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Taking New Directions: How Rural Queerness Provides Unique Insights into Place, Class, and Visibility

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Taking New Directions: How Rural Queerness Provides Unique Insights into Place, Class, and Visibility

Abstract
In this paper I demonstrate how an attention to rural queerness offers a beneficial and necessary opportunity to examine queer subjectivies through the lens of space, place, and class. I highlight how individuals' claims to queerness can actually be embeddd within identifications with class and place. I demonstrate how identifications with place are illustrative of a broader coneption of rurality, an often-ignored yet immensely pervasive thread of identity, which, governed by familiarity, familial affiliation, and community participation, can actually provide rural queer individuals with a means of both acceptance and queer expression alternative to dominant models. I illustrate how rurality is not only absent from hegemonic urban conceptualizations of queer visibility, but is actually incompatible with the basic tenets of mainstream urban queer visibility politics. Rurality thus provides a compelling vehicle of critique and alternative envisioning for contemporary queer politics and subjectivities.

Keywords
space & place, sexuality, class, rurality, identity

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Taking New Directions: How Rural Queerness Provides Unique Insights into Place, Class, and Visibility

Kelly Baker

Introduction

Growing up different in a small homogenous town is not easy. Discovering you are queer[1] in a place where boys will be boys and girls are, unequivocally, expected to love, desire, and marry them is not easy either. Hailing from a Nova Scotian fishing village of approximately 200 people and almost a two hour's drive from Halifax, the nearest city, I can recount first-hand the feelings of fear and isolation. "Am I the only one?" and the perhaps more poignant "will my family disown me?" were two questions that, like most rural queer youth, plagued my mind. The sixth generation to come of age in this village, I grew up enmeshed in a web of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and parents, all of whom served as key sources of both support and validation throughout my childhood and teenage years. The acceptance I received, though in some cases more gradual, from both my family and the wider community, was therefore without a doubt pivotal in allowing me to safely explore my new-found queer identity whilst maintaining my sense of self as a member of my family and rural community.

My upbringing encompassed to a strong degree what Mary Gray calls "a 'never met a stranger' friendliness" (Gray 2009:5) - an ideology to which I attribute the bulk of my acceptance. Though suffocating to the average urbanite, and perhaps repulsive to the urban queer, this "pervasive ethos" (Gray 2009:5) worked to familiarize (or at the very least minimize) my queer difference. A queer teenager in a rather conservative, homogeneous community, I was still the granddaughter of so-and-so and had the last name to prove it, and that counted for something. Tolerance and acceptance, not to mention queer identity itself, are however often equated with the anonymity and diversity of the city. Rural queerness has been either misrepresented or unacknowledged, and so the realities of rural queer individuals have been largely ignored.

A number of recent critiques have illuminated the urban bias or "metro-normativity" (Halberstam 2003) within much queer research and writing (for example, Bell and Valentine 1995; Weston 1998; Gray 2009). Indeed, only a handful of works (namely in the disciplines of human geography and literary and cultural studies) have examined sexual identity and community as it manifests outside of North American urban centres (Gray 2009:10). 'The urban' has often operated as the assumed reference within much social theory and has overshadowed the continuing significance of rural-based identities in general and rural queer identities in particular (Ching and Creed 1997:7). Within much queer popular culture, theory, and writing, rural places are continually deemed significant insofar as they are left behind; they are presented as playing an unimportant role in the actual constitution of queer identity (Weston 1998; Halberstam 2005).

Not only do such "metronormative" (Halberstam 2005) conceptions of queerness spatialize queer individuals as inherently urban and thus blatantly disregard those queer individuals who identify with and live within rural areas, such understandings also fail to conceptualize how queer identity can be rooted in place. Indeed, because queer identity is often situated within a symbolic

[1] I use GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) and queer (as a reclaimed, and more inclusive umbrella term) interchangeably throughout this article. References to queer theory as a body of theory that encompasses 'queer' as both a sexual identity and a non-normative positionality are explicitly noted.

urban space that necessitates a departure or escape from one's home, the ways that queer identities can be tied to or embedded within physical locations (one's rural hometown, for instance) and the ways spatial mobilities (or lack thereof) are framed by class, have been ignored. At the same time, urban-focused conceptions of queerness also fail to interrogate the challenges rural queerness poses to the closet model of sexual identity and the politics of visibility that underlie the current GLBT or queer movement.

This article demonstrates that an attention to rural queerness provides fruitful opportunities for looking into queer identities in-place, and how attachments to place (which are themselves often classed) can actually frame the development of queer subjectivity. This article also conceptualizes 'the rural' as an alternative mode or intersection of identification that works to complicate and in some cases run counter to the basic tenets of queer visibility politics. I begin the discussion with a synopsis of my research, which, seeking to uncover the spatiality and inherent urban-ness of queerness and queer subjectivity, explored the lives of queer individuals living in rural Nova Scotia. The discussion then splinters off in two directions: I first argue that an attention to rural queerness offers a beneficial and necessary opportunity to examine queer subjectivities through the lenses of space, place, and class, highlighting how individuals' claims to queerness can actually be embedded within identifications with class and place. I then demonstrate how such identifications with place are illustrative of a broader conception of rurality, an often ignored yet immensely pervasive thread of identity, which, governed by familiarity, familial affiliation, and community participation, can actually provide rural queer individuals with a means of both acceptance and queer expression alternative to dominant models. I close by illustrating how rurality is not only absent from hegemonic urban conceptualizations of queer visibility, but is actually in some ways incompatible with the basic tenets of mainstream urban queer visibility politics. Rurality thus provides a compelling vehicle of critique and alternative envisioning for contemporary queer politics.

