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Santa Barbara

Unbecoming: Visibility Politics and Queer Rurality

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Feminist Studies

by

Carly Ann Thomsen

Committee in charge:

Professor Leila Rupp, Chair

Professor Eileen Boris

Professor Avery Gordon

June 2014

The dissertation of Carly Ann Thomsen is approved.

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Avery Gordon

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Eileen Boris

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Leila Rupp, Committee Chair

June 2014

Unbecoming: Visibility Politics and Queer Rurality

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by

Carly Ann Thomsen

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

for their work to create a critical sexuality studies working group at UCSB, through which, for example, I was able to bring senior scholars to campus to workshop dissertation chapters (Thanks to Kim Hall and Robert McRuer for leading two of these writing workshops!). Mireille has supported and championed me in multiple capacities, delivering burritos in the middle of comprehensive exams, writing last-minute letters, giving last-minute job talk related advice over the phone, and allowing me to use her house as a writing retreat for the final dissertation crunch. Mireille has always come through in clutch moments when I needed her most.

My colleagues and friends in Feminist Studies at UCSB have been an amazing support network. Lou Anne Lockwood, Feminist Studies office manager extraordinaire, has been, at many points, the calm within the storm. She weathers challenges in ways that have taught me a great deal. I would also like to thank Heather Berg, Lauren Clark, Sarah Jane Pinkerton, Chelsea Jones, Chloe Diamond-Lenow, Leigh Dodson, and Sandibel Borges for fabulous intellectual exchange and support as well as happy hours, road trips, and dinners together. Chelsea Jones made a grand entrance into my life at the moment I least expected it: my last year of my Ph.D. program. Even after witnessing me in the throes of dissertating (read: panicked and frantic with a head of greasy hair), and my waking her early on the weekends with my typing ("Babe, you type like a warrior."), she still is happy to be my date on Saturday night. I never would have believed that someone who started as a colleague could bring so many types of pleasure to my life. Special thanks also go to Leigh Dodson and Heather Berg, who deserve more than this shout out for their friendship and support. Leigh and Heather have read more of this dissertation than I could reasonably expect of colleagues and friends. They are both incisive editors and amazing thinkers, and my work has improved dramatically through thinking and writing alongside them. Chapter five, in particular, would look quite different if it were not for conversations with and feedback from Heather Berg. Our long conversations regarding the overlaps in her scholarship on sex work and mine on LGBTQ visibility politics led to our co-authoring an article that is currently under review. I mention this because the wonderful experience of co-authoring this article pushed and made more nuanced my ideas about the labored nature of LGBTQ visibility politics. In the process, my chapter changed significantly and for the better.

I have been equally blessed with amazing friends and colleagues both outside of my department at UCSB and also beyond UCSB. Jody Jahn became a quick friend in my first year of grad school. She has been there through it all—disappointments, confusions, celebrations. I have learned a great deal watching Jody, who is a couple of years ahead of me, navigate academia, and she has been an endless supporter. Maryam Griffin has had a more profound impact on my thinking and my life while at UCSB than any other person. I do not know what I would do without her friendship. It is harder to find words to capture the meaning of my relationship with Maryam than with anyone else and I believe that this is because her friendship has infused every part of me, my thinking, my life. Maryam and I can (and do) talk about ideas for hours and hours and hours. She has read and commented extensively on everything I have published as well as every part of this dissertation. Her incisiveness, which is so clearly rooted in love, generosity, and a belief in the

I dedicate my dissertation to my family, without whom I never would have made it to Ph.D. land, and to Leila, without whom my time here certainly would have been less provocative, successful, supported, and enjoyable. To each of my fellow villagers who have been a part of this journey, thank you.

VITA OF CARLY ANN THOMSEN
June 2014

EDUCATION

2014   Ph.D., Department of Feminist Studies
University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB)
      Dissertation Title: *Unbecoming: Visibility Politics and Queer Rurality*
      Dissertation Committee: Leila Rupp, Eileen Boris, Avery Gordon

2008   M.A., Women's Studies
University of Arizona
      Master's Thesis Title: "The Rhetorics of U.S. Abortion Narratives: Thematic Continuities, Shifting Applications, and Political Strategies, 1969-Present"
      Thesis Committee: Miranda Joseph, Laura Briggs, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy

2004   B.A., Rhetoric and Applied Writing. Minor, Women's Studies
St. Cloud State University (Graduated Summa Cum Laude)
      Study Abroad: Alnwick, England (2001) & Bangkok, Thailand (2003)

PUBLICATIONS

Thomsen, Carly. 2013. "From Refusing Stigmatization to Celebration: New Directions for Reproductive Justice Activism." *Feminist Studies* 39(1):149-158.

Thomsen, Carly. Forthcoming. "The Post-Raciality and Post-Spatiality of Calls for LGBTQ and Disability Visibility." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*.
*Winner of Charlotte Stough Memorial Prize

Thomsen, Carly. Forthcoming. "In Plain(s) Sight: Rural LGBTQ Women and the Politics of Visibility." *Queering the Countryside: New Directions in Rural Queer Studies*. Mary Gray, Colin Johnson, Brian Gilley, Eds. New York: NYU Press.

Thomsen, Carly. Forthcoming. "Sexualities." *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, Eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press. With Leila Rupp.

Thomsen, Carly. Forthcoming. "Queering Environmental Justice: Local Foods in Rural Locales." *Climate Futures*. John Foran and Kum Kum Bhavnani, Eds.

Thomsen, Carly. In process of revising and resubmitting. "The Politics of Narrative, Narrative as Politic: Rethinking Reproductive Justice Frameworks through the South Dakota Abortion Story."

Thomsen, Carly. Under Review. "The Fetish of Visibility: Malcolm X, Sex(ed) Labor, and Gay Rights." With Heather Berg.

Thomsen, Carly. 2007. "Roe v. Wade." *Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

OTHER WRITING

Thomsen, Carly. 2013. "Not Down With CPCs?: What Feminists can Learn from the Reproductive Justice Activism at UCSB." *Feminist Majority Foundation* blog at http://feministcampus.org/are-you-down-with-cpcs-hell-no-not-me/. Sept 17.

Thomsen, Carly. 2008. "The Prism Project: Supporting LGBTQ Youth." *Community Research News*. Southwest Institute for Research on Women. Tucson: University of Arizona. Vol. 7.

LaDuke, Winona, John Shimek, Carly Thomsen, Mike Triplett. 2006. "White Earth Anishinaabe Nation   Sustainable Energy Plan." White Earth, Minnesota: White Earth Land Recovery Project.

ACADEMIC POSITIONS

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2009-2012   Research Assistant to Drs. Mireille Miller-Young and Paul Amar, New Sexualities Research Focus Group, UCSB

2009   Research Assistant to Drs. Eileen Boris and Leila Rupp, Critical Issues in America series, Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB

2009   Research Assistant to Dr. Leila Rupp, Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB. Conduct interviews with lesbian/bisexual/queer women who are undergraduate students at UCSB

2008-2009   Research Technician and Events Coordinator, Southwest Institute for
              Research on Women, University of Arizona

2006-2008   Research Technician (previously Research Assistant), Prism Project,
              Southwest Institute for Research on Women, University of Arizona.
              Track and interview over 300 LGBTQA youth aged 13-23 in the largest
              federally funded study on queer youth in the United States. Conducted
              baseline and follow-up interviews with the youth, maintained relationships
              with collaborating organizations, presented data in community forums and
              at conferences.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE: INSTRUCTOR OF RECORD

2013   "Activisms: Theorizing Resistance and Building Skills for Social
              Justice" (designed and taught), Department of Feminist Studies,
              UCSB, Fall

2013   "Introduction to LGBTQ Studies" (designed and taught), Department
              of Feminist Studies, UCSB, Summer

2013   "Queer Theory: Space, Bodies, and Time" (designed and taught),
              Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB, Winter

2013   "Activisms: Theorizing Resistance and Building Skills for Social
              Justice" (designed and taught), Department of Feminist Studies,
              UCSB, Spring

2012   "New Sexuality Studies: Queering Research Methods" (designed and
              taught), Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB, Winter

2012   "The Politics of Reproduction: Sex, Abortion and Motherhood"
              (designed and taught), Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB,
              Summer

2011   "Activisms: Theories, Skills and Ideologies for Social Empowerment"
              (designed and taught) Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB, Winter

2011   "The Politics of Reproduction: Sex, Abortion and Motherhood"
              (designed and taught) Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB,
              Summer. Winner of Summer Teaching Competition

2011   "Women and Work" (designed and taught), Department of Sociology,
              UCSB, Summer

2007   "Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in Contemporary Society"
            (designed and taught), Women's Studies Department, University of
            Arizona, Summer

TEACHING EXPERIENCE: GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

2014   "Labors," Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB, Winter
2011   "Women, Representation and Culture," Department of Feminist
            Studies, UCSB, Spring
2010   "Women, Society and Culture," Department of Feminist Studies,
            UCSB, Summer
2010   "Women, Society and Culture," Department of Feminist Studies,
            UCSB, Fall

ADDITIONAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2007-09   "Race, Gender and Resistance," Southwest Institute for Research on
            Women, University of Arizona
            Designed and taught a weekly 2 hour course to youth aged 13-17 who were
            court-mandated to attend the class as part of their drug treatment program.

PEDAGOGICAL TRAINING

Feminist Studies Department's Feminist Pedagogy Workshops (once per quarter), UCSB
Summer Teaching Institute for Associates training and certification, UCSB

FELLOWSHIPS

2014-2016   Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for the Study of Women, Gender and
            Sexuality, Rice University

2014   Dissertation Completion Fellowship, Graduate Division, UCSB

2013   UCSB Affiliates Graduate Dissertation Fellowship, Graduate Division,
            UCSB

2009-13   Doctoral Scholars Fellowship, UCSB

2012   Woodrow Wilson Dissertation Fellowship in Women's Studies, one of
            six fellowships awarded nationally

2012   Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, Pre-Doctoral Fellow, UCSB

2012   Steve and Barbara Mendell Fellowship in Cultural Literacy, Walter H.
                Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life, UCSB

GRANTS

RESEARCH GRANTS

2012   Humanities and Social Science Research Grant, Graduate Division,
                UCSB ($2,000)

2011   Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, Graduate Collaborative Award
                and Grant, "Beyond the Divide: Using Social Justice Theater to
                Challenge Dominant Discourses, Incite Action, and Produce Theory,"
                UCSB ($850)

2011   Santa Barbara Pro-Choice Coalition, Research Grant, "Shared Spaces
                and Shared Positionalities: Using Performance to Address Discourses
                of Multi-Generational Feminist Divides," Santa Barbara, CA ($1,000)

2010   The Myra Sadker Foundation, Teacher Award and Grant, "Beyond
                Internships versus Intellectualism: Incorporating Women's Studies
                Concepts into Social Justice Internship Programs" ($1,000)

PUBLIC HUMANITIES AND DEVELOPMENT GRANTS

2013   The Fund for Santa Barbara, Sexuality Studies Film Series grant (with
                Deborah Rogow and Margaret Lazarus) ($2,000)

2013   Kim Q. Hall's keynote, "Toward a Queer Crip Politics of Food,"
                Primary event organizer and fundraiser, UCSB ($3,500)

2012   Robert McRuer's keynote, "The Crip's Speech in an Age of Austerity:
                Composing Disability Transnationally," Primary event organizer and
                fundraiser, UCSB ($4,000)

2007   Faculty/Student Interaction Grant, University of Arizona ($400)

2006-09   Founding Director of the Women's Resource Center, University of
                Arizona
                $132,000 awarded from the Student Services Fee Advisory Board
                $38,620 awarded from the Parents and Family Association

Grants of $1,000 or less from more than 30 funding organizations and community groups

TRAVEL GRANTS

2013   Travel Grant, National Women's Studies Association

2013   Doctoral Student Travel Grant, Academic Senate, UCSB

2012   Annette K. Baxter Travel Grant, American Studies Association

2011   Travel Grant, UCSB Women's Center, given to three graduate students annually

2010   Travel Grant, UCSB Women's Center, given to three graduate students annually

2008   Women's Studies Advisory Council Travel Grant, University of Arizona

2008   Graduate and Professional Student Council Travel Grant, University of Arizona

2007   Women's Studies Advisory Council Travel Grant, University of Arizona

2007   Graduate and Professional Student Council Travel Grant, University of Arizona

2003   Center for International Studies Travel Grant, St. Cloud State University, Minnesota

AWARDS AND HONORS

2014   Lancaster Dissertation Award for the Social Sciences, an honor given to one Social Science dissertation every two years at UCSB ($1,000)

2014   University Award of Distinction, UCSB

2012   Graduate Scholarship Honorable Mention, National Women's Studies Association

2012	Excellence in Teaching Award and Named University Wide Teaching Associate, an honor given to one UCSB Teaching Associate annually ($1,000)
2012	Outstanding Teaching Associate Award, Residence Hall Association, UCSB
2012	Outstanding Graduate Student Award, given to one UCSB graduate student annually for exceptional service to the LGBTQ community, Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity
2011	Summer Teaching Competition Winner, Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB
2010	Distinguished Service Award, Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB
2008	Ben Graff & Sam Chang Award, the top award handed out by the student government for service at the University of Arizona
2008	Outstanding Community Impact Award, Accolades Program, University of Arizona
2008	Vagina Warrior of the Year, awarded by University of Arizona Vagina Monologues Performance Troupe to one feminist activist annually
2007	ASUA Academic Achievement Scholarship, given to three University of Arizona students annually ($1,000)
2007	Women's Studies Advisory Council, Student Showcase 1st Place Award, given to one graduate student at the U of AZ whose work has had the greatest impact on women ($250)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2014	"Play and Labor, Life and Death: Queer Rurality and the Discourses of Local Foods Movements," American Studies Association, Los Angeles, CA, November (upcoming).
2014	"Queering Local Foods Discourses," National Women's Studies Association, San Juan, Puerto Rico, November (upcoming).
2014	"Local Foods in Rural Locales: The Queerness of Cultural Capitalism, Market Feminism, and Futurity," National Women's Studies Association, San Juan, Puerto Rico, November (upcoming).

2013   "Community beyond Identity: The Politics of Belonging for LGBTQ Women in the Rural Midwest," National Women's Studies Association, Cincinnati, OH, November.

2013   "Indebted: Gay Visibility and Capitalism," American Studies Association, Washington D.C., November.

2012   "Queer Women in the Rural Midwest on Space, Race, and Disability," National Women's Studies Association, Oakland, CA, November.

2012   "Against Visibility: Discourses of Disability and Race among Queer Women in the Rural Midwest," American Studies Association, San Juan, Puerto Rico, November.

2012   "Queering Visibility," Cultural Studies Association, San Diego, CA, March.

2011   "Beyond Divides: Using Social Justice Theater to Challenge Dominant Discourses, Incite Action, and Produce Theory," National Women's Studies Association, Atlanta, GA, November.

2011   "Beyond the Global/Local Divide: Transnational and Rural Queer Intimacies, Discourses and Movements," National Women's Studies Association, Atlanta, GA, November.

2011   "Complicating Belonging: Space, Place, and Race in Discourses and Representations of Queer Women in the Rural Midwest," Contingent Belongings: Queer Reflections on Race, Space and the State, University of Minnesota, September.

2011   "Against The Romance of Visibility: Space, Place and Race in Representations of Queer Women in the Rural Midwest," Women's Center Annual Graduate Student Symposium, UCSB, March (three students accepted to present annually).

2011   "Complicating the Rural, Complicating the Queer: Discourses of Queer Women in the Rural Midwest," Critical Ethnic Studies, UC-Riverside, March.

2011   "'We're Here, We're…Queer?': Queer Women's Negotiations of Visibility Politics in the Rural Midwest," Thinking Gender, UCLA, February.

2010 "Out, Loud and Proud?: Negotiations of Queer Women in the Rural Midwest," National Women's Studies Association Conference, Denver, CO, November.

2010 "Wild Women in the Wild West: Thinking Through the Silences Surrounding Sex Work in the Rural U.S.," Theorizing Economies of Desire: A Graduate Student Symposium on Sex Work, UCSB, May.

2010 "The Rhetorics of South Dakota's Abortion Wars: Women, Race and Narrative Representation in Rural America," New Sexualities Graduate Student Symposium, UCSB, April.

2010 "What does Mount Rushmore Have to do with it?: Abortion, Narrative Representation and Race in Rural America," Women's Center Annual Graduate Student Symposium, UCSB, February.

2010 "Beyond South Dakota's Abortion Ban: Locating Women's (Abortion) Narratives within Anti-Abortion and Abortion Rights Rhetorical Strategies to Identify Counter-Hegemonic Rhetorics of Resistance," Thinking Gender, UCLA, February.

2009 "Aborting Narratives: Women, Rhetoric and Politics in South Dakota's Abortion Wars," National Women's Studies Association Conference, Atlanta, GA, November.

2009 "More than Free Condoms: Forming, Building and Sustaining a Student-Run Women's Center," National Collegiate Leadership Conference, Tucson, AZ, February.

2008 "A Critical Analysis of Utilizing Abortion Narratives for Abortion Rights Activism," National Women's Studies Association Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, June.

2008 "Abortion-Rights Discourse: Emergent Themes and Contestable Applications," New Directions in Critical Theory Graduate Student Conference, University of Arizona, April.

2008 "The Prism Project: Building a Support Program for Transgender Youth," International Foundation for Gender Education, Tucson, AZ, April.

2008 "The Rhetorics of Abortion Narratives: Thematic Continuities and Shifting Applications," Women's Studies Colloquium, University of Arizona, March.

2007   "Recovering Aborted Voices: Combining Women's Life-and-Death Stories with *l'écriture feminine* to Outline a New Rhetorical Strategy for Abortion-Rights Discourse," Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference, Little Rock, AR, October.

2007   "Shifting Notions of Essentialism: Luce Irigaray's Immortal Influence," National Women's Studies Association Conference, St. Charles, IL, June.

2005   "The Sauna: Space, Body Image, and Rhetoric." Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference, Houghton, MI, October.

INVITED ACADEMIC SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

2014   "Queer(ing) Reproductive Justice: Transgression, Identity, and Futurity…Or Creating Queer Coalitions," Workshop co-creator and facilitator, Pride Week, UCSB, May.

2013   "Metronormativity and Desire," Invited lecture, Sex, Love, and Romance class taught by Chloe Diamond-Lenow, UCSB, August.

2012   "Engaged Scholarship," Invited panelist with Dean Melvin Oliver, Dr. Victor Rios, and Dr. Tania Israel, UCSB, November.

2012   "Putting the Justice into Reproductive Justice" Invited panelist on "Sex Scandal: The Politics of Sex in the 2012 Presidential Election," New Sexualities Research Focus Group and the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, UCSB, November.

2012   "Rurality in Social Media," Invited panelist on "Shit Girls Say: Identity Politics and Social Media," Race Matters Series, Multi-Cultural Center, UCSB, April.

2012   "Beyond Performativity: Judith Butler on Space and Place," Invited Speaker, Judith Butler Experience class, Feminist Studies, UCSB, May.

2012   "Feminist Theory, Feminist Practice," Invited lecture via Skype, Women's Studies Senior Capstone taught by Dr. Beth Berila, St. Cloud State University, February.

2011   "LGBTQ in Rural Places," Invited lecture, organized by Department of Women's Studies and the Women's Center, St. Cloud State University, September.

2011	"Reproduction and Transgression," Invited lecture, Gender/Transgender Theory Class taught by Shae Miller Young, Department of Sociology, UCSB, July.
2011	"On Foucault," Invited lecture, Sexuality Studies class taught by Dr. Mireille Miller-Young, Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB, April.
2010	"From Choice to Justice," Guest lecturer, Intro to Feminist Studies taught by Dr. Andrea Fontenot, Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB, October.
2010	"Reproductive Justice: An Introduction" Guest lecturer, Intro to Feminist Studies taught by Eddie Alvarez, Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB, August.
2009	"Reproductive Justice versus Reproductive Rights: Re-framing the frames," Guest lecturer in Dr. Beth Berila's Women and the Body class, St. Cloud State University, September.
2007	"Reproductive Rights in Arizona." Guest lecturer in Dr. Caryl Flinn's Feminist Theory course, University of Arizona, January.

ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

2014	"Queering the Rural: Beyond Doin It in Haystacks," Interfaith Series, Santa Barbara, CA, April.
2013	"Beyond Reproductive Justice," Invited guest on *The Reproductive Justice Hour*, KCSB Radio, UCSB, April.
2013	"From Choice to Justice: Deconstructing Movement Frameworks," Workshop Creator and Facilitator, Women's Center, UCSB, April.
2013	"Activism: Critical Thinking, Critical Doing," Workshop Creator and Facilitator, Student Affairs Staff Retreat, UCSB, January.
2012	"Reproductive Justice Activism—More than Free Condoms," Workshop Creator and Facilitator, Women's Center, UCSB, June.
2012	"Queer Activism: Social and Personal Transformation," Workshop Creator and Facilitator, Emerging Leadership Retreat, Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, UCSB, May.

2011   "Feminist Activism: Strategies and Alliances," Workshop creator and
            facilitator, St. Cloud State University's Women's Center, November.

2011   "State of the Union: Reproductive Justice, Activism and YOU,"
            Invited Speaker, National Teach in on Corporate Greed, organized by
            Dr. Howard Winant and Dr. Cornel West, UCSB, April.

2010   "Building and Sustaining Activist Student Organizations: A Three Part
            Workshop Series" Workshop Creator and Facilitator, UCSB Women's
            Center, Spring.

2010   "What Can *Citizen Ruth* Teach us About Class, Subjectivity and
            Agency?: Re-thinking common assumptions and activist strategies,"
            Discussion Facilitator for UCSB's VOX student organization, UCSB,
            January.

2009   "Why Dumping that Sexist Boyfriend Just Isn't Enough: Feminism as
            a Crazy, Wonderful Journey," Women on Wednesday Keynote
            speaker organized by the Women's Center, St. Cloud State University,
            September.

2009   "Breasts, Breasts and more Breasts: How to Host a Successful Breast
            Casting Event," Workshop creator and facilitator, Women's Center, St.
            Cloud State University, September.

2008   "What does Feminist Resistance Look Like?: Feminist HERstory and
            Contemporary Feminist Issues," Women's Foundation of Southern
            Arizona, Tucson, AZ, September.

2008   "The Prism Project: Successes and Challenges," Community Forum,
            Wingspan—Southern Arizona's LGBTQ Community Center, Tucson,
            AZ, August.

2008   "Media Literacy, Body Image and Resistance," Dove Uniquely Me
            Summer Camp, Girl Scouts, Tucson, AZ, Summer.

2008   "Well, what can I do about it?": Opportunities and Strategies for
            Youth Activism," Dove Uniquely Me Summer Camp, Girl Scouts,
            Tucson, AZ, Summer.

2008   "The Power and Possibility of Feminist Organizing," Feminist
            Majority Foundation's Get Out Her Vote Summit, Tucson, AZ, April.

2008   "Contemporary Issues Impacting Young Women: A response from
           University of Arizona's Women's Resource Center," Daughters of the
           American Revolution, Tucson AZ, January.

2007   "Feminism 101," Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona, Tucson
           AZ, September.

2006   "Protecting Sacred Manoomin," American Indian Awareness Week,
           St. Cloud State University, April.

2005   "Crisis Pregnancy Centers: Are Women Being Misled?," St. Cloud
           Public Library, St. Cloud, MN, April.

2005   "Talking About Choice," Invited panelist, Women's Center, St. Cloud
           State University, April.

SELECTED SERVICE TO THE FIELD AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

2012-14   LGBTQ Studies Minor Committee member, Feminist Studies
           Department, UCSB

2013   Co-creator and Participant, Feminist Climate Justice Futures Research
           Focus Group, UCSB.

2013   Dissertation workshop organizer and participant, with Dr. Kim Q. Hall
           and graduate students working in Feminist and Disability Studies,
           UCSB, April.

2012   Dissertation workshop organizer and participant, with Dr. Robert
           McRuer and graduate students working in Sexuality and Disability
           Studies, UCSB, April.

2012   Workshop Participant, "Past, Present, and Future of Feminist Studies"
           conference, UCSB, February. Working group: Allison Kafer, Matt
           Richardson, Siobhan Somerville.

2011   Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage Panel (Lisa Duggan, Macarena
           Gomez-Barris, J. Jack Halberstam, Dean Spade), Primary event
           organizer and fundraiser, UCSB, March.

2011   Workshop Organizer and Participant, New Sexualities Graduate
           Student Writing Retreat, UCSB, January.

2011	Panel moderator, "Rethinking Sex (Work): Destabilizing Hegemonic Feminist Discourses," National Women's Studies Association, Atlanta GA, November.
2010	Workshop participant (accepted and funded), Queering the Countryside, Indiana University, November.
2010	Panel organizer and moderator, "Women's Studies Legacies and Futures: A Tribute to the Work of Elizabeth Kennedy," National Women's Studies Association conference, Denver, CO, November.
2010	Workshop organizer and participant, New Sexualities Graduate Student Writing Retreat, UCSB, November.
2010	Founder, Graduate Students of Feminist Studies, UCSB.
2010	Participant, Teaching Assistant Development Workshop and co-creator of instructional consultation handout: "Jumpstarting Discussions: Some Challenges, Advice and Tips," University of California Santa Barbara, January.
2010	Workshop Organizer and Participant, New Sexualities Graduate Student Writing Retreat, UCSB, January.
2009	Elected Graduate Student Representative, Department of Feminist Studies, UCSB.
2009	Conference Organizer, The Audacity of Feminism conference, University of Arizona, March.
2007	Elected Representative, Women's Studies Graduate Committee, University of Arizona Serve as the graduate student representative for the graduate admissions process, review departmental policy and language, offer recommendations to faculty regarding the structure of the new Ph.D. program.
2007	Panel Organizer and Moderator, "Rights Discourse and Social Justice in Women's Studies and Feminist Theory," New Directions in Critical Theory Conference, University of Arizona, March.
2007	Conference Co-Chair, New Directions in Critical Theory Conference, "(Re)Locating Borders: Negotiating and Constructing Identities," University of Arizona, March.

2007   Elected Representative, Women's Studies Advisory Committee, University of Arizona

2007   Panel Organizer and Moderator, "Feminist Theoretical Perspectives: Historical Responses, Current Impacts and Connections to Social Justice," National Women's Studies Association Conference, St. Charles, IL, June.

2007   Session Moderator, "Gender, Power and Liminality," New Directions in Critical Theory Conference, University of Arizona, March.

MEMBERSHIPS IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Women's Studies Association
American Studies Association
Cultural Studies Association

SELECTED COMMUNITY SERVICE AND ENGAGEMENT

2013   "Implants, Abortions, and Orgasms: A Critical Look at Contemporary Sexuality Issues," Film and speaker series co-organizer, grant funds solidified from The Fund for Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

2011-13   Advisor and Mentor to End Fake Clinics, an undergraduate student club dedicated to closing Crisis Pregnancy Centers and various other reproductive justice issues, UCSB.

2012   Invited Mentor, Emerging Leadership Institute for Queer Undergraduate Students, Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, UCSB, May.

2011   Primary organizer of Santa Barbara's *Roe v. Wade* events, which included a production of *Jane: Abortion and the Underground*, a play about "The Jane Collective."

2009-11   Board Member, Planned Parenthood 501C-4 Board, Santa Barbara, CA.

2007-09   Appointed Representative, Pima County/Tucson Women's Commission, Tucson, Arizona.

2007-09   Appointed Representative, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) Advisory Council, University of Arizona.

2007-09   Appointed Representative, Commission on the Status of Women, University of Arizona.

2006-09   Founding Director, ASUA Women's Resource Center, University of Arizona.
Until 2006, the University of Arizona had no Women's Center. I invested more than forty unpaid hours/week for 2.5 years building and directing what is now a fully-functioning Women's Center. In short, I oversaw all aspects of operating the Center—Building internal committees, budget, planning more than 100 successful events, solidifying approximately 75 press hits, forming and maintaining relationships with 75 collaborating organizations, and increasing visibility through campus and community outreach. I developed and managed an internship program that more than 100 students participated in, brought in more than $200,000 in outside funding, and worked with University administrators to hire the Center's first paid Director.

2007   Founder and President, Reproductive Rights Coalition, University of Arizona

2006   South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, Volunteer
Contacted by NARAL Pro-Choice America to work on campaign to repeal recent abortion ban by petitioning South Dakotans to refer the issue to voters

2006   White Earth Land Recovery Project, Research and Writing Assistant to Winona LaDuke; Community Organizer, White Earth Indian Reservation, MN
Responsibilities include: Assist with Wild Rice Campaign, various renewable energy projects, reproductive justice projects and economic development plans. Conducted state-wide community organizing and coalition-building, gave public talks, planned events, conducted research and wrote on various issues.

2006   Committee Member, Northwest Minnesota's Clean Energy Resource Team, commissioned by the Minnesota state legislature

2004-05   Training for and undercover investigation of Crisis Pregnancy Centers in Minnesota Resulted in my work being presented in a legislative debate over public funding of CPCs at the Health House Policy and Finance Committee Meeting. Minnesota State Legislature, St. Paul, MN.

ABSTRACT

Unbecoming: Visibility Politics and Queer Rurality

by

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This dissertation critically analyzes gay rights advocates' calls for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people to be "out, loud, and proud" via examining discourses, representations, and experiences of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwestern United States. I bring together rural queer studies, feminist and queer theory, critical geography, disability studies, critical race studies, and queer Marxist theories to examine what I call visibility discourses.

"Unbecoming" is precisely how the LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest that I interviewed found many of the approaches of dominant and national gay rights groups: unattractive, unseemly, improper, inappropriate. I suggest that an estrangement exists between the desires, epistemologies, and strategies of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest and those of gay rights movements, which celebrate making one's LGBTQ sexuality central to one's identity and relentlessly call for LGBTQ people to be "visible." That a particular demographic does not relate to a specific political strategy points to the limits of said strategy. It also does far more: the estrangement between calls for visibility and rural queer sociality opens up the

space to consider the ideologies undergirding and ramifications of such calls. This is the work of *Unbecoming*.

Beyond examining the unbecomingness of visibility politics, I also explore the ways in which calls to be visible function to assist certain subjects in their own *becoming* (legible, authentic, real). Un-becoming is, then, the opposite of becoming, the un-ness of becoming, the un-doing of becoming. It is something we can think of as the deconstruction of what it means to become, the interrogating of the ideologies upon which this becoming relies. Calls for visibility function to create an "authentic" gay subject as necessarily "out, loud, and proud." I suggest that a critical examination of contemporary visibility politics can help us to understand how one *becomes* a certain type of LGBTQ subject in the first place and can broaden possibilities for creating and actualizing sexual subjectivity.

Unbecoming makes four interventions in the interdisciplinary study of visibility. I argue that the politics of visibility—what (in)visibility means, how one comes to see oneself as (in)visible, and beliefs about (in)visibility—are value laden in deeply spatial ways (chapter two); calls for visibility are symptomatic of and enable metronormativity and nationalism (chapter three); visibility politics reproduce both post-racial and what I term post-spatial ideologies (chapter four); and, finally, that becoming recognizable as visible is a labored process, and, as such, calls for LGBTQ visibility, which relentlessly demand constant laboring, are a reflection of and benefit to capitalist logics (chapter five).

To make these interventions, I utilize a mixed-methods approach that blurs the boundaries between the humanities and social sciences. I critically analyzed cultural

representations of rural gayness (such as advertisements, documentaries, media coverage), examined the discourses and ideologies of gay rights groups, engaged in participant observation at Pride events and other LGBTQ social and political gatherings, and conducted semi-structured in-person interviews lasting one to four hours with fifty women in rural South Dakota and Minnesota. I focus on South Dakota and Minnesota because these very different neighboring states disrupt the homogeneity of representations of the Midwest and exemplify the types of rural places overlooked in the metronormativity of both LGBTQ rights activism and academic scholarship. I found my interviewees, who include women of color, women with disabilities, and women from a range of class backgrounds, through snowball sampling.

I draw from interviewees' stories to argue for social movements grounded in the desire to imagine (the social as well as ourselves) otherwise, rather than in shared marginalization or fixed identities. The current approaches of LGBTQ rights groups enable metronormativity, reproduce post-racial and post-spatial logics, and rely upon a (labored) confessing of marginalization and identification. In questioning calls for LGBTQ visibility, I provide new conceptualizations of the relationships between sexuality and space, revise assumptions about the ostensible relations among LGBTQ community, identity, and visibility, and challenge dominant conceptions of the nature of rural communities. Ultimately, I contend that this analysis is crucial for feminist, queer, and trans* studies because the ways in which sexuality and gender are understood, experienced, and framed are deeply spatial. The articulation and actualizing of more capacious sexual and gendered subjectivities, then, is intimately

tethered to broadening the limited cultural understandings of the queerness of the rural.

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Introduction

Unbecoming: unattractive, unseemly, improper, inappropriate. Rarely

adjectives that circulate around being "out, loud, and proud" about one's gay, lesbian,

bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) sexuality. This, of course, has not always

been—and is not always—the case. But in the current political moment, one can find

leftists, liberals, and even conservatives alike who assign positive value to those who

are "out, loud, and proud"—as well as those places that ostensibly enable this way of

being. *Unbecoming: Visibility Politics and Queer Rurality* is concerned with the

ubiquity of calls for LGBTQ visibility and seeks to understand the ideologies

undergirding and the ramifications of such calls.

More specifically, this dissertation offers a critical analysis of visibility

politics via examining discourses, representations, and experiences of LGBTQ

women in the rural Midwestern United States. *Unbecoming* is precisely how the

LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest that I interviewed found many of the

approaches of dominant and national gay rights groups: unattractive, unseemly,

improper, inappropriate. That this particular demographic does not relate to a specific

political strategy points to the limits of said strategy. It also does far more: the

estrangement between calls for visibility and rural queer sociality opens up the space

to consider how visibility discourses—of which calls for visibility operate as one

node—assist certain subjects in becoming legible while for others such discourses are

precisely what render them unintelligible. The lived experiences of sexual illegibility

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I discuss here provide critical accompaniment to visibility discourses and point toward the unbecoming nature of visibility politics.

My use of "unbecoming" is meant as a double entendre. I explore both the problematics of visibility politics as well as the ways in which such calls function to assist certain subjects in their own *becoming* (legible, authentic, and proud or dishonest, backwards, and pitiable). Un-becoming, in this latter sense, points to my analysis of how sexual subjects *become* (recognized as) a particular type of sexual subject, and to a desire to un-do the processes by which we become. Un-becoming is, then, the opposite of becoming, the un-ness of becoming, the un-doing of becoming. It is something we can think of as the deconstruction of what it means to become, the interrogating of the ideologies upon which this becoming relies. I suggest that a critical examination of contemporary visibility politics can help us to understand how one *becomes* a certain type of LGBTQ subject in the first place as much as it can assist in our *unbecoming*—and with it, the broadening of possibilities for the creating, recognizing, and actualizing of more capacious subjectivities, sexual and otherwise.

Each word of my dissertation's subtitle might well be understood as unbecoming: rurality, queer, politics. That much of the country looks unfavorably upon "politics" and "politicians," that the rural is considered anachronistic, and that "queerness" exists in opposition to that which is proper are truisms. At the same time, people *become* through actualizing these positions as well as alternative understandings of these very terms. People organize their lives around engaging in mainstream politics as a means for social change while others work to craft and live a set of politics outside of the mainstream; connections to the rural often open up

alternative ways of relating that might accurately be read as challenges to neoliberal policies and globalization, which, far from backwards, point to queer kinship networks for the future; and some who consider themselves "queer" seek to be proper subjects while for other queer-identified people, the non-normativity of queer subcultures is a sustaining life force.

These differentiations point to the contextual character of unbecomingness: what one considers unbecoming and how one becomes are spatially, temporally, and politically contingent. They are also mutually constitutive. In other words, the type of subject one becomes relies, in part, on just what one considers unbecoming: is it LGBTQ politics? The rural? The past? Further, pairings of these words provoke disdain, disinterest, or disbelief in ways that transcend the individual terms. "Queer rurality" might be considered unbecoming at best, and at worst, woebegone, oxymoronic, or even death-dealing. Such ideas about queer rurality circulate both within and outside queer communities and are indicative of "metronormative" ideologies (Halberstam 2005, 36)—those that envisage "the metropolis as the only sustainable space for queers" (Herring 2010, 14). Metronormative narratives are those that, for example, implicitly naturalize urban/rural dichotomies, render the rural backwards, and assign value to rural-to-urban migration patterns—and the "out, loud, and proud" ways of being such moves ostensibly enable. Metronormativity normalizes the metropolitan as the space for gays to the extent that the ethos of the urban functions as unremarkable, as that which need not be marked.

The predominance of these logics has precluded analyzing for whom and in what ways rural queers are, actually, unbecoming. Building upon the work of other

rural queer studies scholars, it is my contention here that rural queers are unbecoming, not for rural folks, but because the metronormativity of hegemonic and LGBTQ subcultural narratives renders them untenable and illegible.

