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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Mathias J Detamore

The Graduate School
University of Kentucky
2010

QUEER APPALACHIA:
TOWARD GEOGRAPHIES OF POSSIBILITY

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
Mathias J. Detamore
Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Anna J. Secor, Professor of Geography
Lexington, Kentucky

2010

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QUEER APPALACHIA: TOWARD GEOGRAPHIES OF POSSIBILITY

Stereotypes about Appalachia abound through dubious and reductive representations of the 'hillbilly' icon. Sexuality and how it functions in Appalachia is usually cast from the outside as wild, violent, bestial, incestuous and generally base. Movies such as *Deliverance* and television shows such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Dukes of Hazard* render images of Appalachian sexuality as hyper-sexual, both naive and violent. These images of Appalachian sexual ignorance and violence that permeate popular culture have had problematic and reductive implications for rural gay/trans Appalachian folk. Mainstream gay culture has often used the perceived meanings of these images to circumscribe and foreclose upon the possibility of rural queer life, rendering the rural as monolithically homophobic and impenetrable.

This research attempts to destabilize this perspective and critique the impulse for mainstream gay culture to further marginalize rural gay/trans folk in Appalachia. The project reveals the possibility for rural queer life to exist in Appalachia to show not only its presence, but also its varying forms of visibility. To do this, experimental methodologies are employed, drawing on autoethnography that have located my body as an active participant and research object in one particular Appalachian queer geography. By actively participating in a rural queer network, the possibility for Appalachian queer geographies to exist in ways that surpass popular representations emerge in a way that force us to renegotiate our understandings of homophobia and what sets its conditions.

This project begins to uncover and theorize the ways in which kinship as a 'social technology' mitigates social strangeness and operates as a means for social protection and intimacy within rural queer populations. This research is presented in a way that neither dismisses nor emphasizes homophobic violence, but rather argues the imperative for strong political advocacy that recognizes both the struggles and accomplishments of rural gay/trans folk. Three interlinked approaches are used to highlight these possibilities and foreclosures: the exterior representation of Appalachian sexuality in American metropolitan gay cultures and its

politico-cultural effects on rural gay/trans folk, a more nuanced interpretation of homophobia in Appalachia, and how 'place' is made through the operation of rural queer networks.

KEYWORDS: Queer Geography, Appalachia and Rurality,
Queer Kinship, Autoethnography, Geographies
of Possibility

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I dedicate this work to:

My mother, Pamela Detamore and my father, Richard Detamore for their
continued support, admiration and love through all of my endeavors

Dr. Colleen McTague who found a troubled architecture student and
turned him into a geographer

and

My boyfriend and partner in crime Steven Glowicki,
my muse who inspired me to finish

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Chapter 1: Queer Appalachia: Questions, Terms and Roadmaps

Sexualities and sexual discourses, both hegemonic and emancipatory, have traditionally been structured around centers and margins. Foucault's 'history of sexuality' has a (hidden) geography: the legal, medical, religious and other institutions, which discursively constitute and regulate sexualities, are concentrated in geographical and political centers, broadly speaking in metropolitan areas.

– Richard Phillips and Diane Watt
De-centering Sexualities

Always part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty, and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole. No other region of the United States today plays the role of the 'other America' quite so persistently as Appalachia.

– Ronald Eller
Forward, Back Talk from Appalachia

The queer dimension and metropolitan privilege

Stereotypes about Appalachia abound through dubious and reductive representations of the 'hillbilly' icon (Blee and Billings 1999). Sexuality and how it functions in Appalachia is usually cast from the outside as wild, violent, bestial, incestuous and generally base. Movies such as *Deliverance* and television shows such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Dukes of Hazard* render images of Appalachian sexuality as hyper-sexual, marked by both naiveté and violence. These images of Appalachian sexual ignorance and violence permeate popular culture (Massey 2007). These permeations have had problematic and reductive implications for rural gay/trans Appalachian folk. Mainstream (urban/metropolitan) gay culture often uses the perceived meanings of these images to circumscribe and foreclose upon the possibility of rural queer life, rendering the rural as monolithically homophobic. With the rural marked as a 'bad place' for gay/trans folk to live, many rural gay/trans folk have been cast aside in the sexual identity politics of the Gay Rights Movement (Gray 2009, Halberstam 2005).

Further, there is a clear hierarchy to how the academy has approached the studies of sexuality and sexual and gender minorities that has just begun to provide scholarship on rural queer life. Queer Theory has certainly stretched the imagination of the intersection between sexuality and subjectivity, traced through the nexus of Gay and Lesbian Studies and the

postmodern/poststructural theoretical developments from the 1980s onward (Knopp and Brown 2003, Sullivan 2003, Kirsch 2000, Turner 2000, Jagose 1996). Yet the main body of this inquiry has remained largely in the urban, metropolitan areas and the historical and geographical developments of the 'coastal regions' (New York City and San Francisco) as the foundation of 'queer communities' (Spurlin 2000:192). It is here that the activism and identity politics, from Stonewall in the late 1960s to the present, has forged in the popular imaginary a permanent location in urban areas for all Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) sex/life/politics.¹ Research on sexuality has focused on the urban institutions through which the civil rights politics of the 'Gay Rights Movement' have been formed and practiced (Sullivan 2003, Hemmings 2002, Kirsch 2000, Turner 2000, Hay 1996). This practice of concentrating on metropolitan gay life (intentionally or otherwise) has passed over entire social groups that one would think to fall within the rubric of the 'Gay Rights Movement'.