Part 1: Introducing my Research and Overall Findings

As Mary Gray argues, spatial relations play a pivotal role in the particularities and meaning of individuals' claims to queerness (Gray 2009:8). In this way, gay culture has been theorized as having a special relationship with urban space. Indeed, the establishment of queer urban public space has been historically linked to the emergence of gay politics during early 20th century America (D'Emilio 1989). For example, throughout the 20th century gay spaces such as bars, cafes, and neighbourhoods created the possibility for collective consciousness, struggle, and community (D'Emilio 1989; Valentine 2002). The establishment of such spaces provided safety, visibility, and a sense of commonality for queer individuals, and contexts within which political consciousness and movements for public recognition could emerge (Valentine 2002).

Much of gay and lesbian history has thus mirrored the history of the city, with major urban centres being intrinsically linked to the formation of global gay politics and the historical construction of gay identity and community (Halberstam 2005:34; Weston 1998:33). As D'Emilio points out, gay identity emerged in concert with the historical development of urban capitalism, which spearheaded a boom of rural to urban migration and transformed the role of the family and the meanings behind heterosexual relations (1989:102). Similarly, Gayle Rubin has argued that gays and

lesbians required the anonymity and heterogeneity of an urban setting (1984). Certainly, while the size, density, and diversity of urban populations work to insulate and alienate individuals from one another, such factors have also been theorized as providing the ideal setting for subcultural formations (Tonkiss 2005:8). The city's capacities to create visibility, consolidate capital, and foster political power among spatially bound groups rendered it the key site for the formation of early gay and lesbian identities (Gray 2009:7).

Not only, then, has the development of gay community and identity paralleled processes of urbanization, but as Halberstam points out, the construction of gay subjectivity is itself embedded within a narrative of rural to urban migration that maps the psychological journey of 'coming out' onto a physical journey to the city (Halberstam 2005:36-7; Weston 1998:39-40). For Gray this can be understood as a matter of narrative in that narrative structures "do the cultural work" (2009:9) of privileging one narrative at the expense of others. In this way, she argues, the community histories of North American gays "cohere through and hinge on unrelenting narratives that imagine rural spaces as. . . closet[s]" or "premodern trappings" (Gray 2009:9). Purportedly isolated from gay identity, this narrative of progress positions the rural as the necessary shadow against which the political accomplishment of urban gay visibility can be measured and its urban superiority sustained.

In this sense, gayness is configured through an opposition between urban and rural life whereby the rural is positioned as a closet from which an authentic, metropolitan sexuality must emerge (Weston 1998:39-40; Halberstam 2005:37). Queer subjectivity has been situated within a "linear, modernist trajectory" (Halberstam 2005:36-7), with urban GLBT or queer identities serving as markers of modernity. As both Halberstam (2005) and Weston (1998) point out, the image of the escape from the countryside into the anonymity and diversity of urban space was embedded within the gay subject from the very start. A "beacon of tolerance and…community" (Weston 1998:40) for queer individuals, the city has been cast as a refuge from the oppression and discipline of small-town surveillance. And much like the distinctions of right/left and east/west discussed by Ahmed (2006), the rural/urban distinction is not neutral or even. Rather, the urban serves as the straight line, while the rural is a deviation (Ahmed 2006:14).

Indeed for Weston "the gay imaginary" is a symbolic space that configures gayness through a hierarchical distinction between urban and rural space (1998:40). That is, queerness is not only thought to be embedded within an urban location, but is actually situated within a symbolic opposition between urban and rural life (Weston 1998:55). This opposition reveals the rural to be the devalued term, and renders rural queers as out of place or somehow stuck in a place they would rather not be (Halberstam 2003:162). For the rural-born queer, the process of 'coming out' can be seen as embodying what Ahmed calls "a migrant orientation", where one is "facing toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home" (2006:10). Rural space is often portrayed as "a locus of persecution and gay absence" (Weston 1998:40) with tales of isolation, prejudice, and physical violence characterizing the experiences of the queers who live there. And rural queer subjectivities if discussed at all are framed as lacking or incomplete (Gray 2009:10). So while rurality plays a key function, albeit as the 'other' against which the production of urban queer identities can be measured, much work on sexuality and space continually fails to

interrogate or question the urban/rural binary. Such work either fails to consider rural space at all or reinforces the problematic depiction of the two as hierarchically valued and separate, self-contained spaces. And the implications class poses for both spatial mobility and placed and classed identification has thus also been overlooked (McDermott 2010:199).

"Placing" Rural Nova Scotia

In response to such oversights, I set out to explore the identities and experiences of community among lesbians, gays and transgendered people living in rural areas of my home province of Nova Scotia. I began by looking at their reasons for and experiences of living outside the city, and was guided by questions such as: how do rural settings influence the ways rural GLBT individuals identify? Do those who decide to stay in, or return to, their rural hometowns feel integrated within their rural communities and familial networks? Do they experience a sense of commonality with other queer people in their area? Is queer community actively sought? In examining such questions, I hoped to not only illuminate the presence of GLBT communities throughout rural Nova Scotia, but also highlight the ways such communities may challenge dominant notions of sexual identity, community, and rural space.

Nova Scotia continues to have a high percentage of rural dwellers; with a rural population of nearly 75%, Nova Scotia has the third highest rural population in the country (RCIP 2003:7). The socioeconomic status of rural Nova Scotia appears below both the national and provincial urban averages in a number of areas. The education level of rural Nova Scotians, for instance, is substantially lower than that of urban residents areas (RCIP 2003:37). At the same time, unemployment rates in rural Nova Scotia are substantially higher than the national average for rural areas (RCIP 2003:37). Incomes in Nova Scotia are also lower than the national average, with the gap between urban and rural incomes larger than in any other province (RCIP 2003:7). Fisheries and agriculture, two prominent industries within the region, have both experienced a sharp decline in recent years. While the number of people employed in fisheries has been decreasing, farm debt has for the past thirteen years been greater than farm receipts--and this gap is widening (RCIP 2003:7). And while total wages and salaries in the mining, oil, and gas industry have been increasing, the number of people employed in these industries has decreased (RCIP 2003:7). In recent years, however, multiple research initiatives have taken place to help bolster the development of healthy, sustainable communities throughout rural Nova Scotia. The Coastal Communities Network (CCP), along with the Rural Communities Impacting Policy Project (RCIP), has been active in helping to "promot[e] the survival and enhancement" of the province's rural communities (RCIP 2003:1). Official reports borne from such initiatives have lauded such Nova Scotian communities as having a strong sense of community spirit and community values, as well as a deep appreciation for those who help work to strengthen them (RCIP 2003:30).

