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Introduction

There Are No Queers Here

I snaked my way through I-64 traffic, past two car wrecks and several police speed traps to reach Frankfort, Kentucky, by 8:20 that icy February morning in 2002. A regional field organizer from the Kentucky Fairness Alliance (KFA), a statewide lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) advocacy organization, had arranged for me to lobby with a dozen young people and four adults from Berea, a Central Kentucky town of 9,800 people, and I was running almost a half-hour late. I quickly found my fellow advocates crowded around a table in the Kentucky State Capitol's smoky basement cafeteria. They stood out among the gray-haired white men in dark-blue suits who filled the low-ceilinged, fluorescent-lit room silently chain-smoking as they read their morning papers.

The all-white group from Berea sat tightly packed together with their backpacks and winter coats piled on the floor around their feet. An even mixture of young men and women wore Berea College or Berea High sweatshirts. The four adult allies affiliated with the Berea chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) had the tired-but-supportive faces of elders trying to keep up with their younger counterparts' exuberance. As I walked toward them, a tall man in his early fifties with a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard stood up, smiled, and said in a resonating baritone, "You must be Mary." He held out both his hands to shake mine as the youth seated around him also smiled, waved up at me from their seats, and made room for me to squeeze in among them. The excited pitch of the discussion about lobbying strategy and talking points suggested that they were well into a second round of coffee.

After apologizing for being late, I introduced myself, sat down, and asked them if this was the first time they had lobbied together. Two of the younger members of the group smiled widely and said "no," then launched into the following story. The year before, in 2001, a small group

of the same young people from Berea College, a private Christian school, met with their state house representative, Lonnie Napier, during Religious Leaders Lobby Day. The KFA and progressive clergy involved in KFA's Religious Organizing Project co-sponsored the event to educate lawmakers about LGBT issues in the state. "None of us had ever met a government representative before," said Jeremy, a Berea College senior. "I know Napier's family owns a lot of property around town, but I'd never met him in person." The Berea students certainly did not expect their meeting with a local government representative to become a media spectacle.

Jeremy and his friend Seth broke out in laughter as they recounted their barbed exchanges with Representative Napier. "He let me and a couple other guys into his office and then started throwing Bible quotes at us, saying we'd been badly influenced by TV and the Internet. It was weird. He just went off. Then, he tells us he doesn't have to be educated about LGBT issues because there aren't any gays living in Berea!" Napier's claim—professed to two of his gay-identifying constituents—floored Jeremy and Seth. More than 15 people regularly attended the Berea LGBT student group's monthly meetings and many more belonged to its online discussion list. "Berea's got to be the gayest place in Kentucky, outside of Louisville and Lexington!" Seth asserted before returning to the topic of last year's lobbying efforts. Apparently Napier carried the conversation with the Berea students out onto the State Capitol building's steps in range of a local camera crew and reporter covering the 2001 Lobby Day event. The students said that the next day's evening news featured images of Napier shaking his finger in the face of a white young man clutching his backpack straps and looking bewildered as Napier unleashed his fire-and-brimstone condemnations of the gay lifestyle.

LGBT Lobby Day events are quintessential examples of how a politics of visibility can work as a political force in public life. Private citizens coalesce as a community of LGBT people at these events to demonstrate their strength in numbers. Together, they seek to effect change through a public call for social recognition and equal representation. I was intimately familiar with the Berea students' strategies because I was once a queer-youth activist. I moved to San Francisco after college and joined a cadre of dynamic youth leaders, all in our late teens and early twenties, drawn as much to the city's politics as its social scene in the mid-1990s. A range of not-for-profit youth advocacy organizations, like San Francisco's Stop AIDS Project and the Lavender Youth Recreation and Information

Center, provided meeting space and other raw materials for our organizing, but a tight circle of queer-youth activists led the effort to craft and run rallies like California's first LGBT Youth Lobby Day, held January 3, 1996, on Sacramento's State Capitol building steps and in its rotunda.

Hundreds of youth activists from around California bused in or drove to the Capitol for that first Lobby Day to advocate for the passage of what would become, four years later, Assembly Bill 537, a law to protect K-12 students from harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity.¹ A few of the event's organizers, myself included, hailed from small towns, transplants from California's mountain ranges and farming communities. Others grew up in the rural corners of Midwestern and Southern "flyover" states that many city dwellers cannot find on a map. The expectations of conformity and the lack of civic engagement (unless one counts church picnics) that we associated with our upbringings made the idea of publicly reveling in a queer sense of difference ("Let your freak flag fly!") almost unimaginable. Caught up in the excitement of that first Youth Lobby Day, and as only young activists can sometimes believe, we felt we could accomplish anything through these public demonstrations of defiant visibility and collective action.

But the Berea students' Lobby Day experience, which I will return to in the next chapter, demonstrates the dilemmas rural young people face when they rely on similar strategies of visibility and assertions of difference deployed by their urban peers. Unlike urban gay and lesbian communities able to mobilize significant numbers of people and dollars to generate visibility, rural youth and their allies live and work in communities and legislative districts that prioritize solidarity, rely on familiarity, and lack the public or private resources to underwrite sustained, visible dissent to assert queer difference. These are also places where media representations of LGBT people outpace the tangible presence of locally organized constituencies able to or invested in prioritizing queer recognition.

This book addresses how young people in the rural United States who lay claim to LGBT identities confront the politics of gay visibility, expectations, and constraints that define and shape the recognition of LGBT-identifying people in popular culture and public life. I take an interdisciplinary approach to examine how rural queer and LGBT-identifying youth, contrary to popular narratives of escape to urban oases, stand their ground to name their desires and flesh out their local meaning. I take stock of the strategies they use to create belonging and visibility in

communities where they are not only a distinct minority but also popularly represented as out of place. To do so, they must lean on the structures of rural life, particularly the dynamics of class, gender, race, and location. In equal measure, they also use mainstream and new media representations to piece together what counts as an “authentic” LGBT identity and integrate these depictions of “realness” into rural settings. I argue that LGBT-identifying youth and their allies use their status as “familiar locals” as well as tenuous access to each other, public spaces, and media-circulated representations of LGBT identities to rework the boundaries of public recognition and local belonging. They rally these resources not to combat isolation from their senses of self, but to weather the demands a politics of gay visibility poses outside of cities. Along the way, their experiences attenuate claims that political strategies of gay visibility and recognition have brought us universally to the brink of a “post-gay” moment.

I push against assuming that a politics of visibility can lead to what sociologist Steven Seidman characterizes as life “beyond the closet” because, as scholar Eve Sedgwick among others notes, visibility operates as a binary: in order for someone to be visible, to “come out,” there must always be a closet *someplace* where others clamor or struggle to get out.² The rural United States, as I will argue below, operates as America’s perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet. Examining the assumptions that tether LGBT identities to cities and closets to rural communities opens the door to critique the privileging of some queer identities over others that the politics of gay visibility can produce.

I bring together gay and lesbian studies of community and identity, social theories of public spaces, and studies of media reception, particularly the role of new media in everyday life, to frame how sociality, location, and media shape the visibility of LGBT-identifying young people living in rural areas of Kentucky and along its borders. With the help of these academic conversations, refracted through the lens of ethnography—the qualitative study of research participants’ interactions and perspectives—I set the stage for readers to consider how strategies of visibility that currently drive mainstream gay and lesbian social movements in the United States work out in the country. More broadly, I lay the groundwork to make the case that this ethnographic study of rural LGBT-identifying and questioning youth contributes to larger debates regarding young people’s contemporary experiences of sexual and gender identity and the mediation of public engagement in a digital era.

