is the hick from the country goes to the big city, no, I didn't have any of that!” I was struck by this comment because I was, in fact, not trying to elicit that narrative. Actually, I thought I might hear the opposite – that the migration made her value rural life or people, since other interviewees expressed that sentiment. Finally, in a couple instances it was clear that individuals thought I wanted to hear a story about how living in a rural area as a gay or lesbian is oppressive. When asked about her experience as a lesbian in a rural place, one individual said, “this is going to disappoint you – I’ve never had a negative experience.” Her response really threw me – in part, because her experiences would not have disappointed me, but, in fact, would have done just the opposite given my research questions and interests. All these

moments in the interviews made me pause because I had not fully recognized how the people I interviewed would be thinking about my position as a researcher, and about the interview in terms of that interviewees might want to portray a certain story.

This issue arose much later as well. While I was presenting my research, someone asked a question that more or less got at whether I thought of the responses as “true” or reflecting interviewees’ “actual” experiences, or whether responses were created vis-à-vis a desire to present a certain version of self and reality that perhaps reflected either what people thought I wanted to hear or what they were most comfortable presenting about themselves. For me, this question underscores a tension I felt throughout the interview, analysis, and writing process. For instance, at one point I found myself struggling during in the analysis and writing about people currently living in rural areas. I realized this was, in part, because I was trying to make a definite statement about who was “out” and “visible,” rather than make a statement about how individuals understood how and why they were out or visible. In other words, I am less interested in making claims about “this is how it really is” and more interested in claims about “this is how individuals understand it to be” – and then thinking about how or why they understand themselves and their experiences in the way they do and the ramifications of such understandings. In part, this tension reflects my interdisciplinary training and encouragement to both rely on and be critical of empirical inquiry. Likewise, it reflects the move to synthesize two approaches to studying identity and experience that are often understood to be incommensurable. Within sociology of sexualities, this debate often rests on questions about if and how interpretive sociological theories and queer theory can be utilized in empirical inquiry. As I noted in the previous chapter, one of the central

contributions of this dissertation is to offer an alternative assessment about how these theoretical paradigms can be synthesized to study identity constructions of sexual minorities.

Demographic Context

I recruited people who had grown up in or were currently living in rural Michigan and Illinois. My decision to recruit in Michigan and Illinois was driven by the similarities of these two Midwestern states in regard to characteristics of both gay and lesbian life and rural life. Both states have similar laws regarding gays and lesbians. In addition, research demonstrates the historical existence of gay and lesbian life in urban locales in both states (Johnson 1997; Drexel 1997; Retzliff 1997; Thorpe 1997), and also estimates similarities in terms of contemporary gays and lesbians. Recent estimates show that there are more than 251,000 gay, lesbian, and bisexual people currently living in Michigan and more than 345,000 in Illinois (Romero et al, 2007a, 2007b). Same-sex couples live in every county of each state, further justifying the exploration of rural life. In rural counties in Michigan, there 1,486 are same-sex households; there are 1,641 same-sex households in rural counties in Illinois.

Further, Michigan and Illinois share similar characteristics of rural life (USDA 2008). Census data shows that 1,705,887 people live in rural counties in Illinois, and 1,839,156 in Michigan in 2000. In other words, in 2000 14% of the population in Illinois lived in a rural county and 18% of the population in Michigan lived in a rural county. Likewise, per capita income in 2006 was similar in rural Illinois and rural Michigan, at \$27,001 and \$27,408 respectively. Both had a poverty rate estimated at 13% for 2005.

There are similarities in rural contexts in Michigan and Illinois on education as well, with 38% and 37%, respectively, of people 25 and older in rural counties completing college.

Government agencies and research utilize multiple definitions of “rural.” For the definitions based on population size, depending on which definition, “rural” includes areas with fewer than 2,500 people, or 10,000, or 50,000 people (USDA 2007a). I began my project utilizing the 2000 Census definition of urban and rural. The Census classifies a territory as urban or rural based on its population density per square mile and the population per square mile of surrounding areas. Based on this definition, areas with fewer than 2,500 residents are considered rural. These areas can consist of the country, farmland, or small towns. There are 1,139 rural areas in Michigan and 954 rural areas in Illinois and I began the project with intentions to recruit participants from these areas. However, I soon recognized that many people who were contacting me lived in towns with populations larger than 2,500, yet still thought of their communities as rural. Thus, I began to use a more expansive definition of rural put forth by the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA 2007b) that includes areas and places with populations less than 50,000 as “rural.”

Of the thirty interviews I conducted with people currently living in rural areas, half were living in towns with populations of less than 2,500 (see Table 1). Six people live in towns with populations less than 10,000 (all of these towns actually had populations between 3,000 and 5,000). The remaining nine people were living in towns with population sizes more than 10,000 ,but under 50,000. I interviewed these people in the interest of hearing from individuals who understood their living situation to be rural, in order to hear what “rural” meant to them and what it was like to live there as a gay or

lesbian individual. Since I was also interested in how people make sense of space and geography – how those differences between urban and rural are constructed in people’s everyday lives and how they think of those differences mattering – I felt comfortable using the more expansive definitions.

For those interviewees who were currently living in a city but had grown up in a rural area, I used the 2000 census numbers as an initial guide in determining if their town would count as rural. I also asked people how big their town was when they were growing up and or how big their high school graduating class was, as a way to gauge rurality since size of graduating high school class was something that early respondents had mentioned. Just as there were a range of types of places that people thought of as “rural,” the people who had migrated to cities also lived in a range of cities. Some were living in large metropolitan areas like Chicago, while others were living in smaller cities with population sizes in the 100,000 to 200,000 range. Others had lived in places like New York City or San Francisco before returning to rural areas. Thus, when I analyze how people described their experiences in “cities,” it is important to remember that there are a range of types of cities people are describing. It is also important to consider how interviewees make sense of the differences between urban and rural spaces – and how they make sense of migration depends on where they grew up. So, some of the people I interviewed who migrated to cities with populations around 100,000 thought of those as large cities, even though that might be another person’s small town.

To underscore the fact that I used an expansive definition of “rural,” I want to sketch briefly how people described the areas where they were living or grew up. For instance, some individuals grew up on farms – and, thus, explained that they did not

necessarily feel like they grew up “in town.” Others, like Heidi, described where they grew up as “just on the outskirts of town, just outside the city limits” but “it wasn't a farm.” The towns that individuals lived in (or just outside of) ranged as well in terms of what was in town. For instance, Xander said the town he grew up in had “like a K-Mart and a grocery store, and, you know, it's like a mile long, not even that, with a couple stoplights.” Others like Nate described their towns more as “resort towns” that often attracted tourists in the summer. Jake, who also said his town is a resort town described it in this way: “It's got one main street. It's located right on a lake so it's a big tourist town. Usually in winter tourism and a lot of festivals in the summer. So there is a lot of out of towners.” Again, while there was often one street or a stoplight – not everyone lived “in” town. Robert lives “about 4 miles outside of town, so back in the woods.”

Molly outlines some of what is in her town:

There is one grocery store, and then there is a post office next to it, and then there is a dollar store, and then, um, if you go downtown a little bit more, there's like a health food store, they're all very small, but there's a pharmacy, and then I think there's also like a chain of offices that has like a video store and a physical therapy place.

While some characteristics of their towns differed, all the people living in what they understood as rural areas described their towns in a similar way to Tara, below:

Well it's like other towns, everybody knows everybody. And if they don't, they know your family...It's homey, it's friendly, people wave, you know, you wave at each other. People don't realize that when they are from the city, or even a bigger town, when you get in those little towns, you wave. People think you're nuts, but that's what we do! We wave at each other. You check on each other.

That “everybody knows everybody” or “never met a stranger” (Gray 2009) mentality epitomizes rural life.

Sample Demographics

Of the sixty participants, 43 (72 percent) of the participants are women and 17 (28 percent) are men. The participants range from twenty-one to sixty-eight years old, with the average being forty-one years old. The sample is predominantly white, with one person each identifying as Asian, Biracial (Hispanic and White), Hispanic.⁴ That nearly all participants identified as white is another limitation of this work, especially given that there has been an increase in immigrant and racial minority populations in small towns and rural areas (Lichter and Johnson 2006).

Of the people currently living in rural areas, only six of them had not also grown up in a rural area. There are 9 men and 21 women (see Table 2). The ages of the interviewees in this group range from 22 to 55, and the average is 41 years. Most of the people in this group are white, with 1 person who identified as Asian, and 1 who identified as Hispanic. For those who are currently living in rural areas, 2 people listed their household income as less than 24,999. 9 had household incomes between 25,000 and 49,999; 7 between 50,000 and 74,999; 4 between 75,000 and 99,999, 2 between 100,000 and 149,999, and finally 1 had a household income between 150,000 and 199,999.

These demographics closely mirror those for the group of people who grew up in a rural area and are currently living in an urban place. In this group, there are 8 men and 23 women. Their ages range from 21-68 and the average age is 41. Like the currently living group, most people identified as white, with one person who identified as Biracial (Hispanic and White). Household income is the one characteristic that has the most difference between the two groups. There were more people who had household incomes

⁴ Demographic data are unavailable for five participants.

below \$24,999 in this group (6 people total). 6 people listed their household income as between 25,000 and 49,999, 8 between 50,000 and 74,999, 7 people between 75,000 and 99,999, and finally 2 people had household incomes between 100,000-149,999.

Coding & Analysis

Once the data was collected, I transcribed the interviews in full. I began the analysis by reading through the transcripts and interview fieldnotes and taking notes on what interesting themes were emerging. Following Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995, p. 144), I approached analysis with a concern for generating and discovering new themes in the data, while also recognizing that “data do not stand alone.” In other words, I read the transcripts with a set of predetermined themes I was interested in, given the literature and my research questions, yet I was also open enough to allow for unanticipated themes to emerge. For instance, one thing I was initially interested in and focused on was how individuals engaged with cultural understandings about gay and lesbian sexuality; in contrast, the themes which emerged around class distinctions within rural environments and between rural and urban spaces were unanticipated.

Throughout the analysis process, I was also concerned with pursuing “member’s meanings” and asking questions about how individuals made sense of themselves, others, and their experiences (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Such concern made salient the distinctions that individuals saw between rural and urban people, in general, and with regard to gays and lesbians, and their theories about why such distinctions existed. Also, it highlighted the importance for individuals to be able to claim connection to rural communities. Thus, I coded my interviews using what Emerson, Fretz and Shaw refer to as open coding, generating broad categories such as these. I then analyzed these

categories with a focused coding approach, a process that generated the more specific topics that appear in the findings below, such as “being known as a good person” and “everybody knows everybody.” What emerged from this coding was then developed into initial and integrative memos, which were then developed into the chapters that follow (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Specifically, writing these memos allowed me to analyze the relationship between what individuals described as important in rural areas and how they made sense of their sexual identity – or about the relationship between gendered cultural narratives of gay/lesbian sexuality and gendered norms in rural communities. Throughout the process of writing these memos, I “asked” several questions of my data in order to help explore links or see if my hunches about what was going on actually seemed to play out. For instance, I would go back to the coded data and ask “what’s different about the narratives from those living in rural areas compared to those living in urban areas?” This questioning helped me see that one major difference was how individuals understood the other people living in their communities and the lack of diversity in their communities. In order to ensure confidentiality, I have not used any names of real towns or people. The quotes used have been edited for the sake of both confidentiality and clarity, but the meaning and words have not been otherwise changed.

Chapter 4

Circulating Cultural Narratives of Gay and Lesbian Identities: The Importance of Spatial Meanings

In this chapter, I analyze the narratives about gay and lesbian identities circulating at the cultural level. I do so by examining the different ways that the people I interviewed make sense of gay and lesbian identities. Since cultural narratives outline possibilities (Holstein and Gubrium 2000), understanding how people make sense of what it would (or does) mean to be gay or lesbian highlights the multiple stories circulating at the cultural level about these sexualities. A rich body of literature addresses the construction of sexual identity at the cultural level. Scholars have traced how the categories “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” emerged only at the end of the nineteenth century in medical and sexological literature (Foucault 1978, Halperin 1989; Katz 1990; Terry 1999), and analyzed how this emergence shaped same-sex relationships at the turn of the century (Faderman 1978; Newton 1984). Attention has also been paid to how activists have both challenged and embraced medical understandings of same-sex sexuality (Stein 1997). More generally, sociologists have focused on how social movement activists have created and utilized particular understandings of sexual identity in political mobilizing (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Cutler 2003; Ghaziani 2008). In other words, this work illustrates the various binaries that have structured what it means to be gay or lesbian in the United States at the cultural level since the recent

invention of the category. Activists have worked to construct publicly available cultural identities of gay and lesbian – and have dealt with tensions about which identity is most appropriate. Specifically, tension has existed about whether asserting sameness to or difference from mainstream society is the best strategy. Similarly, accounts of gay/lesbian sexuality have been constructed through binaries such as radical/assimilationist and normality/nonconformity (Armstrong 2002; Gamson 1998). Another key piece of the literature looking at social movement organizing and the work activists have done to create a publicly available gay identity that is significant for my work is the tension between individuals who wanted to assert that gay/lesbian sexuality was all about sex – versus those who wanted to stress that gay/lesbian sexuality in fact was about much more than just sex and wanted to distance social movements from associations with sex (Armstrong 2002). Thus, the narratives I analyze reflect a continuation of such debates.

Scholars have also looked at the ways in which queer sexualities at a cultural level signal a particular space in the cultural, social, and economic landscape. In other words, rather than analyze how particular individuals (in medical or social movement realms, for instance) construct categories of “gay” and “lesbian,” some analyze the work those categories do at a cultural level. Examples include Halperin (2010), who posits gay sexuality as a “cultural practice” insofar as queer sexuality signifies a particular relationship to culture, or Wittig (1981), who argues that lesbian sexuality does the work of rejecting the role of “woman.” Across all this scholarship is an interest in analyzing the identities of gay and lesbian not in terms of how individuals negotiate those labels, but in terms of the categories’ construction and significance at a cultural level. Building

on this work and drawing on insights from queer theory, I investigate how rural gays and lesbians make sense of cultural narratives. What cultural narratives are salient for rural gays and lesbians? How are certain narratives understood as linked to urban life?

While I begin by briefly sketching some general narratives about gay and lesbian identities, I focus most of my analysis on how geography is embedded in cultural narratives about gay and lesbian identities. The narrative that equates gay/lesbian identity with “being cool” is an example of a narrative that is not necessarily embedded in spatial meanings. Among those narratives that are tied to understandings about geography include ones that utilize a dichotomy that distinguishes between the “exciting” urban gay and “boring” rural gay, and link urban gay identity with political activism.

The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that people draw on an understanding that gay/lesbian identity not only indicates same-sex attraction, but is also connected to multiple non-sexual categories and meanings. Specifically, I argue that the people I interviewed understand certain ways of being of gay or lesbian as linked to urbanism. Importantly, these are often aligned with accepted cultural narratives about what it means to be gay or lesbian. Findings from this chapter help underscore that rather than reject the cultural identity of gay or lesbian totally or say that it’s not important to them, people challenge the way that geography is embedded in cultural narratives about sexual identity. In other words, the cultural narratives about gay/lesbian sexualities are modified because rural gays and lesbians understand certain parts of those narratives to be linked to urban spaces – and thus modify or reject them. The findings in this chapter exemplify the usefulness of the theoretical approach I outlined in chapter 2. Specifically, this chapter demonstrates how binaries are at work in understandings of gay and lesbian

identities, which indicates that sexual categories are attached to non-sexual meanings. Engaging with cultural narratives about gay and lesbian sexual identities thus entails making sense of not only desires or sexual experiences, but also non-sexual identities as well. I argue that one important avenue for sexuality researchers is to analyze how sexual identity shapes the imaginary – the internal constructions and imaginings of who one is and who one will become.

Part 1: What Does It Mean to Be Gay or Lesbian?

While I cannot offer a complete analysis of the multiple cultural narratives circulating about gay/lesbian identities or argue why some people know certain narratives and not others, I offer this brief discussion to illustrate that these narratives circulate and are part of how individuals come to make sense of their personal identities. These data underscore how gay/lesbian identities are understood as about much more than sexuality. The people I interviewed differed in when they became aware of narratives about gay and lesbian identities. Some were aware of these narratives before identifying as gay/lesbian, knowing any other gays/lesbians, or participating in any gay/lesbian events, while others only became aware of these narratives in the process of participating in queer subcultures, for instance. That people were able to articulate different understandings of what they thought it meant to be gay or lesbian makes sense given that activists have worked to construct a range of publicly available cultural identities of gay and lesbian – and have debated which identity is most appropriate for achieving political goals (Armstrong 2002). Some of the narratives I analyze below reflect a continuation of such debates.

To begin, the men and women I interviewed talked about negotiating the sense that gay/lesbian sexuality meant more than simply having a same-sex partner or having

same-sex attractions or desires. Interestingly, opposed to some psychological models of sexual identity development, many discussed having no confusion or conflict with having same-sex desires or sexual experiences. Rather, they saw a disconnect between how they understood themselves and how they imagined gay/lesbian identity. For instance, Adam (42 yrs. old) said, “I mean it made sense to me - what I wanted to do made sense. But I think [I had] all the trappings of, you know, if you're gonna be gay...you have to be all these things.” His quote illustrates how gay/lesbian categories are embedded in other cultural meanings and do not just shape how people understand their desires or sexual behaviors. In Adam’s case, among “these things” that gay men “were” included: doing theater and dressing nice. Likewise, Debbie (44 yrs. old) talked about how she was having sex with women but still had not connected that to a label of “lesbian.” She says: “I didn't know anybody gay. I don't know that I knew what gay was.” For Lisa (54 yrs. old), although she thought that “it would be really nice to be able to share my life with another woman,” she also thought “that wasn’t the same as being a lesbian.” These quotes illustrate how sexual identity categories are embedded in other meanings at the cultural level. In other words, identity categories like “gay” and “lesbian” do not just shape how people make sense of their desires or sexual behaviors, but are given meaning in how they are attached to non-sexual ways of being and acting. This finding makes sense given that the degree to which sex should be central in defining gay and lesbian identity has been a tension in gay and lesbian communities and social movement organizations. Gay liberationists, for instance, specifically tried to create a gay identity that was built on more than just sex (Armstrong 2002), and lesbian feminists sought to define lesbian identity as a feminist political statement. Thus, the finding that narratives

about gay/lesbian identity incorporate non-sexual meanings is not unique to rural gays and lesbians' understandings. However, given how important geography is in shaping meanings about gay/lesbian identity, it becomes useful to understanding how rural gays and lesbians modify certain characteristics of cultural narratives while accepting others.

Further, while people's descriptions illustrate how cultural narratives circulating about gay/lesbian identities involve more than just meanings about sex, there were a variety of narratives that individuals remembered being salient growing up or when they were first coming out. For instance, Jake (40 yrs. old) described the understanding he had about gay identity prior to talking with a religious leader who told him to accept his sexuality:

Up until that point, everything had been so negative, like oh you're gonna be miserable for your whole life, you're gonna be alone, you're gonna you know, disease is rampant, you can never have a long-term relationship, everything was like, you can't have this you can't have that, you can't have happiness.

In contrast, Miranda (21 yrs. old) had a more positive understanding of gay/lesbian identities, yet one that was equally imagined as at odds with how she understood herself:

I thought there was something kinda inherently cool about gays and lesbians, which is kinda hard to explain I guess...I just didn't think that I could be [gay], it just seemed like those are kinda special people or whatever, and I was like, oh well I'm not that special, so I can't be gay.