One such group that this dissertation project concerns itself with and may be arguably the most invisible within (what I will be calling) the 'neoliberal gay project'² is rural sexual and gender minorities (Phillips, Watt and Shuttelton 2000, Bell and Valentine 1995, Kramer 1995) – rural Appalachian gay/trans folk to be specific. If sexuality *has* been mentioned in rural studies, it has been treated as another feature in a complicated set of 'sociocultural variables' (Bell and Valentine 1995).³ Indeed, to the extent that there has been study of rural sexuality, it has been largely theorized as a trickle down, one-way, hierarchical relationship of classical urban models, where the

¹ Indeed the Stonewall Riots on Christopher Street in New York City that began during the early morning hours of June 28, 1969 occurred when a small brigade of NYPD officers titled the 'Public Morals Squad' attempted a routine raid on a *mafia* owned gay bar called the Stonewall Inn. The ensuing riot that erupted over the course of that night spawned five nights of waxing and waning violent encounters between an emboldened group of gay men and women (especially drag queens and the homeless queer youth living across the street in Christopher Park and Sheridan Square) and a humiliated and angry police force. Ostensibly the hinge point around which the contemporary 'Gay Rights Movement' pivots, the Stonewall riots have been reconstituted in history as the moment in time that reconfigured our entire approach to civil liberties politics. It should be mentioned however, that in many ways this is a revisionist history. Jeff A Jones has reminded us in his dissertation on queer life in Lexington between 1930 and 1999 (2000), that the Stonewall riots were such an isolated and under reported event in the media that many gay folk across the country did not even know that it had happened in some instances up to ten years after the actual event (see for example, Armstrong and Crage 2006). Robyn Ochs, who was recently at the University of Kentucky to give a workshop on breaking binaries and defending 'bisexuality' as a legitimate sexual identity (March 3, 2010) remarked to me that as a little girl of about ten years old, she actually embarked on a bus with her mother on Christopher Street in the epicenter of the riots, during their daytime reprieves while they were actually going on. Even she did not know about Stonewall until ten years later when she was in college. While we should not forget the importance of Stonewall as a historical rupture, we must remain ambivalent about its position within the matrix of an 'entire' gay history and for that matter, geography.

² See below for a preliminary definition of 'neoliberal gay project' that will be explored in further detail in Chapter 2.

³ There is however a recent influx of critical work on rural gender (Little 2007, 2002, Little and Panelli 2003, Jones 1999), nonmetropolitan sexualities (Phillips and Watt 2000), Appalachian sexuality (Massey 2007) and a burgeoning array of exciting work on rural queer life (see for example Gray 2009, Halberstam 2005, Howard 1999, 2000).

urban is the core and its products disperse from center to hinter simultaneously diluting and reinforcing the urban manifestation from which it originates (Knopp and Brown 2003, Phillips and Watt 2000). Yet, in their study of the diffusion of sexualities in Seattle and Duluth (and the rural hinterlands of each), Larry Knopp and Michael Brown argue that these are indeed “multidirectional flows rather than just downward flows” (2003:414) suggesting that the sexualities of rural sexual minorities are far more complex and nuanced than credit has been given. Further to the extent that rural erotica does find its representations in the urban, they are generally distorted past recognition and managed through an appropriative and fetishized set of conceits and practices (Massey 2007, Herring 2006). These practices often cannibalize rural queer life, relegate it to the consumption and/or disposal practices⁴ of metropolitan gay life and evacuate the meanings of its representations for ‘actual’ rural queer life.

It is now time for expanding the body of critical study on sexual and gender minorities in rural America, American Studies, and both Rural and Queer Geography. While this project has begun, particularly in the discipline of geography (see for example Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton 2000, Kramer 1995), there is still much to be explored in this burgeoning sub-sub-topic in the sub-sub-discipline of rural queer geographies. The primary tenet of queer theory approaches to geography that this dissertation adopts, benefits from and hopes to add to, is the fluidity with which queer geographies operate (Knopp 2007, Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton 2000). Rural gay/trans folk *are* legitimate social actors that do indeed move in and out of the urban and the rural with their own forms of and negotiations through agency that shall come to be highlighted throughout these pages. They are marked by unique social identities, cultural formations, and problems that are not mere re/articulations of urban homosexuality in a rural context. At the same time, the rural and the urban are *not* isolated concepts. Because of this, the binaristic divide that holds the urban in an obverse diametric to the rural is destabilized and rendered insufficient to talk about 1) the differences between country and city gay/trans folk, 2) the web of homophobic processes and spatialities that bind these geographies, or 3) how ‘place’ as a set of intimate practices and politics comes to be understood. The rural does flow to the urban and back again – in short term and long term migratory patterns (locally, regionally, nationally), commuting to larger towns and cities to explore ‘queer identity’, the creative and transformative uses of ‘metro-queer’ experiences and

⁴ I shall come to an extensive discussion of how rural queer life is appropriated, consumed and disposed of by metropolitan gay life in Chapter 4.

aesthetics integrated into their own, the internet and other forms of media and market economy transactions, in just surviving (Knopp and Brown 2003).

This dissertation will demonstrate that there is indeed a rural queer visibility. While it may operate through differing styles, codes and practices in relation to conventional understandings of queer visibility marked metropolitan, its undeniable presence must be accounted for. In this visibility a looking glass is placed before us that forces us to recognize in that reflection a set of rural queer geographies that are as complex, vexed by struggle and imaginatively formed and reformed at the intersection of queer and straight social worlds as the contingencies and negotiations of metropolitan gay life. These rural queer visibilities simultaneously add to our continuing discussions on the history and geographies of sexual and gender minority folk and potentially offer us lessons about queer life for the constitution of a refreshed and more inclusive political terrain. We must break with the 'queer privilege' afforded to metropolitan gay sex/life/politics and reexamine what constitutes queer life and how it is both complicated and intensified at the intersection of competing social worlds. In other words, the urban and the rural are implicated dialectically in the constitution of each other. One should not be privileged over the other.