Never Met a Stranger

Small-town life, so the story goes, engenders a kind of “never met a stranger” friendliness—a popular Southern euphemism I heard often during my time out in the country. It is a pervasive ethos, what cultural theorist Raymond Williams might have called a “structure of feeling,” that makes it easy to presume you have known the person ahead of you in the grocery store checkout lane all your life.³ This imagined, affable familiarity animates both the repulsion and fascination many urbanites—particularly queer-identifying ones—feel toward the rural. They might ask, why would any self-respecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person forego the expansive safe havens of urban enclaves like the Castro in San Francisco, Boystown in Chicago, the Village in Manhattan, Brooklyn’s Park Slope, Florida’s Key West and Miami, and West Hollywood in Los Angeles for the suffocating myopia of the sticks?

At the heart of the antipathy between familiarity and queerness is the belief that discovering a sense of one’s queer self requires three things: the privacy to explore one’s queer differences beyond the watchful eyes of those who presume to know everything about one; a visible community able to recognize and return one’s queer gaze; and the safe space to express queer difference without fear of retribution. These conditions considered pivotal to reaching that last stage of identity development called “coming out” are presumed to be part of a city’s fabric (even if, at times, threadbare) while veritably absent out in the country. Even if one questions the availability or existence of these conditions to most urban dwellers, without question rural youth negotiate queer desires and embodiments under different logistical realities.

Unlike their urban and suburban peers, young people living between the metropolises of San Francisco, Chicago, and Manhattan face vastly different access to agencies serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender-identifying youth. Many also live beyond the reach of publicly funded LGBT health programs, community-based support agencies, and visible constituencies able to finance, nurture, and augment such services.⁴ The dearth of capital and community-based resources also means that gatekeepers, like Berea’s Representative Lonnie Napier, can make all the difference. Powerful individuals wield a disproportionate amount of power in setting local agendas and therefore the conditions for LGBT visibility. This leaves little recourse or incentive to risk one’s local acceptance by

registering dissent. 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.

But the ubiquitous presumption that only urban centers can properly foster the kinds of visibility considered essential to LGBT identities and community organizing drove me to ask: What are the queer sexual and gender possibilities in places where the operative assumption is that one has never met a stranger? If access to a visible community of sexual and gender difference is central to the story of urban queer cultural formation, how do the expectations and experiences of prosaic familiarity, central to the organization of rural communities, produce and articulate queerness differently? Where, when, and how do rural youth who seek support for their sense of gender or sexual difference acquire a vocabulary for specifically LGBT identities? And, with the rapid but unequal incorporation of new information technologies into the lives of rural youth and their support agencies, what difference does the Internet's increasing presence—and presumed ubiquity—make to youth negotiating the politics of LGBT visibility in small towns across Kentucky and its rural Appalachian borders?

Epistemologies of LGBT Visibility:

Gay and Lesbian Studies of Community and Identity

The contemporary story of gay identity formation in the United States is that it started in (and could not have happened without) a city. Historian John D'Emilio's now classic argument posited that capitalism's mobilizing forces reorganized same-sex desire into a visible and viable social identity. Masses of young, single individuals discovered new erotic as well as economic opportunities as they migrated from farms to cities at the turn of the 19th century, crescendoing in the post-World War II era.⁵ D'Emilio argued that the anonymity of U.S. cities provided same-sex desiring people with networks of connection. These new "homophile movements," as they were called, defied medical discourses that defined same-sex desires as an individual pathological defect and transformed homosexuality into a collective identity.⁶ Historians like George Chauncey in his book *Gay New York*, for example, added greater nuance to this argument, noting that the racially and class-stratified sexual circuits of gay life in New York City organized more through habits or patterns of congregation than through anonymity.⁷ Nonetheless, the cityscape took center stage as the key site for the rise of gay and lesbian identity and community formation.

Out of this amassing of desire came a visible political movement inspired by the strategies of the new social movements for civil and women's rights that took root in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.⁸ Through a range of political and social strategies, not the least of which was savvy use of mainstream and alternative media, gay- and lesbian-identifying activists of this era demanded legitimacy.⁹ Urban chapters of activist organizations like the Gay Liberation Front and later the Gay Activists Alliance fought nationally on projects ranging from the repeal of sodomy laws that entrapped anyone seen to traffic in the "perversion" of "unnatural" sexual acts to reforms of the American Psychiatric Association's classification of homosexuality as a mental illness. While some activists, certainly radical lesbian feminists, sought broader social revolution through liberation from the confines of heterosexuality, others fought for recognition and validation of gay and lesbian people to live and love just like everyone else.¹⁰ These "wars of position" would later be characterized as a struggle between liberationist and assimilationist politics.¹¹ Both positions, however, work from an assumption that visibility and political dissent operate the same way across space and time and are readily available and universally valued no matter where one might live. Cities are imagined to draw out and bind together the nameless throngs of same-sex desiring and gender-variant people to build visibility and political power. This particular history of gay and lesbian visibility positions the city's capacities to make space for queer difference and consolidate capital as necessary precursors to modern lesbian and gay identity formation.

D'Emilio and other social constructivist scholars, building on earlier feminist critiques, meant to challenge biological assumptions about sexuality and gender roles, and open them to cultural inquiry.¹² But as sociologist Steven Seidman observed, "As much as these [social construction studies of gay and lesbian community formation] challenged essentialist or universalistic understandings of homosexuality, they contributed to a politics of the making of the homosexual minority" (Seidman 1996, 9). The political gains of gay and lesbian organizing made in the 1970s and 1980s buoyed U.S. scholars, particularly gay- and lesbian-identifying ones, to legitimate homosexuality as an object of historical and cross-cultural social formation rather than an individual pathological defect.

Community studies expanded cultural and historical understandings of gay and lesbian urban enclaves and established gay and lesbian studies as legitimate fields of study in the social sciences and the humanities.¹³ Kath Weston, in her exhaustive 1993 review of the anthropological literature

resulting from this boon in gay/lesbian scholarship, characterizes this time period as a shift from incidental “subrosa” references to homosexuality and gender variance as deviations from the norm to a salvage anthropology of “ethnocartography” consumed with locating and redeeming (predominantly male) homosexuality’s centrality to social life.¹⁴

Some of the most important and influential work in and beyond lesbian and gay anthropology, such as anthropologist Esther Newton’s groundbreaking studies of male drag performers and, later, lesbian community in New York’s Cherry Grove on Fire Island, theorized the particularities of place, gender, class, and race as critical to understanding the shape identities take. Newton’s pioneering scholarship and that of others, exemplified by the work of linguistic anthropologist William Leap, laid the foundation for conceptualizing U.S. lesbian and gay urban public life as performative, constructed through the interactions of spaces, politics, and subjects rather than rooted in any intrinsic qualities or characteristics of lesbian- and gay-identifying people.¹⁵ The ethnographies of U.S. lesbian and gay community life that followed could no longer discount or downplay the pivotal role spatial relations played in the particularities and cultural meaning of individuals’ claims to the word “gay” or “lesbian.” At the same time, none of these studies ventured beyond urban communities.