Assumptions about visibility are central to metronormative narratives, which simultaneously assign value to and derive value from visibility discourses. Indeed, of each of the words in my dissertation's subtitle, "visibility" connotes the least negativity—an irony, perhaps, considering that my dissertation is a critique of visibility discourses. But this is precisely the point: visibility occupies an unduly celebrated place in the cultural imaginary, a place defined alongside and through the ethos of the gay metro. In this dissertation, I examine the estrangement between the desires, epistemologies, and strategies of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest and those of gay rights movements—particularly their celebration of making one's LGBTQ sexuality central to one's identity and relentlessly calling for LGBTQ people to be "visible."

It is impossible to consider the problematics of visibility politics or the lessons that can be gleaned from the ways in which visibility operates in the rural Midwest without engaging with the cultural narratives that compel and attribute value to visibility. One need not look far to find evidence of the value-laden nature of LGBTQ visibility. One dominant narrative goes something like this: You recognize that you are LGBTQ. You work to accept this. You develop an identity. You then orient your life around this identity. You necessarily tell friends, family, and co-workers about this new identification, lest you be an inauthentic liar. Doing so means that you have "come out." Articulating this identity publicly then allows you to have a community.

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Coming out and becoming visible saves you from the life (and death) of the (community-less) closet and, in the very same moment, pushes society forward.

This admittedly reductionist—but, nonetheless, frighteningly accurate—rendition of the scripts of gay rights advocates points to the ways in which LGBTQ visibility, identity, and community appear as if they simply cannot be disentangled in contemporary logics; each depends upon the other, operating as a trilogy in the gay rights mantra. Within these narratives, visibility, community, and identity each operate as goals *and* as means to goals. Visibility, for example, is itself a desirable goal because it represents personal and societal liberation; it also functions as a means to an end in that visibility supposedly leads to political rights. That is, visibility, it is assumed, will lead to further progress and is always already evidence of progress. The Human Rights Campaign, the largest lesbian and gay civil rights group in the United States, relies upon such positions. The group believes that

> one of our most basic tools is the power of coming out. One out of every two Americans has someone close to them who is gay or lesbian. For transgender people, that number is only one in 10. Coming out STILL MATTERS. When people know someone who is LGBT, they are far more likely to support equality under the law. Beyond that, our stories can be powerful to each other. Every person who speaks up changes more hearts and minds, and creates new advocates for equality.[1]

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[1] http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/national-coming-out-day. Accessed 6/1/2014.

Gay rights advocates consistently call for visibility by making this very point: It works! People who *know* someone gay *do* vote differently! Recent Pew Center research data explores shifting attitudes toward same-sex marriage. According to one article posted on the Pew Center website, as of March 2013, 49% of people in the US now support same-sex marriage, an all-time high. Pew data shows that 14%—or approximately 1/3 of same-sex marriage supporters—stated that they had previously opposed same-sex marriage but had changed their position. Of this 14%, 32% claimed that their position shifted as a result of knowing someone gay. So, of the 49% of same-sex marriage supporters, less than 5% stated that they came to their position because they know someone gay.[2]

Of course, it is theoretically possible that others who support same-sex marriage also came to their position, in part, because they know people who are gay. Yet, this is not reflected in the data considered here. The people polled were classified as those who either had *always* favored the legalization of same sex marriage or had changed their mind on the issue. It would be strange if those who *came* to their position because they found out that they "know" someone gay would report that they had *always* held this belief—particularly when narratives that claim that knowing gay people changes belief systems circulate widely. Despite the hegemony of these narratives, 33% of same-sex marriage supporters reported that they had "always" held this position.

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[2] "Growing Support for Gay Marriage: Changed Minds and Changing Demographics" Pew Research Center for the People and the Press website. 3/20/2013. http://www.people-press.org/2013/03/20/growing-support-for-gay-marriage-changed-minds-and-changing-demographics/. Accessed 2/12/2014.

And yet, gay rights advocates continue to praise visibility for its capacity to change belief systems. This narrative ignores several demographics that exist within the study advocates often cite: those who claimed their positions shifted for other reasons, those who claimed to have supported same-sex marriage all along, and perhaps most strikingly, the 42% of people for whom increased visibility of LGBTQ people did not shift their anti-same-sex marriage positions. Presumably, many of the individuals who make up the 42% of same-sex marriage opponents have encountered or know LGBTQ people; the increased social and political visibility of LGBTQ issues and people makes it hard to imagine that there exists a rock big enough to shelter anyone anywhere from LGBTQ issues and people. Indeed, as one scholar who begins her book on gay visibility suggests, "There is no doubt that gays and lesbians have entered the public consciousness as never before" (Danuta Walters 2001, 3). That nearly half of the population has not been swayed by this increased visibility ought to give LGBTQ rights advocates pause about relying on visibility as a political strategy. Furthermore, even if increased visibility did actually lead to political rights, it is important to keep in mind the personal and political costs associated with this visibility. It is these costs with which I am concerned.

This narrative also ignores that social positions never exist outside of discursive formations. Discourses that suggest that people change their opinions because they know gay people inform, of course, people's changing opinions. With these discourses, if one opposes gay marriage, learns that a loved one is LGBTQ, and does not shift their position, they *become* someone who cannot love their friend/child/sibling/parent, a bigot, or, if they manage to retain a relationship with

their loved one but not shift their perspective on gay marriage, a disillusioned hypocrite—none of which are particularly compelling ways of viewing oneself. I am not suggesting that no hypocrites or bigots exist. Rather, drawing from poststructuralists such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, I am interested in thinking about the ways in which subjects *become* through discursive formations. Butler, in her analysis of how certain bodies come to matter, is worth quoting at length here.

> Th[e] exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation (1993, 3).

Butler is not, of course, talking about how the abjection of the (queer) rural constitutes subjects. But her point that all subjects are constituted through their relations to one another—either they are not the abject, or they are—is relevant to understanding how sexual subjects come to exist in the contemporary moment. That the rural is ostensibly unlivable for queers renders illegible rural queers and, in the very same moment, marks as liberated those who are not rural queers. And yet,

discursively, each is impossible without the other. We are inside and outside of one another.

Put simply, discourses create subjects as subjects create discourses. But it is not only particular types of LGBTQ subjects that visibility discourses construct; they also function to create (liberal or conservative) political subjects more broadly. The suggestion that people change their opinion on gay rights issues through learning that someone is gay—or through a particular discursive event—ignores that visibility discourses circulate much more broadly and have political purchase beyond individual coming out stories. In many ways, the belief that an individual relationship with a gay person could change someone's viewpoint points to the ways in which cultural ideologies and discourses must appear natural. It is precisely their unremarkableness that allows the subject to be interpellated by ideology and the state, by what Althusser called "ideological state apparatuses" (1971).The subject is never outside of ideology (or the state, particularly in the case of desiring LGBTQ recognition by the state). Instead, we all *become* through these ideologies.

Beyond problems with the logics undergirding and deployments of this data, I contend that there are serious flaws with its collection. If, as this narrative suggests, knowing someone gay changes how people vote, we must ask, of course, what it means "to know" someone gay. Is knowing someone gay different from knowing that someone *is* gay? Or is knowing that someone whom you know is gay enough to shift attitudes? If not, is there something particular about the prescribed coming out speech act that makes people feel as if they know the person in question to a degree that

forces an attitude shift? The data is not clear because researchers have not critically examined—or even operationalized—what it means "to know."

It is not just think tank data that indicates a correlation, even a causation, between knowing an LGBTQ person and political positions on LGBTQ rights. Some academic scholarship has made similar arguments (Herek 1988; Howard-Hassman 2001; Lance 1987; Schneider and Lewis 1984). One scholar argues that "The most important influence on respondents' developing respect for gays and lesbians was actual contact with members of the gay community: having, in effect, gay cousins" (Howard-Hassman 2001, 16). If you don't have "gay cousins," there might still be hope for you: "The new openness of the gay community" means that heterosexual people can see "gays and lesbians a[s] people they know, not merely strangers from a foreign (sexual) landscape" (Howard-Hassman 2001, 16). In this sense, to "know" another, you simply must encounter them. A confessing of one's sexuality may or may not be a part of such encounters (the scholar does not say). This scholarship does not make it clear if deeply knowing an LGBTQ person produces different results than encountering someone who is LGBTQ.

In conflating "actual contact" and "knowing," Howard-Hassman gestures toward the nebulous nature of the claim that knowing someone LGBTQ changes others' belief systems. I am not the first person to recognize the problems associated with such academic studies on shifting attitudes toward LGBTQ people. In a review of seventeen studies of university-based interventions geared toward changing homophobic attitudes of students, the authors conclude that "it remains to be seen whether any short-term interventions can create lasting shifts in attitudes that translate

into behavioral changes toward LGB individuals" (Tucker and Potocky-Tripodi 2006, 188). This review challenges the efficacy, methods, results, and analyses of studies whose goals include changing "heterosexual prejudices" by either "dispel[ing] myths and stereotypes attributed to homosexuals" or "shar[ing] positive experiences with homosexuals" (Tucker and Potocky-Tripodi 2006, 178). Although these scholars' frame their critiques primarily in terms of the studies' methodologies—lack of operationalization of terms, lack of measuring how much of a change in attitude actually results in changed behavior—I see their concerns as in alignment with my theoretical critiques of the sloppiness with which "knowing someone gay" is deployed by scholars and activists alike.

This sloppiness is only one of the problems with these studies and narratives. I am particularly interested in the ways that metronormative ideologies prevail in both the collection and dissemination of this data. The assumption that to know someone gay requires that the person in question "come out" does not capture the ways in which knowledge circulates in rural communities. In many rural communities, people know things about people without ever being told by the person in question or by anyone who knows intimately the person in question. Heck, people in my hometown know things about me that I have never even known about myself!

This narrative about visibility leading to political rights not only ignores forms of knowledge production and circulation in rural communities, it also reiterates the problematic assumption that in order to "know" someone, you must know about their sexuality. And preferably directly and explicitly. This assumption relies upon viewing the sexual acts in which one engages as necessarily constituting some part of one's

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authentic identity—a position scholars have heartily critiqued (Foucault [1978] 1990; Rupp 2009; Shah 2011). With their alternative understandings of the relevance, value, and meanings of gay identity, community, and visibility, LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest trouble this simplistic tethering. The ways in which LGBTQ community, identity, and visibility are married in the cultural imaginary—and further that this marriage is contested by LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest—are important for my critical engagement with visibility discourses.

I suggest that the literal and figurative distance between LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest and national gay rights organizations creates a space from which the cultural ideologies undergirding the relationships among identity politics, gay community, and political and personal visibility, can be critically examined. I challenge the idea that visibility is inherently positive, progressive, and celebratory and view visibility politics as a reflection of the type of desire Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism." Lauren Berlant asks, "When is the desire for the political an instance of cruel optimism?" (2011, 19). For Berlant, "an optimistic attachment is cruel when the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it: but its life-organizing status can trump interfering with the damage it provokes." In this dissertation, I examine LGBTQ visibility as a relation of cruel optimism and attempt to interfere with its damages. Ubiquitous calls to be "out, loud, and proud" now constitute a life-organizing mechanism for many LGBTQ people, communities, and movements so hegemonic it is rarely questioned, its damages unnoted and proliferating. Harkening back to that classic feminist mantra, I examine the relationship between personal (in)visibility and political (in)visibility. In

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the most profound and simple sense, I ask: what does it mean to be (in)visible? And what are the intellectual and political ramifications of calls for visibility?

Through analyzing the deployments of visibility politics in discourses and representations of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest in relation to broader gay rights discourses and academic positions, I argue for the re-thinking of calls for LGBTQ visibility as a (sub)cultural organizing feature. That LGBTQ rights advocates continue to call for strategies of visibility that do not work in rural places, a point made by rural queer studies scholars, is a problem for contemporary LGBTQ movements as well as LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest, who *become* through these discourses illegible subjects. I suggest that the estrangement between mainstream LGBTQ groups and LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest is an intellectually and politically productive one as it points to previously unexplored problematics of visibility politics more broadly.

My concern, then, is less that the strategies and discourses in question do not work for rural LGBTQ women—or any other particular demographic—and more with the problematics, ideologies, and ramifications of the discourses themselves. Scholars and activists have similarly argued that contemporary ways of understanding gay identity—and, by extension, the visibility that is expected to emerge from proper identification—do not work for those who experience marginalization along more than one axis. They may not, for example, capture the experiences of LGBTQ people of color, poor and working class LGBTQ people, and LGBTQ people who live in the non-West. My goal is not to add rural LGBTQ women to a list of those marginalized by gay rights strategies and logics, but rather to jump off from the insights of rural

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queer studies and rural LGBTQ women to take on the cultural logics of visibility

directly. The problem is not that these strategies do not work for some. The problem,

as I argue here, is visibility politics themselves.

To be clear, I do not make these arguments through comparing rural to urban

LGBTQ women or rural people of varying genders. I focus here on the ideologies that

undergird discourses in circulation and the ideologies obscured by these discourses.

Drawing from queer of color critique and transnational queer studies, we know that

the discourses and approaches of lesbian and gay rights groups do not work for many

demographics of LGBTQ folks.[3] But visibility discourses and politics are not the

focus of these studies. Further, LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest—an

understudied demographic that prioritizes their rurality and possesses understandings

of LGBTQ community, identity, and visibility that differ sharply from those of

lesbian and gay rights groups—bring visibility politics into question in new ways. I

make three primary arguments here: that calls for visibility enable metronormativity

and nationalism, that visibility politics reproduce both post-racial and post-spatial

ideologies, and that becoming "visible" or "known" ought to be understood as a form

of labor that benefits and reflects capitalist logics. In doing so, I challenge an idea

foundational to contemporary lesbian and gay movements: that visibility leads to

political rights and that political rights *are* liberation. These claims rely on those

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[3] Queer of color critique and transnational queer studies are developed and rich
bodies of thought that it would be impossible to do justice to in a footnote. For key
texts see: Bailey 2013; Ferguson 2003; Gopinath, 2005; Manalansan 2003; Massad
2007; Muñoz 1999, 2009; Puar 2007; Reddy 2011; Shah 2011. For further discussion
of how this body of work is relevant to rural queer studies, see chapter three.

poststructuralist queer scholars who have argued that visibility is not "a matter of detecting or displaying empirical bodies but of knowledges—discourses, significations, modes of intelligibility—by which identity is constituted" (Hennessy paraphrasing Butler, 2000, 116).

But before I go any further, I will take a cue from Midwestern senses of temporality and slow down long enough to define terms that will remain key throughout my discussion.

Visibility Discourses and Terms of the Debate

I utilize terms and concepts throughout this dissertation that are worthy of explication. These include: "rural," "queer," and "Midwestern." In analyzing these key terms, I gesture toward concepts and epistemologies that are central to my definitions. I also discuss the relations among various different but deeply interconnected terms: "LGBTQ" and "queer," "place" and "space," "dominant," "urban," and "national," and "advocates" and "organizations."

Let's start with "queer." Queer studies scholars have grappled with and debated the uses and definitions of this term. Some activists and scholars use "queer" as an umbrella term that encompasses lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans* identities and experiences.[4] Others have troubled this usage of the term, arguing that it conflates queer with gay and disconnects "queerness" from its radical political roots. For many

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[4] Scholars and activists alike use "trans*" to gesture to the wide range of gender non-conforming behaviors, identities, and experiences that might not be captured by "transgender," including, for example: transmasculine, transsexual, transfeminine, and genderqueer.

of these scholars, "queerness" refers to a political—rather than sexual—orientation and ought to be understood as "an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices" (Halberstam 2005, 1). This focus on queerness as strangeness, imagination, and eccentricity undergirds the position that queerness "can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (Edelman 2004, 17). In terms of queer epistemologies, the types of sex one engages in are largely irrelevant. One can have same-gender and/or incredibly non-normative sex and have devastatingly normative politics. Or one can possess radical leftist politics and have quite generic sex. In short, "queer" operates in opposition to the normative and assimilationist politics gay rights groups have been heavily critiqued for promoting. My use of "queer" is in line with those queer theorists and activists who see "queerness" in relation to political positionalities, rather than strictly sexual acts or identities.

It seems obvious that not all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans* people live in these imaginative and non-normative ways, and instead can be characterized as "homonormative," a term that refers to "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 2004, 50). Many of the women I interviewed might well be characterized as "homonormative." Most had no interest in politics and no desire to "contest heteronormative assumptions and institutions." Yet, at the same time, their disidentification with visibility politics—one key approach through which gay

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subjects come to be recognizable as those homonormative subjects who desire participation in heteronormative institutions such as the military, marriage, and the capitalist marketplace—suggest that these women also hold certain positions that might best be read as queer. And these are women who predominantly identify as lesbian, some of whom even balked at or interrogated my use of "queer" in both my call for interviewees and also in my answering their questions about my own (epistemological, political, and sexual) identifications. I will avoid describing those who did not identify as queer with this term, although I may suggest that their ideologies and practices are, in fact, queer.

As such, I find it most useful to think of gay/lesbian/bisexual/trans* positionalities and queerness as relations, rather than either as if one term possesses the power to accurately supplant another or an oppositional dichotomy. Throughout much of my dissertation, I will use "LGBTQ," an intentional move that points to the relations among the letters of this acronym. At the same time, I have little interest in encouraging the conflation of these terms and will attempt to use more specificity when doing so is possible. In general, I use "lesbian and gay" to refer to national organizations, whose normalizing politics are primarily meant to serve lesbian and gay (rather than bisexual, trans*, or queer) identified people. At other times, I use "LGBTQ" to point to the ways in which the discourses, expectations, and strategies of these very organizations traverse these groups and inform those with an array of political, gender, and sexual orientations and identifications.

This traversing is evident in Sandy Stone's now classic urging of transsexuals to be visible as such because, for Stone, the visibility of alternatively gendered bodies

holds the promise for gender transformation; the (visible) trans* body is, then, itself a site from which we can gain a better understanding of the relationship between gender identity and the body (1991). Other trans* studies scholars have critiqued this variety of calls for the visibility of trans* bodies, arguing that such calls reproduce individualistic, neo-liberal, rights-based notions of subjectivity and liberation. Dan Irving, for example, argues that academic and activist obsessions with the visibility of trans* bodies have precluded analyzing ways in which class and capitalism operate in order to produce trans* subjects who are visible, and, therefore, intelligible as workers (2008).

While mainstream lesbian and gay rights groups compel a particular type of homonormative visibility, similar approaches are utilized by various LGBTQ groups and advocates, which also utilize discourses of visibility to talk about "trans*" or "queer" lives.[5] Some advocates, such as Stone, call for (trans*) visibility out of a belief that this visibility can assist in radically re-thinking gendered systems.[6] I bristle at the expectation inherent within such claims that those marginalized by current structures should do the labor to reform the social order. This position aside, queer and trans* visibility discourses rarely are deployed to encourage a radical re-thinking of gender and the (gendered) body. Rather, queer and trans* visibility discourses

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[5] The title of Vivian Namaste's book, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, speaks to precisely this point (2000).

[6] Scholars have heartily critiqued the simplistic tethering of the trans* body to a radical gender transgression, arguing that such associations speak to the types of representational burdens trans* bodies have been forced to endure (Halberstam 1998; Namaste 2000; Stryker 2006).

operate in the service of precisely those sorts of normalizing projects that queer and trans* politics have long attempted—and continue to work— to disrupt.

At the same time, one set of practices can simultaneously operate as transgressive and homonormative, crossing one boundary while re-instantiating another. I use the phrase "queer rurality." I want to be clear that this use of "queer" is not meant as an umbrella term for LGBTQ but rather points to the ways in which the rural occupies a queer location in the cultural imaginary; those who are rural lesbians are, in very particular ways within the hegemony of metronormative logics, culturally queer. Interviewees simultaneously express desires for ways of living that might seem best characterized as homonormative and in the very same moment challenge the very foundations of homonormative logics. My understanding of gay and queer as a relation, my use of "LGBTQ," and my deployment of "queer rurality" throughout this dissertation reflect my commitment to explicitly queer thinking and world-making projects—projects that rely on a nuanced understanding of the political positionalities undergirding various sexual identities and experiences.

Much like "queer," "rural" and "Midwest" are difficult terms to define. Scott Herring suggests that "something in excess of empirical geographic specificities or the faulty logic of population density governs the urban/rural divide that informs U.S.-based queer studies" (2010, 8). Herring argues that this "excess" is evident in and challenged through queer rural cultural artifacts, artists' works, and aesthetics. Following Herring, I am not interested in viewing urbanity and rurality as dichotomous and instead see that "any 'urban/rural' distinction is as much context-specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and…standardizing as it is

geographically verifiable" (2010, 8). My interviewees confirmed this point time and time again. One interviewee who currently lives in Sioux Falls, South Dakota—a city of approximately 160,000 people that comprises 28% of the state's total population—suggested that the city feels rural because so many of the people who live there are from rural places.

Considering that Sioux Falls is *the* city in the state—the place where people living in smaller nearby or not-so-nearby towns visit for groceries, shopping, movies, and special occasions—this characterization of Sioux Falls as rural may seem surprising. Such a position, I suggest, is as informed by the culture and aesthetics of the town, as Herring might emphasize, as the broader geographic context. "The Midwest" is understood as rural and, therefore, its urban areas are rural too—both for some of the people who live there and in the broader cultural imaginary, a point that gestures toward the complex ways in which "the rural is always present in the urban and vice versa" (Manalansan et al 2014, 4).

"The Midwest," like other terms discussed here, evades simplistic definition. According to the US census data that Herring so astutely critiques, the Midwest is composed of twelve states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. In some "Midwestern" states, such as Ohio and Missouri, certain people identify as Midwestern, while others don't, largely depending on their geographic (and urban) location within that state. Beyond signifying a geographic location, "the Midwest is also a perspective, a way of positioning oneself in the world" (Osborne and Spurlin 1996, xxi), both a "geographic entity and…a discursive formation" (Manalansan et al

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2014, 1). It is imperative to resist a totalizing definition of the Midwest and instead to grapple with the complexities and paradoxes of this space and place, the largest and most academically ignored geographic region in the U.S. My focus on South Dakota and Minnesota is clearly geographical, but I am attentive to the ways that both the "rural" and the "Midwest" are imaginaries as well as places. "The rural" and "the Midwest" are simultaneously deeply spatialized and "post-spatial," a concept I develop in chapter three.

My use of the terms "queer," "rural," and "Midwestern," then, should not be read as totalizing, homogenizing or essentializing. Following Herring and other critical geographers, I resist setting up strict boundaries around these terms, which are always already performative, relational, and subjective (Herring 2010).[7] We might view "rural" and "Midwestern" as containing the types of possibilities for fluidity and continuous shifting evident in other markers of social location and identity, including gender, race, sexuality, disability, class, and so on. In using these terms in this way, I hope to create—rather than foreclose—discursive possibilities.

These positions are informed by post-structuralist, feminist, critical geography, and queer scholars. In crafting her feminist "politics of location," Adrienne Rich suggests that the body is the closest geography ([1986] 2003). Critical geographer Kathleen Kirby describes this draw to thinking about subjectivities in relation to space, arguing that space connects us with the material in a fluid and mobile way that is consistently open to negotiation and reshaping (1993, 175). These

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[7] For provocative discussions of the limits of analyzing space through the concept of "regions," see Krista Comer (2010) and Manalansan et al (2014).

post-structuralist understandings of abstract and material spaces are in alignment with

critical geographers' descriptions of space as freedom and place as security. This

distinction is evident, Tuan argues, in phrases such as "there is no place like home" or

"there is no space here" (2011, 3). If space refers to movement and spaciousness and

place connotes pause and familiarity, as Tuan argues, this dissertation is certainly

about both space and place. The theoretical perspectives captured in these

articulations of the politics of location are capacious enough to make it possible to

analyze the (sexual) body as a type of geography, and the rural Midwest as

simultaneously an abstract construction and a specific geographic locale.

In a dissertation that argues for recognizing the deeply spatial nature of

sexuality, I would be remiss if I did not discuss how I view the relationship among

"dominant," "urban," and "national," all words I have thus far used to describe a

particular lesbian and gay politic. Just as "queer" is deployed to stand in for the place

of "gay," these terms are also used interchangeably (though, much like the use of

"queer" to stand in for "gay," not unproblematically). The HRC story begins:

> The Human Rights Campaign represents a force of more than 1.5
> million members and supporters *nationwide*. As the *largest national*
> lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender civil rights organization, HRC
> envisions an *America* where LGBT people are ensured of their basic
> equal rights, and can be open, honest and safe at home, at work and in
> the community.[8]

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[8] http://www.hrc.org/the-hrc-story. Accessed 1/9/2014.
The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and The National Gay and Lesbian
Chamber of Commerce are two additional examples of organizations that use
discourses of "the nation" in their arguing for LGBTQ rights or addressing LGBTQ
issues.

In this two sentence description of the organization, HRC points to the slippery-ness of "dominant," "urban," and "national." The group uses the words "national" and "largest" to connote HRC's dominance. Not surprisingly, the urban location of the group remains unmarked. The urban is present not only in HRC's literal urban Washington D.C. address but also in the assumption that it need not be stated, an assumption that points to the dominance of the urban. The metronormativity of national lesbian and gay rights groups is reflected in the make-up of the Human Rights Campaign's Board of Directors, Foundation Board, and Board of Governors, as listed on the organization's website in 2010: Of the 201 individuals serving on these boards, a mere five hailed from rural places.[9] Of course, HRC does not acknowledge its metronormative underpinnings as doing so would point toward the myopic manner in which the group has conceptualized the "national." While I do not desire to contribute to the presumed interchangeability of these terms, I view this slipperiness as symptomatic of the social and spatial location these groups occupy: national gay and lesbian rights groups are urban based and they dominate LGBTQ rights discourses and approaches. I will return to the ways in which visibility discourses, which are present in the above quote, enable metronormativity and nationalism in chapter three.

The last terms I must explicate are "advocates" and "organizations." For the most part, I use these terms interchangeably. This is not because I see no difference between the two; of course, individuals and organizations operate on differing scales.

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[9] http://www.hrc.org/the-hrc-story/boards. Accessed 10/5/2010.

Considering that this dissertation is a critical analysis of the role of place and space in constructing sexuality and of sexuality in the construction of space and place, what I'm about to say might seem, at first, to undermine my entire intellectual project: the place of visibility discourses is irrelevant. Why? Their ubiquity, their assumed ability to travel trans-spatially, marks them as beyond place. This is, I argue, one problem of visibility discourses, which are evident everywhere: lesbian and gay rights and queer activists, conservatives and liberals, political and apolitical people, and urban and rural folks use visibility discourses. All of these actors are implicated in the generation and dissemination of the visibility frameworks I examine here.

Yes, rural. This claim may appear to conflict with my position that an estrangement exists between LGBTQ rights advocates' calls for visibility and rural LGBTQ women. Although many of my interviewees were fluent in the language of visibility, they also expressed ideas about visibility that diverge sharply from those of LGBTQ rights groups. Interviewees described a complex relation to coming out and being out that is not evident in dominant representations of contemporary gayness. I return to this point in chapter two, in which I detail the ways that visibility looks different, means something different, and is valued differently among my interviewees.

Few discourses—with the exception of those emerging from leftist queer or far right conservative margins—challenge the assumptions that LGBTQ community, identity, and visibility are inherently positive, reflect progress, and are worthy of celebration. As is evidenced in chapter four, individual advocates, who may or may not be connected to a particular organization, often draw from similar discourses and

ideologies as those used by organizations. The ubiquity of visibility discourses

suggests that individual LGBTQ advocates and dominant LGBTQ rights

organizations are not contained entities, but rather, mutually constitutive.

This ubiquity also challenges the production of queer and mainstream LGBTQ

projects as distinct. The LGBTQ activism at the University of California, Santa

Barbara, my current institution, points to the use of visibility discourses for projects

articulated through the language of queerness. A blog that details the history of

"Queer Organizing at UCSB," describes how the iconic "queer bomb" project came

to UCSB.[10]

> Queer Bombing arose [from] the need to heighten queer visibility in and around UCSB and to reclaim hetero-dominated spaces for our community to connect and celebrate. [Students] initiated the first Queer Bombing events in the Spring of 2004, after researching innovative tactics of non-violent direct action to combat heterosexist/transphobic/homophobic behavior at UCSB. They found an activist/improv group called Guerilla Queer bar whose sole mission was to infiltrate traditionally heterosexual social venues and bomb/overwhelm it with Queer Fabulousity. [Students] decided to use the iconic 'Queer Bomb' T-shirts to actively engage the UCSB community and to celebrate our Queer identity at events ranging from bowling nights to queer bombing UCSB's graduation ceremony. Queer activism has always had a heritage of being in-your-face, media-savvy, and effective. We Queer Bomb because in a hostile world, our civil rights and our access to space are constantly attacked, we refuse to take it lying down because we're not 'gay' as in 'happy', we're Queer as in 'FUCK YOU.'[11]

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[10] http://ucsblhp.blogspot.com/2012/03/as-ucsb-queer-commission-presents.html. Accessed on 1/10/2014.

[11]http://wgse.sa.ucsb.edu/sgd/CMSMedia/Documents/Queer%20Bomb%20Pamphlet. pdf. Accessed on 1/6/2014.

The "fuck you" is indicative of the anti-assimilationist and anti-normative perspectives that undergird the "queer bombing" project. A belief in visibility is also central to "queer bombing," a paradox considering that calls for visibility are one approach through which lesbian and gay rights groups compel normativity and assimilation. Visibility discourses are evident on multiple scales here: the history of the group has been written so that invisibility becomes the reason for the project's existence and even the project itself. Those who don the black t-shirts decorated with the classic neon pink "queer bomb" *are* the project. Their visibility is meant to connote a great deal: their own liberation, the progressive subjectivities of those around them, and the "liberal" status of the time and place in which they live. It also frames invisibility as a social problem against which this individual Queer Bomber is fighting.

My recognition that Queer Bombers see challenging visibility as their political project is deeply informed by the work of Andrea Smith. Smith reflects on activists' confessing of their individual privilege and suggests that this confessing rarely translates into political projects. Instead, "the confessions become the political project themselves" (2013, 263). In a similar vein, Queer Bombers frame "the need to heighten queer visibility" as a political project worthy of engagement. But just as Smith suggests that individual confession of privilege does little in the way of social change, becoming visible at the bowling alley or graduation ceremony also does not dismantle the systems that create and perpetuate homophobia in the first place.

The UCSB "queer bomb" history also highlights how deeply discourses of visibility rely on celebratory ideas about gay "community" and "identity." Visibility

is needed "for our community" and to "celebrate our Queer identity." Although this dissertation is fundamentally about visibility politics, I have come to recognize that critically engaging with ideas about LGBTQ community and identity are crucial for an engagement with visibility—for it has come to be widely assumed that LGBTQ community, identity, and visibility exist in a one-to-one relation with one another; that is, each belongs to the other, and in this particular case, is necessary for the very existence of the other. Dominant discourses suggest, for example, that LGBTQ community relies upon people identifying similarly and being willing to be visible around this ostensibly common identity—positions challenged by my interviewees.

The logics and discourses of gay pride events and gay rights rallies exemplify this point and speak to the ways in which LGBTQ identity, community, and visibility, arguably the discursive trilogy of LGBTQ rights advocates, are understood as unable to be disentangled. "Out of the Closets, and Into the Streets" and "We're Here! We're Queer!," two slogans commonly heard at LGBTQ social and political events, compel and celebrate visibility (the being "here" and in "the streets") via discourses of identity ("We're queer") and community (those who are "here" protesting in the presence of others are assumed to make up some sort of a community, possible only because everyone has purportedly come "out of the closet"). For this reason, discussions of community and identity pepper this dissertation, although I consistently work to understand what the deployment of such discourses reveals about the logics undergirding and ramifications of visibility politics.[12]

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[12] I do not mean to suggest that gay identity and community function in unproblematic ways. For critical analyses of gay identity and community, respectively, see John D'Emilio (1983) and Miranda Joseph (2002).

The hegemony of visibility discourses means that they operate far beyond mainstream gay rights groups—deployed even by those who are often framed as existing outside of the concerns of these very gay rights organizations. Janet Mock, a famous trans woman of color activist and writer, started #GirlsLikeUs, which her website describes as a "movement that encourages trans women to live visibly."[13] Her boyfriend, a photographer and filmmaker, states on his own website that he is also "committed to living visibly."[14]

Although I am unsure what exactly it means to live "visibly," I suspect that such claims rest on a conflation of authenticity, honesty, outness, and visibility. The slippage between each of these words and "visibility" gestures toward the very hegemony of visibility politics I seek to undermine here. As such, my analysis has relevance for explicitly queer and trans* politics and epistemological commitments, as well. This is not, then, just another critique of mainstream lesbian and gay rights movements by a queer theorist who is presumed to be "outside" of some presumed "community"—though, frankly, I find nothing wrong with queer theoretical critiques of mainstream LGBTQ activist movements. I see scholarship and activism as necessarily mutually constitutive. Rather than reproducing the tired and bankrupt (but still-circulating) divisions between theory and practice and activism and the academy, I see this project as adding to the critical work that has attempted to dismantle these simplistic dichotomies.

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[13] http://janetmock.com/janet-mock-bio/. Accessed on 5/1/2014.

[14] http://www.tredwellphoto.com/aaron-tredwell-bio/. Accessed on 5/1/2014.

In her examination of the relations among intellectual and activist work, Laura Briggs suggests that the scholarly "account of activism has been at once too much and not enough. That is, we give activists or oppressed people too much credit for always having a good analysis of their situation and always resisting it, something that often gets expressed through the term *agency*, on the one hand, and too little credit for their intellectual work, on the other hand" (2008, 81). Robin Kelley, in a related vein, considers the deeply intertwined nature of activism and intellectual thought, focusing on the importance of dreaming and surrealist art for black freedom movements. Drawing from Robin Kelley, I view social movements—even those of which I am deeply suspicious—as "incubators of new knowledge" (2002, 8) that might allow us to imagine the social as well as ourselves otherwise. It is my belief in the potentiality of LGBTQ social struggle to produce new dreams and new worlds that fuels my critical analysis, which is inspired deeply by Avery Gordon's claim that the "devastations and afflictions to which we are too routinely subjected require from us 'something more powerful than skepticism'" (2004, 187).

Actualizing this potentiality requires critically engaging the discourses and strategies upon which these movements rely. The conflation of political rights and liberation represents one of the many normalizing ideologies of gay rights groups, ideologies which, I argue, are advanced through calls for LGBTQ visibility. Although queer theorists and activists have long worked to intervene in and provide alternatives to the discourses, strategies, and ideological assumptions of national lesbian and gay movements (Conrad 2010; Duggan 2004; Warner 2000), the logics and ramifications of *contemporary* visibility politics—which, again, are crucial to normalizing

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projects!—have garnered too little critical scholarly and activist attention. This statement should not suggest that a dearth of scholarship exists on visibility and visibility politics—quite the contrary, in fact.

Key Texts and Broader Debates

In this dissertation, I bring together rural queer studies, feminist and queer theory, and critical geography, along with transnational queer, critical race, disability, and queer Marxist theories. I engage throughout with rural queer studies, feminist and queer theory, and critical geography. I engage the other bodies of scholarship in particular moments. Chapter three draws significantly from transnational and global queer studies work. Chapter four explores points of interconnection between disability, critical race, and rural queer studies. Chapter five builds upon the work of queer Marxists. Each of these chapters begins by outlining the epistemological assemblages in ostensibly disparate bodies of scholarship and by explaining why these particular bodies of thought are crucial for the analyses in that chapter. Here, I point to key texts that undergird my entire project.

While mainstream LGBTQ organizations uniformly call for gay visibility, scholars have taken up a variety of positions on the topic. In what is considered one of the founding texts of queer theory, Eve Sedgwick points out that visibility is treated as the binary other to invisibility, which comes to exist as the abjection that visibility must work against ([1990] 2008). In a long footnote in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick highlights the conundrum of visibility: "the damages of….intensive regulatory visibility on the one hand, of discursive erasure on

the other," describing this flawed dichotomous pairing as incommensurable ([1990] 2008, 6). She goes on to argue that "the most significant stakes for the [LGBTQ] culture are involved in precisely the volatile, fractured, dangerous relations of visibility and articulation around homosexual possibility" ([1990] 2008, 18). For Sedgwick, questions of visibility must be examined in regards to regulation *and* possibility.

Other critical and queer theorists have addressed more directly the regulatory regimes furthered through visibility. Leila Rupp, in her discussion of romantic friendships, suggests that we know less about men's romantic friendships than women's because the "greater visibility of male same-sex sexuality in the urban subcultures" meant greater surveillance for men (1999, 87). In his well-known analysis of the panoptican, a prison with a tower at the center from which a guard could always view every prisoner, Foucault argues that visibility creates the possibility of additional surveillance. Visibility is, for Foucault, "a trap" (1977). In her discussion of possibilities for increased state regulation, Wendy Brown argues that claims to a victimized identity—expressed through making this identification publicly visible—further victimize those marginalized by the state by framing them as so helpless they inherently require state protection. Through this process, according to Brown, the state's power is increased (1995).