This dissertation begins to track a critical analytic that looks past the political foreclosures currently set in place by the neoliberal gay project and urges us to see the 'geographies of possibility'⁵ already present in the make-up of rural queer geographies. The arguments laid out here seek to challenge metropolitan gay life (without disqualifying it) and point to the possibilities of queer life in the country, specifically rural Central Appalachia. To do this, I am not seeking to proscribe what gay life 'is' in Appalachia. I'm not trying to determine its features. I'm not trying to highlight its struggles. I'm not trying to find its numerical distributions in the landscape. I'm not looking at 'coming out' stories, I'm not examining the areal patterns of rural to urban migration and I'm not seeking to concentrate on how homophobic violence operates in Eastern Kentucky.

I am not trying to do any of these things, but many of them are nevertheless present. But their presence is not meant to say 'this is queer Appalachia.' Their presence becomes salient as a means to allude to the possibilities for queer life to exist in these kinds of rural places without already determining what those places are. I neither dismiss nor glorify homophobic violence, I report and analyze (within my limitations through which I attempt to remain as critically ambivalent

⁵ See my discussion in Chapter 3 on the 'geographies of possibility'.

as possible). For us to be able to do legitimate research that neither victimizes nor valorizes rural queer life (excludes it or romanticizes it), we must first have a critical theoretical stage on which to conduct research. By developing a critical working definition of homophobia (that I will explore in detail in Chapter 5) and analyzing its vectors and seeking how these work through narrative examples, we come toward this critical analytic, while still watching how one particular queer geography, in which I still actively participate begins to emerge.

The thrust of this research then is to approach the study of queer life in rural Appalachia from a perspective of possibility while remaining critically ambivalent of such possibilities. Specifically I set out to prove that queer life in rural Appalachia is not only viable, but has more possibility than it is given credit in mainstream and primarily metropolitan gay culture. In this research, I have avoided victimizing rural gay/trans people and casting Appalachia as a monolithically homophobic and inordinately violent place for gay/trans folk to live. Yet, to avoid romanticizing, valorizing or fetishizing rural gay life, I have neither been interested in writing tales of redemption (Povinelli 2006). It would be equally specious to say that their 'ruralness' lends to some more 'valid' and 'authentic' manner of struggle. To maintain fidelity to this premise, I attempt to lay out here what I am calling, an 'ambivalent analytic',⁶ from which I draw on particular queer theory attempts at '(re)materializing' the 'queer' in queer theory.

Limitations, ambitions and frameworks: positioning queer Appalachia as a site for study

In this introductory chapter, I will set out a critical approach to analyzing rural gender and sexual minorities in Appalachia in two parts. The first of these shall lay out research questions and preliminary definitions of certain terms that will be explored in more depth throughout this dissertation. In the second of these parts, I will lay out chapter summations beginning with Chapter 2 that locates this research in relevant literatures and Chapter 3 that offers a critical justification for the analytical devices that undergird the theoretical moves and challenges I make throughout this dissertation. From there, I will sketch the basic tenets for the next three chapters, and their expected contributions to the arc of the argument that is being formed here. These three Chapters

⁶ The overarching theoretical complexion that binds all of the theoretical moves, arguments, endorsements and conclusions that will be made throughout this dissertation will be drawn from a location that I am calling an ambivalent analytic. I shall define in greater detail and critically justify this move in Chapter 3. For the purposes of a preliminary definition for understanding its preemptive use in this chapter, I am defining 'ambivalence' as a sustained critical uncertainty that is meant to analyze the features, moves and contributions of this dissertation research without defining in absolute terms what the rural queer geographies that I will come to describe are.

(4, 5 and 6) culminate in a growing argument that revolves around three interlinked approaches: the exterior representation of Appalachian sexuality in American metropolitan gay cultures and its politico-cultural effects, a more nuanced interpretation of homophobia in Appalachia, and how 'place' is made through the operation of rural gay networks. I shall then briefly touch on the concluding chapter which will think about critical praxis, a new look at politics and identity, and themes and topics for continuing research.

Part I: Terms and Conditions

Research questions

This research hinges on the interrelations between five theoretically informed questions laid out to engage four interrelated concerns that aim: 1) to understand the complexities of rural sexual and gender minorities, 2) to implicate urban sexual discourses and politics into both the foreclosures on and the production of these complexities, 3) to describe the relationship of sexual and gender minority identities and subjectivities to rural identities that produce particular rural queer sex/life/politics, and 4) to interrogate how a rural queer sex/life/politics folds back into rural places. The case study for this exploration is located between two Appalachian mountain communities, Harlan and Whitesburg, Kentucky. This study operates under the notion that rural sexual minority geographies like other queer geographies are not spatially bounded (Knopp 2007, Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton 2000) but function on the development of particular social relations which cross multiple scales and boundaries (Knopp and Brown 2003).

When I first started this research, I envisioned a grand, robust arena of documented interviews, focus group discussions and a broad amorphous geographical site of study. I figured that I would attempt to excavate the multiple forms of 'queer life' by examining those that are self-identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender. I also sought to figure how a rural identity or rurality intersects with these identities. I wondered what kinds of regional variations become constituted through these identifications. I wanted to know to what extent they do or do not associate with metropolitan gay culture. I even wanted to try and find those that remain 'closeted,' 'invisible' and/or unidentified, such as Men who have Sex with Men (MSM), and to explore how 'discreet geographies' might function for these types of social interaction. I wanted to figure out how gay folk learn to 'read invisible geographies' into the landscape to negotiate social relations, interactions and encounters.