And certainly the need to respond to the tragedies of the AIDS pandemic through much of the late 1980s and 1990s further drove anthropologists and social workers to the urban epicenters of the AIDS crisis. These activist-scholars used their research to challenge the popular representations of HIV/AIDS as a “gay disease” while unpacking the ways institutionalized forms of discrimination and oppression in our national health care and public health systems intersected to accelerate the disease’s spread among gay- and bisexual-identifying men and men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay or bisexual.¹⁶

More recently anthropologists working outside the United States and with diasporic communities have called into question what gay visibility means and looks like in a global context.¹⁷ Evie Blackwood’s work with *tombois* in West Sumatra and Megan Sinnott’s research of *toms* and *dees* in Thailand, for example, draw attention to how individuals’ expressions of female sexual desire and embodiment interlock and work through cultural understandings of gender roles.¹⁸ Tom Boellstorff’s research on *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians argues that through what he calls a framework of “dubbing,” Indonesians take up the fragmented discourses of lesbian and

gay identities circulating in mass media and transform them into locally particular experiences of subjectivity.¹⁹ Martin Manalansan's landmark ethnographic study of gay Filipino men living in the diasporic spaces of New York City calls into question any stable, universal gay or lesbian subject, noting how established norms of gay and lesbian cultures are constantly translated and transformed in specific locations.²⁰ The growth in transgender studies scholarship further complicates how the experiences of transgender people and, as David Valentine argues, the category of transgender itself fit into the coherency of a steady, equally fought march toward non-normative sexual and gender visibility.²¹ Yet all of these studies, to varying degrees, inadvertently carry forward assumptions that cities are the "habitus" of queerness wherever one travels.²² This book is the first contemporary ethnographic study of queer rural life in the United States and the first to consider how the saturation of gay visibility in the media might, particularly through the experiences of young people, challenge presumptions of queerness' proper place.

De-centering Metronormativity

As historical anthropologists James Clifford and George Marcus suggest, a narrative that consistently presumes the absence or impossibility of particular "social forms . . . demands analysis as a narrative structure" (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 112). These narratives do the cultural work of keeping one story visible at the expense of others.²³ Community histories of U.S. gay minorities cohere through and hinge on unrelenting narratives that imagine rural spaces as "gay America's closet," the premodern trappings that must be "left behind to reach gay culture and community formation in the cities" (Howard 1999, 63). The rhetoric of the countryside's "isolation" from gay identity, implicit in this progress narrative (how are you going to keep them down on the farm once they've seen gay Paris?!), helped stabilize gayness as an inherent trait just waiting for the right (urban) conditions to come together so it could come out and proudly shine. Gay visibility is simultaneously given a spatial location and a social value in this formulation. In other words, the narrative of rural to urban migration graphed gay visibility as a political accomplishment onto the space of the city. A politics of visibility needs the rural (or some *otherness*, some *place*) languishing in its shadow to sustain its status as an unquestionable achievement rather than a strategy that privileges the view of some by eliding the vantage point of others.

The language researchers use to describe rural queer experience often presumes pre-existing, yet alienated, sexual and gendered subjects who seek belonging in their own skin and a connection to gay culture that exists in an urban elsewhere.²⁴ By extension, such representations frame rural queer-youth sexualities and genders as “lacking” or “incomplete.” A few researchers have questioned the curious sidestepping of the rural as a site for investigation of queer sexualities and genders. Anthropologist Kath Weston, for example, noted the importance of a rural/urban binary to queer sensibilities of gay urban migration.²⁵ Deploying Benedict Anderson’s concept of an imagined community, Weston argued that the contrasting images of “escape from the isolation of the countryside . . . to the anonymity of the urban landscape . . . [f]rom the start . . . were embedded in the gay subject” (Weston 1995, 274). More recently, queer theorist Judith Halberstam coined the phrase “metronormativity” to characterize this peculiar tendency to conflate the urban with visibility and sexual enlightenment that “reveals the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern U.S. sexual identities” (Halberstam 2005, 36–37).²⁶

Some academic disciplines have been more attentive to the neglect of the rural in thinking through what difference place might make to expressions of queer sexualities and genders.²⁷ Jon Binnie and Gil Valentine note in their review of the cultural geography literature addressing lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexualities how the handful of rural sexuality studies “demonstrate how much we take for granted that lesbian and gay lives are lived in the urban environment” (Binnie and Valentine 1999, 178). Indeed, their summary begins with an overview of where geographies of sexuality have gathered the most data—North American cities—such as the commonly cited study of gay and lesbian space in San Francisco by Manuel Castells and Larry Knopp’s extensive analyses of political economies of gay men’s gentrification of urban spaces.²⁸ The only collection of cultural geography essays that moves beyond the landscapes of the city is *Decentring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, edited by Richard Phillips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton.²⁹ The anthology draws from disciplines such as literary and cultural studies, queer studies, history, and law but does not offer a sociological or ethnographic take on its subject matter.

Despite the recognized neglect of rural spaces noted by a range of scholars, there remain relatively few extended studies of queer sexualities and genders in the rural United States. Two notable exceptions that

contribute to the cultural understanding of U.S. rural queer sexualities and genders centrally inform this book. I will elaborate on the theoretical contributions of these texts throughout this book, but let me briefly offer an overview here. *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, John Howard's vibrant analysis of Mississippi's queer history between 1945–1985, as told through oral histories, draws a picture of male-male desires in the common spaces of house, church, and school in stark contrast to the images of the South as devoid of sexual and gender difference (Howard 1999). Howard's detailed accounts of the racial and sexual lines that order queer male homoerotic desires in the South and centrality of circulation rather than congregation that characterize the making of queer spaces in rural communities directly challenge presumptions that rural spaces cannot sustain rich queer cultures. *The Stranger Next Door: The Story of a Small Community's Battle over Sex, Faith, and Civil Rights*, sociologist Arlene Stein's ethnographic study of a small Oregon lumber town in the 1990s, found that local "culture wars" over sexuality, particularly gay and lesbian people's rights to protection from discrimination, echoed deeper anxieties about the community's economic and social stability and race and class tensions (Stein 2001). Stein brings a similar theoretical complexity to lives lived queerly in rural spaces and, importantly, speaks to how central race and class are to the expressions of queer sexualities and genders in places organized around getting along and discomfort with strangers.

To date, no studies have focused specifically on youth in the rural United States and their negotiations of a queer sense of self and the expectations of visibility that have become a feature of modern LGBT experience and popular culture.³⁰ This ethnography is an attempt to intervene and refocus our attention. These case studies of rural sexualities and genders offer fresh vantage points to consider the links among larger structural issues, such as statewide social-service funding and regional race and class relations, media representations, and day-to-day processes of individual presentations and negotiations of identity.

Queering the Effects of Media Visibility

If visibility is imagined to be the road to acceptance for LGBT-identifying people, much of that recognition circulates through representations in the media. Films, television characters, press accounts of social movements, AIDS reporting, plays, books, and the Internet are where most stories of queer desires transpire. These representations translate queer desires into

LGBT-specific identities and give them a proper locale, typically the city. As such, media are the primary site of production for social knowledge of LGBT identities. It is where most people, including those who will come to identify as LGBT, first see or get to know LGBT people. In other words, media circulate the social grammar, appearance, and sites of LGBT-ness.