She laughed as she described the way she made sense of gay/lesbian identities prior to coming out because of how much it differed from her current ideas. It is likely that the differences between Miranda's and Jake's understandings partly reflect their age differences and the dramatic changes in gay and lesbian life in the past decades, including increased visibility and normalization (Seidman 2002; Walters 2001).

Certainly the connection between gay and lesbian sexual identity categories and non-sexual meanings has implications for all individuals who adopt a gay or lesbian identity insofar as that entails negotiating much more than sexual experiences. In this way, the prior brief sketch underscores how queer theory and pragmatism can be useful in investigating a range of sexual identity constructions, not only those of rural gays and lesbians. However, geographical meanings are particularly central to how gay and lesbian identities are understood, as I analyze below. Understanding this has particular ramifications for analyzing rural gays and lesbians, as it allows us to see how meanings are reworked as individuals make sense of their own experiences and sense of self - experiences that are often not reflected in cultural narratives.

Part 2: How Ideas About Geography Shape What it Means to Be Gay or Lesbian

I don't really have the desire to be eating out in fancy restaurants in New York or hanging out in Chelsea or wearing a lot of designer clothes or all night dances. I can't stand dance music. I mean those are all things that kinda fit that stereotypical city gay lifestyle.

- Ethan (39 yrs old)

One narrative that most centrally highlights the importance of geographical meanings in gay/lesbian identity is the “get thee to the big city” narrative (Weston 1995). Weston argues that the urban/rural binary structures gay and lesbian subjectivity. Interviewees’ descriptions about their experiences in both rural and non-rural areas underscore the varied ways that they negotiate the cultural assumption that constructing a gay or lesbian identity rests on being in an urban locale and rejecting the oppressive rural context. Arguably, in this assumption, an urban locale on the West or East coast is also privileged over a Midwestern urban locale. This privileging is evident in Brittany’s (47 yrs. old) description of how friends would ask “what in the hell are you going back for?” when she moved from San Francisco to an urban area in Michigan. Other interviewees

described being confronted with similar reactions to living in rural locales in the Midwest, even if they never thought about leaving. Lisa (54 yrs. old) explained, “people have asked me, ‘have you ever had somebody be really, really rude or scarily aggressive toward you or anything like that because you’re a lesbian?’ And I never have.”

Similarly, in describing reactions he has received from people in gay and lesbian urban locales when traveling, Gene (34 yrs. old) said “when they find out that you're from a more rural community, it's almost like, ‘oh well aren't you precious, you came to the big city,’ kind of thing.” Thus, even those who never felt the need to “flee” still engaged with the cultural narrative that links gay and lesbian sexual identity outside of rural spaces, at times because of reactions from others. In other words, while some people are able to imagine themselves as gay or lesbian in rural locales – and thus disrupt the formula story about fleeing in their personal sexual identity constructions – this does not negate the fact that the narrative still circulates.

It would be remiss to paint the story as one where only metro outsiders ask why they have not fled. In other words, I do not dismiss the “get thee to the big city” narrative as categorically false. Certainly, individuals have had same-sex desires and partners in rural areas without fleeing to the city (Howard 1999), and LGBTQ activism takes place in rural areas (Gray 2009). However, geographical binaries have still played a role (imagined and real) in shaping how individuals, both straight and gay, think about gay and lesbian identity. Here, I address if people knew gays and lesbians in their rural communities growing up or if they knew about queer sexuality, and how they remember making sense of it. I do so as a way to be clear that my goal is not to argue that the link between queerness and urbanism is wrong, but rather, to ask how individuals make sense

of this cultural link and how they might challenge it in their everyday understandings. Even those who did not think about “fleeing” or do not want to “flee” still explained that they did not necessarily know about queer sexuality or know gays and lesbians. Importantly, if they did know about queer sexuality – it was a concept not tied to rurality. For instance, Chelsea (late 20s) agreed with her partner Andrea’s (also late 20s) assessment that “you knew of [gays/lesbians] in a very distant sort of [way], that other people [might be gay] but that does not happen in our town sort of way” and added: “it’s just not something that we’re exposed to.” Likewise, Camille (43 yrs. old) said that “I don’t think I had ever known another gay person...so it wasn’t really a real concept to me.” Erin (54 yrs. old) agreed: “I didn’t grow up around that, I didn’t have anybody that I knew that was gay, and I so I just kinda had no points of reference.” Similarly, Nate (50 yrs. old) explained how there were two men he saw while working in a nearby town that were assumed to be gay. He says: “they weren’t members of the community. They had moved [here], but they weren’t like me who had grown up there. That was a different situation.” William (24 yrs. old) described meeting a gay guy from out of town through his friend in the following way:

How do I act around a gay guy? I don’t know, like I like to think that my family raised me to be accepting of people, and so I’m like, how do I act, you know, like, what’s the socially acceptable way to act...I remember kinda being caught up in that, just kinda like, how do I react, what do I do, because it’s like [in] [rural] Michigan, there’s no gay people, like what do you do when there’s a gay person around?

Through all these narratives, queer sexuality and gays and lesbians are imagined as outside of rural space.

An excerpt from Adam (42 yrs. old) underscores one important consequence of the fact that gay and lesbian identities are equated with urbanism. He says:

There weren't people I knew of as gay around...you feel very isolated...you don't think of them being around you, because you'd obviously be able to tell because they'd act in a certain way. So it didn't occur to you that the people around you might be [gay] because it would be so obvious.

As evidenced in this quote, for Adam, the link between urbanism and queerness makes it difficult for him to imagine the possibility (for himself or others) to be gay in rural areas.

In thinking about other individuals in their towns, many people brought up how there were often rumors about different people who might be gay, but nothing that was confirmed. These rumors often came up around school teachers. Terri (23 yrs. old) said, "I mean there were a couple teachers who they would like joke about, just making comments because they didn't know, but, I don't know for a fact." Such stories were echoed throughout many interviews. Of course, often others *do* know – as illustrated by Adam's story. Here, he is talking about when he first moved back to town and his friend was showing him the area: "...we drive by this big old house, and she's like, that's where the music teacher lives with his partner." Further, Rita (46 yrs. old) had a very different experience insofar as she knew lesbians who were positively received in community growing up. She says:

I didn't grow up you know not knowing another lesbian, because that wasn't true at all. My dad and mom, like I loved sports, so from the time really that I was like 3 or 4, I had a baseball glove and I've said [to my] Dad "you know, you sent me to the lesbians!" I was put into positions where I played softball on very competitive teams from the time I was really little. So, I was around really strong women and a really strong lesbian community from almost day one. I didn't get negative feedback from that. There weren't people who said, oh god, you shouldn't be doing that, or oh those people. So that was I think really important for me to find some identity and stuff as a kid.

I asked if she remembers knowing that they were lesbians and she replied:

Yeah, oh yeah. I don't remember when I actually like knew that. But it was never any, like I didn't ever question it you know. It's not like I was wondering where their husbands were or something. I don't know when I actually knew it, but by the time I was in junior high and high school, I was going to parties with all lesbians. We were hanging out and we all knew each other from all the little rural towns around and we would all go to the same houses and that kind of stuff. I was very fortunate. I wasn't one of those kids who didn't ever see it.

While Rita knew lesbians in her town and neighboring small towns and thus could imagine gay/lesbian sexualities in such a way that did not displace them into urban space, the majority of people I interviewed did not have such experiences.

Another way that people described how they knew about queer sexuality is illustrated in how one individual explained that having sex with guys was not something that meant you were gay. Robert (41 yrs. old) said, “when I was young, being in a small town, we all kinda partied together...and there was a lot of experimentation.” In his story, it seems like effeminacy is what made one individual be “the only one that would come out of that with a label, fingers pointing at him, [us] saying like, oh he is [gay], we're not.” Finally, people referenced other gays or lesbians they knew who had fled their rural community. For instance, Teresa (46 yrs. old) said, “there was someone who was a theater major and ran off to New York City, so by the time I was in high school I knew that he was gay.” Terri (23 yrs. old) also said that she knew someone who came out in high school who was “always very outgoing and very into theater and he went to school out east.”

That individuals recalled that “gay” or “lesbian” identity was not a real concept to them reflects how these sexualities are embedded in other cultural meanings – specifically, in spatial meanings that place it outside of rural space. This attachment is also clear in the fact that when people described other gays or lesbians they knew, they

were often not from their own communities but outside (with the exception of Rita). Knowing that many narrated an understanding that equates urbanism and queerness is important insofar as it can help illustrate how people might modify or reject the “get thee to the big city” narrative without discounting the validity of the narrative itself.

The narratives people described do not necessarily correspond with their migration stories. For example, Rita who talked about her positive experience of playing softball with lesbians is currently living in a city. Chelsea who described not having a concept of “gay” or “lesbian” growing up or knowing adult gays or lesbians in her town is currently living in a rural place (never fled), and talked about wanting to stay there so that she and her partner can enact some change in their communities - namely, making sure that kids do not continue to grow up without awareness of gays and lesbians. Although not causal, these narratives are important insofar as they are one of the many narratives that are part of how individuals make sense of their migration stories.

Part of the “get thee to the big city” narrative is the way that urban space is imagined (and experienced for many) as the place not only to come out, but to find other gays/lesbians and to participate in queer communities (Weston 1995). While this narrative resonated with many people’s experiences, some people were out in rural areas before migrating, and some knew of gays or lesbians in their town while growing up. However, these data demonstrate that the city still was imagined or experienced as a site where *new* narratives about their sexuality circulated, in part because of the connection to other queer people and events. In other words, insofar as people could imagine and did construct gay/lesbian identities in rural locales, the city is not imagined as the *only* place to do so. Yet the city is still important in constituting *certain* kinds of gay and lesbian

identities. Some interviewees understood meanings about gay/lesbian circulating in urban spaces to allow for a greater expansion of what it could mean to be gay or lesbian (Miranda). For others, urban spaces were imagined or experienced as a site where they were held to narrower expectations of their sexual identity (Robert, Jake).

For most of the people I interviewed, the city was equated with the place to interact other gays and lesbians. For instance, Chelsea said that “the only reason I'd go to the city, because that's the only place you're gonna find any other gay people. It's just a population thing, you know, it's hard to find somebody when you live out in the sticks.” Her partner, Andrea, agreed that in the city it’s “easier to find community, easier to connect with another group of gay people.” The imagined/experienced lack of gays and lesbians nearby was particularly important in terms of finding partners. Indeed, Kevin lamented that it’s “really hard” to “find a lover in a small community.” Many of the people who are currently living in rural areas were already partnered before moving (or moved there to be with a partner) (like Leila and Nancy), or were single and not interested in being partnered (like Adam). Chelsea and Andrea noted that they “found each other on the Internet, and that’s the only way.” Their use of the Internet mirrors how others also described using the Internet as a way to connect with other gays and lesbians. Gene said:

The biggest thing is the Internet. I mean that's really where most rural people that I know get that connection is online...the Internet plays a huge role in the quote unquote rural gay community. It tends to expand your connection beyond the city limits, but at the same time, it's still not that human connection.

In contrast to Gray (2009) who finds that rural youth use the Internet and other new media to complement, not supplement, their local conditions, the people I interviewed

understood the power of the Internet to be in its ability to mitigate the lack of rural queer community.

Along with finding other gay people, the city is also the place to participate in queer cultures. Alice (44 yrs. old) said the following in describing what her town is like:

There's a lack of, what do I want to say, things to do as far as culture. Like if I want to see any more progressive things or anything, I've gotta drive to [the city]. So if I wanna go see anything, I've gotta go to [the city] for the march. As far as for my lifestyle, there's none of that around here.

Importantly, while interviewees did express that rural areas lacked queer subcultures or events, not all of them understood that lack as evidence of rural places as totally homophobic or unwelcoming for gays and lesbians.

Urban spaces also meant becoming aware of new narratives about gay/lesbian sexuality that circulated within queer communities for some interviewees. For instance, Robert (41 yrs. old) described coming out in an urban space in the following way: “I thought that with that label came a whole different, this is what you're supposed to do, this is what you're supposed to be, this is how you're supposed to act.” His reiteration of the “supposed to” do/be/act further illustrates how sexual identity categories become embedded in other meanings at the cultural level. In other words, those categories do not just shape how people make sense of their desires or sexual behaviors, but are linked to broader ways of being and acting. That these narratives are experienced in urban, not rural contexts is significant. As Robert further explained, “It wasn't until I moved back home [to a rural locale] that I was like...I can define myself. I can say, this is who I am and this is what it means for me to be gay.” For Adam, there are certain narratives and expectations about gay identity that circulate in urban spaces that are absent in rural contexts. The consequence of the lack of certain expectations of gay men in rural areas is

that he understands these areas as affording him the ability to construct a more nuanced gay identity – and one that resonates more with how he sees himself.

In a similar way, Ethan, who is currently living in a rural area in the Midwest after having lived in New York City, said:

I appreciate the city...where there is more of a gay community, but at the same time, I just don't enjoy a lot of it...That actually kinda turned me off...because I was so overwhelmed with...that stereotypical lifestyle...I met a lot of people who went to New York to be somewhere where they could be free and they wanna be like in the center of this gay world kind of thing, but I guess I kinda just feel like, you've moved from one spot where you couldn't be free to another where you're being free, but by being just like the stereotypes.

These individuals, like others, experienced urban spaces to be those where they encountered new expectations about what it meant to be gay or lesbian. Importantly, they understand these expectations or narratives about what it means to be gay as specific to urbanism. As such, these data underscore that geography is important in how people make sense of gay and lesbian identities not because urban spaces are imagined or experienced as the *only* place to be gay or lesbian, but because they are understood as a place to be a *particular* type of gay or lesbian.

One narrative that interviewees expressed about urban gays and lesbians is that they are “exciting,” in contrast to “boring” rural gays and lesbians. Take, for instance, the following description from Laura (55 yrs. old). In talking about how she viewed her lesbian identity differently than what she saw in gay pride parades in cities, she said: “There’s some of us that are just old married people. We don’t do anything exciting...we go to work, go home, cook breakfast, dinner, lunch, do laundry, go canoeing maybe, do some dishes.” Throughout my interview with Tara (46 yrs. old), she kept stressing “I’m boring.” As she put it: “I am very very very very very boring OK. If there's a rock laying

in the road, that rock has more action than I do!” Presumably, urban gays and lesbians also do the things that Laura mentioned (go to work, go home, cook, do laundry). It is not that rural gays and lesbians really are more boring, but what is interesting is how that sense of excitement gets mapped onto geographical space. In these understandings, the city becomes the site for gay pride parades and all the other exciting ways to be gay or lesbian. That people utilize a dichotomy that distinguishes between the “exciting” urban and the “boring” rural gay or lesbian indicates the way that geography is embedded in meanings about those sexualities.

Also evident in Laura’s quote is that part of what it means to be “boring” is being married. Similarly, many interviewees, particularly men, understood being gay in urban queer subcultures to mean having multiple sexual partners. Thus, differences between urban and rural gay/lesbian sexual identities are constructed through binaries of married/single and monogamous/polyamorous. Xander’s (29 yrs. old) reflections about his experiences in San Francisco resonated with those of other men I interviewed. He is now living in an urban area in Michigan, but of San Francisco he said:

I think the biggest complaint that I have [about the city] – and most of my friends here just would laugh at me when I say it – [but] because there's just so many gay people there... people just bounce around a lot...so it was really hard to find like, stable relationships, you know. Not that I wanted to get married to the first person I [saw]...but it's just like it's a city that's very set up to have open relationships. Almost every gay person I knew like, functioned in open relationships.

He further explained that while he does not think that *everyone* needs to have “someone that you're with the rest of your life,” he does see *himself* as someone who “would just rather settle down at some point.” Thus, he found it frustrating that “it seemed like there are so few options, to kinda have a more stable, like monogamous relationship.” Gene

(51 yrs. old) also thought that “a lot of couples in more urban settings are the type to be more open in terms of the bedroom.”

I think that's the biggest difference I see between the urban community and the more rural community. In the urban community, commitment isn't such a big thing, where as it seems to be, from my personal observations, it seems to be much more important to those who've grown up in more rural communities.

He speculated that those differences might exist because rural gays have fewer opportunities to meet others. As he put it “I think it makes you a little more prone to, when you find someone that you do connect with, you want to maintain it. Most of the people that I know that come from rural communities believe the same thing that I do – that a commitment is a commitment.” Gene, like Xander, noted that he did not think everyone needed to have the same belief – “I'm not saying that homosexuals in cities are bad or anything” – but his narrative underscores one way that the “exciting urban gay” is given meaning.

Finally, the urban environment is also imagined as linked to a narrative about activism. One way that Miranda (21 yrs. old) imagined what it would mean to be gay was by imagining a “protester.” Just as she had pictured that “every Black American was just like, yeah civil rights!” during the civil rights movement, she thought “every gay person” would be wrapped up “in this big struggle” for rights like marriage. She explains she thought that, as a gay person, her life would be “kinda like a martyr situation, like, I'm gonna be remembered! I'm gonna change stuff but then people are gonna hate me! So, yeah, I thought it would be more dramatic.” Her experiences in an urban context and being exposed to gays and lesbians there, in fact, was part of how she says she realized she “could become an activist, and could fight for chance and all that sort of stuff, like if I

wanted to” – but that it was not required. For Evelyn (27 yrs. old), her experiences of what it means to be a lesbian in urban areas are linked to activism. While she is currently living in an urban environment, ideally she wants to end up in the country. She says, “I feel like I know a lot of people who have similar interests, but a lot of [them] are really more city people. They want things to do and they want the connections to other lesbians, to lesbian groups.” She imagines different experiences in the country, where she ideally wants to end up. She explained that she felt “strange” saying that, given her role in a LGBT resource center.

It feels kinda wrong when I’m sitting in my LGBT Resource Center Office and saying that...[because] when you’re sitting in the office...it just seems like you should be very very open, very very upfront, you know, because you’re like this role model.

Her quote reflects that being visible (“open and upfront”) as a lesbian is one that way activism is understood. Because of this, though Evelyn knows she will be “pro-gay rights” no matter where she lives, she does not think that will necessarily equate to visibility in rural contexts. In the country, unlike the city, she imagines that she would be really visible only if she had kids - and not with her family of “a partner and a pet.” Evelyn’s story begins to highlight how understandings about what it means to be gay or lesbian, and out and visible, differ across geographic contexts.

Despite the previous data, it is also certainly the case that the people I interviewed did not wholly narrate understandings that link gay/lesbian sexuality with urbanism. As expected, the formula story that being gay or lesbian means needing or at the very least wanting to flee to an urban area denies the diversity of people’s actual lived experiences, as do all formula stories (Loseke 2001; Crawley and Broad 2004). Rita, for instance, grew up playing softball with lesbians, and Kyle had positive experiences being

out in his high school in a small town before migrating to the city. Moreover, the equation between urbanism and queerness obscures the fact that anti-urban sentiments exist in gay and lesbian communities such as the radical faeries and the lesbian land movement (Herring 2007; Hennen 2008; Bell and Valentine 1995; Bell 2000; Stein 2001). In contrast to many of the lesbians living in the small Oregon town Stein studied who narrated connections to the lesbian-feminist “back-to-the-land movement” (2001, p. 44), Renee was the only person I interviewed to discussed this. While she was currently living in a city, she said that if she were to move back to a rural place, it would be lesbian land.

Over the many years I've had fantasies about moving into a land community....I don't know about that one. Because it's been a dream that's been kinda shattered different times, but also have been open to. But there's lots of lesbians that live in the county, and always have actually.