I thought I could 'tell the story' of gay life in Appalachia. But as I got into the field and began living a day-to-day life in Harlan County, Kentucky, it became apparent to me that I have to be very careful about what kind of story I tell. Without scholarly precedent for studying this group of people, I felt more comfortable thinking through critical aspects of what separates urban gay life from rural gay life, mounting a critique of that relationship, and using my experiences in the field to show the kinds of queer possibilities that there actually are and might be. Furthermore, I had hoped to examine the particular issues which rural Appalachian gay/trans populations face, so that their distinct needs and desires might be engaged through better advocacy and social services. I had wanted to participate in the creation of a political space that would articulate with the broader imaginary of the Gay Rights Movement. I still hope to accomplish many of these in this dissertation and in future research, but I realize now the importance of constructing a critical stage upon which these goals can take shape. This critical lack has rendered rural gay/trans folk in Appalachia invisible. Because of this, I did not feel comfortable trying to mount the breadth of inquiry I had initially set out to achieve without first having a critical place to start. In this sense, which I will describe further in Chapter 3, my body has emerged as a primary research object and instrument located at the site of social interaction, one that helps to inform and manage the analytical developments of this research.

It is understood that the generalizability of this project is contingent upon its ability to build an analytic for understanding rural queer geographies. The analytics that are being developed here are seen as a means to describe rural queer geographies in a manner that remains ambivalently open to their variations and possibilities. The rural queer geography about which I will be speaking (as the case study for this research) is an emerging geography described through the negotiations and social networks that I have begun to form and am an active participant of, as a result of doing this research. These networks, around which I become a nodal point, are intimate and operate at differing levels. In Harlan, I have developed relationships that I will describe as a form of kinship throughout these pages. In Whitesburg, I have developed friendships and allies that have become important in developing research and advocacy for rural queer populations in Appalachia.

This geography and its intimacies represent a specific geography that is being used to highlight the fungibility of the analytic I am forming and advocating – it is not meant to stand in as a generalizable rural queer geography, Appalachian or otherwise. Rather, it alludes to the possibility of other rural queer geographies while testing the function of the analytic. To craft both the analytic

and how it applies to this geography, the questions that animate this dissertation include: **1) What is the rural and rural identity? 2) What is the relationship between urban sexuality and rural sexuality as sexual discourses circulate between the two? 3) How do urban/mainstream representations of rural erotics and iconography perpetuate negative stereotypes of and create political foreclosures in rural places? 4) How does homophobia function in Appalachia and what are its variations? 5) And, how does Appalachian space and culture influence the constitution of place-making in rural queer networks and geographies?**

Definition of terms

From these questions that structure this research, there is a necessary clarification of how I am using some of the terms that constitute sexual and gender minorities. At first glance, many of the categorical terms being used here that come to describe sexual and gender minority sex/life/politics, as well as geographies, histories and identities might seem interchangeable. I will be moving in and out of these terms and some are liminally interchangeable, while others are not. These terms that I shall give preliminary definitions to below, might be thought to fall within three categories (that give them their contingent interchangeability): the transformative, the contingent and the normative.

Terms that fall under the 'transformative' rubric are radical in nature and often limited to the function of analytical devices to describe political potentialities in the abstract rather than in the material. In other words, their salience is not in their direct applicability to everyday life, but in their ability to describe the processes by which everyday life negotiates, challenges and transforms its environments. In the contingent category, these terms try to bookmark sexual and gender minority identities and realities while remaining as ambivalent and neutral in their meanings as possible. Hailing into existence, in the Athusserian sense, sexual and gender minorities by labeling them as such both precludes and assumes political identities. However, the salience in this approach to use 'neutral' terms is an effort to avoid what these material formations might look like. The normative category also speaks to a primarily analytical set of terms that attempt to 'stabilize' the politics, aesthetics and categorical identities consolidated through the neoliberal gay project. These terms set the context for the struggles faced by the political foreclosures on rural queer life and its geographies.

Transformative terms:

- **Queer** sets the complexion of transformative sex/life/politics that animate the geographies of possibility that I will be exploring here. 'Queer theory', 'queer life', 'queer geographies', 'queer identities', 'queer country' and the like will come to represent contexts in transition. In this way, the use of the 'queer' speaks to the ambivalence and transformative struggles present in sexual and gender minority lives and spaces that are by their very presence 'queer', i.e. disruptive of the politics of normalization. Unless otherwise mentioned for clarity, queer will be used in descriptions of the rural. Yet, when particular formations in the rural might be read as 'stable' and/or established and their complexion is not necessarily transformative, but is more a description of everyday life, they will be described as 'gay' (see 'gay' below).
- **Appalchianness** speaks to a set of identity practices and politics that brings being *of* and *in* Appalachia into relief. Colleagues of mine and I have argued, amongst established Appalachian scholars such as Dwight Billings (1999) against trying to define a distinct, stable Appalachian identity. Rather, 'Appalchianness' as a complex term that for the purposes in which I am using it here, embodies a strategy of resistance to dominant discourses about Appalachian culture, while simultaneously occupying being from Appalachia. In this set of identity politics, resistant strategies to political, cultural and social reduction are challenged within the paradigm of what Appalachia is and means.

Contingent terms:

- **Sexual and Gender Minorities** is the most 'neutral' of the terms about which I will be speaking. While calling someone or a group 'sexual/gender minority' already brings those bodies under the political discourses that circumscribe 'sexual dissidents' (Bell and Valentine 1995), it does so in such a broad way that it does not stabilize or recognize what those formations might be. We must nevertheless remain cognizant that this term, crafted out of an ambivalent contingency still attaches an intentionality to the formation of sexual and gender identity – this is most problematic in places and social formations where an imperative to claim an identity is either moot, unnecessary or doesn't exist.
- **Gay/trans (Folk)** still attempts to remain neutral, but begins to lose its neutrality in that it begins to give 'form' to sexual and gender minorities. For example: many rural sexual minorities identify as 'gay' while there is nevertheless a disruptive power in claiming this

identity that already has 'queer' features, i.e. transformative. This term still maintains a contingent complexion that recognizes that sexual and gender minority identities and practices *do* exist in rural Appalachia that have both form and function. I am using it because of the liminally political character that it adds to sexual and gender minorities, while trying to remain contingently sensitive to how those political and cultural deployments of an assumed identity actually play out. These two terms, 'sexual and gender minorities' and 'gay/trans' (folk, life, geography...) will be used somewhat interchangeably here, except where clarification requires one over the other.