During the summer of 2007, however, tensions emerged among a number of northern Nova Scotian counties when the mayor of a town called Truro started what some have called a "rural trend" of refusing to raise the pride flag during Nova Scotia's gay pride week celebrations. Despite the fact that same-sex marriages have been legally recognized in Nova Scotia since September 2004, the mayor, citing his religious convictions, stated that "God says 'I'm not in favour' [of gay pride] . . . and I have to look at it and say, I guess I'm not either"

(CBCnews Aug, 2007). Both Pictou and Cumberland counties followed, implementing policies that would prevent non-government flags from being flown on municipal poles. While the mayor's position may have confirmed for many the stereotyped beliefs surrounding small town backwardness and oppression, this incident, which received national attention, allowed the issues and experiences of rural GLBT Nova Scotians to gain visibility and recognition throughout Canada. It illuminated the fact that Nova Scotia contains a number of rural GLBT communities, who are actively promoting acceptance and equality within their wider rural communities.

Broadly speaking, my findings indicated while there was evidence of pressures to conform, participants experienced a surprising level of tolerance and acceptance. None of my participants spoke of having experienced any physical violence, and less than half (five) spoke of having directly experienced verbal homophobia while living in rural Nova Scotia. Of those five who did experience verbal homophobia in their rural towns, two also reported having experienced homophobia (and to higher degrees) while living in the city. The isolation of rural life, however, sometimes required additional effort to find or access GLBT community. For some this involved access to, or physically going to, the city. At the same time the urban GLBT community was not always experienced as 'home'. Class and cultural differences between urban and rural queers overshadowed the sharing of a GLBT identity. To this end, many participants actually expressed a preference for their rural queer counterparts and highlighted the previously and currently thriving rural GLBT communities throughout Nova Scotia.

Part 2: Country Queers: Exploring Class and Place

Despite the in-flux in spatial and intersectional analyses of sexual identity, gender, and race, there remains a dearth in the literature surrounding class and its impacts (both material and through place-based identification) on spatial mobility (McDermott 2010). At the same time, the increasing conflation of 'space' with 'place' in studies of sexuality and space has also contributed significantly to the lack of enquiry into the lives of rural dwellers in general and rural queers in particular (Ching and Creed 1997:6-7). As Ching and Creed point out, the conflation of place with the more "fashionable" or fluid components of identity erases the role of "real" places in identity formation (1997:6-7). Indeed, for Yi-Fu Tuan space is abstract and allows movement, while place is a pause; space is transformed into place as it becomes more familiar, intimate, and valuable (1977:6). A distinctive form of space that emerges out of history, particularity, and everyday lived experience, place provides a locus of identity and sense of belonging among those who inhabit it (Hubbard & Kitchin 2011:6). Put simply, place matters; it serves as a "way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world" (Allnut 2009:3). We as individuals are always emplaced as "there is no body without its place in the world, no matter what that place is" (Allnut 2009:3). While all identifications thus have location implications, current theories of identity often present identity as disembodied or detached from place (Allnut 2009:3).

McDermott points out that social class influences and shapes place-based identification and attachments, which in-turn determine peoples' understandings of their sexual identity (2010:206). While the middle-class lesbians in her study constructed and understood their lesbian identity through travelling throughout a

variety of geographical and social spaces, the working-class lesbians "'became' lesbians in the places they were born" (McDermott 2010:206). Attachments to place forged through their identification with their working-class background provided them with distinct understandings of what being a lesbian meant – notions which differed greatly from those individuals more middle-class and spatially-mobile. This mapping of class onto spatial mobility and place-based identifications and attachments resonates with Appadurai's (1996) assertion that "localities are not contexts, but. . . contexts define the boundaries of localities" (cited in Evans 2010:63). Here, familial context can be understood as framing conceptions of place and allowing or preventing mobility between places (Evans 2010:63).

In my study, participants' discussions of their initial experiences with the urban queer community illuminated a common thread: though drawn to the city because of their sexuality, the urban queer community was somehow lacking. This, coupled with homesickness, familial obligations, and a high level of acceptance at home, drove a number of participants to return to their rural hometowns. In this next section I illustrate participants' connections to place firstly through their experiences of coming out and gaining acceptance in their rural hometowns, and secondly through their dissatisfaction with urban space. Here I highlight how their discomfort or failure to fit into the urban queer community was framed by many as a contrast between urban and rural space. I then discuss place and class as they manifest in participants' reasons for returning home, and their perceptions of their rural queer communities.

Acceptance back home

For some of my rural-born participants a deep connection to place (to their particular hometowns), via familiarity and community participation, was cited as granting them a particular type of acceptance as a queer individual. For instance, discussing her experiences of coming out, Donna (50, rural-born) notes:

> People just kept treating me like me. . . I think that was the ticket. . . . They just said "you know, its somebody who we've known forever, and she is who she is. . . . In fact, if anything. . . it seemed like people were going out of their way to be really nice to me. . . . I totally attribute it to small communities where people know each other. And I have been a part of this community forever, I mean, I grew up here, I helped people out. . . as a teenager, I'd always go and help somebody paint their house and I'd go buy groceries for the old lady down the road, you know, that was the community, you'd just help people out. And so it wasn't like "oh yeah, I knew her, she grew up down the road," it was, "oh yeah, she's been in my house, you know." And I was totally, totally accepted.

