We Really Do Live Here:
Strategies for Rural Queer and Trans* Women

BY

AMANDA A. STEWART
B.A., Luther College, 2003
M.A., University of Manchester, UK, 2005

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Defense Committee:

Lorena Garcia, Chair and Advisor
Nilda Flores-Gonzalez
Pamela Popielarz
Barbara Risman
Laura Carpenter, Vanderbilt University

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SUMMARY

This project draws on in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of queer and trans* women in rural spaces. As much of the existing scholarship on queer and trans* lives focuses on men in urban spaces (Armstrong 2002; Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani 2009; Chauncey 1994; Dugan 2005; Ghaziani and Fine 2008), it is not only important to bring the experiences of queer and trans* women into the discourse, but also to consider how rural spaces, often considered less welcoming (Aldrich 2004; Brown et al 2007), can be conducive to queer and trans* lives. My dissertation considers the following key questions: 1) Why do queer and trans* women live in rural locations and what social processes have informed their current residency in the rural locations and 2) What role does rural residency play in their sexual identity formation, as well as their sexual relationships and practices and experiences with partnering?

Using literatures from urban and rural sociology, geography, gender, sexualities, and queer studies, I argue that rural spaces, while often considered unwelcoming and closed minded, can also be conducive to queer and trans* lives. This dissertation focuses specifically on the strategies that queer and trans* women use to negotiate the places where they live and the associated challenges. These strategies include creating communities and families of support, strategic outness, concealing identities, living openly, and creating visibility, tolerance and acceptance in their communities. This project not only advances scholarship on rural queer and trans* lives, but also furthers understandings of queer and trans* sexualities and desire, which have been only minimally considered previously.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Having spent the past fifteen years living in Chicago, I often traveled back to my hometown in rural north central Iowa to visit my family. One early, midsummer evening in 2013, I was driving back to Chicago after spending a long weekend with my family. Just before exiting onto Interstate 380 in central Iowa, I noticed a new billboard that was mostly white with bold black characters, erected at the edge of a cornfield. The billboard read, in all caps, "VOTE MORALLY – ABORTION AND GAY MARRIAGE IS NOT GOD'S PLAN." Despite the fact that gay marriage was legalized in Iowa in 2009, making it the fourth state is the U.S. to legalize same-sex marriage, this issue was still very much on the minds of some people in this rural community. The sign remains, to this day, even after the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of Obergefell v. Hodges legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states. Every time I pass this sign, I ask myself, "How do people live here?" At the same time, I very much realize, as a person born and raised in a community with a population of less than 8,000, that queer and trans*[1] individuals do live and, in many cases, raise families in these communities. While this sign is not the sole inspiration for this project, it does get at one of the big picture questions that I'm asking – How and why do rural queer and trans* women live in rural locations? Like many queer and trans* individuals who were born and raised in rural communities, but no longer reside in these spaces, I have often wondered what it would be like to return as an adult. As I work to complete this dissertation, I am getting a glimpse into this reality as I've relocated to a smaller town in the rural Midwest for my first full-time position. Having now come full circle, I'm beginning to not only see, but also experience some of what my respondents discussed in their

[1] Trans* is used to indicate the inclusion of gender identities such as transsexual, transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, gender-fluid, agender, etc.

interviews and will continue to build my own understandings and strategies of rural queer and trans* living as I construct a life for myself and my family, alongside my partner, a transman, in this small university community.

Much of the existing scholarship on queer sexualities is attached to geographic locations, most often urban locations (Armstrong 2002; Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani 2009; Chauncey 1994; Dugan 2005; Ghaziani and Fine 2008). Urban contexts are seen as safe spaces that allow for political organizing and creating queer identities and visibility (Castells 1983; Knopp 1987). In contrast to urban spaces, rural locations are considered less welcoming (Aldrich 2004; Brown et al 2007) and lacking in supportive sites for the construction of queer identities, relationships, and social networks, such as community centers and bars (Kramer 1995). There are multiple factors leading to these characterizations about rural contexts, including strong religious views and conservative political and social understandings that shape the everyday lives of rural residents (Smith and Mancoske 1997; Beale 1993). For instance, survey data indicates that those living in rural spaces have more negative attitudes about homosexuality than urban residents (Eldridge, Mack, and Swank 2006). But generally, research on queer and trans* individuals in rural spaces is in need of development. The existing literature on queer and trans* persons in rural spaces, while important, primarily centers on the experiences of men (Fellows 1996; Bell 2000; Kennedy 2010) and to a lesser extent on youth (Gray 2009; Poon and Saewyc 2009). Limited is our understanding of the experiences of queer and trans* women in rural spaces. While some scholars have started to shift their focus to this group of women, the existing research tends to concentrate on small sample sizes (McCarthy 2000), queer men *and* women rather than only on women (Kazyak 2011), and a single geographic location (Smith and Holt 2005; Yost and Chmielewski 2011).

While much of the current scholarship on queer and trans* lives focuses on urban locations, my dissertation advances knowledge on women, and sexualities more broadly, by exploring the experiences of queer and trans* women in rural communities. While my respondents do experience hardships in their rural lives and communities, their desires to be and remain in these locations outweighs anything negative that they have experienced. It's not only critical to bring these understandings into academic discourse but is also important to show how rural spaces can be conducive to queer and trans* lives.

More specifically, my qualitative study explores the following key questions:

1) Why do queer and trans* women live in rural locations? Specifically, what social processes have informed their current residency in the rural locations?
    - How do queer and trans* women understand their experiences in rural spaces?
    - What social processes contribute to variations in their experiences?
2) What role does rural residency play in their sexual identity formation, as well as their sexual relationships and practices and experiences with partnering?
    - How do rural queer and trans* women form romantic and/or sexual partnerships? Where and how do they seek out potential partners? Who are considered desirable partners? Who becomes partnered with whom? How are these partnerships maintained and/or why do these partnerships end?
    - How do rural queer and trans* women experience sexuality and sexual pleasure? How do their sexual experiences, practices and behaviors differ depending on their relationship status (single, looking, partnered, short term v. long term partnership)?

While the research on queer and trans* individuals in rural spaces does indicate that there are challenges to living in these locales, we should not readily assume that this applies to all rural contexts or dismiss these places as being less sexually enlightened in comparison to urban locations. My research challenges this dichotomous understanding of how geography shapes experiences by systematically exploring those of queer and trans* women. The greater goal of

this project is to not only advance scholarship on rural queer and trans* lives, but to also further explore understandings of queer and trans* sexualities and desire, which have only been minimally considered previously.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 33 rural queer and trans* women, this dissertation specifically considers the strategies that these women use to negotiate the places where they live and the challenges that are associated their rural lives. The outline of the dissertation is as follows. In Chapter 2, I bring together literatures from urban and rural sociology, geography, gender, sexualities, and queer studies to show that there is a significant gap in the overall literatures on rural spaces, often referred to as the urban/rural divide. By considering these literatures, I identify a greater gap, specifically the overall lack of literature focusing on the experiences of queer and trans* women, including those relating to partnering and sexual practices. Chapter 3 considers the methodology of the project. Chapter 4 focuses on the overall strategies that queer and trans* women use in their everyday lives and interactions. The analysis, based on the ways that those who I interviewed discuss their everyday lives and interactions with individuals, groups, and institutions, shows how queer and trans* women use a range of strategies, depending on where they're at as well as the situations and processes which they're attempting to navigate. These strategies include creating communities and families of support, strategic outness, concealing identities, living openly, and creating visibility, tolerance and acceptance in their communities. While some individuals use a single strategy, others employ a combination of strategies as they work to negotiate their everyday lives in their rural communities. Chapter 5 builds on the previous chapter by specifically considering the topics of community and belonging and the strategies that these women use to not only negotiate these topics but also to work within the various social processes and circumstances related to

economics, employment, safety, and discrimination that they face in their everyday lives. In Chapter 6, my final substantive chapter, I focus on the relationships that queer and trans* women have in rural spaces. Continuing with the theme of strategies, I focus specifically on interpersonal and romantic relationships. The analysis builds on the strategies that have already been considered in previous chapters. The chapter also expands on Chapters 4 and 5 by considering what strategies individuals and couples use in their everyday lives as they navigate dating, sexual practices and desires, as well as the interactions that they have with their partners. In my conclusion, I consider implications of my work and the need for future research on queer and trans* families and racial and ethnic minorities in rural spaces.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE

Defining Urban and Rural Spaces

It has been argued that there is "no single universally preferred definition of rural that serves all purposes" (Flora 2008:8). Both the United States Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) have established a method for classifying spaces as urban or rural. According to the Census definition, which is based on the population density per square mile of an area and the population per square mile of surrounding areas, any territory, population, and housing units that are not classified as urban are classified as rural. Urban areas are defined as those places with populations of 50,000 or more (US Census 2012). Rural is thus defined as any place that is unincorporated or a Census designated place that has a population of less than 2,500 and is located outside of an urbanized area.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), part of the Executive Office of the President of the United States, has a more complex method of defining urban and rural that focuses on the integration of rural and urban spaces and acknowledges that most counties in the United States are comprised of both urban and rural areas. With this in mind, the OMB defines, what they call metro areas as: "1) Central counties with one or more urbanized areas. 2) Outlying counties that are economically tied to core counties as measured by work commuting" (Flora 2008:8-9). According to the OMB, any areas that do not fit these criteria are classified as rural.

While both the U.S. Census Bureau and OMB definitions of rural are valuable for governmental classification purposes, scholars focusing on queer individuals in rural spaces have discussed the importance of not automatically applying these definitions in their research. For example, Preston and D'Augelli (2013) discuss the difficulties they have had with definitions of rural, as there is no consensus among rural sociologists. In their work, which focuses on how

stigma operates in the lives of rural gay men, Preston and D'Augelli use a range of methods to determine rural residency, including asking potential informants to describe their place of residence, relying on US Census based county designations and zip codes and drawing on central place theory,[2] which considers "where goods and services are marketed to populations of less density surrounding more densely populated central places" (2013:8). Other researchers have used this multi-method technique to identify AIDS service organizations in places with populations of less than 50,000. These organizations were then used to help locate social networks of gay men (Baer et al. 1997). And Bealer and colleagues (1965) also assert the need for a more careful consideration of what is meant when an area is defined as rural.[3] In classifying a community as rural, they suggest looking at ecological, occupational, and cultural dimensions, rather than just relying on a simplistic, often population-based measure.

In her work on rural gays and lesbians, Kazyak (2011; 2012) initially used the Census definition of rural but found that many of her potential respondents still considered their communities to be rural, despite being from places with populations larger than 2,500. Kazyak thus sought out a more expansive definition and instead opted for the definition used by the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that defines areas with populations of less than 50,000 to be rural (USDA 2012). This allowed her respondents to be able to identify the areas in which they live based on their own definitions of rural rather than those definitions that are imposed by state or governmental entities.

Queering the Urban/Rural Divide

Within popular discourse and research, rural spaces are often characterized as

[2] Christaller 1966

[3] Bealer, et al ask respondents to describe their place of residence. This simple question proved useful as they went on to determine that an individual's description of their place of residence was highly correlated to Census definitions of rural and urban.

unwelcoming for queers (Aldrich 2004; Brown, et al. 2007) and, in general are seen as quite different than urban locales (Kramer 1995; Weston 1995). Brown and Schafft (2011) argue that the relationships of individuals in areas with larger and denser populations differ from the relationships of individuals living in areas with low populations in which primary groups are based predominately on family and kinship. In less dense, rural spaces, individuals are more likely to have conservative political attitudes, including having more traditional views about marriage, sex education, families, homosexuality, and abortion (Beale 1993), strong religious views which shape the values and norms of their everyday lives (Smith and Mancoske 1997), and less access to employment and job security which contribute to the possibility for less financial stability (Brown and Schafft 2011). According to survey data, residents in rural areas tend have more negative attitudes about homosexuality than their counterparts in urban and suburban communities (Eldridge, Mack, and Swank 2006) as these communities lack queer-affirming education programs and messaging in schools, media, and law enforcement. Additionally, police in rural communities have sometimes been less willing to investigate violence and assault against queer individuals, as it is often believed to be part of the "gay experience" and a risk that queer individuals take when they are open about their sexuality. Generally, at least in the past, there was also little sense of gay community in many rural spaces. If there was a community, it was not an open community. More recently, a shift has been noted as the number of same-sex couples living in rural areas has increased (Gates 2007). Furthermore, the close knit social and kinship networks of small towns also leave little room for privacy and both gossip and truth travels quickly through the "small town grapevine" (Williams et al. 2005). Factors such as these, understandably, do lead to the generally taken for granted assumption that all rural spaces are less welcoming to queer individuals when compared to urban settings.

Scholars such as geographers view urban centers as not only more liberal for gays and lesbians, but also note that within these contexts gays and lesbians can feel safe (Castells 1983; Knopp 1987) and organize politically for greater civil rights (Lauria and Knopp 1985; Knopp 1987). Aldrich (2004), for instance, discusses rural spaces as socially and sexually constraining while urban spaces are considered to be ripe for the construction of contemporary gay and lesbian culture, serving as ideal sites for forming social networks and gay and lesbian centered communities. In urban spaces, gays and lesbians have been able to organize for both political and economic gain as they begin to gentrify areas that were previously considered gay ghettos (Aldrich 2004). Larger gay and lesbian populations also allow for greater anonymity. In times where homosexuality was illegal, this allowed for greater individual safety. Cities also have a wider variety of places where gay and lesbian individuals can meet, such as bars, clubs, and community centers.

Within much of the current scholarship and popular culture, there is a tendency to associate urban settings with visibility and enlightenment and rural locales with invisibility and ignorance, which whether intentional or not, places less value on rural experiences. This is what Halberstam (2005) terms metronormativity. Johnson (2013), a historian, examines the history of same sex experiences in rural America and argues that queer history can also be found outside of urban spaces. Despite the urban bias within the literature that often omits or discounts the experiences of queer individuals in non-urban settings, some research has shown that there is an increasing presence of queer individuals and cultures within rural settings (Fellows 1996; Black, et al. 2000; Gates 2007). Gates (2007), a demographer, has detailed this geographic trend, specifically finding that from 2000-2005, Midwestern states, which are vastly rural in their make-up, had the largest percent increase of same-sex couples and that 17% of same-sex couples

live in rural areas. This is a 51% increase from 2000-2007. Gates attributes these shifts to the increase in coming out in rural areas, as well as lesbians and gays being increasingly willing to be counted in surveys. With this shift, there is also a greater possibility for queer individuals to build communities because they are less likely to be isolated from others with whom they not only share an identity with, but also experiences common to rural living. As patterns of gay migration show that gays and lesbians are moving away from cities into smaller, including rural communities, it is increasingly important for research to account for these shifts, particularly to better understand queer relationships, quality of life, and health and social service needs in rural communities.

Queer Rural Studies

In much of the early research on queers in rural spaces, the focus is comparative in that it focuses on the differences between rural and urban lives and experiences. Both Kramer (1995) and Weston (1995) discuss the difference between rural and urban life. Using the framework of "metrocentrism," or the idea that there is a bias in the literature to only include the experiences of gays and lesbians living in urban settings, Kramer (1995) works to understand how gay and lesbian identity construction differs in rural and urban settings. Much of Kramer's work focuses on the problems faced by rural gays and lesbians. He finds that gays and lesbians living in rural North Dakota lack options for developing their social networks and intimate relationships. And Weston (1995), through a series of oral histories, tells the stories of what she terms the "great gay migration" or the need that many gays and lesbians, herself included, had to move to urban centers in search of community in the 1970s and 1980s. Weston argues that proximity to an urban area makes resources more available and thus makes sexual identity more real for those who have migrated from rural locations. Her ethnographic work focuses on rural gays and

lesbians, but only tells the stories of those who have left and relocated to urban locales. Weston finds that, "In story after story, a symbolics of urban rural relations locates gay subjects in the city while putting their presence in the country under erasure" (1995:282). Although these scholars made significant contributions to the emerging field of queer rural studies, their work focused on the urban/rural binary.

Current research is attempting to insert the experiences of rural gays and lesbians into scholarship on LGBTQ groups. Recent studies have focused on a wide range of topics relating to rural gays and lesbians. For example, Kazyak (2012) considers the gender presentation of both lesbians and gay men living in rural spaces. She finds that both gay men and lesbians are able to gain acceptance in rural communities by doing masculinity. According to Kazyak, rural lesbians are able to present non-normative gender identities and break out of gender norms, such as doing "heavy" farm work, mowing the lawn, and helping fathers with work. Whereas men were forced to comply with gendered expectations, such as playing sports. In addition, Kazyak finds that queer women may experience greater flexibility in gender presentation that they could potentially use to their advantage as they work to gain acceptance within their communities.

Preston and D'Augelli (2013) also look at issues relating to acceptance and tolerance in rural communities. Focusing on gay men, they explore the different ways that these individuals deal with stigma and intolerance in rural communities. They find that gay men have three strategies for coping with stigma: concealing their identity, selectively coming out to others, and living openly. Adding insight to how context matters, Wienke and Hill (2013) discuss how place of residence, either urban or rural, affects the wellbeing of gays and lesbians. They find that rural gays and lesbians are not worse off than their peers in urban areas. In actuality, those individuals living in the largest cities, especially lesbians, may be worse off than their rural peers. According

to Wienke and Hill, gays and lesbians living in areas with larger populations were less satisfied with work and less happy and healthy than those in smaller cities. They find that the costs of living in a large city outweigh the benefits. While large cities have more opportunities for social networking, have greater social and institutional support, and are generally more tolerant, they also have more noise, pollution, traffic, and crime, which tend to lead to lesser levels of well-being (Wienke and Hill 2013:1272).

Scholars have also considered the presence of queer youth within rural communities. For example, through ethnographic work, including participant observation and interviews with queer youth in central and eastern Kentucky, Gray (2009) examines the ways in which rural queer youth use the internet and new media to connect with others, form their identities and create a sense of visibility and belonging within their communities. And Poon and Saewyc (2009) explore how urban and rural sexuality minority youth differ in terms of emotional health, victimization, sexual behaviors and substance abuse, ultimately finding that youth need additional support and social services as they develop and grow within these rural spaces. Overall, this literature provides further insight into understandings of health, well-being, and belonging of LGBTQ individuals in rural communicates and finds that these individuals can find strength and happiness with the aid of various strategies.

Lacking in the literature is a focus on the experiences of rural lesbians and gay men with partners and sexual practices. Cody and Welch (1997), in their work on gay men in northern New England, provide a short discussion on partners as part of their focus on coping with rural living. However, I have yet to encounter other research on rural gays and lesbians where partners and sexual practices are considered in greater depth. This gap in the literature is important to address because there is a tendency to conflate sexual identities and sexual practices.

And while significant, much of the existing research on rural sexualities focuses on queer men, but little attention has been given to the experiences of queer women. For example, Kramer (1995) begins by discussing the experiences of both men and women, but then shifts his focus to the experiences of men, specifically the division between the sexual identities and behaviors of men and stigma often associated with rural queerness. Thus, he relies more on queer men's experiences to analyze the experiences of both queer men and women. It is problematic to assume that the experiences of queer men and women are the same. Existing research, including Kazyak (2012), has shown that the lives of queer men and women in rural spaces are indeed different, specifically in terms of gender presentation and community acceptance. As queer women have their own unique experiences, it is critical to include their own voices and experiences within the literature.

The research that does considers the lives and experiences of queer women in rural spaces is limited because it tends to be based on a small sample size (McCarthy 2000), focuses on a single location (Yost and Chmielewski 2011), and/or consider the lives and experiences of queer women alongside or in comparison their male counterparts rather than focusing solely on queer women (Kazyak 2011; 2012). For example, through a single focus group (n=10), McCarthy (2000) considers the formation of individual and group identity of lesbians in rural areas. She finds that while rural lesbians initially feel isolated, this feeling is alleviated when they are able to connect with others and build social networks. By using a focus group, McCarthy sets herself apart from other researchers, but the study is limited in that it focuses on a single group of ten lesbians. Yost and Chmielewski (2011), using a phenomenological analysis and small sample (n=10), explore the role that communities play in how rural lesbians in central Pennsylvania experience and feel about their bodies. And while there are multiple single-site

studies of queer identity in rural spaces (McCarthy 2000; Boulden 2001; Yost and Chmielewski 2011), there is also room for multi-site research that will allow for a greater exploration of queer rurality. If we shift the focus to privilege the experiences of queer women, increase the sample size in studies on this group, and also consider multiple rural sites, we may begin to see patterns that would otherwise remain unexplored. While existing research gives us a glimpse into the lives of queer women in rural spaces, there are still additional stories to be told and new directions for research in this area.

Queer Women, Sexualities, and Identities

Sexual identity development is also a growing focus of both theoretical and empirical work on queer sexualities. When studying the lives and experiences of queer women, it is important to consider the development of the scholarship relating to identity development, including more recent discussions of sexual fluidity. Throughout the 1980s, the literature focused on what have been called traditional models of identity development that focus on the development of sexual identities through a varying number of stages. Coleman (1982), a psychologist, argues that sexual identity development is a five stage process that includes pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationship, and integration. Cass (1984), who is also a psychologist, has a different understanding of the process, which she describes using a six-stage model. Her stages include "identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis." Troiden (1988), a sociologist, presents a four-stage model that includes the stages of sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and commitment. While each of these scholars has their own understanding of the process of identity development, the common thread between these models is the idea that sexual identity development is a one directional or linear process. The main critique of these identity

development models is that they assume that the process is one directional and thus, do not include or explain the experiences of individuals whose identity development experiences do not reflect a linear progression.

Rosario et al (2008) complicate earlier understandings of sexual identity development, which they believe have failed to consider the diversity that exists in the process. In their conceptualization, sexual identity development is a two-part process of identity formation, which includes a period of self-discovery and exploration and a period of identity integration, which includes acceptance and commitment to sexual orientation, questioning LGB identity, or having same-sex sexual relations. This work moves understandings of sexual identity development in a new direction by asserting that there is not a single process or model that applies to all individuals.

Diamond (2009) also challenges traditional models of development and argues that development of sexual identity is neither one directional nor does it have a single outcome that that is uniform for everyone. While previous research has considered queer women to be variations of gay men, Diamond argues that this is not the case, instead women have their sexual responsiveness that is not only flexible, but also situation-dependent (2009:2). Queer women, unlike their male counterparts, are more likely to have attractions and behaviors that fall outside of their identities throughout the life course. Diamond finds that sexual identities are complex and are shaped by both internal and external factors. The sexual fluidity that Diamond observes in women indicates that it is not only critical to consider the experiences of those women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or gay, but also to look beyond these labels in order to understand the diversity of sexual identities and experiences.

While there is a wealth of literature focusing on queer sexual identity development, there is minimal work concentrating on queer and trans* dating, relationships, sexualities, and desire and almost nothing focusing specially on these areas within rural contexts. The majority of research on lesbian dating experiences focuses on dating scripts and the role of technology in dating (Peplau and Fingerhut 2007; Rose and Zand 2002; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). While technology has allowed LGBTQ individuals greater access to a variety of potential partners (Tikkanen and Ross 2003), this technology is somewhat limited in rural spaces due to the overall smaller pools of prospective partners.

When considering the overall relationship experiences of LGBTQ individuals, much of the research focuses on relationship formation, satisfaction, and longevity. While most individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, tend to value individuals who are affectionate, dependable, and share common interests, women tend to place the greatest emphasis on personality (Peplau and Fingerhut 2007). Lesbians, when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, are found to have relationships that are more satisfying, egalitarian, and successful in conflict resolution (Beals and Peplau 2001; Kurdek 2008; Spitalnick and McNair 2005; Ussher and Perz 2008).

There is limited research, overall, focusing on the sexual practices of rural LGBTQ individuals, with most of the existing research focusing on men, sexual health, and risk behaviors (Rosenberger et al 2014; Kakietek et al 2011). When considering lesbians' sexuality and romantic relationships overall, research most commonly focuses on the experiences of college students and younger lesbians and often emphasizes questions of sexual frequency and fluidity (Averett and Jenkins 2012; Claxton and van Dulmen 2013; Nichols 2004). Discussions of sexuality and pleasure in LGBTQ women often focus on lesbian "bed death" or "problems of

inhibited sexual desire or infrequency of sexual activity" (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Loulan 1984; Nichols 1987). Only recently have scholars began to problematize narratives of lesbian bed death (Iasenza 2002; Matthews et al 2003; Nichols 2004). In reality, lesbians are actually more arousable, sexually assertive and comfortable using sexualized and/or erotic language with their partners and researchers have found no differences in sexual frequency between lesbians and heterosexual women (Iasenza 2002; Matthews et al 2003).

In sum, the empirical literature on rural queer experience indicates a need for further studies about queer women, especially in relation to partnering and sexual practices, as previous works have been limited in terms of sample size, focus on the experiences of both cisgender men and women, or centered on a single research site. I aim to expand knowledge on rural queer experiences by exploring the lives and experiences of queer and trans* women. In exploring these lives, I work to toward the greater goal of furthering understanding of rural queer and trans* lives that are not only positive, but also productive.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My analysis of my dissertation data draws on the theoretical insights offered by the scholarship on sexuality as a social construction, queer theory, and the links between gender and sexuality.

Sexuality as a Social Construction

Through the 1960s and 1970s, there was a significant shift in the way in which sexuality was theorized within sociology. Prior to this shift, sexuality was considered natural and thus part of our genetic make-up (Freud 1962). In this new theorization, sociologists, drawing on symbolic interactionism and labeling theory, instead argued that sexual meanings and identities were instead socially constructed and differed based on the social and historical contexts in which they

unfolded. Gagnon and Simon (1974), building on a symbolic interactionist perspective, rejected earlier biological explanations for sexuality and instead argued that sexuality is based on sexual scripts that exist to not only help the individual find self-acceptance for their desired sexual behaviors, but also to understand the expectations that others, including partners, have attached to these experiences.

Also considering the relationship between sexual identities and behaviors, McIntosh (1968) argues, in her application of labeling theory, that homosexuality should not be seen as a diagnosable condition, but rather as a social role. In understanding sexuality as a condition, which is based on the binary of heterosexual/homosexual, behavioral patterns were dichotomized. McIntosh felt that behavioral patterns should not exist within this simple binary, which thus introduced the role of the bisexual. In her understanding of homosexuality, McIntosh also differentiates between the homosexual role and homosexual behavior. While the homosexual role focuses on the expectations that others and society at large places on those who identify as homosexual, homosexual behavior is the actual actions of the individual. Overall, McIntosh encourages us to question how institutional arrangements perpetuate societal expectations "of the homosexual". By considering the norms and expectations that society places on sexuality, McIntosh laid the groundwork for others to theorize about the limits that heterosexuality has placed, not only on our sexual lives, but also on our social lives (Ingraham 1994; Jackson 2006; Pascoe 2007).

Ingraham (1994) considers how we experience heteronormativity in our lives, what she terms the heterosexual imaginary. Institutionalized heterosexuality normalizes how we regulate sexuality through institutions such as marriage and weddings, which are regarded as normalized cultural institutions and ultimately work to create and enforce the gendered expectations within

society. Expanding on theorizations of heterosexuality, Jackson (2006) argues that heteronormativity not only regulates those who are living within the boundaries of heterosexuality, but also places sanctions on those who fall outside of these boundaries (p. 105). According to Jackson, both sides of this social regulation are not always taken into consideration. Heteronormativity goes beyond simply defining what is acceptable within sexual lives and practices and also influences social structures, institutions, and relations, as well as our sexual and gendered selves. Heteronormativity as a concept serves not only as a way of understanding how sexuality and social lives are often constructed in relation to heterosexuality, but also serves as one of the major building blocks upon which queer theory rests.

Queer Theory

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, activists reclaimed and embraced the word *queer* and used it as a new way to signify the both the political projects and collective identities of members of younger generations of gay and lesbian identified individuals (Duggan 1992; Stein 1992). In academic circles, *queer* was also embraced to signify a theoretical shift and to differentiate themselves from the less politicized work of gay and lesbian studies.[4] Queer theory pushes scholars to turn a critical eye to their work and include sexuality as an aspect of their work. In doing this, queer theory not only encourages us to move away from binary thinking in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality, but also works to problematize normative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Queer theory also brings a focus to intersectional identities, shows how sexual identities intersect with other axes of oppression, helps us to rethink issues of power, structure, and agency, and challenges the norms associated with heterosexuality (Ferguson 2004; Foucault 1985; Plummer 1995; Somerville 1999).

[4] Also sometimes called gay studies, lesbian and gay studies, or queer studies.

Within the literature, understandings and definitions of queer are both contested and wide-ranging (Butler 1993; Epstein 1994; Gamson 1995; Jackson 2006; and Warner 1991). While each individual understanding is valuable within a specific context, I am using the term queer as an umbrella term for identities that challenge and disrupt heterosexuality, therefore including those women who identify not only as queer but also as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or trans*. And I am also using the term queer as a theoretical framework and epistemology for understanding and challenging heteronormativity. In my dissertation, I consider how the experiences, relationships, and sexual practices of queer and trans* women challenge the heteronormativity of rural spaces.