- **Sex/life/politics** is a term that sits on both sides of the 'gay' and the 'queer'. The term acts as a bookmark for multiple forms and assemblages that constitute the lives and politics attached to sexual citizenship. When these are seen as 'transformative', they will be described as 'queer'. When these are read as 'normative', they will be marked as 'gay'.
- **Appalachia** is a complex term in this research. For my uses, it does a number of things. First, it shall be shorthand for Central Appalachia, where this research is set, unless otherwise noted for clarity and analytical purposes. Appalachia shall remain a primarily abstract analytical device in this research that is first and foremost concerned with how 'representations' of Appalachia are made, what those look like and how they are used at the expense of Appalachia(ns). However, I also remain cognizant that Appalachia also describes a material set of assemblages that include: cultures, politics, economies, geographies and geomorphologies, histories and erasures, and so on. The latter of these are present in the autoethnographical work that I have done in Harlan Country, Kentucky and beyond that I shall be drawing on throughout.

Normative terms:

- **Gay**, much like queer (except when articulated as gay/trans) will be added as a prefix to assemblages such as 'politics', 'life', 'culture', 'history', 'geography' and so on. It will also be used for the description of 'proper' gay life that is understood as the normative set of assumptions attached to 'sex/life/politics' that polices the political, aesthetic and material conditions of what constitutes 'acceptable' sexual/gender minority formations within the Gay Rights Movement. Its difference from 'queer', however, is in revealing its assumptions about stabilized and normalized identities that orbit the current iterations of sexual and gender minority sex/life/politics. Unless otherwise mentioned for clarity, gay will be used

mostly in descriptions of the urban. Yet, when 'transformative' politics are present in the metro-gay experience, they will be described as 'queer'.

- **Gay Rights Movement** describes the current iterations of 'gay identity politics' that is argued here to function from a set of 'elite' and 'privileged' positions including class, race and gender, as well as (dis)ability, age and personal variation. This privileged politic has, in the estimation of this research, lost its 'radical' and 'transformative' edge once present in other 'queer' political movements that sought the disruption of heterosexual privilege in an attempt to renegotiate the lines of sexual citizenship and its forms. Now, the 'movement' benefits the politically inclined and economically solvent through a limited set of political agendas including marriage, legitimate military service and the integration into the consumption practices of late capitalism. It is being argued that this political maneuver is shortsighted and leaves entire groups of sexual and gender minorities politically unrepresented.
- **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, Ally (LGBTIQQA)** are the categorical identity positions within this 'queer alphabet' that describes the Gay Rights Movement and its identity politics. The 'IQQA' are recent additions to the acronym that describe the contingent flexibility of the neoliberal gay project to expand its borders and draw in a broader sense of identifications. LGBT is the more traditional acronym to which the 'B' and 'T' have been added over time. These additions are not uncontested and in spite of their 'presence' many of these contentions still exist. For example, many gay folk (men and women) are skeptical of 'bisexuality' and find it difficult to qualify as a legitimate identity position which underestimates and oversimplifies the struggles of bisexual folk (Ochs and Rowley 2009). Nonetheless, each figure within the acronym as it grows is still wrapped up in attempts to stabilize queer identity. Yet, the acronym is often rendered through different configurations: in some assemblages the characters are left off, in others they are arranged differently or there might be some combination of both (i.e. GLBT). It is my perspective that it is 'better' to put the 'L' before the 'G' to recognize male privilege and try to deflate that. However, when I am investigating particular uses of this term, I will present the acronym based on those uses. Notwithstanding, this acronym will only be used when I am speaking about conventional and normative gay politics.

- **Neoliberal Gay Project** is an important term that will be used throughout this dissertation to describe the consolidated practices that manage and set the conditions for 'proper' gay life and the assemblages that bracket these practices. This concept will be explored in depth in Chapter 2, in the section: *Neoliberalims: politics, homonormativity and the trappings of consumption*. The neoliberal gay project will be primarily defined as the structure that encompasses three interconnected positions:
 - The '**complicit queer politic**' draws on Natalie Oswin's concept of 'complicit queer futures' (2004) in relation to what Heidi Nast has described as 'queer patriarchies' (2003). It is being used to highlight the collusion that many sexual and gender minorities conform to in reproducing the politics of 'proper' gay life.
 - '**Homonormativity**' (Duggan 2002, 2003) shall further highlight the practices of this collusion with the complicit queer politic, by highlighting how these forms of complicity meet up with neoliberalism and the consumption practices of late capitalism.
 - And '**metronormativity**' (Halberstam 2005) shall describe the styles by which homonormativity brackets the perceptions of the aesthetic, political, spatial and erotic symbols, codes and images of privileged white, upper middle class, gay men, which become viscerally (and often unintentionally) attached to the neoliberal gay subject. The metronormative sets the conditions for the policing mechanisms of the neoliberal gay project.

I am not lost on the limitations of any of these terms. While I do my best to describe the conditions of material life that these terms attempt to describe they remain largely analytical in nature. They are not meant to define what is materially present as much as they are being used to analyze the processes of these materialities. First of all, by collapsing the multitude of forms that make up sexual and gender minority assemblages, I am already directing these forms into similar political formations. In truth (to limit this caveat to 'LGBT'), lesbians have differing needs, struggles and political ambitions, than do gay men, than do bisexuals, than do transgendered folk. For example, there is a problem with conflating gay with trans that 'gay/trans' suggests – there are indeed differences and asymmetries of violence and mistreatment, the brunt of which trans folk often find themselves receiving the lion's share (Mottet and Ohle 2006). Collapsing trans with gay

in many ways misrepresents their struggles, as sexual orientation is not gender orientation (and vice versa).