Arguably, media's social force seems heightened (sometimes hyped?) in rural places not because of a complete absence of LGBT-identifying or queer-desiring individuals with whom rural youth might identify, but because of the way rurality itself is depicted as antithetical to LGBT identities. Mass media consistently narrate rural LGBT identities as out of place, necessarily estranged from authentic (urban) queerness. These images teach rural youth to look anywhere but homeward for LGBT identities. Should we presume rural queer and questioning youth treat new media technologies as the latest vehicles of escape? Is it possible that, for the rural youth who stay put, new media serve not primarily as "opportunities for the formation of new communities . . . spanning vast distances" but as opportunities to create and consolidate networks much closer to home that are otherwise absent from mass-media representations?³¹

One of the difficulties in researching the role media play in the cultivation of a rural queer sensibility is that it is all too easy to fall back on the presumed properties of the technologies themselves to the exclusion of the social contexts that give technologies meaning.³² Historically, technological innovations in the modern era simultaneously raise society's hopes and stoke its fears.³³ But no technology comes prepackaged with a set of "good" or "bad" traits. Unfortunately, until the novelty of a "new technology" tapers off or is displaced by something newer, media-effects researchers and cultural critics alike cycle through fixations on the good, bad, and ugly that come hidden inside the box—whether it is a radio, a television, or the Internet. This has produced a lineage of media scholarship tightly focused on communication technologies as things that produce effects rather than cultural elements of the complexity of human interactions and our relationships with/to innovation itself.³⁴ These debates over media's strong or weak effects rage on regardless of the media in question.

However, the tenor of these intellectual deliberations reaches a fervent pitch when questions turn to media's potential influence on children. Young people have always been the screens onto which society projects its greatest fears. Film historian Greg Waller, for example, points out the ways early discussions of the nickelodeon concerned issues of effects on

children and their moral character.³⁵ More recently, with the advent of everything from MySpace to Gameboys, new technologies are presented in popular culture as sources of distraction, violence, or allure that threaten the sanctity and safety of children. Judith Levine argues that rather than accept the statistical reality that children are more vulnerable to sexual harm at the hands of immediate family members, society projects its fears onto strangers, seeing media as one of several tools used to lure unsuspecting children. A case in point is the “pedophile panic” that spurred the drafting of the 1996 Communications Decency Act (Levine 2002, 20–44). This panic led to institutionalizing parental surveillance through codes for films and music, as well as v-chips and Internet-filtering software. These preventive measures presume and perpetuate the notion that media have direct and very negative effects on children. Prevention logic suggests one can curtail certain behaviors by regulating access to these media or the content of media itself. Of course, the reality is far more complicated.

Interventions: Breaking the Media-Effects Habit

Out in the Country bridges ethnographic approaches to media from an anthropological perspective and reception or audience studies in the field of communication.³⁶ Ethnographers of the media sometimes forget they are, as Janet Staiger argues, “doing textual analysis” through the interpretation of fieldnotes, interviews, and other mainstays of the ethnographic tool kit (Staiger 2005, 13). Losing sight of this can sometimes lead to framing media as taken-for-granted tools rather than texts with histories and politics to be unraveled.³⁷

Media studies tends to approach the question of representations of social influence of media as a matter of impact. We think the medium itself carries certain properties and, therefore, inherent powers. New media promise to bring about change—slipping it in around mass culture. We attach cultural weight to it as we look to blogs to address our mistrust of mainstream journalism or turn to distance learning to address the increasing costs of higher education. But new media are part of mass culture—the stories they circulate remediate the stories already out there. Often, new media studies perpetuates a “media effects” approach. For example, we might be tempted to imagine that new media technologies allow rural gay kids to escape their rural communities and find refuge and recognition online. But framing the question like this leads us down a dead-end road of inquiry unable to explore how rural queer and questioning youth

engage and transform media as they respond to expectations of visibility and the structures of familiarity that organize their offline experiences. Focusing on new media as spaces that produce online worlds fails to respond to the call of critical cyberculture researchers to examine how “[o]ffline contexts permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into offline experience” (Baym 2006, 86). Media scholars like Nancy Baym call on us to “recognize that the internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life” (Baym 2006, 86).

What we learn from reception and audience studies in media studies, particularly work done with and about youth from theorists like Ellen Seiter and Sonia Livingstone, is that youth engage media in far more complicated ways than we assume.³⁸ Seiter and Livingstone respond to and challenge work that assumes media are deleterious to kids based on presumptions about the particular effects of the medium. They apply an ethnographic and qualitative approach to complicate what “effects” might look like in the lives of young people by studying their everyday uses of media. They treat young people, much as work in new childhood studies and critical youth studies do, as active agents but also a culturally constructed demographic.

What we learn from reception studies, particularly among young people, tends to be adult-centered and adult-monitored; it is driven by questions parents have about their children’s consumption of media and focused on demonstrating how deleterious media are to kids—their negative effects. Some work challenges this. Ellen Seiter, for example, pioneered scholarship in children’s use of the media that worked to understand not only how children make meaning in their lives through their use of media, but also how parental anxieties over children’s media use spoke more broadly to societal tensions over what constituted “proper parenting,” particularly the mother’s role as moral guide. But much of the work on reception studies focuses tightly on the conditions for viewing, centered on the moment of reception itself. How can we break out of this narrow focus to see the more complicated relationships between media and their meaning in our everyday lives? One way is through ethnographic approaches that contextualize media engagements as part of a broader social terrain of experience. Performances of identities require tools. What tools are out there for rural youth to pick up if they seek to express a sense of self that doesn’t square up with the heteronormative expectations around them? What allows for an iteration of a sexual or gender identity that is constructed in popular culture as antithetical to their rural communities? What kind of

visibility can be performed here and through what means? What are the limits of these iterations? What do we need to politically tweak to make queer sexualities and genders more habitable to rural youth? It might be specific enunciations of identity, or it might be creating a politics that does not see visibility as the primary goal, therefore allowing an affinity and political kinship to take center stage.³⁹

Remediating Media Reception and Cyberculture Studies

This book underscores the continued, pressing need to understand media reception not as a singular one-way passive act but as constellations of active moments of engagement saturated in histories and contemporary experiences of raced, classed, and placed identities.⁴⁰ When rural young people watch a TV show or surf the Internet, their sense of who they are, how others see them, and where they live is always part of the picture. To capture a more contextual notion of media reception, I situate the production, consumption, and circulation of media representations and new media technologies within the broader social conditions of rural life—most notably the dynamics of class, gender, race, and location. These conditions afford different access to technology use and social identifications. Paying attention to how rural young people deal with the material realities of their lives challenges theoretical models of media use that presume anything conclusive or universal can be claimed about media’s “effects.”

The politics of LGBT visibility’s demanding refrain to “come out, come out, wherever you are” echoes the rhetorical invocations of disembodied freedoms and escapist anonymity attributed to the “effects” of the Internet. I use the examples of youth turning to online coming-out stories and personal ads to complicate these libratory discourses popularly associated with discussions of “cyberspace.” LGBT-identifying rural young people use new media not to escape their surroundings but to expand their experience of local belonging. They use new media to enhance their sense of inclusion to broader, imagined queer communities beyond their hometowns. They also experience new media as one among several ephemeral moments of public space and belonging. They effectively—though not without cost—suture the queer social worlds they find in their hometowns, on television, and online.

These young people’s strategies offer models for rethinking the relationships among visibility, public spaces, and media, particularly in a digital era. The day-to-day uses of new media as source materials for identity

work also highlights the frayed and fragile edges of a politics of LGBT visibility in communities that battle for basic resources and struggle for community recognition in the broader U.S. political landscape. Without question, new media were central to understanding the distributed and collective underpinnings of modern queer identities among rural youth in the United States. In making this assertion, I am not claiming, as early Internet enthusiasts did, that new media produce new identities.⁴¹ In fact, I am arguing that the more compelling issue warranting investigation here is the critical link between modern identity categories and the circulation of popular discourses vis-à-vis “new” media. Unfortunately, new media studies often neglects how technologies reflect, reproduce, and are embedded with a given society’s gender and sexual mores and ethics.⁴² So, instead of asking whether technologies intrinsically offer political promise for queer youth in rural places, I examine how technologies are used (and not used) across multiple sites for queer-identity work. Under what socio-political conditions do online youth communities make sense? How are broader possibilities of identity representation both enabled and disabled by engagement with these technologies?