The absence of these back to the land narratives in others’ narratives is striking and important. It raises the question of how and why some rural lesbians see themselves as connected to this movement while others do not.

In analyzing how people make sense of what it means (or would mean) to be gay or lesbian, findings in this chapter demonstrate how sexual identity shapes more than just desires and erotic behavior, and how gay/lesbian identities are given shape through their entanglement with other categories of difference. Specifically, geography is important in shaping gay and lesbian identities. With the exception of those like Rita - who described knowing lesbians when playing softball growing up – or Kyle – who described being out as gay in high school before migrating to a city - by and large, the interviewees’ narratives maintained the link between queerness and urban space. Importantly though, what these data show is that the city is not understood as the *only* place to be gay/lesbian,

but is understood as the place to enact a particular version of that identity. Differences among gays and lesbians (e.g., marriage status, participating in pride events, having monogamous relationships, being an activist) are understood as connected to rural-urban differences. Some narratives about gay/lesbian sexualities – often ones that are aligned with culturally accepted understandings about these identities – are understood by the people I interviewed as being tied to urban spaces. In the following two chapters, I ask how people engage with these cultural narratives in their everyday lives. Given where people are living (urban, rural, in one location but hoping to get elsewhere), how does it impact their identity? what are they doing with these narratives?

In many of these narratives, rural contexts become the imagined (and experienced) space where they are “free” from certain expectations about gay/lesbian identity – where gay/lesbian identity need not be equated with other non-sexual meanings. Remember Adam’s understanding that it was not until he moved back home that he could define for himself what it means to be gay. If this is the case, what *does* happen in rural areas? In other words, if being in rural space means not being held accountable to cultural narratives about what it means to be gay or lesbian – then what do those sexual identities look like outside of cities? How do gays and lesbians in rural areas make sense of these cultural narratives about queer sexuality in their everyday lives? Are the cultural narratives modified in individuals’ sense of personal sexual identity? If so, how? And why? I turn to these questions in Chapter 4. Then, in Chapter 5, I look more closely at the interviewees who are currently living in urban areas and ask how they make sense of cultural narratives that link queer identity with urbanism. Is their migration an indication that cultural narratives might resonate with them more than with

the people who are in rural areas - and thus, such narratives might be more a part of urban migrants' personal narratives?

Explaining Migrations

Before turning to these questions, let me provide a brief sketch of some of the reasons why people are living where they are currently living. Of course, there is a range of why people leave or stay or migrate back and forth. For some individuals with whom I talked, they always knew they would or were encouraged to leave their towns. Mostly, these were individuals whose parents encouraged them to go to college. Others left for military service or jobs. As Elise explained, "I don't know anyone that is just staying that I felt had enough money you know to go to college and move someplace else, or try something different." Yet, I interviewed people who could "choose" to leave and who also "chose" to migrate back. Knowing this helps resist the reading of individuals who migrate back or who stay as too poor (or stupid) to do anything else. Among those who migrated to urban locales and then migrated back home, like Alice and Adam, returned to take care of aging parents or other family members. For some interviewees, their partners brought them to the area. Robert says that he moved "to basically pursue our relationship. That's what brought me to this area." Others talked about wanting to move to a smaller town when they had kids. For instance, in describing one of the reasons they wanted to be in a rural community, Leila and Nancy, a couple with children, explained: "A lot of it has to do with, both of us went to smaller schools, we started the school, we went all the way through high school, we had the same friends all the way through, and we wanted our children to experience that same thing that we experienced." Nate saw moving back to a small town as good because of being able to start a business.

Interestingly, others who were currently living in urban spaces who talked about wanting to migrate often brought up connection to family as a main motivating factor. Further, some people who migrated knew about gay/lesbian sexuality or individuals in their towns and/or were out themselves. In sum, there are a range of reasons why people ended up where they did and where they ideally wanted to end up – and some of these had nothing to do with sexuality. Among the reasons why some individuals currently living in rural areas don't want to migrate to cities include, as Chelsea puts it: “[The city] is too stressful! (laughs). Just too many people and just, um. That and I really have a problem with wanting to transfer my job.” My goal is not necessarily to construct an argument about why some individuals migrate or not. Rather, I analyze how migrating matters for how those who move make sense of their sexuality, how these various cultural narratives matter in their everyday lives, and how they reject or modify the narratives in their personal sense of sexual identity. I turn to this analysis in the next two chapters.

Chapter 5

Get Me to the Sticks: Constructing Gay and Lesbian Identities in Rural Locales

In this chapter, I focus on the people who are currently living in rural areas and ask how they construct gay and lesbian identities. Most of them lived in a city at some point in their lives, but seven people had never migrated to a city. I first analyze how gays and lesbian in rural areas make sense of cultural narratives about gay and lesbian sexualities. Which components of the formula story that links queerness to urbanism do they modify, reject, or reproduce? Second, I outline the personal narratives of sexual identity for those individuals living in rural locales, focusing on understandings about what it means to them to be out, visible, and accepted as gay or lesbian. Drawing on understandings about rural life and people, gays and lesbians in these locales construct sexual identities that are often framed in opposition to cultural narratives about what it means to be gay and are, instead, grounded in specific rules and logics of rural life. Specifically, the following understandings of rurality are central to how they narrate what it means to be gay or lesbian in rural spaces: being known as a good person, having ties to the community, and the close-knit nature of rural life.

Part 1: Modifying Cultural Narratives About Fleeing and Urban Queer Cultures

It seems like a lot of gay people...wanna be in New York City or Los Angeles because there's so much more opportunity and you can kinda fit in and stuff...and for me, I was just the opposite...I was so very happy to get to move *out* of the city.

- Jake (40 yrs. old)

This quote from Jake illustrates some of the findings about how rural gays and lesbians make sense of the cultural narrative that coming out as gay or lesbian necessitates fleeing oppressive rural spaces as they narrate their own experiences. For

some people I interviewed, including Robert, Nate, Tom, and Adam, though they are currently living in a rural area, they did narrate their coming out as tied to migrating to a city. For some of them, their ability to migrate was linked to military service. For instance, Robert explains, “it was linked to being gay, to kinda get out, to strike out on my own and discover myself so to speak. I used the military as that vessel to just break away from everyone I knew. Likewise, Tom said, “I still think of the Navy as the best four years of my life in some respect because it got me out of [my town].” Others migrated for school or job opportunities, like Alice who talked about going to an urban place as “the point where I guess my world started opening up more,” insofar as she met other lesbians. Yet, although migration was linked to coming out for people like Alice, Tom, and Robert, their migration *back* to rural areas signals one way that the cultural narrative that the city is the place to be gay gets modified.

Further, there were a few people like Rich, Chelsea, and Tara, who had not lived in a city. Rich’s (52 yrs. old) personal understandings resonate with the fleeing cultural narrative insofar as he sees himself as somewhat closeted. He says that he’s “living a hidden lifestyle to some degree” and thinks this, in part, “has to do with the size of the community.” Yet Tom’s understanding of being closeted was an exception. The others who had not lived in a city narrated an understanding of their sexual identities that rejected the cultural narrative of fleeing to the city. For instance, Tara (46 yrs. old), in reflecting on whether she thought about going to a city to come out, said,: “No, I didn’t feel like that at all. You mean to flee to hide in the big city? Or go to where I would feel more comfortable? I personally wouldn’t flee to a big city, because I don’t like them.”

One of the ways that people living in rural areas modify or reject the formula story of fleeing is through their understanding that the lack of diversity in rural areas does not translate into automatic hatred or prejudice of gays and lesbians. For instance, Robert (41 yrs. old) told me the following story about his nephew (his sister's son) and the nephew's friends coming to visit him and his partner: "my sister emailed and said, thanks for letting us stay, and she had found out that my nephew, on the way down in the car said [to his friends] 'now my uncle is gay and if you have a problem with that you can just stay home.'" Robert explained that the instance "really speaks a lot."

I mean he's a 13 year old living in [rural] MI, really rural, so the ideas have changed. I mean just the fact that they say those things now, in my day, when I was that age, those thoughts would have never occurred to me. So you know that that area is completely changing.

His story reveals how the people I interviewed living in rural areas, even if they had different experiences of those areas growing up, have recent experiences that illustrate to them that not all rural folks are homophobic or intolerant.

Most interviewees in rural areas agreed "rural" need not equal totally backwards. However, some still had concerns that small towns might produce more prejudice. Take, for instance, the following exchange between Chelsea and Andrea (late 20s) when talking about wanting to have kids in the future and whether they would move. They both grew up in and are currently living in a rural area. Yet, Andrea had migrated to an urban place and ideally wanted to end back in an urban place, whereas Chelsea had not migrated and did not want to in the future. Chelsea said:

In my family, I was never exposed to anyone of any other color, or, anything, but I don't have a problem with them. I don't care. I don't care what creed or color you are, as long as you aren't up in my business, I won't be up in yours, and we'll all get along just fine. That goes for everybody.

In Chelsea's mind, the lack of racial diversity in rural areas does not mean that white rural people "have a problem" with racial minorities. Thus she thinks it would be fine to raise kids in a rural environment like the one in which she was raised. In contrast, Andrea felt strongly that their kids should be exposed to racial diversity and thus wants to live in a city when they have kids. She says, "I want my kids to be raised around diverse people. I'm a grown adult, and I know better, and I'm trying to change those things. So I want to give my kids the best shot, you know, that I can give them towards being whole, well-rounded people." This difference in how they understand the consequences of living in rural areas emerged at other times during the interview. It was not only tied to the lack of racial diversity in rural areas, but also to the lack of exposure to certain foods or sports, as the following exchanges illustrate. At one point, Andrea referenced a friend of theirs who is from a small town: "she's 30 years old and she had like never had a kiwi fruit, she didn't know what it was! So like, I don't want my kids to be raised in such a small little place." Another example she gave was the fact that, "I didn't even know what lacrosse was until I went to college" – at which point, Chelsea laughed and chimed in with "I still don't know what lacrosse is." They also reflected on their differences in how they reacted to seeing a car dealership with a sign that was misspelled. Andrea was irate and went in the dealership to tell them the sign was misspelled. It didn't bother Chelsea, who reasoned "everybody goofs up now and then, you know? Could've happened to anybody, if you're just lost in thought somewhere else, and writing at the same time." Such exchanges illustrate the variation in how people negotiate the narrative that conflates rural with backwards and uneducated, and the lack of diversity in rural areas with prejudice.

Interestingly, interviewees did make distinctions between small towns. For instance, Nate (50 yrs. old) who moved back to a small town after living in a city, talks about how he specifically chose his town rather than another one he was considering. Talking about the town he did not choose to live in, he said, “I just decided it reminded me too much of the town I grew up in and it brought back the fear that I felt when I was growing up.” Likewise, Erin (54 yrs. old), in comparing her town to others nearby, suggested that: “I think [mine] is much more progressive, probably higher educated, higher income people probably than [surrounding area]. In [surrounding areas] [people] would be much less tolerant.” As both of these quotes reveal, people living in rural areas understand “rural” or “small town” in nuanced ways. For Nate and Erin, these spaces are not imagined or experienced as monolithic, totally backward, or unwelcoming as they are in a cultural narrative that suggests rural gays and lesbians must flee.

While the people I interviewed disrupted the notion that gays and lesbians need to flee rural areas to be out, they did, however, narrate an understanding that queer events or communities were in urban, not rural, areas. For instance, Jenny (31 yrs. old), in talking about going to gay and lesbian bookstores when traveling, said, “there really isn't a gay and lesbian community around here...we try to frequent them, and we try to, you know, get as much of that culture as we can, because there's none up here.” For some this link between city and gay communities was imagined (i.e., they had limited or no connection to queer urban communities). Sandra (36 yrs. old) said, “I have never been to any gay bars or anything like that ever. I've lived a very sheltered life.” She explained that while she had never been to gay bars or pride parades, “we did go just recently to [nearby city], to the Prop 8 rally,” which “was great.” She said it was “mostly gay people but there

were heterosexual couples that were there too, you know, rallying for our right. It was fabulous.” While Sandra said she had limited experiences with urban queer cultures or events, her brief experience was a positive one.

Yet others who had limited experience in urban queer cultures narrated a more negative view of what they imagined they were like. Rich (52 yrs. old), for instance, has visited Chicago and knows of Chicago’s gay neighborhood, but he has never been to any of the gay bars there. When I asked him why not, he said, “I guess I viewed the gay community as being very flamboyant and you know, feminine...that just wasn't for me.” As evidenced in this quote, the “urban gay” becomes reified in the narratives of some people who have no experience with urban queer communities – and the image is often understood as negative. Echoing Rich, Gene (34 yrs. old) explained that “it's kinda bad, because even though I'm gay I have some very negative views of the gay community as a whole.” His negative views were expressed when talking not about gay bars, but rather, about urban gay pride parades. In the quote below, he explains what he told his friend about why he did not want to go to a pride parade:

I'm sorry, but I don't wanna be lumped together with a bunch of homos running around dressed in women's clothes, funky make-up, drunk, dancing to Cher. I just don't want that affiliation...What you need to do is you need to put a human face on homosexuality. Instead of having a big pride parade next year with everybody dressed in drag dancing to Cher, you wear everyday clothes, be an everyday person, you know, that says, I'm a teacher, I'm a lawyer, I'm a doctor, I'm a construction worker, whatever the case may be. And that will get people's attention.

His assertions about not wanting to be lumped with “a bunch of homos running around dressed in women’s clothing” reveals many important things. His comments can be read within the context of “homonormativity” (Duggan 2002) or privileging gays that display normative gender presentations or are career focused, for instance – all components that

appear in Gene's account. In other words, not only rural gays and lesbians like Gene might desire to normalize homosexuality (Seidman 2002). Importantly though, that sense of what is normal also gets mapped onto geographic space insofar as the city – and the pride parades that happen there – are equated with drag queens. Thus, the accounts from Rich and Gene demonstrate that the formula story not only denies the diversity among gays and lesbians who live outside urban contexts, but it can also deny the diversity among gay and lesbians in cities.

However, unlike Rich, many people currently living in rural areas, in fact, had experiences in urban queer subcultures, which they understood as not available in rural areas. Thus, narratives about what it is like to be gay in urban contexts or participate in queer communities were not always imagined, but rather experienced. Some people, like Ethan, understood their urban experiences in negative ways and viewed their own personal sexual identities in contrast to what they had experienced in queer urban cultures. Ethan (39 yrs. old) explained that:

I don't really fully relate to gay culture and I don't really like it. I mean I guess I'm kinda a part of it. I go to the bars a lot and I have a lot of gay friends. And I appreciate like the city and that lifestyle you know and where there is more of a gay community. But at the same time, I just, I don't enjoy a lot of it. Other than the social part of it and the freedom that comes with it, I don't really wanna be part of it.

Likewise, talking specifically about his experiences in urban gay bars, Adam (42 yrs old) explained:

It wasn't real welcoming I guess. I've been in bars with my father in [my small town], and you know, people knew each other, it was a very friendly, laid back place. This was kinda dark and smoky. No one just came up to talk to you or anything...so it just didn't feel warm and friendly, no one was gonna come and talk to you. It was intimidating. It didn't feel welcoming.

Like Ethan, Adam also has had negative experiences in queer urban cultures. His quote positions his experience in an urban gay bar in contrast to how he experienced rural bars. Specifically, the distinction between which one felt welcoming rested on the degree to which “people knew each other.” The value on being known appears again in narratives about what it means to be out or accepted in rural areas, as I illustrate in the next part of this chapter. Here, it also interestingly shapes how rural gays and lesbians make sense of their experiences in urban queer subcultures.

In contrast to the narratives analyzed above, many people who were currently living in a rural area, in fact, had positive experiences in urban queer cultures and events. Among them is Morgan (54 yrs. old), who said that in gay bars in the city “I just felt, just relieved.” She said, “there's just no way to describe how much freer you are in a gay bar.” She described her experiences visiting San Francisco in the following way:

Usually when you go somewhere, you kinda look for the homosexuals. If you're walking down the street, you've got your eyes going around looking. Well, when I was in the gay games in San Francisco, the straight people were doing that. Because there was so many homosexuals on that street you could tell the straight people were looking around to see if there were any more. So it was great! It was role reversal.

Leila (39 yrs. old) similarly described how excited she was in the city because “it was a whole different atmosphere. I started knowing people who were gay and lesbian, and I was like, wow, that's what it is!” Being around other gays and lesbians through participating in urban queer culture was also something that Alice (44 yrs. old) appreciated because “it's the one time where you are not the minority.” Tracy (58 yrs. old) says that she joined a lesbian group in the city and it was then that “I met a new group of people, I met actual lesbians.”

Urban queer cultures, events, and organizations were also understood as positive insofar as they allowed people to be politically active and stay connected to gay/lesbian communities. For instance, Leila (39 yrs. old) and Nancy (42 yrs. old) explained that “we went to Pride. It was nice, because we can just go there...and we're both pretty politically active...we go to, adoption days at the state capital, and, we went to the second parent day, we went to the mental health parenting day.” Andrea found a queer organization while living in the city to be “really helpful.” She explains:

It was really helpful just to have people to hang out with and people. I didn't know any other gay people besides those people. So, you know, it was helpful because, I was able to network and found other community resources in [the city], like, the gay community center.

Finally, some people described both positive and negative experiences – or described how they understood their interactions with urban queer people, subcultures, communities, and events as both helpful and not helpful to their understandings about their sexual identities. Take, for instance, the narrative from Robert (41 yrs. old), who described his migration to an urban environment as connected with his coming out in the following way:

I still hadn't said the words out loud, I just thought it in my head. It wasn't until another gay couple, who was a little bit older than us, we were talking, and they looked at me and they said, you're gay, you know. And to me it just kinda all of a sudden became real. To have somebody actually say it to my face. So I remember that moment so well, when somebody said, well you're gay. It became real. I can't explain that moment, but it was a very profound moment when they actually verbalized it.

For Robert and many of the people I quote above, knowing other gays or lesbians – a knowledge that developed for them in urban areas – was important for their ability to come out. Yet, these experiences are also important for how they understand their sexual identity insofar as people understand themselves in opposition to what they experienced

in urban queer cultures. In Robert's narrative, participation in queer cultures both shapes his ability to construct a gay identity *and* to construct one that he sees as distinct from others in urban locales.

I got involved in gay veterans, so we organized a lot of parades and pride-fest parades and I really got heavy into the different lifestyle choices that you have when you're gay. Going to the bars and to parties. [I] just kinda explored what it meant to be gay. And I've kinda come back a little bit from that because I just found it so empty. When I first came out and I started exploring it, I thought that with that label came a whole different, this is what you're supposed to do, this is what you're supposed to be, this is how you're supposed to act. So it wasn't until I moved back home that I was like, you know, I can define myself. I can say, this is who I am and this is what it means for me to be gay.

Robert makes sense of his gay identity differently in the city than in a rural area. His quote demonstrates how he understands the gay identity he constructs outside of urban spaces as somehow more personal – “this is what it means for *me* to be gay” (emphasis mine).