Donna's experience of acceptance within her hometown demonstrates how an attention to identity in-place and community belonging can uncover unique examples of queer acceptance that fly in the face of predominant configurations of rural hometowns as predominantly homophobic. For Donna, because she had "been a part of this community forever," she was "totally accepted." More than a mere acquaintance, she was "somebody who [they]'ve known forever" and in an intimate way. As a member of the community she had "help[ed] people out" and as a result people even went out of their way to assure her that she was fully accepted. As Donna's experience

illustrates, queers' experience of acceptance in rural places can thus provide beneficial opportunities for dis-embedding queer identity from its current moorings in urban space and can provide new understandings of how place, identity, and sexuality can intersect.

Dissatisfaction with the urban queer community

Regardless of having been accepted at home, for rural-born participants, the city was still a symbolic homeland, which, upon 'coming out', needed to eventually be visited. Accordingly, Weston notes that "in relationship to an urban homeland, individuals constructed themselves as 'gay people': sexual subjects in search of others like themselves" (1998:49). Though Weston highlights the fact that many journeys into this homeland do not result in the discovery of the "Promised Land" (1998:49). Rather, some find the urban community to be "insular and exclusionary" (Valentine and Skelton 2003:861). At the same time, the community is also divided by gender, ethnicity, age, and class (Weston 1998:49). Access to and inclusion within the urban queer community are therefore dependent on factors outside of simply claiming a gay or queer identity; the search for community extends far beyond simply entering the space of the city (Weston 1998:49; Valentine and Skelton 2003:861).

Many of my participants' discussions of their 'coming out' and concomitant journeys into the city contained a degree of disappointment. For some, such dissatisfaction with the urban queer community was framed within a contrast between urban and rural space. For instance, Charlotte (58, rural-born) who spent only two years living in Halifax, had traveled between her small town and Halifax attending many lesbian-feminist dances and conferences. While upon first visiting the city, Charlotte felt like she was "home", as a "little ol' small town girl" Charlotte eventually found that she didn't necessarily fit in with the urban queer community:

> Umm the city, I found, like I didn't really meet up to their standards. I wasn't as informed and I didn't know the lingo, the correct way to be, or talk or whatever. I was just me, little ol' small town girl, farmer's daughter. . . . I wasn't able to really. . . I fit in but I was very quiet, because so many of them talked, and their food and their lifestyle was so different than what I was used to. You know, meat and potatoes, I didn't know about garlics and you know, the dishes, and you know, it just overwhelmed me. . . that kind of lifestyle, and culture, and cuisine, I felt like a little country bumpkin, you know (laughs). . . . I felt a little intimidated.

For Charlotte, entrance into the urban queer community involved an entirely new urban lifestyle. Being "informed," knowing "the lingo," and being acquainted with urban "culture and cuisine" were all things that as a working-class farmer's daughter she was unaccustomed to. For Charlotte, acceptance into Halifax's queer or lesbian community was not only dependent upon a being in the right space and having the right identity; it necessitated a certain amount of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1973) or class--that is, a certain kind of knowledge, a certain vocabulary, and a certain type of taste. Although she identified as a lesbian, because she was born and raised on a farm, Charlotte lacked the necessary class prerequisites for being included into the urban queer community. Rooted in her place of birth, and in the physical land, her identification with her working-class, rural upbringing

prevented the space of the city from fulfilling its promises.

Similarly Manny (43, urban-born) though alluding to the current lack of gay community in the small town in which he lives, hypothesized that if there were such a community, it would be more friendly and down-to-earth than that of the city:

> I think the gay community here [in his small town] would be a lot friendlier than in the city. In the city you have some that, you know, think they're better than others, and I find here a lot of them are level-headed. . . . I think just everyone would be more friendly to each other. And there wouldn't be one that is better than the other, or has more money than the other, I think they would all just stick together. Because in the city, like, you have people who think they're too good, and people who have a lot of money, and there are some that don't.

Although during his 'coming-out' story, Manny revealed that he initially found the urban gay community to be "even better" than he had imagined, he now believes that hypothetically, if his town were to have such a community, it would be more friendly and egalitarian. While the city, for Manny, contained people with more money, in the small town, Manny argues, gay people are "level-headed" and would "all just stick together" and not be exclusive to anyone. Like Charlotte, Manny is illuminating a classed distinction between urban and rural queers. While for Charlotte this distinction lies more-so in social class--via the city's culture, cuisine, and language--for Manny, it is rooted in a convergence of economic and social class--urban queer people with more money "think they're too good" and are less "level-headed" and "friendly" than their working-class, rural counterparts.

Returning home

Wilson points out that for many queers, the benefits of small-town living may be as important as, and even override, the benefits of urban sexual collectivity (2000:214). Certainly, the benefits of rural life contain many contradictions: wide-open spaces and sparse populations on the one hand, and small-town claustrophobia on the other (Halberstam 2005:27). Halberstam notes, however, that "the rural queer may be attracted to the small town for precisely those reasons that make it seem uninhabitable to the urban queer" (2005:43). These reasons can include a tight-knit, watchful family. Indeed, among my participants, the most common reason for moving to, or staying in, rural Nova Scotia was family – eight (five of whom were born-and-raised in rural Nova Scotia) cited their family or spouse as being a contributing factor to their remaining within, or relocation to, rural Nova Scotia. For instance Donna (50, rural-born) states:

> I lived in the city [Halifax] just for a couple years, three or four years ago. . . .[Now] I live three or four miles from the place I grew up in. . . I love this place, I love everything about it. I mean, I've been to other places, but this is my home. . . my family is here, my parents are still here, my sister and her partner and kids, yeah, these are the people I grew up with.