This study addresses how these technologies take part in producing and circulating queer categories as well as how the materiality of rural young queer life increasingly—although differentially—involves entanglements with online spaces. I sidestep actually defining “new media” because it is as elastic a category as “rural,” “queer,” or “youth.” While the newness of the media may be relevant, one can never tell from a distance or from the texts themselves what kind of relevance it will have. For rural queer youth, it arguably matters more that today’s media markets are saturated with specific popular discourses defining LGBT identity politics that conspicuously exclude them. Broadcast television programs, like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, as well as niche-market consolidation of queer-owned Internet and print media, such as PlanetOut Partners (owners of Gay.com and PlanetOut.com) and Liberation Publications (publishers of *Out*, *The Advocate*, and Alyson Books), distribute a more standardized image of LGBT people today than early homophile organization publications.

My two contributions to studies of new media and their relationship to social knowledge production draw on the same logic of de-centering. Just as I seek to bring the rural out of the margins, I aim to de-center media as the object of analysis and to shift to a deep contextualization. I theorize the relationship between media and identities as sociotechnical,

never imagining that social identities happen through unmediated processes. I confound distinctions between online and offline to answer the call by critical cyberculture scholars mentioned above. I also draw on media scholars Bolter and Grusin's argument of remediation.⁴³ New media circulate old stories entwining or commingling aesthetics of media forms to keep some narratives and forms of storytelling prioritized over others. In other words, media are products of and do political work.

Young people confound clear boundaries between online and offline worlds by integrating their uses of media and public spaces in everyday processes of identity negotiation and articulation. There's not one site that matters more—they all matter differently at different moments in the narration of the self. I'm looking to de-center media radically to see what else is in the picture—what contexts and conditions make some media engagements and visibilities seem to matter so much, and other times seem irrelevant, to the youth I met. They confound online/offline divides and utopian notions that new media are qualitatively different experiences of sociality because of some inherent quality or properties of the media themselves. As Sonia Livingstone points out, "The simple distinction between offline and online no longer captures the complex practices associated with online technologies as they become thoroughly embedded in the routines of everyday life" (Livingstone 2008, 393–94).⁴⁴ I'm looking at how young people confound distinctions between online and offline and how they draw lines between online and offline to negotiate visibility. Not to hide but to be seen. I am questioning whether this is a qualitative shift in the experience of visibility with access to new media or if it remediates old stories about identity. But experiences—reception or media engagement—cannot really separate out the phenomenological, the rhetorical, and the political. Properties of the media and the rhetoric that surrounds them are shot through with political expectations of what they can and cannot, will and will not do. These discourses hint at but cannot tell us what people try to make them do or how they minimize their impact in their lives. Rural young people's uses of new media disrupt clean divisions between online and offline experiences. Their everyday processes of identity integrate uses of new media, from their selection of words in an e-mail to denote their membership or connection to other Gay-Straight Alliance members to sending out action alerts through a PFLAG listserv to organize rides to a lobbying event. In the first half of the book, I am radically de-centering media to see what else might be in the picture of young rural people's engagements with a politics of visibility.

Affirming claims to LGBT identities may comfort a deep sense of alienation some individuals feel when they push against the grain of heterosexuality and gender conformity, but these claims are not (or need not be) the only route to political and social gains for queer lives and social movement in the United States. This book considers how “metronormative” epistemologies of visibility privilege urban queer scenes. The systematic marginalization of the rural as endemically hostile and lacking the cultural milieu necessary for a celebratory politics of difference naturalizes cities as the necessary centers and standard bearers of queer politics and representations. Along the way all those not able, or inclined, to migrate to the city are put at a notable disadvantage not just by the material realities of rural places but also by the shortcomings of queer theory and LGBT social movement in ways we have only recently begun to explore.

Youth Identities Out in Public

The entanglement through much of the 1970s and 1980s of political and intellectual work with mass-mediated representations discussed above gave rise and recognition to gay and lesbian urban communities.⁴⁵ These same politics of visibility inspired the field of psychology to produce new theories of sexual identity development to explain the presence of all these gay and lesbian people, particularly teens and young adults, flocking to the counterculture scenes in San Francisco and New York. Psychology as a discipline needed to update its definitions of homosexuality once the American Psychiatric Association removed it from its list of mental illnesses in 1973.⁴⁶ Psychologist Ritch Savin-Williams convincingly argues that psychologist Erik Erikson’s theories of adolescent identity formation—the dominant identity development model of the discipline at the time—served as the starting point for a veritable cottage industry in “sexual identity” process modeling to account for the presence of all these homosexuals hanging around the city.⁴⁷ The premise of Erikson’s work is that adolescence is a socially sanctioned life stage of “normative crisis” in which individuals explore and, eventually, integrate facets of their identities, including sexual desires, into a coherent sense of self.⁴⁸ The more than two dozen (and counting) models that Savin-Williams documents are variations on a theme that naturalizes the coming-out process as a series of stages or (more or less) linear trajectories that inevitably culminate in the integration of the healthy, happy homosexual respected and recognized from the inside out.⁴⁹

Both Savin-Williams and sociologist Janice Irvine note that the explosion of this literature on the coming-out process contributed to the construction of a monolithic social category, “gay and lesbian youth,” particularly as an “at-risk population” in desperate need of rescue.⁵⁰ To be sure, there are queer and questioning young people who experience a great deal of pain, frustration, confusion, and eventual relief through their engagements with LGBT identities. The majority of young people I interviewed expressed everything from ambivalence to self-destructive anger when it came to making sense of their sexual and gender identities under the relentless (monotonous) norms of heterosexuality and gender conformity that structured their lives (and those of anyone living in the United States). But, returning to historical anthropologists James Clifford and George Marcus’ warning to be suspicious when cultural narratives of social formations seem to persist and repeat, I want to note that the “sexual identity formation” models Savin-Williams and Irvine critique dovetail too much with theories of gay community formation to be serendipitous. In effect, these models and our popular incorporation of their logic into how we think sexual identity works to pathologize experiences of desires and claims to identities—and by extension places—do not conform to a politics of visibility. As a result, researchers typically assume rural youth lack the resources, capacity, and support to actively foster difference in the seeming homogeneity of their small towns.⁵¹

Theorizing Youth:

Applying Critical Youth Studies to Queer-Youth Identity Work

Rather than presume an absence of critical materials for identity formation, I draw on a sociological tradition that theorizes identity as a highly social, contextual, and collective achievement rather than a psychological expression of an internal process of integration. Far from being the reflection of an inner drive, I argue that youth identities are cultural assemblages that work with the materials on hand.⁵² My approach is deeply informed by the scholarship that falls under the rubric of new childhood studies and critical youth studies.⁵³

New childhood studies takes adult researchers (perhaps many of today’s parents) to task for uncritically applying a developmental paradigm that frames young people’s identity practices as playful experimentation rather than seeing these practices as ways of being in the world.⁵⁴ Children’s and adolescents’ articulations of identity are interpreted strictly as rites of

passage, paths youth travel on their way to adulthood. Under this rubric, young people's experiences of identity are simultaneously understood as the blossoming of an individual's unique character and, paradoxically, the timely appearance of universal characteristics particular to a phase of the human life course. New childhood studies challenges researchers to work against ahistorical, apolitical accounts and universalizing developmental models of children and adolescents. In its place, new childhood studies offers a critical analysis of the "socially constructed nature of childhood and adolescence" replete with the cultural baggage of adult-centered views of the world (Best 2007, 11).⁵⁵