These data suggest that the urban-rural binary is still salient in shaping how gay and lesbian identities are constituted, not because the city is imagined as the only place to be gay, but because it is imagined (and experienced) for some as the place inhabited by certain kinds of gays and lesbians. People often make sense of their experiences in queer urban spaces through narratives about urban-rural differences. The formula story that links queerness and urbanism assumes that individuals in rural areas with non-normative sexualities suffer the inability to articulate a gay/lesbian identity within a hostile environment. As Gray (2009) nicely illustrates, the narrative of finding a gay community often dovetails with narratives of constructing a liberated gay self. The people I interviewed, however, make sense of their experiences in such a way that distinguishes between expectations in rural and urban contexts. In doing so, their stories challenge a

component of the formula story. They replace it with the story that people in rural areas do not articulate an *urban* gay identity, and not always (or only) out of an inability to, but also out of a lack of interest in doing so. As Ethan put it: “when I say I don't really like gay culture it's not really that I'm offended by it or I feel even uncomfortable like in a gay dance bar or something, but I just don't have a desire to really you know live that way.” People like Ethan and Robert found an ability to articulate a different understanding of their sexuality in rural contexts than in urban ones. Indeed, interviewees living in rural areas made sense of their sexual identities by drawing on narratives about rurality. Below, I analyze how their ideas about what it means to be accepted, out, and visible as gays and lesbians are shaped by their understandings of and attachments to narratives about what it means to be rural.

Part II: Drawing on Narratives about Rurality in Constructing Gay & Lesbian Identities

Constructing Narratives About Being Accepted Through Understandings of the Importance of Being Known as a Good Person & Having Ties to Rural Community

In narratives about expectations and experiences of their sexual identity being accepted in rural areas, interviewees point to being known as a good person within their communities and having ties to the community and people. For example, Leslie (35 yrs. old) explained that “if people know you and know you're good people, I think people are fine with it.” Others echoed the sentiment that what matters most in rural locales is being known as a good person, as evidenced in the following quotes: “this town doesn't care if you're gay or straight or whatever. As long as you're a good person, they could care less” and “all they care about is that I work hard, I'm a good person, if I tell them I'm gonna do something I show up and I do it.” Tara (46 yrs. old), when describing why she was not

concerned about moving to a small town as an out lesbian said, “see now the reason why is most people know me. There's not hardly anybody in that town that doesn't know me or know someone that knows me. So...I had no problems.” Nate (50 yrs. old) offered, “I think it depends on how long you've lived there and how much you're embraced by the community... if you're a part of the town, they accept you much easier.” Being known as a good person is connected, in part, to having ties to a particular rural community and thus being able to lay claim to being part of it.

Indeed, having a tie to communities was salient in many narratives about coming out as gay or lesbian in rural locales. Jenny (31 yrs old), who grew up in a rural town nearby where she and her partner are now living, describes that people have been open and accepting and that she was not surprised by this. She asserted, “[my partner] was more surprised by the reaction of people and how open and accepting they were. I just assumed people seem to like me enough.” Similarly, Chelsea (late 20s) said, “I came out here, kinda no fear. Like fine, if they have a problem, you know what, I'll give it right back to them. I grew up here too and I know what it's all about.” In this narrative, her tie to the community served as leverage for any problems she might have anticipated when coming out. She further explained, “this is the community that I've always been in. I'm not scared of the locals. Why would I be?” The following coming out narrative from Joan further illustrates how personal narratives about being gay or lesbian are tied to understandings of what it means to be known and liked in rural areas. In what follows, she describes the reactions of the people she worked with in a seasonal position:

All the guys I liked came up to me and shook my hand and said, I hope you're back here next fall, we really appreciate your work and this and that. So they had made up their minds that they didn't care that I was gay.

They just said, who cares, she works really hard and she pulls her own weight and we really like her.

The importance of having ties to the rural community was salient in Lisa's (54 yrs. old) discussion of being accepted by others in her town:

We were here first anyway so they have to fit into our neighborhood. We aren't trying to fit ourselves into theirs. Which is in a way an advantage. I mean it [might be] different if you move into a small town and tried to present yourselves to other people...that would be a different proposition I think. You'd have to probably think about it differently.

For these people, their narratives of coming out and anticipating or experiencing acceptance of their sexual identity rely on their understandings about rural life and the things that are valued in rural communities – being a good person and having ties to the area.

That people living in rural areas understand acceptance of their sexuality as tied to the degree to which they are known and well-liked reveals the fact that they stress how others treat them in interactions as more important than what others think about queer sexuality or how others vote, for instance. Many said things like Andrea, that although she did not really know what others might “say about me behind my back,” she did know they treated her well face-to-face. Chelsea demonstrates this point in the following story:

You never know if anybody says anything bad about me at work, but I do know that one of my co-workers called [my partner] to wish her a happy birthday. He was like, what's her phone number? I wanna call her! You know, it was on a Sunday, it was on his own spare time, he just called to say hey, which was cool.

The value placed on how people interact with one another rather than what they might think about each other outside of those interactions makes sense given that many people described this sense that living in a rural environment also cultivates a different way of

relating to people. For example, Lisa (54 yrs. old) had this to say about the difference between personal interactions in rural, small towns and cities:

I think the people skills are different as well...It's hard to describe what that is. But I would say... people are more involved with each other and more inclined to avoid negatives toward each other...And they're not nearly so quick to discount people like just to sort of ignore and cross them off their list like, "I don't care what she will think or say." [It's] more important to acknowledge that someone said something even if you don't agree with it. "Yeah, I understand that that's how you feel, I think differently." Where I still feel that [non-rural] people are more inclined to just sort of just discount things. Live within themselves I would say. There's, the boundaries between people are more permeable [in my experience living in a small town]. Maybe that's a good way to put it I think.

She describes that people in the cities are "more self-contained" and "more interested only in their own standards" and gives one example from her experiences watching her partner's softball game in a nearby city:

...if someone in the crowd makes a comment about something that has to do with the game like an umpire's call or a player's attitude or something about the game and another person doesn't feel the same way, they would be more inclined to just try to sort of shut the person down or ignore them or change the subject or talk over them...Rather than [thinking]... "Maybe she's having a hard day." "Maybe there's something going on we don't know about"...I guess to me it would have been much more common in my growing up to have that: the opposite view acknowledged. Not agreed with. We don't all have to be the same but more acknowledgment of difference of opinion.

What is interesting about this story is that she explains how what is reasonable for her is to acknowledge people whose views disagree from your own; as she says, "acknowledged, not agreed with." She attributes this perspective on interpersonal relationships to her rural background, later explaining that "quickly in a small town environment, if you alienate this one and that one, pretty soon you've got nobody." Within this context, it makes sense that people think it is important to be treated well in

everyday interactions and can disconnect how others treat them from knowing how others might “actually” think about their sexuality.

Being known for “who they are” or for being a good person or for being part of a community allows for a separation from cultural narratives of gay or lesbian identities. Talking about how others react to gays and lesbians in small towns, April (22 yrs. old) commented that the reaction would be “oh that's so and so and that's their family, but it's not like [that's] gay so and so. Whereas I feel like in a more urban setting, it's like, that's so and so and she's totally gay.” This quote gets at the idea that being known facilitates a certain way of being gay that does not necessarily rest on being “totally gay,” which is tied to urbanism. This is not to say that people in rural areas do not have nuanced understanding about their sexuality or that their understanding of their sexuality is somehow less than or reflects internalized homophobia, but rather it is different. Understandings about what it means to have their sexuality accepted are tied to narratives about how important it is in rural areas to be a “good person.”

Constructing Narratives of Recognition & Visibility Through Understandings of the Close-Knit Nature of Rural Life

In addition to being known as a good person and having a tie to the community, understandings of the close-knit nature of rural life were salient and informed the narratives about being out, recognized, and visible as gay or lesbian in rural areas. Interviewees repeatedly characterized rural locales as creating a small, close-knit, “everybody knows everybody and their business” atmosphere. Nate (50 yrs old) explained:

One of the things I love about it is that it is a small town, [so] you go into the grocery store and you know the check-out people [and they] will call you by name and you go into the gas station, they know you, you go into

the bank, you know wherever you go, they know you, and it's just a very, comforting, supportive, situation.

Constructions of sexual identity and narratives of what it means to be out, visible, and recognized were informed by such characterizations of rural life. Specifically, the understanding of rural life as close-knit informed two narratives that exist in tension with each other. Rural life facilitates both anonymity and visibility, both implicit and explicit recognition of sexual identity, and both a greater interconnectedness and “live and let live” attitude.

One narrative is that the atmosphere of rural towns facilitates an implicit recognition of sexual identity, yet one that is not necessarily talked about explicitly. As Molly (24 yrs. old) explained, “there are people who are gay, but people just don't talk about it in the community.” She further describes one such couple:

People know they're gay...they're part of the community, they're...part of our congregation, and um, he's friends with [people I know]...[I think] they think he's a little effeminate, but he drives a truck, and you know, he has like a farm, and had like a huge house and stuff like that.

A similar narrative emerged when Natalie (33 yrs. old), described coming out to her grandma. She told me that her grandma made reference to the lesbian couple who lived next door to her by saying, “well you know, I've lived next door to so and so for years and years and I just think they're great.” Natalie assumes that couple has never “officially” come out but, nonetheless, according to Natalie’s understandings, her grandma had implicitly recognized their sexuality and was part of how she made sense of her granddaughter’s identity. Likewise, Alice (44 yrs. old) said that though she had not *explicitly* come out to her mother, she had overheard her mother explain to her brother that she was a lesbian. One person explained that rural people “would simply

acknowledge, OK this is going on, but we better not say anything...they would never talk about it. It's like, they wouldn't openly slam me or say anything negative to me about it." In other words, everyone might know everyone else's business, but there is also a tacit agreement that "your business is your business."

This agreement is tied to a "live and let live attitude." Erin (54 yrs. old) explains that "I just never felt the need to jump up on the soapbox, it's just like, I'll leave you alone, just leave me alone, we'll live our lives. Country is kinda like, leave me alone, you live and I'll live, you know, live and let live I guess." This informed how people understood how heterosexuals would respond to gays and lesbians. For instance, one person said that she thinks "there are a lot more good-hearted people who are at least accepting enough to let live and let live. They may not endorse and think what other people are doing is wonderful, but they don't care enough to get upset about it or anything like that." Further explaining how rural life facilitates this kind of "live and let live" attitude, Andrea offered the following:

In the city, if somebody...has a problem with you being gay [they can] get in your face and tell you about it because there's a chance they're not gonna see you again. Whereas...somebody around here is gonna be less likely to come up and say something...because we're gonna see them around, like we're their neighbors.

Here, the close-knit nature of rural life became salient in narratives about how sexual identity might be known and tacitly accepted, but not explicitly recognized.

This narrative exists in tension with another narrative that ties the close-knit nature of rural life to constructions about how sexual identity is recognized, visible, and accepted. For instance, for some, just the fact that they were known within the community entailed a simultaneous recognition of their sexuality. For instance, Jenny (31

yrs. old) described her interactions with people in her “little redneck area” in the following way: “everybody knows who I am, everybody knows who [my partner] is, and you know, that's been a huge factor for me, to be able to be completely honest and open with who I am.” Another example of how constructions about what it means for sexuality to be visible are tied to being known and active in the community comes from Gene. When talking about whether he is visible in his town as a gay man, he says:

Not as much as I used to be, because you now I was out traveling quite a bit and then I was [away] for a little bit, so I'm not quite as visible as I was before. I actually used to be pretty well known because...I would volunteer...[and] being such a small town, I was actually pretty well known.

Another person explained that “I don't have a rainbow flag out...I don't have anything that identifies me as gay, but it's just like, here in town, they know that I am.” This quote underscores that constructions and recognition of gay and lesbian sexual identity in rural areas do not always rely on urban gay and lesbian cultural markers such as rainbow flags. Rather, such markers and narratives about what it means to be gay are disrupted as individuals construct personal narratives within rural locales, narratives that are tied to their understanding and experiences of rural life.

Additionally, the close-knit nature of rural life is salient in people's narratives about being out. For instance, Andrea (late 20s) described that “everybody knows everybody...if one person knew I was a lesbian, the whole town would know. So, it's just easier to be upfront about it.” Sarah (22 yrs. old) had a similar narrative about coming out to her entire family. In explaining her decision, she says:

I didn't want them to hear through the grapevine, I wanted them to find out through me telling them, not through someone else telling them. Because they all live around here and when people get to talking, and you know, because some of my friends that went to the HS, their parents knew, like

their mom and dad knew, so, it started to kinda, you know, and their parents are fine with it, but, it's like, they'll talk to this person, who talks to this person, so that's kinda why I did that.

Others echoed the sense that their sexual identity is known through the fact that in rural locales, everybody knows everybody and news travels fast. One woman reflects on what it was like when she first came out: “It didn't take long for it to get all around town” and that she was told how people “were talking about it at the coffee table” in a diner. Nate and Joan both described stories about people in town finding out about their relationship break-ups without their being the ones to announce the news. Nate told the following story:

I remember when we broke up...I was walking down the street...[and a] driver saw me...and she said, “Oh there's [person's] boyfriend!” And another person on the bus said, you heard they broke up didn't you? [She said]: “No! I can't believe they broke up!”

He explained that “this whole conversation got relayed to me later” and suggested that “only in a small town!” would such a thing happen. Similarly, when talking about breaking up with her partner, Joan told me:

I'm walking across the street to go get cup of coffee and this one guy is coming out that I know and he just looks at me a certain way as we're crossing the street, and goes, “how are you doing?” And I said, “who told you?” and he goes, “I can't tell you.” I said, “how did you know?” And he goes, “I just heard, I can't tell you who, but we're all really worried about you, are you OK?” I said, “I'll be fine, but I appreciate your concern.” He goes, “well if you ever need anything, you just call us, even if you just wanna drink a beer.”

In both of these cases, individuals pointed to others knowing as a positive thing that “felt good” as it indicated, “being accepted into the fold” and “speaks volumes.” As such, both of these stories reflect that narratives about what it means to be gay or lesbian in

rural towns are informed by a sense that everyone knows everyone (and their business) and word travels fast.

Moreover, narratives about what it means to be visible often disrupt cultural narratives. Specifically, individuals pointed to the fact that being seen in the community with their partner was a route to visibility and recognition. For instance, Tom (42 yrs. old) explained that he and his partner are not “the type to hang the gay pride flag out in the yard” and “neither one of us comes off as...stereotypically gay.” Rather, his sense of being recognized or known is tied to the specific nature of his understanding of rural life:

We go down to [the one bar in town]...I'm sure people have talked. Nobody's gotten the nerve to come up to my face yet...but I mean if somebody came out and asked, I'm not gonna lie about it...but nobody's come out and asked. But it's like, wherever I'm at, [my partner] is at, and wherever [my partner] is at, I'm at, when we're at [the one bar in town] or, it's not like either one of us goes while we're by ourselves, we only go when we're together.

In this example, while his sexual identity has not been explicitly asked about, because of his understanding of rural life and what it means to be seen around town with his partner, he is sure that people “have talked” and know.

The importance of being seen with a partner was salient in other narratives about being visible in rural areas. For instance, when describing the extent to which people know she is a lesbian, Lisa (54 yrs. old) replied in reference to her partner: “we're always together. I mean in a small town like this, you do get seen when you go to the ice cream place or to the bank or something and if we're not seen alone, we're seen together.” Likewise, Andrea and Chelsea (late 20s) thought that “everybody in town knows” about their relationship because “not only does word travel fast, but like, we go places together... we go to the grocery store and shop together” and “we hold hands” and “we

walk around the yard, look at the flowers, and hug and smooch.” Another couple, Leila and Nancy, offered the following about being out: “I mean we don't really have a choice, we have to be out. We have a houseful of kids, and they need to see that, we are comfortable with who we are, you know, and it's not something that they need to hide or be ashamed of.”

Similarly, Rita is not currently living in a rural place but still had a story that further helps to illustrate this point. Here she is describing bringing her partner to the annual church mother-daughter banquet. She explains that “If you know anything about rural Illinois, probably rural America in general, the mother daughter banquets are like the be all and end all of these small communities. And, you know, it's like where you go to be seen, you know, and it's like this annual event.” She goes on to say that:

So we sit next to these, like at the table with my mom and my sister in-law, and all of these women who are probably like between 60 and 90 and they were just going on and on about her and how she was dressed, she was so beautiful and whatever. And then one of them turned to me and said, you're really lucky. And she was like 85 years old! and it was like the first time I had ever heard anybody from that community or from that church ever acknowledged that this was actually my partner. So, you know, I don't know you know. I think we've come a long way definitely in these rural areas.

In this way, people drew on understanding about the close-knit nature of rural life in constructions about what it means to be visible as gays or lesbians in rural areas.

Further evidence that visibility happens through partnership in rural areas comes from Adam (42 yrs. old) who noted his lack of partner/boyfriend as the reason why he did not feel visible in his rural area. He says:

I think in my experience it seems like the people who would know I'm gay are the people who are more OK with it. And the people who wouldn't be are kinda oblivious. It's like if people can't figure it out on their own, you know that telling them is probably gonna be problematic for them. I don't

tend to worry about it, you know, I'm too old to be fake and pretend. I wouldn't say, oh I've got a girlfriend or anything like that, but I also don't walk up to people and say, hey I'm gay. If I were dating, if I had a relationship, I would probably share that. So and so are doing this or that this weekend, things like that. But when you're single, you know, that doesn't just come up in conversation. So no I don't feel visible. Not terrifyingly closeted but fairly private I guess I would say. In that kind of range.

His narrative also illustrates the tie between visibility and activism, as he indicates that he's "not an activist. Not out there saying here I am, educate yourselves, do this, and all that."

In Adams's narrative, as in others, he also constructs an interesting extreme between "closeted" and "visible" that he sees himself between. Speaking about his sexuality, Robert (41 yrs. old) describes that he was neither "in your face out or you can be totally denying," and still another respondent explained that "if somebody were to come up to me and ask, Are you gay? [I would say] yes I am. But I'm not gonna flaunt it. But I'm not ashamed of it either." Likewise, speaking about whether or not she was out, Jenny (31 yrs. old) said "oh yeah. Yeah. I don't hide it. I'm not flamboyant and I'm not walking around with my rainbow flag every day, but it's not hidden by any means." In this way, individuals draw on multiple narratives in making sense of their sexuality.

Cultural narratives are not absent from these individuals' understandings about what it means to be gay or lesbian. The cultural narrative that being gay or lesbian in a small town necessitates a desire to flee to a big city often emerged from other people's reactions. Some interviewees, like Robert and Nate, described how they felt like they had to migrate to a city to come out – even though they eventually migrated back to a rural place and understood their sexualities as different from what they experienced in urban contexts. They also engaged with other cultural markers and expectations of gay and

lesbian sexual identity that they understood as linked to urban locales. While not everyone I interviewed experienced a need to flee to come out – many of the interviewees did offer explanations that linked queer events and communities with urban locales. There was variation in terms of what kind of queer urban cultures people described participating in and if people described positive or negative experiences in urban queer communities. For instance, some like being connected to organized political rallies while others find bars and parties of urban gay culture unsatisfying. Yet it is important to note that for the majority of people I talked with, the opportunity to participate in queer events, communities, or subcultures are linked to urbanism. In fact, the constructions of sexual identity of gays and lesbians living in rural towns were often formed in contrast to cultural markers, such as displaying gay pride flags. In this way, cultural narratives about what it means to be gay or lesbian are challenged as individuals construct personal narratives of these sexualities within rural locales. Drawing on understandings about rural life and people, gays and lesbians in these locales construct sexual identities that are framed in opposition to cultural narratives about what it means to be gay, and are instead grounded in specific rules and logics of rural life. Being known as a good person, having ties to the community, and liking the close-knit nature of rural life shape narratives about how acceptance, recognition, and visibility of sexual identity occurs in rural space. These findings are in contrast to previous research positing the visibility of sexual minority youth in rural areas occurring through drag shows, gay pride picnics, or queer punk bands (Gray 2007). Yet importantly, these findings do not negate this previous research, but rather, they extend understandings about the numerous ways that gays and lesbians stay put in rural areas. They suggest that some gays and lesbians in rural locales construct

sexual identities that often look very different from cultural narratives about what it means to be gay or lesbian or what those sexual identities look like. Future work should address more fully how age impacts the differences in how gay and lesbian identities are constructed and made visible in rural areas.