Other scholars have focused less on surveillance in their critical analyses of visibility. In perhaps the most pointed polemic against visibility, performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan argues that "the risk of visibility…is the risk of any translation—a weaker version of the original script" (1993, 97). Avery Gordon, in

theorizing ghosts and haunting, draws from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to consider

the relations among hypervisibility and *un*-visibility, suggesting that "the dialectics of

visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and

what is in the shadows" ([1997] 2008, 17). Queer disability studies scholar Robert

McRuer terms this dialectic "relations of visibility," arguing that "visibility and

invisibility are not, after all, fixed attributes that somehow permanently attach to any

identity" (2006, 2). These analyses strike at the heart of the logics of contemporary

LGBTQ visibility politics, which rely on an understanding of LGBTQ identity as

inherently victimized (we must be visible so that we no longer are marginalized),

view visibility as a fixed place and practice one arrives and stays at, and rarely

conceptualize visibility in terms of risk—aside from the potential risk of being "out"

in unsafe (rural and non-Western) places.

Transnational and rural sexualities scholars have taken on the narratives that

frame the rural and non-West as inherently "risky" for LGBTQ people. Some point

out that visibility politics serve to solidify and spread the dominance of Western and

urban gay rights groups. More specifically, transnational LGBTQ sexualities scholars

suggest that strategies used by international rights seeking organizations may not

apply in non-Western contexts (Manalansan 2003; Massad 2007; Puar 2007; Rupp

2009). And in a related vein, rural queer studies scholars argue that the approaches of

the largely urban based gay rights movement do not map neatly onto rural spaces

(Gray 2009; Herring 2010; Howard 2006). Considering the epistemological overlaps

in the scholarship on rural and transnational LGBTQ sexualities is particularly

generative for an analysis of visibility because visibility politics are both produced in space and produce these very spaces—a point I explore further in chapter three.

Despite these academic critiques, invisibility continues to exist in the cultural imaginary as apolitical, as abject, as the thing that visibility must expose and extinguish—a position furthered, in some cases, by academic scholarship. In her analysis of gay visibility, Suzanna Danuta Walters grapples with, to draw from Sedgwick's language, the regulation and possibility that visibility politics enable. On the one hand, Danuta Walters argues that "new visibility creates new forms of homophobia (for example, the new good marriage-loving, sexless gay vs. the bad, liberationist, promiscuous gay) and lends itself to a false and dangerous substitution of cultural visibility for inclusive citizenship" (2001, 10). On the other hand, it appears that Danuta Walters has a hard time critiquing visibility politics. She explains that she has personally witnessed its possibilities for social transformation through coming out to those around her. Her position that "Visibility is, of course, necessary for equality" (2001, 13) undergirds her readings of the problematics of visibility. While Danuta Walters sees her task as identifying which forms of visibility "shake up the world and which ones just shake us down" (2001, 15), her potential critique is tempered by her nostalgic reverence for visibility and metronormative position. These ideologies are evident in her discussion of the 1993 March on Washington for LGBTQ rights:

> It is probably no overstatement to claim that thousands now live *more open* lives than they did prior to that weekend. And, this was, importantly, not simply an urban festival. *Small towns are beginning*

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> *to produce the same sorts of gay enclaves* once only found in the larger metropolitan areas such as New York and San Francisco. Gay people have—obviously—always existed in small towns and rural regions. But the *new visibility and political power of gays has given momentum to the development of real communities in those previously isolated areas*, many of whom were represented at the march (2003, 48).

Danuta Walters' claim that people live "more open" lives as a result of this march is clearly value laden; it is meant to point to the benefit of the march, a benefit that is articulated through spatial discourses. For Danuta Walters, it is "important" that this march had social relevance beyond the urban. Indeed, from Danuta Walters account, one might envision little gay enclaves peppering those "previously isolated" rural areas that have been—at long last!—saved through "new visibility." Such positions belie Danuta Walters' belief that visibility marks progress, assumption that rural life is characterized by isolation, and need to subsume the rural into the urban in order to make celebratory claims about visibility. Rural queer studies scholars provide ample evidence that small towns are not "beginning" to produce "the same sorts of gay enclaves" as those of urban areas. Instead, these scholars argue that what we understand today as evidence of LGBTQ identities or desires have always existed, and continue to exist, in rural places in ways that differ radically from those in urban areas. These experiences are illegible within narratives that see visibility as that which leads to people living "more open" lives.

Danuta Walters' discussion, in which she claims to examine the limits of visibility politics, points to the difficulty in analyzing visibility as regulation in a cultural moment when visibility is, as Danuta Walters puts it, "all the rage." And as

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Danuta Walters' work suggests, academics, as well as activists, are responsible for

perpetuating celebratory understandings of visibility—LGBTQ or otherwise.[15] Even

in those texts that otherwise possess sharp critique of mainstream LGBTQ

movements, the problematics of visibility go largely undetected, as is the case in Alan

Sears' analysis of the commodification of gay experiences (further discussed in

chapter five): "In many of the most developed capitalist countries, lesbians and gays

are heading towards winning full civil rights, including anti-discrimination

legislation, the recognition of same-sex relationships, legal marriage and an

unprecedented cultural visibility" (2005, 92). Sears presents visibility as something

that, like marriage and anti-discrimination legislation, is won. Visibility, as Sears and

Danuta Walters underscore, is understood almost solely through the lens of

possibility—indicating that all is right in the world of gayness (or at least moving in

this direction). This rightness is, of course, always already spatialized: it is of those

"developed capitalist countries," it is of the urban West.

     Rural queer studies scholars have critiqued the cultural ideologies that make

possible metronormative narratives and have provided counter-narratives in which

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[15] See, for example, those feminist and LGBTQ studies books that include "visibility" in their title, but spend little time considering the problematics of the term: *Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth Century America* (McGarry et. al 1998); *Circuits of Visibility: Gender and Transnational Media Cultures* (Hegde 2011); *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility* (Casper and Moore 2009). Although the authors of *Missing Bodies* work to understand the complexity of visibility as it relates to invisibility, their focus on the "recuperation of missing bodies" (2009, 14) functions to reproduce the notion that invisibility is negative and ought to be extinguished. This point is evidenced in their tethering of invisibility to certain abject and marginalized bodies—those of Iraqi civilians, dead babies, and the victims of HIV/AIDS—and connecting of visibility to other ostensibly more privileged bodies (those of celebrities, certain (white) U.S. soldiers, and politicians).

rural queer lives are not defined by violence, fear and reclusiveness. They challenge

the idea that same-sex sexual desires and experiences in rural spaces are rare,

invisible, dangerous or isolated.[16] These scholars urge us to re-think the cultural

narratives that pair closeted, violent, and homophobic with the rural and liberated,

safe, and tolerant with the city. Although almost none of the scholarship on queer

rurality focuses directly or overtly on visibility, I suggest that the very existence of

this scholarship challenges dominant ideas about visibility through providing

alternative conceptualizations of the rural—namely that rural LGBTQ people must

necessarily be "invisible." In other words, that this scholarship exists makes clear that

rural LGBTQ people exist too, and in a way that cannot be characterized as

"invisible."

Although rural queer studies scholars rarely name "visibility" as the

problematic they engage,[17] they have directly addressed another stereotype of the

queer rural experience that enables metronormativity: the ostensible violence of the

rural. Scholars argue that hate crimes against LGBTQ people are *more likely* to

happen in dense *urban* areas because the men who typically perpetuate such crimes

find safety in their anonymity (McRuer 2006). Mary Gray argues that the violence

directed toward LGBTQ people in rural spaces are different from, but no greater than,

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[16] In *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History,* for example, a seminal book on
LGBTQ rural sexualities, John Howard provides a history of men who desired men in
rural Mississippi from 1945 to 1985 (2001). He examines the racial dynamics of the
South, the role of religion, and the influence of rurality on gay Mississippians' lives
to challenge the characterizations of both homosexuality as urban and white and also
religion and the South as inherently anti-gay.

[17] Mary Gray's work is the obvious exception. I explicate in greater detail how my
work builds upon and differs from Gray's in chapter three.

violence faced by urban LGBTQ residents (2009). Beyond dismantling the tale of rural homophobic violence, these scholars suggest that life for rural queers is characterized by negotiations, including "fewer public displays of affection, a greater feeling of rootedness, less pride in outness, more of a sense of safety" (Howard 2006, 101). This brief discussion should not suggest that rural LGBTQ people do not ever face violence, discrimination, or isolation; it should, however, encourage us to re-think the hegemony of representations of the rural as anachronistic and the urban as liberatory. It should also inspire reflection on the geographically contextual character of (what counts as) violence. Indeed, one of my interviewees described what she views as in-your-face gay rights politics as violent.

Rural queer studies scholars provide us with stories of LGBTQ people who *want* to stay in rural places to show how "rurality—at once a geographic and performative space that has often been shunned, mocked, and discarded by the metropolitan-minded—can be a supreme site of queer critique" (Herring 2010, 13). Mary Gray provides an example of how this queer critique might manifest. In examining of how LGBTQ youth in rural Appalachia relate to gay visibility, Gray posits that the goals and strategies of rural LGBTQ people differ dramatically from those of urban LGBTQ folks, that rural queers prioritize solidarity and loyalty to the familiar over public declarations of difference (2009, 91):

> Reliance on family, local power dynamics, class and racial politics, and the cultural marginalization that structures these specific rural communities render them ill-suited to strategies of visibility currently privileged by the priorities of the United States' predominantly

middle-class, urban-focused gay and lesbian social movement (2009, 30).

Part of the reason dominant cultural narratives cloaked in metronormativity persist is because alternate modes of being queer and articulating queerness—including those based in the rural or outside of "out, loud and proud" discourses—are not recognized as legitimate modes of queerness. Re-thinking the centrality of metronormative narratives to mainstream and gay cultural imaginaries requires re-thinking dominant discourses and strategies that assume that visibility and "outness" constitute the only path toward liberation.

My dissertation is deeply indebted to this insightful and growing body of scholarship on queer rurality[18]—research that contests the "essential characterization of queer life as urban" (Halberstam 2005, 15) and counters queer studies' nearly totalizing dismissal of rurality. Despite the recent growth in the publication of rural queer studies scholarship, very little focuses on LGBTQ sexualities in the Midwest— a strange oversight, considering that it is the largest geographic region in the United States.[19] Similarly, little research examines the experiences of women, even in a

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[18] This brief overview rural queer studies scholarship is simply meant to introduce the field. It is not meant to be comprehensive. Throughout this dissertation, I will engage with additional rural queer studies texts. Because I am focusing on LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest, this literature review covers some closely related scholarship on LGBTQ men's (and in the case of Gray, youth's) sexualities in the contemporary rural U.S. This should not suggest that no other scholarship addresses rural LGBTQ sexualities. Historians, for example, have written about homosexuality and bestiality in rural Sweden from 1880-1950 (Rydstrom 2003), the lives of lesbian women in Canada from 1900-1965 (Duder 2010), and the differently classed experiences of rural and urban gay men in the Pacific Northwest from 1890-1930 (Boag 2003).

[19] For exceptions see: *Reclaiming the Heartland: Lesbian and Gay Voices from the Midwest*, a multi-genre anthology composed of various artistic and literary pieces

tangential manner.[20] The omission of LGBTQ women in scholarship is often

explained through the lens of visibility. Drawing from the work of Julie Podmore

(2001), the editors of *Geographies of Sexualities* state, "*lesbians have very different*

means of making themselves visible (to each other) than gay men and that to properly

explore these practices, geographers need to (re-)integrate the domestic sphere into

their interpretations of urban space" (emphasis added) (2009, 7). Although I am fond

of the editors' call to scholars to integrate space into analyses of sexuality, this

suggestion falls devastatingly short. It reproduces problematic public/private splits

and implicitly places women in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, understanding

LGBTQ women's uses of space, I argue, requires not just re-interpreting urban space,

or even expanding this framework to include rural LGBTQ women, it also requires a

radical re-thinking of visibility.

  While I add to this body of work an analysis of both women and the Midwest,

I intend for my analyses to be useful beyond "filling this gap." I view this dissertation

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(Osborne and Spurlin 1996); and also: Will Fellows' *Farm Boys*, a collection of
stories about the lives of gay men who grew up on farms in the Midwest but migrated
elsewhere (1996). While Fellows attempts to broaden the range of representations of
gay men to include Midwesterners, he does so in a way that reiterates the dominant
cultural narrative that frames rural to urban migration as liberatory. Fellows' text also
omits completely the experiences of women and both tend to invoke the stereotypes
of the Midwest that they attempt to disrupt.

[20] Scholars, including Judith Halberstam (2005), Leila Rupp (2009), and Elizabeth
Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis 2014, xiv) have commented on the lack of
analysis of gender in LGBTQ studies and queer theory, a point particularly relevant in
regards to the literature on LGBTQ rural sexualities. For exceptions, see Emily
Kazyak (2012); Colin Johnson's chapter "Hard Women: Rural Women and Female
Masculinity" in his *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (2013);
Johnston and Valentine (1995); and Valentine (1997).

as just one potential version of a radical re-thinking of visibility politics and discourses. My analyses of the ways that visibility politics construct a particular type of LGBTQ subject might give activists and scholars the critical tools with which to examine other contemporary cultural formations as central to the constituting of sexual subjectivities. This examination of the relations between visibility and normativity expands upon queer critiques of normative rights-based approaches in ways that will, hopefully, inspire a pause in those (many) moments when visibility is compelled and celebrated.

Although queer studies scholars have long been critical of the normalizing tendencies of LGBTQ rights groups, little work has considered visibility politics as *central* to the assimilationist projects of these groups. An examination of the relations between visibility and normativity is crucial precisely because visibility discourses simultaneously receive cultural capital from and grant cultural capital to these struggles. As one example, scholars writing on the same-sex marriage debate argue that marriage both "forces people to be out" and is a reflection of desires for "visibility and recognition of their partnerships and families" (Bernstein and Taylor 2013, 18 and 5). This articulation of the need and desires for marriage relies, in part, on assumptions about the value of being visible, just as visibility's capital is increased through its connection to struggles for same-sex marriage. Here, as elsewhere, visibility is so sutured to what counts as political that it becomes nearly impossible to imagine a politics outside of this framework—a framework epitomized by the hypervisibility of same-sex marriages.

The limited nature of contemporary gay rights movements is at the root of

leftist and queer critiques of gay marriage—critiques coming from within queer circles.[21] Critiques of marriage are, of course, nothing new. Feminists have long taken on the institution of marriage for its patriarchal underpinnings. In a feminist analysis of same-sex marriage, Nan Hunter asks if making these particular marriages legal has the potential to disrupt the patriarchal understandings of gender that undergird the institution of marriage (1991). Some leftist activists and scholars continue to emphatically scream "No!" In addition to highlighting the patriarchy upon which marriage is based, queer critics of same-sex marriage suggest that these movements ignore ongoing racial oppression through their narratives of social progress (Farrow 2010), reiterate partnered monogamy (and thus a narrow family structure) as the norm (Bornstein 2010), and ignore those for whom marriage is an impossibility or will not lead to rights (Nair 2010). If neither partner is a citizen or neither has health insurance, marriage will do nothing to access citizenship or health care—two common claims made by same-sex marriage advocates.

For these scholars and activists, same-sex marriage is not the problem; it is merely a symptom of the broader issues with contemporary gay rights movements: the quest for inclusion via normativity (Nair 2010; Warner 2000). Expanding who might be able to squeeze into "the norm" or making more diverse the norm, these scholars argue, does little to create a world that accepts deviation from norms. I briefly outline these queer critiques of same-sex marriage to make clear both the

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[21] I do not mean to set up a dichotomy in which gay politics necessarily support same-sex marriage and queer politics necessarily contest marriage equality. For a nuanced discussion of the queer potentialities of same-sex marriage, see Taylor and Rupp "Are we Still Queer Even Though We're Married?," (forthcoming).

ideologies that inform mine as well as to further explicate how my work both draws from and adds to other queer critiques of normativity.

In a political moment marked by omnipresent celebrations of same-sex marriage, which is represented as the apex of not only lesbian and gay political rights, but the very recognition of lesbian and gay people as "full subjects," the task of deconstructing the regulatory regimes attached to visibility politics is particularly pressing. Furthermore, this critical examination of visibility has political salience beyond LGBTQ communities; analyses of visibility have particular relevance for studies of gender, disability, class, and race—as well as their related movements— because these markers of experience, like sexuality, can be both obvious and hidden. And, as importantly, because visibility politics function to construct sexual subjects, this discussion could influence broader examinations of how subjectivities (sexual and otherwise) are continuously made and re-made through the circulation of contemporary discourses.

Methods

To make these interventions, I utilize a mixed-methods approach that draws from both the humanities and social sciences. I critically analyzed cultural representations of rural gayness (such as Flickr accounts, Facebook pages, media coverage, and websites), examined the discourses and ideologies of gay rights groups, and engaged in participant observation at LGBTQ social and political gatherings. I also conducted interviews with fifty women in rural South Dakota and Minnesota. Interviews were semi-structured, lasted between one and four hours, and were audio

recorded and transcribed. I found my interviewees, who include women of color, women with disabilities, and women from a range of class backgrounds, through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling refers to a methodology in which the interviewer relies upon previous interviewees to generate additional contacts.[22] My sample is quite diverse: Interviewees ranged in age from 18-73. Eight are women of color. And interviewees' identified with a range of class positions—from poor to upper middle class to "wealthy in the heart, poor in the pocket," as one interviewee joked. Annual incomes ranged from $2,400-$80,000. Interviewees included women connected to, disconnected from, and indifferent toward LGBTQ causes.

I chose to focus on South Dakota and Minnesota for both practical and intellectual reasons. The practical: I spent the first nineteen years of my life in South Dakota and the next six in Minnesota, where I went to college and, after, worked at a reservation-based non-profit organization in the northern part of the state. Because my networks are based in this region, I accurately predicted that this meant I would have entrée, which would otherwise be difficult to gain. The intellectual: South Dakota and Minnesota exemplify the types of rural places overlooked in the metronormativity of both LGBTQ rights activism and academic scholarship. They are also very different neighboring states whose particularities disrupt the homogeneity of representations of the Midwest, a diversity that is lost in disparaging references to the country's "flyover zone" (a term I was first introduced to while attending graduate

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[22] For a discussion of the problematics and techniques of snowball sampling, see Biernacki and Waldorf (1981).

school in California).[23] South Dakota is extremely rural and consistently politically "red," while Minnesota is a mix of rural and urban and regularly votes Democratic on a state level. LGBTQ organizations are active, easy to locate, and well-organized in Minnesota, and the state's college campuses boast developed and long-standing LGBTQ and Women's Centers. In contrast, not a single university in South Dakota has an LGBTQ or Women's Center. These distinctions speak to the rich and complex differences in Midwestern states.

That one of the first questions I am often asked when discussing my research is how I possibly managed to find interviewees *out there* speaks to the hegemony of metronormative logics; such questions assume implicitly that LGBTQ people do not live out *there*, and if we do, we cannot possibly be *out* there. Locating interviewees in either case (either they literally do not live there, or they cannot be "out" about their sexuality) would be difficult. In fact, identifying interviewees and conducting interviews was the easiest—and an incredibly enjoyable—part of writing this dissertation. The ease with which this process evolved speaks to the cultural politics of the region; the materiality of what we upper Midwesterners refer to as "Minnesota nice"—that one should always put on a nice face, treat others with kindness, and support those around you whenever possible, regardless of your actual feelings or your position on a topic—meant that I had an incredible amount of support. My professors, mentors, bosses, family members, and friends from high school and college—some of whom I had not seen or even communicated with in years—

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[23] The "flyover zone" refers to the area that one "flies over" in traveling between Los Angeles and New York City.

reached out to their networks on my behalf. The people with whom I became associated throughout this process—friends of my friends, strangers to me—went out of their way to connect me with their networks. I met eighteen of my interviewees via my (mostly heterosexual) contacts in Minnesota and South Dakota or via (the mostly heterosexual) people in the networks of my contacts. Twenty-six of my interviewees were referred to me by other women I had interviewed. As it turns out, the cultural politics of the rural Midwest make the region very conducive to identifying research participants. They also enable "snowball sampling," which relies upon referrals from initial interviewees to generate additional contacts.

This description should not suggest that the process of collecting interview data was without significant challenges. It was not. These difficulties were, in part, geographic. I conducted all fifty interviews between September and December of 2011. I drove more than 7,000 miles, travelling, at times, eight hours for a single interview. The other significant challenge I experienced was rooted in my assumption that people with what I presumed to be certain political positions would be interested in supporting my research. I began the process of identifying interviewees by contacting faculty members connected to Women's Studies departments at South Dakota universities. The University of South Dakota and South Dakota State University, the state's two largest universities, both have Women's Studies minors. These programs are maintained by a network of faculty who cross-list courses they teach in their home departments. No university in the state has a Women's Studies major, an LGBTQ Studies major or minor, or staff dedicated to their Women's Studies programs. I emailed faculty members who teach Women's and LGBTQ

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Studies courses. I also contacted various LGBTQ student groups directly, including the Gay and Lesbian Association at Black Hills State University, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Alliance at the University of South Dakota, and Sons and Daughters at South Dakota State University. I heard back from only one faculty member I contacted, and most of the emails I sent to student leaders bounced. These efforts did not result in a single interview.

Prior to my research trip, I made the decision to avoid attempting to locate interviewees via contacting local LGBTQ organizations that conceptualized their work as political. My initial feeling was that I could tap into the discourses and ideologies of folks attached to these groups by analyzing the groups' websites, Facebook pages, and other literature associated with these groups. I accurately predicted that I would have little trouble locating interviewees in Minnesota because I am quite tied into LGBTQ and other activist networks in the state. At the time, I did not yet have LGBTQ networks in South Dakota, my home state, and as such, the process for identifying interviewees was slower than what I experienced in Minnesota. While the emails in my sent folder acquired virtual dust, I posted an ad to Craigslist under "Women Seeking Women," making clear my desires to identify interviewees for research purposes. When I posted my call in October 2011, I was the only ad on the site under "Women Seeking Women" for the entire state of South Dakota. It should come as no surprise, then, that I met no one through this approach. This absence online—in line with those absences I discuss further in chapter three— challenges the narrative that suggests that rural LGBTQ people are finally building community via the Internet, a narrative in desperate need of more nuance. The

LGBTQ women in rural South Dakota and Minnesota that I interviewed rarely

discussed using the internet for identifying sexual partners or for community building.

At the same time, 77 ads were posted on Craigslist in the "Men Seeking Women"

category and 94 ads were posted in "Men Seeking Men"—which suggests that some

rural heterosexual and gay men are using the internet for precisely this purpose.

After two weeks without conducting an interview, and without a single lead, I

started to panic. A week later, I caved. I emailed Equality South Dakota, an LGBTQ

political organization in the state that, based on information on their website,

appeared to have two women board members. The Director replied that those women

left their positions and that he was not interested in helping me—a far cry from the

support I had come to expect for my project. I learned over the next months that this

organization is understood locally as the gay men's organization, and primarily

participates in traditional mainstream gay rights work. The group had lost its funding

and office staff and was considered by many to be in disarray. By contrast, the other

two LGBTQ organizations in the state were understood primarily as women's social

groups—and, especially in comparison to this gay men's group, they were doing quite

well. The social—rather than mainstream political groups—boasted developed

Boards of Directors, paid staff, and active constituencies. Had I been successful in my

attempts to avoid locating interviewees through LGBTQ organizations, I may not

have gleaned this information regarding the local social and political LGBTQ

landscape.

As such, the benefit of connecting with local LGBTQ groups was not in the

recruitment of interviewees. In fact, only four interviewees came to me directly via

calls sent out by local LGBTQ organizations. Three of these women were employees

or board members of these organizations. Only one person responded to my call for

interviewees that was sent out by LGBTQ organizations. At the same time, that my

information and a blurb about my project appeared in two LGBTQ organizations'

newsletters offered a certain legitimacy to my research and to me. Several

interviewees mentioned that they had seen my research described in a newsletter, but

that they never would have contacted me had a friend not recommended participating

in an interview. I also interviewed one close friend and met one interviewee at a Pride

festival.

I was open to interviewing any person who answered the call in which I

expressed interest in interviewing LGBTQ women in rural South Dakota and

Minnesota. I intentionally did not demarcate boundaries to any of these terms:

LGBTQ, women, rural, South Dakota, Minnesota. In fact, I interviewed one person

who identified as a transgender man, one person who had spent significant parts of

her life in Sioux Falls, SD, but who currently lives in the very northwestern corner of

Iowa (not far from South Dakota), and several people who live in what might be

considered "urban" Midwestern places, including Minneapolis, MN and Sioux Falls,

SD. As I mentioned in my discussion of terms, I have no interest in policing the

boundaries of terms that are, as Scott Herring suggests, phantasmatic, fluid, and

performative. If a person who did not ostensibly fit within the confines of the call as

circulated expressed interest in being interviewed, I accepted that they must know

their lives, experiences, desires and identifications better than I could, and I worked to

understand through the interview what about my call spoke to them. I accepted that

people "are" what they claimed to be, both in terms of their sexuality and geography. Although few people would question this method in terms of participants' sexualities, some have expressed confusion at my decision to define space and place through a similarly capacious model. Following rural queer studies scholars, the "rural" and "the Midwest" mark ways of living, thinking, and being simultaneously connected to and disconnected from geography—a point made evident through the various people who contacted me that did not exactly "fit" with my call.

Having described the methodology I used to collect my interview data, I now turn to describing how I analyzed the data. I chose to sift through hard copies of my transcripts rather than utilize qualitative data analysis software. I did so for one reason, which is simultaneously symbolic and material: I much prefer paper to electronic files. I like how paper feels in my hands. And I hate technology. The materiality of the text made me feel as if I was grappling with the complexities of interviewees lives in ways that I did not when scrolling up and down a computerized page. Although I coded my data by hand, my approach mirrored that of many qualitative data analysis software programs: code data once, look for themes among codes and group them together, and copy and paste the coded data from each interview into documents organized by theme. I first read through printed transcripts of my interviews, marking in the margins words that correlated with the content of that section of the interview—a "word-by-word, line-by-line, incident-by-incident" approach (Charmaz 2006, 54) that scholars have termed "open coding" (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw 1995). I then compiled these terms, grouped them, and identified themes. These included: activism, coming out, community, disability, discrimination, family,

gender, identity, knowledge circulation, pride, race, and visibility. Next, I combed

through each interview a second time, marking each section of applicable text with

the themes I identified. Finally, I copied and pasted the sections of text that correlated

with the themes into individual Microsoft Word documents.

My approach is in line with what social scientists have termed "grounded

theory" (Glaser and Strauss 1967), a methodology that refers to those "theoretical

constructs derived from qualitative analysis of data" (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 1). In

many ways, my theoretical arguments emerge from the stories of my interviewees'

lives. As an example, when I conducted my interviews more than three years ago, I

did not envision this project to be in conversation with disability studies. My

understanding of my project at the time as one informed by and contributing to queer

theory and rural queer studies, of course, led me to ask certain questions; not being

oriented toward issues of disability at the time of the interviews meant that I did not

ask initial or follow-up questions that could have led interviewees to share additional

or alternative parts of their narratives. For example, the father of Becky, one

interviewee, had then-recently had his leg amputated. Becky stated that she had never

experienced any homophobia in general or from her family. She had never formally

"come out" to her parents about her sexuality (she mentioned that it is possible that

her sister told her parents, though even she was unsure about the veracity of this

claim), but they also knew her partner as her partner. Becky felt she had her family's

full support. She attributed her father's "butting heads" with her partner to his general

"grumpiness." Describing her father as "grumpy" could be a way to dismiss his

possible homophobia or could be a gesture toward the affects associated with his new

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disability and changing material conditions. Describing people with disabilities

through their negative character traits is, after all, common. Of course, both readings

are speculative. But even my ability to speculate is limited because I did not ask

particular questions.

Despite not asking any questions about it, disability came up in nearly every

one of my fifty interviews. Women expressed caring for a partner, child, or loved one

with a disability, volunteering and working for non-profit organizations dedicated to

disability issues, having an intellectual or physical disability themselves, and working

as a caregiver to people with disabilities. Even for the women who did not express a

quotidian relationship to disability, ideas about disability still infused the interview.

The significance of disability to the lives of my interviewees led me to disability

studies and to examine various sites through which disability and LGBTQ discourses

and advocacy converge. The epistemological assemblages among disability, rural

queer, and critical race studies is discussed further in chapter four. I came to

recognize the need to engage with disability studies and issues through my interview

data.

At the same time, the data alone did not push my research in this direction. I

do not pretend to occupy an objective position in relation to my interviewees or

believe that my data has the capability on its own to radically shift my thinking;

researchers bring various subjective experiences to our work, a point feminist

methodologists have long made. The qualitative codes researchers create, then,

"reflect the researcher's interests and perspectives as well as information in the data"

(Charmaz and Belgrave 2012, 355). Although I was not tuned in enough to disability

studies to ask interviewees questions about disability, I was able to see the presence

of disability in their narratives. Drawing from Clare Hemmings' analysis of how

feminists tell stories about feminism, storytelling is always already political. How we

tell stories matters. The politics of the present shape our subjectivities as story-tellers

and inform the stories that we tell—both my interviewees' telling and my own telling

of their telling. As Hemmings argues, "which story one tells about the past is always

motivated by the position one occupies or wishes to occupy in the present" (2011,

13). My analysis of disability, then, reflects interviewees' stories as much as my own.

Interviewees' constructing of their experiences, desires, and pains is as

political and contextual as my re-constructing of their lives here. I consistently work

to remain faithful to my data and also refuse to fetishize these women's experiences.

I did not conduct interviews with rural LGBTQ women in pursuit of one "truth." I do

not believe that interviews allow researchers to access some type of "real" or

unmediated version of material experiences. I am sharing here bits of the stories of

LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest—narratives that often go unheard and

unspoken. In telling interviewees' stories, I am both unearthing narratives and

constructing new ones.

Describing how I draw from a Foucauldian perspective in analyzing my

interview data is apropos here. Across Foucault's oeuvre, he examines the history of

an idea, asking how we have come to understand certain things—such as the idea that

sexuality, madness and crime constitute a natural part of our subjectivities—as true.

But it is not "truth" itself that interests Foucault; rather, Foucault focuses on the

structures, regimes and apparatuses of truth, and in the process, provides new ways of

understanding power, discourse, knowledge, and the subject. I draw from Foucault's understanding of discourse as bodies of knowledge, his description of power as multi-directional and omnipresent, and his articulation of knowledge as discontinuous and existing beyond the dominant and official (1972; 1977; 1990). A Foucauldian approach requires that I analyze various types of discourses—interviews, online representations, silences—as well as the apparatuses and structures that produce discourses, subjects, and ideas.

I conducted interviews, in part, because I believe one can access knowledge and information that does not circulate otherwise through conversations with people. These conversations both gesture toward broader cultural ideologies and make evident the quotidian, mundane, and even imperceptible ways in which such logics are challenged and negotiated. Furthermore, very few cultural representations exist of rural LGBTQ women and I created this archive, in part, because it did not exist elsewhere—an omission especially worth exploring in a cultural moment in which LGBTQ people are consistently interpolated into authentic subjectivity via visibility discourses. In other words, when visibility is at a premium, these types of "invisibilities" are particularly worth interrogating.

The extent to which my analyses are guided by interviewees' stories, which pointed me toward new and unexpected bodies of scholarship and modes of thought, speaks to the reverence I have for interviewees' time and insights. It is out of this respect for my interviewees, as well as a refusal to fetishize interviewees or view them as any more "real" than other cultural representations, that my critique emerges. I do not uncritically share interviewees' stories, and I consistently work to move

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beyond a maternal subject position from which researchers often protect their informants. I see critical engagement as the highest form of respect. And yet, my critique is not directed at my interviewees; I have no interest in chiding interviewees for drawing from available cultural discourses. Rather, I consider interviewees' stories in relation to broader ideologies and epistemologies—with the goal of better understanding and providing alternatives to these cultural logics. Narratives, like other forms of cultural representation, deserve critical engagement, through which it is possible to grapple with their content in more complex ways, and also to analyze them as inflecting, informed by, and challenging to broader discourses and ideologies in circulation. My interviewees' stories are deserving of critical engagement precisely because they are extraordinarily rich; without this engagement, the depth of their lives, and the possibilities of their epistemologies for constructing alternatives, would remain unrevealed. Through critically considering interviewees' narratives alongside one another, I seek to convey the complexity of queer Midwestern rurality.

Throughout *Unbecoming*, I analyze the ways in which LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest relate to the cultural templates that construct the rural, the queer, and the rural queer. Heeding Joan Scott's warning that viewing experience as evidence can result in an under-theorization of the structures that shape experience (1991), I consistently analyze the relationships among institutions, discourses, cultural representations, and individual experiences, to avoid, as Scott suggests, reproducing individual identities as natural or unproblematic.

In so doing, I work to expand upon those queer theoretical examinations of intimacy and public life. In her tracking of women's "'bargaining' with power and

desire in which members of intimate publics always seem to be engaging," Lauren

Berlant critically examines how what she calls an "intimate public" has come to be

viewed as a (personal and cultural) "achievement."

> Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, it flourishes
> as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that
> promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of
> consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live
> as an *x*. One may have chosen freely to identify as an *x*; one may be
> marked by traditional taxonomies—those details matter, but not to the
> general operation of the public sense that some qualities or experience
> are held in common… (2008, viii).

For Berlant, this desire to construct a common intimate public "means that people

participate in it who may share nothing of the particular worlds being represented in a

given magazine, book, film, or soap opera venue (2008, ix). For many scholars and

activists who are interested in constructing a more ethical and just world, the

problematic has become precisely this: a lack of (social, institutional, political,

popular) representation of the marginalized group in question, which both contributes

to and reflects a broader lack of social belonging. These various cultural

representations construct those intimate publics that, in turn, make clear how one is to

"to live as an *x*."

It would be quite easy to argue that LGBTQ rural women "share nothing of

the particular worlds being represented," that we are not represented within

discourses and representations that collectively construct those intimate publics that

let one know how one is to live as an *x*, particularly when that *x* is an LGBTQ person.

For Berlant, this variety of oft-seen argument would be symptomatic of a much larger

problematic: "Even when people speak out against the terms the intimate public sets

out as normative, they are still participating in the promise of belonging that it represents insofar as they are trying to recalibrate whose experience it can absorb so that they can feel included in the mass intimacy that has promised to include them" (2008, ix).

My goal in this dissertation, then, is not to attempt to make more "visible" those (rural) experiences that LGBTQ intimate publics have rendered irrelevant or obsolete so that rural queers might be able to feel more included in these spheres; it is, rather, to recalibrate LGBTQ politics and discourses by critically examining the ideologies undergirding and ramifications of one aspect of what makes the public intimate (for LGBTQ people and otherwise) in the first place: contemporary visibility discourses and politics. I do so with the belief that the stories of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest contain possibilities for engaging in this social and political recalibration. If, as Avery Gordon argues, "We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there" ([1997] 2008, 5), this dissertation suggests that knowing, too, where those who are not the "we" live might illuminate those aspects of where we live that make it difficult to imagine living elsewhere. Indeed, our imagining of living elsewhere and otherwise might be enhanced by knowing where *others* live now.

Chapter Two

(Be)Coming Out, Be(com)ing Visible

LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest live their lives in ways that do not align with the demands of gay rights groups. One might call this lack of alignment a disidentification, an estrangement, or a disaffection. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to it in each of these ways, focusing specifically on how this gulf manifests through and alongside visibility discourses. In doing so, I identify the precise manifestations of estrangement between gay rights discourses and LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest. I begin by situating my analysis in relation to Jose Muñoz's theory of disidentification and engaging with the scholarly literature on coming out. Doing so sets the stage for my subsequent analysis of cultural representations as well as my interviewees' narratives, through which I examine the complex relationships among LGBTQ identity, visibility, and politics.

For gay rights advocates, *being* out is simply impossible without *coming* out. Being visible is, similarly, inconceivable without coming *and* being out. And coming and being out are understood as always already politically and socially relevant. By contrast, my interviewees generally see themselves as "out," but many have not "come out." Yet, they do not feel unknown, inauthentic, or stuck in some spider-web-filled closet. I draw from the stories of interviewees' lives to complicate the aforementioned ascription of the automatic and exclusive political value of visibility—something ostensibly impossible to achieve without throwing open the doors of one's proverbial closet. Beyond disrupting the coming out=being out=visibility formula, I also challenge the related assumption that LGBTQ people

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must be visible in order to live their sexualities, be who they feel they are, and engage in the political. Rural LGBTQ women are living their sexualities, feel as if they are completely themselves, and are engaged in politics on their own terms—while simultaneously disidentifying with the logics of visibility politics.