Queer theory has also significantly informed the conceptualization of sexuality as a continuum rather than as fixed identity and/or practice. Recent research on the sexuality identity construction of youth finds that existing labels for sexuality are obsolete and that our current understandings of sexual orientation are too simplistic (Savin-Williams 2005). Vrangalova and Savin-Williams (2012) argue that sexual orientation should instead be considered as a continuum and that expanding sexual orientation beyond a three-category model is more appropriate for research. Beginning with Kinsey (1948; 1953) and his bipolar scale which allows for an individual's orientation to fall within a continuum between "exclusive heterosexual" and "exclusive homosexual" and ending with more recent research by Morgan, Steiner, and Thompson (2010), as well as that of Morgan and Thompson (2011), we begin to see how individual identities are more nuanced and thus that the three-category model of heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual is not enough. My research considers how queer women self-identify and what informs their identity formations, which will add to the understanding and development

of more inclusive language as well as account for the diversity of experiences of queer and trans* women in rural spaces.

Broadening the application of queer theory and studies, my dissertation is also informed by the work of scholars who consider how sexuality varies geographically (Bell and Valentine 1995; Binnie 1997; Cloke and Little 1997; Browne 2009). Traditionally geographic studies have excluded discussions of the body, sexual lives, and non-normative sexualities (Binnie 1997). In spite of this absence, Binnie argues that sexual geographers "should place a greater emphasis on the lived experiences of sexual dissidents" and should also "include a greater critical awareness of the material conditions for the production of knowledge about sexuality," through what he calls a "queer geographic epistemology" (p. 224). Within the field of geography, studies of the body and sexual lives and practices have often been considered off-limits, with much of the focus instead situated within understanding communities and identities. Binnie argues that we need to understand queer lives in relation to geographic locations and create knowledge that goes beyond that of our own personal experiences. Using a queer geographic epistemology, I question previous knowledge about sexuality in rural spaces and work to better understand how these locations are changing both demographically and socially.

Relationship between Gender and Sexuality

There is wealth of discussion surrounding the relationship between gender and sexuality. While some scholars, including many queer theorists, argue that sexuality can be separated from gender (Rubin 1984; Sedgwick 1990), others find the relationship much more complicated and argue that gender and sexuality are intertwined (Butler 1990, 1997; Ingraham 1994), that sexuality itself is a gendered experience (Rutter and Schwartz 2011) or that we derive sexuality from gender, thus assuming that 'appropriately gendered' people are heterosexual (Rich 1980).

Rubin's theoretical work on gender and sexuality is of specific interest to this debate as her arguments, unlike those of others, have shifted over time as she rethinks her original analyses. In her early work, Rubin (1975) finds that sexuality and gender are interwoven. In her later work, Rubin (1984) argues that sexuality should be separate from gender and is critical of other understandings that reduce sexuality to gender. Ingraham (1994) also argues that gender and heterosexuality are intertwined, a concept which she describes as heterogender. In her critique of weddings, she maintains that research needs to focus more on how institutionalized heterosexuality is linked to gender.

Sedgwick (1990), whose work is also often situated within queer theory, also argues for an analytic separation between sexuality and gender. She sees gender and sexuality as distinct, and in some cases even opposed to one another. Gender, according to Sedgwick, is often associated with women, reproduction, and the controls that are placed on women's bodies. Conversely, she sees sexuality as occupying "the popular position of the relational, the social/symbolic, the constructed, the variable, the relational," all of which she associates with the sexual excesses of men (Sedgwick 1990:29). Sedgwick views gender, which she associates with women as being stable, while sexuality, which she associates with men, to less stable and more likely to change and reconfigure itself over a period of time. Sedgwick, whose work may have been influenced by Rubin (1975; 1984), favors a model, much like other queer theorists, that allows for sexuality to be theorized separate of gender. Rich (1980) argues that sexuality, specifically heterosexuality, is an institution that denies the existence of lesbianism, imposes male sexuality onto women, and overall works to exert control over women's bodies, thus putting women in a subordinate position. Through what she calls the "lesbian continuum," Rich argues that women-centered relationships have always existed although they tend to be

overlooked or dismissed. By understanding the lesbian continuum, we begin to see how women have resisted male dominance; both socially and sexually, and can start to understand the role that sexuality, as an institution, has played in the lives and experiences of women. While some theorists classify gender and sexuality as separate entities, others cannot detach the two. I intend to contribute to theoretical and empirical discussions of the link (or not) between gender and sexuality through my focus on the experiences of queer and trans* women in rural communities.

The main objective of this research is to explore the experiences of queer and trans* women and to understand how they assign meaning to their identities. In this dissertation I draw on the empirical and theoretical understandings outlined in this chapter to further explore questions about rural queer and trans* women that have only minimally, if at all, been addressed previously. The specific questions I address are:

1) Why do queer women live in rural locations? Specifically, what social processes have informed their current residency in the rural locations?
    - How do queer women understand their experiences in the rural spaces?
    - And what social processes contribute to variations in their experiences?
2) What role does rural residency play in their sexual identity formation, as well as their sexual relationships and practices and experiences with partnering?
    - How do rural queer women form romantic and/or sexual partnerships? Where and how do they seek out potential partners? Who are considered desirable partners? Who becomes partnered with whom? How are these partnerships maintained and/or why do these partnerships end?
    - How do rural queer women experience sexuality and sexual pleasure? How do their sexual experiences, practices and behaviors differ depending on their relationship status (single, looking, partnered, short term v. long term partnership)?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Within sexualities research, much focus has been placed on quantitative work, in order to get at questions such as age of first sex, number of partners, and age at which one accepted a sexual minority identity. I use qualitative methods to gain insights as to how social processes inform the lives and experiences of rural queer and trans* women. Using qualitative approaches to study sexualities, particularly in relation to "non-normative" sexual practices and identities increase visibility, challenge cultural assumptions about sexuality and allow for individuals to self-identify throughout the research process (Gamson 2000).[5] I conducted 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in order to allow respondents to construct narratives of their own lives and experiences. Interviews allowed me to move beyond the basic questions of how many and when and to gain a more complex understanding of how my respondents form partnerships and participate in sexual practices. Interviews also allowed my respondents to construct more in-depth narratives about their lives and experiences in rural spaces (Davidson and Layder 1994; Hesse-Biber 2006). The narratives are 'a way of knowing' and help me to better understand my respondents' thoughts, understandings, and interpretations of their everyday lives and experiences (Seidman 2013). Overall, interviews allow me to gain a wide range of insights and to better understand the social realities of my respondents (Morris 2015).

Research Site and Methods

While previous studies focusing on sexualities have been based in rural communities (Gray 2009; Kazyak 2012; Yost and Chmielewski 2011) as well as urban spaces such as Chicago (Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani 2009; Garcia 2012; Ghaziani and Fine 2010) and Cincinnati (Dugan 2005), there is a need to further expand this research to include non-urban communities.

[5] Existing scholarship has found interviews to be effective in doing research about sexuality. (Carpenter 2005; Garcia 2012; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Moore 2011; Tolman 2002)

Interviews were conducted in person or via phone or Skype in seventeen states.[6] My interviews lasted between one and four hours, with an average length of one hour and 45 minutes. As my research funding was somewhat limited, I conducted in person interviews, whenever possible, when respondents were located with six hours driving time of Chicago.

Recruitment

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, I entered the field with the intent to interview as many as 60 individuals or until I researched the point where no new information was being collected, often referred to as saturation. All interviews were collected during a thirteen month period from December 2014 to January 2016. In order to participate, respondents had to meet the following criteria:

1) Self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and/or queer and a woman
2) Ages 25-65 years old
3) Currently living (for at least one year) in the rural United States. (Rural defined as having a population less than 50,000 and being more than one hour from a major city (major city defined as having a population of 200,000 or more).

For me, self-identification is important as identity plays a major role in the story that each individual tells. For this project, self-identification was vital as the identities on which I focus are complex (Borland 1998; Richards and Schwartz 2002; Wagle and Cantaffa 2008). Overall, I find it important to allow individuals to choose how they identify themselves, rather than to place them in a box or force a specific identity on them. Instead of making assumptions or labeling individuals, I instead took the time to ask each individual how they self-identify and how they came to identify in such a way.

[6] Arkansas, Connecticut, Idaho, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

While I had initially proposed to recruit individuals ages 18-64, I was encouraged by my dissertation committee to focus on a more narrow age range to avoid predominantly recruiting college-aged individuals. Based on this suggestion, I began by recruiting individuals ages 35-55. While this narrower age range would have allowed me to make greater comparisons based on cohort, recruitment was very slow and after four months, I processed an IRB amendment for a wider age range, 25-65. This wider range not only allowed me to reach a greater number of individuals, but also helped me to see how the experiences of queer and trans* women compare throughout the life course.[7] After considering rural classification methods used by other researchers (Flora 2008; Kazyak 2011, 2012; Preston and D'Augelli, 2013), as well as the formal definitions from the United States Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget, I formulated a definition that was conscious to not include spaces that were within commuting distance of a major city (requiring that all participants be more than an hour driving time from a major city, which is defined as having a population of more than 200,000) and to limit recruitment of individuals living in places which fell just below the Census definition of urban (less than 50,000). Members of the committee were concerned that the majority of my respondents would come from places that were near the upper end of my population range, but only nine of thirty-three respondents were from places with populations of 30,000 or more.

I recruited individuals through LGBTQ specific or supportive organizations, cultural institutions, and university LGBTQ and/or gender and sexuality centers and student organizations. Over the course of a year, I emailed over 500 requests for flyers to be shared and had over 80 emails returned to sender, thus showing the lack of structure and longevity of many LGBTQ organizations in rural spaces. From these 500+ emails, I received only 30 responses

[7] While this comparative work is not present in my dissertation, the data could be used to formulate later articles or book chapters.

acknowledging that the recipient shared my recruitment information and/or flyer with their group listserv, posted it to Facebook, and/or included it in their organizational publications. Recognizing that these organizations have limited resources, I also offered to send copies of my flyers to organizations and asked if they would post them in their physical/meeting spaces. As I traveled, either for interviews or personal reasons, I also posted flyers on various community bulletin boards in restaurants, gas stations, book stores, grocery stores, and libraries. Based on these postings, I had 48 inquiries from potential respondents of which 33 agreed to participate. My best response from these email inquiries came from a lesbian meet up and networking group in a small city which yielded three interviews.

In order to add to my sample, I also used snowball sampling, which included asking my respondents, after their interview, to refer me to other queer and trans* women within their social network or geographic area. Snowball sampling is especially useful in finding populations that are hidden due to low numbers of potential respondents or because of the sensitive nature of the research (Browne 2005). While my snowballs were mostly small scale, including individuals referring a partner or friend, I did have one larger snowball, which connected me to a rural church where I went on to interview seven individuals who were either members of the church or were connected to those who were members.

At the beginning of each interview, I obtained informed consent. All respondents were sent the consent documents via email before the interview so, if desired, they could review the documents beforehand. In the case of in person interviews, a signed consent form was obtained. For phone interviews, verbal consent was recorded before then interview began. Before and during the interview, respondents were reminded that their participation is voluntary and that they can skip any questions that they did not wish to answer, ask that the recording device be

turned off, or that they could end the interview at any time without penalty. Of the 33 individuals interviewed, two interviews ended early, due to time constraints. These interviews both went on to inform the project based on the information that was gathered in relation to families and coming to sexualities later in life. During the interviews, I used an interview schedule which helped me to gather information regarding: Demographics; Families and Growing Up; Everyday Lives in Rural Communities; Establishing a Sexual Identity; Dating, Partnering, and Relationships; and Sexual Practices and Behaviors.[8]

Interviews took place at a location of the participants' choosing or by phone/Skype. While I prefer in-person interviews, this was not always possible due to geographic and financial limitations, as well as the level of comfort of the respondents, as some also prefer the distance provided by phone/Skype[9][10] (Iacono, Symonds, Brown 2016). Other sociological researchers exploring rural spaces including Kazyak (2012), have also used phone interviews. In person interviews were conducted in sites chosen by the participants. This allowed participants the ability to identify the space in which they felt most comfortable. These spaces included private homes, a coffee shop inside a local museum, and a church fellowship/conference room. Following the interviewing techniques outlined by sociologist Laura M. Carpenter (2005) in her research on virginity loss, I conducted interviews in a "conversation style" to establish a greater rapport with participants, lessen the inequality that is sometimes present between researchers and informants, and hopefully made them feel more comfortable talking about their personal sexual experiences. By structuring the interviews more like conversations, I allowed for participants to

[8] See Appendix B for interview schedule.
[9] In person interviews n=10, Phone n=21, VoIP (Skype/FaceTime) n=2
[10] VoIP (Voice of Internet Protocol) technology, including technologies such as Skype and FaceTime, allow researchers to interview participants using voice and video using a real time connection and open up greater possibilities for reaching individuals worldwide in a manner that is not only time efficient, but also affordable. This technology, allowing for greater sample sizes, also limits other important areas including rapport with respondents and ability to observe presentation of self and non-verbal cues from respondents.

play a greater role in the structure of the interview. Rather than attempting to stick to a series of questions from an interview guide, I allowed participants' responses to shape the interview and returned to specific questions or topics only when the conversation came to a lull. Like Carpenter, I also gave participants the opportunity to ask questions of me, both during and at the end of the interview. During the interview, I didn't provide too much personal information as doing so can compromise the overall quality of the research, but by providing limited personal information, I worked to cultivate a greater sense of trust between myself and my participants. Establishing a rapport is especially useful in this case as individuals are often apprehensive about discussing sexuality and sexual lives with interviewers, who are most often previously unknown to them.

Access and Researcher Positionality

My entrance into these rural populations was facilitated by my identity as a queer woman who grew up in the rural Midwest. There are very few LGBTQ organizations in these areas, thus informal networking was beneficial to help identify possible respondents. While some communities have a larger representation of queer women, other areas do not, making it more difficult for me to gain access. Therefore I also relied on my ability to establish rapport with individuals to gain their trust and insights into their local communities.

Feminist researchers (Garcia 2012; McCorkel and Myers 2003; Moore 2011; and Naples 2003) have discussed debates surrounding insider/outsider status. Naples (2003) notes that while insider/outsider status is often seen as a fixed dichotomy, she views it to be situational and thus ever shifting based on the social locations and experiences of individuals. Using Naples as a guide, Garcia, in her work on Latina youth and sexuality, also understands her identity as a researcher to be fluid and therefore not only influenced by her own understandings of self, but

also by how her participants constructed her identity. Garcia also sees insider status as somewhat of a double-edged sword. While insider status can sometimes allow for greater ease in accessing a community, it can also lead participants to believe that you're already 'in the know,' thus leading them to not always tell you the entire story, as they assume that this knowledge is already present. This therefore leaves researchers who present themselves as insiders with the challenge of having to ask questions that may be assumed to be part of their existing insider knowledge (Collins 1991; Patillo-McCoy 1999).

Moore (2011), like other feminist researchers, finds that the researcher's status as an insider/outsider is continuously shifting based on the specific situation or relationship. In her research with Black lesbian headed families, Moore identified as an insider in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, but throughout the course of her research found herself to be an outsider when it came to having knowledge and understanding of the "norms and practices of Black lesbians as a group" (p. 236). Moore also found class and cultural differences played a role in understandings her role as a researcher.

In the field, my status as an insider/outsider was situational and shifting, rather than fixed. While there were advantages to identifying as a queer woman who was born and raised in the rural Midwest, I am also an outsider, as much of my adult life has been spent in urban spaces, in both the United States and Europe. While racial differences may influence researchers in other situations and spaces, I rarely encountered racial differences between myself and my participants, based on the overall demographic make-up of the rural communities in which my respondents lived (See Appendix A for study participants' demographic information).

Strategy for Analysis

I transcribed and analyzed my interview data using Devault's (1990) strategies for interview analysis. In working with interview data, Devault places emphasis on constructing topics, listening and writing. In constructing topics, Devault encourages researchers to go beyond the topics and terms that are typically seen in research and to instead work to construct topics that make sense to the work. For example, when considering the lives of women, Devault finds difficulties in classifying the household activities of women as either work or leisure. She instead encourages us to think about of things like family, community, or volunteer work might be best classified as "invisible work" and how terms like "public" and "private" also help us to better understand the spaces in which work happens (p. 97). Other scholars have successfully used Devault's strategies in research about the unwanted sexual experiences of men (Fagen and Anderson 2012), sexual identity development and management (Orne 2011), and the school experiences of young gay men (Smith 1998). Using this analytic strategy, I constructed categories that are not only meaningful, but also resonated within the lives and experiences of my respondents. Throughout the interviews[11], I looked for themes and patterns to emerge from the data as it was collected (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Lofland et al. 2006). Some of the major themes to arise during the course of data collection, which then guided my coding process, were rural living and communities, later in life sexualities, and precarity. Using Atlas-TI, I coded each individual interview, using open coding. I initially went through all interviews generating as many codes as possible. The coding process was theoretically guided, although iterative in nature. This also allowed me to include unexpected codes that emerged throughout the coding

[11] My interview types varied, but most were phone interviews (see footnote 9 for a breakdown of types of interviews). I also used an interview schedule that I wrote which included theoretically informed questions.

process. Once that stage was completed, I then began to sort these codes into smaller categories in order to further organize the codes into major themes.

CHAPTER 4: STRATEGIES FOR NEGOTIATING RURAL QUEER AND TRANS* LIVING

On a warm summer day in June, I traveled from Chicago to a small Midwestern town to interview Kam Gilman (51, genderqueer, queer, Midwest) at one of the churches where they have been a pastor for the past eight years. As I sat in the church fellowship room, which doubles as a library, Kam apologized as they knew in advance that we would likely be interrupted as things came up to which they must attend which included a fitting for a new stole and robe that a member of the congregation worked to alter as we spoke. Each time someone knocked at the door, I paused the recording, made a mental note of what question we were discussing, and waited until the door was closed and we were again alone before proceeding. Throughout the interview, Kam was both guarded and candid as they answered my questions, especially in the beginning. When asked, "How would you describe your gender identity?" Kam checked to make sure that no one was outside of the closed door before they answered, "It depends where I am." Kam then explained to me how they desired and were hoping to have top surgery in the coming year. They realized that this may raise questions with their church and parishioners and had already prepared themselves for addressing these questions with medical, rather than identity-based answers. While Kam felt like they were unable to be openly out in their workplace and the greater community, they noted that they did have other queer individuals and close friends with whom they would be more open about this, and their identity in general. This example is just one of the many stories that show how queer and trans* women negotiate their identities and actions and use a wide range of strategies, depending on their geographic and social locations.

In this chapter, I analyze the strategies rural queer and trans* women develop and use to negotiate their everyday lives in rural communities.[12] I do this by looking at the different ways they discuss their everyday lives and interactions with individuals, groups, and institutions in their rural communities. These strategies include creating communities and families of support, strategic outness or selectively coming out to others, concealing their identities, living openly and creating visibility, tolerance, and acceptance in their communities. While some individuals only utilize one of these strategies, the majority employ a combination of strategies depending on the situations and processes they're attempting to navigate.

An extensive tradition of literature addresses how individuals present themselves based on the interactions they have with others and thus develop their own identities and selves based on these interactions (Goffman 1956, 1963). Within these interactions, individuals also work to present an idealized version of themselves that is more consistent with the norms and values of society. For queer women, this might include wearing clothing that is considered more feminine in the workplace even though they may be more comfortable wearing something that some might consider more masculine, such as a suit and tie. Through impression management, individuals also control how information is communicated to others through their interactions. Within these strategies, rural queer and trans* women are not only continually working to manage the interactions they have with others, but also are doing what they need to in order to put themselves and their families in the best position, both in their present situations and for their futures.

[12] In my research, I consider the experiences of queer women, including trans* women. While I acknowledge that there can be distinctions between these two groups of women, this study is not designed to be a comparison of these two groups. Instead, I focus more broadly on their experiences as queer women within the context of rural communities in the United States. A comparative approach is beyond the scope of this project at this time, however, findings from it may be useful for informing the design of such a study.

Within the literature that focuses on queers in space, more specifically public spaces, scholars also consider the ways that queer individuals exist within space, as well as how spaces reinforce heterosexuality. For example, Ahmed (2006) argues that sexual orientation determines how we reside in space, and not only determines the direction of desires, but also those with whom we inhabit spaces. Berlant and Warner (1998) further this discussion and argue that our actions and experiences within everyday spaces work to reinforce heterosexuality in educational, religious, legal, and medical situations and spaces, thus limiting how queerness plays out in public spaces. As Berlant and Warner also posit because heterosexuality, is neither fixed nor stable, queer individuals can restructure heterosexual spaces and create their own structures within these spaces. The queer and trans* women I interviewed are actively doing this in their rural spaces and are thus creating spaces and communities which are best suited for themselves and their families. The strategies that I consider within this chapter further these discussions about queer sexuality and space. While the research on queering of public space has historically been limited to urban spaces (D'Emilio 1983), my analysis demonstrates how rural queer and trans* women, despite the difficulties that many of them face in their rural communities, are able to negotiate various situations and processes within their lives, suggesting that rural spaces can also be conducive to queer and trans* lives. My findings also challenge the greater cultural narratives that often insist that queer and trans* individuals are best suited for urban living.

Creating Communities and Families of Support

For queer and trans* women, their families and social networks are part of their everyday lives within their rural communities. For some of these women, their families of support are built into their local networks given that they live close to their families of origin or choice.[13] For

[13] Families of choice, a concept popularized by Weston (1991), are often associated with queer and trans* individuals and are often created as either as a way of claiming members of an individuals' friends and social

others, there is physical or social distance sometimes resulting from conflicts, lack of support, or intentional distancing from their families, either to protect themselves or others in their families. While family networks are essential sources of support for some, many rural queer and trans* women also rely on queer social networks in their communities and beyond, workplace networks, and their churches and religious groups for support. For queer and trans* women, social networks of support are vital to overall health and well-being. Research on social support and well-being finds that social support has a positive effect on psychological well-being for women. When specifically considering lesbians, social support also reassures these women of their worth as individuals and is critical to their overall mental health (Vincke and van Heeringen 2004, Williams, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig 2005). When coupled, well-being is even greater for lesbians (Wayment and Peplau 1995). Research has also indicated that mental health may be affected by the broader social contexts in their greater communities, including the organization and prominence of the local LGBTQ communities (Willging, Salvador, and Kano 2006). As rural communities are often considered to be less welcoming (Aldrich 2004; Browne et al 2007) and lack supportive sites for the construction of queer identities, relationships, and social networks, such as community centers and bars (Kramer 1995), social support, which positively influences individual sense of self and is vital to mental health, is increasingly important.

Len (57, two-spirit, lesbian, Midwest) has always had the support of their partner and partner's brother, who lives and works on the property adjacent to their home. In describing their partner's brother, Len notes that he is maybe not someone that would typically seem to be accepting and supportive.

> If you would meet him randomly you would think conservative, kind of traditional, gun owning, hunting, fishing, kind of outdoorsy country guy. He is that but also totally is with

networks as family or as a way of broadening what family means to further encompass any and all relationships that an individual finds important to their everyday lives and experiences.

> us for who we are…He built our house. He knows we share a bed…He means so much to us and has totally affirmed who we are.

Existing research focusing on negotiations of sexual identity similarly shows how sometimes these identities are not formally disclosed, but instead surface based on the interpretation of interactions as well as through self-presentation (Decena 2008, Acosta 2013). These understandings which have never been verbalized are "tacit subjects" (Decena 2008) and work within families to show how individuals are connected even though these connections cannot or have not been verbalized. For example, Decena describes how the family members of one of his respondents, Pablo, knows that he is gay, despite him never having verbalized this. Pablo explains that his family knows not only because of the way that he dresses and acts, but also because he has integrated his partners into the family by bringing them to birthday parties and other family gatherings. Similarly, Len has never formally come out to their partner's brother or talked about their relationship, but knows that he is not only accepting, but also there to support them.

Having lived in her community most of her life, Lenae (37, female, bisexual, Midwest) also finds a great deal of support in her friends and family. Despite having had negative experiences with some of her neighbors and as well as other individuals in her small Midwestern town of less than 1000, Lenae knows she has a local network of friends and family on which she can always rely. In talking about her support system, Lenae discusses her relationship with one neighbor who is especially supportive of her and her family:

> One of my neighbors, I've known my entire life. If anyone ever came anywhere near here, he would knock them in the face…my dad lives next door and my family has been here a long time. His son lives next door to my dad, and he would take care of it too so I'm really not too worried about it.

Having both family and close friends in her proximity, Lenae not only feels supported, but also feels safe in her community.

However, not all of my study participants report having long-term connections to family members or neighbors that afford them a greater sense of support or safety in their communities. Some do point to having the support of their friends and families, but these individuals do not live in their immediate communities. For this reason, my respondents often find it necessary to create communities and families of support in their rural communities. These support networks take on many different forms, some being just an individual and/or their current partner, while others are much larger, and often include diverse groupings of friends, families, coworkers, and other community members. While support networks are integral to the lives of queer and trans* women in rural spaces and often help them to build affirming lives and communities in these spaces, forming these networks is often challenging for newcomers, as they do not have the advantages that come with being in the rural communities in which they grew up or having lived in the community for an extended period of time.

Newcomers to rural communities often struggle to establish support networks because much of rural queer social activity happens 'undercover' in individual homes and other private spaces as there are often no community centers or gay bars in these communities (Preston and D'Augelli 2013). After ending a long-term heterosexual marriage, Leslie (42, female, bisexual, South) found herself faced with the difficulties of moving for a new job at a regional university and establishing a new network of social support. Despite moving to a town that she described as being "the San Francisco of the East," she still found it difficult to establish herself within the community and create a social support network. After attending a university-based Safe Zone training, Leslie finally found a supportive group of colleagues, with whom she has now become

friends. She explains, “I started going to dinners and cookouts and about half of them are out. People at the university know it and support it. Some of them just got married because it became legal everywhere and the other half are DON’T TELL ANYONE. Everyone acts straight…the scene is not really open.” Despite the challenges of being in an area with a somewhat closed social scene, Leslie has found great support in her colleagues, who, alongside her current partner and teenage son, are her family and major supporters.

In rural communities, churches often play a vital role in the lives of individuals and the creation of community. Because of the lack of tolerance of many religious organizations, queer and trans* individuals often feel estranged from the churches and religious traditions in which they were raised (Dahl and Galliher 2010). Hansen and Lambert (2011) find that, in the case of rural lesbians, they feel the need to modify their beliefs because of the rejection they experience by from the church itself and/or members of the church. This estrangement and disconnect often makes things increasingly difficult for individuals who are navigating queer and trans* identities in rural spaces. These difficulties are magnified in cases where these queer and trans* individuals are not only part of a religious community, but also are religious leaders. While research often finds that religious communities, especially in rural communities, are not places that are affirming to queer and trans* lives, my respondents often found both formal and informal networks within these institutional spaces which allowed them to not only be themselves but also to connect with and create community with other queer and trans* identified individuals and allies.

Kam (51, genderqueer, queer, Midwest) returned to rural living after having lived in Chicago for 15 years. After taking a position that divides their time as a pastor between two rural churches, Kam struggled, at first, to create a community of support in an area where being out

was not the norm and social groups were difficult to find. Because of their profession, Kam notes that they do have to be careful, as to not lose their position in the church and are constantly negotiating what it means to be queer and a rural religious and community leader. When asked if they have support in the community, Kam answers:

> Yes, just the close circle of people that does grow a little bit, person by person…I do look for people to support me to support others and I've got a handful of people who do that. Some of them are clergy, our local clergy, some of them are, because you don't get straight people buy in. It's really hard to make it happen.

Many of those individuals act as gatekeepers and peacekeepers within the congregation and religious community and shield Kam from the questions and pushback that is very much a reality in their life as a queer leader of a rural congregation. Kam notes, "[The support] feels really good. That happened because I forged relationships in some way. Sometimes you just get lucky." Kam feels like the supportive networks that they've found in their community are an important resource, but still feels they can only totally be themself within their close circle of queer friends who have become their family. While the formal support that Kam has found is somewhat limited due to their leadership role in the church, the informal social networks, as well as the personal and romantic relationships that they have formed are invaluable to their life.

Jai (38, genderqueer, queer, Midwest), who lives with their partner of sixteen years, has a had a tumultuous relationship with their family of origin, and notes that their "biological family is just such a mess right now." Having suffered emotional, physical, and sexual abuse throughout their youth, ultimately leading them to be emancipated from their biological mother at the age of 17, and more recently struggling with addiction and mental health, Jai now finds great support in what they call their "logical family." Jai's logical family consists of other queer and trans* individuals they met through their church who act as parents, one of which they call Mom. These individuals have helped Jai get into a mental health rehabilitation program, guided them through

difficult times, and helped to structure their spirit. As Jai notes, it's because of their logical family that they are where they're at today. "…they just really helped me structure the spirit. Because my spirit was broken, and they saw that, and they wanted to help me fix my spirit. It's been amazing." With the help of their logical family, Jai has also been able to connect with other queer, trans* and gender non-conforming individuals, both in their community and nationally through the work they do as an organizer and activist with national queer and trans* organizations. Even with the great difficulties that they have experienced throughout their life, Jai has, with the support of their family of choice and the church community, found ways to not only survive, but also thrive in their rural community.