Chapter 6
Get Me to the City

In this chapter, I focus on the interviewees living in the city and ask how they make sense of their experiences and sexual identities. How do their narratives about their personal sexual identities resonate with cultural narratives about gay and lesbian identities? Do modifications or disruptions occur and if so, how? Of the thirty people living in cities, there are sixteen people who make sense of their experiences in ways that mirror many of the circulating narratives. People in the “get me to the city” group cannot imagine being gay in a rural place or hate rural areas and think that cities are ideal. In this way, how they narrate their personal experiences and sexual identities fits with the culturally accepted narrative of fleeing. Further, in the narratives of these men and women, space and queer sexuality are understood as linked in the following ways: they feel like they are in the closet when they go back home; they understand the lack of diversity in rural spaces to mean those spaces (and heterosexual individuals living there) are totally unwelcoming for gays and lesbians; they imagine urban sites as welcoming of gays and lesbians and safe; and they think heterosexuals living in rural areas have a limited, stereotyped idea of what it means to be gay or lesbian.

Such narratives stand in contrast to ones expressed by those living in rural areas. Rather than understand all rural people to be unwelcoming or unsafe, those living in rural areas think only certain ones are (e.g. the rednecks). Likewise, those currently living in rural areas also asserted that bigots could live anywhere, and that in fact in cities, people might be more able or willing to openly express hostility. In other words, the narratives of these two groups indicate the different ways that safety and space are understood. Finally, while those living in the city think rural heterosexuals have a limited or stereotyped understanding of gay and lesbian identities, many of those living in rural

areas think that such narrow understandings circulate more in urban environments and that they have more flexibility in rural environments.

In addition, there are fourteen people whose personal understandings resonate with the fleeing narrative insofar as they migrated to the city. Yet they also modify or reject other aspects of accepted cultural narratives in how they make sense of their personal identities and experiences. Therefore, I grouped these individuals into the “get me to the city *but*” category. One way that some interviewees modify the cultural fleeing narrative is in their narratives about wanting to end up back in a rural place. Also, others’ personal narratives illustrate a rejection of certain aspects of urban queer culture. In doing so, they experience other gays and lesbians reading their sexuality as dysfunctional or not “really gay.” These narratives, like ones articulated by gays and lesbians living in rural areas, begin to underscore how cultural narratives are modified as individuals construct stories about their experiences and make sense of who they are. In other words, modification or disruption in how geography and sexuality are linked does not occur only outside of the city. Further, despite having migrated and, at times, understanding all rural places and people as backward, some of the people in this group nonetheless resisted how others in the city equated rural with backward. The discussion below is divided between the two categories of people living in the city: “get me to the city” and “get me to the city *but*.”

Part 1: Get Me to the City

Author: So you can't imagine you and your partner moving back to a small town?

No no no no! We like the big city because we like the culture that is here...there's a lot of things going on in the gay community...even if you don't participate in it, just knowing that it's here and that there's a lot of other gay people in this county and in this

state. We go to the gay pride parades and there will be like 10,000 people and that's just a fraction of the gay people here. But yeah you couldn't do that in a small town.”

- Esther (61 yrs. old)

In the [city] world I live in, I can be whoever I am. I can go out with my girlfriend to the grocery store, do whatever, and I don't really care who sees me, I can be [me]. When I go home to my parent's house...I have to be this person that I'm not. I have to put all of that aside. So it's like circulating in two worlds.”

- Natalie (33 yrs. old)

As these two quotes suggest, the city continues to be important in shaping gay and lesbian identities (Weston 1998). Many of the people I interviewed who migrated to the city expressed that feel like they are in the closet when they go back home to their rural towns. Take, for instance, Sarah (22 yrs old), who explained that at college (in an urban environment), she is “more comfortable with myself” but that she “never really made that transition here at home.” Further explaining what it is like to go home, she says, “I feel like when I come back here, I live that different life...It's almost like I'm out but I'm not. ‘Cause I don't talk about it [and] they don't.” Natalie expressed a similar sentiment. Describing her urban home, she says it is “the world where I can be who I am and be for the most part accepted.” By contrast, when she travels to the rural town where she grew up and her parents still live, she says it is a “world where I have to pretend to be somebody I'm not and still not be accepted.” Another individual reiterated this theme, saying that he thinks the sentiment among heterosexuals in rural towns is the following: “I think in the rural towns, [people think], yeah we have it, it existed, you know, but, it's almost like don't embarrass the town by coming out while you're still here. Go move to [a city] if you wanna come out or something. And again, I think that's just really sad.”

Additionally, in making sense of their migration and experiences in different areas, people expressed an understanding that rural spaces are lacking in diversity, and

thus inhospitable for gays and lesbians. Urban sites, however, are imagined as totally welcoming of gays and lesbians and safe. In other words, they understand the city to be totally good, reflecting the flip-side to the “rural is totally bad” narrative. In both narratives, safety and acceptance gets mapped wholly onto one place. Whereas those living in rural areas map a lack of acceptance or hostility onto the “rednecks” in their community, many of those who are currently living in cities and who do not ever want to live in a small town map that ignorance onto all rural people. For instance, in explaining one of the reasons why he left, William (24 yrs. old) said, “I was sick of the close minded people. You know. I think that was the biggest thing. Cause people just didn't seem very accepting.” He further explains that “in a bigger city,” he “figured that being gay would be more accepted.” Likewise, in explaining why she thinks her parents have reacted negatively to her sexuality, Sarah (22 yrs. old) says, “I believe the whole area has a big influence on it, because...like, they don't get out of the area, they don't realize that there're other people out there, you know, like, they're lacking in the diversity.” Both these quotes demonstrate the sentiment that since rural spaces are lacking in diversity, people there are not accepting of gay and lesbian sexualities. Following the sentiment that urban spaces are wholly accepting, people in the “get me to the city” group also thought that it would have been easier to come out as gay or lesbian if they had grown up in a city. Terri (23 yrs. old) reflected, “I didn't have kinda, the safe space and the opportunity that some people did who like grew up in large communities where it was totally known and OK to be gay.” Again, what is interesting in these narratives is how the urban/rural divide becomes neatly tied to how people make sense of who is and is not accepting of gays and lesbians.

Related to the narrative about rurality, lack of diversity, and ignorance, in making sense of their experiences, people indicated that heterosexuals living in rural areas had a limited, stereotyped version of what it means to be gay or lesbian. In talking with Terri about rural people watching television shows with gay characters, she said “they're not really gonna understand the whole range of what it means to be gay. Like they're just still gonna hold tight to those stereotypes.” Elise (23 yrs. old), describing her parents and others living in rural towns, said “their exposure to the gay community is almost nothing.” She gives the example of how her mom “just thinks all gay people do drugs.” Again, this narrative is strikingly different to the one expressed by many individuals living in rural communities, about how they felt that the stereotypes and limiting understandings of what it means to be gay or lesbian were most salient in the city. However, many individuals who are living in the city also create distinctions between themselves and other gay and lesbian identities circulating in urban areas. I turn to their narratives below, as well as ones expressing a desire to move back to rural areas. Both of these are examples of modifications of cultural narratives that occur as people living in the city make sense of who they are and want to be.

Part II: Get Me to the City *But*

Among the people who express a desire, ultimately, to migrate back to a rural area is Phil (42 yrs. old). He explains:

I would love to move back here [rural area] some day because I love it here, this is my home and I would love to retire here. I really do want to move back here, but I guess now the best I could do would be to live in Chicago and come down and visit on weekends...but yeah this place is my home, this is where I feel most comfortable on the planet earth.

Such narratives illustrate that the way geography is embedded in sexuality can entail a sense of loss at the personal level. For instance, Miranda (21 yrs. old) said:

Well I think that it would be easier because it seems like, in a city, like they'd probably be more accepting of a gay relationship or just like a gay person...But I think ideally, if I could live anywhere, I'd probably choose to live in a little rural place, you know, with some like property and some sheep or something.

Her reflection serves as a reminder that for many people, the questions significant at the personal level differ drastically from those emerging from formula stories. In this case, the question is not “why would gays and lesbians *stay* in rural areas,” but rather “why can't I live where I want?” Since some gays and lesbians want to be in rural areas, yet see queer sexuality as existing “out there” (e.g., in the city) from either themselves or others, it is not only reasonable, but important for people to be able to claim gayness “in here” (e.g., in rural areas).

Further, unlike those in the “get me to the city” category, people in the “get me to the city but” category expressed frustration with others assuming that rural places are backward, even if they, at times, understood their towns in that manner. In response to others questioning “why in the hell” she would want to go back to the Midwest (not even necessarily to a rural area), Brittany (47 yrs. old) said:

I had a friend who...thought I had this very odd sort of Pollyannaish view of some sort of pastoral dreaming about what the Midwest was. And...part of that was true...But part of it's still here...I understand the whole perception of, “Yes, this place is backwards.” Yes, it is. It totally is. But that doesn't mean that there's not good people here, it doesn't mean that queer people should give up on it. I mean, there's still queer people here.

Another example comes from Cynthia (51 yrs. old), who does not want to migrate back to a small town or rural community and whose coming out was entangled with urban

spaces. Talking about political and news events, she says, “I do think the thing about small towns is that it takes longer for information to filter there.” She further explains, “I mean it's the same with fashion or movies or whatever, it all gets here a little later. But that's ok. There's not like there's any magic about that.” She’s getting at this sense that even if rural areas are “more backward” insofar as people might be behind the times, there’s not “any magic about that.” She states that, for instance, growing up she did not know about the civil rights movement, which she attributes to the fact that she grew up in a small town. Likewise, being in a rural area means being behind current fashion or movies. Yet her narrative underscores the fact that she does not necessarily think there’s any “magic” or that there’s anything beyond that just being the state of things. Rural people are behind, but it need not mean inferior.

Finally, another negotiation of cultural narratives about gay/lesbian identities that results in a modification in their personal identities for people in the “get me to the big city but” category, is how they describe their experiences in urban queer spaces. While these individuals find urban areas ideal and do not want to migrate back to a rural place, they reject other narratives about what it means to be gay in the city. For instance, Xander (29 yrs. old) describes his interactions with public urban gay space in this manner:

As a soon as I was out and everything, I've never been this club going sorta, that type of gay person...So just going to [local dance club] was just kinda like, oh, this is what it's like. Like this is like kinda like the stereotype that's always like portrayed in the media and stuff. So I was like, OK, that's cool, I can have fun in that situation, [but] it's not for me. So I guess I kinda just feel like I've always like not really fit into like gay stuff. But not because like anything other than just like, my own personal taste.

When I asked how he thought being from a rural background has shaped this taste and experiences of urban gay clubs, he responded:

I think more than rural, we grew up like really really poor... But I think in terms of my approach to things... I can't really adopt this like snooty like, gay, see, it's so bad, it's not really a gay thing, but it kinda is in a way, it's this like name brand, you want like all the best things, everything's Abercrombie this, Abercrombie, and it's just like, I don't, like I still buy like all my clothes at a thrift store...I feel different because I feel like I was like kinda forced to invent my own world in a way...I was in nowhere town... It's just I never had anything like handed to me, like in terms of like, oh gay people like this. So I was kinda like...I guess I'll figure it out! Then [I had to] just figure out what I wanted, but not like what you're supposed to, quote unquote, act like or be.

Kyle (30 yrs. old) had similar experiences to Xander insofar as he did not always feel comfortable in gay urban bars. In part because of this, he explained, “I don’t feel like I have issues with gayness or my own sexuality, but it’s different from [my partner’s]. And in the beginning, he interpreted that difference as a kind of dysfunction or malfunction.”

By addressing these sentiments, I do not mean to diminish the historical importance of the bar in creating gay identities, subcultures, and means of resistance to straight worlds (Kennedy and Davis 1993); nor do I mean to diminish the continued importance of bars, as reported by many interviewees. I do, however, hope to highlight the varied ways that people engage with cultural narratives that provide the broad outlines within which they construct personal identities. Certain components of the cultural narrative that links urbanism and queerness resonates with how people like Xander understand their experiences (e.g., they had to flee to a city and want to stay). Yet, they often also challenge other components of circulating cultural narratives. What findings in this chapter illustrate then is that people who migrate to the city have varied, nuanced

experiences. As evidenced in Chapter 4, gay and lesbian identities are given meaning through the ways that they are attached to other categories of difference. Thus, since those identities entail more than same-sex desires or sexual experience, having a same-sex partner and identifying as gay, but not also, for instance, feeling attached to urban queer communities, is one way that modifications in cultural narratives are made at the individual level. Importantly, such modifications often mean having one's sexuality read as "dysfunctional," as in Kyle's case. Further, as Xander's quote begins to highlight, meanings about space – and narratives about sexualities circulating within different geographic contexts – are also shaped by how they intersect with other categories of difference. Class and gender are two such categories that are important in shaping how people make sense of space and sexuality, as I analyze in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

How Geography, Sexuality, Gender and Class are Co-Constitutive

I began this project with an interest in how people engaged with and challenged spatial cultural narratives about what it means to be gay or lesbian in their everyday lives. As I did the interviews, however, it became clear to me that class and gender were central components of this story. Certainly, geography is not the only cultural meaning that shapes constructions of gay and lesbian sexualities, nor does it exist apart from its intersections with other social categories such as race, class, and gender. Here, I address how class and gender intersect with spatial meanings and shape the identities and experiences of rural gays and lesbians.

How individuals describe what they think it means to be lesbian and gay – and the ways of being gay that they saw as aligned with urban space – were also entangled with class. Attending to class meanings in constructions of space and sexuality is important insofar as the class distinctions individuals make are “images of their hopes and fears for their own lives and futures” (Ortner 2003: 31). It is not only that certain narratives of gay and lesbian identity are classed, but rather, that broader understandings of geography are classed as well. That is, the geographic meanings that inform cultural narratives about gay/lesbian identities are themselves informed by class. Class, geography, and sexuality are co-constitutive. How do class meanings inform how people make sense of urban-rural differences (broadly), and how do class meanings inform the geographical cultural

narratives about gay and lesbian identities? In answering these questions, I utilize Ortner's understanding of class identity as an "internalized version of the world that becomes part of people's identities" and also as something that is "always being made... kept... defended, feared or desired" (2003, p. 14).

Indeed, class and space are linked generally, as this following quote from Teresa (45 yrs. old) underscores: "I grew up as this working-class rural kid, I've become this middle-class urban adult." Her quote also reflects a narrative that equates rural with poor, and migrating to the city with an upward class migration. Within this narrative, people who stay put in rural places are understood as too poor to migrate; as Elise (23 yrs. old) put it, "I don't feel like you stick around if you have money." The narrative that couples geographic and class migration – which was actually true for some of the people I talked with – exists in tension with another circulating narrative that equates urban and poor. African-Americans populate this urban poor narrative. That these two narratives exist simultaneously – that the city is where rich (white) people live and where poor (Black) people live – illustrate that spatial constructions are not only tied to class – but clearly also tied racial meanings.

Findings in this chapter also illustrate how space, class, and sexuality meanings are intertwined. The people I interviewed expressed an understanding of urban gay and lesbian identity that rested on the urban-as-higher-class narrative. In other words, urban gays and lesbians are understood as rich. Given this construction, we might assume that rejecting or modifying the urban way of being gay or lesbian also entails a rejection of higher-class mentality. People did, in fact, construct a rural identity in part by positioning rural dwellers outside of the higher-class mentality of urbanites and

defending and embracing the rural class mentality. However, they also create class distinctions within their rural communities by constructing differences between “hicks” and “rednecks.” I argue that such distinctions allow the people I interviewed living in rural areas to maintain a higher-class position than they imagine (or experienced) as possible in the city. By staying in rural places and maintaining a distinction between hicks and rednecks therein, people are able to understand themselves as hicks, but not as rednecks. In cities, those distinctions are erased and they are understood by others as poor. While equating the city with higher-class status entails being suspicious of becoming a rich urbanite, it also entails being fearful of being unable to do just that. Rural gays and lesbians understand their class position within two narratives: the rich-urban and the poor-redneck.

Part I: Class and Constructions of Rural-Urban

Here, I analyze how class informs the differences constructed between “urban” and “rural.” As Andrea and Chelsea agreed, “class is a mindset” and the people I interviewed imagine certain mindsets as tied to geographic space. In examining how people make sense of their experiences in rural and urban environments and make sense of the differences between urban and rural, the most significant finding is that individuals experienced an exposure to new class dynamics in the city. For some, it was the exposure to poverty that was new. Yet, for the majority of people I interviewed, the city was where they became aware of higher-class individuals, and thus where they began to read themselves and their class position in new ways. I outline these findings below, highlighting the varied reactions and ways that individuals negotiated or made sense of

class and space. As individuals migrated or moved between spaces, their understandings about their class background and identity also often shifted.

To understand this shift, we must first understand how individuals thought about their class identity (or family class background) growing up in rural areas. Some interviewees described having an understanding that their family was higher-class than other families in the area. For instance, Elise said that she and her friend “would talk about how our families had more money than the families around us or like the kids that we went to school with, and it was kinda like, we were the cool girls.” She remembers “feeling proud of that and excited that my parents were rich.” Others understood their families to be, as Stephanie put it, “kinda in the middle.” She says, “there were probably some families that were probably a little better off and quite a few people that probably weren't as well off as we were.” For her, like many people I talked with, the expression “we always had enough to eat” was a common one in explaining why they felt in the middle. Others, however, described feeling poorer. For instance, Natalie explained: “I thought we were poor...my mom always said, well we don't have any money but we have love. But so was everybody else.” Her explanation “but so was everybody else” illustrates another way individuals made sense of their class position – that they thought there were no class distinctions in their communities or that those distinctions were minimal. Bethany recalled of her rural upbringing:

There was a greater sense of, we were all more similar than we were different, and I think it was kinda a class issue. Meaning it was known that some of us had a little more than the rest of us...but the distinctions were so little, that it was never a divide...that's not to say we didn't you know sometimes notice that or have to help out or do clothes drive or do food drives once in a while for those folks, because we would, but, it's almost like it was because they deserved our help and support, not like, we were better than them. It didn't come from there. It came more from, oh my

goodness, they live here in our community, they go to school with us, they should have some nice clothes. It just seemed to have a little less of a divide about it.

For Bethany, while she knew her family was among those who “had a little more money” than others, she also thought there was not a stark divide between classes and certainly not one based on antagonism.

Regardless of how people understood their class position growing up, as they migrated or visited urban areas, those understandings often shifted given that they were now exposed to different class dynamics. In other words, people often re-read their class background or position. For instance, Elise, who described how she felt like her parents were rich growing up, explained that in the city she felt “so poor.” She explained that in the city she realized: “I’m not rich, I’m so poor! Just the differences like...how to dress, like, they had access to, you know, all the crazy fashion stuff that like I had never, even really noticed it.” Likewise, Teresa described how she “believed I was middle-class” until she migrated out of her rural community and “met actual middle-class people.” She further explains this re-reading of her class identity:

My mother told me that we were middle-class because she grew up really really poor and she really wanted us to be middle-class. We actually weren't, we were working-class, and we were actually when I was young I think we were really poor and then my dad got a union job which brought us in to sorta solid working-class, health insurance, buy a house. So I believed I was middle class until I met actual middle-class people and it was kinda a surprise.