I suggest here that what might be understood as interviewees' quiet challenges to visibility politics reflect a disidentificatory position, one that, as José Muñoz argues, allows marginalized people to simultaneously work on, within, and against dominant ideologies, neither assimilating into nor dogmatically opposing such structures (1999, 11). Muñoz's disidentification, a theory deeply "indebted to anti-assimilationist thought" (1999, 18), might seem a strange framework for examining those experiences and desires that appear to be in alignment with *certain* aspects of the assimilationist goals of mainstream lesbian and gay rights groups. Indeed, many interviewees discussed their desires for marriage and children or their participation in the military. But their articulations of these desires and experiences operate in a markedly different manner than those of gay rights groups. Muñoz describes this practice of desiring the cultural ideal (which manifests here as normativity) but "desiring it with a difference" as the type of negotiation central to disidentification (1999, 15).

Calls for visibility, far from a simple rights-seeking approach, reflect deep cultural ideologies regarding sexuality—ideologies that lesbian and gay rights groups draw from and produce. As such, challenges to these calls strike at both the heart of the logics of lesbian and gay rights movements and also those cultural ideologies that produce a hegemonic LGBTQ subject as necessarily out, loud, and proud. This

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position should not suggest that such challenges exist outside of the cultural and

LGBTQ subcultural logics that create LGBTQ subjects. These challenges are made

possible by, indebted to, and reproduce the very constructions at which they are

directed. Within a social order that relies on binary thinking, challenging boundaries

also functions to re-assert these boundaries in new ways. But, following Muñoz, we

might also recognize the potential resistance involved in this *scrambling and*

restructuring.

> The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the
> encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the
> encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and
> recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority
> identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further
> than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this
> code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or
> positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant
> culture (1999, 31).

The cultural texts that I deconstruct and reconstruct here are, of course, various

iterations of visibility discourses. I draw from interviewees' narratives to expose the

exclusionary machinations and encoded meanings of these discourses. My hope is

that my interviewees' stories and my interpretations of them might break "open the

code of the majority" and create possibilities for thinking through those politics and

positionalities "rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture": both queer rurality

and queerness beyond an out, loud, and proud frame.

Disidentification, then, operates in this chapter on two distinct but intersecting

scales: In reading interviewees' thoughts, experiences, discourses and desires as

disidentificatory, I, too, participate in a disidentificatory process via "recycling and

rethinking encoded meaning" (1999, 31). The encoded meaning that interviewees

rethink and recycle, is, I suggest, that of dominant gay rights groups, while the codes

I rethink and recycle are those of both gay rights groups and interviewees' stories

themselves. A researcher's deployment of interviewees' stories is necessarily a

recycling, and I intend to use this recycling in the service of imagining new

possibilities and positionalities—in short, to disidentify.

An analysis of the layers of disidentification with visibility politics at play

here is enriched by an engagement with what it means to "come out." One's being

read as "out" is defined in opposition to an image of pitiable LGBTQ others who

remain "in the closet" (Sedgwick [1990] 2008). What it means to be visible similarly

relies on an image of closeted "others" (those who are ostensibly "invisible" in their

closets), a point that gestures toward an intertwinement among be(com)ing visible

and coming out. Indeed, in the discourses of gay rights advocates, visibility and

outness appear interchangeable.

In this chapter I push back against the ubiquitous conflation of being visible

and being out evidenced here. I work through the relations among coming out and

visibility, which are, I argue, simultaneously distinct and overlapping phenomena. It

seems obvious that one can *be* out, but not have *come* out, particularly if the only way

to be (authentically) out is to explicitly tell those with whom one is (expected to be)

affectively close. Or that one might have come out and still not be visible in

prescribed ways. Such assertions require critically examining what visibility itself

means. Beyond political visibility—a form of visibility not desired everywhere and

that itself looks quite different across time and place—LGBTQ people might strive to make visible their LGBTQ identity via aesthetics and consumption, essentially working to wear one's sexuality on one's body in a manner that allows others to read it as such.

Yet, like desires for political visibility, possibilities for enacting visibility via one's body differ along geographic lines. The aesthetics that connote LGBTQness in one geographic location are in line with those of heterosexuals in others; what is considered a non-normative or queer gender presentation in the California town in which I currently live, for example, resembles the aesthetics of heterosexual farm wives' in rural South Dakota.[24] In making such distinctions, I implicitly question the terms through which we understand being out, coming out, and being visible, each of which are value-laden in deeply spatial ways.

Following insights from rural and transnational queer studies scholars whose research has demonstrated that strategies of dominant gay rights groups do not align with those LGBTQ people marginalized along spatial lines via their non-Western and/or non-urban positionalities, this chapter examines what it means to come out—to confess via a speech act one's non-heterosexual desires, experiences, or identities to those near and far—in relation to what it means to *be* out, and explore what rethinking this relation might tell us about visibility politics more broadly. Scholars, activists, and artists have documented the unique ethos and epistemologies of rural

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[24] For an extended discussion of rural aesthetics, sexuality, and farm women, see Colin Johnson's chapter "Hard Women: Rural Women and Female Masculinity" in his *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (2013).

and transnational/non-Western queer lives, desires, and experiences and argued that this uniqueness means that queer rurality cannot ethically be subsumed into, or understood within, dominant (Western and urban) LGBTQ frameworks.[25] This scholarship deeply informs my position that LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest disidentify with calls for visibility in ways that challenge the foundational logics of gay rights groups.

My argument expands upon in particular and significant ways Mary Gray's analysis of how queer Appalachian youth negotiate the politics of visibility—politics that are central to the framing of rural queers as necessarily "out of place" (2009, 4). Gray's suggestion that visibility politics create challenges for rural queer youth just as rural queer youth creatively challenge visibility politics is foundational to my argument. Mary Gray makes clear that visibility politics do not have the same valence in rural places as they do in contemporary gay rights discourses, or in the phantasmatic urban places these discourses conjure (2009).

I do not seek to show here that Gray's positions do or do not play out among a different demographic (LGBTQ women rather than queer (mostly male) youth) or in a different rural area (the Midwest versus Kentucky). Gray's assertions regarding the limitations of strategies of visibility for rural queers are in line with my analyses of my interviewees' narratives. Indeed, Gray's work serves as my point of departure, the point from which I leap in order to examine the relations outlined here, and, in later chapters, additional unexplored problematics of visibility politics: their enabling of

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[25] I explore the relation between non-Western and rural queer experiences further in the following chapter.

metronormativity, producing of post-racial and post-spatial logics, and obscuring of labored processes.

By challenging the idea that one must necessarily formally come out in order to either view oneself as out or to be understood as out by others, I also expand upon the work of those queer theorists and LGBTQ studies scholars who have complicated common understandings and deployments of "coming out" [and] of "the closet" (Esterberg 1997; Phelan 1993; Rust 1993; Sedgwick [1990] 2008; Stein 1997). This typical "coming out" has traditionally been presented as a linear process that happens in predictable stages and culminates in the "acceptance of a modern gay identity in which the subject has merged her private self-understandings with the public self she reveals to others" (Moore 2001, 21)—a notion of coming out furthered by psychologists and LGBTQ activists alike.[26] That the height of gay identity development is presented as "coming out" by both rights seeking activists and medical professionals gestures toward the deep links between visibility and identity politics as well as the processes by which visibility comes to be viewed as valuable.

Feminist and LGBTQ studies scholars have long critiqued this "coming out" model for the ways in which it renders individual quite complex social processes, overlooks the often circuitous paths by which people might come to view their experiences and develop their identities, and ignores those sexual systems—both historic and geographic—that would challenge its very premises. Mignon Moore, for example, suggests that this linear model for making sense of coming out processes

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[26] For a quintessential example of an academic text that describes the coming out "process" in this manner, see Vivienne Cass (1979).

does not apply to Black women in New York City, whose acting on their same-sex sexual desires is better understood as "coming into" a community (2001, 22).

Historian George Chauncey discusses this relation between coming out of/coming into, arguing that in the pre-war years, gay people "did not speak of coming out of what we call the 'gay closet' but rather of coming out into what they called 'homosexual society' or the 'gay world,' a world neither so small nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as 'closet' implies" (Chauncey 1994, 7). The phrase "coming out of the closet," according to Chauncey, was not in circulation until the 1960s. If coming out has meant—and for some people continues to mean—coming out *into* a group (of LGBTQ people), rather than coming out *out* of a group (of presumably heterosexual people)—the latter being the contemporary model—then what it means to "come out" or to be "in the closet" is historically and socially specific. It is also, as Chauncey points out in describing the "gay world" as a "spatial metaphor," deeply geographic (1994, 7).

The pressures, dangers, benefits, and value of (not) coming out are, by extension, also culturally contextual. From the 1890s to 1940, the decades Chauncey examines, joining a community of other lesbians or gay men—"coming out," if you will—could lead to arrest (as well as the expression of desire, of course). Being known as lesbian or gay during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s was also extremely dangerous (and, in other contexts, of course, pleasurable). These dangers, perhaps much like the various *pleasures*, of "coming out" in the pre-war era or in the 1980s, for example, were quite different than they are in 2014. Today, the hegemony of visibility discourses makes it quite dangerous to *not* come out—for precisely the

reasons I outlined in the Introduction: one is assumed to be unknowable, thwarted in their realization of who they "are," and, perhaps worst of all, an inhibitor of social progress. In an age when identity politics and gay rights reign, ostensibly lacking identity or impeding the gaining of rights (which come to stand in for progress) marks a type of social illegibility that might well be understood as social death.

And, yet, in a contemporary moment in which "gay visibility…in popular culture is not viewed as exceptional but speaks to broader changes in the social status of lesbians and gay men" (Seidman 2002, 1), we must also question the continued relevance of the trope of the closet. Steven Seidman engages in precisely this sort of critical re-thinking of the closet. Seidman interviewed thirty people who considered themselves closeted in order to examine the "psychological and social texture of the closet" (2002, 7). Seidman's research encouraged him to re-think his assumption that "the closet was still the defining reality for most gay Americans" (2002, 7) and to conclude instead that "many gay Americans today live outside of the social framework of the closet" (2002, 9).

Strikingly, Seidman came to this conclusion by interviewing people who identified, at least in part, as "closeted." Seidman found that his interviewees framed their past—rather than present—lives as closeted. Part of this contradiction is definitional: what Seidman's interviewees described as "closeted" (hiding particular details of their lives from particular individuals) Seidman decidedly argues against. The closet, for Seidman, refers to an individual's making "life-shaping decisions in order to pass" rather than what Seidman sees as an "episodic pattern of concealment" that had little bearing on one's life (2002, 7). "If the concept of the closet is to be

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useful in understanding gay life, it should describe a '*life-shaping*' social pattern"
(Seidman 2002, 8).

But, as Seidman suggests, many LGBTQ people—even those who consider
themselves closeted—no longer conceal their desires, experiences, or identities in a
manner that allows this omission to shape their lives significantly. Such statements
accurately characterize my interviewees' discussions of their lives. So, while I agree
with Seidman's assertion that "many gay Americans today live outside of the social
framework of the closet" (2002, 9), I bristle at the implicit suggestion that this renders
the closet analytically obsolete. It is certainly not obsolete for those who live in those
(rural and/or non-Western) geographic places that serve as the proverbial closet of the
urban and/or West. LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest can never be outside of the
construction of the closet regardless of how (out) they live their lives. They live there,
in the closet, after all. That both my own and Seidman's interviewees viewed
themselves as closeted if they conceal their sexuality in any moment speaks to the
continued relevance of the closet in dominant and LGBTQ subcultural imaginaries—
even as it can no longer capture the complexity of the material experiences of
LGBTQ people and, therefore, its meanings must be questioned.

In what follows, I explore these tensions by analyzing how and why
interviewees disidentify with visibility politics. Indeed, the relationships of LGBTQ
women in the rural Midwest to outness suggest that visibility does not have the cache
in rural places as it does elsewhere, as Gray argues, and speaks to what Seidman
views as the limited nature of the trope of the closet. I first quickly analyze how
visibility discourses manifest in similar and different ways between national gay

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rights organizations and those in South Dakota. I then consider the general lack of online representations of rural LGBTQ women to suggest that this absence functions as part of the story, as evidence itself of the limits of visibility politics. This absence is particularly notable in light of the common assumption that rural LGBTQ people, due to their supposed invisiblity in their rural communities, are now increasingly finding community via the Internet. Following this line of thinking, one might expect to find an array of online representations of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest. And yet, despite my scouring of the Internet, I found remarkably few images or narratives of this demographic. The online "invisibility" of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest, far from constituting a dilemma in need of a visibility-based remedy, speaks to the problematic and over-determined nature of expectations for visibility. I conclude the chapter by turning to interviewees' narratives. My interviewees' experiences demonstrate how rural queerness exists in a disidentificatory relationship with mainstream visibility politics, reconfiguring its vocabulary to validate their authenticity through living one geographically contingent version of "outness" while simultaneously dismantling its central commitment to the confessional performance that it insists is at the heart of liberation. They also make clear that coming out, being out, and being visible, while overlapping significantly, are quite distinct, as well as geographically contingent, concepts—despite the gay rights discourses that rely on their conflation.

Visibility Politics in Lesbian and Gay Rights Organizations

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For lesbian and gay rights groups, becoming visible is both a means and an end; visibility, it is assumed, will lead to further progress and is always already evidence of progress. The Human Rights Campaign, the largest lesbian and gay civil rights group in the United States, relies upon such positions. The "Event Ideas for National Coming Out Day: Come out to Family, Friends and Co-Workers" section of the group's website, urges people to

> Make a commitment to be *honest* about your sexual orientation or gender identity to those who know you. *Coming out and living openly* as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or supportive straight person is an act of *bravery* and *authenticity*. Being brave doesn't mean that you're not scared; it means that if you are scared, you do the thing you're afraid of anyway. Polls continue to show that people who know someone gay are more likely to support *full equality*.[27] [Emphasis added.]

In this passage, HRC connects increased visibility to greater political rights. Furthermore, HRC's pleas to its members to hold "Coming Out Day" events suggest that the group assumes "coming out" is a series of moments that can begin on a prescribed day decided on by an organization, rather than a complex social process that occurs in ways that are particular to one's time, place, and circumstance. It also assumes that to be "honest" and "authentic" one must accept a single definition of "being out," which includes explicitly telling friends, family, and co-workers about one's sexual preferences. The bravery associated with doing so could ostensibly lead to HRC's vision of "full equality," or more accurately, the right to marry. Of the

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[27] Human Rights Campaign website. http://preview.hrc.org/issues/3374.htm. Accessed 6/11/2013.

thirteen issues on which HRC claims to work, no other comes to assume the

privileged position of same-sex marriage rights, captured in statements such as, "Only

marriage can provide families with true equality." [28] Although queer scholars and

activists have long critiqued the normalizing logics at the heart of this vision of

equality, such analyses have rarely focused explicitly on visibility, a remarkable

oversight considering that visibility is one mode through which normalcy is

compelled and articulated.[29]

Equality South Dakota is South Dakota's version of the Human Rights

Campaign. Much like HRC, Equality South Dakota assumes that political rights and

visibility are mutually constitutive.

> The mission of Equality South Dakota is to secure and protect the
> rights and well-being of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and
> transgender) South Dakotans and their families through full
> *engagement in the political process*. We seek dialogue with elected
> officials and invite them to use us as a resource in their decision
> making. In doing so, we give a *voice* to families that have been silent
> and fearful.[30] [Emphasis added.]

The deployment of "voice" and "full engagement in the political process" points to an

ideological connection between Equality South Dakota and the broader cultural

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[28] http://www.hrc.org/americansformarriageequality/impact. Accessed 6/11/2013.

[29] A great deal of queer theoretical scholarship critiques the normativity of gay rights groups. See, for example, Lauren Berlant (2000); Ryan Conrad (2010); José Esteban Muñoz (1999; 2009); Michael Warner (1993; 2000).

[30] Equality South Dakota website. http://www.eqsd.org/about.html. Accessed 6/11/2013.

narratives that assume a relationship between visibility and political rights; the using of one's voice for political purposes is precisely the form of visibility for which the Human Rights Campaign calls, after all. Yet, Equality South Dakota makes no explicit claims about the political benefits of visibility. For Equality South Dakota, the "voice" of South Dakota families emerges out of *the organization's* engagement in struggle over political rights—a result, rather than a priori, that is tethered to the organization, rather than individual LGBTQ people. Unlike HRC, the group does not argue for the benefits of hosting a "Coming Out Day," and instead urges its supporters to get involved by, for example, assisting with the organization's website, hosting a house party, or speaking with their legislative representative—a far cry from urging people to come out to "those who know you."

Despite the group's production of a discourse that is not fully in line with the ideologies of national lesbian and gay organizations, their implicit framing of visibility as in opposition to silence and fear arguably influences the ways in which South Dakota women connect to the organization, a point I discussed in the Introduction. As one example that is symptomatic of this estrangement, only two of Equality South Dakota's board members are women, and significantly, they utilize discourses markedly different from those of their male counterparts to articulate their connections to the board. In their short biographies posted on the group's website, both women explain their position on the board in terms of their families' deep connections to the state. [31] Sharon Ludwick Warner, one of the women board

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[31] While the men also work to articulate their connections to South Dakota, each relies solely on his own life. "Board of Directors," Equality South Dakota website. http://www.eqsd.org/about/board.html. Accessed 5/28/2013.

members, mobilizes a rural familial history, beginning by describing herself as "a *third generation family owner* of Rain Bird Corporation, a manufacturer and provider of irrigation products and services" [emphasis added]. The biography of Amy Richards, the second woman board member, similarly states that she "grew up on a ranch east of Sturgis, SD on the Belle Fourche River. She is the *granddaughter of a Methodist minister*, Reuben Tanquist, and a great uncle, Dr. Benjamin Rush, signed the Declaration of Independence." [Emphasis added.]

The ways in which Warner and Richards account for their positions on the board is indicative of Mary Gray's finding that rural LGBTQ people deploy discourses of family and localness in order to gain community support (2009, 28): it is through the histories of their upstanding (business-owning and religious) families, which have given a great deal to South Dakota and to the nation, that Warner and Richards legitimate their localness. They are from here. They can expect things of this place that is theirs.

This approach relies on a framing of LGBTQ people as *similar to* the people in their rural communities. Indeed, as Gray argues, rural LGBTQ folks prioritize solidarity and loyalty to the familiar over public declarations of difference. Such strategies and priorities mark a significant departure from national lesbian and gay rights groups' expectations that their constituents come out and be visible, which requires articulating oneself as *different from* those around them, a point that explains why such strategies may not be desirable or tenable for rural LGBTQ people.

According to the logics of lesbian and gay rights groups, it is though this articulation of difference that we will become known to those who are not like us,

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convincing them that we too are deserving of rights. This tension between sameness and difference represents a paradox of homonormative rights seeking approaches: we are compelled to express like-ness through centralizing our difference, a difference so crucial that it is impossible to be authentic or known without an articulation of this difference. We are compelled to articulate our sexual difference so that others may cast it aside as unimportant, simultaneously rendering us similar to them and producing themselves as the type of flexible subjects who are tolerant of such difference (McRuer 2006, 17-18). In short, becoming recognizable as similar requires an articulation of sexual difference, which functions to make one knowable. Visibility is both a goal and effect of the expression of such difference.

The two women on the board of Equality South Dakota, by contrast, feature their multi-generational attachments to the state, working to construct their subjectivities within discourses that suggest same-ness. They are know-able through their families and their communities, rather than via an articulation of their (sexual) difference.[32] This desire for similarity—without prerequisite difference—provides one reason that calls for visibility do not resonate in rural places, where such approaches are necessarily sites of negotiation and contestation, a point exemplified by the lack of online representations of LGBTQ women.

Absence as Evidence: Suburban and Rural Gay Life at Flickr.com

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[32] Neither woman states her sexual orientation or gives any clues that suggest how she might identify. Their sexual identities are largely irrelevant for this analysis, as I am interested in the discourses that circulate *by and about* LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest.

Flickr.com is an image-hosting website in which participants can upload

photographs or videos, communicate with groups of like-minded people, and view

over 5 billion images from around the world. The site is composed of groups,

including those who have come together as the "Suburban and Rural Gay Life"

group. The group is not attached to a particular region or locale. In conflating the

rural and suburban, the group's creator positions both in relation to the urban and

suggests that non-urbanness is a commonality around which LGBTQ people might

gather. Its 124 members have posted 388 photographs; of these, 190 overtly evoke a

sense of place: landscapes, flowers, foods, and animals suggestive of rurality

dominate the photographs, speaking to the importance of place to group members'

articulations of their sexualities.[33] In many ways, the photographs posted to the site

simultaneously construct a representation and represent a construction of rural

sexuality. In other words, these photos both create new ideas and reflect current ones

regarding rural sexualities.

The very existence of this Flickr group makes visible the presence of gay

sexualities in non-urban places; ironically, it does so through the erasure of sexuality.

The prominence of place in the photographs informs the site contributors' collective

construction of rural gays as wholesome, normal, and deeply connected to their rural

communities. The much less prominent images of people on the site feature

normative and intelligible same-sex relations, rather than any explicit sexual content.

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[33] These numbers are from an analysis I conducted on 9/22/2010. The images posted
on Flickr.com can change daily, so while the numbers I cite here would likely differ
on another day, they reflect the importance of rural place to the group, a trend I
recognized after following the site for several months.

It is through the simultaneous erasure and visibility of sexuality within the Flickr.com group that posters come to constitute good (normative) rural folks *and* good (homonormative) gays. This presentation of the rural gay is, of course, intentional and mediated, as indicated by the group moderators' direction: "Please avoid pornography or nudity. There are plenty of other groups available on Flickr for that. If they are posted, they will be deleted." The possibility of rural gayness depends upon constructing both gays as normal and unthreatening and the rural as idyllic and unthreatening. If the rural is understood as unsafe or homophobic, gays cannot plausibly exist there happily. Likewise, images that frame gays as outside of normative constructions of the subject challenge representations of the rural as wholesome.

Such representations of rural gayness reiterate dominant conceptions of the rural as tranquil and pure. As Johnston and Longhurst argue, "Rural spaces are often represented as natural or pure spaces, contrasted with urban spaces which are often represented as unnatural and impure. Life in the country is commonly characterized as providing a space of refuge away from the oppressive spaces of the city" (2010, 95). While the images posted to "Suburban and Rural Gay Life" recapitulate hegemonic ideas regarding the rural, they do so in the service of disrupting a contradictory narrative that describes the rural as homophobic, backwards and dangerous for LGBTQ people.

Michel Foucault's description of all discourse operating as a "node within a network" is especially useful for understanding these conflicting narratives of the rural, both hegemonic but on different scales and within differing communities. For

Foucault, nodes and networks are each composed of multiple discursive levels: an individual statement might be considered a node while a combination of individual statements constitutes a network; this network, made up of the aforementioned nodes of individual statements, can then serve as a node itself within a broader discursive network. This broader discursive network constitutes a node within a more capacious network. Within this Foucauldian framework, a narrative, image, or book can serve as a node or a network, depending upon its position in relation to other nodes or networks (1972, 23). The individual photographs posted to the "Suburban and Rural Gay Life" group, then, function as nodes within a broader discursive network constituted by other photographs. In turn, this network of photographs serves as a node within those discursive networks that paint the rural as either wholly idyllic and tranquil or entirely homophobic and dangerous. In attempting to challenge the latter narrative that assumes their ostensible marginalization in their rural communities, the photographers posting images to the Flickr group re-inscribe the former, collectively creating a visual narrative of the rural as an idyllic space of refuge and revealing the importance of the politics of space to the construction of their sexual identities.

Beyond pointing to the relevance of space and place, the images posted to the Flickr site also reveal the gendered operations within the group. The vast majority of the photographs were posted by men, the top five contributors to the site are men, and images of men dominate the site. Of the site's 388 photographs, 124 contain men, often as the sole person in the photograph. Forty-five of these images include two men who are presumably meant to be read as coupled based on the actions captured within the image, comments provided by the photographer or other group members,

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or as understood within the context of other photographs posted on the site.

By contrast, only twenty images contain people recognizable as women, including two of young girls, one of flag dancers, mixed-gender groups of friends, a (possible) family, and one LGBTQ political activist. Aside from the activist holding a protest sign, none of the images of women connote same-sex sexuality or desire. Even more striking, only one photograph of affectionate or coupled women is posted on this site.[34] In this image, two women enjoy a moment of intimacy outside in the rain, hidden from the camera by a bright blue umbrella, rain drops falling into the puddles filling their (rural or suburban) street, complete with cookie-cutter homes, a U.S. flag, and a non-descript car—a picture of normalcy that is fully in line with the group's representation of rural and suburban gay people as firmly rooted in their communities.[35] The kissing women stand in the center of a neighborhood's flooded street, taking the time to kick up their feet and enjoy a moment of intimacy. The position of the umbrella simultaneously shields the lovers from the viewers and makes them visible to their rural or suburban community. But these women are not concerned with the neighbors. They own this street. They are not in a rush. They belong here.

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[34] If you do the math, my breakdown does not total 388 photos. I classified eight photographs as gender-neutral because they include people with ambiguous genders. This is clearly not a quantitative analysis; I am providing these numbers to highlight the male dominated nature of the site.

[35] While this photo does not connote any particular rural aesthetics, it is posted on a site dedicated to "suburban and rural gay life." Further, to assume the photo is not of a rural space (especially when posted on this particular site) reiterates the privileged space of the (sub)urban in our imaginaries.

Love(EXPLORE): An image posted in "Suburban and Rural Gay Life" at Flickr.com.

Yet, in other ways, this anomalous image exists outside of the norms

established by the Flickr group and challenges their stated purpose: "While suburban

and rural gay life might not be quite as visible as gay life in the cities, we are out

there and we are living our lives. Here's your chance to show it off."[36] The women in

this image, as presented by their photographer, are not interested in showing it off.

They are not interested in using this site to increase the visibility of rural and

suburban gays. In the only photograph of two women together, in which sexuality is

hinted at but not made explicit, the women are veiled behind an umbrella. Viewers

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[36] "Suburban and Rural Gay Life" on Flickr.com.
http://api.flickr.com/services/feeds/groups_discuss.gne?id=662371@N22&lang=en-us&format=rss_200. Accessed 5/28/2013.

are, of course, meant to assume their intimacy. The genders, and thus sexualities, of the women are largely ambiguous, only made clear in a comment on the photograph. Jackson H., the photographer who posted the image, wrote, "love(EXPLORE). . . hahaha i didnt have a guy with me so is used 2 girls hahahah" (sic). Within the context of this particular site, Jackson's light-hearted comment suggests that he would have preferred to be in the photograph with another man. It also suggests that Jackson H. recognized that the posting of a photograph of two women on this site, an obvious rarity, required an explanation.

The dearth of representations of women on the Flickr site, as well as the veiled or partial visibility in the site's sole image of two intimate women, suggests that consumable visible representation on such a site is not important to rural LGBTQ women, a trend evident online more broadly. That the Flickr site is symptomatic of a general lack of online representations of rural LGBTQ women further crystallizes the paradoxical nature of the tension between calls for LGBTQ visibility and the approaches of rural LGBTQ women. For example, I have yet to locate a single blog or website authored by an LGBTQ-identified woman from the rural Midwest. Of course, it is possible that these women are blogging and creating websites without writing about their sexuality or that their blogs and websites are not open to public viewing. In either of these speculative cases, the women would not be utilizing this medium as a way to increase visibility or gain the rights to which increased visibility will ostensibly lead. The absence of websites run by and for LGBTQ rural women as well as the lacunae of representations of LGBTQ rural women on sites dedicated to

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rural gay life,[37] here exemplified through the Flickr group, is an argument for the significance of a null set: the online invisibility of rural LGBTQ women, from the Midwest or otherwise, suggests that this demographic is not using the Internet as a site to increase their visibility, contrary to popular narratives. It also provides additional evidence for a claim I make here: that rural LGBTQ women disidentify with calls for visibility—a point best made by my interviewees' themselves.

Outness, Visibility, Rurality, and Identity

The claim that LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest disidentify with gay rights groups' calls for visibility should not suggest that interviewees avoided visibility discourses entirely or were explicitly critical of gay rights groups. This was, in fact, rarely the case. At the same time, many interviewees articulated a hard-and-fast refusal of visibility politics. Interviewees often utilized visibility discourses, but did so with a difference—to the extent that their deployments of such discourses challenge logics central to gay rights groups, including those which hold that visibility is necessary for and simultaneously equivalent to liberation. Following Butler, "the real task is to figure out how a subject who is constituted in and by discourses then recites that very same discourse but perhaps to another purpose"

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[37] Individual blog posts or articles on rural LGBTQness exist on other sites that may or may not focus on rurality or sexuality, or may concentrate on LGBTQ sexualities, but only peripherally consider rurality. Consider, as examples, the post titled "Rural Route Lesbians" on the blog *Welcome to our Big Gayborhood: Where the Queers Write.* Despite the blog's claim to be one big "gayborhood," this is the only post on the site relating to rural LGBTQ women. Other blogs and websites, such as Mary Gray's "Queer Country," focus on rural sexualities more generally, but do not specifically address issues relating to LGBTQ women.

(1999, 165).   Drawing from Althusser, Butler asks, "What does it mean to

appropriate the terms by which one is hailed or the discourses in which one is

constituted?" (Bell 1999, 164).

Butler's question gestures toward the ways in which people negotiate the

complexities of everyday life in complicated ways, a process that results in what

Avery Gordon terms "complex personhood."

> Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about
> themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about
> their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is
> immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are
> reaching toward…Complex personhood is about conferring the respect
> on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are
> simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning
> (Gordon [1997] 2008, 4-5).

In what follows, I share that which may appear to be straightforward about

interviewees' stories in an attempt to grapple with the "enormously subtle meaning"

of their lives and how this subtlety illuminates the falsities and fissures of a

hegemonic visibility-centered politic. I analyze interviewees' articulations of their

relationships to visibility, their appropriation of terms and logics that they undermine

even as they deploy them. I begin by considering why it is that my interviewees

expressed a disinterest in visibility, focusing on their lack of identification with their

sexuality and the role of rurality in shaping their positions. My goal here is not to

further complicate what it means to come out (I have drawn substantially in this

chapter from those scholars who convincingly do so)[38], but rather to think about how interviewees' positions regarding LGBTQ identity as well as their geographical positionalities manifest in their disidentifications with dominant conceptions of visibility.

Interviewees shared stories that speak to the complex relationships between and among coming out and viewing oneself as visible, coming out and being out, and various forms of visibility. In fact, many of my interviewees would be considered "closeted" according to dominant cultural narratives regarding what it means to "be out": that one has *explicitly told* their co-workers, friends, family, and, most importantly, parents about their sexual orientation. Although my interviewees overwhelmingly viewed themselves as "out," most had explicitly come out to very few people. This resistance to coming out is, I suggest, largely rooted in their lack of identifying strongly with an LGBTQ identity and a broader disinterest in the ways in which gay rights groups politicize sexuality, both of which I consider here, respectively. In the following passages, it will become evident that interviewees craft their identities in ways that neither centralize nor ignore their sexualities. This form of crafting implicitly rejects mainstream gay rights advocates' assumption that visibility is the key to self-actualization. Based on interviewees' testimonies, it is evident that in some cases visibility actually interferes with rural LGBTQ women's ability to be

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[38] I share stories that speak to the complicated nature of what it means to be out for my interviewees in chapter five, in which I consider how people negotiate visibility politics in the workplace.

themselves, live their sexualities, and engage politics in ways that feel authentic to them.

For Eileen[39], a lower-middle-class white woman in her late-20s who lives in southeastern South Dakota, her sexuality is part of who she is, but it does not dominate or define her identity. Instead, she explains that "coming out" as a lesbian, a process that was marked by going "absolutely crazy," was only a first step in her self-realization; she subsequently came into herself as Eileen, someone defined by more than just her sexuality:

> My mom and I have this conversation all the time. Me being gay does not create who I am. It is a part of who I—of my identity and that's something...it took me a long time to realize. [In] my Kansas City experience, 'Eileen is gay.' [The people in my circle] were on the exact same level…I used to have hair down almost to my butt. I went to Kansas City and shaved my head. I buzzed it. I went to Pride in Kansas City and went crazy. I shaved my head, I met some girl, we were gonna get married like in two days, forty eight hours. Like went absolutely crazy because that's who I was, and...[now][my partner] to me is number one in my life and there's nothing I would do to hide that, there's nothing I would do to shy away from that subject… that's who I'm going to love for the rest of my life. But I'm also Eileen, I'm also, you know, a full-time employee, I also…have my own circle of friends that I can hang out with…everyone else when I came out saw me as 'the lesbian,' but it's almost taken me just as long to realize that there's more to me than just my sexuality. There's a lot of other aspects to me that are still just as important…absolutely it's not everything, or all, or the most important, it's just, it's there.

Although Claudia, a lower-middle-class, white, disabled woman in her late-20s who lives in central Minnesota and is in an inter-racial relationship, like Eileen, also used the language of "coming out," she explicitly resisted the assumption that, as

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[39] All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

an "out" person her sexuality defines her identity. Noting that, as a former graduate

student in sociology she understands identity labels based in difference as products of

social construction, she explained that she is not comfortable allowing those

constructions to label her. She stated in regards to relating to an LGBTQ identity:

> I think that it's really interesting that people…want people to identify and even in the LGBT community people want people to identify. And I know I've always kinda resisted identifying as anything. And so even calling myself a lesbian doesn't feel accurate. Even calling myself bisexual doesn't feel accurate either. I don't feel that my identity is in my sexual orientation…In the LGBT community, a lot of people put their identity in their sexual orientation probably because its marginalized…But I've always kinda resisted that and so I don't necessarily see…myself as an LGBT person. I just see myself. I identify as a woman pretty strongly. You know because it's always been there. But I'm more. You know I just see myself as a person who fell in love with a person…And so it's very strange. I feel like it's very strange to go from…a privileged status to an oppressed minority status just like that. [After] I came out in college, I didn't really identify as anything…People would ask you in grad school…what your orientation is. And it always made me uncomfortable…I was never really sure how to answer that because I didn't identify as straight, lesbian, or bi. Anything. Or even as queer. You know some people would say, 'Oh, well then you're just in the queer category.' No. You know, I just feel like why do I have to pick an identity all because I have something that is a difference? But it doesn't have to be my identity…We don't identify. We don't have identities based on other differences between us. You know. I'm aware that it's very socially constructed, this whole identity thing. Probably because I studied it.

Similarly, Jody, a lower-middle-class white woman in her late-40s who lives

in southeastern South Dakota, explains that her personality and physical traits are just

as important to her identity as her sexuality:

It's not the biggest thing that I am, it's just something that's a part of me but it's a small part of me…I hope that people think that I'm a really good person, and I hope they think that I'm caring, and kind, and compassionate, …blue eyed, five foot eight, 120 pounds…It's a part of me that's no bigger than most of those other parts. You know, I seriously think that being a gay is so far down on my totem pole, I'm so much more engrossed in sports and fantasy football than I ever would be about who's gay.

For Glenda, a middle-class white woman in her early-20s who lives in western South Dakota, her identity is also predicated as much on her personality, in this case, being a smart ass, as her sexuality:

Well, I don't really see my sexuality as…who I am, the forefront of who I am. My personality…is who I am. And that's how my friends and family see me, like you're just [Glenda]. I'm a very big smart ass. I get it from my father…I'm just like very loyal, caring…love to listen to people…always there for anybody, just…very sweet. I'm a very old soul, gentlemen-y kind of person, I guess….I'm a smart ass and I'm a lesbian.

Jolene, a lower-middle-class white woman in her late-20s who lives in central Minnesota, sees identity as something that might thwart personal growth:

If you have friends [with whom] the only thing you…have in common is drinking, well, you know every time you go out you're just going to get wasted. If you have certain friends that all you guys do [together] is talk about twilight, you're going to get your twilight charts….I think, then, like [focusing on a] certain only identifying factor…you…miss growing because you can be that forever... Regardless of it, you need to grow in other ways.

Bobbi and JJ, two middle-class white women who live in central Minnesota, and in their early-70s and early-50s, respectively, have been partnered for decades. I

asked them if they use the Internet in search of gay community. JJ responded with a

laugh and a snicker, "No, for gay. I wouldn't be looking for gay communities

…because I wouldn't want to identify that way."

> I don't relate to somebody based on sexuality because sexuality isn't
> what it's about for me…and so why would [I] go and have the whole
> basis of a relationship based on something that's kind of irrelevant in
> my life…what sense does that make?…It's like, okay, we just
> happened to both share the same prejudice…that's not something to
> base a relationship on. When you keep dividing us up into identities,
> what's left? Ya know, and it, and it means I'm basically reduced to
> this identity and that there isn't something true about me that's beyond
> all of the identities.