Chris (27, rural-born) echoed a similar sentiment: "My father passed away, which brought me back. . . plus, my family was there." Charlotte (58, rural-born) also cites family ties as contributing to her move back home:

> My dad was not well. . . so I basically moved back home because of that, plus I was homesick, plus, you know,

> my whole family was here. . . going up there [Halifax] and you don't even know the person in the next apartment, I found that very different. . . . So I came back home.

For Donna, Chris, and Charlotte, the desire to return to their hometowns was driven by the presence of biological kin. For Donna and Charlotte in particular, this was entwined with a valuing of the place itself. For Donna that place was her home, and while she had indeed lived in other places, it was this place that contained the people she loved; she loved "everything about it." The case was similar for Charlotte. In Halifax, she found that she "[did]n't even know the person in the next apartment," which was quite jarring in comparison to the close-knit community "back home." Her sick father, coupled with her homesickness for her particular hometown, and her distaste for city living in general, brought her back to her rural hometown.

Queer Identities in Place

Recent studies (such as Bell & Valentine 1995; Riordon 1996; Gray 2009) have shown that rural queers are also establishing tight-knit queer communities of their own. Many rural queers have developed support networks, which "facilitate…the creation of spatially disparate but strongly interwoven communities" (Bell and Valentine 1995:116). Developments in global communication technologies have bolstered this, and phone lines, internet, and satellite television have offered alternative ways in which rural queers can locate, experience, and participate in various forms of community (Riordon 1996; Bell and Valentine 1995; Wakeford 2002). Indeed, for some participants, GLBT community and identity was experienced most intensely in rural space. For instance, Donna notes:

> Most of the women I knew and had hung out with were rural, because these organizations were rural-based. I didn't know very many women in the city; I didn't spend much time there. I'd go into the dances or something once in a while…we'd have conferences here [in her rural town], and we always had dances, we always had women's dances, and there was always a lot of lesbian content.

For Donna, a sense of lesbian community was embedded within rural space. Because she was involved in rural-based women's organizations that had their own conferences and dances, she did not feel the need to seek community in urban space. She may visit the city "once in a while," but for her, a sense of lesbian community was experienced most satisfying within her rural hometown.

Donna also prefers her distinctly rural, yet widely-dispersed lesbian community:

> So you know how far apart they are geographically, and yet I feel as much a part of the Pictou community, you know, like, they are my people, as I do with the women on the South Shore. And we've always had gatherings at our houses…and all kinds of lesbians all across the province are invited, and so there's a whole slew of us. So…I think maybe because we're rural, we made an effort... Like, we'd go to these things because it's our community…people who live outside the city aren't afraid to drive…its not intimidating. Whereas…I have friends in the city who don't seem to go outside [the city] that much…Different mindset.

For Donna, lesbian community, though geographically dispersed, is necessarily tied to the rural. "Because we're rural," she notes, "we made an effort. . . it's our community." As such, gatherings throughout rural Nova Scotia are an essential means by which community is formed and experienced. Though rooted in the rural, for Donna, a sense of community also defies the confines of space. Regardless of geographical distance, she feels a sense of community and camaraderie with rural lesbians all over the province. And although spatial distance requires more of "an effort" with regard to travel, for Donna, this is related to a distinctly rural "mindset" or identification, which is derived from living in more isolated, less concentrated places. While urban folk may be intimidated by such long drives, rural folk, she notes, "aren't afraid to drive." Rather, it is a necessity.

The particularities of Nova Scotia as a place also factored into participants' experiences and constructions of GLBT identity and community. Two participants in particular cited local history as having a direct influence on their communities. Bonnie (52, rural-born) for instance explains:

> There isn't a history of that kind of larger, umm queer community in the rural area here, as the history is in Pictou. Um what is here, is a really nice women's community, so it is very comfortable for lesbian and straight women to get together and socialize. So that's kind of nice.

As Bonnie points out, while local history of queer community and organizing is lacking in her particular area, there is a well-established women's community that serves as a means of comfort and community for lesbian and straight women alike. Bonnie also explains:

> For some reason, Pictou county has kinda been. . .kinda has a long history of being a bit of a gathering point for lesbian women. So there's quite a large community of lesbian women in the Pictou area, which is kind of cool.

While her current town is lacking in that history of rural queer community, Pictou, she notes, has a long history of queer community organizing, particularly for lesbian women. Pictou has over the years served as a "drawing card" for lesbian women, and has a history that continues to impact local queer communities today. As Regina (31, urban-born) who was born in Halifax but now resides in Pictou notes: "I could have sworn there was something in the water. . . there is a strong community here that has been here a long time." In these instances, a sense of queer community was not only tied to rurality in general, but a rural place in particular--one that has had a history of queer community organizing unique among other rural towns throughout the province.

Rural living also appeals to those people who wish to create and nurture alternative lifestyles. Alternative communities utilize rural space to embrace the spirituality of nature and the "liberatory healing effects" of non-urban, non-industrial, and non-consumerist lifestyles (Bell and Valentine 1995:118-9). Such communities have drawn links between nature, sexuality, spirituality, and alternative politics; contact with "raw nature" in rural places has offered many the opportunity for spiritual and sexual renewal (Bell 2000:554-5). Such claims to space are also, as Tonkiss points out, distinctly gendered (2005:108). Idealized wilderness has been perceived as the natural site for "unreconstructed" and natural masculinity while nature has been perceived as restorative for emasculated urban men (Bell 2000:555-6). Rural areas

have also had particular links with the lesbian feminist movement (Bell 2000:556; Bell and Valentine 1995; Valentine 2002). Radical lesbian feminism has embraced many essentialist ideas about women's affinity with nature whereby menstruation, child rearing, and a natural relationship to mother earth are framed as linking women and their "natural femininity" with rural space (Bell and Valentine 1995:118). A return to nature has therefore offered lesbian feminists a break from the oppression of the nuclear family, a separation from the man-made city, and above all, freedom from men (Bell & Valentine 1995:118). Such notions were illustrated by Janis (57, urban-born), for whom relocation to the country was directly linked to a lesbian-feminist politic:

> I was a part of the back to the land movement. . . I'll always live in the country, I never will go back to the city. . . changing the world with lesbian feminism. It gave me the confidence to do what I really wanted to do, which is farm. . . . I realized one of my largest dreams in farming. Getting this close to the earth, it's become my lifeblood.