However, for simplicity and clarity, we shall accept these limitations, recognizing that this dissertation is largely exploratory in its descriptions of rural gay/trans folk, rural queer geographies and their social formations and negotiations. The primary purpose of this research, stated above is to craft a critical stage on which to analyze rural sexual and gender minorities by exploring emerging queer geographies in rural Appalachia. From the location of this research, we can see how future research can begin to delve into the finer points and nuances that constitute differing sexual/gender minority positions and identities. Therefore, we can use these terms to bookmark the future endeavors of research, while critiquing the neoliberal gay project and heterosexual privilege that set the conditions for (rural) homo-, bi-, trans- and inter(sex)- phobias.

The above terms, questions and theoretical warnings have been designed to come toward understanding the production of rural queer geographies in Appalachia. By creating an analytic for uncovering rural queer geographies and using the case study of a queer Appalachian geography in which I am a participant, I hope to trace out an argument for geographies of possibility that recognizes the need for possibility in analytical approaches. This research is designed to contribute to the growing literature on sex, sexuality, queer geographies and rural studies. It is the goal of this research to enrich the theoretical approaches by which marginal and underrepresented populations might be studied (in the rural and beyond) that has academic and political potential for the development of a continuing discussion on the nature of and debates around sexual politics in the United States.

Part II: Roadmaps and summaries

I want to briefly lay out the chapters for this dissertation and what their contributions are to the arguments that I have begun to lay out in this introductory chapter. The theoretical and methodological contributions of this research are laid out in the next two chapters. In Chapter 2, *Queer Country*, I will trace the connections of this research to the literatures it finds itself in to conceptualize the theorization of rural Appalachian sexual subjectivity. This chapter highlights five theoretical themes: 1) rural geographies and rural subjectivity (rurality), 2) Appalachia, 'Appalachianess' and geographies of difference, 3) queer theory, sexuality and the rural dimension, 4) neoliberalism, consumption and 'homonormativity', and 5) the 'carnal' body (Povinelli

2002, 2006), both as a means to reintegrate the material and the representational, as well as to accentuate the failure of liberal multiculturalism and its conceits, reductions and elisions around intimacy and the body.

In Chapter 3, *Queer(y)ing the Ethics of Research Methods*, I explore the methodologies (both theoretically and materially) that have been deployed to collect and analyze this research. This chapter has three primary parts to it. The first of these establishes a critical justification and explanation of the terms 'geographies of possibility', the 'ambivalent analytic' and how I am 'managing' my body as a site of study in this research. The second of these launches an interrogation into the ethics of doing research, how ethics are inherently methodological, and why queer theory is an appropriate vehicle for establishing a 'politics of intimacy' and 'queer ethics'. The final part describes my methods for conducting this research, as well how I came upon the group of rural gay/trans folk and allies that I will be discussing throughout these pages.

In Chapter 4, *Representing Rural Erotica*, I examine how representations of rural symbols and iconographies are appropriated and transformed to suit metro gay consumption practices, while eliding the everyday lives of rural gay/trans folk. Using 'Orientalism' as a set of organizing modalities for circumscribing the Other, I show how rural queers are cast as abject and become an 'untouchable' figure indefinitely suspended, if not altogether erased from the neoliberal gay project. Critiquing rural images in the media, I then explore these abject rejections through two means. The first looks at the metronormative gaze of metro gay audiences to explore how their revulsion to the photographic work of Michael Meads exemplifies the erasure of the rural queer body. The second interrogates the movies *Deliverance* and *Brokeback Mountain* to explore how popular images of Appalachian sexuality and rural queer death animate these revulsions. Finally, I briefly look at the movies *The Laramie Project* and *Small Town Gay Bar* to allude to the emerging possibilities and complexities already present in rural queer sex/life/politics.

In Chapter 5, *(De)constructing Homophobia*, I develop a critical working definition of homophobia that attempts to break with the idea that the rural is a 'militarized zone' for gay/trans folk, a place where its borders are closed to queer life and politics. To do this, I begin by bringing the queer body and the hillbilly body together through the rhetorics that have claimed both as the 'last socially acceptable forms of discrimination'. From here, I distinguish the conditions for religious and secular modalities of homophobia and claim that 'heterosexual privilege' sets the conditions for both. I turn this critique onto queer regionalisms to show how the discriminatory

regionalisms that circumscribe rural queer life and emanate from within gay culture are actually homophobic. Working through this definition, I finally move through a number of examples of homophobia that I experienced and have been described to me during the course of my research to highlight the variability of rural homophobia, which turns out to be as contingent, striated and incomplete as urban homophobia.

In Chapter 6, *Queerbilly in the Hollow*, I draw on the rural queer geography that I have come to participate in to reveal some of the possibilities for place making and social networking in Appalachian spaces. I begin with a discussion on what queer place making and its social contingencies are. From this understanding, I begin to lay out examples of how this mode of production is being formed and reformed in the relationships and intimacies that I have created in Eastern Kentucky. It is here that the geographies of possibility begin to emerge to reveal the potentiality for rural queer life in Appalachia. These three substantive chapters culminate in an arch that starts from the real and perceived political and social foreclosures and oppressions present in rural space. The analytic trajectory then moves to destabilizing these perceptions by reinterpreting our understandings of homophobia to dismantle the idea that rural homophobia is monolithic and impenetrable. The argument is finally resolved, through examples, with the production of the space to imagine those possibilities for rural Appalachia that have emerged.