As the quotes from Elise and Teresa demonstrate, the re-reading of class identity happened as a result of the fact that for many, urban space was given meaning through its association with higher-class people, mentalities, or actions. For instance, Evelyn (27 yrs. old) expressed being “afraid” that people in the city would see things about her that

seemed “stereotypical country,” mainly that her family wasn’t as she says, “upper-class proper.” Kyle (30 yrs old) described what it was like living in a rural town and traveling to a city to get a cappuccino in high school with friends in this way:

It was scary (laughs)... I think the word “cappuccino” and the idea of cappuccino was so foreign and strange to us that to actually order one and drink one felt really like, “we don’t do that”...It felt a little like play-acting.

Evelyn’s and Kyle’s narratives both highlight a sense of being afraid. Yet not everyone expressed that same reaction.

Adam (42 yrs. old) described dating in the city: “He was a little too, more cultured I think for someone from a small town. Or, I don't know if cultured is the right word. Uppity. You know, we'd go out to eat, and I didn't order anything fancy.” For Elise, it was “awesome” to experience new foods associated with larger places – like sushi rather than the “meat and potatoes kind of stuff” she was used to – as well as to meet people who were not white. She explains that “it opened my eyes to a lot of things, you know, that there's more stuff out there than I had been exposed to before.” We see echoes of this theme in the following story from Jenny (31 yrs. old) who used the term “redneck” in describing herself. In imagining life outside a rural area, and in an urban area, she explains that “redneck doesn't really fit in there,” so her and her partner would have to be “yuppie versus redneck.” When I asked what that would look like, she explained it might include having “newer vehicles,” having “a really nice vegetable garden” rather than just a “three foot patch anywhere in the yard,” buying flannel shirts from “a fancier store [than Wal-Mart]...like Columbia.” In sum, they would have “more expensive” and “high end” things that they “can’t afford” right now. Terri (23 yrs. old) described her experiences in urban spaces in the following way: “I feel like pretty much

everybody here, they grew up in a city, and their parents had tons and tons of money, and they really didn't know what it was like to be from a small community.” As these narratives illustrate, the city is conflated with higher-class position and rural with lower-class, regardless of how people reacted to that conflation.

In contrast, interviewees also offered the contradictory narrative that associates urban spaces with poverty and lower class. Andrea (late 20s) explained how growing up, she heard at church “about the plight of the homeless people in the cities.” She said that she “had never personally seen a homeless person [in her rural town],” but when she went to the city, she did. Or, at least she thought she did. She explains:

I see on all these street corners, all these homeless people, just like I had heard about in church, and I had read about in the textbooks and school and everything. And my heart was just, my tender nursing heart, was just breaking for these people, wondering what I could do for them. So this went on for like a month, I would drive places and I would see them everywhere, on the street corners. Until one day, I realized that they were just people waiting for the bus (laughs). They weren't homeless people! They were just people waiting for public transportation!

Her story highlights the existence of the narrative that links urban and poor.

Narratives about safety in different environments are another instance in which class meanings are constructed. Leila and Nancy described how they were happy to move out of the city because where they were living “in a lousy neighborhood” with “a lot of drug activity” and “prostitution.” They explained that they did not feel safe and “wouldn't let our kids go play outside there.” In contrast, in talking about their home in a rural area, Leila said it was “such a pleasure to move out here.” Nancy explained:

People take care of their yards. We were the only house in the whole neighborhood [in the city] that planted flowers and mowed our lawn, you know, and decorated on the holidays. Whereas out here [rural area], it's like, everybody takes care of their yard. People wash their vehicles, people mow their lawn.

Her partner chimed in with another example of the differences between their experience in a small town and the city: “people stop and say hello.”

Importantly, while urban spaces are conflated with both higher and lower classes, meanings about class encompass more than money in all narratives. Indeed, class meanings were constructed as people made sense of the different values, outlooks, or ways of being in the world across urban and rural contexts. One way this is most salient is in how they see themselves as different from their urban peers. The most striking example of this came from Xander, who had a horrible experience growing up in a rural area, has absolutely no desire to ever live in a rural area again, and cannot imagine how any gay or lesbian individual would want such a thing. Yet, in the city he met mostly “really rich” friends. Describing his experience of bringing one friend who was wealthy and from New York city to his rural hometown, he says that she “thought it was a joke” and “didn’t know places like [that] [actually] existed.” He was upset by her “kinda rude” reaction:

Because I spent 18 years here you know...it's also the thing that's like, OK I hated [my town]...But um, you know when it's like you can attack your family, but other people can't...I don't wanna defend it, but I wan[t]ed be like, show some like respect for what I went through, you know...It was like so beneath her to think that like a place like [my rural town] existed.

He explained that, to this day, whenever anyone finds out where he’s from, they ask “how did you survive?” and “how did you come from there because you seem like you're not?” Again, these responses anger him, in part, because they rest on the assumption that “everyone who came from [rural] Michigan is destined to repeat it.” Such responses also rest on the assumption that people in rural areas are “bumpkins” or do horrible things like

“listen to the 700 club.” While he admitted that his own family did such things, he also noted that they are also “really awesome.” He explained that:

They like had to be like, had things shown to them in very personal, specific ways, and they're awesome people. And there are people like that like all over the place. So that's why I get really mad when people [assume everyone from a rural area is backward].

Xander's experiences highlight the complicated attachments to rural space and how class is bound up in meanings of space. Also, they begin to highlight what kind of things one might have to abandon to be in a city and fully assimilate into a “city” mindset that views the rural site with absolute horror or even disbelief. Teresa (45 yrs old) shared an experience that gets at a similar idea:

I have a couple of friends here [East Coast, urban] who are also Midwesterners and when we're together, we're like, oh thank god! it's just the Midwesterners! We don't have to, you know, [say] that we don't like jello! [laughs] There's a social sense that we share that we're so comfortable in one another's presence that is a way of being together that we don't have with other people. You know, it's not this horrible, oh other people are mean or, it's just, there is a kind of comfort to having, being around people who grew up in those small Midwestern towns.

Her quote also hints at how certain mindsets or actions understood as particular to rural Midwesterners – in this case, granted, the somewhat insignificant one of liking jello – are out of place in urban contexts.

Many other interviewees also explained how they saw themselves as different and unique in comparison to their urban peers – or, in the case of those who are living in urban environments, how they see value in what they see as rural outlooks. As Andrea (late 20s) put it:

I found a lot of people [in the city] who were interesting to me, [who]...enjoyed doing a lot of the same things that I did...but...when you grow up in the country... a certain set of things are important to you that I didn't find in people in the city. Like I found great people in the city, I

found salt of the earth people, but...they just looked at the world through different eyes than what I did.

Similarly, Heidi (48 yrs. old) explained that: “I’m probably more countrified than most people! (laughs). It’s just something I notice. And it doesn’t seem like [urban people’s] values are quite the same as mine. I kinda have some old-fashioned values that maybe are more grounded in the country than they are in the city.” Interviewees raised numerous distinctions they saw between rural and urban dwellers. They believed that rural people had a greater respect for the natural world, had a different set of people skills that included not discounting others even if their opinions differed from your own, and finally, had an understanding of hard work, a do-it-yourself mentality, and did not take anything for granted.

In terms of being humble, multiple people stressed that they are “not afraid of work” and that they “earned and appreciated” what they have. Stephanie (48 yrs. old) says her appreciation for hard work in rural areas is not true of urban areas: “Yeah you know I think in a rural areaI grew up with a real appreciation for hard work.” They also brought up not being too proud to buy clothes at “Goodwill,” explaining “we don’t have to have brand labels.” Likewise, Rita (46 yrs. old) explained the difference in how rural and urban people understand what “dressing up” means:

When you're down like in Central Illinois there's such a difference in the value of material things and clothing and all that stuff. Their dressed up is if their jeans don't have holes and you know their sweaters are kinda clean, you know. I mean it really is a different mentality. And I think there's some really good things about that you know.

Her quote demonstrates how rural-urban binaries are co-constructed with meanings about class and how meanings about class entail material things (e.g., clothes you wear) as well as values (e.g., being humble) or mentalities (e.g., what it means to dress up).

This idea that distinctions between rural and urban manifest in terms of imagined values or what one does and how class is connected to the value system came up throughout the interviews. In describing differences, Chelsea related this story:

When I was living in [small town], I was living on a lake, and a lot of people from [the city] would come up for the weekends, for their cabins. We'd be like, oh here come the trunk slammers. I don't know what the big difference is, you know, because we got along with them, we had a good time, but it almost seemed like a lack of respect thing. Because they were on vacation, but they were vacationing in our regular life.

This quote implicitly conveys a sense of what it means to be rural: resisting the lack of respect displayed by urbanites.

Given how class works in the construction of differences between urban and rural, when rural gays and lesbians applaud rural mentalities or ways of life, they are at the same time guarding against or rejecting a higher-class position that is imagined as linked to urbanism. Thus, many of the people I interviewed read themselves vis-a-vis a rich-urbanite narrative. However, contradictory narratives inform rural lesbian and gays' sense of class. They understand themselves against narratives about rich urbanites, but, with the exception of Jenny,, also against narratives about rural rednecks. In this section, I explore the differences between "redneck," "country," and "hick" that individuals construct within rural spaces and how these are informed by class.

When I initially started doing interviews, some individuals would use labels like "hick," "redneck," and "county" to describe themselves and others. While not everyone adopted these labels to describe themselves, for many, these markers signaled differences between themselves and urban dwellers and also between other people who lived in their communities.

Take, for instance, Chelsea and Andrea who asserted that they are “more hick than redneck.” They explained that:

If we were rednecks, we probably would have offered you like Bush Light when you came in...Like if we were rednecks, we would drink Bush Light and Boone's Farm and be happy to not ever try to experience anything else. But we're hicks... We've been trying to drink more wine lately. Albeit it's \$4 or \$5 bottle wine, not the good stuff, but, you know, it's just another step out of redneckism.

When describing what the difference was between “hick” and “redneck,” they offered a number of things, including:

Hick is just a little bit more just country, out in the sticks...It's more like hearty and cornfed...You can do for yourself, you can take care for yourself, you're not afraid to get dirty, and you appreciate what you have...Hick is like the people from *Little House on the Prairie*...They're like, really in touch with their families and have good values as far as, you would do anything for a friend, you know, doesn't matter what time of day or night, you would drop whatever you were doing and not expect anything in return.

In contrast, they explained that redneck “kinda insinuates a degree of whitetrashyness ...and uneducatedness.” They further explain characteristics of rednecks:

Not gonna move up in the world kinda thing...to me redneck means you're really happy to stay in the low kinda status... you're comfortable there... you don't have motivation to do better for yourself...Rednecks [are the people you see] on *Jerry Springer*.

In contrast to hicks, rednecks are “out to get theirs first.” Another example they give centers not so much on how much money a person has, but what they do with it: putting money into a house and wanting to move upward and have better things for oneself is something a “hick” but not a “redneck” would do. Such distinctions lead them to assert that “class is a mindset.”

For many people, “hick” as well as “redneck” was connected to not being very exposed to the world around them. For instance, Paula (52 yrs. old) explains that she was

a hick growing up because “I was pretty sheltered, I guess. I didn't know a lot of outside my environment.” Nate (50 yrs. old), who would not use either term to describe himself says that: “I'll be generalizing here, but if I were to describe a redneck I'd say that typically they're blue collar, limited in their education level, limited in their exposure to the world.”

While both hicks and rednecks don't have much exposure to the world, one major difference on which the divide between hicks and rednecks is constructed is political opinion. Redneck means someone who is politically conservative; a hick is not necessarily so. This distinction was crucial for people who understood themselves to be hicks but not rednecks. Take, for instance, the following from Paula, who said:

I am definitely not a redneck! [laughs]. I think Obama is too conservative. A hick, well, yeah in some sense I would say... there just wasn't a whole lot of exposure to different things, to travel, or different ideas or anything like that. So not exposed to a lot of the world I would say. When you say hick, that's what I think of. So yeah I'd say I was definitely a hick, but not a redneck because I think a redneck, I associate more political connotations with the word redneck. More conservative.

She explained to me that her brother is more of a redneck because “[h]e's prejudiced. I about hung up on him when he told me he wasn't going to vote for Obama!” Likewise, Megan (51 yrs. old) noted that: “To me, I use the term "hick" to refer to a country living mentality. A hick is laid back and has simple pleasures. A redneck to me, is someone who carries all kinds of prejudices and is very close-minded to new ideas.” The distinctions people create between hick and redneck allow them to remain attached to a “country” mindset or way of life without adopting what others (and they themselves) view as a close-minded mentality. While a hick is just someone who enjoys simple pleasures, a redneck is prejudiced.

We see this distinction play out in Debbie's narrative about why she sees herself as "country," in part, because "given a choice, would I rather go to the mall or would I rather backpack in for the day, I'd rather backpack in for the day." While she identifies as country, she does not associate herself with labels like "redneck." She explains the distinction in the following way:

When I think of redneck, I think of like the movie *Deliverance*. I'm gonna tell you though, we had some people called the [x] boys and they lived down the road from us, and they had no teeth, overalls, um, they were just, I think stupid. I guess when I think redneck [I think of them]. And I feel like I'm not stupid, I've always felt really intelligent. So maybe that's why I view redneck as kinda stupid.

The distinction of intelligence resonated with Anna (61 yrs. old), who said that redneck "contains a negative connotation implying intelligence and I don't agree with that at all, for anyone, and definitely not for me or my family. I was an avid reader, this was way before cable or digital TV, so you didn't get any TV, we had like three channels, so I read all the time." Indeed, the connection between intelligence and these labels led Derek (50 yrs. old) to reject those terms for thinking about himself or others. He responded that he "never used that labeling for myself or even for other people. I just, it just seems negative and derogatory."

More examples of how class differences are imagined or experienced within rural communities include the following description from Robert. He describes how people living where he does are often read as "backwoodys, whitetrash, hillbilly type mentality." In his experience, he has definitely seen that, for instance "one family that they have trailers and junk on their property," and yet, he has also seen people who are "more stuck-up kinda people that aren't really down to earth, you know, that think too much of themselves." In other words, both sides of the imagined class spectrum exist as he

imagines his own town as well as its neighboring towns. Furthering this point, here he explains the different types of houses that exist near his:

There's an old farm house, we have a family that their kids are playing in the middle of the road with bare feet, so I mean right next to a nice home is just this a-frame home with 30 kids and the dog tied up out front and a big dump truck sitting. You can certainly see the house that has the farm and the dilapidated shed out front with the cows that are always getting out and then the a-frame with the million kids playing in the street, then it starts going up [in terms of] class. So there's quite a mix here.

The following excerpt underscores how he reads himself against both narratives. He says: “I find I look at myself [in] different [ways]. I look at myself still as that kid from here, who's just light-hearted and friendly and open. Whereas, I see the more people around me in my small setting here are not so much, although they are friendly, they have a different attitude. They don't have that hick attitude.” In other words, everyone is rural, but some have hick attitudes and some have hillbilly attitudes.

A few interviewees had a different understanding of either hick or redneck, which shaped how they understood themselves. Erin (54 yrs. old) understood hick to be “a backwoods person that just doesn't know anything” – a construction that differed from others since it included being uneducated. Different from the hick, she says “a redneck has maybe a bunch of views that I wouldn't agree with.” She further explains how she understands what it means to be a redneck:

Rednecks seems a little more rigid in their beliefs...just people that are real ingrained in what they believe in and generally it doesn't encompass what I believe in. They don't like change. They like everybody to be exactly like them, everybody to be in a little box. Hicks just don't care.

She then says that “I'm probably country, country is kinda like, leave me alone, you live and I'll live, you know, live and let live I guess, that type of thing,” though she is clear to point out that she “definitely wouldn't fall into” any of the negative connotations

surrounding those labels. Likewise, Jenny (31 yrs. old) who described herself as redneck didn't include any of the political, uneducated connotations when describing it. She says that she does see herself as a redneck and that she's "kinda proud about it." For her, rednecks are "just who we are" and it means being "so excited to go to the old gas tractor show in [my town] in the middle of August...fix[ing] our own things...build[ing] our own stuff...recognizing that duct tape fixes a lot of things!" She says that "we've got a lot of stuff, but nothing's new, and I can fix most all of it and I have the connections to fix most all of it."

The distinctions between redneck, hick, and country give people living in rural areas the ability to resist narratives that conflate all rural people with being backward or uneducated. These distinctions also are at work in who they imagine to be bigoted and even dangerous in their communities. The issue of how safety becomes embedded in these constructs was salient in Chelsea and Andrea's story about how they went to a "country western bar" and left soon after getting there: "we slipped out the back door, just because all the eyes were on us." They described this as an instance in which they were "uncomfortable" and which illustrates how "we're out but we're also smart about like where we could get into trouble." They started the story by telling me they went to a country western bar and then one of them pointed out that "but that [the fact it was a country western bar] isn't what made me scared," to which the other agreed. They explained: "It was just the aura of the people in the bar (Chelsea); Yeah, it was, they were a bunch of rednecks (Andrea); Exactly (Chelsea). They were a bunch of rednecks and you could tell (Andrea)." Their story exemplifies how only certain segments of rural communities – the "rednecks" in this case – are understood as potentially dangerous for

gays and lesbians living in rural areas. In contrast, cultural narratives ascribe hostility and potential threat to all rural dwellers.

The distinctions interviewees constructed between “rural” and “urban” are partly informed by class. Thus, the creation of geographic distinctions reflects people’s “images of their hopes and fears for their own lives and futures” (Ortner 2003, p. 31). In one narrative, the city is conflated with a higher-class position. For some, the city is disliked, even feared, because it signifies an abandonment of certain mentalities or ways of life that are attached to class position – for instance, being humble or buying clothes at Goodwill. Experiences in the city also raise emotional reactions of guilt, shame, and excitement. Yet, importantly, many people described being proud of their rural upbringing and recognized a value in the differences they saw between urban and rural spaces and people. Such reactions might be understood as a resistance to reading oneself through the eyes of city dwellers, eyes that would see them and their lived experiences as backwards or unimaginable and discount worldviews they have come to value as important. In sum: rural gays and lesbians read themselves against a narrative about upper-class urbanites.

Yet, distinctions within rural communities between “rednecks” and “hicks” and a narrative about lower-class rural rednecks also inform how rural gays and lesbians understand their class identity. In this sense, being in a rural space allows some to maintain and enjoy a more privileged position – by being hicks, rather than rednecks. These distinctions are erased in the city, because, as Andrea explained, “rednecks and hicks can spot each other, but from the outside, like somebody who's like a middle-class kinda suburbanite is just gonna have one classification that they put you into.” Despite

reading themselves against the “urban-rich” narrative, they likewise read themselves against the “redneck-rural” narrative. Thus, highlighting these narratives is important in order to not conflate rural with working-class or lower-class.

Not only do the distinctions within rural communities do the work of allowing some to maintain a higher class position, claiming a “hick” (as many interviewees did) or “redneck” (as only Jenny did) identity might further strengthen the ability for gays and lesbians living in rural spaces to lay claim to being part of rural communities. Indeed, as Chapter Five detailed, laying claim to being rural and knowing and engaging in rules of rural life is an important strategy for gays and lesbians living in such spaces to gain acceptance. In cultivating distinctions within rural communities and small towns, the people I interviewed were able to claim similarity to those around them, while simultaneously defending themselves against a lower-class redneck identity. Further, as people made sense of who a “redneck” was through the course of the interview, they also, with the exception of Jenny, made sense of who was potentially anti-gay or at least ignorant. While they asserted that hicks and rednecks might be lacking in exposure to the world, the construction of “redneck” signaled the understanding that a lack of exposure should not be conflated with being politically conservative or anti-gay. Thus, people I interviewed rejected the way that rural space serves as “America’s closet” (Gray 2009) or even more broadly as the space of bigotry or backwardness on a range of social issues. But, at the same time, they did not reject the possibility (and confirmed experience) that some people living in rural areas could be anti-gay.