Bobbi chimed in to express that sometimes she thinks "wouldn't it be nice to have [a

gay community] but then as soon as we think of the reality of that, we say, 'Why

would we move into that jungle?'" JJ agreed, "That's…not us." JJ described feeling

alienated by feminists and queers who have what she called "a hard line." For JJ,

building politics out of identity actually contributes to her feeling invisible, even, or

perhaps especially, within a group of people who share her sexuality:

> Where I'm gonna be defined, I'm gonna be more pigeon-holed by
> [feminist and queer activists] placing an identity on me. Even though
> they're…doing it for my purpose…*they aren't seeing me* [emphasis
> added]. They've got much more painting on their glasses when they
> look at me than the people around here will.

Each of these interviewees made clear that she is not closeted or not out. As

Bobbi explained, "It's not that we are denying [our sexuality] at all." JJ, her partner,

added, laughing, "No, no we live it." A refusal to hide or deny one's sexuality does

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not equate to strongly identifying with it, of course. For these interviewees, in fact, rejecting an identity defined exclusively by sexuality allows them to become the fullest version of themselves, which includes living their sexuality.

In addition to a disinterest in organizing their lives around an identity, interviewees also resisted politicizing their sexuality in the ways that gay rights groups demand. Interviewees overwhelmingly expressed disdain for the ways in which sexuality has been politicized, and in particular, those approaches that they see as "in-your-face." While interviewees rarely explicitly questioned the goals of lesbian and gay movements—and often used discourses that suggest a deep intertwinement with such movements—they did express disdain for the (ideologies undergirding the) approaches of such groups, highlighting the ways in which visibility politics exist as contested and contestable terrain. In what follows, I share stories in which interviewees complicate the relationships among identity, visibility, and the political in an effort to glean a more complex understanding of what might account for interviewees' disindentification with gay rights advocates' strategies.

"I'm Just Me": On Politics and the Politicization of Sexuality

Across the interviews, the question of visibility was understood to be fundamentally political and rooted in an identification; indeed, the link between the political, identity, and visibility was referenced by many interviewees, who often expressed their disinterest in the political by disavowing an LGBTQ-centered identity or the "out, loud, and proud" strategies of visibility upon which LGBTQ organizations rely. Importantly, many of the interviews explain their aversion to

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pursuing a politics based on sexual identity as a function of their general feeling of

belonging even while they do not hide their sexuality. Community, then, is a more

attractive priority than politically contrived forms of visibility for rural LGBTQ

women who live their sexuality but do not define themselves by it.

Marie, a middle-class white woman in her mid-30s who lives in southeastern

South Dakota, stated that she does not see sexuality as political. Although she tries to

avoid politics, she also will "follow [national gay issues]…just [to] kind of see what's

going [on] *out there*."

> A lot of my friends [are not] the raising-your-fist type. I've never
> really had…a friend that's like, 'Lets go on a March!' I just kind of
> steer clear of all that stuff...Just because I'm gay doesn't mean I have
> to go out and join every movement. We always laugh like, 'I'm not
> going to carry a damn rainbow flag and have a parade with horns and
> stuff behind me.' No. So I mean just because it's who I am doesn't
> mean I have to all of a sudden join a movement. And that's probably
> most of my friends. I mean we'll go to…Prides probably because they
> have beer there. It's probably about 95% of why the lesbians are there:
> The beer garden! It's not because you're going to sign up and join a
> movement. They just want to go have fun. It's a social thing. Lesbians
> are very social. They like the social groups and stuff. And you get beer
> and other girls there, you're going to have a good turnout.

Nissa, a middle-class Native woman in her late 20s from northern Minnesota,

wishes that sexuality did not need to be political. In regards to politics, Nissa stated,

"I don't really care. I try not to get into that…because it gives me a headache." Her

remarks, in fact, suggest she does not need to politicize her sexuality because she

does not feel alienated in the first place:

I don't feel you know like 'Oh I'm gay, I'm an outsider and I need to'…I just feel like me. I don't feel any different than I was before I came out, so I just live my life normal…I don't live it any different.

Similarly, Casey, a white woman in her early-30s who lives in southeastern South Dakota and marked her class status as "student," explained that she does not feel a pressing need to make politics out of her identity. When asked whether or not she sees her sexuality as a political issue, she answered:

No. I don't. I don't. I would be interested in, I think, like the bullying thing. That's really as far as it goes. I don't really want to, you know, picket for marriage. I don't need to be doing it because for me it doesn't really make a difference. [My partner] and I will be fine no matter what the law is.

Bethany, a lower-middle-class white woman in her late-40s, answered the same question with a bit more trepidation than most others, "I don't know. I don't think I've thought about that. You know maybe if I was more out there. I, I don't know."

Leslie, a middle-class Native women in her late-40s who lives on a reservation in northern Minnesota, quickly responded that, "No," her sexuality is not political. I followed up by asking if she sees her race as political. She responded without hesitation, stating "Yeah, yeah." After thinking for a moment, she smiled, laughed, and added, "That one threw me off, okay." She continued:

I was in college…and one Native girl came up and said, 'We're gonna go and march…and say we're gay and all of this, and you better come

with us'…No, I'm not gonna go. That's not who I am, that's not how I was brought up…you don't stick out.

On our way out of the casino after the interview, Leslie commented that she was still stuck on thinking about whether her sexuality could be politicized in the ways in which race always has been for her.

Nancy, a poor white lesbian in her 40s responded to the question regarding the politicization of her sexuality by stating simply, "I don't. I know a lot of people do. And actually, I'm not very political at all. Like not at all."

I do try to keep up on…the current events, like the Don't Ask, Don't Tell…but…that's not my purpose in life, and I'm just kind of who I am, and I'll be supportive, and open, and accepting, and affirming…but I don't like to go into all that…I'm not real loud, and I never have been, but I am out, and I'm proud of everything about me, and I know that to the people who matter to me, that I am fine, and I don't have to be loud…But I don't go to parades, and do that stuff…I don't know how to explain it.

Nancy has never been to the gay bar in Sioux Falls but has taken her daughters to LGBTQ events, such as a film screening of *Out in the Silence*, a film about LGBTQ people in rural places. She will go to events that are "educational, and aren't just about being belligerent and forcing your views on people…It's educational and it's gentle." I followed up by asking if she is connected to any national gay rights organizations or issues. She responded, feeling me out, "No. Should I be? What do you think?" When I responded with, "No, I don't," Nancy immediately became more comfortable, answering "Okay. Good."

None of these women see their sexualities as political. Each answered the question by referencing the assumed relationship between the political and the visible: If only Bethany was more "out there," perhaps she would view her sexuality as political. Marie, like Nancy and Casey, tries to keep up on national LGBTQ issues happening "out there," although she does not have any interest in rainbow flags, parades, or movements—terms that LGBTQ advocates use to gesture toward politicized visibility. Leslie has no desire to "stick out" and Nissa said she lives no differently than before she came out. At the same time, none of these women hide their sexuality, and, in fact, reference feelings of belonging and acceptance by loved ones who are aware of their sexualities.

Despite their general disinterest in politics, some interviewees answered questions that would not require referencing lesbian and gay rights groups by commenting on the politics of these very groups. Genie, a middle-aged, middle-class white woman, has been partnered with women for more than twenty years but refuses to identify with any sort of label in regards to her sexuality, leaving blank the sexual orientation slot on the demographic form I distributed to interviewees, stating, "I'm just me." I asked if her dislike of labels suggests that her sexuality is not a significant part of her identity.

> You'll never find me in a parade. Guaranteed. Will never be in a parade. I'm not gonna advocate for gay, lesbian, any rights like that. I will not do it. If I'm gonna advocate for something, it's gonna be, ya know…you're being an asshole, knock it off!

Although Genie made light of advocating for issues, she is incredibly involved in her

local community and she also sits on the board of a national disability rights

organization. Of lesbian and gay rights issues, she said, "It's not important to me."

She viewed the advocating of gay marriage as a "circus" and described gay rights

parades as an "offensive" shoving of beliefs onto others, something she is "turned off

by [rather than] motivated [by]." Genie expands upon this stance by referencing her

little town:

> If you wanted to have a gay rights parade in [the town in which I live],
> not gonna fly. You can't [be] in-your-face [to] people here, but if you
> want to just live your life and be who you are, let's just do it.

Although Genie offered her take on lesbian and gay politics in response to a question

regarding her sexual identity, she also expressed great surprise at my asking, "Do you

see your sexuality as political?" This question links the political with personal

identification and experience in a way that mirrors the very logics Genie deployed in

answering my question about her sexual identity by referencing contemporary

approaches to gaining political rights. In other words, Genie sutured personal identity

to political organizations, even as she questioned and pushed back against this very

tethering. Genie thought for several seconds before answering:

> Wow…On a national level, I can see where it would be….A personal
> level? No…I've never ya know, I've never been asked that question so
> I was like wow….Okay.

While it would be easy to view interviewees' lack of interest in LGBTQ issues as a disavowal of the political more broadly, this reading ignores the ways in which interviewees engage in and connect with a variety of political issues. And yet their approach to the political issues that interest them reflects their approach to sexuality – visible identification does not appeal to them and is not understood to be a pre-requisite for meaningful engagement with (what are assumed to be) accompanying issues. Indeed, Marie and her partner talk about marriage, an issue that is widely understood as political. And Genie and Leslie have both run for public office. Ideas about visibility are central to how Genie and Leslie describe their political positions and approaches to politics. When Leslie ran for the position of her tribe's chairperson, she did so as a "silent candidate" who "did not campaign openly," choosing instead to be "just a name on a ballot." When I asked why, she responded:

> Because that's how my life has been actually. Just…now…I realized that. In silen[ce], we were two-spirited…I just realized [during the interview] that everything was done without saying, and I ran without…promoting myself.

Leslie's political commitments are to her tribe. When I asked about her political leanings, she responded that she votes for "whoever supports treaty rights, [or is] leaning toward the positive outcomes of Native American people. That's who I vote for." I followed up by asking if gay rights issues are important to her. Leslie responded, "Sometimes I think so but sometimes, I don't know…It's hard to…put a label on your forehead and say 'This is who I am.' So I don't really know." Leslie said that she peripherally follows mainstream gay politics and stays informed via her

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two-spirit friends who let her know when relevant issues emerge. Leslie's identity as two-spirit, rather than with "lesbian" or another term captured by the LGBTQ acronym, was common among the Native women I interviewed, a point that speaks to their commitment to and prioritizing of traditional Native knowledges.[40]

Like Leslie, Genie has also run for public office. Genie idolized her grandmother, a registered Republican, and followed in her footsteps by registering as a Republican when she turned eighteen years old. Years later, she campaigned as a Republican. When I asked about her political leanings, she responded, "Honestly? More and more, I'm a closeted democrat." A disinterest in making one's positions visible is central to interviewees' approaches to the political: Leslie ran as a silent candidate and Genie kept her political views "closeted." It is telling that even the two interviewees who had previously run for political office did not see their sexualities as political.

This position was echoed by Kayla, a lower-middle-class white woman in her late-30s who lives in southeastern South Dakota, "I just hate to think about politics, honestly." Her partner, Jody, a lower-middle-class white woman in her late-40s, added that she didn't see sexuality "as being related to politics at all." I asked about their interest in or involvement with any gay rights issues. Jody, Kayla, along with their friend Maryam whom I interviewed at the same time, stared back at me in

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[40] Two-spirit refers to a way of viewing gender and sexuality that has been documented in more than 150 North American tribal communities over the past 130 years. Two-spirited people often identify as both women and men and often possess characteristics that are typically seen in both women and men (Roscoe 1991). While some scholars have termed two-spiritedness a "third gender" (Herdt 1996), others have critiqued this framing (Towle and Morgan 2002).

silence. Considering that this chatty trio had answered every other question with detailed and hilarious stories, the long pause in response to this question compelled a hearty laugh from each of us. Maryam, a lower-middle-class white woman in her mid-40s who lives nearby Jody and Kayla, worked to explain their silence, "It's not that we're against….rights." Jody added, "Well, we talk about getting married all the time." Kayla added, "But as far as saying marriage is legal for us, I don't really care." Although Kayla, Jody and Maryam expressed a common disinterest in mainstream politics, LGBTQ and otherwise, this should not suggest that they are uninvolved with their local communities or with political issues. All three, for example, are involved with a national disability rights group and told stories of challenging peoples' use of disability-phobic terms. In this realm, all three are extremely active and made themselves visible as advocates. Kayla, who has a daughter with an intellectual disability, explained this distinction:

> I don't think of myself as a minority [and] that I need to join something, well, for my cause. I would much rather rally for…these [disabled] kids than for a gay issue. I think it's selfish… I can see [my daughter] getting picked on a lot faster than a gay or lesbian student.

Kayla explicitly connected a victimized identity to LGBTQ movements and explained that her lack of identification in this manner accounts for her lack of participation in these movements. She also gave a geographic justification, stating:

> I don't think that people in the Midwest really get involved in that kind of stuff…We've got to live our lives, go about our business…I think it's more of a coastal kind of thing where they think they need to be

> involved and changing the world….We just want to drink beer and
> watch football.

Jody agreed, providing an additional justification rooted in geography and in

generational ties to community:

> How hard we've, how hard our relatives had to work to exist in this
> environment and part of that is still in us….There wasn't any time to
> worry about issues up until not so long ago, maybe the 70s.

As Jody, Kayla, and Maryam suggest, interviewees' tended to resist gay rights

advocates' demands for visibility, explaining their resistance not only through

describing their sexuality as not particularly relevant to their identities, lives, or their

relations with others, but also as a reflection of the conditions of rural life.

In what follows, I suggest that rural ways of being, living, and communicating

influence interviewees' positions in at least two ways: the manners in which

knowledge circulates in rural communities as well as, drawing again from Mary Gray,

rural LGBTQ people's prioritizing of similarity rather than difference. As will

become clear, I see these characteristics of rurality as deeply intertwined.

Interviewees expressed that they feel not only not closeted but also known and

even *visible* because everyone in their communities knows about their sexuality due

to the ways in which information circulates in rural spaces; that is, everyone knows

everything about everyone. Interviewees felt it was rarely necessary to "come out"

because everyone already knows. As Leslie said:

> Everybody knows. A lot of people, well, they'll say, 'Well, I didn't know that,' you know, and it's like oh c'mon. Yeah I've lived with a couple women, so, yeah, people know. They try to say they don't know, but you know how that goes.

Leslie's friend who was with her during the interview agreed, "The reservation is so small you'd have to be blind, deaf, dumb and stupid not to. It would be an impossibility." The notion here is that one would have to be wholly incapable of communicating with others in order to not know any piece of the constantly circulating information about all community members.

Interviewees felt as if stating what they assumed people already know is unnecessary, a garish manner of imposing one's ways of living onto others, and a harmful way of distinguishing oneself from the community. In regard to this latter point, Jody stated:

> My community is probably pretty small…I have really good friends but not a whole shit ton of them. Our church community, the family's very supportive…people at work. I, I can't imagine that it's anything different than heterosexuals. I just, I don't see any distinction at all.

And Jolene said, "I have a gay community. They are just all straight." For Jolene, community is composed of people who support you, rather than people with similar social and political identifications. Therefore, it seems perfectly logical that her straight friends are her gay community. Jody framed LGBTQ people as *similar to* the people in their rural communities; she sees no distinction at all between community for rural LGBTQ people and rural straight people. And JJ and Bobbi feel more "seen" by people in their rural communities than by feminist and LGBTQ activists.

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I have suggested here that LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest can feel out

and visible without ever speaking about their sexuality, identifying strongly with it, or

politicizing it. The alternative ways of being visible and valuing visibility evident

among LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest quietly strike at the heart of the logics of

gay rights advocates. In a similar (quiet) fashion, interviewees also challenged local

enactments of homophobia. In the final section of this chapter, I briefly consider how

the approach to LGBTQ visibility (and community and identity, more broadly)

articulated here informs the production of a localized resistance to both dominant

LGBTQ politics and local forms of homophobia that exists beyond the out, loud, and

proud.

Quiet Resistances

Lavonne, a middle-class white woman in her early-30s who is a university

professor in southeastern South Dakota, responded to my question about whether she

feels visible:

> I don't know if I feel like I need to be the one to be this vocal
> champion of lesbian rights in [my town] in South Dakota…I feel like
> I'm just kind of doing that…by living my life and by teaching and by
> just meeting other people. Our neighbors have come to our house for
> dinner…I feel like that's enough championing. I suppose absolutely if
> I lived in a bigger city with the marches and this and that had big pride
> parades, absolutely I would be there.

And to a follow-up question I asked regarding whether she sees herself as an activist,

she replied:

> Um, no. But I think again if I lived in a place where [activism happened]…I could totally see myself marching around the capitol or doing something….I don't think I'm an activist in a stereotypical understanding of what it is. But then I'm also…not revolutionary by any means, but…I'm doing things the way I want to do them...I guess I'm not letting tradition or prescribed rules dictate. So I suppose that's what an activist [does]...I don't know!

Lavonne actively displaced activism from the city in which she currently lives; it is something that happens in "bigger cities" and in "capitols." Political activism is not something with which she feels as if she needs to engage in her current city. Incidentally, the city in which Lavonne lives has a gay bar, LGBTQ social and political groups, softball teams almost entirely made up of LGBTQ women, and developed Pride activities. Lavonne knows this, and mentioned at one point that she might join the softball league. Despite this, Lavonne will leave the political activism to those elsewhere. To those who aren't, like her, "sneaky" activists, one who simply attempts to inspire students to think about LGBTQ issues in complex manners *without* her coming out to them (Lavonne is not out to her colleagues or students).

> [Students] write a big research paper, and the model like I give them is a paper [in support of] gay marriage. And I'm like regardless of your feelings on it this is a really good paper because it does this, this and that. And then they have to read the paper. You know what I mean. So I do all these subtle like things to get them to think about rights and equality and diversity and inclusiveness and all that stuff. So I don't know, maybe…It's a maybe. A sneaky, very subtle quiet activist.

Like Lavonne, neither Mona nor Gladys, two middle-class white women in their mid-40s who have been partnered for two decades, like the word "activism" and they are

not engaged with gay rights groups or activities. Mona and Gladys are "out" and "proud" in ways that are not "loud." Gladys stated, "I feel like we're out to …the people in our life that matter." Mona responded "And we're proud. But we aren't loud about it. I mean, no." They see having children as something that required them to be visible. After working to get to know the other families at their children's elementary school, their older child moved schools for middle school. They had to get to know new school administrators, teachers, and parents. They also had to fill out forms. Mona asked rhetorically, "Is it important that we put down both parents? No. But I'm going to write down both parents on this form." I asked if they see these moments as activism or resistance.

> Well, it seems that as I'm getting old…Yeah, I'm going to tell you your form is screwed up…Yeah, maybe that's my own…little South Dakota way of oh! Here.

Gladys added, "Here are changes for you." Mona continued:

> You know I kind of enjoy calling up the electric company or whatever and they're like 'Well you're not [the name on the account].' And I'm like 'No, but I would be her wife.' And so I kind of like…to irritate people over the phone.

Gladys joked, "She likes to do it over the phone." Mona laughed, adding, "Do it over the phone not ever in person with anybody! I think that I would admit to that, yeah!"

For Gladys and Mona, there is political potential in challenging people and institutions that refuse to recognize them. But there is also political potential in

preserving the shadows in existence so that people can resist within existing structures without sacrifiing the functioning of their daily lives. Gladys and Mona each birthed one child and then they both adopted the child birthed by the other parent. According to Gladys and Mona, South Dakota is one of the few states that will allow an unmarried couple to adopt and to have both parents' names on a child's birth certificate—a "loophole" that Gladys and Mona were excited to point out does not exist in New York. They mentioned that they do not actively try to hide this information, but, at the same time, making this information visible would threaten the existence of the loophole. As Gladys said, "We don't want that to be known either so people can continue to do it. If they know about it, then they're going to close that loophole." In this particular case, then, visibility actively threatens an important channel through which they both resist heteronormativity and live the important truths of their lives.

Aly, a middle-class white woman in her early-30s who lives in South Dakota, works for an LGBTQ organization—one of the few people I interviewed who considers herself an activist. She discussed working to increase the visibility of the organization "because you can't access something if you don't know it's there." Aly's desire for visibility is in regard to increasing the visibility of services to those within a community, not increasing the visibility of their community to heterosexual people with the goal of gaining political rights. While Aly does see her sexuality as political, she has said that it is a political issue only "because ...those that are opposed make it political." Even as an employee of a local LGBTQ community center, Aly claims:

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> I don't make a point of talking about it. I also don't make a point of
> hiding it…If I meet somebody new and they talk about their husband
> or their wife or their girlfriend or their boyfriend, you know, I'll talk
> about mine…I won't hide the fact that I'm gay, but I also won't make
> an announcement, like, 'Hey, I'm gay!' You know, it's not the first
> thing, not even one of the first ten things I tell anyone about
> myself.…But then, because of my position, I'm also sometimes
> required to essentially be like, hey, gay. Very gay…Personally…I'm
> not all about trying to dress in rainbows all the time and announce to
> the world that I'm gay, but professionally, I mean, there's a rainbow
> flag right next to you right now.

Aly frames being visible as part of the politics of her job, and she makes a distinction

between this expectation and her personal approach. She also makes a distinction

between national organizations and the organization for which she works:

> The national organizations that you tend to hear about are ones that are
> fighting for political issues, and they're very important, but we're
> more here to serve all parts of the person. We're definitely interested
> in equality and rights, and we want those things, and think it's very
> important to fight for those things. We also think it's very
> important…for a fourteen year old gay kid to have a place to go so that
> they feel safe, or for…gay families with children to have a way to
> come together and show their kids that their families are normal too.
> There's just a lot of really small things about just being a person, not
> just a gay person. Being a person…gets forgotten in those big agendas
> that a lot of national organizations can have.

Aly speaks to what she sees as key differences between the efforts of national

LGBTQ groups and what happens at her Center, differences that Aly expresses in part

through visibility discourses. Personally, she does not always want to be "hey, gay,

very gay," but feels as if this is compelled of her as an employee of an LGBTQ

organization. This difference opens up the space to consider the other forms of quiet

challenges that LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest mount as resistance, both to

homophobic logics and to LGBTQ visibility politics more broadly. Lavonne, Mona, and Gladys avoid using the word activism to describe their actions because they feel they are sneakily, quietly, in a "little South Dakota way" challenging ideologies, and that adopting this tactic, unlike visibility, allows them to be most effective. They are not overt or visible (in the dominant LGBTQ sense of the word).

The predominance of metronormative narratives makes it clear that these quiet challenges to visibility politics register as little more than fancy ways of being closeted, which are, in turn, read as a symptom of apoliticality. This position cannot possibly capture interviewees' relationships to one another, to their sexualities, or to (those in) their rural communities. The representations, experiences, and narratives of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest suggest that this simple tethering of identity to outness to visibility to politicality must be re-thought, and urge us to see that what (in)visibility means, how it operates, and how it is valued are deeply geographically contingent.

Chapter Three

Visibility Politics, Metronormativity, and Nationalism:
Considering the Case of Jene Newsome

Jene Newsome, an Air Force Sergeant stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base

in rural western South Dakota, didn't tell. And no one asked. Until November of

2009, that is, when local police officers visited Newsome's home looking for her

partner and spotted a marriage certificate on her kitchen table. The officers

subsequently reported this piece of information to the military, essentially "outing"

Newsome, who was honorably discharged in January 2010 under "Don't Ask, Don't

Tell," the military's former policy that dictated that lesbian, gay, or bisexual

individuals could serve in the military so long as the military remained unaware of

their sexual orientation.[41] With assistance from attorneys at the American Civil

Liberties Union, Newsome filed a complaint against the Rapid City Police

Department, stating, "I played by 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'. . . I just don't agree with

what the Rapid City police department did. . . They violated a lot of internal policies

on their end, and I feel like my privacy was violated."[42] Newsome directed her

criticisms at the individual police officers involved with her case, rather than the

military or its policies.

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[41] The case I consider here obviously took place prior to the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in 2011.

[42] Newsome's quote, given to the Associated Press over the telephone, circulated in many news stories about the case. See for example, "Jene Newsome Discharged: Rapid City Police Told Air Force that Sergeant Was Lesbian," *Huffington Post*, March 13, 2010.
 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/13/jene-newsome-discharged-r_n_498134.html. Accessed 3/28/2013.

Despite Newsome's position, various liberal media sources, as well as national lesbian and gay rights organizations working to abolish "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," used Newsome's story to express and foment opposition to the policy. The *Washington Monthly*, one such liberal news source, wrote, "MEET JENE NEWSOME. . . The repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' pending in Congress, can't come quickly enough."[43] The remainder of this report argued for the need both to completely do away with "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and, in the interim, make the policy less stringent so that third-party "outings"—such as the one that occurred in Newsome's case—would not lead to the dismissal of military service members. Of course, readers did not actually "meet" Jene Newsome in this article, as its opening line promised. Instead, her story was co-opted to support a broader fight against "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," despite Newsome's own refusal to critique the policy.

Jene Newsome, like the interviewees I feature in the previous chapter, utilizes approaches that speak to a lack of alignment with dominant LGBTQ rights groups. In this chapter, I consider cultural representations of Newsome's case to explore the ways in which visibility discourses aid in the production of metronormative and nationalist logics.[44] I argue that a critical consideration of contemporary visibility politics is crucial for rural queer studies because the abjection of the rural, based as it

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[43] Steve Benen, "Political Animal," *Washington Monthly*, March 14, 2010. http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2010_03/022853.php. Accessed 3/28/2013

[44] To be clear, I solely consider cultural representations of Newsome's case. In preparation to return home to conduct interviews, I sent Newsome a Facebook message to see if she would be willing to be interviewed. She did not respond. Her lack of interest in being interviewed might be read as symptomatic of a disinterest in LGBTQ politics similar to that which I analyzed in the previous chapter.

is on metronormativity, informs and is informed by cultural and (LGBTQ) subcultural ideas regarding the political potential of visibility. I begin by considering the relations among urban/rural and global/local binaries to argue that simplistic assumptions about the liberty associated with political visibility not only render the rural backwards but also produce the non-West as anachronistic, and in the process facilitate nationalism.

The Rural and the Global: Linking Metronormativity and Nationalism

Transnational LGBTQ studies scholars and activists have problematized the totalizing discourses of international lesbian and gay rights organizations, pointing out that many of their assumptions do not necessarily apply in non-Western contexts. These scholars highlight, for example, the ways in which the deployment of Western categories and ideologies actually creates sexual subjectivities as well as their accompanying backlash and violences (Massad 2007, 183), the mutually constitutive nature of contemporary Western and non-Western LGBTQ identities (Boellstorff 2005 and 2007; Manalansan 2003), and the normalizing of Western lesbian and gay subjectivities so that non-Western (Muslim) subjects might come to occupy the space of the abject (Puar 2007, xxvii). A critique of visibility politics undergirds much of this scholarship, which calls into question the assumption that non-Western identities, representations, discourses, and strategies will be progressively influenced by Western intervention—to which visibility politics are central. Joseph Massad, for example, points out that the Egyptian government has attempted to repress the *public nature* of gay identification, rather than same-sex sexual activity (2007), a point that

speaks to Jasbir Puar's challenge of the promises visibility and representation hold for non-Western LGBT people, through which she highlights "the limits of identity-based narratives of queerness, especially those reliant on visibility politics" (2007, xxvii).

I suggest that the kind of argument made by scholars of transnational LGBTQ sexualities—their challenge to the deployment of Western discourses, categories and strategies—may be parallelled *within* Western, and particularly rural, spaces. As I discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, rural queer studies scholars, and the rural LGBTQ people they feature, challenge hegemonic ideas regarding sexuality from positions that insist that space and place figure prominently in the ways in which people construct, discuss, and experience sexuality—a point that overlaps significantly with those claims made by transnational queer studies scholars and activists. Nearly a decade ago, Judith Halberstam, following Tom Boellstorff, called for such "translocal" analyses, arguing that examinations of this variety could complicate our understandings of sexuality within and outside the West (2005, 38). Boellstorff cautions against what he sees as those too simple narratives that pit the non-West against the West: "Claiming that concepts like 'homosexual,' 'sexuality,' and 'gender' fail to explain non-Western realities misleadingly applies that the concepts are adequate in the West" (2005, 8).

Other global (queer or otherwise) sexualities scholars argue that a focus on the global has the potential to make evident transhistorical and transgeographic connections that are unable to be unearthed without utilizing a global framework (Bleys 1995; Rupp 2009). Other scholars argue that there is a "danger [in] focusing

on a global or monolithic gay culture" precisely because the "local and national are inflected and implicated in manifold ways with each other and with the international/transnational on the level of everyday life" (Manalansan 2003, 190). While these two positions may initially appear contradictory, they also overlap in generative ways: both argue for the need to consider how the local and transnational intersect with one another. In other words, a global framework can make transnational and transhistorical connections without reproducing the idea of a global gay *culture* through focusing instead on global *flows*.

How we understand flows of meaning via global movement is at the heart of the scholarship on global sexualities—the movement of people (Constable 2003; Lubheid and Cantu 2005; Manalansan 2003), ideas (Altman 2001; Bleys 1995; Boellstorff 2005; Constable 2003; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998), and capital (Altman 2001; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Manalansan 2003). That several of these citations do double duty here points to the ways in which the movements between and among people, ideas, and capital cannot be easily disentangled, movements that happen on multiple scales simultaneously. Dennis Altman speaks to these multi-directional flows and forces, arguing that globalization has changed sexuality just as sexuality has impacted transnational cultural, technological, epistemological, and capital flows (2001). How we understand flows of (sexual) meaning is now, for Altman and many other scholars, a global question.

While the "global" has often been set up against the "local," this binaristic framing no longer works. J.K. Gibson-Graham speaks to this point, arguing that "the making of a new political imaginary is under way [that] confounds the timeworn

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oppositions between global and local, revolution and reform, opposition and experiment, institutional and individual transformation. It is not that these paired evaluative terms are no longer useful, but that they now refer to processes that inevitably overlap and intertwine" (2006, x).

It is this overlapping and intertwinement that I seek to explore. The recognition that both rural and non-Western LGBTQ subjects are read as pitiable, closeted, and victimized—their abjection crucial for the development of the type of liberated subjectivities against which they are deployed—creates possibilities for examining the relationship of the rural to the non-Western. Bridging the literatures on rural and non-Western sexualities creates opportunities to dismantle both urban/rural and global/local binaries and to examine the relations at play within each binary as well as the ways in which the binaries themselves are mutually constitutive. Assumptions about the rural are, of course, as informed by ideas about the urban as they are the global (both of which the rural is not), a point crucial for understanding the centrality of visibility politics to metronormative and nationalist logics.

I take off from the aforementioned queer theoretical examinations of visibility, as well as the literatures on LGBTQ sexualities in both rural U.S. and non-Western contexts, to consider an additional problematic of visibility politics: calls for visibility reassert the dominant narrative of the history of sexuality that Foucault has so famously argued against, a history that suggests we have moved from the repressive Victorian era, in which we could not talk about sex, to the present-day, where we are liberated enough to do so freely ([1978] 1990). Put another way, visibility is the mechanism through which a progress narrative is both made possible

and articulated. That LGBTQ people today can be "out, loud, and proud" functions as evidence that our society has progressed beyond the backwards ideas common to other eras, during which people were assumedly less open-minded and liberated and gays were either closeted or sexually repressed.

Such understandings of our contemporary moment are as bound to the geographic as they are to the temporal. Certain spaces, including the rural (Herring 2010) and the non-Western, exist in the cultural imaginary as inherently more regressive (Said 1979). Ideas about visibility are often central to such framings; the ostensible inability of LGBTQ people to be "out" *there* serves as evidence for such narratives, which simultaneously elide geographic and historical nuance. The closeted, afraid, and embarrassed LGBTQ people who inhabit non-Western and non-urban spaces today are imagined to exist in much the same way as LGBTQ people in the urban U.S. in prior (less advanced) historical periods.

Those who are "out, loud, and proud" simultaneously serve as embodied representations of both their own liberation and the progressive nature of the time and place in which they live. By extension, then, those LGBTQ people who do not fulfill dominant cultural and LGBTQ subcultural expectations for visibility come to exist in opposition to progress. According to this logic, if one does not confess, come out, and become visible, one must not be liberated enough to do so, or must not live in a time or place in which such a move is allowable. As Mary Gray argues, "gay visibility is simultaneously given a spatial location and a social value" (2009, 9). The spatial location is urban or Western and the value is progress.

Assumptions about visibility are central to progress narratives, which aid in

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the production of the nation as one that community members ought to be proud of.

One that gives people "equal rights." One that is on the right side of history. The

nation is, as Benedict Anderson argues, an "imagined community" (1991) that

occupies a prominent place in people's imagining of their lives. For Anderson,

"nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time"

(1991, 3).

It is my contention that nation-ness is produced (in part) through LGBTQ

visibility discourses—a point evident, for example, in the gay rights discourses

emerging out of Israel's LGBTQ tourism campaigns. As Jasbir Puar shows in her

critique of Israeli tourist campaigns' "pinkwashing"—the promotion of Israel's

supposed gay friendliness to downplay their occupation of Palestine and violations of

Palestinians' human rights—that LGBTQ people can be "out, loud, and proud" in

Israel is utilized as evidence for the country's progressive nature (2010). This

progressive gay-friendliness is implicitly and overtly contrasted with the supposed

homophobia of Palestine and Islam. Visibility discourses, and the narratives of

progress they compel, promote positive affective associations transnationally with

Israel and enable a sense of Israeli national belonging.

Although many rural queer studies scholars draw from transnational queer

studies scholarship, little work has teased out how exactly the queer rural and

transnational connect—aside from acknowledging their shared marginalization along

spatial lines. This oversight is evident in queer critiques of Israeli pinkwashing, which

largely ignore that the country's tourism campaigns locate their ostensible gay

friendliness in Israeli *cities*. Just as an LGBTQ traveler may not be safe in

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homophobic Palestine, these discourses suggest, one might also be in danger in Israel's rural areas.

Visibility politics function in the service of LGBTQ progress narratives and, by extension, what Benedict Anderson describes as the imagined community of the nation—the progressive nature of which is located in its cities. Put slightly differently, calls for visibility enable nationalism and metronormativity through narratives of social progress, which have at least three ramifications: LGBTQ people become conceptually inseparable from the time and place they inhabit (but in ways that manage to ignore the relevance of time and place to the construction of LGBTQ identity and experience); the rural and non-West are, once again, reproduced as abject; and normative understandings of "space-time" relations are reiterated (Massey 1992). The "naturalization of both time and space" at the heart of progress narratives obscures the ways in which visibility is a *constructed* spatial practice with ramifications for how we conceptualize the very spaces from which such practices emerge (Halberstam 2005, 8).

The ubiquity of calls to be out, loud, and proud has rendered it difficult to see how such calls participate in constructing space and place; the calls themselves, like the understandings of time and space they deploy, have been naturalized. But, as with all cultural logics, we can recognize moments in which certain fissures challenge this naturalization. Some fissures explicitly and directly challenge the status quo. Other fissures make evident logics that otherwise remain covert. The latter is evident in the following slogan, which one can see on T-shirts, LGBTQ websites, and banners at Pride events:

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The hide-and-seek refrain makes painfully clear the a-geographical nature of calls for LGBTQ people to be out, loud, and proud. *Wherever you* are, just do it. Within these logics, one homogenous LGBTQ subject exists. "You" are all alike. "You" are expected to act in one manner regardless of "wherever" you might live. No one and nowhere is exempt from the demand to come out and be visible. Such calls simultaneously disregard and render illegible and inauthentic all ways of being LGBTQ that cannot be understood within this model.

In an attempt to further elucidate the damages of ubiquitous calls for LGBTQ visibility and to examine the ways that these discourses encourage the production of metronormativity and nationalism, I examine here the discourses surrounding Jene Newsome's outing and military discharge.

Newsome in the News

In October 2009, Jene Newsome and her partner, Cheryl Hutson-Newsome, got married in Iowa, the only Midwestern state to have legalized same-sex marriage at the time. Just weeks later, the officers from the Rapid City Police Department came to Newsome's home looking for Hutson-Newsome, who was wanted on theft charges in Alaska, and subsequently saw the couple's marriage certificate. This incident led to

Newsome's eventual discharge from the military. With assistance from ACLU South

Dakota, Newsome filed a complaint against the city of Rapid City in which she asked

for $800,000 in damages, a policy change that would prohibit police officers from

releasing personal information to the military in the future, a reprimand for the

officers involved with her case, and a formal apology. Despite the applicability of

"Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and same-sex marriage rights—two issues that have recently

dominated the efforts of national lesbian and gay rights groups—to Newsome's case,

she continually aimed her criticisms at the Rapid City Police Department, rather than

commenting on either of these federal issues or the governmental institutions

responsible for such policies.