For queer and trans* women, their families of origin and/or choice, workplaces, churches, and other community networks often play a vital role in their abilities to negotiate life in rural spaces by providing them with social support. By examining the relationships that these individuals have with others in their communities, we begin to have a greater understanding of how queer and trans* women address some of the challenges that are often associated with rural living. One way of doing this is by creating social networks and communities which allow them to thrive within their rural homes. While these individuals are, for the most part, out to their families, they are not always out to others in their communities or workplaces. Below, I analyze how decisions about being out are made on an individual basis, informed by the context and the relationships that queer and trans* women have with others in their communities and places of work.

Strategic Outness

Strategic outness, coming out selectively, or what Orne (2011) discusses as, "the continual, contextual management of sexual identity" (p. 682), is a strategy that many of my

participants employ in a wide range of situations, most notably in professional and business situations. By shifting the ways we think about coming out and instead focusing on identity management or how people control access to wide range of information about their lives and identities, we begin to see how my respondents continue to take control of their lives and relationships and continue to build their networks of support in these rural spaces.

In deciding to whom, when, and/or if to be out at work, many use elements of this strategy, including direct disclosure (Savin-Williams 2001), clues, concealment, and speculation (Orne 2011) in their everyday interactions with their coworkers and supervisors. Research on LGB experience in the workplace finds that fear of discrimination is major factor that keeps individuals from disclosing their sexual orientation in the workplace (Croteau and Lark 2009). Other factors include threats (Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, and King 2008) and negative verbal exchanges (Bradford, Ryan, and Rothblum 1994). When LGB individuals are supported in the workplace by their supervisors, coworkers, and the organization at large, they experience greater job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and outness at work (Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, and King 2008). When making decisions regarding if and to whom to be out to at work, queer and trans* women, some of whom also struggle with being women in male dominated workplaces, also have to consider the ultimate costs that may come with being out at work and how this might affect their economic livelihood. Work plays a vital role in the lives of queer women because they are unlikely able to be financially dependent on a partner and this facilitates a need for financial self-reliance throughout the life course (Dunne 1997, 2000). While this need is potentially empowering and/or a struggle, it adds additional pressure to queer women who do not have others to financially support them.

Leslie, whose partner helped her find a job in the area in which she is now living, was warned about coming out to others at work, despite the city's reputation for being queer friendly. While initially heeding this advice by concealing her identity to her coworkers, Leslie found it extremely difficult to make small talk with her coworkers without mentioning her family or partner. After about three months in this new position, Leslie found herself selectively coming out to the coworkers that she respected and trusted the most. In discussing coming out to her supervisor, Leslie details her decision-making process: "We started talking about having parties, like a gathering for families…I knew at that time that I couldn't lie about who my family was or who my partner was. I trusted him and I came out to him at that moment." Leslie, who had often talked to her coworkers about her housemate, let her supervisor know that her partner was more than a housemate. Her supervisor, who had suspected this was the case, was extremely supportive and requested she come to him if anyone was less than respectful to her as she came out to others. With her increased interactions and depth of personal knowledge about her supervisor, Leslie felt that she no longer had to be as selective in what she said during their interactions. He also helped her to gauge the reactions of others and create a plan for coming out to others. When discussing her strategy for coming out to others at work, Leslie notes:

> I ask everyone I tell to not out me and to let me do it...as I developed professional relationships, usually with someone who I think is liberal minded or younger…I just keep testing it out…There are certain people who I know who are very strong, conservative, Republican, old school people and usually they have a lot of Christian symbolism or talk about their church a lot. I'm less likely to come out to those people.

Based on the social relationships that she builds with her coworkers, Leslie comes out to those with whom she works based on her interactions and personal knowledge of them as individuals. Being out at work not only positively affects general well-being (Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, and King 2008) but also benefits the organization as lesbian and gay individuals are found to be

most productive and involved as workers when they feel safe and are able to be open about their sexual orientation (Van Den Bergh 1999). Being able to be increasingly out at work has allowed Leslie to not only feel more at ease in her position, but also to be able to interact on a more personal level with her coworkers, many of whom have become part of her community of support.

In her current position, Leslie also finds herself working with community-based and non-profit organizations in her community. While she is often able to come out in the university setting, this ability does not always extend to her work in the community. In discussing the role she plays in the community, she notes:

> I'm facilitating a coalition in the little town that I live in. I don't come out to anyone over there because I'm the face of the coalition right now…I'm terrified if I come out, now personally I don't care, but if I come out that it would close down the work of that coalition. I know how that community runs. I'm very careful over there.

Despite working at a public university in a nearby community, Leslie realizes that the communities served by her workplace are more conservative and thus she finds herself also employing an entirely different strategy to maintain the community presence that she has worked to build. Leslie's use of different strategies, based on her geographic and institutional location, further illustrates the importance of impression management. In her case, she finds that the stigma that is associated with queer identity is greater outside of the borders of her university town. With this in mind, she chooses to conceal her queer identity and manage the way in which she is perceived in that community. While Leslie does have continual interactions with those who work within this coalition, her personal knowledge of these individuals and the community in which they live, greatly influences her decision to conceal her identity within these places and spaces. Despite feeling the need to conceal her identity in certain spaces, Leslie finds that she is

increasingly able to be herself and has a greater sense of belonging than what she had upon her initial move into the community.

Strategic outness is a strategy that many queer and trans* women use, regardless of their profession. Educators, specifically those who work in primary and secondary school settings, often struggle to negotiate the stigma that is sometimes associated with being queer or trans* and working with children and young people. This is further complicated by the fact that many school districts do not have policies that protect teachers from sexuality-based discrimination and unwarranted termination. Because of the stigma and overall lack of workplace protections, teachers, regardless of their geographic location, often use strategic outness as they manage their identities and sexualities within their school and university settings (Jackson 2007; Connell 2015). Esther (52, female, lesbian, Midwest), who has worked at both a rural public high school and a rural public university, uses various strategies to negotiate her identities in the workplace. When asked if she was out in her previous position as a high school teacher in the rural Midwest, Esther notes:

> I was not [out] because I was pretty certain I would have been fired. Being a woman, teaching science as a woman, it was a very hostile work environment…If they had known I was a lesbian, I would have just left my job...I could be fired for it. These are more rural people. A little more narrow minded, more Republican so I'm a little more careful.

Based on her interactions with others, as well as the personal knowledge that she had about the political and social views of her co-workers, including the fact that there are no employment non-discrimination laws protecting queer individuals in her state, Esther felt it was best for her to conceal her identity in the workplace, even though she is out in other aspects of her life, including to her family.

Literature that focuses on lesbian experiences in the workplaces describes how lesbians are often assumed to be 'doubly disadvantaged' because of their gender and sexual orientation

(Peplau and Fingerhut 2004; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008). Counter to this assumption, evidence shows that lesbian workers have advantages over their heterosexual female peers in terms of earnings, which are typically higher, especially in male-dominated professions (Frank 2001), work commitment, and competence (Badgett 2001). In addition to this, lesbians also experience sexual advances and gender based harassment less than their heterosexual female peers (Peplau and Fingerhut 2004, Wright 2008). Similar to some research, I find that for my respondents, gender often presents a greater barrier than sexuality (Colgan et al, 2008).

In her more recent position at a private university in the same community, Esther has had a very different experience and is able to be more out. As she explains, "I'm more out, but because I'm not in a relationship, it doesn't come up that much…I don't know if everybody knows, but I'm not hiding it." In various situations, Esther can safely come out and notes that she is able to do so when she is around more educated colleagues. In the coming academic year, Esther is returning to teach at a high school, but she expects the environment will be different, as she will be working side-by-side with more educated individuals and teachers. But, she still does not plan to be out. In addition to being in a new social setting, the fact that her state does not have protections for sexual orientation in employment plays a major role in her management of her identities as both a lesbian and a teaching professional. Despite the lack of employment protections in her community and the occasional need to negotiate situations on a case by case basis, Esther remains solid in her decision to move to a more rural community. She recently took a new position, also in education, where she feels she will be able to be out and live a more authentic life in her community.

Union contractors and small business owners also use elements of strategic outness as they negotiate their identities, who, like teachers, are often competing, with their professional

lives. In their professional positions, these individuals rely greatly on the relationships that they have with others, most notably their employees, employers, coworkers, customers, and clients. Without these relationships, these individuals are unable to work or conduct business. They also must consider how coming out can lead to the death of a business or prompt fear and anxiety from their customers, thus bringing further difficulties to their sometimes already precarious lives (Preston and D'Augelli 2013).

Alice (38, female, lesbian, Midwest), a union contractor, finds herself talking either in vague terms or not talking at all about her personal life amongst her coworkers and supervisors as she negotiates her identities within her ever-changing workplace. When asked about being out at work, Alice describes her decision-making process:

> When I am working, I don't talk a lot about my personal life…I don't talk a lot to my coworkers. Some people, I feel more comfortable being out to than others. Because I am in a male dominated field, I don't feel comfortable. Because I am a woman, I don't feel comfortable telling everyone that I'm a lesbian and that I have a wife and three kids…I think some of them would be judgmental and homophobic towards me. Maybe not overtly, but I think that maybe if I had a boss who didn't agree with homosexuality that he wouldn't say anything about it, but he might give me a shitty job, or I might be the first one to be laid off. I'm already a woman so I don't want to make things worse for myself.

Alice, like Leslie, finds herself opening up more to her colleagues as she interacts with them and gets to know them more. When she can freely open up about her identities, Alice notes, "I get excited that I can tell them about my life instead of feeling like I have to hide it." When getting to know new coworkers, Alice, like Leslie, tests the waters with them, using some of the aspects of strategic outness, including concealment and clues, and considers their social relationship, to gauge if they are someone to whom she can come out.

> If they're overly religious, I won't disclose my sexuality to them. I think if they're around my age or younger [under 40], they're more accepting. If their personality in general is just kind of quiet, I'm not going to come out to them. If they say they have a gay relative

> or if I can just tell they are accepting of it, I'll come out to them but if I can't tell whether or not they're accepting, I generally won't come out to them.

Despite having come out to her family at age 15, Alice still actively manages the access that others have to information about her sexual identity on a regular basis, thus again showing how coming out is not just a single disclosure, but rather a lifelong process. As Orne (2011) discusses, coming out is contextual and part of the continual process of identity management that is dependent on the social context and relationships that we have with others. Alice, like many others, considers not only the environment in which she is working, but also the relationships that she has formed with others including her bosses and coworkers, before she decides to come out or conceal her identity. In addition to these factors, it is also possible age and generation plays a role in these interactions. As Alice mentions, she finds that individuals who are under 40 are more open and accepting, in her experience. In addition to negotiating strategic outness at work, Alice, like Esther, also struggles with being a lesbian in a male dominated profession and finds herself not only considering how her sexuality will be received, but also her gender, as she works to maintain employment in a field that is already somewhat precarious, especially for women, due to its contracted nature.

Celia (36, female, lesbian, Midwest), who owns a small insurance agency which has been in her family for years, also finds herself having to strategically negotiate outness with those individuals with whom she interacts daily. While she's out to her coworkers, this is not the case for all her clients. While Celia doesn't actively work to conceal her identity, she realizes that she does need to control access to information about her sexuality to protect her business. She specifically considers both her interactions with each client as well as how much she knows them before disclosing anything to her clients. In discussing her process of coming out to others associated with her business, Celia notes:

> In my professional life with my clients, some of them know and some of them don't. It's not anything that I choose to hide. It doesn't come up. I have a lot of older clients…if my clients don't like me, whether they don't like me because I gave them that service or I was not nice to them, that's a reason they're going to take that money out of there. And, like I said, all my clients are very rural and some of them are very close-minded so I think that if I were to put up a sign behind me that said, yes, by the way, I am gay, it would certainly hurt my business.

For Celia, who started coming out to her family in her teens and twenties, being out as a business owner in a small town is a continual negotiation as she tries to not only do what is best for her, but also what is best for her business and relationships with others in the community. For my participants, being open about their sexuality is not something that they are able to do in all situations. Even though they are often out to their families and close friends, these queer and trans* women are more selective about with whom they share information about their identities and families in order to protect themselves, their jobs, businesses, and families. While elements of strategic outness work for many of my interviewees, this is not universally the case. Next, I explore why concealing their identities is also an often-used strategy of rural queer and trans* women.

Concealing Their Identity

While strategic outness works for many, there are still some individuals who find concealing their identity to be the most effective strategy for their rural lives. Choosing to not be open in their communities is a strategy that some use while others work to pass as heterosexual as a way of not only protecting themselves personally, but also protecting their jobs and the relationships they have with others in the community. For these individuals, constantly managing the impression and image that they put forth is important and they work to not only establish, but also maintain positive relationships with others in their respective communities. The existing literature on passing and recognition in relation to group membership including sex, gender, and sexuality, finds that gender and sexual identities are often products of individual and group social

interactions and, especially in the case of passing, are viewed as accomplishments of normative interactions that can garner greater social privilege (Pfeffer 2014, Connell 2009). Passing also allows for the assumption that there are authentic and inauthentic ways in which to be part of a particular social identity group. Those who pass are thus seen as "rightful owners" of membership to the group and often, with this ownership, comes not only privilege, but also social power (Harris 1993, Calavita 2000). For my respondents, homonormativity, in this case passing as heterosexual and/or not being recognized as queer, allows them greater access to social groups and institutions within their communities, most often their workplaces.

Violet (41, female, bisexual, Midwest), a massage therapist and natural healer, is, like Celia, a small business owner and service provider for her immediate community. While Celia finds that she can be out to some people in her community and uses strategic outness, this is less of the case for Violet. She believes that the main focus of her business should be patient care and not her personal life. Because of the intimate nature of her work, which not only involves the bodies of her patients, but also her own, Violet makes a greater effort to disconnect her own identity from the work which she is doing. When asked if she was out to people in the community, Violet notes that while she is out to friends and those with whom she is closest, this does not extend into her business.

> I'm really careful to keep patient care very much patient centered. I just don't do a lot of talking about my personal life. That's been true as long as I've been in practice…I just don't volunteer about my private life because it's not my time to talk, it's my time to listen.

Like some teachers who struggle with competing identities as LGBTQ and professionals, Violet works to leave her sexual self at the door and instead abides by the tenents of professionalism (Connell 2015). As a matter of respect for her clients and an attempt to shield herself from the discrimination that she sees throughout her state, Violet often conceals her bisexual identity and

thus passes as straight, especially as she is currently in a relationship with a cisgender man. Having been with women previously, Violet notes that her bisexuality is often an invisible identity, something that she experiences most often when she is in a relationship with a man. While women's sexuality is often evaluated based on appearance alone (Woolery 2007) bisexuals who don't have a distinct visual identity, especially when they are in relationships with men, often remain unseen (Hayfield, Clarke, Halliwell and Malson 2013). Heteronormativity and the assumptions that are often made of women who are in relationships with men allows Violet greater privilege in her community, more specifically in her business ventures.

Rachel (28, female, lesbian, West), who previously worked as a patient care provider for disabled and elderly individuals in her community, also finds it important to conceal her sexuality from her clients to assure that they're focused on their individual care needs and not on her identity. Like Violet, she practices what Connell (2015) terms splitting. In the case of teachers, they "leave their sexual selves behind and replace them with asexual teaching selves that abide by the tenets of teaching professionalism" (75). Like teachers, Rachel and others conceal their identities in the name of professionalism. As in the case of Violet, Rachel's work not only involves the bodies of her patients, but also her own. As caregivers, it is important Violet and Rachel to remain neutral in terms of sex and sexuality in their workplaces. For this and other reasons, Rachel is cautious and does not disclose her sexual identity to her clients. When asked why she wasn't out to her clients, Rachel notes, "I didn't want it to affect my employment in that sense. You know that they would just request not to have me in their house helping them do the stuff that they need to do just because they heard that I was gay." While Rachel was concerned about her relationship with her patients, she was also concerned about the effect that being out might have on her client base and overall ability to keep her job. Much like

Violet, Rachel considers being able to pass as essential to her job function as she prioritizes the care of her clients and the financial security that this job brings, especially as she is still a college student, over her desire to be more open about her sexuality. Despite having to conceal her identity, Rachel sees the value of remaining in her rural community as it allows her to be close to family and provides her with a greater support network as she works to complete her education.

While Rachel was mainly concerned about her relationship with her clients and her ability to keep her position, other individuals also conceal their identities because of the fears they have about the relationship that they have with their employers. Even after the 2015 Supreme Court decision in the case of Obergefell v. Hodges legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states, there are still 26 states that have no employment non-discrimination laws covering sexual orientation or gender identity.[14] For this, and other reasons, many individuals are still cautious and often specifically seek out employment opportunities in places where they know they will either be accepted or that federal laws or company policies will protect them from discrimination in the workplace.

Ellen (56, female, lesbian, Midwest), who is currently self-employed as a writer and thus able to be more open about her sexuality, hasn't always been able to be out at work. In her previous positions as a young adult librarian and as consultant who was hired to build a community farmers market in a nearby city, she concealed her sexual identity. In discussing her relationship with her previous business partner and the funder for the farmer's market, she details how quickly their relationship changed when he realized that the woman she was living with was actually her partner. As Ellen notes:

> Support just ended. Everything I was doing got an argument. Everything I was doing got very very tense. That made me realize, I didn't really think about it much before…That brought up the questions of outness…everything was saying that you're being

[14] http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non_discrimination_laws

> irresponsible if you're not out. Everybody needs to come out and my response was well, some places you can make a difference, but in some places, you're just being a martyr. This is not necessarily something that is going to help anyone and it's potentially going to make your life miserable. That became clear.

For Ellen, entering into a new relationship with a woman who she describes as being "dyke-city," ultimately ended her ability to pass and put her professional life in jeopardy. While Ellen had not done anything to change her appearance, after leaving her long term, heterosexual marriage, she realized that she did become more visibly queer through her relationship.

After this experience, Ellen is more careful about her relationships with others in town and eventually left the community and moved to another, more rural community, to focus on her writing and to become more comfortable with her lesbian identity. Despite this desire, Ellen continues to have to conceal her identity when she is working professionally, most recently at a local library. In discussing her most recent professional position, Ellen discusses why she concealed her lesbian identity:

> I'm a young adult librarian, so there is no way in hell that I could be out as lesbian. I would not have been hired and I probably would have been fired. I really really cannot imagine the people there tolerating that, the community tolerating that in any way. Because of who I am, I can't do the job.

Feeling like the environment was suffocating her and her identity, Ellen eventually left the library and is focusing on her second novel. Throughout her various positions, Ellen realized the difficulties that she would face with being out and/or being perceived as queer by others and instead found that concealing her identity, while also difficult, was the best strategy for her, considering where she was at professionally. Despite these difficulties, Ellen sees the value that comes with rural living, especially the low cost of living, which allows her to focus on her writing as well as the greenery and outdoor space that she now has to pursue her passion for gardening.

In her professional positions, Ellen was often the face of various institutions and organizations within the community. Other individuals, who are in positions of leadership in the community, especially those working in schools and churches, also attempt to conceal their identity as they feel that it is in their best interest to do so, both personally and professionally. Kathleen (46, female, lesbian, Midwest), who is currently a Professor of Education at a state university, began her career as a public school teacher. As part of her first teaching position, she had to sign a statement that she was and would remain a moral and upstanding person and that she would not interact in any immoral ways, which included homosexuality. At this point in her life, she was still dealing with coming out to herself and was very closeted at work, thus splitting her personal and professional lives. When she started dating a woman, she was apprehensive about coming out to others, as she was concerned about her standing at work. Eventually Kathleen returned to graduate school, where she was hoping to be more out about her identity. When she came out to a professor in her program, Kathleen was again told that it was not okay for her to be out as her professor was uncomfortable with one of her students being out and would have made things more difficult for Kathleen as she made her way through the program. Despite feeling forced to conceal her identity for the early part of her career, Kathleen made sure that this would not be the case as she searched for a permanent position after earning her Ph.D. When asked about the decision to be out professionally, Kathleen notes, "I knew I wasn't going to be the closet the rest of my days, so when I interviewed I specifically asked questions about policies about LGBTQ people and domestic partnerships benefits…I made a conscious choice during the interview process that I was going to be out from that point." While concealing her identity seemed to be her best strategy early on, Kathleen shows that strategies do shift depending on other associated factors. In her case, concealing her identity was not only a

strategy for rural living, but also something that allowed her to find her place professionally and gain financial security. In her current position, Kathleen is living openly with her partner and children and enjoys the opportunities that rural living has afforded them, such as the ability to own a small farm and to raise their children in a tight knit community that is also affirming of queer families.

Kam, as I previously described, is currently the pastor of two rural churches and a community leader, also shows how strategies shift, in their case depending on the geographic location. As a theology student and pastor in Chicago, Kam was the face of their religious community, but could be out and open about their identity. Since accepting a call to serve in a very rural community, Kam is now more cautious, often concealing their identity, especially in professional settings. In discussing why they conceal their identity professionally, Kam notes:

> I do have to be careful. I could possibly lose my position. Part of that is because I don't want to be distracting because if people don't have a theory of mind to be able to understand that heteronormativity is a social construct as opposed to a God construct, I still have to be their pastor. I want to be their pastor.

Kam believes that the ministry is their calling and thus they conceal their identity, both in terms of gender and sexuality, in order to not distract members of the churches and communities from their relationship with God. By not being open in terms of gender and sexuality, Kam is able to blend into the community and puts forth a front that is more consistent with the norms and values of the greater community. Regardless of their geographic locations, these individuals all find that concealing their identities, especially in the context of their professional work, is a strategy that puts them in the best position for negotiating their rural lives and often times putting them in a better place to support their needs, both for themselves and their families. In the following section, I discuss how some queer and trans* women in my study live openly both personally and professionally in their rural communities.

Living Openly

While some individuals are only able to negotiate their everyday lives in their rural communities by concealing their identities, others have found that their best strategy is to live openly, or as Len states, "unapologetically queer." Rather than being selective with whom they share their sexual identities, these individuals are not only out to their friends and family, but are also out to their neighbors, coworkers, and others in their greater communities. While living openly is not a universal experience for queer and trans* women and is often viewed as a privilege, some have embraced this often-affirming strategy in their rural lives.

Hannah (51, female, lesbian, Northeast), who works as an IT consultant and lives with her partner of over eighteen years, has, without question, always been out in her personal and professional life. For Hannah, it's very important that her colleagues and clients are aware of her identity and her relationship. She notes:

> It's not something that comes out in IT a lot, but I make it clear to them that I'm married and yes, I'm married to a woman. I want people to understand that I have a wife outside the office which means I won't be able to do certain things at certain times or be available all the time but also, it's important for them to understand who it is that they are working with and for them to have a personal and professional comfort level with the fact that they are working with an LGBT person who is not going to pretend to be something to get their business or their confidence.

Hannah credits her upbringing with making it easier for her to live openly. Her parents, whom she came out to in the 1970s, have always been accepting of her and her relationships. This acceptance, especially at a time when many queer individuals were still in the closet, has made Hannah feel more comfortable being out in her community as she knows she does have the support of many in her life.

Lauren (53, female, lesbian, Northeast), who works in the legal department of a Fortune 50 company, is also able to live openly, both personally and professionally, which she attributes the policies and support that she has at work. Between 1998 and 2002, the U.S. saw the number

of Fortune 500 companies offering domestic partner benefits to their employees double (Williams, et al 2009). During this time, even more conservative corporations such as Wal-Mart, began to offer benefits to their same-sex employees. When asked if she was out at work, Lauren answered:

> I've never thought about it. I've never been in the closet. People are very accepting of the fact. It is part of our company policy and it is very explicitly presented at the company. We even have a resource group that's for LGBT identified folks so there's no reason not to be out.

Both Hannah and Lauren realize the privileges that are associated with having an accepting workplace with LGBTQ friendly policies. With more affirming corporate workplace policies and cultures, these queer women are not only increasingly open, but also feel more accepted in their professional lives.

While some workplaces have been accepting for quite some time, others have only recently become more accommodating to their queer and trans* employees because of changes within the legal system and federal government. Amelia (61, transgender, lesbian, Midwest), who has worked for the United States Department of Defense for over 30 years, came out at work as transgender in 2013. With changes to policies within the United States Office of Personnel Management, Amelia could come out and live openly as transgender. In discussing these changes, Amelia details:

> If you go to the website, they tell you right up front how you're supposed to treat transgender people in the workplace. How you deal with them coming out…That relieved me a lot even though I'm in [a geographic location that is often seen as been less than accepting]. I knew I could always fall back on stuff like that.

Amelia knew that being out in the workplace was a strategy that would work for her as she saw a colleague transition in her workplace. While there was a learning curve with her new name and pronouns, Amelia eventually saw these issues diminish and with time she was more accepted. While living openly was always the ideal strategy for Amelia, she was only able to do so after

she became more comfortable with the changes that happened in the federal government and institution in which she works.

For those working within colleges and universities, living openly is also a common strategy. Connell (2015) finds that being out as an educator is based on three factors: the policy environment, both at the state and local level; the microculture of each school; as well as the gendered and raced embodiment of each individual. For queer women living in rural spaces, these factors play an important role in their ability to be out. Kathleen, who, as I noted previously, was forced to conceal her identity earlier in her career, especially in her positions within elementary and secondary schools, is now able to live openly on her university campus. When asked if she was out, Kathleen notes:

> All my students know, all my partner's students know [her partner is also a professor on campus]. We came here, we both came here as out queers…We were the head of the students and the faculty group…I was the LGBT coordinator for the entire state university system, so pretty much there isn't anybody left [who doesn't know].

For her, it is both her presentation of self, both personally and professionally, as well as the culture of the university system in which she works, which she helped to create, that allow her to live openly.

Both Karen (31, genderqueer, queer, West) and Alyssa (36, genderqueer, queer, West) work in campus LGBTQ centers and are not only protected by their universities, but also by their unique and very visible positions, which allow them to be out. While Karen able to live openly in her position, they note that this is not the strategy of all LGBTQ employees at their university.

> I'm very privileged in the fact that I do work in higher education. I work in a field where I'm protected by the university. Even folks on campus, there are people who work for the university who can't be out in their jobs. Even though we do have protections through our non-discrimination policies, people still don't feel like they can be out…I feel very fortunate that I can do that.

While the policy environment and the culture of acceptances does exist for Karen, because of their department and position, this is not found across their campus.

Alyssa, who hasn't always been out in their previous positions, realizes that this is strategy is the best suited for them now, especially considering their current geographic location and the protections that their state affords LGBTQ individuals. In discussing being out at work, Alyssa notes:

> When my role shifted [professionally], I was like fuck this. I can't handle not being out. This is stupid. I don't like this. It's devaluing who she is and our relationship. So then I stopped being in the closet. I decided at that point that I could never not be out…I live in a state that is extremely supportive, so even though I don't live in a particularly supportive, at the time, region of the state, this state as a whole really carries the state and protects us.

For Alyssa, it was not only state and university policies that influenced their decision to be out, but also the relationship that they have with their partner.

Even with protections of the state, not all colleges and universities are safe spaces for queer and trans* identified individuals. While the policy environment is largely supportive, sometimes individual colleges are universities, especially those that are affiliated with more conservative, religious organizations, do not have a culture that supports queer and trans* individuals. Marina (56, female, queer, Midwest), who has worked as a college professor for over 20 years, finds that living openly is not always a strategy that she can employ. When she was teaching at a local state university and a less conservative religious college, Marina was able to be out. In discussing being out at work, Marina describes her range of experiences:

> I was out. I didn't talk about it, but nobody was hiding it. Then I started realizing how many jobs I couldn't get which is why I am [commuting to a more urban area for work and job security] …I can't be hired by [two local conservative, religious institutions] because they still have a no hiring of gay people policy which will probably change in the next year or two…I've been told flat out that I can't be hired. It's not hidden.

When applying to these schools, Marina was first questioned about her status as a single, divorced woman. After it was determined that she was not having sex outside of marriage because she was not, nor did she plan on entering into another relationship, Marina's application was sent forward. She later withdrew her application from the search, rather than continue to deal with the extremely personal nature of the questioning. Her desire to live openly has also put Marina in difficult economic situations throughout her career. "I was just frustrated because I couldn't get a job. I was unemployed for a while. You don't know how many times I thought the economic toll coming out took on me is huge. It's hundreds of thousands of dollars of impact on my life." While living openly has been the main strategy for Marina, it has taken a toll on her life, both professionally and economically and is something she continues to struggle with today. While she has secured long-term, contracted positions as a professor in a more urban area, the time she spends commuting in order to fulfill her job responsibilities takes away from her ability to form relationships with others, including longer term romantic partnerships. While Marina finds herself in a less than desirable position professionally, she recognizes that she would suffer an even greater loss if she left her rural community. The personal relationships and social networks that she has in her rural community offer her a great deal of support and are invaluable to her life.