The Co-Constructions of Class, Space, and Sexuality

These classed distinctions between urban and rural have particular ramifications for how rural gays and lesbians negotiate urban gay space and the cultural meanings of gay and lesbian identities. Xander describes his interactions with public gay space in this manner:

As a soon as I was out and everything, I've never been this club going sorta, that type of gay person...So just going to [local dance club] was just kinda like, oh, this is what it's like. Like this is like kinda like the stereotype that's always like portrayed in the media and stuff. So I was like, OK, that's cool, I can have fun in that situation, [but] it's not for me. So I guess I kinda just feel like I've always like not really fit into like gay stuff.

When I asked how he thought being from a rural background has shaped this, he responded by explaining the importance of not only being rural but also growing up “really really poor.” He said:

I can't really adopt this like snooty like, gay, see, it's so bad, it's not really a gay thing, but it kinda is in a way, it's this like name brand, you want like all the best things, everything's Abercrombie this, Abercrombie, and it's just like, I don't, like I still buy like all my clothes at a thrift store, almost...I feel different because I feel like I was like kinda forced to invent my own world in a way...I was in like nowhere town... It's just I never had anything like handed to me, like in terms of like, oh gay people like this...so I was kinda like...I guess I'll figure it out! And then not really wanting to figure it out per se, just kinda like, figure out what I wanted, but not like what you're supposed to, quote unquote, act like or be.

His quote underscores how cultural meanings of gay and lesbian identities are informed by understandings of class in addition to geography.

One person did think that the classed geographic differences between rural and urban gay men are becoming less salient. Gene explains that

I would say 10 15 years ago...it was more of a distinct kind of split. If you were from the city, you went to the theater and went out to more expensive dinners and that type of thing and if you were from a more rural community, it was kinda more down home, laid back, and even the way with clothing and things. [But] a lot of my friends from more rural

communities now get online and buy their stuff from Calvin Klein or whoever...[so] you know instead of blue jeans and t-shirts and all that [like] it really was [10 years ago], a lot of the differences are really starting to fade away more.

Another person also explained that “I just thought, well if you're gay then you go to San Francisco.” In explaining why he didn't think that was an option for him, he says, “Well I knew San Francisco was kinda expensive and I didn't know how I was gonna get a job there, so I thought it would have been kinda difficult to do that as opposed to other places.”

Importantly, the narratives of gay identity and lesbian identity are classed in very different ways. As the above quotes exemplify, cultural narratives about gay men's sexuality is embedded in urbanism and higher-class status. In contrast, one cultural narrative circulating about lesbian sexuality ties that sexual identity to lower-class status. The tie between lesbian and lower-class identities is, in part, connected to a gender inversion model of sexuality, which has particular ramifications for rural lesbians, as I attend to further in the next section. For instance, one person said: “Where I grew up, not only is it working class but there's lots of—well, there's this huge big trailer park which is the rough side of town. So you get these kind of rough girls, it's hard to know if they're poor or lesbians.” Thus, as opposed to cultural narratives about gay men's sexual identity that link it to urban spaces and higher class, lesbian identity is imagined perhaps as more tied to rurality and lower class – thus making it hard to distinguish between poor rural women and lesbians.

The conflation of rurality, lesbianism, and lower class is also apparent in how individuals imagined rural spaces to be more accepting of lesbians. For instance, Xander

echoed the sentiment that it's easier for non-normative women than men and, as his response below illustrates, we can also think about this as tied to class:

I feel like if you're doing something that the town thinks is really useful to the community, I think that, doing the things that they're doing [it's easier]. It's kinda like how they see you in context, so it's like, if you're there and you're a flaming gay queen, they're like, oh you're a freak, I'm scared of you, that's probably what they're gonna say. But if you're like, a really like butch woman and you're working at a factory, I think it's a little easier.

In other words, acceptance in rural communities has a lot to do with *what* you do – in this case, he is talking about how you make a living – but we can also think about this playing out in the understandings about what it means to be a good person. Acceptance is predicated, in part, on your “use” in the community – and a “flaming gay queen” is placed outside that, while a “butch woman” fits in. The connections between class, gender normativity, and sexuality are further expressed in the following quote, in which Jake (40 yrs. old) explains his take on whether he is hick or country at all:

Well my friend, she always refers to [my partner] and I as her flannel gays. We heat with wood, we chop wood, we're always doing projects outside, you know in the yard, building things. So yeah sometimes I guess I feel like a little bit of a hick, but it's like, I grew up on a farm! I don't know how much more hickish you can get! So, maybe that's why I fit in so well up here! [laughs].

Constructions like “flannel gay” or “butch woman factory worker” begin to exemplify how meanings about class, gender, sexuality, and space are constructed in tandem.

Building on this, I now highlight more centrally how gender matters in these constructions. While I have separated class and gender in this discussion for analytic purposes, it is important to remember that, in practice, they are intertwined.

Part II: “You'd Think the Place is Full of Lesbians!” – Negotiating the Gendered Norms of Embodiment in Gay and Lesbian & Rural Communities

Gay and lesbian identities have historically been conceptualized within a “gender inversion” model, which linked gay male sexuality to effeminacy and lesbianism to masculinity (Faderman 1978; Terry 1999). Research illustrates that this conceptualization has had implications for appearance norms and interactions within urban gay and lesbian communities (Clarke and Turner 2007; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Moore 2006; Rothblum 1994). (How) do rural gays and lesbians negotiate gender inversion models of same-sex sexuality? Additionally, scholars note the various gender representations and practices in rural contexts (Bell 2000; Cambell, Bell, and Finney 2006). Much of this work focuses specifically on rural masculinities. Bell (2000), for instance, discusses multiple cultural constructions of “rural gay masculinity.” These include representations of the “priapic hillbilly” (rural men will have sex with anything), “manly love” (rural spaces allowing natural expression of male same-sex sexuality), and “deep masculinity” (rural spaces allow men to reclaim masculinity). Extending such literature, my work analyzes the meanings of femininity in rural contexts. I also ask how constructions of rural masculinity and femininity shape the experiences of gays and lesbians in rural contexts.

Gay and Lesbian Gendered Norms of Embodiment and Narratives

“I guess I just thought that if you're gay, you have to act really flamboyant and queeny. So I think that was one reason why I was like, well that doesn't fit. Then I realized that there was a lot more to it than that!”

- Jesse (24 yrs. old)

Consistent with prior research on urban communities, I find that rural gays and lesbians also negotiate the gender inversion model of same-sex sexuality and subsequent appearance norms and narratives about gay/lesbian identities. Specifically, men negotiate a cultural narrative that equates gay sexuality with femininity. For instance, similar to

Jesse (above), Adam describes the stereotypes he once held about what it meant to be a gay man in this way: “you have to dress nice...you have to be kinda effeminate in your mannerisms, you have to be very effusive, and raise your hand and talk in a high voice.” Rich stressed that, except for his sexuality, he views himself “as a man in every regard,” which further highlights how gender and sexuality are linked in one cultural narrative and part of how individuals make sense of their gay/lesbian sexual identity. Likewise, Kevin explained how his manager at work had told him he needed to “learn how to drop my voice.” In reference to the incident, he said that this happened before he was out and that he “recognized some of the stereotypical stuff” his manager was referencing.

Women also describe negotiating the narrative that lesbian identity is equated with masculine gender identity. As Elise said “I would never have thought that you could be a lesbian and look feminine.” I found that the “gender inversion” model is salient both for people who are currently living in rural areas and for those who migrated. Chelsea and Andrea described having a magnet on the fridge that says: “I once was a tomboy but now I’m a lesbian.” Similarly, Jenny referenced how she had “the stereotypical” markers for being lesbian growing up: “played softball, I was a tomboy, short hair, hated to dress up.” Stephanie said, “I don't dress the most feminine and that ‘usually’ lends people to stereotype me as a lesbian.” While many of the older women I interviewed suggested that the link between lesbianism and non-normative gender presentations had become less salient over time, the younger lesbians I interviewed still described having to negotiate that link. For instance, Sarah, a twenty-two year-old said, “when I first came out, I felt like in order to be seen as a lesbian, you had to be butch. So I changed like how I dressed a lot, and I wore sweat pants and bandanas and stuff like that.” Even

though this individual described initially changing her gender presentation to fit the norms of embodiment of lesbian identity, she says she later concluded that “how you identify does not define how you have to dress.” However, gendered norms of embodiment circulating in lesbian and gay communities or about those sexual identities are not the only ones that rural gays and lesbians negotiate. Also important are norms and meanings about gender in rural areas, which I turn to now.

Rural Gendered Norms of Embodiment

“In a rural area, the range of female gender I think is a little wider. Because there were farm girls – so yeah, they might dress up for the prom – but they also could like slaughter a hog.”

- Teresa (45 yrs. old)

How do the meanings and norms of gender presentations in rural communities matter for the everyday experiences of rural gays and lesbians? According to my interviewees, it is more acceptable for women than men in rural areas to present non-normative gender identities. Elise explained that she thought growing up in a rural area gave her more allowance to “break out of gender norms.” She says, “I mowed the lawn all the time, and I had to help my dad like do kinda, not necessarily farm work, but like we had horses and I did that kind of stuff. So, I feel like that made me feel like I was kinda breaking out of my gender role anyway.” In contrast, men described being held accountable to more strict gender norms, as evidenced by the following quote from Todd, explaining how his dad forced him to participate in sports: “you've got to, this is what little boys do in [this town], there's certain things you can do and certain things you can't, because you know, sorta the masculinity of what makes a boy.” Another example comes from Heidi, who describes her experiences going to gay bars when she first came out: “It was mostly made up of fags. That was real interesting for me because they were so

flamboyant and soft-spoken and, you know, sensitive. Growing up in [my town], you know, farm kids, I wasn't exposed to that.”

Meanings and expectations of gender in rural areas also shape how rural gays and lesbians engage with “gender inversion” models of gay/lesbian identities. Since constructions of gay male sexuality are tied to effeminacy, in contrast to constructions of rural masculinity, the men I interviewed who understood themselves to have (or wanting to have) a more normative gender identity described difficulty in reconciling their gender and sexual identities. Adam, who said that he thought that being gay meant dressing nice and being effeminate, explained: “the attraction to men was there, but I'm not these things, or I don't want to be all these things. It took me a while to kinda figure that out.”

He further explained:

I mean what I wanted to do made sense, but I think all the trappings of, you know, if you're gonna be gay, you have to be in theater and you have to be effeminate, and you have to be all these things, all these stereotypes, I think I thought they were true. And so therefore, you couldn't have one without the other.

Reflecting on his gender and sexual identities as an adult he said: “you know, I'm not the most masculine person in the world! You know, after growing up and thinking, I don't wanna be that stereotype! you know, there's a certain range of: here's who I am. I'm not the stereotype, but I don't have the deep voice.” As this quote begins to illustrate, there are a range of ways that individuals negotiate the gender inversion narrative about gay/lesbian sexualities, and it often shifts over the course of their lives.

That interviewees described men as being held to rigid gender expectations is consistent with past research illustrating the privileging of certain forms of masculinity in rural contexts (Cambell et al. 2006). Yet, what these data also illustrate is how women in

rural areas are able to exhibit a wider range of acceptable gender presentations, perhaps facilitated by the privileging of masculinity. Further, this research suggests that the gender inversion model of same-sex sexuality fits with gender norms of femininity in rural contexts, while it disrupts norms of masculinity in rural areas. Because of this, interviewees often said they believed that it is easier for lesbians than for gay men to live in rural areas. For instance, when interviewing Alice, she explained that she does think it's easier for women than men. She says:

Because you have terminology for...girls. The Old Maid, the librarian, the teacher. It's accepted that sometimes the less pretty girls just grow up and don't get married, you know. But guys, you go through high school and you wave your hand and you walk funny, and [other] guys jump on you and you become a target. So, yeah, that's gotta be hard, you know... whereas women have a little bit of room.

Reflecting on the fact that she did not experience any harassment in school, Sarah reflected: "there was another guy that was gay and he got harassed a lot more, which kinda fits the like the whole like lesbians don't tend to get teased and picked on as much as men do." In my interview with Phil, he asked about the gender make-up of my sample. When I explained that I was having an easier time recruiting women in rural areas than men, he commented, "that says something about us too...I cannot think of one gay guy who stayed."

Importantly, I find that, unlike in urban contexts, non-normative gender presentations in rural communities are not categorically understood as linked to lesbian sexuality. Thus, it is hard to use gender presentation to distinguish between rural heterosexual and lesbian women. Many women living in rural towns agreed with Debbie's sentiment that "you know it is hard sometimes! Sometimes you see those women who you think look gay, but they're not!" Jenny explained how she was a

“tomboy” and played softball, had short hair, and hated dressing up. I asked if other girls were also like that in her town; she responded: “Some...and, they actually came out also...and then, see it's such a farming community, you throw them farm girls in there and it's just a different ball of wax, you know!” Further illustrating this point, when I asked if she thought she was visible as a lesbian in her small town, Jenny replied by saying, “we're pretty stereotypical. I mean look at me, I'm in jeans, a t-shirt, and a hat, you know. But, that's like the general attire of so many women here!” This quote underscores that visibility as a lesbian is usually tied to non-feminine attire (jeans, t-shirt, hat) – but interestingly, that it also aligns with the “general attire” of women in the area, not only lesbians. These data reveal that non-feminine attire is standard for rural women (straight and lesbian). Thus, interviewees talked about it being difficult to determine the degree to which others might read them lesbian based only on “tomboy” presentations.

Further noting the difficulty in distinguishing between a Midwestern rural heterosexual woman and a lesbian, Nancy said “if you were to drive by [our town], you'd think the place is full of lesbians! (Laughs). They're all wearing flannel shirts and cowboy boots.” She talks about how that acceptance of gender non-normativity for women in rural areas shaped her understanding of her sexuality:

Growing up in a small town, I worked on a farm, a lot of women worked on farm, or they worked on road construction, or, non-traditional jobs for women...and it was not uncommon the way I acted, the way I dressed, so I didn't think anything of it.

Chelsea's quote echoes this sentiment:

It's kinda funny around here, because, (laughs), you're like, hey honey, is she family? We'll be talking and it'll be like, I don't know, she might just be a farmer hick. (laughs). You know, here's a woman who's pre-menopausal, with short hair, hiking boots, with a wallet in her back pocket, no she's just a farmer!

Rita agrees that in rural Illinois, “you can't tell whether women are or aren't you know! Because they all have potential!”

Related to the potential to conflate rural straight women with lesbians is the sense that men’s gender non-normativity makes them more visible in rural areas than it does for women, which was described by many individuals. For instance, Xander says:

I think it's easier, like you're a flannel-wearing lesbian, like they may not see the lesbian part of it... I think it does get read differently in [rural areas]. But. I think it'd be hard anywhere if you were like a really flamboyant gay guy. Anywhere like rural, there's really no way to read that as not not feminine. I mean it's always like off from what they're expecting. And I think that's why I'm not like, I mean and there's no judgment here, but like, I'm not like the biggest like flaming person, but like, I feel like I'm well enough on that way, that I feel like people think it's a little off. Like when I go home [to a rural area] and I'm going to get my oil changed and, they're like, what about this gauge, and I'm like, I have no idea what you're talking about! And like, I try to laugh about it and make a joke, but like things like that are always, I like see the way that people look at me, you know, and it doesn't even have to be disapprovingly, but it's like, enough of a look where it's like a double take.

Xander thinks that what is understood as a lesbian marker (“flannel-wearing”) in urban contexts is not necessarily understood in the same way in rural contexts. In contrast, he thinks that male effeminacy is understood as a marker of gay sexuality across all contexts and is especially challenging in rural areas. Thus, by looking at constructions of rural femininity, we see that many rural gays and lesbians assert that living in rural areas is easier for women.

In Xander’s narratives, women’s queer sexualities are hidden in rural areas because of an acceptance of women’s “non-normative” gender presentations and thus women have an easier time in rural areas. However, what I would stress about these data is that they reveal how gender non-normativity is not *enough* to make women’s non-

normative sexuality visible in rural areas. Rather, in constructing a visible, lesbian sexual identity, rural lesbians describe the importance of being seen with a same-sex partner around town as evidenced in Chapter Five. Visibility in rural contexts thus becomes relational rather than individual.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

“Thanks for capturing the stories...I think the storytelling is what keeps us connected.”
- Bethany

Throughout this dissertation, I have analyzed the meanings people make about spaces, how meanings about spaces inform cultural narratives about sexual identities, and how both of these are part of the stories people tell about their sexuality and who they are. This project demonstrates the various narratives through which people make sense of their identities and experiences, and how meanings about space shape the binaries that inform those narratives. Its focus and findings echo John Howard’s (1999) emphasis on “queer agency.” While certainly working within a context of homophobia and heteronormativity, gays and lesbians nonetheless build vibrant families, lives, and identities. At the start of this project, I was interested in interrogating how that building happens in rural contexts in the United States, in part because of the overwhelming cultural assumption that to be rural and gay is incompatible. Through the course of doing interviews, I came to understand how gays and lesbians draw on urban/rural differences in narratives about their sexual identities. Rather than privileging their rural identity over their gay identity, this work illustrates how rural gays and lesbians shift cultural meanings about gay and lesbian sexualities. Far from tolerating hostile environments and remaining closeted in order to enjoy small town life, the people I interviewed drew on

their attachments to small town life to make sense of their identities and experiences as sexual minorities. As I demonstrated in Chapter Five, in their stories about what it means to be gay and lesbian in the country – to be out, visible, and accepted – the people in this study draw on narratives about being known as a good person, having long-standing ties to the community, and living in a context where word travels fast through close-knit networks. Ideas about safety and acceptance were understood through binaries of anonymity and familiarity. In this way, my work documents how rurality produces rather than constrains the construction of gay and lesbian sexualities. Unlike Howard whose analysis privileges queer desire rather than identity, my work has foregrounded identity: the people I talked with do identify as gay or lesbian, and the majority find it important for their friends and family to recognize those identities or same-sex relationships

Likewise, consistent with the work of Mary Gray (2009) and Arlene Stein (2001), my dissertation reveals the importance in rural contexts of being one of the locals. That the people I interviewed who were living in rural areas had grown up in those areas or neighboring ones (or their partners had, in the case of newcomers) no doubt shaped their ability to make sense of themselves as out, accepted, and visible gay and lesbian members of their communities. Strikingly, the narratives in this study about visibility and acceptance differ from the ways in which Mary Gray's participants asserted non-normative sexualities. Thus, my work extends knowledge of the numerous ways that gays and lesbians stay put in rural areas. While Gray documents how rural gays and their allies are politically active, most of the people I interviewed understood the tie between activism and gay and lesbian identities as an urban phenomenon. Less concerned with what others might actually think about homosexuality or vote on gay rights issues, for

instance, interviewees placed more value on how others treated them in face-to-face interactions. Also, the people I interviewed would consider pride websites or doing drag as accounts of gay and lesbian identities attached to urban landscapes. In this way, people maintained the importance of geographic distinctions in how they narrated the differences between rural and urban gays and lesbians. Utilizing narratives about rural life (e.g., the importance of being a local, the close-knit nature of rural life, the “everybody knows everybody” mentality), they constructed stories about their everyday lives as gays and lesbians and what it means to them for to have their sexualities recognized and accepted. In doing so, they challenge cultural narratives that would read those identities as closeted, oppressed, or lacking. Thus, this work contributes to a growing literature looking at what Nadine Hubbs (2009) calls “unfathomable subjects” – subjects like rural gays and lesbians whose identities and lives contradict circulating cultural formula stories. Some of this work illustrates how certain components of queer life and identity, like drag shows, for example, often assumed to be absent in rural contexts, are indeed present (e.g. Gray 2009); or, similarly, how such activities and queer communities, assumed to originate in cities are, indeed, embedded in the histories of non-metropolitan spaces (e.g. Howard 1999; Johnson 2007). Such work provides a powerful challenge to the assumption that no queer people or life exists in rural spaces. My work does this as well, but it also draws attention to the arguably less apparent ways that people in rural areas make sense of gay and lesbian identities. In other words, it is not only that rural gays and lesbians construct sexual identities in ways that mirror certain cultural expectations (e.g., doing drag). They also construct identities that shift the very

meanings of what recognition or visibility as gay or lesbian entails as they make sense of those concepts within a rural context.