In Chapter 7, *The Future of Queeridentity*, I make a final assessment of what this research hopes to contribute to the rethinking of praxis, research and politics. I first launch a critique of Bernadette Barton's current research on the so called 'Bible Belt' (2009).⁷ I show how her reductive retelling of violent 'coming out' stories bracketed by her term, the 'Toxic Closet' is not only erroneous but dangerous. From here, to contextualize the gravity of deploying critical approaches, I explore the lessons that have been learned throughout this research and how we can use these lessons for future research. This compels us, I argue, to rethink our political and academic intentions in and around the rural. I begin to imagine what these new politics might look like. How do we challenge the neoliberal gay project? How do we fight for geographies of possibility in its shadow? Is there a way to simultaneously reclaim the Gay Rights Movement and challenge its conditions set by neoliberalism? What would that politics look like?

⁷ While I reference Bernadette Barton's work on the *Toxic Closet* for context throughout in places where it is necessary, I will come back to a full interrogation of her work and its implications for rural queer geographies in Chapter 7.

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Chapter 2: Queer Country: Theorizing Rural Appalachian Sexual Subjectivity

'Country' and 'city' are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities. In English, 'country' is both a nation and a part of a 'land'; 'the country' can be the whole society or its rural area. In the long history of human settlements, this connection between the land from which directly or indirectly we all get our living and the achievements of human society has been deeply known.

– Raymond Williams
The Country and the City

We must take seriously Vicco's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.

– Edward Said
Orientalism

Theoretical Frameworks and Related Literatures

This project finds itself at the intersection of several key literatures and theoretical debates. These literatures can be roughly organized under five theoretical themes: 1) rural geographies and rural subjectivity (rurality), 2) Appalachia, 'Appalachianess' and geographies of difference, 3) queer theory, sexuality and the rural dimension, 4) neoliberalism, consumption and 'homonormativity', and 5) the 'carnal' body (Povinelli 2002, 2006) both as a means to reintegrate the material and the representational, as well as to accentuate the failure of liberal multiculturalism and its conceits, reductions and elisions around intimacy and the body. These literatures are being used here to destabilize normative regimes of sexuality as they apply to rural geographies. The goal is to come toward a renewed and fresh way of looking at Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) that challenges the disciplinary regimes that produce bodies, while recognizing the production of bodies. This dissertation project begins to look toward geographies of possibility that seek to advocate for the continuously unfolding terrain of sexual desires and practices. It operates from a position of ambivalence and critical inquiry that highlights the ability for these kinds of queer spaces to occur in seemingly 'unlikely' places. In each of the following sections, I will lay out the general literatures and mark my position(s) in/on these literatures to begin framing a critical analytic.

Rurality: Edward Said, Raymond Williams and the flexibility of 'country'

Rural geographies have long been under the purview of geographical and social science inquiry (Summers and Brown 1998, Taylor 1969, Stone 1965, Zelinsky 1962, Taylor 1923). These geographies were often theorized in hierarchical relationships to urban areas and capitalist practices, where cities were seen as the center that organized, produced, and redistributed the resources extracted from their rural hinterlands (Woods 1997, Page 1996, Williams 1973, Blij and Hunter 1969, Soja 1969). Indeed cities were theorized as organizational nuclei to regional geographies that placed the rural, the countryside in particular sites of (de)valuation with little regard for rural localities or how those localities were produced by the social hierarchies that maintained particular commodity relationships (Knox 1994, Lynch 1981, Williams 1973).

In their discussion of the political economy of place, John Logan and Harvey Molotch argue that, "inequality among individuals... not only results from differentiation but also causes it; [s]imilarly, place inequality is both cause and consequence of differences among places" (1987:49). While Logan and Molotch's particular argument is against bourgeois privilege in relationship to the asymmetry of power in urban environments, gentrification and the urban poor, it fits in this context. The rural and its variations are reduced to certain forms of poverty that are cast as the cultural limitations of rural peoples. Poverty, in rural Appalachia for example is rendered as an inevitable and evenly distributed function of 'Appalachian culture' (Biggers 2006, Billings and Blee 2000). This has helped to maintain the particular theoretical optics between the rural and the urban, set in relief to the complex of capitalist practices, structures and ambitions that have historically kept the 'nested-hierarchy' analytic of urban settlement and organization thriving (Knox 1994).

However, the theorization of 'rurality' as a particular site of identity is a recent paradigm for understanding rural geographies and social relations (McCarthy 2005, Roche 2002, Rawding 2002, Little 1999, Hopkins 1998, Cloke 1996). These literatures and the way they inform this research operate under the notion that the rural is a complex yet problematic site where class, race, gender and sexuality (among others) compete with popular notions of rural backwardness to produce particular socio-cultural formations (McCarthy 2006, Little and Panelli 2003, Little 2002, 1999, Jones 1999, Roberts 1996a, Oberhauser 1995). While the rural is considered socially constructed in this research, the material effects of socio-political subversions and economic disadvantages

within the frameworks of a rural identity and rural geographies are not disregarded (Roche 2005, Hopkins 1998, Drabenstott 1996, Page 1996, Roberts 1996b, O'Riagain 1980).

The rural can now be seen as a site of intersecting subjectivities that animates the social processes that similarly produce urban identities with both intricate linkages and vast breadth (Valentine 2007, McCarthy 2006, 2005, Little 2002). Indeed the two are fluid and have come to be understood as dialectically situated within the circulation of particular types of knowledge and power (Bell 2000, Sinfield 2000, Little 1999, Hopkins 1998). This is not to elide certain forms of discrimination and economic disadvantages still present in rural localities, which are often exacerbated by the capitalist practices of urban places. These asymmetries do still exist, but they exist in tension with the burgeoning recognition of their circular flows and diffusions (Knopp and Brown 2003). From this position, the rural is not seen merely as an idiosyncratic landscape, isolated from sophistication by preempted and elitist urban knowledges. The new site of the rural is one of ambivalence, variation, and subjectivity (Fincheqr and Panelli 2001, Jones 1999, Woods 1997). This is not to elide education, drug and poverty problems that are pervasive in rural areas, but this research accepts these as problems endemic to the unfolding of capitalism in an era of neoliberal global economies and not the cultural conditions of the rural and rurality (DiFazio 2006). In other words, poverty is a problem of capitalism, not a problem that is inherently Appalachian.