For Len, living openly is the strategy that best fits their situation and needs, but it has not always been easy for others to accept, especially in their spiritual and professional lives. Len is now pursuing a degree at a Christian seminary, and while this does not constitute a contradiction as they see it, it has been more difficult for other students to sometimes accept. Traditionally, many religious organizations consider homosexuality to be morally wrong and a sin which often leaves queer and trans* individuals to internalize guilt, shame, and self-hatred because of these

messages (Hansen and Lambert 2011). Len, in their current position, both personally and professionally, experiences many difficulties because of this messaging and the associated expectation that queer and trans* people will distance themselves from the church in order to accept their sexual and gender identities. When asked about this disconnect, Len notes:

> I think some people kind of think that being queer identified and pursuing a degree at a Christian seminary is a contradiction. You totally get the look from some people that they don't even understand how that could be so. My brother really has this thing – you can't be gay and Christian because you can't be gay. You certainly can't be gay and Christian and a pastor. It just doesn't work for him…I don't say that it makes it harder for me necessarily, but it makes it harder for some people to get who I am.

Despite the push back that they receive, Len still finds that living authentically as gay, and increasingly now as trans* identified, is the best strategy for them and that by being out they are also about to help others who are struggling to reconcile their identities as both queer and/or trans* and Christian.

Living openly, as a strategy for rural queer living, while effective for some, puts others in increasingly precarious positions, especially in terms of their interactions in the workplace as well as their overall ability to remain employed. Martina (57, non-binary/pangender, queer, Midwest), a music teacher at a private school, finds that while living openly is the best strategy for them, the lack of awareness that others have regarding their identity often creates a hostile work environment. When asked about their experiences at work, Martina explains:

> I have a colleague who continually says things about organists and uses the limps wrists…This person is just a bully. He's an absolute bully. I have to, with him, just say stop it, I find that inappropriate. I don't enjoy that. I think I may just have to be in his face and say, look, I'm queer, stop it. I find that offensive. I don't think he's making the connection…Mostly I tend to probably appear more femme a lot of times so probably, again, people who do not know me and know that I have children and that I was married to a man with a penis, they assume that I'm, you know. They don't know.

Even though they are the faculty sponsor of a student group for queer and gender non-conforming students and is very open about their queer identity, some of their departmental

colleagues still are unable to see or remain unaccepting of their identity. While their workplace, as a whole is accepting, Martina finds that this is not always the case when considering the interactions that they have with others. Martina continues to live openly but finds it difficult to deal with others who make their workplace feel less safe and accepting. Despite the professional difficulties, Martina finds great value in the rural life that they have returned to. Martina values the connection that they have to the physical space as they now live on the farm where they were born and raised as well as the relationship that they have to their greater rural community.

Celia, who is currently a self-employed, small business owner, came into a similar situation after being outed while working for a pharmaceutical company that was based in Massachusetts. Despite having corporate level non-discriminatory practices and policies, as well as offering benefits for queer employees that were legally married in Massachusetts, Celia still faced a lot of hostility and homophobia after being outed by a colleague and thus was more or less forced into living openly. Celia describes this experience, when asked if she has ever been outed.

> Once people found out, they looked at me differently…You walk in a room, they stop talking. The emails that were send were a lot of dumb forwards that are just obviously homophobic and offensive. My boss said some really homophobic comments. I had emails from him with his homophobic shit. It was definitely expressed toward me in a direct and an indirect way…I started getting poor reviews, things like that. My work hadn't changed, if anything, I had gotten better at my job.

Ultimately Celia lost her job as part of a company-wide lay off. Celia did consult a lawyer about bringing a discrimination suit against her company. Eventually, after finding that the supervisors, who supported her and her case, were also laid off, her lawyer convinced her to drop the suit as it was becoming increasingly difficult to prove, especially with the layoffs that affected various co-workers. Despite having policies on the corporate level that supported her, Celia, like some educators, suffered because the microculture of the specific branch where she worked. Living

openly, what Celia considered to be her ideal strategy, was damaging to her career. Now that she is self-employed, she remains more cautious and is only open with those whom she trusts most and only, in rare cases, with her business clients.

Kris, (57, transgender, bisexual, South), like Celia, feels that living openly has had an effect on her professionally. After coming out and living openly as a transwoman in her early fifties, she sees how this strategy affects her prospects of employment, even though she has a long history of service in the United States Navy, as well working at several Fortune 500 technology firms. In explaining her difficulties with employment, Kris answers:

> Because I was out and wouldn't lie about being transgender and would not lie about the fact that I planned to transition, I lost several interviews that I went to. The job interview was set up by a headhunter and I was totally honest about them with about what was going on…I find out from the company that I interviewed with that the headhunter called them and told them about me being transgender.

After coming out as transgender, Kris found less permanent employment and was instead only able to find work with temporary agencies that only paid her a small portion of what they were actually billing the companies for which she worked. As a contractor and temporary worker, Kris faces even greater difficulties, especially as she lives and works in a state that does not have antidiscrimination protections for queer and trans* individuals. To further complicate this, Kris is a contractor and temporary worker and, even when working within more progressive companies that do afford protections for queer and trans* employees, is not covered by these policies. While Kris has never questioned her decision to live openly, she does see the effect that it has on her professional life, both previous to and since beginning her transition. Even with these professional difficulties, Kris has never questioned her decision to move to this community as it affords her many of the freedoms, including owning a home and land, which would not have been possible in her previous urban locations.

While some individuals have only positive experiences with living openly, often because of the protections that exist in their states or workplaces as well as the overall cultures of their workplaces, this strategy does have greater consequences for some rural queer and trans* women. For those who are small business owners, healthcare providers, and contract or union laborers, there is also a need to maintain a client base, which could become problematic, especially in more conservative areas, in order to continue to earn a living. Without local, state, or federal employment protections and supportive workplaces cultures, queer and trans* women, especially those who are outed in the workplace, are often put into a position where living openly is less of a choice, and often directly affects them in both their personal and professional lives. In the next section, I explore how being out allows some rural queer and trans* women the ability to not only create better lives for themselves, but also for others in their communities.

Creating Visibility, Tolerance, and Acceptance for Queer and Trans* Individuals in the Community

Familiarity and belonging are central to rural life and is most often acquired by demonstrating that you are 'the same' as others, most often through connections to family. Family ties allow for the strange, in this case queerness, to be transformed into something that is recognizable. Familiarity can also be used to counter the strangeness and isolation which comes from being unknown in the community, what Gray (2009) discusses as a queer stranger. In her research, Gray discusses the case of Mary Bird, the mother of a lesbian who moved to a rural Kentucky community after retiring. Previous to moving, Bird had been active with PFLAG and wanted to find a way to continue this advocacy work in her new community. Bird joined the local Homemakers Association group because there were no existing advocacy groups in her new community and turned it from a support group for women into a collective action group for LGBT activism that organized informational forums for LGBT youth. What began as an effort to

counteract loud, conservative religious voices in her community ended with making the town a better place for LGBT youth. Using her position as a mother, along with prior experience with PFLAG, Bird worked to educate others in the community to help them understand that her lesbian child is just like anyone else. This is a strategy by which an individual can use notions of family to help solidify their position as a familiar stranger.

As a way of creating visibility, tolerance, and acceptance in their communities, queer and trans* women in my study, like Gray's Mary Bird, often turn to advocacy and community-based organizing. In my research, familiar strangers are individuals who have moved into and established themselves within these communities later in their lives and have lived at least eight years in their current location. In their rural communities, queer and trans* women form rewarding relationships with the individuals and groups with whom they work to gain tolerance and acceptance within their communities. In doing this, they are also often able to create greater opportunities for themselves and other queer and trans* individuals and groups in their area.

Kam, who began working in their rural communities about eight years ago, sees how their work is making a difference in slowly broadening the minds of those in the immediate community. While Kam is not a familiar local, as defined by Gray (2009), and doesn't have a well-known family name, they are very active in the social and political economy of their town. In this way, Kam has become a familiar stranger in their community. Whether it be participating in community events such as corn boils and chili cook offs, representing the local religious community at the dedication of a new park, or visiting the elderly at local hospitals and care centers, Kam is a very visible member of the community.

Kam also finds that the community is becoming more tolerant and even accepting of queer and trans* lives. While they are only strategically out to a small group of individuals in

their community, Kam continues to push for tolerance and acceptance for other queer and trans* individuals in their community by not only being a role model, but also by creating a safer community, both within and outside of the church, for others. Kam finds it important to provide guidance and support for youth and those who are questioning their sexuality and/or gender identity, in order to help them feel as if they are part of a greater queer community in their area, even though it is not always visible. For Kam, this push to be a role model is greatly influenced by their own experiences growing up. As Kam notes, they see being a role model as their responsibility to their community:

> When I was a kid, I was so busy trying to figure out who the hell I was that I couldn't get the community at all. I just knew that I felt trapped and had no role models, nobody I could turn to. Eventually going from slightly bigger city to slightly bigger city, where I could be who I am and there were like-minded people who I could be around and then coming back to a small town again to say now I'm the role model.

Kam especially feels like they are making a difference in the lives of youth in the community who are beginning to see that is it possible to be queer and a leader within the community. In discussing their involvement with the Gay Straight Alliance at a local high school, Kam considers the importance of being out, especially as a member of the religious community, which is traditionally less accepting of queer and trans* lives (Hansen and Lambert 2011). As Kam notes:

> By allowing myself to be more open…when someone comes to me and they say, look, I think I might be going to hell, but I look at you and you don't look like you're going to hell. To be able to say, let me let you in on a little bit more about me so that you can feel comfortable letting me know about your but also know that you're not alone.

In these rural spaces, which are often associated with the closet, it is increasingly important for individuals, especially youth, to have role models and systems of support as they begin to explore identities and find a sense of belonging within their communities.

With their continued support of not just the queer and trans* communities but also of the greater community, Kam finds that their community is also, in turn, there to support them. Recently, when they presided over a lesbian wedding in one of their churches, Kam saw the support of their local community and parishes. While there was some pushback from members of the church and local community, many of Kam's congregants supported their decision to move forward with this wedding and acted as gatekeepers in order to make sure that the wedding was able to happen without interruption. With the relationships that they've formed with their churches and others in the greater community, as well as their community involvement and mentorship, Kam has become a familiar stranger and thus is bringing not only greater visibility, but also increasing tolerance and acceptable for the queer and trans* communities in their rural area.

As a transwoman and transplant to the Southern United States, Kris, who is living openly as transwoman, also finds it important to bring together individuals to create a strong and visible queer community as a means of not only supporting her own identity, but also in helping others who are seeking acceptance and a place to call their own within her newfound home. Having lived in her current location for over ten years, Kris finds that her community is becoming much more open and friendly to the queer and trans* communities. When asked about her community, Kris describes her chosen home as "having people from at least half the countries in the world…when we got here, the churches didn't know anything. They ignored us all. Now we have a lot of protests going on about equal rights, equal protections, etc." Kris and her wife moved to the area for a slower pace of life and to be able to enjoy each other more, which is allowed for partially by the lower cost of rural living. While initially an outsider in this community, Kris has, like Kam, become a familiar stranger due to her presence in the social and

political economy of the area through her advocacy and community organizing work in the queer and trans* community. Over the last ten years, Kris and her wife have worked together with other queer and trans* identified individuals to create a regional community center that now houses support groups and programming for queer, trans*, gender-non-conforming, and HIV positive individuals in their area. Even though they are less involved in the community center now, Kris and her wife continue to see a greater tolerance and acceptance towards queer and trans* identified individuals, who were previously largely invisible within their community.

While some individuals in rural communities find that they can create visibility and change because they are familiar locals (Gray 2009), others who have moved to their communities later in life, as I found in my research, become known through their work and service to the community. Being a familiar stranger not only gives these individuals a greater ability to create change within their communities, but also helps them to create visibility, tolerance, and sometimes even support and acceptance for the queer and trans* communities in their area.

Comparing Strategies – Locals and Transplants

Familiar locals are more likely to be living openly than transplants.[15] For these individuals, living openly best fits their individual situation and needs. As locals, having family support nearby also provides them with a greater sense of security. Both Len and Amelia have not only spent the majority of their lives in their current location, but also were previously heterosexually married and raised children in these communities. While they have both experienced major changes in their lives, Len coming out later in life and Amelia transitioning, they still find that having families close by allows them to be themselves and helps solidify their

[15] 82% of familiar locals are living openly compared to 64% of transplants.

place in their communities. Martina, who has returned to rural living after living in a wide range of locations, both domestically and internationally, lives on the farm in which they were born and raised. While they sometimes struggle to find understanding of their identity in their workplace, Martina now finds that the support that they have outside of the workplace allows them to be open.

Transplants, despite being in positions where they are still 'testing the waters' in the new communities, still decide to live openly (more than half [64%] reported living openly). In cases where transplants are living openly, this can be attributed to the positions which they hold professionally, as well as their location. Transplants that fall in the "living openly" category all also note that this is made possible because of their supportive workplace culture. As discussed previously, Alyssa, Kathleen, and Karen are all employed by universities with protective campus policies that do not allow discrimination. Similarly, Hannah and Lauren, who both work for large corporations, are also protected by affirming corporate workplace policies.

When considering the strategies which garner the greatest attention, locals are overwhelmingly focused on creating communities and families of support, while transplants focus more on creating visibility, tolerance and acceptance in their communities. While some locals have lived elsewhere, they have returned to the rural spaces where they were born and raised to be closer to family, most often to help care for aging parents and/or to provide their own children with the same types of experiences that they had growing up. As transplants have often moved from places where visibility and tolerance were more present and in which they were involved in queer and trans* organizing and activism, their focus is thus different. For example, Kam was very involved with their open and affirming church when they lived in Chicago. After moving to their current community for their job, their involvement has shifted.

Instead of creating an open and affirming community within their church, Kam instead has to be more careful in the ways in which they work to create change in their community and now often works with youth in the community.

Conclusion

This data begins to show us how queer and trans* women are actively using a wide range of strategies to negotiate their everyday lives in their rural communities. Based on their discussions of their everyday lives and interactions within their communities, we can start to see how rural spaces, despite the challenges that are often generated, can be conducive to queer and trans* lives. Overall, these findings highlight how networks of social support, including families, workplaces, churches, and other social networks help queer and trans* women overcome the issues they face as they create for lives for themselves and their families in their communities.

Through strategic outness, rural queer and trans* women control access to information about their lives and identities. By understanding coming out as not a single disclosure, but rather something that many rural queer and trans* women experience throughout their life course, we can begin to understand the ultimate costs that some of these individuals face if they are out in their communities and places of work. As a tactic, strategic outness allows these women to better manage their professional lives, including, in some cases, maintaining their businesses and client base, as well as their financial lives. In some cases, these findings also show how negotiations of outness and identity are further complicated when considering intersections of identity, such as being a woman in a male-dominated profession. Overall, when personal and professional identities are competing, anxieties and fears of being out professional can often be heightened.

With heightened anxieties, some queer women conceal their identities or pass as heterosexual not only to protect themselves, but also their families, jobs, and relationships they have with others in the community. Like strategic outness, concealing is a constant process of identity management. For the most part, these women, who have positions that serve the community including healthcare, non-profit work, and public service positions including teachers and clergy, recognize that concealing their identities and passing as heterosexual is a privilege that allows them greater access to social groups and institutions, most often within their workplaces.

Much like concealing and passing, living openly is a strategy that is often considered a privilege and is specific to certain types of workplaces and geographic locations, often either because of the protections that exist within a workplace and/or because of their social location, such as working for a college or university. Living openly, as a strategy, also puts some individuals in precarious positions and can also have great consequences including losing a job or business or creating a hostile work or living environment. Even if workplace culture and/or policies support queer and trans* individuals, individual colleagues can often make living openly less acceptable and safe. Regardless of the other strategies that they employ, we see queer and trans* women who are working to create visibility, tolerance, and acceptance for queer and trans* individuals in their communities. Through advocacy and community-based organizing, we begin to see how these women either as individuals or as part of a group are bringing greater opportunities for themselves and other queer and trans* individuals in their areas.

Overall, these findings begin to challenge existing cultural narratives that see urban spaces as the only places where queer and trans* individuals can live and thrive. As evidenced in this chapter, queer and trans* women, by using these strategies, are able to construct lives in

their rural communities and, in some cases, are also able to bring increasing levels of tolerance, and sometimes even acceptance and belonging for themselves and other queer and trans* individuals in their communities. Community and belonging are two concepts which are important in understanding how queer and trans* women make sense of their lives in rural communities. In the next chapter, I will further explore these ideas while also considering why these women live in rural spaces.

CHAPTER 5: COMMUNITY, BELONGING, AND WHY RURAL

On a cool spring afternoon, I spoke with Celia Larson (36, female, lesbian, Midwest). We struggled to hear each other, at first, a product of the often-insufficient mobile phone networks in rural spaces. Later on in the interview after I apologized for some background noise, Celia noted that she was actually taking the call in her car to be in a better location for phone signal. Throughout the interview, Celia discusses her relationship with the rural community in which she was born and raised, which she now also calls home. Having lived in various urban areas, both as a student and as a young professional, Celia has been part of many different communities. In discussing life in her rural hometown, Celia explains how being gay and a familiar local (Gray 2009) has been aided by her family ties to the community.

> The people are friendly to people who've grown up here. They're not friendly to outsiders. I think because I was born in the area it's easier for me to be gay in the area because they're like, oh well, I knew your dad or your mom or your grandpa. Like you're our gay so that's okay, but don't be bringing her around because she's not our gay. She's a whole different kind of gay.

This example illustrates how community and belonging is a given for those who are familiar locals but is more complicated for other queer and trans* individuals in these communities. While all of my respondents discuss belonging or feeling like they are part of their greater communities in some way, this is often complicated by a range of factors including their status in the community (i.e. being a familiar local or a transplant), gender presentation and/or identity, sexism, homophobia, and homonormativity.

In this chapter, I examine queer and trans* women's narratives of geography, community, and belonging in rural spaces. There is a greater cultural narrative and a general assumption that urban gays are "exciting" and rural gays are "boring." Rural respondents often describe themselves as old married people who work, do housework and occasionally participate

in outdoor activities, but mostly just go about their day to day lives. In contrast, urban gays and lesbians, as described by rural respondents, are more extreme, participate in pride events, and enjoy culture, including going to bars and parties (Kazyak 2011). Despite the perceived divide between urban and rural lives, community and belonging are experienced in both spaces.

In this chapter, I focus on how my respondents experience community and belonging in their rural communities. Building on Chapter 4, I further detail the strategies that queer and trans* women use to navigate their everyday lives in relation to economics, employment, safety and discrimination. I also consider the following questions: 1) How do queer and trans* women understand their experiences? and 2) How and why do they live in these spaces? This chapter builds on the previous chapter by not only considering the strategies that these women use, but also showing how they work within various social processes and circumstances that they face in their everyday lives while also considering the interactions that they have with individuals, groups, and institutions in their communities. The findings in this chapter also continue to challenge cultural assumptions about rural queer and trans* living.

Community, Belonging, and Homonormativity

The extant literature on community focuses not only on social cohesion, but also on civic participation and attitudes about communities. Mahar (1991), in her study of economic capital and rural women, defines community as a "notion on belonging [to] a social space in which various households are linked by kin, social and economic ties, a sense of shared history and expectations of certain behavior, and a cycle of religious and social activities" (363-64). Beggs, Hurlburt, and Haines (1996) further this understanding of community with a focus on social cohesion and bond with community. Community attachment, as they measure it, is based on three dimensions: interpersonal, including the extent and strength of an individual's ties and

social networks, participation in community organizations, and sentiments, incorporating the range of positive feelings about their community.

Scholars agree that there are many different ways to belong and that processes and understandings of belonging are not only social, but also political. Yuval-Davis (2006), for instance, discusses the multi-layered nature of belonging. Belonging can be based on social location and the associated power relationships and intersectional characteristics, identities or emotional attachments, and ethical and political values. When considering sexualities, homosexuality is considered a more stigmatized identity category and thus queer individuals often experience a reduced level of belonging. The emotional and personal experiences of individuals also aide in the understanding of belonging. In the case of rural queer and trans* lives, an overall sense of belonging is often tied to things like feeling safe and/or secure or feeling at home. In rural spaces, attitudes and ideologies are often more conservative and heteronormative (Little 2003; Oswald and Culton 2003). For this, and other reasons, belonging is often complicated as queer and trans* identities are often marginalized in these spaces.

Homonormativity, what Duggan (2002) discusses as "the expression of the sexual politics of neoliberalism" (p. 179), can also aide the experience of belonging for queer and trans* individuals in rural spaces. By making coupling and long-term monogamous relationships a priority, leading lives that are increasingly private, and possessing an overall greater desire to fit in, queer and trans* individuals begin to demonstrate a sense of 'sameness' with their heterosexual counterparts (Richardson 2005). While some argue that homonormativity fails to consider the experiences of gays and lesbians outside of metropolitan centers (Brown 2012, 2015), we see how increasingly liberal attitudes about homosexuality and new forms of legal equality, including, but not limited to same-sex marriage, are also found outside of urban spaces.

In rural spaces, homonormativity, especially in the case of middle class, white, monogamous, married couples, is increasingly present. Rosenfeld (2009) and Stryker (2008) push for an alternate understanding of the origins of homonormativity, specifically pointing to the experiences of individuals in the early homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In their discussions of "postwar homonormativity," they find that conformity in terms of gender and as well as passing as heterosexual worked to create a greater acceptance of homosexuality in a time where politics were also in flux. In rural spaces, homonormativity and the associated sense of belonging is similar as it is often facilitated by adopting gender conforming behaviors and presentation (I address limitations related to my analysis of homonormativity later in this chapter in footnote 16.)

Rural (Queer) Communities

Rural communities are small, close knit places, where everyone knows everyone. The close knit social and kinship networks of small towns also leave little room for privacy and both gossip and truth travels quickly through the "small town grapevine" (Williams et al. 2005). More often than not, everyone knows and recognizes you and your sexual identity, even though this isn't something that is explicitly discussed. This attitude described by Kazyak (2011) as "live and let live" leads to gays and lesbians not being acknowledged in their communities. Factors such as this led to the generally taken for granted assumption that all rural spaces are less welcoming to queer individuals when compared to urban settings.

Rural spaces offer greater familiarity with others in the community, which comes from having a small, close knit group of friends, who are not necessarily gay, with which they can not only socialize but also find social support (Cody and Welch 1997). Even though queer and trans* individuals often feel isolated and have a range of other negative experiences in their rural

communities, there are also positive aspects of rural living including a slower, less stressful, and more peaceful pace of life. Other benefits of rural experiences include finding self-acceptance and a high quality of life. While there are benefits, there are also costs including the absence of LGBTQ organizations and resources, individual and structural homophobia, and lack of equal rights for LGBTQ individuals (Oswald and Culton 2003). When LGBTQ organizations and services do exist, they are often disorganized, underfunded, and thus often staffed by volunteers.

Why rural?

There are various reasons why queer individuals choose rural living, including an overall slower pace of life, the desire to be outdoors and connected with nature, and the ability to maintain relationships with family and friends (Boulden 2001; Cody and Welch 1997; Kirkey and Forsyth 2001; McCarthy 2000; Oswald and Culton 2003). In interviews with individuals who could choose to leave and/or chose to move back, Kazyak (2011) finds that her respondents chose rural living in order to care for aging family members, to be with partners who were from or had family in the area or took jobs in the area, to start a business, and to give their children the same experiences they had growing up, including going through school with their same peers and allowing their children to maintain friendships and other relationships in their community.

As noted previously, rural living does create a range of challenges for queer and trans* individuals including navigating discrimination and overall negative attitudes about homosexuality (Beale 1993; Eldridge, Mack, and Swank 2006; Smith and Mancoske 1997). Rural gays and lesbians also experience an overall lack of support due to a lack of affirming social spaces (Aldrich 2004; Browne, et al 2007; Kramer 1995) and service and medical providers who are often ill prepared to deal with the unique needs of queer and trans* individuals (Eliason and Hughes 2004; French 2000).

While there are challenges, rural gays and lesbians are not worse off than their urban peers. Wienke and Hill (2013) found that gays and lesbians living in areas with larger populations are less satisfied with work and are less happy and healthy than those individuals living in smaller cities. While large cities have more opportunities for social networking, have greater social and institutional support, and are generally more tolerant, they also have more noise, pollution, traffic, and crime, which tend to lead to lesser levels of well-being (Wienke and Hill 2013). While the research on queers in rural spaces does indicate that there are challenges to living in these locales, we should not readily assume that this applies to all rural contexts or dismiss them as somehow just being less sexually enlightened in comparison to urban locations.

Being (A)Part of the Community

Familiar Locals

When negotiating their lives in rural communities, queer and trans* women have varying experiences with acceptance. Some individuals, who were born and raised in these communities, feel as if they are accepted, thus they have an easier time than someone who was not from there. Others find they are able to gain acceptance in their communities, but this only comes with time (Gray 2009; Kazyak 2011). In the previous chapter, I showed how being a familiar local plays an important role in creating better, more affirming spaces for others. As seen in the example of Kam, it is less about what individuals are able to do for themselves and more about the ability that it gives them as individuals to create visibility, tolerance, and sometimes even support and acceptance for the queer and trans* communities in their area. In this chapter, the focus shifts to consider how being a familiar local ultimately supports them as individuals and provides them with a greater sense of belonging in their community.

Jai (38, genderqueer, queer, Midwest), who lives in the community in which they were raised, finds a greater sense of acceptance, not just in the community, but also in their church. They note that even though they are known as gay in the community, that this doesn't always mean that they feel safe. Jai still finds there are times when they do not feel totally safe in the community, which they attribute to their more masculine presentation. Despite this, Jai remains open about their sexuality and continues to present in the way with which they are most comfortable. Even though they don't always feel safe in their community, Jai still believes that living openly is the best strategy for them. When asked if they are out in their community, Jai answers, "In a social setting, I'm out to anybody I'm talking to. If I feel comfortable enough, I go there." While they do feel there are some exceptions and spaces where they don't feel safe or accepted, Jai is out to those with whom they interact in the community including former classmates, teachers, and current members of their church congregation. As a familiar local who has the support of their church, both in their fellow parishioners, pastor, as well as other leaders of the church, Jai not only has a community, but also experiences belonging in a way that may not be possible for other queer and trans* individuals in their community.

Amelia (61, transgender, lesbian, Midwest), who lives in the same house that she built with her family prior to transitioning, also feels that individuals in her neighborhood and community are more accepting because she's not just "someone who's moved in here and that's acting weird." In her community, she's not just 'a transgender.' She instead sees that she is "someone…one of the first people in this neighborhood." Amelia, who is also a familiar local, also believes that having a family, more specifically, a child who went to school locally and was also part of the neighborhood has played a role in her acceptance.

> The kid played with other kids that were in the neighborhood...I think they have a little bit of knowledge of what I've been and who I am and maybe that's helping them

> overcome their own differences. Maybe they're giving me a pass due to the fact that I have been here so long, and they do know me even though we don't socialize that much…They do know me, and they do know that we have a son…That's probably been beneficial. It's probably a lot more so than what it'd be right now if I moved right now to some rural environment. I would probably have crosses burned or my car tires slashed. I don't anticipate that happening here.

Amelia is unsure if her transition would have been received in the same way in another rural community where she was unknown. Being known to those in her neighborhood has made a major difference in how people treat her, especially following her transition. By doing many of the same things that she did before transitioning, such as mowing the lawn and taking care of her family home, Amelia remains a visible member of the community. Because of their status as familiar locals both Jai and Amelia recognize the benefits of being known in their community and realize that their experiences and their associated strategies might be much different if they were new or more recent transplants, who often only experience greater levels tolerance with time.

As gender non-conforming and trans* individuals respectively, Jai and Amelia have different experiences with belonging than cisgender queer women who do conform to gender expectations, both in terms of behaviors and presentation. Jai is more masculine in presentation but does not experience the same level of acceptance as Amelia because Jai is still seen as a woman in their community because of their status as a familiar local . Despite being visibly trans*, Amelia finds that she is more accepted in her community because of her family, which brings her closer to the norms that are established by heterosexual society. While she doesn't 'fit in' or pass in terms of gender, she is white, middle class, in a stable, long-term marriage (she remained married to her wife even after transitioning), has economic security, having been employed by the Department of Defense for over thirty years, and, as mentioned previously, has raised a child in her community. While Amelia does not possess all the traits associated with

homonormativity, her experiences are much closer to homonormativity than Jai's. Jai doesn't experience the same level of privilege because they are lower class, often unemployed or underemployed, and does not conform to gendered expectations. While Jai is in a long-term relationship, they are not and do not desire to be married, are not monogamous, and do not have any children. While neither Jai nor Amelia conform in terms of gender, Amelia finds greater acceptance in her community by remaining closer the heterosexual norms.

Acceptance Over Time

While some queer and trans* individuals feel that they are accepted in their communities as they are 'from there', those who are not native to their current communities often find that acceptance is something that comes over time. Hannah (51, female, lesbian, Northeast), who moved to her current town with her partner, has found that people in her community have become more accepting of them and their relationship over time. By not only being open, but visibly queer, in their relationship and marriage, Hannah feels that she and her wife have gained greater recognition in their community.

As Hannah notes:

> We go to the local restaurant and people know we're a couple. We go to the grocery store and they know we're a couple. It's not a secret in town. People that want to know can walk over to the town hall and can find out. Okay, they're a couple. They own that property together. It's very much an accepting reality.