The vast majority of local and regional press coverage of Newsome's case

similarly focused on the Rapid City Police Department, with little mention of same-

sex marriage rights or "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Of the thirteen articles published in

the *Rapid City Journal* regarding Newsome's case, none focuses primarily on "Don't

Ask, Don't Tell" or even mentions marriage. An editorial written by the *Journal*'s

board begins, "The Rapid City Police Department has changed its policy on sharing

information with Ellsworth Air Force Base officials. The new policy states that only

the department's records custodian can turn over official documents to the military."[45]

The editors go on to describe this policy change, which emerged out of Newsome's

encounter, as "sensible," without addressing the national policies responsible for

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[45] "Editorial: Police Policy Change Makes Sense," *Rapid City Journal*, April 16,
2010. http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/editorial-police-policy-change-
makes-sense/article_1f1d892c-4966-11df-b6e3-001cc4c03286.html. Accessed
5/28/2013.

making Newsome's case notable in the first place; the word "marriage" is absent, and "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is mentioned just once. Much like Newsome's own approach, the editors work to de-couple Newsome's story from both national politics and from her sexuality, stating, "We don't see how the case would have been handled any differently regardless of Newsome's sexual orientation." It seems obvious that the case would have been handled differently had Newsome's partner been a man—in fact, there would have been no case. Had Newsome been married to a man sought by local police, officers could have plausibly contacted the military in their search, but reporting Newsome as married would have had no repercussions. In suggesting that Newsome's sexuality was extraneous to the officers' decisions, the editors depoliticize the case's connections to national debates over same-sex politics and shift the focus to the politics of policing in the context of the local community—re-politicizing the case in ways that mirror Newsome's concerns.

By contrast, Newsome was tertiary in the coverage of her story by urban non-Midwestern news sources and national lesbian and gay rights groups, which used the story in order to argue for same-sex marriage rights and the repealing of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," framing these issues, rather than the Rapid City Police Department, as the roots of Newsome's problems. Even in an article titled "Military Discharges Sergeant After Cops Out Her," posted to the *San Francisco Chronicle* website, national lesbian and gay political issues occupy at least as much space as does Newsome's actual story.[46] The article ends with a statement from Nathaniel Frank, a

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[46] Timberly Ross, "Military Discharges Sergeant after Cops Out Her," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 14, 2010.

researcher at the Palm Center, a former University of California, Santa Barbara, think tank dedicated to research regarding LGBT people in the military, "Even though 80 percent of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' discharges come from gay and lesbian service members who out themselves, third-party outings are some of the most heinous instances of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell.'" That the article ends by referencing a national political issue, rather than Newsome's story, marks a significant departure from the framings of the case by the local and regional press and by Newsome, who has said very little about third-party outings, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," or same-sex marriage, and has refrained from intertwining her narrative with discourses and positions evident in national political debates.

The complexity of Newsome's story is not captured, however, by viewing her case as a simple co-optation of rural stories for the fulfillment of urban goals. In fact, it is certainly possible that Newsome's desires could be in line with the goals of mainstream lesbian and gay rights-seeking organizations; she is, after all, both married and a former military employee. Furthermore, her demands for compensation included public reprimands of the officers and a public apology. However, even in this case, Newsome's desires were never for her own visibility, and were not intended to gain rights or further a movement, pointing to the distance between Newsome's approaches and those of national lesbian and gay rights organizations.

This is nowhere more evident than on the "Justice for Jene!" Facebook page, launched on March 13, 2010 by Newsome's friends. The anonymous creator of the

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http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/editorial-police-policy-change-makes-sense/article_1f1d892c-4966-11df-b6e3-001cc4c03286.html. Accessed 5/29/2013.

site, who goes by the name "Justice for Jene!," posted forty-eight messages between the day of its inception and June 3, 2010.[47] The group's first wall post, which mimicked the group's mission, stated, "Jene Newsome was outed by the Rapid City Police Department for no apparent reason to the United States Air Force. Because of the outing Jene, a nine year service member, has been removed based upon the military's 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. Let's end DADT and get justice for Jene!" Although "Justice for Jene!"'s initial post called for ending "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and implied that doing so would result in local recompense, none of "Justice for Jene"'s future posts, nor the posts of the group's 5,135 fans, even reference the policy.

During the time in which the Facebook page was active, Congress considered legislation regarding "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the policy was consistently in the national spotlight. But neither Newsome herself nor her Facebook supporters conceptualized Jene's justice in relation to national lesbian and gay politics and, thus, challenging this policy could not possibly have been the intended purpose of the page, despite the aforementioned statements to the contrary. That "Justice for Jene!" never again mentioned "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in any of their forty-seven subsequent posts—but that the ban is referenced in the page's initial post and mission statement—speaks to the difficulty of discussing Newsome's case outside of the logics of conventional lesbian and gay politics as well as the desires of rural LGBTQ folks to do so.

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[47] While the creator of the site was anonymous, the content of the posts suggested that the creator lived in South Dakota, or, was extremely familiar with local politics through other avenues.

The "Justice for Jene!" Facebook page functioned to raise support for

Newsome's battle against local authorities and institutions. Forty-one of "Justice for

Jene!"'s forty-eight wall posts commented on the Rapid City Police Department,

Rapid City Council, or Rapid City Mayor. In one such post from April 6, 2010,

approximately one month after the site launched, "Justice for Jene!" wrote:

> The Rapid City Council discussed the situation with Jene last night but
> they are still not taking any official action. It's been three weeks since
> Jene's story went public and the Rapid City Council has not made a
> single statement. It looks as if they are simply going to allow the Rapid
> City Police Department to act and do what they want too (sic).

Such posts are reflective of Newsome's public statements documenting her frustration

with the police officers' violation of what she viewed as a set of unspoken local

norms that functioned to allow her to presume that her marriage was a private matter,

rather than with local politics that might appear to preclude her from being "out" or

visible. In many ways, Newsome was "out"; her family and friends knew about her

sexual orientation, and she is married, something scholars have argued both "forces

people to be out" and is a reflection of desires for "visibility and recognition of their

partnerships and families" (Bernstein and Taylor 2013, 18 and 5). Assumptions

regarding the value of visibility—which hinge on the idea that marriage and military

rights allow one to be one's most authentic (read: out) LGBTQ self—undergird

contemporary struggles for lesbian and gay rights. But such positions do not resonate

with those posting to the "Justice for Jene!" Facebook page or with Newsome, who is

married and out, but exists in ways that do not satisfy the demands of calls for

visibility. As Newsome said, "I'm not an activist. I hadn't planned to be changing my life…If I hadn't been discharged I'd be making the Air Force my career."[48] Newsome refused to frame her case in relation to the military or the federal government, or to work to change these institutions so that she might be allowed to exist in alternative (more visible) ways.

I opened this chapter by describing Newsome as an Air Force Sergeant stationed in Western South Dakota. I did not mention that she is Black or working-class, or that she is part of an interracial couple. I intentionally left out these descriptors for two reasons: first, it mirrors the omission of this information in deployments of her story by LGBTQ organizations as well as in the news coverage of her case; second, in utilizing Newsome's story as an entry point into my research, I have learned that when I do not make clear that Newsome is Black up front, people automatically assume she is white—a point that gestures toward the reading of the Midwest (and its people) as homogenously white.

Such a problematic is especially evident in South Dakota, a state largely imagined as white, but with particular racial dynamics that require serious consideration. For example, American Indians comprise eight percent of the state's population, the history of radical Indian activism continues to influence how race is understood in the state, and Indian leaders such as Cecilia Fire Thunder have made national headlines by discussing race in relation to contemporary political issues,

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[48] Frank Pizzoli, "Lesbian Air Force Sgt. Jene Newsome in DADT Grinder," *Central Voice*, March 20, 2010. http://centralvoice.wordpress.com/2010/03/20/lesbian-air-force-sgt-jene-newsome-in-dadt-grinder/. Accessed 3/28/2013.

including abortion and land rights. The framing of the Midwest as white allows for such intricacies to be left out of analyses, resulting in the further marginalization of racialized subjects.

In ignoring Newsome's race, lesbian and gay rights organizations, the ACLU, and local, regional, and national news unintentionally participated in constructing the Midwest as white and its racial minorities as inherent "others." In Newsome's case, the representation of the Midwest as white meant that groups deploying Newsome's story could not comment on her race because racialized subjects are always already outside of hegemonic representations of what constitutes both the (good) queer and the (good) rural Midwesterner—and yet Newsome was (even if temporarily) both.

The discursive and material complexities of Newsome's story are flattened when sexuality is not examined in relation to race or when race goes unacknowledged altogether. The "Justice for Jene!" Facebook page is the sole site in which the politics of race, an otherwise overlook dimension of the case, are commented upon in any capacity. The group's final two Facebook posts addressed racism explicitly. On June 2, 2010, "Justice for Jene!" wrote, "Continued race problems haunt policing in Rapid City," and included an accompanying link to an article in the *Rapid City Journal* that describes a march in protest against the Rapid City police department's refusal to punish an officer for his killing of a young Native man exactly one month earlier. The following day "Justice for Jene!" posted a link to a 1963 report on the racism of the Rapid City police department, stating:

> Rapid City, South Dakota has a fairly extensive past of racial discrimination. In 1963 the United States Government investigated allegations of racism against African-American Airmen from Ellsworth Air Force Base and found systemic racism. Racism continues to be an issue that haunts Rapid City.

Such posts simultaneously work to historicize contemporary instances of racism against Native people and to suggest that racism was involved in Newsome's case—a marked difference from the approaches of lesbian and gay rights groups, which ignored Newsome's race in their attempts to increase opposition to "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" via deploying Newsome's story, and often, ironically, her photo. Similarly, the ACLU disregarded the influence race may have had on the case. Although the discourses Newsome utilized—her critique of the Rapid City Police Department, rather than the U.S. military or government—directly reflect the history of police brutality against Black communities, Newsome also refrained from discussing her case through explicit discourses of race, framing her situation as one in which local police officers violated her privacy.

In some ways, this makes sense. Marriage and intimacy are, for Newsome, private matters, after all—a position that marks Newsome's approaches as distinct from those of lesbian and gay rights groups. Desires for privacy exist in fundamental opposition to calls for certain intimacies—largely those homonormative, and thus legible, enough to do the work of making LGBTQ desires appear normal and non-threatening—to be made publically visible. While Newsome's deployment of privacy discourses reflects the ways in which the contemporary neoliberal moment compels individualization, privacy also becomes the mode through which Newsome both

expresses a distancing from national lesbian and gay rights groups and also carves out

a place through which she can connect her case to histories of police brutality against

communities of color without explicitly addressing the potential racism involved in

her case.

The ignoring of Newsome's race, then, informs and is informed by the

metronormative narrative that constructs the rural as backwards, homophobic, and

stifling, always lacking the glamour, lights, and diversity of the big city.

Metronormativity benefits from dominant constructions of the rural as white, which

come to stand in for the ostensible safety *and* backwardness of the rural. The relation

of whiteness to both safety and backwardness is, of course, contextual. Certain people

are more likely to view the presumed whiteness of the rural as a reflection of political

conservativism and, thus, safety, while others will read this same rural whiteness as

standing in for political conservativism and, thus, danger for those who occupy

marginalized subject positions. Because I am concerned with the circulation of

narratives among liberals, progressives, and leftists, I am more concerned here with

how the ostensible whiteness of the rural enables the metronormative framing of the

rural as culture-less and anachronistic, an epistemology far more likely to be

deployed by those without conservative politics.

Newsome's case epitomizes critical race and whiteness studies scholars'

claims that understanding race in this contemporary political moment requires new

theoretical frames that take seriously the construction of whiteness. As Howard

Winant argues, "The recognition that racial identities—all racial identities, including

whiteness—have become implacably dualistic, could be far more liberating on the left

than it has thus far been" (2004, 67). Actualizing the liberating possibilities of this position requires that we analyze how spaces become racialized to the extent that not only are racial others in those spaces rendered illegible, but the spaces themselves get cast aside as beyond repair.

While metronormative narratives benefit from the erasing of race in rural locales, race remains central to narratives of Western-global and urban-global relations. Those with liberal political commitments, including those reminiscent of the lesbian and gay movement, who desire to be understood as "flexible subjects," who are tolerant of difference (McRuer 2006, 17-18), require various forms of (racial, gendered, sexual) otherness in order to perform their ideological flexibility. As such, non-Western LGBTQ subjects who move to the urban United States are compelled to retain their "otherness" in order for urban liberal subjects to assert a (nationalist) progress narrative and articulate their own flexible subjectivity. Without this otherness, rural folks cannot possibly develop this ideological flexibility. The rural's failure at multiculturalism, then, comes to represent the inability of its people to be "inclusive," and thus, its own backwardness.

The approaches of Jene Newsome and her Facebook fans depart from this metronormativity, as well as the broader ideologies of lesbian and gay rights groups of which this metronormativity is indicative. Such partings might best be understood as the type of disidentificatory practices I discuss in the previous chapter which, as José Muñoz argues, allow marginalized people to simultaneously work on, within, and against dominant ideologies, neither assimilating into nor dogmatically opposing such structures (1999, 11). Newsome and her supporters at "Justice for Jene!" neither

reproduce the discourses and strategies evident within national lesbian and gay groups nor engage in oppositional approaches that would place themselves outside of struggles for lesbian and gay rights. If Newsome and her supporters at "Justice for Jene!" identified with the logics of lesbian and gay rights groups, they likely would have blamed federal policies for Newsome's problems. If they counter-identified with such groups, they might reject the logics of the dominant system, and critique the military, the government, and marriage as oppressive institutions. Newsome and her Facebook fans disidentify, working on, within, and against dominant logics, power structures, and institutions.

Conclusion

Global and rural sexualities scholars have argued that the strategies of the contemporary lesbian and gay movement—including calls for visibility—are incongruous with the lives of LGBTQ people beyond Western metropoles. In this chapter, I extend this argument by considering what the estrangement between LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest and lesbian and gay rights organizations tells us about the relation of calls for visibility to metronormative and nationalist ideologies. Mary Gray explains that "reliance on family, local power dynamics, class and racial politics, and the cultural marginalization that structures these specific rural communities render them *ill-suited* to strategies of visibility" (2009, 30). The ill-suited nature of visibility politics to the rural tells us at least as much about the problematics of such strategies as it does the nature of the rural and the relationship of the rural to the urban.

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Rural queer studies must remain critical of such rights-seeking approaches, not because they are untenable in rural places, but rather, because they implicitly allow the rural to be made abject. For the purposes of my argument, the ill-suited nature of such strategies to the rural is, perhaps, less important than what this estrangement points toward: the ill-suited nature of the rural to the urban. Attempts to rectify the predominance of metronormative and nationalist ideologies are futile without a critical engagement with the modes through which such ideologies come to exist in the first place. Visibility politics—far from a simple reflection of the nature of rural communities or an effect of the hegemony of the urban—aid in the very existence of metronormativity and nationalism.

Chapter 4

The Post-Raciality and Post-Spatiality of Calls for LGBTQ and Disability Visibility

Just as secrets function as liberation's enemy for LGBTQ rights advocates, so do they for disability rights supporters. Those liberated enough to be "out, loud, and proud" about their (hidden) disability or sexuality are celebrated as the agents of society's ostensible progress and simultaneously serve as evidence of such advancement. In this chapter, I argue that contemporary visibility politics encourage the (re)production of post-racial and post-spatial logics. In demanding visibility, disability and LGBTQ rights advocates ignore, ironically, visible markers of (racial) difference and assume that being "out, loud, and proud" is desirable trans-geographically.

I begin by defining terms key to my argument and outlining the epistemological assemblages among rural queer and disability studies—fields that have engaged in remarkably little conversation. I then examine two examples of calls for visibility by LGBTQ/disability activists. The discourses evident in such calls transcend movements and virtual spaces and emerge as some of the LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest that I interviewed discuss their relations to (their own and others') LGBTQ sexuality and disability. I analyze several cases (two websites and three interviews) to illustrate how visibility discourses compel the erasure of material bodies, and in the process, render certain (spatialized and racialized) experiences obsolete. I close by considering how my critique of visibility discourses might influence critical discussions of identity politics more broadly.

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Setting the Stage: Terms and Assemblages

I suggest in this chapter that post-raciality and what I term "post-spatiality" are deeply intertwined concepts, the logics of which are furthered through visibility discourses. My understanding of "post-racial" relies upon Sumi Cho's definition: an "ideology that reflects a belief that due to the significant racial progress that has been made, the state need not engage in race-based remedies, and that civil society should eschew race as a central organizing principle of social action" (2009, 1594). Such post-racial logics are evident in calls for disability and LGBTQ visibility, which situate race and racism in the past, ignore ongoing racial injustices, and insist on colorblindness. These are the features of post-raciality I consider here.

Just as assumptions about social action and progress are at the heart of post-racialism, they, too, inflect metronormative logics—namely the idea that the rural is dangerous for LGBTQ people, who cannot live happily, let alone organize, here. What I term "post-spatial" expands upon rural queer studies scholars' discussions of metronormativity. As I mentioned in the Introduction, metronormative narratives naturalize urban/rural binaries, render the rural simultaneously anachronistic and unremarkable, and assign value to the one-directional move from the rural to the urban—as well as the out, loud, and proud ways of being such moves ostensibly enable. When the metaphysics of the metropolis become normative, prescriptive, hegemonic—always already assumed to apply trans-geographically—we are, I suggest, imagining post-spatially. Post-spatiality, then, undergirds the metronormativity that inflects and is reflected in calls for visibility.

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I bring together disability and rural queer studies because space is central to their analyses and, to a lesser degree, these fields have examined the relation of visibility to space. For disability studies scholars, space is central to how disability is understood and experienced: disability is a product of the social and spatial conditions that make it difficult to live with an impairment; the social constructionist model of disability argues that inaccessible spaces *create* disability, that disability does not exist prior to (the limits of a) space. This model for understanding disability, now the primary lens used by disability studies, has been critiqued for its focus on visuality (Samuels 2003) for if space, along with one's recognition of their own abnormality through another's gaze, creates disability, this model cannot capture the experiences of those with disabilities that seem to transcend space (chronic pain) or be invisible to others (Patsavas forthcoming). These approaches simultaneously marginalize those with invisible disabilities and, in calling for disclosure, target them (Samuels 2003). Others have suggested that disability studies' focus on visibility is masculinist (Corker 2001) and that visibility does not necessarily secure acceptance, particularly for those without race and class privilege (Kafer 2013, 46).

Despite such critical interventions, the relation of visibility to disability continues to be discussed in largely celebratory terms. Even in a special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* on invisibility and visibility, both the ideologies undergirding and the problematic implications of visibility politics as they relate to disability were left under-theorized (2003), pointing toward the ways that academic

scholarship has approached visibility and invisibility as binaristic and mirrored

movement assumptions that visibility represents and ushers in progress.[49]

For rural queer studies scholars, the space one occupies has as great an

influence on how we experience and identify in the world—our ways of constructing

meaningful lives, as well as our abjection, marginalization, desires—as other social

markers, a position with remarkable similarities to disability scholars' and advocates'

claims. Rural queer studies scholars suggest that LGBTQ desires, experiences, and

identities are value-laden in deeply spatial ways, a point epitomized through rural

queer disidentification with calls for LGBTQ visibility. The hegemony of

metronormativity renders these ways of being LGBTQ—beyond the out, loud, and

proud—unintelligible—or, worse, necessitates that these alternative approaches be

seen as reflecting the dangers of queer rurality, rather than the limits of visibility

frameworks. As I suggest in chapter three, visibility politics enable the very

production of the metronormativity rural queer studies scholars critique.

Much like space, then, visibility further ties together disability and rural queer

studies. Sexuality and disability can be both overt and hidden, or sometimes obvious

and sometimes hidden, or simultaneously explicit and hidden—obvious to some and

not to others. Despite the deep intellectual entanglements of rural queer and disability

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[49] For work that positions visibility as necessarily progressive see, Solis (2007) or
Corbett, who frames coming out as both enabling societal progress (via creating
possibilities for coalitions) and also reflecting individual progress (through which
people move from "self-oppression to self-respect" (1994, 349). In analyzing what
disability means for women with chronic illnesses, Jung unsettles disability as a
category, but, in doing so, leaves relatively intact visibility as a category. The
unintended result is a framing of invisible and visible disabilities as largely binaristic
(2011).

studies, there has been little conversation between the fields. Sexual geographers and rural queer studies scholars have acknowledged the glaring omission of analyses of women in their fields, but the omission of disability as both an analytic and a way of experiencing the world has seemingly gone unnoticed in these bodies of scholarship—an oversight with potentially significant ramifications for both bodies of thought. Hegemonic representations of the rural as largely able-bodied (with its big and strong farmers, mothers, laborers) influence how systems of sexuality are maintained and challenged, a point with which rural queer studies must grapple.[50] In a similar vein, disability studies would benefit from considering alternative conceptualizations of space beyond the built environment—geographic location, for example—as significant to how one experiences sexuality or disability.

I bring together and expand upon these analyses of space and visibility to consider a previously unexamined problematic of visibility discourses: Beyond marginalizing certain (rural) LGBTQ people or perpetuating a simplistic invisible/visible binary that requires disabled people with less overt disabilities to "come out" in ways that are not expected of people with more apparent disabilities, calls for visibility encourage the production of post-racial and post-spatial epistemologies. As critical race studies scholars have convincingly argued, race and space get demarcated together; cultural narratives of place are always already racialized, just as the nuances of race, racism, and racialization will be missed without

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[50] This lack of analysis of disability in rural queer studies is symptomatic of broader trends in queer theory and LGBTQ studies. For a discussion of the lack of examination of disability in LGBTQ Studies and the lack of analysis of sexuality in disability studies, see Mollow and McRuer's *Sex and Disability* (2012).

a critical consideration of the space and place to which such processes are tethered (McKittrick and Woods 2007; Lipsitz 2007; Woods 1998). Disability and queer studies scholars have addressed the mutually constitutive nature of race and disability (Bell 2012; Jarman 2012) as well as race and sexuality (Somerville 2000). My contribution to this scholarship is examining how visibility discourses prevent analyzing the raced and placed nature of disability and sexuality. In doing so, I consider each of these terms—post-raciality, post-spatiality, visibility, disability, sexuality—as epistemologies, analytics, and logics. This gestures toward my position that these concepts circulate beyond the realms of identity and experience and must be examined both as containing possibilities for exploring and *as* themselves cultural ideologies.

While "coming out" to be "loud and proud" is language commonly associated with LGBTQ communities and experiences, disability advocates deploy similar discourses. The post-raciality and post-spatiality I analyze is evident both in LGBTQ and disability advocates' separate calls to their respective constituents to be visible as well as in those moments in which discourses of disability and LGBTQ visibility meet. In the following section, I consider two cultural representations of activists' deployments of visibility discourses to illustrate the deeply intertwined nature of race and place, post-raciality and post-spatiality, evident in calls for LGBTQ/disability visibility.

"Disabled Access Denied?" and "Disaboom": Activist Deployments of Visibility

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In a review of the 2012 gay pride march in New York City, blogger Mia

Vayner proposed increased visibility as a solution to social ills. Vayner, a self-

described disabled "out lesbian" who has advocated for gay rights since the 1990s

and disability issues since 2005, states, "The one way to fight bigots in all realms of

society is to be out, loud and proud. If you're in the communities line of vision

everyday eventually they have to admit you're there and when they admit that your

rights must be enforced [sic]." Vayner's activism is premised on the familiar notion

that visibility leads to rights. She continues to describe the event:

> There were…and rightfully so gay groups proudly representing every
> ethnicity in our wonderful borough of Queens, but not ONE disabled
> group…rolling around for 1 hour I saw 2 dozen wheelchairs and twice
> as many mobility scooters covering at least ten nationalities. So with
> this cross section at one small gathering in an outer borough, why is
> there no representation of the gay disabled community?

Vayner conjures LGBTQ disabled people of color to argue for the need for

representation of LGBTQ (non-racially marked) disabled people. LGBTQ disabled

people of color were, and presumably could be, represented via groups of LGBTQ

people of color. Vayner's claim, then, is either directed solely at white disabled

people or expects LGBTQ disabled people of color to come together around their

disability rather than their race or nationality. In making these claims, Vayner

recognizes race. Yet, she does so by relegating the significance of race—and, by

extension, the potential for racism—to the past, a classic feature of post-racialism.

Vayner's deploying of this variety of post-racial discourse speaks to what scholars

have described as the problems with multi-culturalism: the recognition and

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celebration of race without—indeed, so that we might avoid—challenging the systems that perpetuate differential access to resources based on this construction (Gordon and Newfield 1996).

Assumptions about the value of visibility enable Vayner's post-racial claims: In Vayner's estimation, people of color have that (visible representation) for which disabled gays must strive, a discursive move that quickly dismisses those issues disabled LGBTQ people of color—or people of color who are not LGBTQ or disabled—might experience. For Vayner, visibility challenges bigotry both within and outside of LGBTQ communities. It is that which can counter ableism within LGBTQ subcultures and also "fight bigots in all realms of society," which, in Vayner's estimation, leads to political rights. Those who are visible as (racially) different and, even more so, who organize around this difference, then, are assumedly better off than those whose problems remain invisible or underrepresented—in an embodied or political sense. In calling for increased visibility of LGBTQ people with disabilities, Vayner ignores the ongoing significance of race and reduces identity to visibility and symbolic representation, simultaneously conflating and hierarchizing various forms of marginality,[51] and de-politicizing the histories of (those distinct and overlapping) identities for which she seeks representation. These are (some of) the logics of post-raciality.

Similar epistemologies are evident on "Disaboom," a website that describes itself as "the leading resource for disability information and real-life articles about

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[51] For critical discussions of analogizing categories of difference, see Samuels (2003) and Reddy (2008).

people with disabilities." The following image of a black man and a white man,

neither with visible disabilities, accompanies an article posted on the site titled

"LGBT and Living with a Disability: Where to Find Support." The article begins:

> Being gay or lesbian with a disability makes you a minority times two.
> Discrimination can come from many different sources, even within
> either of those communities, the very places where you'd expect
> support. But there are locations where people exactly like you can find
> a community of comfort and inclusion. LGBTs with disabilities have
> unique challenges to face. Do you out your sexual orientation? How
> about a hidden disability?

The placement of the above image next to the article's opening sentence suggests that

both men are equally minorities times two, rendering race invisible, a non-signifier

devoid of meaning. No other "differences" or identity markers, visible or not, are as

important as being gay and disabled. The men's disabilities and sexualities make

them exactly alike, and if you are disabled and LGBTQ, regardless of your race,

"exactly like you" too. Although the article's "minority times two" framework also

disregards classism, sexism, metronormativity, xenophobia, and other ways people

experience minoritization, it does not draw from imagery that intentionally calls up

these issues in order to actively eschew their significance. Of course, the author's

framework cannot possibly apply to LGBTQ disabled people of color, LGBTQ people with visible disabilities, or anyone who experiences the world through more than two axes of marginalization. This article epitomizes what Cho describes as the "aspirational" "retreat from race" that is central to colorblindness (2009, 1598). Here, colorblindness is deployed (we will not acknowledge race) in order to fulfill its own post-racial aspirations (talking about race is unnecessary). [52]

The colorblindness inherent in the "Disaboom" article depends upon assumptions regarding who is meant to be visible and in what ways. The difference visibility is meant to confer is enigmatic: Certain forms of (visible, racial) difference are literally unrecognizable while "coming out" and becoming visible (as disabled or gay) is framed as a move toward "comfort and inclusion." The assumption that visibility leads to individual satisfaction and (sub)cultural recognition relies on the image of the black man—always already visible as oppressed without needing to come out—as no longer marginalized, as also a minority times two. His oppression is untenable for this narrative, not only because it situates racism within the present, but also because the logics of calls for LGBTQ and disability visibility rely on the assumption that his visibility as an oppressed person (in a prior historical period) is precisely what saved him and our society. The hypervisibility of the black body functions, on the Disaboom site and more broadly, as a type of social invisibility. As

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[52] Cho suggests that post-racialism and colorblindness are overlapping but distinct ideologies: post-racialism "signals a racially transcendent event that authorizes the retreat from race. Colorblindness, in comparison, offers a largely normative claim for a retreat from race that is aspirational in nature" (2009, 1597-1598).

Avery Gordon argues, "Hypervisibility is a persistent alibi for the mechanisms that render one *un*-visible" ([1997] 2008, 17).

The post-spatiality of calls for visibility is unmistakable in both examples considered above, which point to the ways that visibility is understood to have "a spatial location and a social value" (Gray 2009, 9). The location is urban and the value is progress, evident in Vayner's aforementioned claim: "The one way to fight bigots in all realms of society is to be out, loud and proud. If you're in the communities line of vision everyday eventually they have to admit you're there and when they admit that your rights must be enforced [sic]." Vayner's claim rests upon imagining a homogenous "gay community" that functions everywhere in precisely the way Vayner's New York City community does. The ubiquity of metronormative logics allows Vayner to ignore that her perspective has been influenced by geography—an irony, considering that, as a wheelchair user, she is, presumably, reminded frequently that marginalization transpires along the lines of space and place. The "Disaboom" article acknowledges this very point. The promises ("comfort and inclusion") and the dangers ("discrimination" from an assumed community of support) of coming out and becoming visible are represented in inherently spatialized terms; oppression transpires in a *place*, while people "exactly like you" find comfort in a particular *location*.

This understanding of inclusion and marginalization as spatially contingent does not, however, allow "Disaboom" to question how oppression or inclusion transpire in various locations differently. In claiming that inclusion is predicated on finding people "exactly like you," "Disaboom" covertly tethers inclusion to the urban.

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The rural can never be the site of comfort for LGBTQ people with disabilities precisely because it is from rural places that LGBTQ people ostensibly must escape. Indeed, the logics of metronormativity render the rural antagonistic to LGBTQ people; the rural is where there will be no others "exactly like you" if you are LGBTQ. Here, metronormative ideologies circulate through the superficial deployment of discourses that gesture toward the spatiality of knowledge formations while simultaneously ignoring the continued significance that place plays in people's lives, particularly those marginalized by metronormativity.

The logics implicit in such calls for LGBTQ and disability visibility are, in this contemporary moment, hegemonic in nature, traversing space and place. In what follows, I consider how discourses of visibility, with their accompanying post-raciality and post-spatiality, surface in my interviews with LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest as they discuss their relations to (their own and others') sexualities and disabilities. The sociality of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest is a particularly generative location to consider precisely because calls to be out, loud, and proud hold far *less* cache in rural areas than they do elsewhere (Gray 2009). In other words, that interviewees also reproduced post-racial and post-spatial logics through discourses of visibility in a locale in which this method of political organizing is already a site of contestation and negotiation points to the hegemonic allure—and depth of the problematics—of such discourses.

A Note on Methodology and Epistemology

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In the remainder of this chapter, I draw from three of the fifty interviews I conducted with LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest: one "not-straight" woman in central Minnesota, one lesbian-identified woman in eastern South Dakota, and another in the western part of the state. Each of the narratives I feature here are those of white women. That white women in the rural Midwest (a place erroneously imagined as homogenously white) articulate difference in post-racial terms suggests not only that white women's lives are racially structured, as Ruth Frankenberg argues (1993), but also that this racial structuring occurs through *post-racial* ideologies. I expand upon Frankenberg's classic work, in which she suggests that race, race differences, and whiteness can be explored through the lenses of invisibility and visibility, to suggest not only that post-raciality (like the whiteness, race, and race differences Frankenberg considers) can be examined through visibility discourses but also that visibility politics *enable* post-raciality—a concept similar to and different from Frankenberg's "whiteness": while whiteness refers to "locations, discourses, and material relations," (1993, 6) as does "post-racial," it also gestures toward an embodied way of experiencing the world in ways that "post-racial" does not.

I focus here on a few key interviews because highlighting how multiple analytics—disability, sexuality, race, visibility, space—converge requires analyzing various parts of interviewees' stories closely. I chose these vignettes because they illustrate the theoretical intervention I make here, not because they are (or are not) representative of my sample. Let me explain: When I conducted these interviews two years ago, I saw my project as in alignment with and expanding on queer theory and rural queer studies. I asked questions about rural life as well as LGBTQ community,

identity, and visibility. I did not ask questions about disability, although disability came up in many interviews. Indeed, it was interviewees' narratives that led me to consider the relations among race, space, disability, and LGBTQ visibility.

That I can draw from interviews I conducted in which I did not explicitly ask questions about race or disability to examine how disability and LGBTQ visibility discourses get deployed to further post-racial and post-spatial logics speaks to my point that the logics undergirding calls for disability and LGBTQ visibility are deeply intertwined with one another and further problematic notions of race and place. In what follows, I consider the existence of post-racial and post-spatial epistemologies in interviewees' narratives in order to examine the ways in which calls for LGBTQ and disability visibility may render race and place ideologically obsolete, rather than to critique interviewees for drawing from those cultural ideologies in wide circulation.

"Better Than New"

On a cold night in late 2011, I made my way to a middle-class neighborhood in eastern South Dakota to interview a middle-aged, white, lesbian who adopted two daughters from China. Early in the interview, I asked Kay if the adoption process was difficult.

> At the time, Chinese adoption was open for women, single women, single men, married, whatever. Although, I did have to sign a statement…to the Chinese government that said I was straight… I am a very honest person, but I had no trouble doing that. I did have to have a home study…where they asked about prior relationships and I sort of fudged on that, but they did not really probe much.

By the time Kay adopted her second baby, the regulations around international

adoption had shifted. Kay explains that the Chinese government reduced the

percentage of babies that could be adopted by single women to eight percent,

because, according to Kay, the government had become:

> concerned about too many lesbians adopting these little Chinese
> girls….And now it's a lot tighter… I had decided that I wasn't going
> to get a second child because I didn't want to stop any other single
> women from being able to get one child. So I got [my second
> daughter] through the Waiting Child Program…She had a heart
> murmur, heart defect… She wouldn't count against the 8%...She had
> surgery about six months after we got back from China. That's been
> corrected and she is as good as new or better than new.

Kay continued, referencing, in her next breath, a question I had asked earlier

regarding any racism the girls face at their largely white school:

> oh, yeah and [my daughter] doesn't have any issues at school. Plus,
> their school principal is a lesbian, although, that is a secret.

Kay framed her lesbian sexuality and her child's disability as having equal

importance in how she has come to live her life. Kay expressed that she felt lucky to

be a lesbian because had she been in a heterosexual relationship, she would have

reproduced "the old fashioned way," rather than adopting. Had Chinese adoption

policies not shifted to make a distinction between impaired and healthy babies, Kay

would not have adopted a second Chinese daughter.

That Kay's daughter's disability was able to be "corrected" to make her "as

good as new or better than new" required a spatial move, in this case, from the non-

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West to the West. When I asked about the impact of the children's race on their lives, Kay dismissed the potential for racism through conflating sexuality and race, claiming that her daughter "doesn't have any issues [with racism] at school." For Kay, that the school principal is a (secret) lesbian accounts for the lack of racism her children face. Kay's narrative—her adopting of Chinese daughters and their move to South Dakota, her daughter's invisible disability, the erasure of visible racialization, and the secret lesbian principal—points to the ways that visibility discourses are deployed to undermine the continued significance of race and place in people's lives.

"What Brought Me Here Was"

Just as Kay's child's disability and her own sexuality deeply inform her life narrative, Linda, a white, working-class lesbian with a disability who lives in rural western South Dakota, framed disability as a driving force in the unfolding of her life. She moved to South Dakota in her late 20s for college. I asked why. She responded:

> A lot of it revolves around my learning disability. I was in special ed. my whole life and my father was dyslexic but undiagnosed. So I always had somebody in my life that I could look up to…He's a very good man and good role model…when I was growing up I was in special ed., like I said, and I already knew what discrimination was from the get-go…That helped me to form my personality…One day I had a broken arm and I stayed home from school and I was watching one of my mom's soap operas and I was just praying she wouldn't walk into the room cause two girls were gonna kiss. And I thought, there! There really are other people like me.

For Linda, disability is foundational to her life trajectory, which she says, "revolves around [her] learning disability." She views her disability as a source of

discrimination that formed her personality so that later she was more prepared to deal

with homophobia. Visibility is central to Linda's narrative; for Linda, having a role

model in her father and witnessing same-sex intimacy on TV was formative. She

continues to describe the importance of having a gay community:

> I found a place called gay horizons…It saved my life….I used to sneak down there one day a week, and I made friends, and I went to the parade and there was a quarter of a million people. So I knew I wasn't nuts…Um, but what brought me here was, you know, my life blew up as a gay person. I was out and loud.

Within a matter of minutes, Linda went from explicitly stating that her disability was

at the center of her move to South Dakota to saying that her life as a gay person

accounted for the move. She continues to tell a chronological narrative of her life to

which her disability is key. At this point, I still didn't understand what encouraged

Linda to move to South Dakota. I re-asked the question and Linda responded that

there were only "two schools with Indian Studies programs [in the country]."

> I didn't know what I wanted to be but I knew I wanted to learn about Native American people, so let's go…My first handful of years going through the Indian Studies Program, my college was just impeccable, incredible, the student support service—I even signed up for the student gay club at the time…I decided because I did so good in Indian Studies [to]… do the teaching thing. Maybe I could help a couple kids not go through the crap that I [went] through. And it was perfect...for me because Native American Studies is very oral…it's about the stories and the humor. Well, I fit right in.