Additionally, this dissertation contributes to knowledge of rural gays and lesbians in its interrogation of how class and gender shapes their experiences. As evident in Chapter Seven, class binaries are part of how migration and urban and rural contexts are understood. While people construct a rural identity, in part, by defending and embracing a rural class mentality against the assumed-to-be higher-class mentality of urbanites, they also create class distinctions within their rural communities by constructing differences between “hicks” and “rednecks.” Such distinctions allow the people I interviewed who live in rural areas to, in fact, maintain a higher-class position than they imagine (or experienced) as possible in the city. These classed binaries of hick-redneck also inform how rural gays and lesbians make sense of safety. The stories people told about gender also demonstrate that geography matters. Unlike in urban contexts, women’s non-normative gender presentations in rural communities are not categorically understood as linked to lesbian sexuality. This reveals how gender non-normativity is not enough to make women’s non-normative sexuality visible in rural areas. Rather, in constructing a visible, lesbian sexual identity, rural lesbians describe the importance of being seen with a same-sex partner around town, which resonates with findings presented in Chapter Five. The narratives I heard about gender also point to how understandings of non-normative gender expressions differ across geographic contexts. This is evident insofar as people articulated how instances of what some would consider gender non-normativity are, indeed, normative for gay and straight women in rural contexts.

The findings presented in Chapters Five and Seven illustrate the diversity of rural gays' and lesbians' experiences – diversity that the circulating formula story about space and sexuality does not capture. Yet, I do not argue that it follows from these findings that the formula story is inaccurate. Indeed, many of the people I talked with who are living in cities after having grown up in rural areas understand rural spaces to be unwelcoming or unsafe, and articulated a sense of needing to be closeted when they go back home to their rural towns. Also, many of those living in the city think rural heterosexuals had a limited or stereotyped understanding of gay and lesbian identities. In sum, for some people the city continues to be the place to be out, as Chapter Six demonstrates. Yet, an equally important finding in this chapter is also that the formula story that narrates the “liberated urban queer” who is connected to a queer community also fails to capture the diversity of gays and lesbians in cities. While people's experiences of migrating to cities might resonate with the circulating cultural formula story, other aspects of their experiences modify it. For some, the modification entails asking the question “why do I have to leave?,” rather than “why would you want to stay?” Thus, this dissertation highlights the loss that, for some, accompanies migration.

That the formula story fails to capture the diversity of gays and lesbians experiences in both rural and urban contexts underscores that the identities and experiences of gays and lesbians are complex. In narrating how they make sense of themselves, the people I interviewed grappled with contradictory and complex experiences. For instance, some people living in cities who never wanted to go back to rural places, like Xander, nonetheless expressed frustration with people making assumptions about his hometown. Like Xander, others had stories acknowledging how

family members could, on the one hand, be wonderful and accepting, while also doing “horrible things” like listening to the 700 Club. Further, some people living in rural areas who could not wait to get *out* of the city, nonetheless, also told me how they were sure to choose small towns that were not quite the same as the ones where they were raised. Others who had no desire to live anywhere but rural areas, like Andrea, rejected the notion that *all* rural folks are ignorant or homophobic, while also painting a less than positive picture of the “rednecks” she has encountered in her small town. Thus, one important accomplishment of this dissertation is to shed light on the complex ways that people make sense of space, sexuality, and identity.

Yet, even as they narrated ambivalent, nuanced, and complex experiences, people nonetheless often erected clear boundaries between rural and urban. Indeed, the urban-rural binary is still salient in shaping how gay and lesbian identities are constituted, as evidenced in Chapter Four. The city is imagined not as the only place to be gay, but it is imagined (and experienced) for some as the place inhabited by certain kinds of gays and lesbians. Differences among gays and lesbians, including things like marital status, participating in pride events, having monogamous relationships, and being active in politics, are understood as connected to rural-urban differences. Interviewees understood certain narratives and expectations about gay identity to circulate in urban spaces, but not in rural contexts. Further, many of the people I interviewed grew up with an understanding that gay and lesbian sexualities were outside of rural contexts. The ability to reorganize the link between urbanity and queerness in their own lives and claim gay and lesbian identities in rural areas thus signaled an important process for them. In order to understand how cultural narratives shift, we need to understand where individuals start

from – and pay attention to what “re-organization” or “disruption” is most important to them.

These findings draw our attention to three processes: first, that people imagine identities (e.g., imagine what the identity “gay” or “lesbian” means); second, that what they imagine those identities to mean shifts; and third, that binaries matter for these imaginings. Given its illustration of these processes of identity construction, this dissertation extends theoretical discussions about identity in addition to contributing to empirical knowledge about rural gays and lesbians. Specifically, analyzing the narratives of rural gays and lesbians highlights processes of identity construction that necessitate a “restorying” (Hostein and Gubrium 2001) of how interpretive sociological theories and queer theory can be utilized in studies of sexual identity. This work also illustrates how sexual identity categories are embedded in other categories of difference. Shaping more than desires or bodies, sexual identity categories are given cultural meaning and significance vis-à-vis their attachments to other cultural binaries. Queer theory allows for an awareness of those binaries. Findings from this dissertation also illustrate that as people make sense of their sexual identity, they are also constructing a sense of who they are and will be (what kind of person, what they will do in life, where they will live, what their lives will be like). Pragmatism allows for an engagement with how people have the capacity to (and do) construct a sense of self that entails an internal imagining of who one is and will be. There are processes that may or may not be connected to what individuals “do” or “present.” Combining insights from queer theory and pragmatism thus allows for an engagement with questions about how people make sense of what it means to be gay or lesbian.

My work suggests the importance of grappling with all the non-sexual meanings attached to sexual identity categories. I argue for a more thorough investigation that explores questions like: what are the different ways that same-sex sexuality is attached to non-sexual meanings? How do people make sense of these attachments and how do meanings about sexual identities shift in their everyday lives? My dissertation investigates an example of how this happens with regard to geography. One of the questions this work opens up is how and why the urban-rural binary remains salient in people's stories, despite experiences that might complicate the neat divide between urban and rural that narratives suggest.

This approach to studying sexuality and identity – one that combines pragmatic and queer theory to analyze internal imaginings and binaries – can prove useful beyond studies of geography and sexuality. For one, scholars have noted the increasing visibility and normalization of gay and lesbian identities (Seidman 2002; Walters 2001). Sociologist Steven Seidman argues that gays and lesbians find themselves in an era “beyond the closet” – wherein they accept their sexual identity and integrate it into their social lives. This suggests that the processes involved in what it means to “be out,” rather than “coming out,” might be more salient. It also suggests that if people integrate their sexual identities into the rest of their lives, they make sense of those identities within a context that involves more than sexual meanings. That there is an increased visibility of gays and lesbians in culture also suggests people are more aware of these sexualities, albeit even if that the awareness is incomplete, imperfect, or problematic. As people create gay and lesbian identities and make sense of those identities vis-à-vis their broader social lives, they do so with initial understandings about who gay and lesbians are.

Further, this approach to identity is useful insofar as sexuality scholars have become interested in theorizing heteronormativity – the ways in which heterosexuality is privileged, expected, and assumed in everyday life (Jackson 2006; Kitzinger 2005). Research has begun to demonstrate how children come to understand heterosexuality as normal, noting how parents (Martin 2009) and cultural texts (Martin and Kazyak 2009) matter. For instance, Karin Martin’s (2009) research shows how parents describe adult relationships as only heterosexual and make gays and lesbians invisible, thus reproducing a heteronormative social world for their children. That actual gay or lesbian lives are still sometimes rendered invisible resonates with the findings in this dissertation. For many of the people I interviewed, the ability to imagine what it would mean to be gay or lesbian (particularly within a rural context) was what proved difficult, not, for instance, reconciling having same-sex desires. Analyzing the processes by which how people’s imaginings about gay and lesbian identities shift can thus provide a window for understanding how heteronormativity is disrupted in everyday life. Pragmatism and queer theory can aid in analyzing how people create sexual identities and how they make sense of what it means to “be” gay or lesbian.

If, as Bethany’s quote opening this chapter suggests, “storytelling is what keeps us connected,” then what are some of the broader implications of how rural gays and lesbians story their sexualities? Throughout the course of writing and presenting this research, I have encountered numerous comments that express the multiple reactions people have to my analysis, including disbelief, resistance, and excitement. By way of concluding, I want to address some of these reactions and stress the necessary tensions at work in how I (and others) read these findings.

To start, what should we make of the fact that some rural gays and lesbians reject the relevancy of certain cultural markers like rainbow flags – markers that many worked hard to build into the cultural lexicon? First, this question points to how rapidly social changes have occurred for gays and lesbians in the past decades – across urban and rural contexts. The Internet and the increased visibility of gays and lesbians in television shows and movies has impacted the experiences of sexual minorities in rural areas (Gray 2009). Likewise, many of the people I interviewed who were living in rural areas had, at one time, lived in an urban place and described participating in queer cultures and events there. Yet, painting the picture that expressions of non-normative sexualities and communities only emerge in cities and then spread to the country negates the histories of non-metropolitan spaces that suggest otherwise (Herring 2007; Johnson 2007). The question remains why, with the exception of Renee, the people I talked with did not explicitly draw on such histories of non-normative sexualities in rural contexts.

Second, the question of what to make of gays and lesbians disavowing certain cultural narratives about their sexualities also gets at the fact that what people “do” or how they “present” their sexuality is often conflated with their presumed awareness and acceptance of their sexuality. This is reflected in how many people I interviewed expressed disappointment over being read either as in denial of their sexuality or even as not gay when they did not “do” their sexuality in the same way as others. As Kyle put it, “I don’t feel like I have issues with gayness or my own sexuality but it’s different from [my partner’s]. In the beginning, he interpreted that difference as a kind of dysfunction or malfunction.” Such accounts very much resonate with my initial interests in pursuing this project. They also demonstrate the value of using pragmatism and queer theory in

the way I have suggested, in order to extend analyses beyond what people externally do. Emphasizing only what people do or present when analyzing identity can lead to assumptions that certain presentations or bodily displays are most visible or radical.

However, while I clearly think it is important to acknowledge the varied ways in which people construct gay and lesbian sexualities – variations that formula stories, by definition, deny – I do not intend to valorize one variation as more authentic or radical. In other words, my aim is not to uphold the identities of rural gays and lesbians as a model to which all should adhere. The stories people tell about differences between urban and rural gays and lesbians raise questions about the degree to which it is possible to simultaneously reject or modify narratives for yourself, without denying their importance for others. Moreover, it is important to note how the narratives of interviewees at times reify “urban gays” in much the same ways that the formula story reifies “rural gays.” Interviewees’ stories illustrate that reifying “urban gays” discounts nuances among gays and lesbians living in urban environments, and works to deny recognition of potential similarities across contexts. For instance, in some accounts I heard, going to pride parades was conflated with urbanity and excitement – and, further, understood in opposition to being married and boring and just going about one’s day-to-day life. Yet, of course, urban gays at pride events do all those things as well. Indeed, urban gays might disavow pride in many of the same ways as rural gays do. Finally, reifying “urban gay” and upholding the urban as a site of total acceptance (as in some people’s narratives) works to deny that bad things happen in the city. In other words, the work the rural-urban difference does for people at the individual level as they think about their own identities does not reflect “reality.” Likewise, what is effective for some

individuals does not necessarily map neatly onto what is effective for broader social change for all. In this way, another interesting topic that deserves further attention is the reification of “urban gay” within the contexts of both urban renewal, a process displacing many queers out of the city, and of anti-gay political activism (Fetner 2001).

The stories my respondents told also raise questions about what it means to be political or radical. Like other work focusing on differences between narratives at the cultural and personal level, this research confronts us with the recognition that “narratives beneficial in encouraging change at one level might not be so beneficial at another level” (Loseke 2001, p. 680). People’s narratives reveal contradictions in how they simultaneously distance rural gay identity from “activism,” and yet frame the act of staying put in rural places as political. Consider the following example from Chelsea: in response to her partner Andrea’s desire to go to a city when they have kids, Chelsea said:

Yeah but how are we gonna expose all these redneck lesbians that are married? I just think that the more you expose them, the more you educate people about our lifestyle, the better off we're gonna be as a whole. If you keep pigeonholing, and segregating people, and not exposing them to our lifestyle, their kids are gonna be brought up just like we were, not knowing what the word lesbian is. And if it's that one classmate that has two mommies that teaches some kid that it's ok, then good, we're making a step forward.

For Chelsea, migrating to the city would reflect a “pigeonholing” of gays and lesbians that would continue a trend she sees as negative: people in rural areas not knowing gays and lesbians. Her account asks us to consider how, for some, staying put reflects not naiveté or oppression, but a conscious, political decision. Yet, of course, other people’s accounts ask us to abandon the desire to link the construction of gay and lesbian identities with making a political statement at all.

The above quote from Chelsea also demonstrates that actions understood as normative in urban contexts (e.g., gays and lesbians partnering and having kids) take on different meanings in rural contexts. That partnerships were so central to many people's narratives raises questions about how the changing legal contexts with regard to relationship recognition might also matter for how rural and urban areas continue to be imagined and experienced by gays and lesbians. In other words, are rural experiences different in states that legally recognize same-sex marriage? Regardless of the legal status of gay marriage, are these narratives particular to the rural Midwest? Finally, Chelsea's quote indicates that she understands staying put in a rural area as a "step forward" because it will entail others in the area becoming aware of gays and lesbians. One question that remains unanswered by this research is how rural heterosexuals might make sense of gays and lesbians. Yet, many of the people I interviewed assume that heterosexuals in rural contexts do acknowledge and accept gay and lesbian sexualities. At the very least, the narratives analyzed here serve as a reminder – to both heterosexuals and queers in both urban and rural areas, and to both conservatives and liberals who cannot imagine it – that, as Brittany expressed it, "there's still queer people here."

Appendix

**Table 1: Rural Town Populations
(Rounded to nearest thousand)**

Interviewee	Population Size
Adam	14,000
Alice	2,000
Andrea	1,500
April	21,000
Camille	5,000
Chelsea	1,500
Erin	1,700
Ethan	1,000
Gene	11,000
Iris	21,000
Jake	3,500
Jenny	3,200
Jesse	21,000
Joan	280
Kevin	36,000
Laura	11,000
Leila	2,200
Leslie	3,200
Lisa	2,500
Megan	570
Molly	2,000
Morgan	1,000
Nancy	2,200
Nate	1,000
Rich	14,000
Robert	3,500
Rose	4,900
Sandra	21,000
Tara	1,100
Tom	1,300

Table 2: Comparing Currently Living v. Grew Up

	Currently Living	Grew Up
Age		
Range	22-55	21-68
Average	41	41
Gender		
Women	21	23
Men	9	7
Race		
White	28	29
Asian	1	0
Hispanic	1	0
Biracial	0	1
Household Income		
Less than 25,000	2	6
25,000-49,999	9	6
50,000-74,999	7	8
75,000-99,999	4	7
100,000-149,999	2	2
150,000-199,999	1	0

Table 3: Demographics

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Race	Household Income	Rural Status
Adam	42	Man	White	50,000-74,999	Both
Alice	44	Woman	White	25,000-49,000	Both
Andrea		Woman	White		Both
Anna	44	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Grew Up
April	22	Woman	White	25,000-49,999	Current
Bethany	61	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Grew up
Brittany	47	Woman	White	25,000-49,000	Grew Up
Camille	43	Woman	White	150,000-199,999	Both
Chelsea		Woman	White		Both
Cynthia	51	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Grew up
Debbie	44	Woman	White	75,000-99,999	Grew Up
Derek	58	Man	White	50,000-74,999	Grew up
Elaine	68	Woman	White		Grew up
Elise	23	Woman	White	Less than 24,999	Grew Up
Erin	54	Woman	White	100,000-149,999	Both
Esther	61	Woman	White	75,000-99,999	Grew Up
Ethan	39	Man	White	75,000-99,999	Both
Evelyn	27	Woman	White	25,000-49,000	Grew Up
Gene	34	Man	White	25,000-49,999	Both
Heidi	48	Woman	White	75,000-99,999	Grew Up
Iris	30	Woman	Hispanic	25,000-49,999	Current
Jake	40	Man	White	75,000-99,999	Both
Jenny	31	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Both
Jesse	24	Man	White	Less than \$24,999	Both
Joan		Woman	White		Current
Justin	32	Man	Biracial	25,000-49,999	Grew Up
Kara		Woman	White		Grew Up
Kayla	29	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Grew up
Kevin	50	Man	White	50,000-74,999	Both
Kim	43	Woman	White	100,000-149,999	Grew Up
Kyle	30	Man	White	25,000-49,000	Grew Up
Laura	55	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Both
Leila	39	Woman	White	75,000-99,999	Current
Leslie	35	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Current
Lisa	54	Woman	White	25,000-49,000	Both
Megan	51	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Both
Miranda	21	Woman	White	Less than 24,999	Grew Up
Molly	24	Woman	Asian	Less than 24,999	Current

Morgan	54	Woman	White	25,000-49,999	Both
Nancy	42	Woman	White	75,000-99,999	Both
Natalie	33	Woman	White	25,000-49,999	Grew Up
Nate	50	Man	White		Both
Paula	52	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Grew Up
Phil	42	Man	White	75,000-99,999	Grew Up
Renee	61	Woman	White	75,000-99,999	Grew Up
Rich	52	Man	White	50,000-74,999	Both
Rita	46	Woman	White	50,000-74,999	Grew Up
Robert	41	Man	White	50,000-74,999	Both
Rose	24	Woman	White	25,000-49,000	Both
Sandra	36	Woman	White	25,000-49,999	Both
Sarah	22	Woman	White	Less than 24,999	Grew Up
Stephanie	48	Woman	White	100,000-149,999	Grew Up
Tara	46	Woman	White	25,000-49,999	Both
Teresa	45	Woman	White	75,000-99,999	Grew Up
Terri	23	Woman	White	Less than 24,999	Grew Up
Todd	47	Man	White	75,000-99,999	Grew Up
Tom	42	Man	White	100,000-149,999	Both
Tracy	58	Woman	White	25,000-49,999	Grew Up
William	24	Man	White	Less than 24,999	Grew Up
Xander	29	Man	White	Less than 24,999	Grew Up

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