As far as she is concerned, people in their town began to realize that they were bringing revenue to the community, were not a nuisance, and were not bad neighbors. With time, Hannah and her partner became more known in town and people, as Hannah recounts, "They just look at you as another person." With time, visibility, and being a positive fixture in their communities, my respondents find that they are increasingly accepted in their communities as they are no longer seen as unknown but are now recognized as members of the community, familiar locals.

Sophia (44, female, lesbian, Midwest), who has been in her current location for fourteen years also finds that, over time, people have become more accepting and open to get to know her as person, rather than just as that new "gay, bi or whatever" woman at the university. When she first moved to town, Sophia found that people would ask and say the "most ridiculous" things about her: "People were drinking…someone sort of decided it was an appropriate forum to question me about how I knew I was gay and what it meant to be gay." Fast-forward to today, Sophia finds that she is extremely supported in her community. While she did come out to some people early on, the more established members of the community only came to know about her sexuality after Sophia had proven herself as a member of the community. By choosing to conceal her identity initially, Sophia was able to first establish herself as a member of the community, through volunteering and church work, before many people found out that she was queer and thus was not only able establish herself in the community, but also to find her own sense of belonging.

Families, Homonormativity, and Belonging

Over the past two decades, much of the social and political activism in the LGBTQ community has focused on the lack of privileges relating to family formation including adoption and marriage (Stone 2012). The Supreme Court decision in the case of Obergefell v. Hodges (2015) legalized same-sex marriage in the United States and changed the relationship that many LGBTQ individuals had with the previously exclusive institution of marriage. Rather than challenging the institutions of marriage and family, queer and trans* individuals often experience greater inclusion within these communities through homonormativity or adhering to the norms of heterosexuality (Duggan 2002; Herring 2010), which are often valued in rural communities. For many of my respondents, a greater sense of community and belonging comes with not only being

in a long-term committed relationship or marriage, but also by having children. These children, which are most often products of previous heterosexual relationships, bring women closer to heterosexual norms as they appear to exhibit a greater connection to homonormativity through their focus on domesticity, which is most often connected to marriage and children.[16]

Donna (41, female, lesbian, Midwest), who moved to her current community after retiring from military service in hope of finding a more stable environment and good schools for her children. With time, her family has become accepted in their community. After leaving her heterosexual marriage and forming a relationship with and marrying her partner, Donna finds even greater support in their community.

> I feel comfortable…to be able to show affection; other cities right around us, not so much…I think all the boys' friends' parents are supportive. It doesn't matter to them. We're just another set of parents. The one boy had prom last year. Me and my wife went over to another boy's house, there were probably like twelve kids, all the parents went over there for pictures and there was another lesbian couple there. That was exciting.

With time, Donna and her family feel as if they are accepted in their rural community. As her children grew older, this acceptance became increasingly visible as they had greater interactions with other families with children in the community. Her children are now teenagers. By not only providing a better situation for her family, but also adhering to the norms associated with heteronormativity, including being married and having children, Donna has experienced a greater sense of belonging within her community.

Kathleen (46, female, lesbian, Midwest) has had similar experiences in her community. When she moved to her community to take a faculty job at a regional university, she was single. Upon not only forming, but also maintaining a long-term relationship with her partner, she began

[16] My analysis of homonormativity in relation to gender presentation is somewhat limited as the majority of my interviews (due to limitations discussed in my methods chapter) were voice only. That said, I have included analysis relating to self-presentation based on in person interviews or what my respondents verbally noted about their self-presentation or the self-presentations of their partners.

to build relationships with others in the community as they connected with others through their business, a truck farm. After becoming a foster parent and eventually adopting, Kathleen sees how her family was increasingly accepted, both professionally as well as in the community.

> I think I was actually seen as more of an oddity before we had children. They didn't know exactly how to categorize me, what was okay. There wasn't a lot of information that people had. They were very friendly and welcoming, but they didn't have a lot of information about what is this. Socially, how do we do this thing? They wanted to, but they didn't really know what they were doing. Now that we have kids, it kind of erases that sexuality within the professional realm because I think that the role of being a parent, they kind of code you as that first, before queer. So, it has less of an impact now and less of an impact on (her partner) as well.

Queerness, as Kathleen sees it, has been erased and now her family is the focal point within the community. Like Donna, it was through adherence to the expectations associated with families, including having a long-term, committed marriage, children, and economic security that Kathleen became not only known as a part of the community, but also experienced belonging through her role as a parent, which, as she notes, often erases her sexuality. Both Donna and Kathleen are often seen with their partners in their communities and are thus more visibility queer. Even with this visibility, their overall focus on their families and most often depoliticized lives bring them closer to heterosexuality and thus grants them greater acceptance in their communities.

While being in a long-term relationship and/or marriage with children often leads to greater acceptance within rural communities, there are cases where belonging is more complicated. Lenae notes that being part of the community where her family has lived for centuries, leads to greater community acceptance for her as an individual. This, however, is not the case for her immediate family, specifically her partner and daughter. Lenae's partner, who identifies as genderqueer, is more masculine presenting and has very short hair—finds that they do not have the same acceptance as Lenae does in the community. Lenae also notes that she is

treated better when she is in public without her partner. She attributes this difference not only to her status as a familiar local, but also to her partner's gender identity and presentation. As Rosenfeld (2009) notes, passing or adopting gender conforming behaviors makes homosexuality more acceptable. This is particularly important in smaller communities where difference often attracts great scrutiny. Lenae's daughter, who is in 6th grade, also does not experience the same sense of belonging and acceptance. While she accepts her family and embraces the fact that she has two moms, this is not the case at her school where her teacher told her that being gay "is not okay." The school did nothing to address this statement. Like Lenae, Donna and Kathleen also have partners that they describe as being more masculine in appearance. While Donna and Kathleen both live in communities that are not only within 25 minutes of small universities, but also are within 15 minutes of towns with more than 50,000 people, Lenae is at least an hour from a small university and about equidistant from a larger town. These geographic differences may begin to explain the differential acceptance in these family situations. For many, being married and having a family leads to greater acceptance and feelings of belonging, but this is not the case for all individuals in rural communities. As noted, other factors, including gender presentation/identity, relationships with institutions, as well as proximity to more urban spaces, can further complicate this sense of belonging.

Community, Belonging, and Race

Whiteness also plays a role in acceptance and belonging in rural communities. As Browne (2006) and Vitulli (2010) note, homonormativity normalizes and creates a hierarchy that grants privilege to certain forms of heterosexuality over others, thus providing lesser advantages to those who are non-white. Kazyak (2011), who also interviewed mostly white individuals, also describes how a queer woman of color experienced discrimination and was seen as an outsider in

her community. She attributed this discrimination to not only not being a local, but also to her race. Kennedy (2010) also finds that racial/cultural differences lead to being excluded, labeled, and often rejected by their communities, even for those who were natives and would have otherwise likely been accepted because of their time in their community. While none of my respondents specifically link experiences of discrimination to race, it is possible that racial/ethnic difference plays a role in their lives. Len (57, two-spirit, lesbian, Midwest) and Jai, who both identify as white and Native American, note that they feel like they have been discriminated against in their communities. While they both attribute this to their sexuality, as well as their more masculine gender presentation, this could also be related to their skin color as both could be perceived as non-white. Sandra (65, transgender, queer, Northeast), who identifies as White and Hispanic, and was once a small business owner, describes how her business suffered after she began to transition. While she mainly attributes this to her transition, this could be further complicated by her racial/ethnic identity as she lives in an area which has very little diversity in terms of race and ethnicity. In rural communities, racial issues, while ever present in many communities, are often left untouched as many individuals and institutions still adhere to the adage that they don't see race, they see people, and thus fail to recognize the realities of discrimination and institutional racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hughey et al 2015). Alternatively, Hannah, who identifies as African American and Hispanic, and lives in a rural space with a greater population, does not feel like she has been discriminated against in her community. This absence of discrimination could also be explained by her prestigious position in the community as she has a Juris Doctorate, is currently employed as an information technology consultant, and earns more than $100,000 per year. As may be expected, privilege and prestige, associated with

educational and professional attainment, and being of a higher social class, also alleviates the challenges with which respondents might otherwise be faced.

While Part One of this chapter has explored study participants narratives and experiences of community and belonging, Part Two considers the questions of "how" and 'why" rural for this group of women. In some instances, narratives of rural queer and trans* individuals paint the picture of individuals who are somehow stuck in these communities and are unable to leave because of finances, family obligations, or other complicating factors. Continuing with the theme of strategies, Part Two of this chapter will further consider the strategies queer and trans* women use as they negotiate their everyday lives in relation to the individuals, groups, and institutions in their communities.

Wanting More or Choosing Rural

Rural queer and trans* women live in their communities for a wide range of reasons including a slower pace of life, to be outdoors and connected with nature, and to maintain relationships with family and friends (Boulden 2001; Cody and Welch 1997; Kirkey and Forsyth 2001; McCarthy 2000; Oswald and Culton 2003). While some have ultimately chosen rural living, others are in their current locations for a wide range of personal and professional reasons. Regardless of their reasons for rural living, most feel that their current location has shortcomings and that they want and need more for their lives and their families. Similar to others living in rural spaces, most individuals noted their desire for greater amenities including better grocery stores, restaurants, cultural venues, and nightlife. While these aren't queer specific wishes, they are things that were noted by almost all the women in this study. Another downfall of rural living that was most often noted was the lack of healthcare, specifically queer and trans* affirming

physical and mental health services. Quality healthcare for queer and trans* identified women in rural spaces is a privilege that is most often associated with an individual's employment status, access to insurance, and geographic location, specifically the proximity to a college or university (Fisher, Irwin, and Coleman 2014). Even with these shortcomings, most of my respondents find that the advantages which coincide with rural living outweigh the desire they may have for greater amenities and services.

Healthcare

Through their current employment, Alyssa (36, genderqueer, queer, West), a LGBT center coordinator, Karen, (31, genderqueer, queer, West), a LGBT center director, and Audra (25, female/fluid/agender, bisexual, South), a graduate student in engineering, not only have access to quality insurance, but also to a wide range of healthcare providers. As Karen notes, "With my job, I have the privilege of having of having good insurance and the university provides us with lots of referrals for doctors that are supportive." While Audra has also had great experiences with healthcare, she has also experienced that some providers have presented themselves as less than supportive for queer patients. She notes, "About twenty percent of the time I'd say you get a negative response. For example, there was an ear, nose, and throat doctor who had signs up in his office about how Jesus was the ultimate caregiver and there were literally Bibles everywhere. That made me a little uncomfortable." Similarly, while Alyssa has a very supportive primary care doctor who is the mother of a former student, she still feels that there is room for improvement. More specifically, Alyssa would like to see her doctor, "…take some more initiative into looking for specific care for queer women and trans needs." Alyssa, who has recently been questioning her gender identity, reported that she would also go outside of her community if she were to consider any sort of gender affirming procedures, such as top

surgery. Despite the shortcomings they've experienced, overall Alyssa, Karen, and Audra do see how their positions within the university have allowed them the privilege of quality healthcare. While seeking healthcare services outside of their communities is possible for most of my respondents, it's not a strategy that they often utilize, unless they are seeking specialty care, most often gender affirming procedures and trans* specific healthcare.

Others also find that geographic location, specifically their proximity to mid-sized cities with populations from 100,000-150,000, provides them with advantages when it comes to securing quality and queer specific healthcare. Having worked previously in a mid-sized city in their region, Len has relationships with queer and trans* affirming medical and mental health providers and only speaks about positive experiences. While these relationships were initially based on convenience given the providers' proximity to their work, Len continues to see these providers even though they now have to travel for appointments. For Len, seeking healthcare outside of their immediate community is something that, while inconvenient, is fundamental to their physical and mental health. Lauren (53, female, lesbian, Northeast), who commutes as needed to a mid-sized city in her region, also finds that services in her area are adequate. Both her and her partner have a primary care provider in a nearby town and don't feel the need to leave their community for services in the nearest city. While these individuals have found affirming medical and mental health services in their areas, this is not the case for all.

Specialty Care and Mental Health Services

The majority of individuals noted that healthcare options in their community were lacking and were particularly difficult to navigate as queer and trans* women (Eliason and Hughes 2004; Fisher, Irwin, and Coleman 2014; Lindhorst 1998; Willging, et al 2006). While most individuals were able to access healthcare for very basic primary and clinical needs,

specialty care and mental health services were often scarce. As a stage three cancer survivor, Kathleen, found herself traveling about an hour and half for healthcare providers she felt could serve her needs.

> I wouldn't go anywhere near any of these places for any kind of healthcare, gay or straight. I have issues with depression and anxiety and have no ability to find decent counseling or psychiatry anywhere near. There are zero in our town...Then to find some that are LGBT comfortable, not even identified, but comfortable is a huge issue.

Because of the dearth of mental health services in her area, she now finds herself following a lesbian counselor, even though her practice has moved several times and is most recently located about an hour and 40 minutes from Kathleen's home. For Kathleen, like Len, seeking services outside of her area is vital to her overall health and well-being.

Marina (56, female, queer, Midwest), who has also struggled with mental health issues since coming out of a heterosexual marriage, also has issues finding a therapist in her community. While there are queer identified and affirming providers, Marina struggles to find a therapist who is not connected and/or currently a provider for other queer women in the community.

> It's maddening…I remember trying to go to a therapist not too many years ago, who turned out to be the therapist of a woman who is in love with me…so she asked me to go see someone else. I guess it's just too fucking small. There is no therapist that I can find that isn't connected to everybody else.

Because of the insular nature of her community, Marina feels she is forced to seek out mental health services in the nearest metropolitan area, which is over two hours from her home. For this reason, she has only gone a few times and continues to find it difficult to connect with a provider.

Accessing care as a LGBTQ identified veteran is also a complex and difficult process (Sherman, et al 2014). Donna, who served in the United Stated Navy for 10 years, currently

accesses physical and mental health services at her local Veteran's Administration (VA) Hospital. She finds that the care that she receives is highly inadequate. "I'm a woman and a lesbian. I'm a rare breed over at the VA…It's not a woman-centered environment. Definitely know nothing about lesbian or gay over there." After having a botched gynecological procedure at the VA, Donna is now under the care of a local, civilian specialist. Based on her geographic location, Donna is able to access specialized care, either through the VA or civilian medical networks, but this is not the case for all, especially those who are looking to access trans* specific health services.

Gender Affirming Physical and Mental Health Services

When attempting to access gender affirming physical and mental health services, rural trans* women often face a wide range of difficulties (Bradford, et al 2012; Horvath, et al 2014; Willging, et al 2006). Amelia finds that while she has access to quality healthcare through her local university health system, the services that she receives are not affirming in her identity and she often experiences overt discrimination. Since transitioning, she is often misgendered and referred to as her former/dead name. While she understands that this may initially happen, this is a continual issue for her when accessing care. Kam (51, genderqueer, queer, Midwest), who is currently accessing both mental health and trans* specific health services, often travels two or more hours for provider visits. Kam notes that while there are some providers in their area, they travel because they have remained associated with providers in their former city and that travel not only allows them to be around other queer individuals and but puts them in a position where they have to be less guarded in accessing care. Unlike Amelia and Kam, Sandra is unable to access trans* affirming medical care in her immediate area: "I'm dependent upon a medical facility that just does not exist here. There is not a gender facilitating practice in this area at all.

There is one, supposedly one…but I wouldn't send anybody to her." For this reason, Sandra is forced to travel over 100 miles in order to access medical and mental health services. While the ability to access quality physical and mental health services in rural areas is a concern for many living in rural spaces, these concerns are intensified by the needs of queer and trans* identified individuals.

Queer Visibility

Many study participants also discuss their desire to not only feel more comfortable within their own relationships, but also to be able to display their affection for their partners more outwardly. Because of the lack of social spaces and networks in rural spaces, such as bars, community centers, and queer specific spaces and social services agencies, there is often a lack of visibility for queer and trans* individuals in these spaces (McCarthy 2000). When asked how her life might be different if she lived in a more urban environment, Leslie (42, female, bisexual, South) notes that she may finally be able to be more affectionate with her partner in public spaces and feel like she is just doing what is normal and natural as a couple.

> …I would be able to walk down the street and hold my partner's hand and give her a kiss. I think I would be like any other couple…[here], every time you're in public, you are NOT the norm. And if you were to do something that any other hetero couple did you would get starred at or treated differently so it makes it all not worth it. I feel like if I lived in a different area…I know if I go to [nearest mid-sized city] or other places, we hold hands and it's fine and it feels great.

Leslie not only desires the ability to be visibly queer in her community, but also wants to feel safe and affirmed in her actions. While she does have a supportive community with which she can be herself, Leslie wishes this support would carry into public spaces as well. Celia also notices how she's treated differently when out in public with her girlfriend.

> There are so many lesbians out here. We're afraid and you don't want to go to town. When you go to dinner with your girlfriend, you have to pretend she's your friend.

> Whereas in [nearest mid-sized city] I go to a restaurant that proudly files a pride flag at their door…It's not a problem.

Visibility, which is often tied to being seen with the same partner (Kazyak 2011) is desirable for many of my respondents but being visibility queer is not something that is seen as acceptable their rural communities. As discussed previously, homonormativity, which often leads to greater experiences of acceptance based on "fitting in" to heterosexual society, which depending on the geographic location and historical context, can include "passing" in terms of gender and sexuality. Familiar locals like Celia feel accepted in their community as individuals because they have grown up there or, in the case of others like Leslie, have gained acceptance over time. In both these cases, this acceptance is also aided by the presentation of their gender as well as their ability to, in most situations, pass as straight. This sense of belonging is complicated when partners are added to the equation and thus leaves individuals questioning if they truly belong in their communities. If they were living in a more urban space, these women would likely not only feel safer, but also more affirmed in the identities and relationships. In order to be seen as visibly queer and feel accepted in their relationships, many of my respondents often travel to more urban communities for Pride celebrations or weekend getaways. While homonormativity is present in more urban communities, most urban spaces continue to have a sense of gay culture which is sometimes political and does push back against the norms associated with heterosexuality.

Resources for Families

When considering the opportunities and resources that are available for forming and sustaining a family, many queer women also question their current locations. Lesbian couples who live in rural areas are also more likely to be low income, when compared to those who live in urban spaces (Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013). This also can play a major deciding role in the family formation decisions of rural queer women. Alyssa, who has been able to

maintain a long-term partnership in her rural community, is beginning to question if her current community is right for her future, especially considering their desire to foster and eventually adopt children. In discussing fostering and future plans for a family, Alyssa and her partner began to seriously consider moving to a larger city. While her close friends encourage her to stay and build programs for queer families in the community in which they currently live, which some of my respondents have done, Alyssa feels overwhelmed by this prospect. She explains, "I don't want to have to do everything for my community. There's that piece, in bigger cities, there are organizations for kids and queer families, and I wouldn't have to do it." Despite this desire for the resources that often come with urban living, Alyssa remains conflicted.

> There's part of me that's like, yeah, I totally miss it and want to go back. Then there's other times where we will have just visited a big city and we'll come back and it's like, oh, we can relax into it, because we're not constantly on the move. It's a possibility, but our lifestyle has changed so much in the time that we've been her, that it seems strange to think about seriously moving back but I love cities, so I feel drawn to that.

Even with the draw of resources and amenities that come with living in larger cities, the connection that has brought many to stay or remain in their rural communities also remains strong.

Lack of Diversity and Queer and Trans* Affirming Communities

Even with the strong pull to rural living, for some, the greatest shortcoming is the overall lack of community (Oswald and Culton 2003). While some long for a greater sense of queer community, others yearn for a community that is more accepting of the differences that make up the communities in which they live. For Destiny (55, female, bisexual, South), it's been difficult to find a place within the community because of the sexism and discrimination that is ever present in her community.

> We're in the Bible-belt. I have not really put down roots here. I find it very difficult to do so, partly because most of the people here are not well educated and still carry a strong

> belief that men are better than women and the women participate in this belief as well. So there's a lot of vague discrimination that I find upsetting. It took me at least three years to not get angry every time you went anywhere. I would say I have a couple of friends, but I don't see them regularly. Day-to-day life is very removed from society.

The lack of acceptance in her community, combined with her personal struggles with physical and mental health takes a toll on Destiny's life. She channels much of her energy into painting, but still struggles to find her place and sense of worth within the community. Sandra, a transwoman who lives with one of her best friends, who she considers a sister, also struggles with the lack of community and acceptance in her rural location. Previously, Sandra felt like she had a small sense of community at a local restaurant that, because of the ownership, created a safe and comfortable place for all, regardless of their identities. After the owner passed away, the sense of community also died, thus illustrating the fragility of communities, especially those which support queer, trans* and other minority communities in rural spaces. As a transwoman, Sandra believes that she stands out, in her otherwise 'redneck' community.

> I might as well have a big sign on me that says I'm a transwoman. I'm six foot tall, and I'm broad shouldered, and have big hands and big feet. That's the reality. People can like it or not like it, but that doesn't mean that they won't take a poke at you. There's no place locally that I can really go, that I can afford to go in the first place but can go and feel safe.

In addition to not feeling safe in her community, Sandra has also experienced physical violence first hand and now carries both pepper spray and a gun. For her, this is just the reality of living in her current locale.

While some individuals yearn for more tolerance and respect in their communities, others desire more opportunities and spaces to interact with like-minded and diverse individuals. When asked what types of events or establishments they wish were in their community, many mentioned the need to create spaces for diversity within their communities. While some thought these spaces could be created in local libraries or schools, others had more extensive plans for

creating a space for queer communities, not only for themselves, but also for queer and gender non-conforming youth. Ellen (56, female, lesbian, Midwest), who lives in an area that lies between many small cities, finds it difficult to know where her community is. While she notes that one of the small cities in the area does have some diverse programing, she finds that most of their offerings, as the programming is associated with a local religious college, is centered around Christianity and thus not what she, a middle-aged, Jewish, lesbian, is looking for. In another nearby small city where she previously lived, there were attempts to start an LGBTQ specific support organization, but the process was short lived because of conflicts and in-fighting in the community. Similarly, a larger city in the area, where there are several colleges as well as a local branch of a state university, has problems sustaining an LGBT center. Ellen notes:

> [Local city] has never been able to support any kind of a strong sort of LGBT presence. They also have a support organization…I wish there was a bit more organizational sophistication in the organizing communities. I don't know that there is enough support in the communities. The populations of people who would be interested in these services are so small and so scattered and are so cliquish already. The people already know each other and aren't interested in getting to know anyone else.

Despite being in a rural area, Ellen observes many of the same issues that LGBTQ organizations in more urban communities face (Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani 2009; Ghaziani and Fine 2010).

Elizabeth (31, female, queer, Northeast), who feels like she lives in the bubble of her small college campus community, also notes that there is not much space for diversity in her community and sees the need for a community center or other places where diverse individuals could come together in her community.

> I think it would be great to have more places to convene, like a community center or something like that. I can't be the only queer person [here]…It's hard for people to be different in a small community where there's not a lot of difference. There's no programming space, no programs that actually really do happen.

While there is some programming at the local library, Elizabeth notes, it's not very diverse. She also believes that more diverse programming could be really useful. "I understand that we don't have a lot of resources…There are little things that I would love to see…I would like to see a little bit more places for social gatherings or doing community outreach or things like that." Martina (57, non-binary/pangender, queer, Midwest), as a teacher in the music department at a boarding school, experiences somewhat of a dual sense of community, similar to that of Elizabeth. While on campus, they are part of a community that, for the most part, embraces diversity, having students from around the world as well as a population of students, faculty, and staff who identify as queer and/or gender non-conforming, and come together to form a very active student organization. When they are off campus, Martina finds less opportunities for interacting with diversity in the greater communities. Overall, they would welcome the opportunity to "join with others with the like mindset, like orientation. Just to feel less on the fringes to enjoy many many more opportunities." While adding queer community programming would be the ideal, adding any sort of diverse voices and programs to their communities would also be greatly welcomed.

While some rural queer and trans* individuals desire more spaces for diversity in the community, others long for a greater sense of queer community in the current locations. Kam has some queer friends in their area, but ultimately wishes there was more of a space for community, either in their church or in the greater community.

> I wish we could have LGBT night at the coffee shop or a pride parade. I would love to have a pride parade in one of the towns that would be great. I wish we could have a resource center. I wish I could celebrate Pride Month and do like I did in [major metropolitan area where they last lived] and put a rainbow flag on the alter. Yeah, there is a lot of stuff. I wish I could get more buy in for World AIDS Day, National Coming Out Day.

Overall, Kam believes that a greater sense of community, as well as having the ability to be more out and vocal within the community, would make many of their ideas more of a reality.

Karen, who also notes that while there are queer people in their community and that they do have some queer friends, still doesn't feel like they have the type of "nerd-centric" queer community that they would have in a bigger city.

> I'm a nerd. I like video games and like going to see scary movies and action movies. My wife and I do that together, but when it comes to friends and finding a community, I would love to be able to find those folks. Other genderqueer, masculine lesbian or queer women who would want to do that kind of stuff with me, you know? I don't have that kind of community here…I would love to have a lesbian bar in town so that we could go there on weekends. That's kind of my idealistic fantasy…I could go play darts, and my wife could meet friends and have people to talk to, too.

While Karen realizes this sort of queer community is very specific to their interests, they also knows that these communities do exist, especially in more urban centers.

Destiny, while having a small sense of queer community in her area, also longs for a more specific community for her and her partner, specifically a trans* community. While their town has a small number of local community events, including community cookouts and dances at the local firehouse, there is not a sense of queer community. Destiny and her partner, a transwoman, worked to build the queer community in the region and were major players in forming a regional LGBT center. Even with this center, as well as other cultural events that are popping up in the area, Destiny still finds that distance and the lack of focus on trans* identities and issues, keeps her and her partner away. When talking about the regional LGBT center and local cultural and entertainment venues, Destiny notes:

> I would go to those things if they were closer and I would try to pull the T in the LGBT people in the mountains here and get them to go with me. I would build the community and [her partner] would too…I need people that are awake and thinking people. It's very hard when you spend time with people that choose ignorance.

By having a greater sense of queer and trans* community, Destiny feels that it would not only make her life more enjoyable, but also more livable in her southern mountain community.

When considering their overall social, relationships, and family needs, many queer and trans* women feel that their current environments are leaving them wanting more. While rural spaces are ripe with natural amenities, including wide open spaces and natural landscapes, there is a distinct lack of amenities which are often associated with urban spaces including shopping centers, cultural venues, and queer specific destinations, including pride events, community centers, and gay bars. When asked how her life would change if she were to move to a more urban area, Celia, whose established family business roots her to her current location, is somewhat conflicted. While she notes that the country is her home and where she is ultimately most comfortable, she still feels that it might be easier and better for her if she were to move closer to an urban area.

> The country will always be my home. I feel most comfortable in the country, but I'm made uncomfortable by people in the area…My only choice, which I've been considering a lot is to move closer to the nearest urban area so that I could socialize with like-minded people but still have income down here and just commute daily.

While her business provides her with an income which allows for financial stability, Celia still questions if her current rural location is right for her. When asked about the possibility of moving, she still remains conflicted.

> I'm going to move. One the one hand, you say to yourself, I'm going to stay and I'm going to fight and I'm going to change it. And on the other hand, you're like I love the area so I don't want to leave the area, but, at the same time, there is just so much that you can't do in the country…No matter how many gay people I get together, it's just not the same. I would like to be in a larger area…not huge…because that's overwhelming. Something more accessible.

For Celia, the challenges and shortcomings that come with living in her current location are beginning to override her ultimate desire to stay in the rural environment where she is most comfortable.

Advocating for Youth

While others have also mentioned the need for a greater sense of queer community, they're more specifically concerned about the resources and opportunities for queer and gender non-conforming youth. Having lived in rural communities growing up, these interests could also be attributed to their own experiences, especially considering the challenges that rural sexual minority youth face including social isolation, homophobic bullying, and overall negative health and life outcomes. As urban and rural sexual minority youth differ in terms of emotional health, victimization, sexual behaviors, and substance abuse, there is a greater need for additional support and social services for these youth as they develop and grow (Poon and Saewyc 2009). Living in a community with a regional branch of the state university system, Alyssa is starting to see resources, outside of the university, for queer youth and elders.

> I think it's frustrating that we don't have resources for our community. There's not a queer center for the community. There are no gathering places. We are just starting to actually have some organizations that are starting to work on that, which I think is really amazing and exciting…Locally, I think the one thing that I do see picking up a bit more is that there's an online community that I think does a good job of working with a specific age range of people, fifties and above. There's this pocket of people who are like, maybe 25-50, that are just winging it.

Despite the things that are happening in her community, Alyssa still feels there is room to grow, especially outside of the university.

While Alyssa has seen increasing resources and opportunities for youth, this is not the case in most of the communities in which these queer and trans* women live and work. Celia is

increasingly frustrated by the lack of a queer community in her area but is extremely concerned that youth don't have a space or sense of community.

> I really wish that there was just, maybe not a gay and lesbian center, but just a big open center. An affirming place…I would just really like some kind of a gathering place…if a university or community college made space on their campus…especially for youth because youth are very marginalized, and you just want to make sure that they're going to be okay. I think it'd be great because they could see folks who are older and who have made it and they are living their life. I wish there was something like that out here.

While some of her desire is based on her personal needs, Celia, like others, is also concerned about the youth in her community.