For Janis, lesbian-feminism, farming, and the country are intertwined. Rural Nova Scotia offered her a space within which her political ideologies and personal dreams could be realized. As she states: "feminism, lesbianism, and rural, they're all wrapped together in the country. . . . I've developed my identities in the rural." Janis's identity as a lesbian feminist is directly linked to her identity as a farmer. Her queerness is rooted not only in a rural setting, but is situated within her relationship between with the physical land.

While I have thus far discussed the hegemonic urbanity embedded within narratives of queer subjectivity, and the class- and place- based identifications inherent within rural queers' coming-out narratives and experiences, I now demonstrate the incompatibility of rural queerness with the dominant closet model of sexual identity as well discuss the politics of visibility, illuminating how such politics can in many ways be rendered incompatible with the structures of life, community, and identity in rural places.

Part 3: Rural Queerness and Politics of Visibility

The urban queer spaces that proliferated in the United States during the early 20th century mark the beginning of a distinctly modern as well as Western, and metropolitan, queer identity (Kennedy and Davis 1993:8). As Kennedy and Davis note, the queer identities that prevail in contemporary urban Europe and America are unique to both this culture and time period (1993:8). Accordingly, Foucault argues that the notion of a gay identity and community emerged during a time when homosexual acts were becoming increasingly medicalized and pathologized (1990:44). During the latter part of the nineteenth century, 'the homosexual' became both a personage and a species, which prompted those identified as such to demand acknowledgement and legitimacy as a collectively identified community (Foucault 1990:43,101). This dominant model of sexual identity is characterized as the "closet model," whereby gay subjectivity initially lies dormant, "awaiting only the right set of circumstances to emerge" (Halberstam 2003:163). Mobilizing a collective understanding of what it means to be queer or gay, these modes of self-identification, Weston points out, classify gay people as a finite, bounded group; they employ and universalize a Western conception of selfhood in which sexual acts

and desires are purported to "thoroughly to infuse a self" (1998:33).

While such a model of sexual identity has been privileged within much current and historical queer narrative, rural queerness can complicate or work against such identity claims. Indeed, Halberstam reminds us that not all rural queers leave home to become queer (2005). Thus, we must consider the possibilities that "the condition of 'staying put'" (2005:27) may offer in terms of producing alternative or complex queer subjectivities. For instance, with their relative isolation from metropolitan queer identity, some rural queers may not position sexuality as the "definitive characteristic of self" (Wilson 2000:210), in that doing so could easily negate other parts of their identity such as ethnicity, class, and local familial history or place. Rather, rural sexual communities must be understood as "complex interactive model[s] of space, embodiment, locality, and desire" (Halberstam 2005:45), which may exist in proximity to rather than in distinction from heterosexualities (Halberstam 2005:39). While hegemonic constructions of mainstream queer identity are inflected with urban-ness, so too are rural queer identities entwined with spatially constructed notions of rural-ness.

Often "riddled with insider/outsider social structures" (Wilson 2000:208), Wilson argues, the key to survival in many rural places revolves around social conformity and community interdependence. As such, she notes, the power of small-town loyalty and familial ties should not be overlooked (Wilson 2000:214). In places built upon solidarity, familiarity, and belonging, and where familiar locals are valued above any other identity claim, such ties can work to transform the 'strange' or the 'queer' into something, indeed someone, who is both recognizable and familiar (Gray 2009:31,38-9). As Gray points out, many rural queers enact a "politics of rural recognition" that privilege one's credentials as "just another local" (2009:37) and denounce claims of difference. Accordingly, in speaking with rural queers throughout Canada, Michael Riordon observed that many rural queers find that they are judged and granted acceptance into the community based primarily by their farming abilities, their community involvement, and their roles as good neighbours (1996:47). Indeed, social involvement and community participation are strongly embraced within rural communities and are the primary means by which respect and reciprocity are achieved (Smith and Mancoske 1997:17; Wilson 2000:208; McCarthy 2000). Rather than simply be 'out and proud,' rural queers may express their queerness within and through the norms of their communities. In this way, the spatial construction and experience of gay or queer identity in non-urban contexts can defy or complicate dominant conceptions of the closet model (Wilson 2000:208). Operating as an identity thread rather than core identity, queerness may be negotiated so as not to undermine other elements of one's identity (Seidman 2004:89).

Challenging the Politics of Visibility

Like Anna Clark who aims to "restore agency" (1996:27) to the process by which individuals' sense of self is deliberately constructed in direct personal, material and cultural contexts, I too seek to posit rural queerness as a legitimate identity practice in its own right and not a lesser or lacking version of mainstream, hegemonic, urban queerness. While Gray's "politics of rural recognition" (2009) illustrates the challenge rural queerness can make to the hegemonic, metronormative closet model of sexual identity, it simultaneously illuminates an alternative approach to the politics of visibility. Simply put, identity politics

operationalize identity as a "crucial ground of experience, a course of social knowledge, and a basis for activism" (Halperin and Traub 2009:25); they rely on collective identification as a mode of political empowerment. And as previously noted, the collective definition of such identification is formed by hegemonic metronormative narratives of urban queer subjectivity, which both assumes an urban location and privileges sexual identity above all other identity claims.