More recently, building on the work of new childhood studies, critical youth studies uses the insights and tools of cultural studies and critical studies of race, sexuality, and gender to engage children and adolescents as active agents and independent social actors rather than passive "subjects-in-the making" (Best 2007, 11). This approach attempts to foreground how power dynamics, including the researcher's relationship to youth participants, produce the cultural knowledge that shapes our understandings of young people. Working from this premise, critical youth scholars seek to acknowledge adults, children, and adolescents as cultural participants working in and through a dense network of power relations. This is particularly the case when it comes to the culturally charged discussion of youth sexuality. As Susan Driver argues, in reflecting on her own pioneering research examining queer youth's exploration of sexual desire through digital video, youth research must respond to and work against the heteronormative "conventional codes of academic knowledge" that "render ambiguous, indirect, and unstable ways of signifying [queer sexual] desire invisible" (Driver 2007, 308).

Studying rural queer and questioning youth identity formations builds on new childhood studies and critical youth studies in two important ways. Unlike the independence and self-determination that define the queer-youth political culture of national LGBTQ youth advocacy programs or queer-specific, urban-based resources and social services, rural young people's engagements with LGBTQ politics are marked by their interdependence with familiar queer adult advocates and non-LGBTQ allies. Since the 1990s and the visibility of "gay youth" as a cultural category, city-based queer-youth activists that followed my own envisioned their work as autonomous from that of adult queer activists (even though it was contingent on capital trickling down from adults). Rural queer and

questioning youth have neither the peers nor the local tax base to imagine such independent political power. This echoes the broader disenfranchisement that challenges all rural-based political organizing efforts. As a result, studying rural queer-youth identities requires critical scholars of youth culture to complicate youth-centered research models to account for adults' active participation in the construction of rural queer-youth identity and community.

I investigate rural queer-youth identities as performative, socially mediated moments of being and becoming or, as queer theorist Lisa Duggan puts it, identity construction as a "process in which contrasting 'stories' of the self and others—stories of difference—are told, appropriated, and retold as stories of location in the social world of structured inequalities" (Duggan 1993, 793). I work against privileging youth experience in ways that could inadvertently essentialize queerness as a stable state of being that some youth possess.⁵⁶ Instead, I legitimize rural young people's claims to queer identities as, by definition, always more than "just a phase" or "experimentation" while questioning the presumption that identities ever start with or settle down to rest in the hands of individuals.

My own use of the metaphor of collective labor in a discussion of youth identity—talking about identity as work shared among many rather than the play of any one individual—is meant to recognize that the assembly and articulation of one's sense of self is, like any other social action, as sociologist Anselm Strauss puts it, "work [that] always occurs in contexts" (Strauss 1993, 95–97). Sociologist Barbara Ponse defined identity work as "the processes and procedures engaged in by groups designed to effect change in the meanings of particular identities" (Ponse 1978, 208). Drawing on Strauss and Ponse as well as the youth studies scholarship discussed above, I define queer-identity work as the collective labor of crafting, articulating, and pushing the boundaries of identities. I frame youth sexualities and genders as labor carried out among and through people, places, media texts, and a host of other circuitous routes. Treating identity as work highlights the strategies youth and their allies employ as they encounter the politics of visibility across these various work sites. I argue that rural youth do the collective labor of identity work differently than their urban counterparts not because rural queer youth have it inherently harder, but because they confront different heteronormative/homophobic burdens. They also bear the weight of a politics of visibility that, I argue, was built for city living.

Methods: Locating the Rural

Over nineteen months, between September 2001 and April 2003, and several short follow-up trips in the summers of 2004 and 2005, I drove around (and around, and around) the regions I describe in this book. I traveled more than 40,000 miles crisscrossing and circling the topography of my research site by the end of my work. I rarely stayed in one locale for more than a few days at a time, often driving from one meeting, event, or informal get-together to the next and then circling back to my Louisville apartment in between when at all possible. Sometimes I spent more time traveling to a remote town (discovering how unreliable online maps are for ferreting out KenTennessee's many unincorporated townships) than at an event or with the youth I drove out to meet.

Some readers might wonder why I chose rural communities in Kentucky and along its state borders for this research. Probably like most West Coast latchkey kids of the 1970s and 1980s, reruns of TV sitcoms and old PBS documentaries about President Johnson's War on Poverty framed the few images I had of this region. Even though California is rarely imagined to contain "rural" within its borders, there are plenty of small towns (including my own) in my home state that I could have studied and with which I would have had greater familiarity. But I wanted to exploit the reputed chasm between "the rural" and "the urban" to examine the layered cultural work such a binary produces. First, I wanted locate my research in an archetypal rural space that loomed large in the cultural imaginary of the United States. Doing so would allow me to investigate which stories of everyday life structure the mythology of a clear and clean divide between "rural" and "urban."⁵⁷ Related to this, I also sought to question the presumed ubiquity of new media technologies in the United States and to challenge conversations about the digital divide that tend to be narrowly concerned with questions of technology's availability (particularly "elsewhere") rather than social accessibility. While Internet access, for example, may be available in rural areas of the United States, its technological presence cannot (and should not) be easily equated with technological access and equal distribution. Selecting rural U.S. communities as a fieldsite troubled facile, colonialist-inflected distinctions between "developing" and "developed" worlds and what difference technological presence means absent the political conditions and will to ensure its equitable use. If I wanted to bring into relief the unexamined metrocentricity of scholarship on queer identity and

community formation, I needed to radically de-center cities from my investigations and let rural young people's experiences and negotiations of queer subjectivity shape my understanding of where cities fit in their lives.

I spent the first two months of my research familiarizing myself with Louisville, Kentucky, and volunteering as an adult mentor with the Louisville Youth Group (LYG), a small nonprofit support organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning young people under 21 years old. LYG's sole employee, a charismatic leader who had co-founded the group as a teenager, coordinated LYG's activities from her donated (unair-conditioned) office space on the third floor of a local church. LYG's youth leaders and its director planned campouts, drag show fundraisers, and Big Brother/Big Sister-type mentoring projects that matched local youth with adults in the community. Its weekly support group meetings moved between another donated church space located downtown and the offices of a well-known area LGBT advocacy organization. I soon realized that many of the youth who regularly attended LYG's weekly meetings traveled from rural counties as far as two hours away, sometimes carpooling with friends, other times driving alone, to take part in the two-hour meetings and post-meeting gatherings in which the group of twenty to twenty-five boisterous teens typically relocated to a nearby fast-food restaurant. The contingent of rural youth who routinely drove one hundred miles each way—typically in one evening—to attend LYG events quickly confounded the simple distinctions I had drawn between rural and urban lives.⁵⁸ I needed to be as mobile as the rural young people I hoped to get to know if I wanted to understand their sense of place in the world and its relationship to their identities.