For Linda, her learning disability allowed her to "fit right in" with the culturally-

derived pedagogical approaches (the focus on orality and story-telling) of the Indian

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Studies program. Without skipping a beat, Linda stated that her positive experience in Indian Studies led her to join the gay club, and later, to teaching, through which she hoped to help students with learning disabilities avoid the troubles she encountered. In much the same way as Linda's analogizing of her experience as a white disabled lesbian with those of Native people disregards race, so does her articulation of her move to South Dakota as being informed first by her disability and then her sexuality. In the ways she tells her story, neither her disability nor her sexuality actually accounts for her move; the only thing connecting Linda to South Dakota as a place was the Indian Studies program. Race and place—the racialization of place, the place of race—undergird Linda's life choices, and yet the significance of these analytics to her trajectory disappear as she frames her story through her disability and sexuality. These are the discourses of post-racial and post-spatial logics.

Linda's visibility as a lesbian in her rural community is intricately interwoven with her disability. Linda's dyslexia makes it arduous for her to read or write, so communicating via email, a common organizing tool, is a significant challenge. As the sole staff person of an LGBTQ organization, Linda fundraises, plans social events, and serves as the organization's spokesperson—without reading or writing extensively. In this process, she becomes visible as a lesbian (via her attachment to the LGBTQ center) and also as disabled (in the difficulty she experiences filling out forms or her asking for particular types of assistance), blurring the line between invisible and visible disabilities, and highlighting the mutually constitutive nature of disability and sexuality.

Although Linda tentatively described this work as political—as she said, "Isn't everything political?"—she also qualified her claim. "I think it's a lot different than the national thing. I know there are several people who come into the Y[MCA] that are gay, and I don't think they're ashamed of it. I think they just are in their own little cliques…Even though we're not political people, it's a political thing." She continued, "I mean if I were black, you know, trying to get…a group of people that could all go into the same bar and just have a drink, is it not political?"

Assumptions about visibility shape Linda's understanding of the political. Linda knows things are done differently in the rural Midwest because people are not asserting their sexuality in the ways that national gay rights groups demand; they are "in their own cliques" rather than publicly visible, an approach that, in the Midwest, does not connote shame. For Linda, invisibility does not translate into apoliticality. It makes sense, then, that Linda understands the work that she does as different from that of national gay rights groups. The visibility politics of national organizations are antithetical to the goals of many rural LGBTQ women Linda knows through her organization.

To frame the quotidian experiences of LGBTQ people as political, Linda deploys the visibility of the black body and references approaches of the civil rights movement (getting together a "group of people" to sit in a public place). Such a move is simultaneously post-spatial and post-racial; in conflating race and sexuality, it situates race in the past and ignores the ongoing racism faced by American Indians in South Dakota, who, as the state's largest minoritized racial group comprise eight percent of the population (in comparison to the one percent of black people). Linda's

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referencing of the black body is meant to call up its visibility; the black body, then, comes to stand in for the types of differences Linda referenced between rural and national LGBTQ organizations. Although Linda tethered the rural Midwest to the political by relying on the post-spatial claim that "everything" (everywhere) is political, she ultimately displaces politicization from the rural Midwest by framing the political as what rural Midwestern people are not—even if the issues are political. Politicization, and the visibility that is understood to make it possible, exists elsewhere; it is called for through national organizations and is recognizable as the body of a black person—things that exist outside of Linda's imagination of the here and now of the rural Midwest.

"I have to deal with so much shit legally already with the disability stuff"

Claudia, a white, disabled woman in her late-20s who lives in central Minnesota and is in an inter-racial relationship, arrived at her interview wearing the Human Rights Campaign's "Legalize Gay" T-shirt.[53] As we discussed public displays of affection, Claudia pointed to her shirt, saying that such forms of affection are "not really political for me at all…In fact, this is as political as it gets. Wearing this T-shirt that I got from Pride. It's not political. I just want to hold her hand like everybody else."

Despite wearing a marriage equality t-shirt (a form of political visibility), Claudia does not view public displays of affection (a form of visibility) as political. I followed up by asking if she views her sexuality as political. She responded, "I think

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[53] For a critique of this campaign, see Yasmin Nair (2009).

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because of the time and place that I live in, it has to be…I can't really opt out of it

being political because it just is simply political right now." Like Linda, Claudia

understands the political as inherently spatial and temporal; she is required to be

political because of the time and place in which she lives:

> If I can opt out of being political, I might. I might pick and choose
> when I want to be political and when I don't… Having a chronic
> illness…a disability, and dealing with insurance company issues and…
> financial stuff. We have one income instead of two. And not being
> able to get partner benefits…it's a nightmare. Probably every day I
> make some sort of phone call, some sort of paperwork, or something
> that has to do with some sort of legal something for me with disability
> insurance. There's certainly…institutional homophobia.

For Claudia, a discussion of the political is impossible outside of her disability and

the homophobia of the social structures with which she must interact. As long as she

remains a dependent of her parents (and, thus, unmarried) she can access her father's

governmental benefits. If Claudia were to marry her partner, to whom she was

engaged, Claudia would risk losing her disability benefits, even though the federal

government did not recognize same-sex marriage at the time of the interview.

Claudia represents a paradox of the political: her disability both necessitates

that she cannot opt out of viewing her sexuality as political and also might prevent

her from acting in a political manner; it is Claudia's fight for access to disability-

related resources that simultaneously constructs her sexuality as political and makes it

difficult for her to participate in political action. For Claudia, the political sits at the

intersection of her sexuality and disability; the political is the lived, the quotidian, the

exhausting, the practical. Discourses of visibility undergird Claudia's articulation of

the political.

> So the visibility piece…part of it is very personal, right? About just…being accepted…for who I am in my community…And then part of it for me, I think, is feeling a responsibility to give a name and a face…to the cause. I know the research that says that peoples' attitudes change when you know somebody who's LGBT. You know, race attitudes change. The more black people and the closer that they are to you, then your attitudes change. More so than just simply wearing a t-shirt around public, I think [being known] might have a positive effect. But for the people who are really homophobic, it doesn't…change anything...And so I feel that my responsibility to be visible is sort of to be known and be out to those people…that are close to me who aren't necessarily pro-gay.

While Claudia suggested that being visible can lead to personal acceptance and

political rights, she also pointed to what she sees as the limits to this strategy (it won't

change "really homophobic" people). In this articulation of the value of visibility,

which both mirrors and departs from the ideologies of national gay rights groups (for

whom there appears to be no limit to such value), Claudia, like Linda, conflated ideas

around race and sexuality, assuming that strategies that have supposedly worked for

people of color will also have political relevance for LGBTQ people.

Despite this brief mention of race in relation to gay rights, that Claudia is in an

interracial relationship still had not come up more than an hour into our conversation.

I met the couple at a Pride event and knew that Claudia's partner is black. I asked if

she had experienced any issues related to her interracial relationship. "I don't think

so. I think that being a lesbian couple kinda trumps that as far as society goes. I think

that they don't really care." Despite framing race as less important than her sexuality

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and her disability to organizing her life, Claudia goes on to describe various situations

that she understands as occurring due to people's responses to her partner's race,

situations in which people stare at them or go out of their way to be overly nice to her

partner:

> My theory is that they're not used to seeing very many black people in
> the area. And so when they see black people it's a difference that they
> can't help to notice. And it's the only thing they can think of and they
> feel guilty about the fact that they can't get the idea out of…their head
> that she's black, and so then they feel that they need to do something
> to help make themselves feel better...I think that they're scared that
> they're gonna come across like they're racist…Like it's gonna be
> revealed that that's the only thing that they're thinking about...And so
> then I think that they go out of their way to be nice to her to
> compensate for that…But the people in public don't typically know
> that we're a couple. And then if they do, it's the lesbian thing that gets
> them more than the inter-racial.

Claudia's description of the etiquette of racial recognition reflects the demands of

post-racialism: we must not acknowledge race because it no longer exists. The very

recognition of race operates as a fissure in these logics; the proliferation of these

ideologies requires that we view such cleavages as our own failures (evidenced in

people being overly nice to Claudia's partner), rather than the failures of the logics

themselves. Claudia's analysis of her encounters with the material manifestations of

post-racialism depends upon spatial claims: people "in the area" rarely see black

people. Post-racial logics circulate in Claudia's narrative on two scales: she points to

her encounters with post-racial ideologies and also deploys these ideologies herself,

evident in her position that sexuality trumps race "as far as society goes." The post-

racial and post-spatial logics undergirding this claim inform one another. Claudia

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suggests that her lesbianism is a problem *in society*—an a-geographical claim. Meanwhile, for Claudia, people in the Midwest respond to her partner as they do because they have not seen black people—a simultaneously post-racial and post-spatial claim that suggests blackness does not compel a response elsewhere. The post-spatial claim that sexuality trumps race everywhere enables the post-racial positioning of race in the past. By extension, those (rural) people who live in (rural) places that recognize race become anachronistic, pointing to the circular logics that bind post-racial and post-spatial ideologies.

Post-racial and post-spatial epistemologies operate in each of these three interviews. Kay's daughter's impairment was fixed through a move from China to South Dakota, Linda's desire to learn about Native people led her to South Dakota, and Claudia suggests that she and her partner experience racism because people in the Midwest rarely see black people. Although discourses of place and race appear in interviewees' narratives, they are deployed to suggest their lack of importance. The post-racial and post-spatial logics I examine here often manifest discursively via conflations of race with other marginalized subject positions. Kay believes her daughter does not experience racism at school because the principal is a lesbian, Linda views American Indian Studies as perfect for her due to her learning disability, and Claudia argues that being in a lesbian relationship "trumps" any racialized discrimination she and her partner could face. Discourses of visibility enable these slippages. Linda believes that she was better equipped to deal with her disability and her sexuality because she had visible role models and communities, Kay describes the principal's lesbian sexuality as a "secret," and Claudia's ability to be political as a

lesbian is circumscribed by her disability and related need for insurance. Each woman articulated connections between sexuality and disability through discourses of visibility in ways that draw from and reproduce post-racial and post-spatial ideologies.

Imagining Otherwise

I have critiqued here activist calls for LGBTQ and disability visibility and examined the ways in which the cultural logics undergirding such calls transcend movements and appear as LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest articulate their relations to sexuality and disability. I have argued that visibility discourses draw from and uphold post-racial and post-spatial ideologies, pointing to the paradoxical nature of such calls: although certain visible differences can be (and are) rendered invisible, LGBTQ and disability rights organizations remain invested in the idea that marginalized individuals becoming visible both already represents and will engender social transformation. These visible markers of (racial) difference are, as the evidence I have presented here suggests, called up for the purposes of analogy and then ignored when and where they manifest as material markers of difference. That the marginalization of some bodies that evidence difference can be ignored while bodies that may not be read as marginalized are encouraged to verbalize an identification with that marginalization speaks to the nebulousness of visibility politics.

In contemporary cultural (and LGBTQ subcultural) logics, LGBTQ visibility, identity, and community exist as almost indistinguishable—achieving one enables the other (and in this achievement, one's own authenticity as LGBTQ). As such, my

discussion of visibility has implications for examining the politics of identity more broadly, the relations among which feminist philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff also explores in her analysis of what she calls visible identities. Alcoff defends identity politics against conservative critics, arguing that, "The focal point of power most often today operates precisely through the very personal sphere of our visible social identities… such as race, ethnicity, and gender" (2006, viii). This position reproduces invisible/visible binaries, hierarchizes oppressions, and ignores that social structures compel the making visible of those identities Alcoff views as invisible—moves I attempted to undermine here. My critique of visibility politics is indebted to those leftist queer analyses that Alcoff necessarily ignores in framing challenges to identity politics as solely conservative. Queer theorists critique contemporary deployments of LGBTQ identity for their sloppy, a-historical, and (what I understand as) a-geographical tethering of actions to LGBTQ identities, positioning of identity as static, and normalizing tendencies. For queer theorists, identity, like visibility, is contestable and contested terrain.

To be clear, I am not arguing for more capacious calls for or types of visibility that could ostensibly recognize a wider range of identifications based in marginalization. Visibility politics compel hierarchical identifications in ways that negate the shifting nature of identity and experience and preclude possibilities for coalition building. As such, "challenging invisibility" (Bolaki 2012) will do far less to actualize justice than deconstructing (and reconstructing) the terms of social inclusion, equality, and freedom—which emerge and crystallize in calls for visibility.

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Visibility politics, then, are the problematic; their encouraging and supporting of

post-racial and post-spatial logics are the symptoms I consider here.

Critical engagement with visibility discourses and their accompanying post-

raciality and post-spatiality is crucial for the creation of the "transformative feminist

disability theory and practice" for which Kim Hall calls (2011, 10)—a theory and

practice that will be enriched by refusing fixed understandings of visibility and the

related hierarchizing of oppressions, thinking across movements and bodies of

thought, and holding onto the conviction that alternative modes of operating in the

world (including those beyond the out, loud, and proud) are actually possible.

Chapter 5

Queer Labors: Visibility and Capitalism[54]

In this chapter, I critically consider the ideologies undergirding and the ramifications of the cultural expectations that LGBTQ people be "out, loud and proud" about their sexualities through the lens of queer Marxist thought in order to explore the work of the production of legible LGBTQ sexual subjectivities. I am interested in thinking about the performative process of becoming visible as LGBTQ as a form of labor. Conceptualizing living visibly as labored creates space to consider the relationship of visibility to capitalism and the modes of labor that visibility, as a political ideal, relies upon and is indebted to. My analyses are motivated by a question posed by the editors of a recent special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* entitled "Queer Studies and the Crises of Capitalism": How might a methodology attuned to both sexuality and the specificities of capitalist crisis orient us toward a world other than the one in which we find ourselves currently mired?" (Rosenberg and Villarejo 2012, 1). I argue that becoming recognizable as an authentic LGBTQ subject occurs through labored processes so insidious they are illegible as such. Calls for LGBTQ visibility, which relentlessly demand constant laboring (even as they obscure this very laboring), are, thus, a reflection of and benefit to capitalist

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[54]This chapter would look radically different were it not for many conversations with and feedback from Heather Berg, for which I am deeply grateful. Some of the ideas presented in this chapter appear in an article Berg and I co-authored ("The Fetish of Visibility: Malcolm X, Sex(ed) Labor, and Gay Rights") that is currently under review. That article emerged out of this chapter (as well as Berg's other work) just as this chapter emerged out of the article. It would be impossible to tease out which ideas existed as they do here prior to either that article or my conversations with Berg.

logics. LGBTQ visibility is best understood, I suggest, as both labored and a commodity, the fetishization of which relies on both those logics that connect outness to sexual authenticity and also an obscuring of the labor required to produce one's visibility (which are, as I will show here, deeply intertwined). These labors are at once social, political, affective, and intimate and the commodity being fetishized is the labor of authenticity, actualized via visibility.

In their introduction to the aforementioned issue of *GLQ*, Rosenberg and Villarejo draw from Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism to argue that "outward appearances of commodities conceal their inner relations, but furthermore these mystifying appearances themselves also and crucially belong to the social realities they conceal" (Rosenberg and Villarejo, 2012). Calls for LGBTQ visibility, themselves a form of commodity fetishism, do exactly this work; it is the very paradox and mystique of visibility (simultaneously something dangerous queers must avoid in certain "backwards" places, and that which, if we manage to achieve it, will liberate us) that conceals the many problematic social realities of visibility politics— including the ways in which the demands for visibility render us inauthentic unless we work, work, work, and then work some more. The task, then, is to "see lodged within the production of value a spectrum of human relationality and social regulation not fully captured by the identity-labels of gender, sexuality, race, and kinship or family" (Rosenberg and Villarejo 2012, 12). Examining how visibility is produced as valuable makes apparent forms of relationality that become naturalized when the mode of analysis is grounded in identity.

I consider visibility politics as an extension of the neoliberal ideologies structuring our world, through which individuals are expected to constantly labor. We do more work at work for less pay. And then when social services and programs are cut, we do even more work (i.e., when a public bus route is cut, those who rely on that form of transportation must work harder just to maintain their lives). Many of us have gotten accustomed to working incessantly, even, at times, convinced that we are not working at all (Weeks 2011, 70). This is certainly true of the work it requires to produce ourselves—in whatever subjectivities we dream or dare to construct and live. In the case of the production of LGBTQ subjectivities, labor is compelled of us under the guise of authenticity and liberation—discourses that obscure that becoming visible as authentic or liberated is deeply laborious.

Understanding becoming and being visible as LGBTQ as labored builds upon the work of poststructuralists, queer Marxist scholars, and Marxist feminists. As such, I begin this chapter by explicating how this argument expands upon these bodies of thought, focusing in particular on queer Marxist analyses of LGBTQ visibility, and bringing together, in the process, poststructuralist thinking with queer Marxism. I then ground my discussion in the discourses of gay rights advocates, with particular focus on their calls to come out at work. I close the chapter by drawing from my interviewees' narratives, with the goal of highlighting existing fissures in the pro-capitalist epistemologies of calls for LGBTQ visibility.

Feminist, Queer, Marxist

Feminist and queer studies have rightly been critiqued for largely ignoring classed processes, relations, experiences, and identities. Alan Sears, for example, claims that queer theory has neglected to analyze "class relations and divisions of labor, the dynamics of state regulation, the specific impact of capitalist restructuring and the cultural logic of processes of commodification" (2005, 94). Vivyan Adair makes a similar point about feminist studies, arguing that despite a stated commitment to analyzing race, class, gender, sexuality, and other markers of difference, analyses of working- and poverty-class experiences are far less common than discussions of race, gender, and sexuality in both feminist journals and feminist classrooms, reflecting what Adair terms "class absences" (2005).

At the same time, feminist and queer Marxisms are robust and important areas of these fields. Marxist feminists have long critiqued classic Marxist thought for its inability to account for women's oppression under capitalism (Federici 1975, 2004; Hartmann 1979; James 1983). And they have called for recognizing as work those intimate, affective, and reproductive—each always already gendered—labors that ostensibly exist outside of what counts as work, focusing primarily on how women labor on behalf of others.[55] Marxist feminists' insights inform substantially those scholars who write about queer sexual politics, experiences, and identities from a Marxist perspective and are developing what we might call queer Marxism.[56] This is

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[55] Scholarship that uses Marxist and feminist ideas to analyze gendered and classed processes and relations is vast. For examples that focus particularly on affective, intimate, and reproductive labor, see, for example: Boris 1994; Boris and Klein, 2012; Boris and Parreñas 2010; James 1983.

[56] For examples of scholarship (that is variously oriented toward queer and Marxist thought) that examine the relations among sexuality and political economy, capital,

because, as Rosemary Hennessy suggests, Marxist feminism is "the most fully articulated effort to explain two of the social arrangements through which sexuality has historically been organized: patriarchal ideologies of difference, and class relations" (Hennessy 2000, 10). However, I engage less here with Marxist feminism than queer Marxism because, as Hennessy points out, "most of the archive of Marxist feminist work has been more attentive to developing an analysis of gender oppression than developing a materialist approach to sexuality" (2000, 10). These narratives are nonetheless worth briefly engaging with here because they might help us to understand how both feminist and queer theories as well as Marxist and queer theories are similarly rendered distinct or even oppositional and also help to explain why I am engaging here primarily with that Marxist scholarship that frames itself as explicitly queer.

I do not mean to position feminist and queer studies, or, by extension, feminist and queer Marxism, as distinct. Attempting to create such divisions can lead to the flattening of intellectual trajectories (Weed and Schor 1997, xi), which, following Clare Hemmings, might have just as many points of overlap as departure (2011). Both queer and feminist studies scholars, for example, analyze the relations between subjects and power, "engage with intersectional thinking about sexualities, examining the ways in which sexuality is transformed as it comes into contact with other modes of identification and ways of experiencing the world and as changing material conditions shape social practices," and interrogate "the relation between the social

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commodification, and class, see: Bassi 2006; Berg 2014a; 2014b; Chasin 2001; D'Emilio 1983; Hennessy 2000; Jackson 2009; Joseph 2002a; Joseph 2002b; Pelligrini 2002; Salton-Cox 2013.

and the self, [arguing that] the social does not exist apart from us; the social is in us

and we are the social. Our subjectivities and desires are always in flux, constructed

through our relationships to the social" (Rupp and Thomsen forthcoming).

At the same time, we can see in Hennessy's quote above how feminist and

queer studies are produced as distinct. Hennessy's reading is not unfair. Feminist and

queer studies are commonly viewed as diverging in significant ways, divergences that

help us to understand the relations between Marxist feminism and queer Marxism. As

Gayle Rubin argued decades ago, gender and sexuality do not, of course, exist in a

one to one relation to one another, and attempts to grapple with the nuances of

sexuality through centralizing gender flatten both (1984). Queer theory's

commitments to non-binaristic epistemologies and deployments of poststructural

theories that deconstruct subjectivities and identities have meant that women—or

even the relation of gender to sexuality—are not necessarily the primary concern of

many recent queer theoretical texts (Rupp and Thomsen forthcoming),[57] a point that

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[57] This is not to suggest that contemporary queer theorists have not considered the
relationships between and among masculinity and femininity and gender and
sexuality. As Leila Rupp and I point out in another context, queer theorists have
analyzed the relations between gender and sexuality in order to re-think these very
concepts and their assumed relations (forthcoming). Judith Halberstam, for example,
argues that an examination of "female masculinity," even termed at one point
"lesbian genders" (1998, xii), helps us to grapple with the complex ways that
masculinity itself is constructed. Lauren Berlant tracks the emergence of and
engagement in what she calls the first "intimate public" culture: a "women's culture"
that is defined by the assumption that women necessarily "have something in
common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief
even when it is mediated by commodities, even when it is written by strangers who
might not be women, and even when its particular stories are about women who
seem, on the face of it, vastly different from each other" (2008, ix). Dominant
narratives of feminist theory and women's studies position queer theory as "coming
after" feminist theory. These narratives ignore that much early feminist work was
quite "queer" in that it refused binaries and advocated anti-assimilationist positions.

gestures toward an epistemological difference between feminist and queer studies,

and, by extension, Marxist feminism and queer Marxism.

Just as feminist and queer studies are seen as relying on differing assumptions

or possessing incongruous goals, queer theory and Marxism have long been viewed

as incommensurable (Floyd 2009). Kevin Floyd traces what he describes as the

impasse between queer and Marxian theories to what appear to be fundamentally

oppositional thinking around totality and reification, two concepts that are, as Lukács

famously writes, deeply intertwined (1971). Totality thinking refers to Marxism's

commitment to prioritizing sameness, rather than difference (Floyd 2009, 6). The

similar Marxian concept of reification suggests that social differentiation reflects a

misunderstanding of capitalist social relations and "preempt[s] any critical

comprehension of the social (Floyd 2009, 17). These epistemologies are, of course,

political. Marxists "tend to emphasize connection rather than

differentiation…because a social and epistemological severing of connections is

precisely one of capital's most consequential objective efforts" (Floyd 2009, 6).

For Marxists, class exploitation is the root of all oppression; that is, all other

forms of oppression, sets of relations, axes of identity, and ways of experiencing the

world that are non-majoritarian would be considered a subset of exploitations under

capital. Even for those Marxists who acknowledge the heterogeneity of the (raced,

sexual, gendered, and otherwise embodied) worker and the influence of these

differences on how people experience the world (as workers or otherwise), these

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As such, these distinctions, which frame queer theorizations of sexuality as if they are
more advanced and less essentialist than feminist theorizations, are intellectually
unhelpful and ethically unfair.

differences are not only typically viewed as a *secondary* source of oppression (or secondary potentiality for resistance), they are also considered to be produced as such through capital and for the benefit of capital. As such, centralizing the differences between and among workers might be viewed as in contrast to Marxian thought and politics, as a focus on difference participates in the mystifying of life under capital (Floyd 2009, 17). If a focus on how people experience the world differently necessitates that one's analysis is read as in opposition to a critical reading of the social, "the persistent Marxian tendency to deprioritize questions of sexuality when those questions were acknowledged at all, to subordinate these questions to other, more "total" concerns—to represent sexuality, in other words, not only as 'merely cultural' but as always already localized and particularized" (Floyd 2009, 5) makes perfect sense.[58]

From a queer theoretical perspective, Marxists and Marxist feminists alike might be viewed as taking social categories (woman, worker) as axiomatic, analyzing power as if it operates in a top down manner (so that men and the owners of the means of production are seen as having power over women and over workers, respectively),[59] and suggesting that nothing exists outside of capitalism, a framing

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[58] I do not mean to suggest that Marxist thinking is homogenous or that all scholarship that frames itself as Marxist operates according to these logics (indeed, there are plenty of examples to the contrary). I am simply attempting to provide a quick gloss of (what others have said of) the similarities and distinctions among fields that have often been viewed as incommensurate in order to highlight how my analysis of visibility politics draws from and adds to these discussions.

[59] From a queer theoretical perspective that refuses binary thinking, this statement does not preclude acknowledging that (Marxists and Marxist feminists also see that) workers and women possess power and agency. Nonetheless, in much Marxist scholarship workers are understood to be constituted as such through their proximate

that might be viewed as producing capitalism as omniscient and fixed. For queer

theorists, each of these assumptions are contestable: women (and workers) come to

exist through their (discursive and material) interaction with the social order, a

position that obliterates the binary upon which seeing women and workers as distinct

from men and management relies; power is multi-directional and productive (rather

than uni-directional and repressive); and as the recent queer theoretical focus on

utopia suggests, perhaps our analyses of life under capital might *center* those

challenges and fissures in capitalist logics that already exist, and in so doing, enact

anti-capitalist practices in the here and now.

Despite these ostensible differences that have led to a general sense that queer

and Marxian thought are incommensurable, there are, too, significant overlaps in

these bodies of thought. Floyd suggests that assemblages in queer and Marxian

thought exist in even those areas in which it seems that queer and Marxist theorists

differ most significantly: totality and reification. For example, Floyd argues that

queer theorists also come from an epistemological position that is marked by a

"refusal of sexual particularization, a refusal of sexuality's routine epistemological

dissociation from other horizons of social reality, [that] has given rise here again to

particularization's dialectical opposite" (2009, 7).

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relation to management (who are the non-workers, or, in the least a different kind
of—and less exploited—worker). And as Eve Sedgwick has argued, within any
binary framework, one side is understood to hold the privilege and power at the
expense of the other ([1990] 2008). As such, the implication is that management and
men have power over workers and women, even though such assertions do not deny
that workers and women simultaneously retain power.

Floyd makes this point by citing Michael Warner's classic *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993), drawing in particular from a quote that Floyd describes as "one of queer theory's most widely cited assertions": "the preference for [the term] 'queer' represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political-interest representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (Warner as quoted in Floyd 2009, 7). Floyd goes on to suggest that this generalization that Warner characterizes as central to queer thought has been challenged by those queer theorists who have argued against such generalizability. These scholars have, at times, taken on Warner directly. Rural queer theorist Scott Herring, for example, argues that Warner's position that "the sexual culture of New York City serves people around the world, even if only as a distant reference point of queer kids growing up in North Carolina or Idaho, who know that *somewhere* things are different" writes over all sorts of queer rural cultures (Herring quoting Warner 2010, 3). For Herring and others, the problem is not just that this sort of "impulse to generalization" erases certain (rural, in this case) queers (and their spaces, discourses, aesthetics, and goals), but rather that they lend themselves too easily to the reproduction of the sorts of dominant (metronormative, in this case) narratives queer theory otherwise insists on disrupting.

Floyd does not engage with any of those scholars who argue against generalizability because doing so would undermine his characterization of queer theory's commitment to refusing particularization, the very point that, for Floyd, links queer and Marxian thinking. Such a move makes clear that Floyd's "basic

methodological orientation is drawn from Marxism" (3). In other words, that Floyd

takes (an oft-cited) quote and extrapolates to characterize a field reflects the very

Marxist desire for a universal analytic, a move that, in effect, glosses over the fact

that contradiction, nuance, and particularity are *also* part of what queer studies sees as

crucial to its critical analyses and world-making projects.[60] Indeed, not all queer

Marxist scholars see totality as simply "a productive joint analytic," instead

describing it as a "hurdle" (Rosenberg and Villarejo 2012, 4). Describing queer

studies' critique of the totality-thinking associated with identity politics through

focusing, instead, on affect, the aforementioned editors of the *GLQ* special issue on

queer studies and capitalism ask: "Is there something that just *feels wrong* about

conceptualizing totality within the ambit of queer studies—itself so finely tuned to the

interstices, glimmerings, and fleeting connections that somehow miraculously seem

to have escaped the thudding reductions and empty equivalences of capitalism to

heteronormativity?" (Rosenberg and Villarejo 2012, 7).

  These scholars link queer studies and Marxism through both fields' ostensible

focus on contradiction, rather than through reification and totality: "the encounter

between queer studies and Marxist and historical-material analysis, at its best, offers

the possibility for analyzing capitalist culture in its dynamic, geographically diverse,

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[60] I question here Floyd's characterization of queer theory (and those narratives that circulate about queer theory) in a way that I do not with regard to his reading of Marxian ideas (and those narratives that circulate about Marxism). That I find questionable some of Floyd's claims regarding queer theory might reflect Floyd's own assertion that his approach is, above all, Marxian. It might also reflect my own queer political and epistemological commitments, which, for me, do not "trump" analyses of class, capital, or political economy, but rather necessitate that one analytic ought never assume a place of primacy.

and contradictory articulations" (Rosenberg and Villarejo 2012, 4). Drawing from Adorno's discussion of the negative dialectic, Rosenberg and Villarejo suggest that this approach does "not posit a comprehensive account of the social world but points up the conceptual barriers to understanding the material conditions of that world" (4). At the same time, the editors, like Floyd, see queer possibilities in totality thinking. They speak of multiple totalities, critique "the conflation of totality and universalism" (8), and suggest that totality can be—indeed, already is being—rehabilitated for queer purposes (7-8). [61] While there is no simple agreement about what queer Marxism is or could be, this brief overview of the relations between both Marxist feminist and queer Marxism and also Marxist and queer thought should give pause to those who see queer and Marxist thought as incommensurable, an incommensurability that many queer (and) Marxists theorists have challenged.

Drawing from queer and Marxist epistemologies, scholars have examined the ways in which sexual relations are intimately bound to matters of political economy, capital, commodification, and class (Bassi 2006; Berg 2014a, 2014b; Chasin 2001; Clark 1991; Gluckman and Reed 1997; Jackson 2009; Pelligrini 2002; Sears 2005). A great deal of this scholarship analyzes the relations among commodity culture and LGBTQ subcultures by focusing on gay tourism, travel, and leisure (Boyd 2008; Clift, et al, 2002; Hughes 2003; Luongo 2002; Puar 2002a, 2002b; Skeggs 1999; Visser 2003). This body of work points to, among other things, the role of

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[61] I do not mean to suggest that different understandings of totality and reification are the only points of contention between these fields or that a focus on contradiction is their only point of overlap. But my task in this chapter is to examine visibility politics from a queer Marxist perspective—rather than to map additional points of distinction or convergence between and among these fields.

consumption in performing gay authenticity, the flow of capital through gay rights movements, and gay rights movements' production of subjects who are recognizable as good consumers and good citizens—which are, these scholars' work collectively suggests, one and the same.

Other scholars have interrogated the relations of LGBTQ identity, community, and visibility to capital outside of the context of tourism or travel. For example, John D'Emilio famously argues that capitalism allowed for the emergence of gay identity (1983). Miranda Joseph argues that (a common) identity is not the glue that binds LGBTQ individuals, as gay rights advocates' discourses suggest, and that these discourses obscure the capitalist processes of consumption and production that, for Joseph, create both communal subjectivities and also communities (2002). This scholarship deeply informs my own analyses of LGBTQ visibility politics in this chapter, which I hope will add to, in particular, those queer Marxist discussions of LGBTQ visibility politics, to which I now turn.

Queer Marxism: On Visibility as Labor and Commodity

In the single in-depth analysis of LGBTQ visibility politics through a queer Marxist lens, Rosemary Hennessy argues that "the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification, a process that invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible *others*" [emphasis added] (2000, 11). Hennessy asks: "What would it mean to understand the formation of queer identities in a social logic that does not suppress [the labor of invisible others]?" I suggest that an analysis of the production and enactment of sexual identities (necessarily visible to be authentic) requires an

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expansion of Hennessy's probe: What would it mean to understand the formation of sexuality within a social logic that views this formation as simultaneously a matter of commodification and a reflection of *one's own* labor? Put differently, I contend that the visibility of sexual identity depends on the labor not only of invisible others, as Hennessy argues, but also of the selves whose labored production we are pushed to conceal.

It is precisely this latter point that has been less explored, and that is of primary interest to me here: the affective, embodied, and political *work* of producing *oneself* as a recognizable commodity. This might seem a strange claim to make since I have drawn throughout this dissertation from those poststructuralist queer theorists who have long analyzed the ways in which we are produced as subjects through performances, acts, and discourses. The little work that has examined how these processes are *labored* has focused on the production of gendered subjectivities— one's own (Wesling 2012) or those with whom one is intimately engaged (Ward 2010). Jane Ward, for example, argues that femmes with female-to-male transgendered partners perform unpaid gendered labor in order to support the development of their partners' gendered subjectivities.

Although this work has considered, at times, how gendered subjectivities are constructed and made apparent via sexual acts, the *labor* required to produce *sexual* subjectivities has received almost no attention—perhaps due to the common conflation of gender and sexuality that Rubin argues against (1984), we assume

erroneously that it has been done.[62] And although queer studies has long critiqued the

normalizing logics of lesbian and gay movements, no scholars have critically

considered the ways in which such movements compel labor via calls for visibility

(focusing instead, in Hennessy's case, on the labor that is ignored).

My analysis of visibility politics here as labor and commodity—which are not,

of course, dichotomous; laborers produce commodities and also possess a commodity

(their labor) that is for sale—is my contribution to queer studies and queer Marxism.

In order to consider one of the types of labor that calls for LGBTQ visibility both do

and compel, I bring together Judith Butler's analyses of gendered subjectivities as

performative (1993; [1990] 1999) and of the speech act as enabling the constitution of

the subject along with Meg Wesling's position that gendered performativity must be

considered labored (2012) to analyze the production of a sexual as distinct from

gendered subjectivity and also to recognize this production as labored. In so doing, I

build in new ways upon Hennessy's formative work on the labored politics of

visibility.

For poststructuralists, the performative enacting of the social marks us as

legible or unintelligible—we literally do not exist as recognizable a priori. Further,

the extent to which these repetitive corporeal acts are *naturalized* allows these very

performative acts to be viewed as a reflection of our inherent desires or identities,

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[62] Although scholars have highlighted and analyzed the processes through which
certain sexual subjects come to exist as such, this scholarship does not examine these
processes as overtly labored or utilize a queer Marxist approach. Nonetheless, for
insightful analyses of the production of gendered and sexual subjects that might be
read as labored processes, see Kulick (1998) and Rupp and Taylor (2003).

gendered, sexual, or otherwise (Butler [1990] 1999). This naturalization of complex

social processes renders certain bodies, genders, and sexualities—and one's living in

them—as (in)authentic. It is this very authenticity of the self that LGBTQ subjects

labor to produce, the labor of which is lost via these very discourses of authenticity.[63]

Calls for LGBTQ visibility are one mode through which repetitive performances are

compelled and naturalized, subsequently rendering certain LGBTQ people as

authentic and others as unintelligible (or worse, all too intelligible in their pitiable

closetedness).

For Butler, our bodies should be viewed "not as a ready surface awaiting

signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and

maintained" (Butler [1990] 1999, 44). If our bodies, genders, and sexualities are not

natural, but become through maintenance and repetitions that have been naturalized,

we ought to consider, Meg Wesling argues, these processes as labored. Wesling

deconstructs the representation of drag in the film *Mariposas* in order to analyze the

"production of gendered bodies and desiring subjects as a repetitive form of labor,"

arguing that "the compulsory repetition of gender as performance might usefully be

understood as a form of self-conscious labor that produces value, both material and

social, even when (or precisely because) that performance is asserted to be natural"

(Wesling 2012, 108). Building on Butler's analysis of gender as inherently

performative, Wesling asks "how we might articulate the labored economies of

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[63] Queer studies scholars have long critiqued the notion of an authentic subject,
challenging the assumed relationship between actions and identities and pointing out
the ways in which sexual desires and identities are historically and geographically
contextual as well as discursively constructed and situated.

sexuality and gender more generally—how the performance of gender and sexuality constitutes a form of labor, accruing both material and affective value" (108).