Len, having worked in a teacher education program before returning to seminary, is also especially concerned about the youth in their community. While Celia and others are mainly concerned about queer youth, Len sees a greater need for a community for center for all youth, with programs and opportunities that are specific to queer youth.

> Queer youth out where we live are really isolated. Often they just keep to themselves and don't identify until they go off to college because they don't feel like it's safe. They don't feel like they would be supported and there's nothing here for them anyway…There is no scene, there's nothing.

Ideally, Len believes that a community center with "some kind of a multigenerational network that connects queer youth with queer elders" would be an idea option. Len asserts, "That way they wouldn't have to go through all these hard things alone, out here in the sticks. There are other people that you can network with and there are ways that you can be supported if you are not supported by youth biological family." Len, within their social network and with others at their church, has already created this sort of a support system for queer and gender non-conforming young adults, but feels that there is still a greater need overall in the community. When asked if anything else existed in their rural area, Len notes, "In the local schools, when I worked at [local regional state university], we did a lot of good work there establishing and

really pushing the edges at getting a queer network going. There are other high schools in the area that have mimicked something along those lines." While they have seen programs beginning in area high schools, these programs are still limited to schools in small and mid-sized cities, not in the town in which Len goes to church or lives.

Leslie, who works for a regional branch of a state university, is also concerned about the lack of queer community in her small town. While there is a Pride festival in her the city where her university is located, she travels just eight miles to the town in which she lives and has entirely different experiences. "[In my town] eight miles down the road, there is nothing. There is not LGBT anything. It wouldn't fly…I wish that my small town had anything. The Presbyterian Church is the only thing that I know of…I'm sure if you're a kid in the school system. WOW. I don't know." While Leslie also notes that she often feels fear in her town and tells a story of the intense anxiety she felt while putting groceries in her car while other young men in the same parking lot were flying confederate flag on their car, she is concerned more for youth. In her community, the only offerings for young people are seedy bars and clubs. Specifically, in her town, it's "one of those where you have to go through the metal detectors and it's rave music." Leslie, when thinking of herself, as well as the youth in her community, is left wanting more opportunities and resources, overall.

Why Rural

When considering their overall experiences with rural living and the opportunities that exist for them in their communities, rural queer and trans* women find themselves wanting more. At the same time, some individuals, including many of those who realize they want more, choose rural living and feel that it is truly where they want to be. For some of these individuals, rural living allows them to be close to their families and caretaking responsibilities. For many,

rural living is ultimately about the happiness and freedom that comes from having space, owning land, and enjoying the surrounding natural environments. Green environments have also been found to have significant health benefits including reducing mental fatigue and stress and lowing levels of depression and anxiety (Beyer, et al 2014). Rural lives also allow individuals to find sense of community and belonging that they haven't, or feel like they wouldn't experience, living in more urban areas. Despite some of the limitations they experience with rural living, they are still drawn to rural living.

Focusing on Family

Sue (53, female, lesbian, Midwest), who returned to rural living in order to be closer to family and fulfill a desire to be back in the country, is happy with her choice to move home.

> I turned forty and the midlife crisis thing hit. I'm like, I really would like to be back in the country. We talked about how far could I drive to work because I wasn't going to change jobs and be closer to my parents, who were getting older, and be in the country. So, we drew about an hours drive so we just started looking an hour away [from my workplace] and found this place.

Returning to the country allows Sue and her partner the opportunity to not only be closer to their families, but also to have the time to have farm animals, grow their own food, and renovate their turn of the century stone farmhouse.

For Mia (52, female, bisexual, Midwest), rural living wasn't something to which she aspired, but was something that she was willing to accommodate in order for her partner to be closer to her family and aging parents. With time, she adapted to rural living. "The adjustment of not having anything nearby. You have to adjust to, okay, we're going grocery shopping for the whole week and also a lot of a lot of driving to get to do anything. So those were the adjustments. I'm adjusted now. I'm happy here now." While moving to a more rural location, after living for many years in major cities and nearby suburbs, was a major adjustment for Mia,

rural living is something that she now enjoys and is obvious in the pride that she takes in her home and farm.

Happiness, Space, and Freedom

While Sue and Mia both turned to rural living for family reasons, they also found happiness with the space and freedom that comes with rural living. Kathleen, who moved often through the course of her graduate education, finds that rural living is the best thing for her. Despite having many concerns about safety and discrimination, Kathleen notes, "I am a rural person and that is also a really important part of my identity. If I lived in the city, I would be a totally anxious nut all the time. I don't like people squished up on top of each other all the time, it freaks me out." For Kathleen and her family, rural living is about having space and enjoying the time that they are able to spend together, even if that does mean having to travel for their jobs and other things.

Marilyn (54, female, bisexual, South), like Sue, Mia, and others, is invested, both financially and emotionally, in the space in which she lives.

> I feel like if I lived in the city, it would be a huge loss for me because I love having my yard, my flowers, my fruit trees, and my space. I think overall I'd have a better experience [living in an urban area] but I can't somehow wrap my head around making myself move to a city because I feel like I'd be losing so much…I have so much invested here, financially, emotionally, I've been creating my home for years and decorating and remodeling and planting lots of trees and plants and just to give that up and sell that and go somewhere that's completely devoid of all that, you know. A concrete jungle feels like a death sentence and yet I'm very acutely aware of what I am missing out on.

Despite the promise of increased social and possibly even romantic interactions, Marilyn is not entirely convinced that her life would truly be better for her, if she moved to a more urban location.

Hannah also appreciates the space for which rural living allows. While she doesn't mind big cities, she finds them tiresome. When asked how her life would be different if she were to live in a more urban area, Hannah notes:

> It would be more crowded. I don't think I would find it comfortable in the long run…I think we would both be okay living in an urban environment, but we wouldn't feel happy and I would feel crowded. The other may have more social opportunities but I'm a bit more solitary anyway so, for me, that would be a bit more tiring just having to deal with that on a daily basis.

While Hannah and her wife carpool into a mid-sized city a few days a week, they're overall happier with their rural life, which not only offers a lower cost of living, but also allows them to enjoy the space and solitude that can come with rural life.

Esther (52, female, lesbian, Midwest) is concerned with how her mental health and wellbeing would be affected by living in a more urban area. She notes:

> I think I'd be depressed. I handle stress by walking in the woods and so I think not having that connection to nature, I would feel more stressed. That would probably lead to depression. I'm not convinced I'd actually have a greater chance of being with somebody and I probably never would get involved…I have had friends tell me that I need to move to [nearest mid-sized city] so you can find somebody. I just love where I live and figure I'd rather stick with the good parts of my life that I know are good than leave behind my house in the woods for maybe being able to meet a girlfriend.

While she realizes there may be more opportunities for making social and romantic connections in the city, Esther does not believe that these possibilities outweigh the happiness that she has in her current location.

Kris (57, transgender, bisexual, South) also feels that while there are possibilities for greater social support in more urban areas, especially greater interactions with like-minded individuals, that this does not outweigh the connection and love that she has with rural living. Having been in the Navy for 20 years, Kris is used to living on small islands and in the solitary spaces of submarines. Because of this, she notes that her ideal location would is "a place where I

could mow the yard naked. I wouldn't quite achieve that [here] but I can cut the backyard naked if I want to." Kris believes that much of her desire for the solitary nature of rural living comes from her past experiences, not only from being in the Navy, but also from being born and raised in a rural setting.

Like Kris, Sandra also feels that life in the country allows her to live independently and deliberately, which is something to which she has always aspired.

> I think it was Thoreau that said in Walden, 'I came to the country to live deliberately and not to find when I had died that I had not lived at all.' I think that is a very pertinent perspective. When you live in the country, you have to live deliberately. You have to plan ahead…Some people are oh, I'd love to live at the beach, I'd love to go here. I don't have a place that I'd love to be, other than where I am.

Despite the love that both Kris and Sandra have for rural living, because of concerns with both personal and physical health, are in positions where they may be forced to move to more urban areas, to better care for themselves and their families. While rural living is their ideal, they both realize that not all the needs, as they age, are best taken care of in their current locations.

Sue, who has lived in cities and suburbs for most of her adult life, also loves the simple, and deliberate, way of living that rural life has afforded her and her family. Having chosen to return to the area where she was born and raised, Sue appreciates and embraces rural living.

> It's a much simpler lifestyle. It's grow your own food, so I know where my food is coming from…being here is a lifestyle that I've chosen for a reason. I grew up with it so it's familiar to me. But this isn't what I want. If I had my druthers, I would make it even more self-sustained. Hopefully someday I get there. That we can go off grid. Grow all of our food and stop paying the power company a fat check every month…Solar power, geothermal. We started an orchard this year.

Ideally Sue longs for a life that would take her back to how things use to be, a very simple lifestyle that would allow her and her family to be totally self-sufficient and independent. While this level of independence goes beyond that of what others mentioned and includes raising and/or

growing all their own food and running their farm on solar or wind power, Sue believes that this is something, going forward, that she will be able to obtain.

Creating Communities of Support

While some note that rural living allows them to live a more solitary and independent life, others have found that their rural locations allow them to create communities of support that they wouldn't have in more urban areas. In some cases, individuals note that they are unable to find community in their rural spaces. For others, rural living allows them to create close bonds with others in their community. For Marina, who commutes long distances for her job in a major metropolitan area, moving to a more urban area would mean losing the community and support that she does have. "I would lose the social support. I would lose the people that I know so well. I would lose the person that can fix my car. I would lose places to show up in, people's houses." This is something that she's thought about more and more lately as she does spend significant time every week away from her home. At the same time, she feels that moving would be too much for her as she would lose the most community that she has ever had, something which she values greatly about her rural life.

Kam, who has also bounced between rural and urban living throughout their life, also finds, that while the community that they have in their rural town is much different, that it is extremely valuable, especially as they become more open and able to connect with other queer and gender non-conforming individuals, including youth in the community. Len also feels a great connection to others in the community, specifically those who are part of their church, drum circle, and local Native community. They specifically note that these individuals are not only their community, but also are their family.

Sophia, who has also found herself in both rural and urban communities throughout her time in higher education as well as the early part of her career, finds her place and community, where she least expected it. "The weird thing is, I feel really supported throughout here. I mean I wouldn't have stayed if I didn't. I don't know why or how it happened." Despite being apprehensive about taking a job in a small, insular, community, at a small, regional, state university, Sophia finds that individuals are willing to get to know her. Fourteen years later, she feels like she has a community, where she's not only able make an impact, but has also been able to form a successful partnership and family. Despite the shortcomings of rural living, which leave many individuals wanting more, there are also many individuals who, while realizing the shortcomings of their communities, also find themselves choosing rural life for their families, the space and happiness which it provides, as well as the overall opportunities to build and sustain communities of support and families.

Conclusion

By exploring narratives of geography, community, and belonging, this chapter illustrates how queer and trans* women understand and navigate living in rural spaces. While all discuss belonging or feeling like they are part of their communities, this is complicated by a range of factors including whether or not they are a local or a transplant to the community, their individual gender presentation and/or identity, as well as other accompanying factors including sexism, homophobia, and homonormativity. While those who were born and raised in their current communities often feel as if they are more accepted, this level of belonging is not commonly experienced by those who are transplants and is something that most often comes with time. Those individuals who are not only in a long term, committed relationship or

marriage, but also have child also experience a greater sense of community and belonging in their communities.

When considering their greater experiences with rural queer and trans* living, many women find themselves wanting more and specifically note shortcomings relating to healthcare, resources for families and youth, queer visibility, and diversity. Despite their limitations of rural life, the many individuals choose rural living and realize that it the only place they want to be because it allows them to be closer to their families, have a greater connection to nature and green spaces, and are overall happier with the sense of freedom and support that they've found in their rural communities.

By considering narratives of geography, community and belonging, as well as the strategies that queer and trans* women use to negotiate social processes and individual circumstances, we begin to see how these individuals not only understand their experiences, but also how and why they live in rural spaces. As I have shown in this chapter, through a consideration of how queer and trans* women understand and experience community and belonging, we can gain more insight into how and why they live in rural spaces. With the increasing populations of queer and trans* individuals in rural locations (Gates 2007), there is an ever present need to not only understand the experiences of this group, but also to be able to better provide for more specific needs in these communities. This chapter also demonstrates how individuals not only work within the social structures and processes that exist in their rural communities but also negotiate and construct strategies in relation to economics, work, safety and discrimination.

In the next chapter I considers the relationships that rural queer and trans* women have with their partners and as well as the strategies that they use to maintain healthy and productive

relationships and sexualities. My analysis, which builds on the strategies that are needed to succeed in everyday life as discussed in Chapter 4, helps us to better understand how queer and trans* women negotiate and form relationships with their partners especially as the current literature focusing on queer and trans* dating and relationships is very limited.

CHAPTER 6: DATING, RELATIONSHIPS, AND SEXUALITIES

On a sunny summer afternoon, I interviewed Len Brown (57, two-spirit, lesbian, Midwest) in a church fellowship room that also serves as a conference room and library. Len began by answering my questions in a short, quick fashion, but started to open up more when I asked them about their family. After sharing about their immediate family and children, I then asked Len about their relationship status relative to their children. Len responded with an answer that was common to many of my respondents.

> I was previously married for 18 years to a man. I divorced him when I really stepped into my authenticity. I've known my own sexual orientation my whole life, but I was raised in such a way, with a very bigoted father, and just the society I was in, it was not an okay thing. I just closeted. I just lived the life that people expected, that society expected of me. If you were female bodied, you dated/associated with male-bodied people and you got married and you did the thing.

Early in their life, Len, like many other respondents, conformed to the heteronormative expectations of society, including dating and eventually marrying an opposite sex partner, having children, and remaining married, even if things in their relationship took a turn for the worse. It was only after meeting and getting to know their now wife and falling in love that Len was able to leave their marriage and pursue a more authentic life. Len's experience also illustrates the role that gender expectations and heteronormativity often play in the lives and relationships of my respondents.

In this chapter, I focus on the relationships that rural queer and trans* women have with their partners. I do this by analyzing the ways that they discuss their dating relationships, as well as their romantic and sexual relationships. This analysis builds on the strategies that are needed to succeed in their everyday lives as discussed in Chapter 4 and considers the various tactics used in dating and coming out of heterosexual relationships. I also examine the strategies that these individuals use not only to enter into partnerships, sometimes through dating, but also to

maintain healthy and productive relationships and sexual lives. While these strategies are not necessarily unique to rural queer and trans* women, they are important to take into account to better understand how queer and trans* women negotiate and form relationships with partners given the currently limited literature focusing on queer and trans* dating and relationships, especially in non-urban contexts.

Dating

For most of my respondents, dating is not a major concern as the majority (n=24) are currently in relationships and many have been for over 15 years (n=11). For those who are not in relationships, dating presents a wide range of challenges, especially considering their rural locations. Some discuss issues regarding the availability and often invisibility of single and/or available LGBTQ individuals in rural spaces which, in some cases, leads them to partners with whom they share ex-partners, while others struggle with negotiating consensual non-monogamy given that heterosexuality and monogamous relationships are generally the prevailing norm in broader U.S. society. Despite the challenges that they face, these women develop various strategies to help them navigate dating in their rural communities with the hope of finding love and healthy relationships.

In recent years, online dating sites and apps have become increasingly popular (Peplau and Fingerhut 2007) with over 60% of same-sex couples meeting online in 2008-2009 (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Technology also allows LGBTQ individuals access to a greater variety of prospective partners (Tikkanen and Ross 2003). As access to technology can be somewhat limited in rural spaces, it is only recently that rural specific websites, such as FarmersOnly.com, and dating apps like OKCupid, Tinder, and Bumble have made their way into rural communities (Oksman 2016; O'Neill 2015). As online dating and apps are still relatively

new, especially in rural communities, there is little research on the role that these apps play and why individuals use these services. Even less of this research focuses on gay men and lesbians.

When asked about her experiences with dating in her rural community, Celia (36, female, lesbian, Midwest), who is currently single, discusses her greatest challenge in finding other queer women in her community:

> There are no lesbians out here. I have to travel in order to find a safe place to meet up with people. Because again, if I just happen to be at a restaurant here and I think my server is gay and I think she's cute, you still really run the risk. And it's like that in all kinds of things. You kind of have to be a little more diligent out here about who you hit on.

Because her options are quite limited in her community, Celia selectively comes out to others that she thinks may be a potential partner, a strategy discussed in previous chapters as strategic outness (Orne 2011). She decides when it is worth the risk to out herself with the hope of connecting with someone and potentially building a relationship. Celia has also expanded the reach of her search by using online dating services and participating in meet-up groups for queer women. Even with the assistance of online dating, Celia is still limited in the potential partners that she finds in her area. By joining various meet-up groups for queer women in a nearby midsized city, Celia has expanded the pool from which she can pursue potential partners. While she has found slightly more success with the meet-up groups, she remains conflicted and recognizes that in order to find and maintain a long-term relationship, she may need to leave her rural community as most of the women she meets are not interested in leaving their more urban community. Additionally, the distance between the city and Celia's family business is further than most potential partners, Celia included, would consider a comfortable commute. When Celia does happen to meet someone who is queer, she sometimes finds herself dating them longer than she may have if she was in a more sizable community. Given that dating prospects in

her community are limited, she finds it difficult to move beyond relationships that she otherwise would have ended. Despite these limitations, Celia has determined which strategies are most useful for her immediate needs living in a rural community, including how to seek out potential partners.

Elizabeth (31, female, queer, Northeast), who has only been in a relationship for a year and a half, also finds dating in her community to be challenging due to the lack of potential partners and because "there isn't anybody that's outwardly queer" in their community. While there are other queer identified women in the college town in which she lives and works, most of them are already in long-term relationships, limiting the pool of potential dating partners. Because of the lack of unpartnered, visibly queer women in her community, Elizabeth, like Celia, finds the prospects for dating in her community are very limited. When attempting to navigate dating situations in real life, Elizabeth not only struggles with approaching women, but also with starting conversations. Even when in spaces where queer women tend to gather, Elizabeth does not assume that someone is queer based on their physical appearance or other factors, such as their presence in spaces associated with queer women. Elizabeth, like Celia, practices strategic outness when meeting someone new as she attempts to navigate the various settings where queer women tend to gather in her community. Roller derby, an activity in which Elizabeth has participated since moving to her rural community, often draws queer women (Finley 2010; Struebel and Petrie 2016). Elizabeth is a roller derby coach and often teaches others in the league, often spending time getting to know other women in the league and deciding (or more often than not), waiting for someone else to make the first move. As she notes, "I don't always assume everybody's straight or everybody's gay because it's a very fluid sport." She was initially apprehensive about dating other derby women, but eventually she met and

formed a relationship with a woman in her league. While this relationship has become complicated when her partner moved cross country for a job opportunity and then cheated on Elizabeth, they are attempting to rebuild their relationship and decide if it can work long term. While she is no longer actively dating, Elizabeth recognizes the difficulties that come with dating in rural spaces and notes that she's unsure how she would proceed with dating again if her current relationship were to end. If faced with being single, Elizabeth would have to consider what strategies would work best for her based on her current geographic location.

Karen (31, genderqueer, queer, West), who met their wife of almost three years shortly after moving to their current community, also discusses the challenges of dating, including having smaller networks, which often leads to dating people with whom you work or who are not located in your immediate area. Karen, like Celia, first attempted to find a relationship in their immediate community, which some find as problematic. Karen did meet someone at work and had "a little bit of a fling" for a couple of weeks, but Karen eventually broke up with this individual as they didn't see themself being with this partner long-term given that they were co-workers.

Karen reactivated their online dating account, which they used when they lived in a small community while in graduate school. In contrast to meeting people in real life, Karen not only appreciates the safety that comes with meeting potential partners online, but also believes it is easier for them as they are able to talk to someone for a longer period of time to determine if they are compatible. Shortly after reactivating their account, Karen was messaged by their now wife, who had also recently moved to the area. Initially, their relationship was somewhat long distance, forty miles apart, but within nine months they moved in together. While the long distance relationship was less than ideal, they were committed to moving in order to be together,

so the dating process was short lived. Despite the limited pool in their immediate area, Karen was able to navigate dating through technology. But even with use of websites or apps, Karen had to be open to partners beyond their immediate community, especially because dating apps for queer identified women have experienced slower growth than those for gay men and heterosexual identified individuals (Duguay 2019; Murray and Ankerson 2015), thus further limiting the number of potential partners for Karen. While this isn't ideal or even possible, especially for individuals who don't drive or have access to other modes of transportation, Karen was able to navigate the situation and is now in a healthy, long-term relationship.

While Potarca et al (2015), in their large scale empirical study of online dating and the dating intentions of gay men and lesbians in eight European countries, find that lesbians are hoping to find monogamous, but not necessarily long-term relationships, my respondents have varied expectations for online dating. For Karen, deciding to use online dating was not only for finding potential partners, but also about expanding her overall social network and meeting people with whom she could be friends. While she was not necessarily focused on finding a long-term relationship, Karen did find a partner to whom she is now married. Celia, who, unlike Karen turned to online dating with the hopes of finding a long-term relationship, has been less successful and instead has shifted her focus by attempting to meet potential partners in person, such as through meet-up groups.

For Violet (41, female, bisexual, Midwest), who is currently in a long-term, open relationship with a cisgender man, dating is also a complicated process, especially in her rural community. Like Celia and Elizabeth, Violet also finds it difficult to identify potential partners, especially women, in her community, because she not only has to negotiate being bisexual but also her practice of consensual non-monogamy. In rural communities, which are historically less

accepting of queer sexualities and are most often very heteronormative, non-monogamy, even when consensual, is not only a fairly unknown relationship concept (it is also something which people are not typically open about, even in more urban spaces). For Violet, her sexuality is often invisible as she is only out to those individuals with whom she is closest. In her professional life, as discussed in Chapter 4, Violet is most often not out to her clients in order maintain a level of professionalism and to focus more fully on patient care rather than her personal life, which is another form of strategic outness. In discussing her experiences with dating, Violet notes that she finds being "in a somewhat open relationship" is more of a closet for her, than being bisexual, living in a small town. While she is open to exploring relationships outside of her current partner, this isn't something that she's easily able to negotiate in her community as consensual non-monogamy isn't something that people talk about or a readily familiar with, in general. While Violet finds herself equally attracted to men and women, she also finds that the pool of potential female partners is limited, as they are often not only already partnered, but also less open to non-monogamous relationships. She notes:

> I meet a lot more straight men than I meet gay or bisexual women and if I do meet lesbians or bisexual women, they're already in relationships. They're already in relationships, maybe it's fair to quantify that, relatively less worldly places, relationships are assumed to be exclusively monogamous, where personally I'm not oriented to be quite as rigid about that. But at the time our closet is about being in a somewhat open relationship than I am about being bisexual. That's not something you talk about in small towns.

For Violet, her dating and long term relationship prospects are not only limited because she is often assumed to be heterosexual because of her relationship with a cisgender man, but also due to broader societal expectations of heteronormativity and monogamy. Overall, strategies for negotiating the closet of non-monogamy, consensual or otherwise, are limited, especially in smaller towns where privacy is minimal because of the close knit nature of the community. This

points to the need for not only starting more expansive conversations about sexualities, in this case, about bisexualities and non-monogamies in rural spaces.

Despite the difficulties that come with dating and finding partners in rural spaces, over half of my respondents (n=17) met their partners when living in their rural communities. Transplants are more likely than locals to be in a relationship.[17] While it may be assumed that transplants met their partners elsewhere, presumably in more urban spaces, more than half (65%) of transplants who are in relationships met their partners in rural spaces. While a smaller percentage of locals are in relationships, almost all (6 of 7) met their partners in their rural communities.

While dating in rural spaces presents a wide range of challenges for queer women, these women have shown that it is possible to navigate dating in their communities. By using various strategies, including strategic outness, expanding the reach of their pools via tools such as online dating and apps, and long distance relationships, these women have found ways to identify potential partners and in some cases, form long-term relationships. For many of my respondents, dating is not their current focus, as they are currently in long-term relationships. While some have entered into these relationships via dating, others only came to build their current relationships after coming out of heterosexual marriages, often later in life.

Coming Out of Marriages and Queer Sexualities Later in Life

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, many of my respondents, like Len, are what the existing research refers to as "later in life lesbians" because they have come to queer sexualities later in life, most often after being heterosexually married. Research estimates that as many as 2,000,000 LGB individuals in the U.S. have been or are currently married to opposite

[17] 77% of transplants are in relationships, compared to 67% of locals.

sex partners (Buxton 2004). When focusing only on lesbians, research finds that half had been married to men, with the average length of marriage at 12.5 years, (Averett and Jenkins 2012; Claassen 2005). These women, especially those who are older, either desired marriage, thought marriage to men was their only option (Bridges and Croteau 1994; Larson 2006; Strickland 1995), only recognized their same-sex desire after they were heterosexually married (Rothblum 2000; Strickland 1995), or delayed acting on their desires (Day and Schoenrade 1997; Garnets and Peplau 2000; Rust 1992). In this section, I turn attention to the experiences of the thirteen women in my sample who only began to explore their queer sexualities and desires after leaving a heterosexual marriage.

Marina (56, female, queer, Midwest) only recognized her same-sex desire after she was heterosexually married. Through the course of her 15-year marriage, she came to better understand her sexuality and desire for women. When she was in her thirties, Marina began to explore her attraction to women and eventually acted on her desires with multiple same-sex partners, both in short and longer term situations, while she was still married. In the late 1990s, Marina was part of an international online lesbian support group for heterosexually married women who were in marriages with "very good men." It was through this group that Marina began to realize that while her marriage meant a lot to her, especially because of the children and life experiences she shared with her husband, it was also important to develop strategies to cope with her own needs. This group not only helped her to recognize that it was normal for her to act on her same-sex desires but also provided her with an outlet for meeting others in similar circumstances and, in one instance, someone with whom she had a one night stand. For Marina, it was the support of others who were also exploring their same-sex desires while still being heterosexually married that allowed her to further explore her needs and desires and eventually

leave her marriage. Throughout her coming out processes, online communities have played a significant role as she developed her identity as a lesbian and began to create her own virtual community. Through the use of online communities, Marina was able to not only find other individuals with whom she shared common experiences, but also find support, which was especially critical considering limited information and communities that were available during the earlier formative years of the internet (Hardy 2019).

Destiny (55, female, bisexual, South) like Marina, didn't begin to accept and act on her attraction to women until she was in her thirties. She remembers being attracted to her friends growing up and wishing that she was a boy instead of a girl, a way of normalizing her same-sex desires in her mind. Her current partner, a transwoman who transitioned after they were married, has helped her to explore her sexuality more, especially early on in their relationship when they practiced consensual non-monogamy. Before meeting her spouse, Destiny was living with chronic pain, was severely depressed, and took large quantities of over the counter painkillers in order to get by. She was also in an "on again/off again" relationship with a man who she remembers as not only being bad for her, but also being violent towards her. It was her now spouse that not only helped her take care of herself, but also supported her. When asked about her current relationship, Destiny discusses how they ultimately assisted each other, "she was rescuing me from myself, mostly…I didn't deserve her enough. I didn't have high self-esteem, a high self-value…my obvious physical problems…She was definitely rescuing me from those." Her partner, who was abused throughout her childhood, escaped by joining the military and was married several times before meeting Destiny and transitioning. According to Destiny, her partner has also found herself and grown throughout their relationship, which Destiny attributes to the commitment and love she has given to her partner. Ultimately, this relationship not only

allowed Destiny to accept her desires, but also helped her to begin to take care of herself and ultimately value herself as a person. Like Marina, Destiny relied greatly on the support of others, including her current partner, to help her navigate and come to terms with her same-sex desires.

Donna (41, female, lesbian, Midwest) was heterosexually married three times and had never touched or kissed a woman before she met her wife. Like Marina, Donna didn't recognize her desires until after she was heterosexually married. As she explains, Donna did what she was expected to do as a woman in a heteronormative society. Throughout the course of Donna's life, her mother has been married five times. Growing up, it was ingrained in her that she was nothing until she found a man who would complete her home. When her relationships didn't work or she avoided sex because it felt like such a chore, especially within her marriages, she felt something was wrong with her. It was during a sober women's retreat that Donna, who had once been called a "militant heterosexual," finally began to understand that the feelings she was having about this woman was actually attraction. While coming out to her family wasn't a big deal as they had always been open and accepting, Donna was concerned about the possibility of losing friends or that her kids would be negatively impacted by her coming out. For the first time in her life, Donna is now in a marriage where things feel comfortable and right. She no longer thinks about things like, "how much longer until he dies so I can be out of this relationship?" She instead thinks about growing old with her wife and "changing each other's Depends together and pushing each other's wheelchairs." Through these relationships, Destiny, Marina, and Donna began to not only accept themselves and their desires, but also to find partners with whom they can see themselves spending their futures.

When considering the experiences of individuals who came to identify their same-sex desires later in life, it may be assumed that they are more likely to have spent the majority of the

lives in rural spaces. When considering my respondents, this is not the case. Less than half (38%) of my respondents who came out later in life have spent the bulk of their time in rural spaces. While these women only came to understand and identify their same-sex desires after being in relationships with men, most often marriages, they are now all in a place where they can appreciate what they have with their partners, such as long-term commitment, greater personal and family stability and happiness. Additionally, they can think more about where the future will take them. For these women, the future likely involves not only being in a long-term relationship with a woman, but also working together with these partners to negotiate life's difficulties and maintain their relationships.