With the help of youth I met at LYG and through regional and state-wide youth and LGBT advocacy agencies, I anchored my research in several small towns and rural communities, most with populations between 900 and as large as 15,000 found in what is referred to by the U.S. Census and Appalachian Regional Commission as the Central Appalachian Region.⁵⁹ I also included young people and adult participants living in communities in Kentuckiana, the areas along the Kentucky and Indiana borders of the Ohio River, and the Tri-State region joining Illinois, Kentucky, and Indiana. Most of my time, however, was spent with youth living in Central and Eastern Kentucky, particularly young people in communities nestled deep in the valleys and winding roads that make up the mountainous border that bridges Kentucky and Tennessee, a stretch of

Appalachia called KenTennessee.⁶⁰ All place names are pseudonyms, but the features of the areas—such as the commercial, industrial, and physical landscape—are consistent. In some cases the exact town populations mentioned are obscured to protect participants' privacy. All participants' names are changed to provide anonymity to individuals and those easily associated with local groups or well-known local personalities. Most of the names of public figures associated with state and national organizations are unchanged.

Following what anthropologist George Marcus refers to as a practice of "mobile ethnography," or more commonly called "multi-sited ethnography," I focused on a strategy of following the "connections, associations, and putative relationships" that connected the rural youth I met and that they cited as important to them (Marcus 1995, 96–97).⁶¹ Ethnography traditionally seeks a holistic view of a single site—a coherent deep reading of the local. Marcus' notion of mobile ethnography does not seek a holistic view of a specific location. This stretches the usual limits of ethnography not from a local to the global but toward what Marcus sees as an effort to get at the context or social systems embedded in cultural formations, in my case a politics of LGBT identity formation. This approach turned out to be well-suited for looking at how rural LGBT-identifying young people constantly reworked boundaries, both local and virtual, to address the politics of LGBT visibility in places defined by adherence to solidarity through sameness. By contesting the presumed distance between an urban "us" and a rural "them" and facile distinctions between "offline" and "online" social spaces, this mobile ethnography allowed me to challenge the colonialist residues of modern ethnography that uncritically presume and dismiss the rural United States as backwater, outmoded, and isolated though rarely acknowledged as an "other" America deeply marginalized by the processes of modernity and globalization.⁶²

It was not hard to find people interested in discussing the experiences of rural young people and how they negotiate a queer sense of sexuality and gender.⁶³ The area's vibrant network of young people and their advocates were neither confined to their small towns nor as isolated from resources in the way I originally imagined them to be. I met youth, their parents, adults with now-grown gay and lesbian children, social-service workers, church officials, earnest lobbyists like Berea's citizens, and the legislators they lobbied scattered across the region, blurring not only lines between rural and urban but also lines among counties, states, and national organizing efforts.

Most striking in this study were the small numbers of young women and youth of color of different genders available and/or able to participate in this discussion. White teenage men overwhelmingly dominated the friendship circles I tapped for participation in this project. Of the thirty-four youth I interviewed in-depth, thirty-one are white. This racial homogeneity superficially reflects the ethnic makeup and distribution typical of rural communities in these regions described in the chapters that follow. But much like the census data itself, it does not reflect the growing population of immigrant communities of color, particularly undocumented Latino workers and their families who go undercounted and misrepresented.⁶⁴ Less than a third of the participants (eleven total) identified as young women, compared to twenty-three young men. I discuss the reasons for the gendering of this difference in this book's Appendix, but, needless to say, it is a severe limitation to this study. Debra Tolman's discussion of sexual desire experienced by young women notes how bisexual- and lesbian-identifying young women feel particularly isolated and may offer some insight as to why they would be reticent to share their stories. Like the young women in Tolman's research, the rural young women I met were "highly aware that a lot was at stake for them because of their desire" (Tolman 2002, 185). Young rural women who identify as lesbian or bisexual or express a desire for other young women commit what Tolman called "a double violation" because "they feel sexual desire and it is for girls" (Tolman 2002, 185). Tolman, citing Rose Weitz, suggests that bisexual or lesbian girls "exempt from the institution of heterosexuality, in fact stand in a very different and threatening relationship to it, by violating its most core principle: that [they] are, by nature, attracted to the opposite gender only . . . these girls have an 'uncontained' sexuality that heightens social anxiety and thus instigates violent reactions" (Tolman 2002, 185). Indeed, several young women I met were willing to talk about their experiences but were unwilling to document them or consent to have them included in this research for fear of "blowing their cover," as more than a few young people put it.

Of the thirty-four youth I formally interviewed, three identified as transgender and all three were white: one 17-year-old female-to-male transsexual, one 17-year-old male-to-female transsexual, and one genderqueer-identifying 19-year-old. In most cases, youth used words to describe their sexualities that were familiar categories: gay and lesbian were the most common terms; bisexual was used occasionally. The median age of youth participants was 16-and-a-half years old.

I attended weekly youth agency meetings, *Queer as Folk* viewing parties, drag show fundraisers staged in barns, and a litany of prayer services among affirming and condemning representatives of the Christian faith. The thirty-four young people between 14 and 24 years old shared their stories through phone and in-person interviews. Our one-on-one conversations typically lasted anywhere from one to three hours. I also captured a handful of interviews from chat-room marathons or a flurry of e-mail exchanges. Among one-third of the interviewees, I used a combination of offline and online interviewing—in most cases using e-mail to follow up on questions generated from face-to-face discussions.⁶⁵

Working Identities: A Note on the Use of Language

I use the term “queer” to characterize the action of identity work, much as Tanya Erzen does in her study of the ex-gay movement, to account for how these social interactions disrupt the norm, even when it might mean striving toward the normative identity category “gay” (Erzen 2006, 14). Like Michael Warner, I also use “queer” “in a deliberately capacious way . . . in order to suggest how many ways people can find themselves at odds with straight culture” (Warner 1999, 38). I frame sexual and gender identities as queer labor carried out between people and places, to map the modern experiences, conditions, and expressions that produce a sense of “authentic” identity. The authenticity of identity from this perspective reads as an ongoing, at times exhausting, dialogue rather than a reflection of reality. It refuses the inclination to be lodged in a singular person, place, or thing.

Some youth did see themselves as consciously queering their community’s norms, but far more used “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” or “transgender” as a noun to name a self-evident, core sense of their identity.⁶⁶ Yet, despite efforts to stabilize and normalize their sense of self through concrete labels, rural LGBT-identifying youth and young people questioning their heterosexuality and gender identity necessarily disrupted (in effect, *queered*) their surroundings. Their mere presence defied local and national expectations no matter how much they might conform to the most normative gay and lesbian standards. In doing so, rural LGBT-identifying and questioning youth complicate critiques of “homonormativity”—gay and lesbian conformity and liberal appeals for acceptance—and perhaps signal the need for rethinking what homonormativity means in locales where even queers assume LGBT-identifying people are out of place.⁶⁷

Drawing on scholar Shane Phelan, I maintain that the usefulness of the term “queer” may be that it names “an unstable identity process” (Phelan 1997, 60) less intentionally claimed by individuals than unpredictably carried out through their interactions.

With almost uncanny consistency, regardless of self-identification, young people and their allies spoke more broadly of belonging to “the LGBT community.” My use of the term “community” is meant to acknowledge its importance as an organizing principle to the people with whom I worked more than to signal my belief in its existence beyond an aspiration or ideal.⁶⁸ When youth referred to others, unless discussing a specific person, they referenced “LGBT (or GLBT) people” collectively—as a bloc constituency. I found it striking that so many youth consistently referenced the lineup of political identities most often cited by our national advocacy organizations. Then I realized that several of these young people regularly read the lesbian and gay community website PlanetOut.com’s news headlines and action alerts posted on the Human Rights Campaign and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force websites. I did the same thing as someone trying to follow national debates about the Bush administration’s efforts to push the debate around a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage or follow which states would be putting an anti-gay marriage measure on their November ballots. The social-service parlance of “LGBT” has become commonplace in the politics of visibility and indexes how deeply steeped some of these youth are in that political culture. So the pervasive use of “LGBT” as a phrase among youth commuting to social-service agencies like urban-based youth groups is not surprising. Like any jargon, it served to mark youth “in the know” and seemed to have been readily picked up by their peers less politically engaged or connected to urban-based social services. The circulation of “LGBT” also marks a strategy rural youth and their urban political counterparts share—a move toward solidarity and a sense of familiarity that precedes connection to an on-the-ground community.