That Wesling does not mark a distinction between sexual and gendered economies allows the labor of *sexuality* to fall out—an important point for my argument precisely because calls for LGBTQ visibility necessitate that one does not become recognizable as an authentic sexual subject through the performance of gender(ed labor) alone. The processes by which LGBTQ people come to be recognizable in this particular historical moment and social location make requisite *particular* types of speech acts (a "coming out," if you will) *in addition to* the naturalization of the quotidian, performative repetitions Butler and Wesling identify as central to the construction of gender. For Butler, all speech acts—including, then, calls for LGBTQ visibility—reflect moments through which subjects are constructed, rather than existing as a predetermined totality (1997). But, as Butler suggests, all gendered and sexual subjects are not compelled to speak in the same way, and, further, the speech act itself will come to be valued differently based on the speaker in question. For example, no speech act that is recognized as such is required of the gendered subject in question in order to be recognizable as (properly) gendered. In other words, gender-conforming women, for example, are not expected to state, "I am a woman" in order to be understood as authentically so. As Eve Sedgwick argues, "The speech acts that coming out…can comprise are…strangely specific… In the vicinity of the closet, even what counts as a speech act is problematized on a perfectly routine basis" ([1990] 2008, 3). Although speech acts and other performative repetitions are, as Butler points out, more mutually constitutive than distinct, this

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point speaks to the ways in which we cannot understand the labored production of the legible sexual subject through the framework of gender alone.

Assumptions about visibility, and the corresponding politics that link visibility to authenticity, are central to this distinction. Gender is assumed to be able to be read by others onto one's body in ways that sexuality is not. Even in the case where one works to present to the world their sexuality via a non-normative gender presentation, this is not enough to be viewed as "out" as LGBTQ which is, as I have suggested throughout this dissertation, represented as the apex of showing the world one's true (authentic and liberated) self. It is precisely the fear and possibility associated with "passing" as non-LGBTQ that renders imperative—and lends value to—the "coming out" speech act. Authentic out- loud- and proudness requires that subjects perform the speech act(s) of coming out, center sexuality as their primary mode of identifying in the world, and politicize this identity. These spoken, embodied, and politicized acts are forms of constant laboring so insidious they are illegible as such.

 In the cases of both gendered and sexual subjectivity, "one comes to exist by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. One 'exists' not only by virtue of being recognized but, in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*" (Butler 1997, 5). For LGBTQ people, this recognizability is predicated upon fulfilling the expectation of coming out. *Becoming* and *remaining* recognizable as LGBTQ requires not only repetitive performance, but also its appearance as natural, that is, as unlabored. For Wesling "this labor is valuable precisely in the extent to which the gendered subject submits 'freely' to the imperative of this continual labor, and

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regards the product of that labor—gender identity—not as an imposition from the outside but as something that originates from within" (109).

Calls for LGBTQ people to come out at every possible moment do precisely this work: they obscure the labor of coming and being out by naturalizing the sexual identity that is produced through these labors and suggesting that coming out is the fulfillment of the internal desire to do so.[64] The authenticity of the self hinges on the appearance of non-work. For visibility to function as a commodity, it needs buyers—subjects (loved ones, employers, states) seeking to craft themselves in relation to a visible other, but it cannot have workers (those discernibly laboring to produce it).

Coming Out at Work (As Work)

Calls to come out at work, a site where one labors in exchange for wages and other material benefits, do something additional: they imply that those marginalized by the hegemony of current sexual norms will (and should) labor for free, even in the very place one expects to receive wages for their work. In a labor market in which "more jobs require workers to supply not only manual effort but also emotional skills, affective capacities, and communicative competencies," training workers to become accustomed to giving of themselves for free does the work of capital (Weeks 2011, 89). Being the right kind of worker requires authenticity, and, by extension, inauthenticity is refusal—and employers regard it as such.

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[64] My discussion of the labor of becoming recognizable as LGBTQ should not suggest that I view the closet as an unlabored site. Of course, as activist discourses suggest, maintaining one's closet might (and is assumed to) be incredibly labored.

A diversity consultant for large corporations urges employers to create

environments where lesbian and gay employees can come out and encourages

employees to take advantage of opportunities to do so. This consultant suggests that

coming out at work is important because studies show that "40% of closeted gay

employees are less likely to trust their employer than those gay employees who are

out. That lack of trust comes into play in their productivity" (McNaught 2011). Being

a 'gay-friendly' workplace is a small price to pay for the increased surplus value that

companies can extract from trusting, pliant employees.

According to an article posted on the Human Rights Campaign website,

coming out at work can "relieve the daily stress of hiding who you are," potentially

resulting in increased productivity and "benefit[ing] your career because your peers

will see you in a new, perhaps even courageous, light."[65] For HRC, coming out can

relieve the stress associated with maintaining the closet. Doing so, it is assumed,

benefits more than corporations and employees; in fact, social progress itself is

understood to rely upon it. An article titled "Come Out at Work on National Coming

Out Day" posted on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force website assumes a link

between visibility, authenticity and political rights, and argues for the social benefits

associated with coming out in one's work environment:

> Despite the remarkable progress made by the LGBT community there
> are still no clear protections for workers, meaning it's still risky for
> many to be out in the workplace. That's why the federal Employment
> Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) is so important to protect people in
> the workplace based on sexual orientation and gender identity… On

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[65]"Coming Out at Work," Human Rights Campaign,
http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/coming-out-at-work. Accessed 7/4/2013.

> this National Coming Out Day, stand up for an America where everyone can be out at work without fear of losing their job because of who they are or whom they love … And, if it feels right and safe, be honest with your co-workers when having conversations in the workplace. The more people who have visible LGBT colleagues the more people will accept us as equals.

Coming out is necessary because, as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force suggests, visibility leads to acceptance and political rights—a narrative I challenge in the Introduction to this dissertation. Calls for visibility function to both create an authentic (out) LGBTQ subject and place responsibility for the state of the social on those continually called upon to maintain this authenticity via their visibility. Although ENDA does not necessarily produce an imperative for visibility—its legal function is to protect those who "choose" to be visible, after all—LGBTQ rights groups' prioritizing of passing this act reflects and informs the cultural imperative that suggests that LGBTQ people must be visible in order to be authentic, a position embodied here by the (good, honest) worker. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a context in which a boss's inability to fire an employee over their sexual preferences or identifications, the desired goal of ENDA, might challenge the cultural expectation to come out and the subsequent tethering of that outness to authenticity. (Those who are not out will be especially inauthentic when ostensible cultural barriers to being so are ostensibly eliminated.)

Such problematics are, ironically, present in gay rights advocates' calls for ENDA. For the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, ENDA is not only that which will allow people to be visible (without being fired); it is that which visibility will enable—a position grounded in circular logics and with potentially egregious

consequences for LGBTQ workers who have no legal protections, pointing to the ways in which one's ability to enact a "choice"—to come out or not—is always already circumscribed. While it may be dangerous to come out at work (and elsewhere), it may be equally dangerous not to, as the labored confessing that makes one recognizable as visible, it is assumed, reflects and leads to individual and social progress.

While I agree with those scholars who have suggested that LGBTQ visibility does not work for everyone—visibility's meanings, risks, and benefits are context-dependent—my point here is not that visibility does not work for some people, a point rural and transnational queer studies scholars convincingly have made, but that it *is* work for everyone.

Having made this case through bringing together and expanding up poststructural and queer Marxist theorists, I now turn to the stories of my interviewees in order to highlight moments in which the calls for LGBTQ workers to display their "true selves" in their places of employment are resisted. Interviewees' positions are especially worth considering in this moment marked by such calls and the related celebration of the slew of cultural workers (professional athletes, musicians, and Hollywood stars alike) who have recently come out "publicly," that is, in their workplaces. In the following section, I consider the narratives of three interviewees who refused their co-workers' invitations (or, perhaps more accurately, polite demands) to come out at work.[66]

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[66] For additional examples of narratives of interviewees who challenge what it means to be out and the logics upon which outness and visibility rely, see chapter two.

From LGBTQ Women in the Rural Midwest

Nissa, a middle-class Native woman in her late 20s from northern Minnesota, claimed that she does not talk about her sexuality at work and that her co-workers and bosses "do but don't kind of know."

> I just never told them but I think they know because my manager was telling me about how her son is gay and I was like 'what is she trying to get at here?' I think she was trying to *make me say*…'Yeah well I am too.' So I think they know but they don't… This lady I work with she has… two daughters that … have red hair… and I was just like 'I just don't like red hair'…and she's like 'Well at least I know you're not going to hit on my daughters.' And I was like 'Mmm what are you trying to say?' They do but they don't kind of know. I am [out] but I'm not.

Yonni, a Native woman in her mid-40s who lives in northern Minnesota and describes her class status as "rich in the heart, low on money," similarly refuses to engage in conversations about her sexuality at work:

> I work construction. Some guys will be like, 'Ugh, man I can't understand [lesbians and gays].' You know, it's not for you to understand! You're sitting around and [the guys will say], 'Can I ask you a personal question?' And you already know what it is. I'm like, 'No, you can't. Can I ask you a personal question?' [The guys respond] 'Oh, sure! Yeah, you can.' I said, 'No, I won't.' And I just leave it like that. Why? That's just the way I am…I don't care if you're knowing me for five years or whatever. Go buy a magazine or something, or go buy a book if you want…I'm just private about that. I'm a private person, but I'm open.

Yonni refuses to answer questions about her sexuality by anticipating the questions

and preventing them from being asked. For Yonni, this has meant that although her co-workers have asked if they *could* ask her a personal question (which she believes would be in regards to her sexuality), no one on the job ever actually *has*.

Leila, a Native woman in her mid-40s who lives on a reservation in northern Minnesota and describes her class status as "rich in all sorts of ways," said she does not hide information about her sexuality at work, but also that she rarely talks about it:

> At the [construction] work site, I don't say nothing to anybody. Really.
> I don't…get into my life or anything like that. First of all, a lot of [my
> white co-workers]…just don't understand Native life. They don't
> understand how we think and how we feel about things and operate.

I followed up and asked explicitly if she talks about her life at all at work. "Hmm, No. Guys would ask me, 'Where are you from?' I would tell them, 'Never mind.' They would ask me, 'Are you married?' 'Never mind.' 'Do you have children?'…I just tell them, 'Never mind.'"

That Leila, Yonni, and Nissa do not talk about their personal lives at work did not translate into their feeling unknown or discriminated against. I could not tell if interviewees felt as if they had not experienced discrimination because they keep information about their sexualities covert or if this lack of discrimination was rooted in something else. I asked each of them if they had ever faced discrimination at work in regards to their sexuality. Nissa and Yonni answered in the negative. Leila paused briefly before answering:

Maybe a little bit but nothing… to fight or squabble about…One time…at work…I caught them…talking shit about…lesbian people. I had to walk down there and tell them to shut the fuck up…'Who the hell are you to judge anybody?'...I was like 'Well it's not up to you…What if your sister or your wife's sister is gay or lesbian or whatever she wants to call herself, if she is happy?' Well they shut up. They…don't talk shit to me at all over there. I've never ran into that on any job site and I've been doing construction for like twenty something years….Nope it goes to show you [the] rarity. Don't hide it in the dark cause that's…dangerous. Definitely show it off.

Although Leila says to "show it off," in her twenty or more years as a construction worker, she has never come out to her co-workers; Leila's version of "show[ing] it off," then, differs significantly from the ways in which gay rights groups demand LGBTQ people to make overt their sexuality. At the same time, she clearly does not feel as if she is closeted or hiding anything important about herself. On the one occasion Leila heard her co-workers making homophobic comments about lesbians—that she makes clear were not directed at her—she stepped in and told them to cut it out. And they did.

That Nissa, Yonni, and Leila are all Native women is certainly relevant to their positions regarding coming out at work. But because the white women I interviewed articulated remarkably similar positions regarding coming out, a point explicated in my analysis of coming and being out in chapter two, race alone cannot account for this disidentification among Native LGBTQ women. It can, however, point to differences in how interviewees articulated their reasons for approaching visibility in ways that are distinct from LGBTQ organizations. White women tended to account for their disinterest in visibility through referencing their rurality, while

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some of the Native women I interviewed rooted this difference in their racial and

ethnic identifications.

Leslie, a middle-class Native women in her late-40s who lives on a

reservation in northern Minnesota, speaks to this point. Leslie, whose story I also

referenced in chapter two, ran for chief executive of her tribe as a silent candidate,

meaning that she did not publicly campaign for the position. I asked her why she

utilized this approach. She responded, "Because that's how my life has been actually.

In silence, we were two-spirited."

> I have a problem with friends wanting me to be [out, loud and proud],
> and I'm like 'I'm sorry, can't do that.' [In our culture] you kinda
> mingle in the community, it's a communal thing. Community keeps
> each other going…If you're doing a right community thing, nobody
> sticks out. I wish we lived in that world. I try to live in that world and I
> try not to stick out, and that's culture and tradition coming back at you.

For Leslie, expectations to be out, loud, and proud clash with her traditional Native

upbringing and values. Yet, Leslie, like Nissa, Yonni, and Leila, sees herself as out.

The family members and friends of each of these Native women know about their

sexualities. Nissa, Yonni and Leila described situations in which their co-workers do,

but they kind of do not know. Although each woman described moments in which she

refused an invitation to come out to her co-workers, she engaged in other (also

labored) behaviors that would make it difficult to see this refusal as symptomatic of

being closeted: Nissa wears rainbow bracelets to work, Yonni describes being

affectionate with her girlfriend in public after having a few drinks (where her bosses

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and co-workers would have been likely to see her in their small town), and Leila stops her co-workers from making homophobic jokes.

So, the question remains: what exactly are LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest refusing in these moments? I would like to return to Wesling's analysis of the labor of the production of subjectivities. My interivewees do not, as Wesling says, "submit freely" to their managers' and co-workers' demands. For Wesling, again, "this labor is valuable precisely in the extent to which the gendered subject submits 'freely' to the imperative of this continual labor, and regards the product of that labor—gender identity—not as an imposition from the outside but as something that originates from within" (2012, 109). But my interviewees' positions depart from Wesling's too. They do not see the *product* of their labor—some form of gender or sexual identity—as an imposition.[67] Nissa, for example, explained that she proudly identifies as a lesbian and Native because she sees each of these things as unique. She wears rainbow bracelets to work and claims that she would go to LGBTQ rallies if she had time (although, perhaps ironically, because of her work and school load, she does not). For Nissa, the imposition is the expectation that she do the labor of telling. Of course, the distinction between viewing as an imposition the labor to produce an identity and the identity itself is blurry—precisely because if one does not labor in prescribed ways, one's authentic relationship to a claimed identity is questioned. Nissa resisted confessing her sexuality to her co-workers, explaining that she felt as if

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[67] Although, as I discuss further in chapter two, interviewees also tended not to see their sexuality as constituting a large part of their identities. As such, many did express disinterest in gay rights advocates' expectations that they identify strongly with their sexualities; the ubiquity of these demands might also be read as a form of imposing.

her manager and co-worker were trying to force her to come out. In resisting, these women challenge both the imperative to come out at work and the image of the authentic gay as someone who is necessarily "out."

Of course, resisting the call, like answering the call, is labored. But the former position is already assumed to be the case. For confirmation of this point, quickly peruse any gay rights advocates' or organizations' blogs, tumblrs, vlogs, or websites, which inevitably urge people to come out. These sites consistently proclaim that lying is exhausting, detailing the "painstaking labor that goes into being secretly gay."[68] Sure, maintaining "the closet" is a labored practice,[69] but producing oneself as an LGBTQ subject who is not closeted, and is therefore authentic, real, and honest, is also deeply laborious. We do not see the latter as labored because, as I suggested earlier by drawing from the work of Meg Wesling and Judith Butler, coming out (so that we might be visible) has been so naturalized, framed as both a reflection of our internal desire to speak and as that which liberates us. Here I am simply attempting to highlight moments in which dominant LGBTQ logics are contested by interviewees who refuse and resist their co-workers' invitations to come out.

My reading of interviewees' experiences with coming and being out at work as disidentificatory relies on the fact that not a single one of my interviewees said that

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[68] Joshua Alston, "How Facebook is Kicking Down the Closet Door," Newsweek. 6/1/2010. http://www.newsweek.com/how-facebook-kicking-down-closet-door-73503. Accessed 5/20/2014.

[69] Steven Seidman's work, which challenges the applicability of the framework of the closet in the contemporary moment, works against the naturalness with which such claims are constructed (see chapter two for an in-depth discussion of Seidman's argument).

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they felt as if they *couldn't* be out at work today. A few interviewees mentioned that their places of employment did not have a non-discrimination policy. And one trans* woman was fired a decade ago for her decision to transition. For Kay, who has a J.D. and knowledge of how the law operates, this means:

> I could be fired for being gay. So that's a little bit scary. I don't, in fact, think I would be likely to be for that reason. But if uh, if they wanted to fire me for some other reason, they could fire me for that reason. And it's perfectly acceptable—perfectly legal I should say. And so…I think there is employment discrimination.

But even those who referenced these types of symptoms of trans*- and homophobia did not suggest that it was these policies that kept them from coming out at work. And for Kay, the fact that employment discrimination is legal is not necessarily enough reason to prioritize and invest in passing ENDA, one of the aforementioned projects of gay rights groups. As Kay said, passing such a law would not prevent employment discrimination; it would only give people who have been discriminated against avenues through which they could contest the discriminatory practices they faced after the fact. Kay mentioned that similar laws exist that are meant to *prevent* "employment discrimination based on race, which is not legal, but it happens."

In stark contrast to the aforementioned image of the good worker as necessarily "out, loud, and proud" at work perpetuated by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign, and related diversity consultants, many of my interviewees were not "out" at work in the ways that gay rights groups ask of LGBTQ people—that is, divulging one's sexuality through a particular speech

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act that is read as a formal "coming out." For many of my interviewees, this did not translate into feeling closeted or "not out" more broadly, or even at work. Other interviewees stated that they are "not out" at work but told stories that seemingly contradict this position.

Interviewees overwhelmingly articulated that their sexuality was not relevant to their work and that they had no desire to be out at work. Nonetheless, even in these cases, most interviewees were out in the sense that some co-workers who they felt close to knew and that, in general, they did not feel as if they were hiding it. They were not out in order to be "known" so that they might be more productive or so that their co-workers might vote differently—two of the reasons given by gay rights groups for the need to come out at work.

Considering how knowledge circulates in small towns, and that people often felt as if "everyone just knows" (a point explicated a bit further in chapter two), it is likely that even those people to whom my interviewees were ostensibly not out, still knew. That people felt as if they were not out if they had not explicitly come out by telling fellow co-workers themselves reflects the ubiquity of the logics of gay rights groups: that the coming out act itself is what marks one as out, a way of thinking my interviewees also challenge. At the same time, that interviewees refused to do the work of coming out at work challenges these groups' calls.

Resistance to the logics of gay rights groups does not have to be as explicit as those moments in which Nissa, Yonni, and Leila refused to answer what appeared to them to be overt questions about their sexuality. As I argued in chapter two, many of the women I interviewed engaged in quiet challenges to visibility politics. They

discussed the complicated nature of being and coming out, articulating what I argue

reflects a disidentificatory position in relation to gay rights movements. I expanded

on this analysis here to consider, specifically, how my interviewees negotiate and

resist these politics, discourses, and expectations at their work places, in particular. In

the following section of this chapter, I draw from those interviewees who claim they

are not *exactly* out at work but share stories to the contrary to suggest that their ways

of engaging with co-workers might also be read as resistance to the demands to come

out at work.

(Out?) On the Job

Avery, a middle-class, white woman in her early-30s who lives in a city near a

Minnesota border, said that she was out at work "to an extent." She had introduced

her fiancée to her boss but she does not talk about it with her "Team," those staff she

supervises. She says, at the same time, and with these very staff, "I don't deny it. It's

kinda hard. I just say my fiancée [Kasen]…most of the time and [because of her

gender neutral name] it…could go either way."

Bethany, a middle-class, white woman in her late-40s who lives in

southeastern South Dakota, stated:

> Most of the people that I know *except for my work* related people
> know that I am gay. There's one guy that I've worked with [who] was
> just always joking. And I joke, you know, and I think he was kind of
> taking [it] a little bit wrong. At one point, I sa[id], 'You don't have a
> chance in hell cause I am gay.' Plus he's just isn't anything that I
> would, you know… bad teeth and heavy, just doesn't do it for me.
> And he goes, 'Ahh, [but] you [have been] joking with me.' And I

sa[id], 'Well you were joking with me.' And [then] I sa[id], 'You know I don't tell anybody that.' So he's the only one that knows out there. And [one other co-worker]. So, work wise, I just don't. [Emphasis added]

Klaudette and Pauline, two middle-class, white women in their mid-60s and 50s, respectively, who live in central Minnesota, agree that visibility is "really important." Both are retired professors; Pauline worked in the sciences and Klaudette in the humanities and also athletics. Both see themselves as out in life, although Pauline says she was not out at work. Klaudette, by contrast, claims she came out to "every one of [her] classes" she taught. But both women shared anecdotes that complicate these statements: Klaudette describes coming out while teaching humanities courses as "very simple. Obviously I can't come out teaching racquetball or something…Oh by the way I'm queer." Pauline, Klaudette's partner, said:

It's interesting because I have some things around my office, and I don't hide who I am, but I don't…announce it to my classes or anything. One of my students…was meeting with me in my office, and I had a button [that] said 'out and proud in [the town I live in]'…that I had gotten from the LGBT Resource Center, and she said 'Oh I like that.' And then she told me that their son came out to them. She said 'Oh he would really like this,' and I said 'Well take it. I can get plenty more.'

Maggie, a middle-class white woman in her mid-40s who lives in southeastern South Dakota, said:

The people I work with know, if there is somebody that I am close to. I mean if a new teacher starts at my school, I may talk to him five times in the whole school year. That's not what I bring up. But after five years if I continually talk with them…I'll talk about the kids. If they

ever asked 'Oh what's your husband do?' I go, 'Oh well it's my wife, you know.'

Kay, a middle-class, white woman in her early-50s who lives in eastern South Dakota, stated:

> I'm not out to people at work. I have a couple of coworkers that I'm out to, but for the most part…it's not something that I talk about, just like straight people don't talk about the fact that they're straight, although they might mention a husband or girlfriend or boyfriend or whatever. And I don't go there because it's…it's nobody's business and my philosophy is that people give you permission to tell them. And if they don't give you permission to tell them then it's just better just not to go there because you don't want them to think that [is] the main thing they think about me...there's a lot more to me than just my sexuality. So, that's not really relevant. People say, 'Do the people you work with know that you're a lesbian?' And I say, 'Well if I ever came out as straight there would be a lot of very surprised people.' I think a lot of them have a pretty good idea and…they don't hassle me.

Although Kay does not see herself as "out" at work, she also explained that she is out to some co-workers and mentioned that some people at work "suggested that I invite [my partner]" to the work Christmas party.

Lou Anne, a lower-middle-class white woman in her mid-60s who lives in a city near a South Dakota border, transitioned from living as a man to a woman in her mid-50s, after working as a manager for a large construction related dealership for nearly twenty-five years. Prior to her transition, she had:

> visited with the corporate manager and we kinda had a plan. That, when I was ready, the old person would leave…and [the new me] would show up as the manager at another town. And that was kind of the whole thing. Well… the president of the company found out about

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my situation, and fired me…with the words 'deal with your gender issues elsewhere.' So I filed a discrimination suit against them. So out of that, I became somewhat um, notable, I guess you might say.

Lou Anne became a local celebrity. The city newspaper "did a two-day feature article…I did go out to California and did a national talk show. So, that all kind of compounded a little bit. Some of my family thought I was going overboard…too visible and too vocal." Lou Anne subsequently became a board member at two local LGBTQ organizations and gave "tons of speeches…all over the Midwest." Lou Anne transitioned nine years prior to my interviewing her. "I don't do that anymore. I've gotten to the point where, I'm just another old, white-haired broad walkin' down the street…whatever. You know, and that's kinda…I like that." It was clear that Lou Anne had made a conscious decision to stop participating in LGBTQ communities. I asked why.

> A lot of it career. When I was in [a larger Midwestern city], you could kinda lose yourself, you know, just in the size. Then they asked me to come up here and manage the store. Uh, so I thought, okay. I don't need those kind of issues here in this town, with me trying to be the manager. So I did drop that.

She became the store manager, worked "anywhere from 70 to 80 hours" per week, stating, "I lived here, this was my life." Despite describing work as "her life" she never told anyone at work about her gender identification:

> I would guess, if they don't know—they have an idea. But they don't acknowledge it. And that's the way I want it. I did have one gal that worked for me here. We both were working here when [I got kicked

out of my church for living as a woman] and all of this crap hit the fan. But…she left me alone. She never went there. I just knew that she knew. Uh, I don't ever talk about it with anybody. Past history. I'm just a grandma.

Lou Anne later quit her job as the store manager and went back to school:

Now that I'm in school, I'm just basically everybody's grandmother out there. You know, and I go out for a job, and I don't want all that stuff kinda hitting me and coming up… At school, I told one person. This was the head of my department, and…I kind of decided that she needed to know what was going on. I know she's made a lot of recommendations about me to people outside [of school]. And I thought, okay, before somebody comes back and goes, "you're recommending *that?* This person, to us?" She needed to know…She'd been my head instructor, I'd had at least two classes from her every semester for at least a year and a half. And she goes, 'I had no idea.' But she's the only one I ever told in school.

Lou Anne has asked her adult son, who still calls her "Dad," to be careful about calling her by this name around classmates and co-workers, in particular. "That's who I am. I am his Dad, always will be. I have asked him, that you know, say, we're around my classmates, or my work—people I work with, you know—if you couldn't bring up 'Dad,' [Lou Anne] is fine. You don't have to call me Mom."

Lou Anne shared a story that speaks to just how "fine" with it she is:

I've had some interesting things [happen]. I used to own a Harley. [My son] and I were at the Harley Davidson shop one afternoon. And he was over looking at bikes on one end of the showroom, and I was getting something, and all at once [he yelled], 'Hey, Dad! Come look at this!' And all the people in the Harley shop are looking around thinking, 'Who's this kid talking to?' It is what it is. He's my son, I'm his father. And…we're both going with that.

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Each of these women speak to the complexity of what it means to be "out" in general and at work, in particular: Are you out if you talk about your fiancée by name, but do not state that you are LGBTQ? Are you out if you do not "hide" your sexuality but, at the same time, have told only a couple of co-workers or wait five years to share this information? Are you out if you have LGBTQ pride buttons in your office, but do not explicitly connect this to your own sexuality? What might it mean to consider someone "closeted" who is out in every other area of their lives other than that of their workplace? Regardless of how my interviewees or I might answer these questions, it seems obvious that LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest, in their explicit and quiet refusals to come out at work, are not the "visible LGBT colleagues" that the Human Rights Campaign or National Gay and Lesbian Task Force envision and call for.

The Fruits of our Labors

 In the final section of this chapter, I want to briefly but explicitly answer two questions: 1.) If visibility ought to be considered labored, what does it produce? 2.) What does any of this have to do with rurality? I will take each question in turn.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, visibility politics produce a great deal: (in)authentic LGBTQ subjects, progress narratives, metronormativity, nationalism, post-raciality, post-spatiality, and what Robert McRuer calls "flexible subjects" (2006, 17). Visibility discourses and politics also produce more than ideas and subjectivities. Visibility is itself a commodity and is understood to be achievable through purchasing (other) commodities. As the aforementioned scholars of LGBTQ

tourism have long argued, visibility politics are deeply connected to commodity culture, producing the desire for commodities and encouraging consumption. The idea of being able to be visible as LGBTQ—which relies on the assumption that this way of being is inherently valuable—is precisely what gay tourist agencies sell. They sell this idea, of course, through selling other more material items, including trips to cities and countries where people ostensibly can be "out, loud, and proud," cruises with other LGBTQ identified people, Pride celebrations, and LGBTQ weddings. The material items cannot, of course, be separated from the cultural ideologies that enable their very existence; in the selling and consuming of these items, visibility politics are strengthened.

To answer the question of what visibility produces, it is useful to state explicitly what the labor of visibility looks like. As I have gestured toward throughout this dissertation, and this chapter in particular, the labors of visibility are at once affective, political, social, and intimate. Further, as I have mentioned here, the labor of the speech act is not the only labor in which one might engage in order to produce one's sexual subjectivity; the various activities my interviewees engaged in at the workplace—wearing bracelets or putting a stop to co-workers' homophobic comments—are, of course, also labored. But, importantly, these labors are valued differently precisely because they do not produce the same commodities as do performances of the coming out speech act. Sporting a rainbow bracelet might be seen as gesturing to one's sexuality to those who know what rainbows symbolize for LGBTQ communities. But donning rainbow attire or putting an end to homophobic comments cannot produce the LGBTQ person in question as someone who is

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authentically so—at least not when, as I have suggested, this authenticity is tethered

to the confessional performance of the coming out speech act. If one does not

explicitly confess their sexuality to others so that these others might be able to

acknowledge this part of the LGBTQ person, that person will never be considered

"out." And, by extension, no flexible subjects and no progress—that which is,

perhaps, the most valued results of the labor of visibility—will be produced. Gay

rights groups do not ask people to wear bracelets, hold hands, or stop homophobic

jokes as a way to create personal liberation and social progress. For gay rights

advocates, only "coming out" via a particular telling so that we become "known"

holds this power.

Now onto the second question: What does any of this have to do with rurality?

Short answer: Everything. Metronormative ideas are, I have suggested throughout this

dissertation, enabled through visibility politics and discourses. Refusals by LGBTQ

women in the rural Midwest to come out at work, like other sorts of challenges to

visibility politics, ought to be read as moments in which metronormativity is

contested—contestations that happen even as metronormative assumptions are being

reproduced.

Let me explain: It is quite easy to read discussions of homophobia in rural

places as a reflection of the homophobia of rural places. But in the rare cases when

interviewees referenced homophobia (in regards to their places of employment or

otherwise), they overwhelmingly referred to comments made to or about *other*

LGBTQ people or to those heterosexual people who claimed to deride the

homophobe in question and were, arguably, sharing that they had done so with my

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interviewees as a way to show their support for LGBTQ people. Kay speaks to

precisely this point:

> Like, maybe snide comments [are made] here and there, not necessarily about me, but just about gays in general. And that's not even that common anymore, because most work places…have policies where you just don't talk about that. One of my coworkers told me, just a couple weeks ago, that [at] a work event that she went to…somebody said an anti-gay comment and she called 'em on it…She's straight, but she's sort of militant—an advocate for gays and lesbians…She said 'I said to 'em, 'You better—you better just watch what you say.' So then she, of course, told me the next day. But she didn't tell me who, I don't want to know who said it. But I don't—I don't ever hear it.

While these narratives of rural homophobia reassert metronormative ideologies that

frame the rural as necessarily homophobic, they also disrupt these ideologies; they

challenge the notion that there are no rural LGBTQ people who live in a way that is

"visible" (they are there, ostensibly visible enough to be discriminated against) as

well as the idea that rural LGBTQ people have no support from their rural

communities (interviewees, such as Kay, often heard of homophobic comments

through heterosexual supporters). Perhaps most strikingly, interviewees

overwhelmingly made clear that whatever homophobia circulated was directed at

others, positioning themselves as accepted in their rural communities. My

interviewees' discussions of homophobia in rural places were deployed, then, for

purposes other than solely framing the rural in the negative. Such moments reflect the

types of quiet challenges to metronormativity—and the visibility politics upon which

such thinking relies—that are possible to detect when we take seriously the role of

space and place in people's lives. It is through visibility discourses and politics—and the labor of enacting or refusing them—that rural LGBTQ women come to exist as such.

Conclusion

Capaciousness, Queerness, Rurality

More than a decade ago, Rosemary Hennessey claimed that "'visibility' is a struggle term in gay and lesbian circles now" (2000, 111). Despite years of academic and activist critique, contemporary expectations for visibility—far from being viewed as contestable, as that over which we might struggle—have been amplified and hardened, perhaps most heartily through the recent proliferation of mainstream political concern over LGBTQ rights issues and related discourses. Perhaps visibility politics might be better understood as a reflection of *too little struggle*, too little critique, reflection, and debate.

This ubiquitous celebration of visibility has material, political, and intellectual ramifications. I have argued here that LGBTQ women in rural South Dakota and Minnesota are disidentifying with calls for LGBTQ visibility as a way to critically examine the cultural ideologies that undergird and are proliferated through visibility discourses. In chapter two, I drew from cultural representations as well as interviewees' stories to highlight what this disidentification looks like. I analyzed the ways in which calls for LGBTQ visibility, a strategy seen as appropriate for community-building and as a desirable form of political activism, overemphasize an urban ethos and do not represent the discourses and communication strategies used by rural LGBTQ women. I examined the complex relationships between and among LGBTQ visibility, identity, and politics. In the dominant cultural imaginary, a formal coming out is necessary in order to *be* out. Being visible without having come out in a prescribed way is unthinkable. And there is little room for imagining visibility

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beyond a limited understanding of the political. I drew from the tales of

interviewees' lives to complicate these cultural ideas about what visibility means and

to highlight the ways in which visibility politics are value-laden in deeply spatial

ways. I do not mean to suggest that LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest are or are

not "visible" (doing so would simply reproduce various binaries I have attempted to

disrupt), but rather that in this geographic locale what (in)visibility means, how one

comes to see oneself as (in)visible, and beliefs about (in)visibility differ sharply from

dominant academic and activist positions.

Based on the insights of chapters one and two, chapters three, four, and five

each sought to make a theoretical intervention in the interdisciplinary study of

visibility. In chapter three, "Visibility Politics, Metronormativity, and Nationalism:

Considering the Case of Jene Newsome," I examined the discourses around

Newsome's outing and military discharge to argue that a critical consideration of

contemporary visibility politics is crucial for rural queer studies because the abjection

of the rural informs and is informed by cultural and (LGBTQ) subcultural ideas

regarding the political potentiality of visibility. Those who are "out, loud, and proud"

simultaneously serve as embodied representations of both their own liberation and the

progressive nature of the time and place in which they live. By extension, then, those

who do not fulfill (dominant and subcultural LGBTQ) cultural expectations for

visibility come to exist in opposition to progress. Chapter three suggests that visibility

politics are not only symptomatic of what Judith Halberstam calls metronormative

logics (2005), but they actually *enable* metronormativity. By considering the relations

among urban/rural and global/local binaries, I further argued that simplistic

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assumptions about the liberty associated with political visibility not only render the rural backwards but also produce the non-West as anachronistic, and in the process facilitate nationalism.

In chapter four, "The Post-Raciality and Post-Spatiality of Calls for LGBTQ and Disability Visibility," I considered the ideologies that emerge when disability and LGBTQ rights advocates' ubiquitous calls for visibility collide. I argued that contemporary visibility politics enable the (re)production of post-racial and what I term post-spatial logics. In demanding visibility, disability and LGBTQ rights advocates ignore, ironically, visible markers of (racial) difference and assume that being "out, loud, and proud" is desirable trans-geographically. I brought together disability studies, critical race, and rural queer studies—fields that have engaged in remarkably little dialogue—to analyze the ideologies that undergird calls for LGBTQ and disability visibility.

Chapter five, "Queer Labors: Visibility and Capitalism," explored the work of the production of legible sexual subjectivities and examineed the ways that visibility discourses enable an erasure of that labor. I built primarily upon the work of Rosemary Hennessy (2000), Judith Butler (1993; [1990] 1999) and Meg Wesling (2012) to argue that becoming recognizable as visible is a labored process, and, as such, calls for LGBTQ visibility, which relentlessly demand constant laboring, are a reflection of and benefit to capitalist logics.

Throughout this dissertation, I have drawn from interviewees' alternative conceptualizations of LGBTQ visibility (as well as community and identity) to argue for social movements grounded in the desire to imagine (the social as well as

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ourselves) otherwise, rather than in shared marginalization or fixed identities. The current approaches of LGBTQ rights groups enable metronormativity and nationalism, reproduce post-racial and post-spatial logics, and rely upon a (labored) confessing of marginalization and identification. Beyond this, they, arguably, do not achieve the rights or liberation it is claimed they do. In questioning calls for LGBTQ visibility, I provide new conceptualizations of the relationships between sexuality and space, revise assumptions about the ostensible relations among LGBTQ community, identity, and visibility, question the notion that visibility is a requisite component of any path toward liberation, and challenge dominant conceptions of the nature of rural communities.

Ultimately, I contend that this analysis is crucial for feminist, queer, and trans* studies because, as critical geographers have argued, the "implicit engagements of space feed back into and sustain wider understandings of the world" (Massey 2005, 8). Further, the ways in which sexuality and gender are understood, experienced, and framed are deeply spatial. The articulation and actualizing of more capacious sexual and gendered subjectivities, then, is intimately tethered to broadening the limited cultural understandings of the queerness of the rural—a point that, I hope, will be viewed as having relevance for queer epistemologies and various movements for social justice. If we are to turn that which is represented as "a shadow of a life into an undiminished life" (Gordon [1997] 2008, 208), we must question the terms by which rural LGBTQ women have come to be understood and represented as (living in the) shadows. We also might consider what we would need to resist the hegemonic push to occupy the space of the non-shadows and engage in a re-valuing of the shadows

themselves, and the shape-shifting, trickery, and queer ways of being such shadows

enable.

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