Maintaining Relationships

While there is no literature, that I've encountered, that specifically focuses on LGBTQ romantic and sexual relationships in rural spaces, there is a body of work that considers the overall relationship experiences of LGBTQ individuals and specifically focuses on relationship formation, satisfaction, and longevity. When compared to their heterosexual counterparts, lesbian relationships are found to be more satisfying, egalitarian, empathetic, and have more effective experiences with resolving conflicts (Beals and Peplau 2001; Kurdek 2008; Spitalnick and McNair 2005; Ussher and Perz 2008).[18] While some of my respondents have only recently entered into relationships or married, others have sustained their relationships for over 15 years (n=11). As existing research notes, most individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation, value partners who are dependable, share common interests and are affectionate (Peplau and Fingerhut 2007). Similarly, my respondents, within their current relationships, work together with their

[18] Moore (2008, 2011) in her study of Black gay women in lesbian stepfamilies and their experiences with distributing housework and responsibilities relating to children, has found otherwise, thus necessitating more research on diverse lesbian relationships.

partners, to maintain their relationships with honesty, shared activities, conversations, and ultimately by finding the best ways to balance each other.

Sue (53, female, lesbian, Midwest), who has been married to her wife for seventeen years, discusses how honesty has helped them to sustain their relationship, long-term.

> I think we're really good about being open and honest with one another. That was one of the things that attracted me to [my wife]. I never had to wonder what she's thinking because she's going to tell you whether you wanted to hear it or not…She doesn't play any games. I had no patience for BS.

For Sue and her wife, their ability to communicate openly and honestly with one another, along with their shared interests and goals, has allowed them to maintain a successful relationship over time. Despite the challenges that have troubled their relationship, including raising her partner's child from a previous relationship together and addressing her partner's desire for an open marriage, Sue continually finds that communication is key to maintaining their relationship. Even though having children who are still at home often constrains the ability of lesbians to re-partner and maintain a relationship (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2003 and Goldscheider and Kaufman 2006) and financial and caring responsibilities for non-biological children are often considered undesirable (Stewart, Manning, and Smock 2003), Sue and her wife work together to address these issues with the goal of remaining happy and healthy in their relationship.

Amelia (61, transgender, lesbian, Midwest), who has been married to her wife for 33 years, discusses how common interests and their family have helped to keep their marriage together, even after she transitioned. She notes:

> …we have our share of problems, but a lot of it has to do with familiarity…I hate to say this, but probably some convenience there as well…I do love her in that I enjoy being with her. I enjoy doing things with her and I enjoy making love to her…we have quite a few of the same interests. I'm vegan and she's vegetarian. We had a child together and brought the child up through now, twenty-seven years. There's a bond that's formed there that is hard to get around.

Amelia is not the same person that she was when they married. She describes herself as becoming more "laid back" and "agreeable" since she came out as trans. Despite having an interest in getting to know other people that she meets, Amelia feels that it would be very hard for her to leave her wife as she has been one of her greatest supporters throughout her coming out and transition. Whether it be cooking, enjoying food, spending time with family, or traveling, Amelia finds that these activities are what keep her close and connected to her wife and have allowed her to maintain their relationship, even after her transition. While Amelia, like Sue's partner, recognizes her desire to potentially explore consensual non-monogamy, she also recognizes the importance of maintaining this relationship, despite her wants.

While Hannah (51, female, lesbian, Northeast), like Amelia, finds that spending time and sharing activities with her partner is important to maintaining a long term relationship, she also recognizes the importance of having space for their own activities and hobbies.

> We spend time doing things that we like doing…but we also give each other space. We don't share every single one of our hobbies. I like to do woodworking and build electronic things as a hobby and my wife could care less. She tolerates me blabbering on…I sit and watch chick films with her because she likes me to sit and comfort her when she cries…it's sharing and being engaged without being immersed.

In addition to having space for her own interests, Hannah also works to sustain her connection with her wife through meaningful conversations and open communication. While some of their conversations focus on everyday things like work and plans for their weekend, they also take time to talk about things that are happening in the LGBTQ community. By sharing in open and honest conversations, having common interests, and balancing time spent, my respondents work together with their partners to maintain their relationships, even when faced with the challenges of raising children, desires for non-monogamous relationships, and gender transition.

For many queer and trans* women, a lasting sexual connection with their partner, over time, is a vital part of maintaining the overall health of their relationships. Overall there is limited research focusing of the sexual practices of rural LGBTQ individuals with most of the research relating to men and focusing on sexual health and risk (Rosenberger et al 2014; Kakietek et al 2011). Most often, studies relating to sexual identities often focus on the questions of how often, with whom, and when people have sex (Johns et al 2013). Research on lesbian sexuality and romantic relationships commonly focuses on the experiences of younger lesbians, often college students, and tends to focus on frequency of sex and sexual fluidity (Averett and Jenkins 2012; Claxton and van Dulmen 2013; Nichols 2004).

When considering the sex lives of queer women in relationships, especially older queer women, narratives in literature and popular culture often focus on the frequency of sex in their relationships. Lesbian bed death, a concept which first emerged in the 1980s (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Iasenza 2002; Loulan 1984; Nichols 1987), includes any problems of inhibited sexual desire or infrequency of sexual activity. Within popular discourse, lesbian bed death has become normalized and is often the expectation in lesbian relationships. More recently, however, the literature on lesbian sexuality and desire has begun to problematize lesbian bed death (Iasenza 2002; Matthews et al 2003; Nichols 2004). While issues of sexual desire and infrequency are often experienced by those who are also managing other life challenges, including work pressures, children, and health issues, some research finds that lesbians are actually more arousable, sexually assertive, and comfortable using sexualized or erotic language with their partners and also report higher levels of sexual satisfaction than their heterosexual counterparts (Iasenza 2002, Nichols 2004, Matthews et al 2003). In their research, which considers the experiences of older lesbians, Averett and Jenkins (2012) found that the majority of

their respondents note having declining sexual frequency with age. Only five women report having sex one to three times a week, compared to twelve who report having sex at that rate at a younger age. While this does seem to denote an overall decline with age, this decline can also be attributed to relationship status as only 10 of the 44 women included in this study were currently in a relationship. Research also shows that sexual activity is less important to lesbians over time. Before the age of 55, 45% of respondents said that sex was very important while only 22% said it was very important after the age of 55 (Averett and Jenkins 2012). In contrast to the literature, lesbian bed death is not the norm in the lives of my respondents. In situations where sexual frequency and satisfaction have become issues, couples work together to find alternatives to keep each other sexually satisfied, both within and outside of their primary, often long-term, relationships.

When asked about her sex life with her wife, Sue discusses how lesbian bed death has never been present in their relationship. While they have gone through periods of time, especially as they age and have been in a relationship longer, where sex is not as frequent, they've always come together to make things work. Sue notes:

> …You can't always both be in the same mood at the same time…So the next day…I'm interested and then she's interested because I'm interested. I'm the one that gets the benefit of that and it's okay even though it's one way, it's okay. It doesn't have to be both ways.

In previous relationships, Sue wasn't comfortable when sex was only one-sided and always felt that her sexual relationship needed to be balanced and reciprocal. She now realizes that it is important to take her partner's and her own needs into account. Sue is increasingly okay with focusing on her partner, even if their desires do not match and some sexual encounters are one sided. She now finds is acceptable to take turns and focus specifically on the needs of one

partner, especially if they are experiencing limitations, either as a couple or an individual, including time, energy, and other physical or bodily limitations.

Mia (52, female, bisexual, Midwest), like Sue, hasn't seen much of a change in her sex life over time. When things got bad in her previous marriage, she began to see a change. While, as Mia notes, sex isn't as important of an element in their relationship for her wife, especially after menopause, it has always been important for her. For this reason, Mia and her wife have worked together to explore a range of options, including consensual non-monogamy. For about eight months, Mia was in a relationship with another woman. While she would have liked to continue this or other relationships outside of her marriage, her wife became increasingly uncomfortable with this arrangement and asked her to commit to their relationship, which Mia agreed to do. Despite the difficulties that have troubled their relationship over time, Mia and her wife have found ways to not only work through their difficulties, but also to reinvigorate their sex life.

In working to maintain and sometimes recharge their sexual relationships, my respondents often come together with their partners to try new things. For some participants, trying new things sexually was mostly about having fun, enjoying the experience, and "spicing things up," for others, it was more about seeking new ways to express themselves sexually in spite of differing sexual interests and drives, ages, and physical abilities.

In recent research, there is a limited amount of information about exploring sexual practices and kink in LGBTQ communities. While some researchers don't have large enough samples to specifically discuss the experiences of lesbians in the kink community (Nordling et al 2006), others focus specifically focus on LGBTQ communities in relation to BDSM, consent, and power dynamics (Bauer 2014), gendered age play in LBTQ BDSM (Bauer 2018),

bisexuality, and doing gender (Simula 2012) and kink within lesbian and bisexual women in an urban context (Tomassilli et al 2009). While many of my respondents were open to trying new things sexually, using sex toys often fell flat. When asked about trying new things, I sensed some frustration as Karen detailed their experimentation with toys and light BDSM.

> We try and spice things up. It sounds stupid, but we tried to put a little light BDSM in there and it didn't work for us. It didn't feel right. It felt kind of forced…It doesn't feel comfortable…We try and spice things up or do something different like maybe blindfolds or handcuffs or something. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. I just depends on how we're feeling that day.

Like Karen, Sue shared stories of sex toys, specifically strap-on dildos, that just didn't work for her and her partner. Despite being such a major part of popular culture discourses and expectations for lesbian sex, neither Sue nor her partner found strap-on sex to be enjoyable. Sue, who was unable to stop laughing, recounts how she came to try a strap-on with her wife while they were visiting Provincetown, about ten years ago. Sue discusses how, for her, it was about gender.

> Part of it came down to gender. I don't identify as being male. Do I have male characteristics? By all means, I have male characteristics, but I have no desire to have a penis. Not my cup of tea. I like being a woman…I'm a dyke. It is what it is.

For Sue, the disconnect when experimenting with a strap on was too much. Since it wasn't part of her own body or her overall desires, there was an overall disconnect which led her to tabling the toy, which she noted remains unused in their bedroom today. While Sue didn't experience pleasure when using toys with her partner, Lenae (37, female, bisexual, Midwest) did find it enjoyable. When experimenting with erotic electrostimulation with her wife, Lenae experienced great pleasure with the experience. As the device they were using is dual marketed for both muscle relaxation and sexual stimulation, Lenae and her wife tried both. While her wife was more interested in its ability to relax her muscles, Lenae, to her own surprise, really enjoyed

when it was used for sexual stimulation. Despite the cultural expectations and pressure that some feel to try new things, overall toys were neither popular, nor useful, for the most part, for my respondents.

When discussing trying new things with their partner, Jai (38, genderqueer, queer, Midwest), unlike others, didn't focus on using toys, but instead emphasized the experiences that they have with their partner. For them, BDSM and risk are sometimes integrated in their sex life. While they are both interested in public sex and the thrill of possibly getting caught, Jai is also into knife play and non-monogamy. Despite their interest, Jai often finds exploring their sexuality difficult because of their lack of energy as they continue to deal with their depression, anxiety, and the related chronic pain, much of which is related to their history of physical and sexual abuse.

While Jai finds their life difficulties as limiting, others, including Alyssa (36, genderqueer, queer, West), use their troubles as catalyst for trying new things. When Alyssa's partner was taking testosterone due to a hormonal imbalance and had an increased sex drive, they decided to take a trip to a feminist sex shop and invest in a strap-on. While Alyssa expected that their partner would "probably be into it," that was not the case. They both hated it because of the disconnect that they felt. As Alyssa notes, "it didn't feel like it was us connecting as much. We were, but it wasn't at the same time. It didn't really work for us." Like others, Alyssa and their partner didn't feel engaged with one another when it came to using a strap one. Even though Alyssa identifies as genderqueer, identifying outside of the gender binary, they still did not feel connected to this toy.

Leslie (42, female, bisexual, South) finds that her sex life has changed, with age, but she works with her partner to make sure that, when they are "awake enough," they continue to have

work together to make sure that physical intimacy is part of their relationship. For Leslie, experimenting or trying new toys is not as important as finding ways to maintain the sexual connection that she has with her partner. In discussing her sex life, Leslie notes, "…we are women in our forties…typically we do follow a pattern…we each perform oral sex on each other and then we each climax with some level of penetration. It's more romantic and slow, not throw each other against the walls kind of sex and always in a bed." While it wasn't always like this, especially early on, Leslie and her partner have come together to find what works for them. They now focus on taking things slower. It's less about experimentation, but, for them, the orgasms are more intense and even though it is routine, they remain sexually active and connected.

For Karen, life stress has begun to have an effect on her sex life. Despite the stresses, mostly associated with work and other life commitments, Karen and their wife are working together to better the intimate side of their relationship. When asked about their most recent sexual experience, Karen discusses their current issues with sex. "It's been something that we've been trying to repair so it was kind of half awkward, half nice. We're working on becoming more intimate with each other." Even with the stresses of life, Karen and their wife are working together to try and repair their relationship. While their interpersonal relationship is still strong, Karen and their wife are struggling sexually, but they are committed and are working to better things for each other.

When Martina (57, non-binary/pangender, queer, Midwest) and their partner began having difficulties connecting, because of work and life commitments, chronic pain, and the impact that of anti-depressants had on their partner, they took on the challenge of working through these issues. Rather than allowing their sex life to die, they began to work together to plan out their encounters. As Martina recollects, "I really loved the planning of it. Sometimes

that's really a turn on…It was a time when we were both had enough physical energy, which was important." By negotiating the encounter in advance, along the "fine line between pain and pleasure", Martina and their partner were able to not only work within their current limitations, but also to "really show love and make that intimate bond stronger." By listening to their bodies and remaining open to experimentation, my respondents are able to not only discover what works for them, but also to recognize their limitations as they continue to build and sustain the relationships that they have with their partners.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the data show how queer and trans* women use various strategies to negotiate interpersonal and romantic relationships. The analysis, building on the theme of strategies for navigating the struggles of everyday life in rural spaces that are explored in Chapter 4, shows how rural queer and trans* women navigate dating, coming out of heterosexual (often married) relationships, and maintain their long term relationships with their partners.

In rural spaces, there are many challenges to navigating dating for queer and trans* women, including the lack of available partners as well as the overall visibility of partners that do exist. Through strategic outness, joining organizations that attract women with common interests and identities, online dating, and long distance relationships, these women begin to negotiate the challenges associated with dating. For some, especially those who are bisexual and/or exploring consensual non-monogamy, the strategies for navigating dating are lacking as conversations about these identities are often lacking in most urban communities, and may be especially foreign in rural communities.

Many of my respondents only came to understand and identify their same-sex desires later in life, often after being heterosexually married. While some only came to recognize their desires after they were married, others hid or delayed acting on their desires in order to conform to the expectations of heterosexuality that are often ever present in rural communities. My respondents also found online communities to be an important course of support throughout these processes as in person support is less present in rural spaces. These groups not only allowed my respondents to meet others with similar experiences, but also helped them to further develop and understand their same-sex desires. Despite coming to recognize and accept their same-sex attraction later in life, these women have been able to form meaningful, and often long term, relationships with women.

For my respondents, maintaining relationships not only includes having positive interpersonal relationships with the partners, but also involves continuing their sexual relationships. While popular narratives relating to queer women often focus on the lack of sexual activity, or lesbian bed death, this is not something experienced by my respondents. Instead, these women use a wide range of strategies including consensual non-monogamy, trying new things, and using the difficulties of life, especially those related to stress, work, and bodily changes, to further stimulate their desire to come together and provide for each other sexually. While the strategies discussed in this chapter are not necessarily unique to rural queer and trans* women, the data adds depth to the lacking body of literature on the overall experiences with dating, relationships, and sexualities of queer and trans* women. The analysis also shows how my respondents challenge assumptions that are often made about queer and trans* sexualities and relationships, including those relating to lesbian bed death or decreased sexual frequency and

desire. Working alongside their partners, these women are committed to building healthy, long-term emotional and sexual relationships.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In June 2019, as I work to complete this dissertation, celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots commence throughout the United States. Historically, these events, which initially began as a way of celebrating the successes and memories of the early gay liberation movement, were only found in more urban spaces such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, and Minneapolis. But we are beginning to see parades and other associated events in smaller communities, including rural towns. This year, Pride celebrations are being held for the first time in Las Vegas, New Mexico; Bluffton, South Carolina; and Middletown, Connecticut.[19] In October 2018, we also remembered the life and tragic murder of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student, who was robbed, beaten, tied to a fence and left for dead by two men he met at a bar in Laramie, Wyoming in October 1998. Now, twenty years later, he was finally laid to rest at the Washington National Cathedral. Today, in 2019, we can start to see how the climate for LGBTQ in rural spaces and elsewhere is changing. In this dissertation, I've argued that rural spaces, despite the fact that they are often considered unwelcoming and closed minded, can also be conductive to queer and trans* lives. By focusing on the strategies that queer and trans* women use to navigate their everyday lives, including their experiences with individuals, groups, institutions, I have contributed to our understanding of how queer and trans* individuals negotiate the places where they live and the challenges they face in their everyday lives.

This project began with the greater goal of furthering the scholarship on queer and trans* sexualities and experiences in rural spaces. Using literatures from urban and rural sociology,

[19] Las Vegas, New Mexico, population 13,201; Bluffton, South Carolina, population 21,085; Middletown, Connecticut, population 47,749.

geography, gender, sexualities, and queer studies, I addressed a significant gap in the literature, the urban/rural divide. As much of the existing scholarship on LGBTQ lives focuses on geographic locations, most often on urban locations, as well as the experiences of men and youth, I found it important to not only bring the experiences of queer and trans* women into the discourse, but also to show how rural spaces can be conducive to queer and trans* lives, despite the negative assumptions that are often made about these spaces (Armstrong 2002; Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani 2009; Chauncey 1994; Dugan 2005; Ghaziani and Fine 2008). Urban spaces are most often seen as safe spaces where individuals can not only explore and embrace their queer identities, but can also work to construct their identities, relationships, and social networks. While existing research does focus on the experiences of queer individuals and specifically considers the gender presentation and expectations of gay men and lesbians (Kazyak 2012), and how gay men deal with issues of stigma and intolerance (Preston and D'Augelli (2013) and the experiences of queer youth (Gray 2009; Poon and Saewyc 2009), there is little research focusing solely on the experiences of queer and trans* women, specifically their experiences with partners and sexual practices. My research challenges the dichotomous understanding of urban and rural spaces by systematically exploring the experiences of queer and trans* women. My research was guided by the following questions:

1. Why do queer and trans* women live in rural locations? Specifically, what social processes have informed their current residency in the rural locations?
    - How do queer and trans* women understand their experiences in the rural spaces?
    - And what social processes contribute to variations in their experiences?
2. What role does rural residency play in their sexual identity formation, as well as their sexual relationships and practices and experiences with partnering?
    - How do rural queer and trans* women form romantic and/or sexual partnerships? Where and how do they seek out potential partners? Who are considered desirable

partners? Who becomes partnered with whom? How are these partnerships maintained and/or why do these partnerships end?

- How do rural queer and trans* women experience sexuality and sexual pleasure? How do their sexual experiences, practices and behaviors differ depending on their relationship status (single, looking, partnered, short term v. long term partnership)?

In Chapter 4, I analyzed the strategies that queer and trans* women used for navigating their everyday lives and interactions in their rural communities. I considered the various ways that those who I interviewed discussed their everyday lives and interactions with individuals, groups, and institutions in their rural communities. Building on the work of Preston and D'Augelli (2013), who explored the ways that gay men deal with stigma and intolerance in their rural communities, I found that these women use a wide range of strategies, depending on the situations and processes that they're attempting to navigate. These strategies included: creating communities and families of support, strategic outness or selectively coming out to others, concealing their identities, living openly and creating visibility, tolerance, and acceptance in their communities. While some individuals only used one of these strategies, the majority of my respondents employed a combination of these strategies as they negotiated their everyday lives in their rural communities. Within these strategies, rural queer and trans* women not only manage the interactions they have with others, but also do what is needed to put themselves and their families in the best positions for their current lives and future situations.

In Chapter 5, I examined narratives of geography, community and belonging in rural spaces. By exploring how queer and trans* women understood and navigated their experiences within their rural communities, I began to challenge the often dichotomous understandings of how geography shapes queer experiences. This chapter builds on the previous chapter by not only considering the strategies that these women use, but also showing how they work within the

social processes and circumstances that they face in their everyday lives to further understand their interactions with individuals, groups, and institutions in their communities. The findings also challenged cultural assumptions about queer and trans* lives in rural spaces and showed how individuals not only work within the existing social structures and processes within their communities, but also constructed and negotiated strategies around a wide range of social processes and circumstances related economics, employment, safety, and discrimination. While the queer and trans* women in my study experience a wide range of challenges in their rural communities, in most cases, these are the only places where these women want to be and ultimately feel like home.

In Chapter 6, my final substantive chapter, I focused on the various strategies that rural queer and trans* women use to negotiate their interpersonal and romantic relationships. The analysis, which builds on my greater discussion of strategies in everyday life, shows how rural queer and trans* women navigate dating and coming out of heterosexual relationships and work together with their partners to maintain their long term relationships. My analysis helps us to better understand how queer and trans* women negotiate and form relationships with their partners, especially as the current literature focusing on queer and trans* dating and relationships is limited. Throughout this chapter, I began to show that despite the difficulties that come with dating in rural spaces and the often precarious nature of relationships, these women are able to find healthy and productive, often in their rural communities.

Contributions and Future Research

My research adds to the existing narratives about rural queer and trans* women. While this research is not the first to look at the lives and experiences of queer women in rural spaces, it

is unique in its focus on strategies for rural living and understanding community and belonging, relationships, and sexuality, and brings together the literatures of rural sociology, geography, gender, sexualities, and queer studies. The findings of this research provide possible implications for further work focusing on queer relationships and families, quality of life, and queer specific health and social service needs in rural communities. More specifically, research could consider questions including: 1) How and why do queer families live in rural spaces? What strategies do queer families use to navigate their experiences and everyday lives in these communities? 2) How do queer and trans* individuals navigate health and social services in their rural communities? What services are available for these individuals in rural spaces? What additional needs exist in their rural communities?

This research could also provide information that could be used by individuals and organizations in rural areas that are actively working to advance services and programming for queer and trans* clients such as more affirming physical and mental health services and develop programs to address other needs relating to employment, education, and aging. Researchers have also found it difficult to study queers in rural spaces, as they are not a highly visible population. This research also contributes to discussions on methods for studying queers in rural spaces, specifically through my focus on rural queer and trans* women who have only minimally been considered in previous research. Finally, this research also contributes to theoretical understandings about identity construction in rural spaces as well the connections (or disconnect) between gender and sexuality within these particular geographic spaces.

There is also a need for additional work focusing specifically on race and families as, in the case of my research, the sample size of non-white individuals, specifically those with families, is very small. In order to further consider their experiences either as individuals or

families, these voices need to be counted and heard. We can begin to see, based on my research, as well as other recent research, the role that whiteness plays in relation to acceptance in rural communities. While my research doesn't specifically explore issues of race beyond this, there is definitely room to further consider the experiences of LGBTQ racial and ethnic minorities living in rural spaces. Throughout the course of my interviews, I also saw a clear need for more discussions of the experiences of LGBTQ families in rural spaces. While my research does focus on families, minimally, there is a need to continue discussions, especially those relating to building and sustaining queer and trans* families in rural spaces.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Demographic Information (n=33)

Name	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Race	Relationship Status	Current Location
Alice	38	Female	Lesbian	White	Married	Midwest
Alyssa	36	Genderqueer (assigned female at birth)	Queer	White	Long term relationship◊	West
Amelia	61	Female; Trans*	Lesbian	White	Married	Midwest
Audra	25	Female	Bisexual	White	Single	South
Bonnie	46	Female; Trans*	Queer	White	Married	South
Celia	36	Female	Lesbian	White	Single	Midwest
Destiny	55	Female	Bisexual	White	Married	South
Donna	41	Female	Lesbian	White	Married	Midwest
Elizabeth	31	Female	Queer	White	Short term relationship	Northeast
Ellen	56	Female	Lesbian	White; Jewish	Single; Divorced	Midwest
Esther	52	Female	Lesbian	White; Jewish	Single	Midwest
Hannah	51	Female	Lesbian	African American; Hispanic	Married	Northeast
Jai	38	Genderqueer (assigned female at birth)	Queer	White; Native American	Long term relationship	Midwest
Kam	51	Genderqueer (assigned female at birth)	Queer	White	Short term relationship	Midwest
Karen	31	Genderqueer (assigned female at birth)	Queer	White	Married	West
Kathleen	46	Female	Lesbian	White	Married	Midwest
Kris	57	Female; Trans*	Bisexual	White	Married	South
Lauren	53	Female	Lesbian	White	Married	Northeast
Len	57	Two spirit (assigned female at birth)	Lesbian	White; Native American	Married	Midwest
Lenae	37	Female	Bisexual	White	Married	Midwest
Leslie	42	Female	Bisexual	White	Short term relationship	South
Marilyn	54	Female	Bisexual	White	Single	South
Marina	56	Female	Queer	White	Single; Divorced	Midwest
Martina	57	Non-binary/pangender (assigned female at birth)	Queer	White	Short term relationship	Midwest
Mia	52	Female	Bisexual	White	Married	Midwest
Rachel	28	Female	Lesbian	White	Long term relationship	West
Sandra	65	Female; Trans*	Queer	White; Hispanic	Single	Northeast

Sophia	44	Female	Lesbian	White; Greek American	Married	Midwest
Sue	53	Female	Lesbian	White	Married	Midwest
Thelma	52	Female	Lesbian	White	Single; Divorced	Midwest
Valerie	47	Female	Lesbian	White	Short term relationship	Midwest
Vanessa	27	Female	Queer	White	Single	South
Violet	41	Female	Bisexual	White	Long term relationship	Midwest

Short term relationship – Less than 5 years
◊Long term relationship – More than 5 years

Appendix B: Definitions

Gender and Sexuality (all respondents were asked to self-identify)

- Bisexual – sexually attraction not exclusive to people of a single gender; attracted to both men and women.
- Genderqueer –an individual who does not identify within the gender binary; identifying with neither or both genders
- Lesbian – a woman who is attracted to other women
- Non-binary - an individual who does not identify within the gender binary; identifying with neither or both genders
- Pangender – an individual who identifies with more than one gender and/or may consider themselves a part of all genders
- Queer – an umbrella term for identities that challenge and disrupt heterosexuality, including those women who identify not only as queer but also as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or trans*; not only a sexual orientation but also a community.
- Trans*- used to indicate the inclusion of gender identities such as transsexual, transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, gender-fluid, agender, etc.
- Two spirit – an individual who identifies as having both a masculine and feminine spirit; used by some Native communities in North America to describe individuals who are identified with a traditional third-gender.

Relationship Status

- Short term relationship – less than 5 years
- Long term relationship – more than 5 years

Current Location (based on Census Regions and Divisions of the United States)

- Midwest – Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin
- Northeast – Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont
- South – Alabama, Arkansas Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia
- West – Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. What is your race or ethnicity?
3. How do you describe your sexuality/sexual preference/identity?
4. Are you currently in a relationship?
    a. If so, how long have you been in this relationship?
5. Highest level of education completed?
6. Tell me about the schools you attended, i.e., private or public?
    a. College(s)?
        i. What was your major/What did you study?
        ii. Degree(s) earned?
7. Are you currently employed?
    a. If yes, what do you do?
8. How much do you earn in a year? [Less than 20,000; 21k to 40k; 41k to 60k; 61k to 80k; 81k to 100k; more than 100k]
9. Tell me a little about where you were born.
    a. Is this where you spent most of your time growing up?
    b. Did you move at all?
    c. [If not US born] When did you first come to the US?
        i. For what reasons?
10. Where are you living now?
11. Who do you currently live with?
12. Do you have any children?
    a. If yes, how many?
        i. Ages?
        ii. Sex/Gender?
        iii. LGBTQ?
        iv. Were/are you a single parent or did you have this child(ren) with a partner?
        v. Were/are you the biological parent?
        vi. Adoptive parent?
    b. Are you out to your children?
        i. If yes, how did they respond to your coming out?

Relating to families and growing up–

13. Tell me about the family that you grew up in?
    a. Siblings?
        i. If siblings – How old are they?
        ii. Where do they live?
        iii. What do they do?
        iv. Are you close?
        v. Do they identify as LGBTQ?
    b. Other close family members?

14. How would you describe your parents?
    a. What is the highest level of education they completed?
    b. What do/did they do professionally?
        i. Currently?
        ii. In the past?
15. Did you get along with your family members growing up?
    a. What about now?
16. Were you raised in a religion?
    a. Did you still identify with this religion?
    b. Another religion?
17. Are you out to your family?
    a. If yes, when did you come out?
    b. If not, why?
18. How do your parents feel about your sexuality?
    a. Siblings?
    b. Other (close) members of your family?