References to a coherent and tangible “LGBT community” speak to the power of nationally mass-mediated conversations to manifest an “imagined community” of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people whether L, G, B, and T-identifying people are present or not.⁶⁹ From LGBT characters on primetime television or in movies to the online community spaces of popular LGBT websites and news coverage of the gay marriage debates, media play a central role in circulating the meaning of “LGBT” identities. These circulations narrow and elide queer experiences of desire

as they produce some identity work over others. As anthropologist David Valentine so convincingly demonstrates in his study of the subtle erasures of subjectivity that happen when categories, like “transgender,” coalesce in institutions charged with serving the people they name, “If the categories we use to talk about our worlds contribute, at least in part, to how we shape action in the world, then we must think about how they impact on those whose categories might be different from ours” (Valentine 2007, 31).

Roadmap: Chapter-by-Chapter Overview

Each chapter illustrates how dense networks of familiarity and estrangement intersect with places and strategies for negotiating a politics of visibility. These negotiations work out the boundaries of identity for queer and questioning rural youth. The book opens by picking up where the indefatigable Berea citizens’ lobbying efforts to be seen by Representative Napier left off. I detail the meaning and use of “family” in the political and social work of local chapters of the national organization Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. This analysis is juxtaposed with a thick description of how one local organization—the Grayson County Homemakers Club—brought the discussion of gay teens to the center of its small town of Leitchfield, Kentucky. Together these two cases demonstrate how both national and local activist communities deploy and complicate metaphors of “family” and legitimate “localness” to strategically move LGBT youth from the category of “queer strangers” to recognizable locals who deserve community support.

Shifting from a focus on the presumed intimacies of home and family, the book lays out examples of public spaces available for identity work in rural communities. It highlights in chapter 3, for example, the battle over Gay-Straight Alliances in rural schools and the struggles of the only rural chapter of the national nonprofit organization Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. Chapter 4 chronicles the experiences of young people doing drag in the aisles of Wal-Mart, and the productive, fragile nature of such performances of identity work in rural communities. These examples illustrate how, in response to rural America’s increasingly privatized and impoverished structural conditions, LGBT youth and their allies make the most of the spaces available to them by creating what I described above as boundary publics.

Having firmly established the presence of LGBT-identifying youth in rural spaces, chapter 5 moves to critically examine how rural young people

experience online coming-out stories, personals, and LGBT-specific web portals as sites of information—discursive practices toward a lived “queer truth.” In concrete ways, young people talked about these media texts—what I call a “genre of queer realness”—as resonances of their own, lived experience as well as evidence of others like them living beyond their small communities.

Chapter 6 examines how two trans-identifying rural young people experience their very different engagements with the same Discovery Channel documentary. The comparison is used to highlight how the dialectic between digital circulations of realness and material conditions of class and location shape queer-identity work. These two analyses suggest that a media-circulated “genre of queer realness” sets particular expectations of normative transgender embodiment. At the same time, the conditions of rural young people’s lives—such as class status and its links to physical location and access to health care—importantly reconstitute and transform these popular discourses of what it means to be LGBT-identified and how to go about becoming a “real” lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans-identifying person.

The concluding chapter ties the book’s arguments together to consider how expectations of gay visibility work through and against structures of familiarity, boundaries of public spaces, and engagements with media to produce rural queer-youth identities. I reflect on how the cultural value and weight assigned to visibility position new and mass media as libratory tools that will lead rural queer and questioning youth out of the wilderness of their presumed isolation. Ultimately, *Out in the Country* questions how the taken-for-granted binaries of rural/urban, closeted/visible, and online/offline work together to privilege ideologies of visibility and produce isolation irrespective of where one lives, universally marginalizing queer lives beyond metropolises in the process.

The book’s Epilogue returns readers to several rural communities and offers updates on the whereabouts of key participants introduced in the book. It opens with a discussion of the 2004 passage of Amendment 2, Kentucky’s state constitutional referendum banning same-sex marriage. I use the fight over this measure, waged right after I completed the research for this book, to assess what Amendment 2 and the broader national fight over gay marriage mean to young rural activists facing arguably more pressing day-to-day political struggles for safe schools and access to LGBT-positive health information and care. Kentucky’s skirmish over gay marriage, as it played out in rural communities, underscores the need to

more closely examine national gay and lesbian political strategies rooted in assumptions about the power and place of visibility that may operate differently outside of urban environments.

As media scholar Suzanna Walters persuasively argues, LGBT-identifying people are perhaps better seen in the media today than ever before, but we are not necessarily better known (Walters 2001, 10). Rural young people's limited successes deploying a politics of LGBT visibility—drawing on public claims to LGBT identities to disarm naysayers like Representative Napier—underscore the dilemmas of living in an era of unprecedented media visibility (“gay people are everywhere—on TV!”) without a national consensus that prioritizes (let alone politically defines) the welfare of LGBT people. Arguably, similar cultural and political pressures compel urban and rural queer folks alike to name their identities and seek validation and legitimacy through acts of public recognition. The politics of visibility that have come to define authentic LGBT identity, however, are tailor-made for and from the population densities; capital; and systems of gender, sexual, class, and racial privilege that converge in cities. Rural youth confront these politics with a shortfall of LGBT-identifying people and dollars. They also depend almost exclusively on non-LGBT-identifying allies and media representations to answer the call to stand up and be recognized.

I do not assume, however, that rural communities are endemically hostile to or unable to make room for queer difference. Instead, building on work exemplified by John Howard and Arlene Stein, I argue that reliance on family, local power dynamics, class and racial politics, and the cultural marginalization that structures these specific rural communities render them ill-suited to strategies of visibility currently privileged by the priorities of the United States' predominantly middle-class, urban-focused gay and lesbian social movement. In working against the assumption that visibility signifies or produces the same kinds of social identities, this book moves the discussion of LGBT youth identity formation away from the private world of individual negotiations of the closet and places it in the thick of a politics of visibility as played out in the rural public sphere.

I hope to challenge pervasive stereotypes of rural places as static and monolithically repressive and push us to rethink metrocentric assumptions of what it means or looks like to be “isolated,” in need of “outreach,” or “out” in public spaces beyond the city's limits. If we are to improve the quality of life lived queerly from a range of social locations, including rural places, we must, as African American Studies scholar Marlon Ross

suggests, “unpack the closet paradigm” (Ross 2005, 179). I take up Ross’ directive to consider the consequences of LGBT visibility in communities where one’s reputation as a familiar local is valued above all other identity claims in a popular media and political milieu that excludes rural landscapes except as scenes of queer tragedy and horror.

Analytically, rural youth’s negotiations of a politics of visibility demonstrate that late-modern identity work engages media and demands a public no matter where you live. Queer-identity work done in places thin on privacy, reliant on familiarity, and shy on public venues for sustained claims to queer difference produce differently—not less—mediated or declarative queer pronouncements than urban LGBT communities. My argument is that the recognition of those pronouncements depends deeply on one’s surroundings.