Certainly, while the current goals and achievements of the gay pride movement, Halperin and Traub argue, revolve around acceptance and assimilation, they also include the right to be different and be legitimated based upon that difference (2009:3). Visibility politics draw upon this assertion and champion the 'out-ness' and visibility of this difference as instrumental in achieving such legitimation and liberation. Rural subjectivities, however, are in many ways inherently incompatible with such visibility claims. The accomplishment of gay visibility is inherently graphed onto urban space and actually requires the rural as that 'otherness' against which this achievement is measured (Halperin and Traub 2009:9). As such, the visibility politics that underlie modern authentic gay and lesbian identities, are, Gray points out, "tailor-made" for the "population densities; capital; and systems of gender, sexual, class, and racial privilege that converge in cities" (2009:30). The familial reliance, local power dynamics, class relations and cultural marginalization inherent to rural areas render them ill-suited to the strategies of visibility taken up by the predominantly middle-class, urban-focused North American GLBT movement.

It must not be assumed, however, that rural places are "endemically hostile" (Gray 2009:30) or somehow incapable of making room for queer difference. Rather, in order to foster belonging and visibility in rural areas, rural queers must work through the structures of rural life, especially the dynamics of class, gender, race, and place (Gray 2009:4). The combination of physical proximity and social distance or indifference within cities has been theorized as a politics of tolerance whereby differences are by default generally accepted (Tonkiss 2005:23). The internal makeup of cities, or what urban sociologist Georg Simmel referred to as "the conditions of metropolitan life" (1950:410), revolves around the conglomeration of large numbers of people with diverse interests and perspectives. Rural areas in contrast are governed by sameness and familiarity and are organized around an appreciation for solidarity, which is expressed through blending in (Gray 2009:38). Rooted particularly in family connections, familiarity and belonging are central to the structures of rural life.

Indeed, rural constructions of selfhood often revolve around family, which operates as the primary category through which rural dwellers obtain and return respect (Wilson 2000; Gray 2009:37). Family connections, and community standing in general, have tangible consequences; in rural areas experiencing poverty, families are where information regarding employment, housing, and many other civic services often taken for granted in cities, is exchanged (Gray 2009:39). At the same time, strangers who are not marked by a familiar family name or local presence are easily dismissed as intruders meddling in local affairs (Gray 2009:37). In this way, Gray argues, the invoking of family can operate as a key strategy in the politics of rural queer visibility in that it not only allows rural queers to avoid marginalization and be integrated into their local communities, it also maintains their access to the bare necessities needed to simply get by.

While urban queer visibility politics at their very tamest centre on the different-but-equal paradigm, rural queer visibility politics involve a delicate balance of queerness and localness, putting forth a logic of different-but-similar.

My research findings serve as a case in point. For instance, although Janis (57, urban-born) did not move to rural Nova Scotia until she was in her twenties, she attributes her hard work, community involvement and neighbourly connections as granting her respect and acceptance within the rural community. Rural community dynamics in her opinion render rural areas more, not less, capable of acceptance:

> People in the country are more capable of accepting us. They are more dependent on us, and they're more aware of that. . . my involvement has protected me. . . helping people, repairing things. My neighbour was a well-respected member of the community, a very solid neighbour. . . . In the country you're protected by certain things. . . hard work is respected, and they saw that I was working hard, and was working good with people.

For Janis, the community interdependency that characterizes rural areas renders rural folk more capable of accepting difference. Her involvement within the community through hard work, helping people, and repairing things helped her earn respect and acceptance. The fact that her neighbour was "solid" and "a well-respected member of the community" also helped her achieve acceptance, which helped protect her as well as integrate her into the rest of the community.

Bonnie (52, rural-born) who also moved to rural Nova Scotia in her twenties cites a similar experience of community acceptance and integration:

> It's within a context of neighbourliness and friendships and just kind of sharing, you know, going to community events at the local hall, and you know, being a part of the community. I've always felt part of the community, I've never felt any rejection. . . . It just feels very much like, to me, its about who the person is, and if they can trust you, and if you're honest and, so it's not about your orientation, its about who you are as a person.

For Bonnie, being an active member of the rural community through neighbourliness and attending community events deemed her trustworthy and honest enough to gain acceptance and belonging, regardless of her "orientation." This is echoed by Manny (43, urban-born) who also moved to a small town at a later age:

> Sometimes you just get surprised by people. And I find you get more surprised by people in the smaller areas than in the city. . . . Here, I see most people almost on a daily basis that I personally deal with. . . it was once I got working at the store, and I got to meet people that I was very comfortable with, and now. . . everybody that I personally deal with at the store knows that me and [his partner] are a couple. And they keep inviting us up for a barbeque, or drinks, and we have some people that just stop in.

For Manny, it was once he began working at the grocery store and got to "personally deal" with and get to know people on a relatively daily basis that he started to get

"surprised by people" in a positive way. As a grocery store clerk he has become a known member of the community. As such, people have accepted him and have continually invited him and his partner for community events such as barbeques and drinks.

In a similar vein, Chris (27, rural-born) teaches high school in the same town in which he grew up. He states: "99% of my students have been supportive. . . . I mean, [their families] knew me since they were born. It [being gay] doesn't make me different." For Chris, the fact that his students and their families have known him all his life has earned him support and acceptance. Though for Chris being gay "doesn't make [him] different." As he states: "I don't let that aspect define me." Echoing this, Charlotte (58, rural-born) states:

> I know a lot of gay people that I don't hang around with. . . there are many [gay people] that I do hang around with, plus, we all hang around with straight people. . . we have all our friends, I've had my friends for years. Everybody knows [we're gay], we just do everything together. There's a gay couple we hang around with, once a month we get together on Saturday nights, and we have poker games, and you know, some of 'em that goes with us are straight, and some aren't, and you know, it's wonderful. Nobody cares.