<u>Living in rural communities – day to day experiences (before and after coming out, if applicable)</u>

<u>Daily Life:</u>

19. Take me through a typical day in your life?
    a. Weekday?
    b. Weekend?
20. Who are the people that you see and interact with every day?
    a. Are you out to these people?
21. Tell me about your closest friends?
    a. How do you know them?
    b. Are they aware of your sexual orientation?
22. Of you closest friends, do any of them identify as LGBTQ?
23. [You've already told me that you are a PROFESSION…] Are you out at work?
    a. To everyone?
    b. To select individuals?
    c. How do you decide who to come out to/if to come out?
    d. Was there anything about your professional life that made it easy or difficult to come out at work?
    e. IF PROFESSIONAL - Do you think being out at work is different for professional women living in rural areas?
        i. If yes, how so?

<u>Community:</u>

24. How would you describe the community that you live in?
    a. Is it a farming community, rural area but not farm, small town, etc.?
25. How would you describe the overall social scene in your community?

    a. Is there an LGBTQ social scene?
        i. If so, describe it.
26. Are any of these events/establishments targeted to/cater to queer women?
27. Do you feel like there are spaces or people who are supportive of you in your rural community?
    a. If yes, where do you find support and who do you feel supports you?
    b. If no, where do you go or who do you go to for support?
28. What types of events/establishments that you wish were in your community?
29. What types events/establishments do you leave your community to find?
    a. Queer specific?
        i. Where?
        ii. How often?
    b. Medical/Mental Health services?
        i. Where?
        ii. How often?
30. Do you ever feel unsafe in your community?
    a. Can you tell me about a time when you felt unsafe in your community?
        i. Elsewhere?
31. Have you ever felt that you were discriminated against in your community?
    a. Elsewhere?
32. Recently several states, including Indiana, have passed (or are working to pass) religious freedom laws (Indiana – Religious Freedom Restoration Act). Are you aware of this law?
    a. How do you feel about this law?
    b. Do you believe it will change anything in relation to your everyday life?
    c. Do you believe this law will have any effect on the status of LGBTQ people in your area?
33. How do you think your life would be different if you lived in an urban (less rural) environment?

Establishing a sexual identity (including coming out)

34. At what age did you first recognize that you were emotionally and/or physically attracted to women?
35. At what age did you have your first same-sex relationship?

36. At what age did you start to come out to others in your life?
37. What was your reason for coming out at this point in time?
    a. Were you in a relationship?
38. We've already talked about being out at work. Who(else) are you out to in your everyday life?
    a. Not out to?
    b. How do you decide who to come out to?
39. Have you ever been 'outed' by someone?
    a. If yes, tell me about it.

Dating, partnering, and relationships

Dating:

40. ([If currently in a relationship [per earlier question]) – Would you describe what you're doing as dating or something else?
    a. What do you understand dating to mean?
    b. How do you differentiate between dating and being in a relationship?
41. Are you currently dating anyone?
    a. If single, what would you/are you looking for in a relationship?
    b. If not, tell me about your most recent experience with dating?
    c. If yes, tell me about this person.
        i. Where did you meet?/Who introduced you?
        ii. How long have you been dating/did you date?
    d. What is the easiest thing for you about dating now?
    e. Most difficult?
42. How do you typically go about finding dates?
    a. Meeting other queer women in general?
    b. Have you ever tried online dating?
    c. Dating apps?

Partners and Relationships:

43. ([If currently in a relationship [per earlier question]) – Can you tell me about the relationship that you mentioned early on?
    a. If NOT currently in a relationship – Have you ever been in a relationship? If yes, can you tell me about your most recent relationship?
        i. How would you describe your courtship?
            1. Where did you meet?
            2. Who introduced you?
        ii. Were you in love?
        iii. What was it about this person that made you fall in love?
        iv. What did this person do professionally?
        v. How did you maintain this relationship?
        vi. Why did the relationship end?
44. Have you ever been in a (or another relationship) that you would consider a long-term relationship?
45. What would you consider to be an ideal relationship/ideal partner?

Marriage:

46. Have you ever been married?
    a. If yes, are you currently married?
    b. How would you describe your courtship?
        i. Where did you meet?
        ii. Who introduced you?
    c. Were you in love?
    d. What was it about this person that made you fall in love?

e. What did this person do professionally?
f. How did you maintain this relationship?
g. If male partner, were you out to this partner?
    i. If yes, how did they respond to your coming out?
h. Why did the relationship end?

47. How many individuals have you:
    a. dated? (Break down numbers in terms of gender/gender identity, sexual orientation)
    b. Had sex with?
        i. Since coming out (Same-sex vs. opposite sex)
        ii. Since living in a rural setting?
        iii. Within the last five years?
    c. Consider serious/committed relationships?
48. Does availability of relationship/sexual partners in your community affect your dating/relationship experiences? If yes, how so?
49. IF HAS LIVED OUTSIDE OF RURAL SETTING - Has living in a rural setting affected your number of sexual partners?

Sexual Practices and Behaviors:

This section focuses on sexual practices and behaviors. The questions are very personal in nature. I just want to remind you that I'm not here to judge and if there are any questions that you prefer not to answer, we can skip them.

50. So the next questions are going to focus more intimately on your sex life. Before we begin these questions I want to know how you define 'sex', 'having sex', 'sexual activity'?
51. Tell me about your first sexual experience?
    a. If opposite sex, also ask about first SS experience.
52. How many sexual partners would you say you've had over your lifetime?
    a. Since coming out? (Same-sex vs. opposite sex partners)
    b. Within the last 5 years?
    c. Since living in rural setting?
        i. Has living in a rural setting affected your number of sexual partners. (If respondent has lived outside of rural)
53. Tell me about your most recent sexual experience.
    a. Who?
    b. When?
    c. Where?
    d. How long?
    e. Oral?
    f. Vaginal?
    g. Anal?
    h. Other?
    i. Orgasm
        i. One?
        ii. Both?

iii. Multiple?

54. What sexual activities are most common in your sex life?
    a. Masturbation?
        i. Self?
        ii. With partner?
        iii. Orgasm?
        iv. Pleasurable?
    b. Vaginal Sex?
        i. Perform?
        ii. Receive?
        iii. Penetration?
            1. If yes, with what?
        iv. Protection?
    c. Oral Sex?
        i. Perform?
        ii. Receive?
        iii. Protection?
    d. Anal Sex?
        i. Perform?
        ii. Receive?
        iii. Protection?
    e. Other sexual behaviors/activities?
        i. Fisting
        ii. Sex toys
        iii. Multiple partners
        iv. Other
55. What sexual activities do you find to be most pleasurable?
    a. How do you define/experience pleasure?
    b. Do you feel like your partner(s) are concerned with your pleasure?
    c. Is pleasure different depending on your partner?
        i. One time partner?
        ii. Dating?
        iii. Long-term partner?
56. Can you tell me about a time when you tried something new for the first time?
    a. Who initiated?
57. What types of sex do you find to be most physically pleasurable?
    a. Can you tell me about a time when your sexual experience was physically pleasurable?
58. What types of sex do you find to be most emotionally satisfying?
    a. Can you tell me about a time when your sexual experience was emotionally satisfying?
59. Why do you have sex? (Arousal/sexual tension; expression of love; make-up sex; because partner wanted to, etc.)
60. Have you ever had a one-night stand? Hook-up? [i.e. a single sexual encounter that did not end in a dating or longer-term relationship]?
    a. If so, tell me about it.
        i. Whose idea was it?
            1. Or mutual?
        ii. Where/how did you (or your partner) meet this person(s)?
        iii. What do you know or remember about this person?
        iv. Were there agreed upon conditions?
            1. If so, what were the conditions?

        2. If so, how were these conditions negotiated?

61. Have you ever been part of a casual, sexual relationship [i.e. lasting more than a single sexual encounter] (hook-up, no-strings attached, etc.)?
    a. If so, tell me about it.
        i. Whose idea was it?
            1. Or mutual?
        ii. Where/how did you (or your partner) meet this person(s)?
        iii. What do you know or remember about this person?
        iv. Were there agreed upon conditions?
            1. If so, what were the conditions?
            2. If so, how were these conditions negotiated?
        v. Did you ever engage in sexual activities with your partner and another partner?
            1. If so, tell me about this experience.
        vi. How long did this relationship last?
        vii. Why did it end?
62. Have you ever participated in an open relationship?
    a. If so, tell me about it.
        i. Whose idea was it?
            1. Or mutual?
        ii. Where/how did you (or your partner) meet this person(s)?
        iii. What do you know or remember about this person?
        iv. Were there agreed upon conditions?
            1. If so, what were the conditions?
            2. If so, how were these conditions negotiated?
        v. Did you ever engage in sexual activities with your partner and another partner?
            1. If so, tell me about this experience.
        vi. How long did this relationship last?
        vii. Why did it end?
63. Has your sex life changed over time?
    a. If yes, how so?
    b. If not, why not? Why do you think this is?
    c. Does your sex life change the longer you are in a relationship?
        i. If yes, how might you explain these changes?
        ii. If not, why not?
64. Is there anything that you thought I was going to ask you that I didn't ask you?
65. Is there anything else that you think is important that I didn't ask?
66. Do you have any questions for me?

AMANDA A. STEWART, PhD

Winona State University
Department of Sociology
175 W. Mark St., Minné Hall 224
Winona, MN 55987
(312) 259-5828
Email: amanda.stewart@winona.edu

ACADEMIC POSITIONS

Fall 2019-Present — Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Winona State University

EDUCATION

Fall 2019 — PhD, Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago
Dissertation: "We Really Do Live Here: Strategies for Rural Queer and Trans* Women"
Committee: Lorena Garcia (Chair), Barbara Risman, Pamela Popielarz, Nilda Flores-Gonzalez (Arizona State University), and Laura Carpenter (Vanderbilt University)

2005 — MA, Honors – University of Manchester, England

2003 — BA – Luther College, Decorah, Iowa

2002-2003 — Fellowship Year Abroad, Eberhard Karls Universität, Tübingen, Germany

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Sexualities, Gender, Families, Qualitative Methods, Rural Sociology, Social Movements

PUBLICATIONS

Peer Reviewed Journal Articles

Stewart, Amanda A. 2016. "Survival. Activism. Feminism?: Exploring the Lives of Trans* Individuals in Chicago." *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 5(1): Article 3. http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/jctp/vol5/iss1/3

Book Reviews

Stewart, Amanda A. 2017. Review of *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, edited by Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley (New York University Press, 2016). *Rural Sociology* 82(2): 368-371.

Other Publications

Stewart, Amanda A. and Virginia Rutter. 2015. *Instructor's Manual to Accompany - Families as They Really Are,* 2nd edition, edited by Virginia Rutter and Barbara Risman. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

HONORS AND AWARDS

2018	Student Forum Travel Award: American Sociological Association
2018	President's Research in Diversity Travel Award: University of Illinois at Chicago
2015-2016	Chancellor's Supplemental Research Fellowship: University of Illinois at Chicago ($4,000/year)
2015	Provost's Award for Graduate Research: University of Illinois at Chicago ($1,500)
2002-2003	Fellowship: Baden Württemberg Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst (Ministry for Knowledge, Research and Art) Tübingen, Germany

INVITED PRESENTATIONS AND LECTURES

2009	Invited Lecture, The Changing American Family, Franciscan Outreach Association, Chicago, IL, February 2009.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2018	""Oh, by the way, I'm…": Strategies for Negotiating Rural Queer and Trans Living. American Sociological Association Annual Conference. August 2018.
2018	"Doing Rural Queer and Trans Research: Strategies and Experiences from the Field." American Sociological Association Sexualities Section Preconference. August 2018.
2018	""It Depends Where I Am": Strategies for Negotiating Rural Queer and Trans Living." Sociologists for Women in Society – Winter Meeting. January 2018.
2016	"Precarity and Vulnerability in the Lives of Rural Queer and Trans* Women in the United States." Sociologists for Women in Society – Winter Meeting. 6 February 2016.
2015	"Precarity and the Lives of Queer Women in the Rural United States." National Women's Studies Association. 14 November 2015.
2013	"Using Chicago as a Site for Service Learning and Teaching Activism." Midwest Sociological Society. 29 March 2013.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2013	"Queering Hookups: Doing and Undoing Gender." Engendering Change - Graduate Student Gender and Sexualities Conference. 14 March 2013.

2008 “Survival. Activism. Feminism?: Trans Identified Individuals in Chicago.” Midwest Sociological Society. 27 March 2008.

2004 "Queering the Classroom." Presented at the annual meetings of the Coalition of Women in German Conference (WIG). 17 October 2004.

Discussant

2015 “Politics, Power, Resistance: Campus Sexual Assault.” National Women’s Studies Association. 14 November 2015.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology, Winona State University
Introduction to Sociology (1 semester)
Social Problems (1 semester)
Social Class and Power (1 semester)

Instructor of Record, University of Illinois at Chicago
Social Problems (5 semesters)
Human Sexuality: Social Perspectives (2 semesters)
Gender and Society (2 semesters)
Sociology of Gender [upper-level] (1 semester)
Marriage and Family (6 semesters)
Social Inequalities (1 semester)
Topics in Race, Ethnicity, and Gender [upper level] (1 semester)

Instructor, Northeastern Illinois University
Introduction to Sociology (6 semesters)
Women, Men, and Social Change (8 semesters)
Sociology of Intimacies, Marriage, and Families (2 semesters)
American Women: Changing Image (1 semester)
Sociology of Sexualities (5 semesters)
Sociology of Youth and Youth Cultures (2 semesters)
Social Inequalities and Social Change (4 semesters)

Instructor, Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, IL
Sex and Gender in Society (2 semesters)

Instructor, Harper College, Palatine, IL
Introduction to Sociology (12 semesters)
Instructor, Loyola University, Chicago, IL
Sex and Gender (1 semester)

Adjunct Professor of Sociology, Triton College
Introduction to Sociology (5 semesters)

Adjunct Professor of Sociology, Moraine Valley Community College
Introduction to Sociology (1 semester)

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2012-2013	Research Assistant and Practicum Team Leader Growing Up in the 21st Century/Gender and Youth Project. Barbara Risman – PI. Mentored first year graduate student researchers; interviewed cisgender and gender non-conforming young people; interview coding in Atlas TI.
2010-2013	Research Assistant Online College Social Life Survey (Hooking Up Project). University of Illinois at Chicago. Barbara Risman – PI. Mentored undergraduate students on qualitative research methods; interviewed LGBTQ identified college students about dating, relationships, sex and sexuality; interview coding in Atlas TI.
2011	Research Assistant Chicago Area Study. University of Illinois at Chicago. Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, Andy Clarno, Pamela Popielarz, Maria Krysan - PIs. Interview schedule and survey writing, interviews with police, fire, and public safety officials about the relationship between their communities, immigration, and race; survey distribution and coding with non-profit and community based organizations.
2008	Ethnographic and Survey Research. University of Illinois at Chicago, Immigrant Mobilization Project. Nilda Flores-Gonzalez and Amalia Pallares - PIs. Recruitment of participants for in-depth interviews at large-scale protests and marches; participant observation and field notes.

PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES AND SERVICE

2015-2017	American Sociological Association – Sociology of Sexualities Section – Early Career Award Committee Member
2014-2016; 2011-2012	Undergraduate Studies Committee – University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Sociology
2014-2019	Sociologists for Women in Society – Student Caucus Committee Member

PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES AND SERVICE

2015-2016	American Sociological Association – Sociology of Sexualities Section – Graduate Student Representative

2007-2012	Undergraduate Sociology Club Adviser – University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Sociology
2004-2011	Northwest Suburban Illinois National Organization for Women Executive Board Member
2004-2005	Graduate Studies Committee Program Representative; Gender, Sexuality and Cultural Studies Department Student Representative, University of Manchester

WORK EXPERIENCE

2010-2012	Graduate Assistant – Undergraduate Academic Advising University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Sociology
2007-2010	Academic Adviser and Program Coordinator University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Sociology

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Sociological Association
Midwest Sociological Society
Rural Sociological Society
Sociologists for Women in Society

REFERENCES

Lorena Garcia
Department of Sociology
University of Illinois at Chicago
1007 West Harrison Street (MC 312)
Chicago, IL 60607
Email: lorena@uic.edu
Phone: 312-413-3759

Barbara J. Risman
Department of Sociology
University of Illinois at Chicago
1007 West Harrison Street (MC 312)
Chicago, IL 60607
Email: brisman@uic.edu
Phone: 312-996-3074

Nilda Flores-Gonzalez
Department of Sociology
Arizona State University
951 Cady Mall #144,
Tempe, AZ 85287
Email: nfloresg@asu.edu
Phone: 708-601-0908

Laura Carpenter
Department of Sociology
Vanderbilt University
220B Garland Hall
Nashville, TN 37235
Email: l.carpenter@vanderbilt.edu
Phone: 615-322-7546

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT CHICAGO

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (MC 672)
203 Administrative Office Building
1737 West Polk Street
Chicago, Illinois 60612-7227

Approval Notice - Continuing Review

June 13, 2017

Amanda Stewart, MA
Sociology
Sociology
1007 W Harrison, M/C 312
Chicago, IL 60612
Phone: (312) 259-5829 / Fax: (312) 996-5104

RE: Protocol # 2013-0223
"Queer Women in Rural Spaces"

Please note that stamped .pdfs of all approved recruitment and consent documents will be forwarded as an attachment to a separate email. OPRS/IRB no longer issues paper letters and stamped/approved documents, so it will be necessary to retain these emailed documents for your files for auditing purposes.

Dear Ms. Stewart:

Your Continuing Review was reviewed and approved by the Expedited review process on June 13, 2017. You may now continue your research.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Protocol Approval Period: June 13, 2017 - June 13, 2018
Approved Subject Enrollment #: 60 (33 subjects enrolled to date)
Additional Determinations for Research Involving Minors: These determinations have not been made for this study since it has not been approved for enrollment of minors.
Performance Sites: UIC
Sponsor: None
PAF#: Not applicable
Grant/Contract No: Not applicable
Grant/Contract Title: Not applicable
Research Protocol:

a) Research Protocol; Version 5; 01/23/2015

Recruitment Materials:

a) Recruitment Email; Version 5; 01/23/2015
b) Recruitment Flyer/Poster; Version 5; 01/23/2015

Informed Consents:

a) Consent Form; Version 6; 01/23/2015
b) Consent and Screening (Phone Interviews); Version 6; 01/23/2015
c) A waiver of consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.116(d) for recruitment purposes only; minimal risk; consent will be obtained at enrollment.
d) A waiver of documentation of informed consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.117 and an alteration of consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.116(d) for the phone interviews only; minimal risk; verbal consent will be obtained.

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review as defined in 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) under the following specific categories:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.,
(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Please note the Review History of this submission:

Receipt Date	Submission Type	Review Process	Review Date	Review Action
05/24/2017	Continuing Review	Expedited	06/13/2017	Approved

Please remember to:

→ Use your **research protocol number** (2013-0223) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

→ Review and comply with all requirements on the guidance:
"UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects"
(http://research.uic.edu/irb/investigators-research-staff/investigator-responsibilities)

Please note that the UIC IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or me at (312) 413-8457.

Sincerely,

Barbara Corpus
Associate Director, IRB # 2
Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

cc: Maria Krysan, Sociology, M/C 312
Lorena Garcia, Sociology, M/C 312

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form such as this one to tell you about the research, to explain that taking part is voluntary, to describe the risks and benefits of participation, and to help you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Principal Investigator: Amanda Stewart, PhD Candidate
Department and Institution: Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago
Address and Contact Information: 1007 W. Harrison St. Chicago, IL 60607 MC 312
astewart@uic.edu 312-259-5828

Why am I being asked?

You are being asked to be a subject in a research study about the sexualities and life experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*[1] and/or queer women in the rural United States.

You have been asked to participate in the research because you are 25-65 years old and are currently living in the rural United States and may be eligible to take part.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Chicago. **If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.**

Approximately 60 subjects may be involved in this research study.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research will explore the experiences of queer women in rural settings. This research will challenge assumptions that are often made about rural living and will explore how rural queer women construct their identities and explore their sexuality within these spaces.

What procedures are involved?

This research will be performed at a location of your choosing. The researcher can also provide a location if you do not know of an appropriate location.

The interview will last between 1-3 hours.

[1] Trans* is used as a short form to include those who identify as either transgender or transsexual.

The study procedures are as follows:

- A one-time interview at a site of your choosing lasting 1-3 hours.
- The interview will be anonymous and confidential
- Questions will be open ended and deal with the sexualities, life and sexual experiences of queer women in rural spaces.
- The interview will be tape recorded and transcribed

What are the potential risks and discomforts?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

You may experience a degree of psychological or emotional distress due to the sensitive and personal nature of the research topic. You will be provided with a list of resources that you may use to help you deal with any distress you may experience.

There is a risk that a breach of privacy and confidentiality may occur (i.e. others may know that you are participating in research and that data identifying your may accidentally be disclosed.)

Are there benefits to taking part in the research?

Taking part in this research study may not benefit you personally, but I [the researcher] may learn new things that will help others.

What other options are there?

You have the option to not participate in this study.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

The only person who will know that you are a research subject is the principal investigator. Otherwise information about you will only be disclosed to others with your written permission, or if necessary to protect your rights or welfare or if required by law

Study information, which identifies you and the consent form signed by you, will be looked at and/or copied for checking up on the research by UIC OPRS and State of Illinois Auditors.

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

Your signed consent form and all personal information and related records will only be viewed by the lead investigator (Amanda Stewart). All documents containing identifying information will be stored in a locked drawer in the office of the lead investigator.

During the interview, your identity as a subject will be protected. The interviewer will not ask you your name, and you will have the option of choosing a pseudonym for yourself. After interview data is recorded only I will have access to all audio recordings in order to transcribe the interviews. You will not have access to the audio recordings of your interview after your interview. All audio recordings will be stored electronically on www.box.com, before and during the process of transcription. Transcriptions will be saved to this secure (password protected) web server that only the lead investigator will have access to. After the interview, the audio recording of your interview will be transcribed and all audio recordings will be deleted after transcription is complete.

What are the costs for participating in this research?

There are no costs to you for participating in this research.

Will I be reimbursed for any of my expenses or paid for my participation in this research?

No. You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. You have the right to leave a study at any time without penalty. You may discontinue your participation either during or after being interviewed. The researcher will destroy and delete all data collected from your participation with no penalty.
The Researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if:

- They believe it is in your best interest

Who should I contact if I have questions?

Contact the researcher Amanda Stewart at 312-259-5828 or email astewart@uic.edu or faculty advisor Lorena Garcia at 312-413-3759 or email address: lorena@uic.edu.

- if you have any questions about this study or your part in it,
- if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research.

What are my rights as a research subject?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns, or complaints, you

may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 312-996-1711 or 1-866-789-6215 (toll-free) or e-mail OPRS at uicirb@uic.edu.

Remember:

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Illinois. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

1. Are you between the ages of 25 and 65?
2. Do you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, or queer AND female?
3. Are you currently living in the rural United States? (Rural defined as having a population less than 50,000 and more than 1 hour from a major city (major city defined has having a population of 200,000 or more).
4. Do you consent to your involvement in research regarding about the sexualities and life experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and/or queer women in the rural United States?

University of Illinois at Chicago
Research Information and Consent for Participation in Social Behavioral Research
Queer Women in Rural Spaces

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form such as this one to tell you about the research, to explain that taking part is voluntary, to describe the risks and benefits of participation, and to help you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Principal Investigator: Amanda Stewart, PhD Candidate
Department and Institution: Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago
Address and Contact Information: 1007 W. Harrison St. Chicago, IL 60607 MC 312
astewart@uic.edu 312-259-5828

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You have been asked to participate in the research because you are 25-65 years old and are currently living in a rural area and may be eligible to take part.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Chicago. **If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.**

Approximately 60 subjects may be involved in this research study.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research will explore the experiences of queer women in rural settings. This research will challenge assumptions that are often made about rural living and will explore how rural queer women construct their identities and explore their sexuality within these spaces.

[1] Trans* is used as a short form to include those who identify as either transgender or transsexual.

What procedures are involved?

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What other options are there?

You have the option to not participate in this study.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

The only person who will know that you are a research subject is the principal investigator. Otherwise information about you will only be disclosed to others with your written permission, or if necessary to protect your rights or welfare or if required by law

Study information, which identifies you and the consent form signed by you, will be looked at and/or copied for checking up on the research by UIC OPRS and State of Illinois Auditors.

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

Your signed consent form and all personal information and related records will only be viewed by the lead investigator (Amanda Stewart). All documents containing identifying information will be stored in a locked drawer in the office of the lead investigator.

During the interview, your identity as a subject will be protected. The interviewer will not ask you your name, and you will have the option of choosing a pseudonym for yourself. After interview data is recorded only I will have access to all audio recordings in order to transcribe the interviews. You will not have access to the audio recording of your interview after your interview. All audio recordings will be stored electronically on www.box.com, before and during the process of transcription. Transcriptions will be saved to this secure (password protected) web server that only the lead investigator will have access to. After the interview, the audio recording of your interview will be transcribed and all audio recordings will be deleted after transcription is complete.

What are the costs for participating in this research?

There are no costs to you for participating in this research.

Will I be reimbursed for any of my expenses or paid for my participation in this research?

No. You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. You have the right to leave a study at any time without penalty. You may discontinue your participation either during or after being interviewed. The researcher will destroy and delete all data collected from your participation with no penalty.
The Researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if:

- They believe it is in your best interest

Who should I contact if I have questions?

Contact the researcher Amanda Stewart at 312-259-5828 or email address: astewart@uic.edu or faculty advisor Lorena Garcia at 312-413-3759 or email address: lorena@uic.edu.

- if you have any questions about this study or your part in it,
- if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research.

What are my rights as a research subject?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns, or complaints, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 312-996-1711 or 1-866-789-6215 (toll-free) or e-mail OPRS at uicirb@uic.edu.

Remember:

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Illinois. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

Signature of Subject or Legally Authorized Representative

I have read (or someone has read to me) the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I will be given a copy of this signed and dated form.

_____ _____
Signature Date

_____
Printed Name

_____ _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date (must be same as subject's)

_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

APPROVAL
STARTS 06/13/2017 — EXPIRES 06/13/2018
UIC UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

LGBTQ Women in Rural Spaces

The Project:

Amanda Stewart, a Sociology PhD Candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago is looking for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, and/or queer identified women who are currently living in rural areas of the United States to participate in individual, in-depth interviews. This research aims to complicate how we understand and make sense of the experiences of queer women in rural settings. This research will challenge assumptions that are often made about rural living and will explore how rural queer women construct their identities and explore their sexuality within these spaces.

To Participate:

To participate, you must be between the ages of 25 and 65 and be currently living in the rural United States. (Rural defined as having a population less than 50,000 and more than 1 hour from a major city (major city defined as having a population of 200,000 or more). This project involves in-depth interviews lasting approximately 1-3 hours that are completely confidential. Interviews will take place at a site of your choosing. All interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed. You will not receive any compensation for your participation.

If you would like more information about participating or would like to volunteer, email Amanda Stewart at astewart@uic.edu. Thank you for your interest in this project!

Queer Women in Rural Spaces
Interview Project
Amanda Stewart
astewart@uic.edu

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Email to Listserv Owner/Moderator

Hello,

I am a PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I am working on a research project that is exploring the experiences of queer women in rural settings. I am currently looking for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual and/or queer identified women who are between the ages of 25 and 65 and are currently living in the rural United States to participate in individual, in-depth interviews. (Rural defined as having a population less than 50,000 and more than 1 hour from a major city (major city defined has having a population of 200,000 or more). This research has been approved by the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board (IRB) – Research Protocol # 2013-0223.

I would appreciate it if you would be willing to share the below information and attached flyer with your listserv. If you are unable to share this information, feel that this research does not pertain to those who have subscribed to your listserv, or have listserv policies that prohibit the distribution of such information, please disregard this message. If you are willing to share this information with your listserv, please reply to this email so that I have a record of your wiliness to distribute this information.

If you have any questions or require further information from me before making the decision whether or not to share it with your listserv, please feel free to email me at astewart@uic.edu.

Thank you,

Amanda A. Stewart
PhD Candidate
Department of Sociology
University of Illinois at Chicago
astewart@uic.edu

Text of email to be shared with listserv subscribers/members:

Amanda Stewart, a Sociology PhD Candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago is looking for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*[1] and/or queer identified women who are currently living in the rural United States to participate in individual, in-depth interviews. This research will explore the experiences of queer women in rural settings. This research will challenge assumptions that are often made about rural living and will explore how rural queer women construct their identities and explore their sexuality within these spaces.

[1] Trans* is used as a short form to include those who identify as either transgender or transsexual.

To participate, you must be between the ages of 25 and 65 and be currently living in the rural United States. (Rural defined as having a population less than 50,000 and more than 1 hour from a major city (major city defined has having a population of 200,000 or more). This project involves in-depth interviews lasting approximately 1-3 hours that are completely confidential. Interviews will take place at a site of your choosing. All interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed. You will not receive any compensation for your participation.

If you would like more information about participating or would like to volunteer, Amanda Stewart at astewart@uic.edu. Thank you for your interest in this project!