Similar to Chris, who does not allow being gay to "make [him] different" or fully "define [him]," Charlotte does not allow sexuality to strongly influence her circle of friends. She socializes with friends, both new and old and both gay and straight, without issue. While "everybody knows" about her sexual orientation, and all of her friends, gay and straight alike, are aware of her and her partner's relationship, and "nobody cares." This, she points out, is "wonderful."

Betty, a lesbian in her late-fifties, who moved to rural Nova Scotia in her twenties, similarly points out:

> [At least] 50% of the community knows who I am and they seem to like me and to have accepted me for what I am, it's not a problem. But I'm not out there "I'm lesbian" I'm just me, I'm just, you know. . . you probably wouldn't even know [that I was a lesbian] if I was in a crowd, you know how you can tell sometimes. But, you know, I fit right in here, no problem at all.

For Betty, sexuality is not the definitive aspect of her identity. Rather, she notes, "I'm just me." While half of the community is aware of and has accepted her sexuality, she is also not "out there" about it. This is also echoed by Bonnie, who notes:

> I was never one to be you know, rash and overt about my orientation. . . . So you know, I didn't push the envelope. . . everybody knows that I'm a lesbian. . . . I don't shy away from being who I am but I am also not overt about my being queer. It's. . . being a part of the community.

For Bonnie, although she is out of the closet, and does not "shy away" from being herself, she is also not "overt" about being a lesbian and does not "push the envelope." Rather, the importance lies in being part of the rural community. Openly asserting her orientation or "difference" at every opportunity could hinder or neglect those parts of her identity. While not denying that aspect of her identity, Bonnie, like Chris, Charlotte, and Betty, values her sexuality without building her life around it; she approaches it as an identity

thread, rather than a core identity (Seidman 2004:89). Such an approach, Halberstam points out, does not necessarily signify the closet (2003:163). Rather for some rural queers the spatial construction and experience of GLBT or queer identity in non-urban contexts may defy or complicate dominant conceptions of the closet model and the politics of visibility (Wilson 2000; Halberstam 2003:163). Contrary to embracing a politics of GLBT or queer visibility, such individuals may seek and gain acceptance of their sexuality not by asserting their difference, but by reinforcing their familiarity and commonality with the members of the rural community.

Conclusions and Future Directions

My research has highlighted and responded to some of the gaps that currently exist within the literature regarding rural queer identity and experience. Since preliminary work on this topic has focused on rural areas in the United States, it is important to address this gap within Canadian context, and examine how rural GLBT individuals approach and negotiate their sexual identities, as well as establish and maintain a sense of community, in a province whose rural population remains at nearly 75%. As my own ethnographic research reveals, in the context of Nova Scotia, the rural/urban binary played a pivotal role in shaping participants' identities and experiences. A rural or 'small town' life appealed to urban- and rural- born queers alike. Often perceived as backward, traditional, and homophobic, rural areas for the participants of this study provided varying levels of acceptance as well as community (both rural and queer).

This article demonstrates how rurality is an immensely pervasive thread of identity that works to complicate dominant models of queer identity and politics of visibility. Examining 'the rural' in this way not only highlights alternative constructions of queer subjectivity, but also exposes the hegemonic urbanity implicit within mainstream constructions of queer subjectivity. Indeed, queer subjectivity is inherently spatialized as urban; constituted within the specific historical conditions of the city, and mirroring processes of urbanization, queer identity is structured as a rural-to-urban migration, with the space of the city working to authenticate modern queer subjectivity. Rural space is simultaneously constructed as the closet from such identities can emerge, and escape. In this way, queer subjectivity is governed by a symbolic urban/rural hierarchy that renders rural queer subjectivities impossible, incomplete, or inauthentic.

While the heteronormativity of everyday space and the 'queering' of it by GLBT communities have been examined within queer studies, the distinction of urban and rural space has not. Rural space, when visible, is often rendered insignificant or hostile to queerness, while urban space is rendered the natural habitat for urban- and rural- born queers alike. An understanding of how class shapes place-based identities as well as mobility across places has also been overlooked. In addition the politics of visibility that characterize the modern GLBT movement are inherently spatialized as urban. This hegemonic urbanism makes invisible the particularities and significance of rural space as the structures of life, community, and identity within rural spaces is incompatible with the basic tenets of mainstream visibility politics. Rather, queer visibility politics in rural areas must work through these unique structures, operating through familiarity, rather than difference. This paper has demonstrated much queer studies' shortcomings in acknowledging and theorizing rural queers' place, and has illuminated the important omissions with regard to rural queer subjectivity that exist as a result.

In drawing attention to such oversights, I have attempted to illuminate some of the important directions future research could take that would, both building upon and departing from existing work, enrich anthropological approaches to queer studies. First and foremost, queer studies needs to follow suit with Howard (1999), Gray (2009), and the growing number of others, such as myself, who are critically interrogating queerness' intrinsic links to the city and are illuminating a multitude of opportunities for revisiting hegemonic conceptions of queer identity, history, politics, space, and visibility. Dis-embedding queerness from its current moorings in urban space through inter-rogating the urban/rural binary and its continued significance despite increasing urbanization would also prove fruitful here in determining the needs of an aging rural queer population. Queer studies could also benefit immensely from a more thorough investigation of class. An understanding of how class inflects queerness, particularly in terms of place identification and spatial mobility, would help queer studies better conceptualize working-class queerness, part-icularly in terms of how intersecting subjectivities based upon ethnicity, class, and spatial origins or hometown create distinct understandings and experiences of GLBT identity and community.

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