To frame the way this research understands rurality as a particular set of socio-cultural relations, this study draws on the theoretical contributions of Raymond Williams (1973) and Edward Said (1979) to constitute the rural as a mobile site for identity that has been rendered from the outside by particular urban discourses in problematic ways (McCarthy 2005, Little 1999, Hopkins 1998, Woods 1997). What becomes particularly salient in Williams is how his theorizations of the 'urban' and the 'rural' interrogate the rhetorical flexibility and semantic mobility of the term 'country'. Williams sketches out this mobility – *country* – as a term that means many things at multiple scales and entry points. It has been applied to unfettered pastoral landscapes. It is often recognized and used as interchangeable with nation-state. It has been used to distinguish urban and rural development (1973:1). This argument can be used to destabilize the bounded, 'Orientalized' ways that exoticize the rural through an exteriority that reduces their representations to cartoonish mockeries for the consumption practices of metropolitan audiences. This exoticization of the rural (and the 'country queer'), as I shall claim throughout these pages, is fragile and begins to unravel around the crisis points already found in neoliberalism and liberal subjecthood.

Drawing on Edward Said, 'Orientalism' offers us a lens for examining the processes by which certain marginalized social groups become reduced to stereotypes and are stripped of their subjective voices. By Said's account, the Orient (East) has a deep and colonized history in its relationship to the Occident (West), "it has been employed by Chaucer and Mandeville, by Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope and Byron" (1979:31). This taken-for-granted notion of difference that folds itself back into the culture of the West, unexamined, produces the latent racisms and potent (external) exoticizations of the Oriental other to the point where this newly formed Oriental object becomes a mythical figure with no basis in reality. Through these exterior representations, we can see how the rural becomes constituted as an exotic 'Other' to the dominant position of metropolitan discourses. By interrogating the crisis points in the neoliberal gay project that set the conditions for this Orientalization of rural sexual subjects, we can highlight and critique the foreclosures and limitations that are produced in its wake. I shall explore these claims in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Linking Said's notion of Orientalism to Williams' argument about the city/country, urban/rural binaries which pervade popular imaginations (Williams 1973, McCarthy 2005, Roche 2005, Little 1999, Hopkins 1998), the rural can be seen as an exotic 'Other' (Little 1999). This 'Orientalization' of the "country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation" (Williams 1979:1), is a pervasive and reductive force with a long history. The terms are there: hillbilly, country-bumpkin, yokel, backward – *barbarian* (Biggers 2006, Billings and Blee 2000, Billings, Norman and Ledford 1999). These are the terms through which Said's definition of Orientalism begins to produce and circumscribe the rural – the fear of the rural, the reduction of the rural, the displacement of ourselves from the rural. However, Williams also precedes this by mentioning the "noise, worldliness, and ambition" attributed (somewhat negatively) to the city, which does not undermine this thesis. For the city to also be attached to a certain range of problematic and unstable attributes suspended in crisis (which also displace their reductive and romantic readings) destabilizes its own position of power over the country (McCarthy 2006, 2005, Little 1999, Hopkins 1998, Woods 1997).

Through this critique, we can begin to break this Orientalization – this exoticization to see it for what it is and rethink the linkages and connections toward forming a horizontal rural/urban dialectic. Re-theorizing the urban/rural binary into a circuitous continuum opens up a new space to understand rural identity and how it circulates in ways that are not bound by, but nonetheless mutually co-constitutive of the urban (Fincher and Panelli 2001, Roberts 1996a, Blij and Hunter

1969, Soja 1969). This research will use this fluid definition of rural geographies and rurality as a way to place the complex social structures of rural sexual and gender minorities into 'Appalachian' space (and what that is and means). By doing this, the study is open to multiple possibilities in its examination of how rural Appalachian gay/trans folk's geographies play out without presupposing or preempting what the forms of homophobia in Appalachia might be to circumscribe *and* produce queer space. But how do we define Appalachia?

Appalachia on my mind: hillbillies, difference and possible geographies

Appalachia entered academic literature of critical discourse in the 1970s that largely centered on the labor disputes and class struggles that orbited the coal industry and debates on cultural poverty (Maggard 1986:101, see also Biggers 2006, Billings and Blee 2000, Scott 1995). This has led to a critique on the ways in which Appalachia has been present or missing from American history and its popular imaginaries. On the one hand, Appalachia is a history without a history – a cartoon imaginary spun from the travelogues of the 19th century and rendered through the caricatures of hillbillies and backward country folk. It is a time without land and a land without time, constantly disconnected from the 19th and 20th century capitalist practices that aided and are implicated in its development (Lewis 1999, Whishnant 1994). This disconnect has rendered Appalachia as an isolated frontier, idiosyncratic in its depiction of violence, poverty, and illiteracy (Billings and Blee 2000, Scott 1995).

By describing the unified growth of capitalist enterprise in early Kentucky, instead of assuming the separate and unrelated development of Kentucky's mountain and Bluegrass subregions, we have tried to unthink the stereotype of Appalachian Kentucky as an isolated frontier (Billings and Blee 2000:48).

On the other hand, an alternative Appalachian history, since the late 1970s (Maggard 1986:101), has begun to be written that is far more nuanced and locates the poverty of Appalachia not as a problem of Appalachian 'culture', but in a complex relationship to capital exploitation that has often been mirrored, however problematically, to reflect the colonial domination of European Imperialism (Billings 1999, Billings and Blee 2000, Lewis 1999, Whishnant 1994).¹

These critical literatures have established the critiques that this research draws on and challenges the many superficial attempts to define what 'Appalachia' is. In this way, we can tease

¹ I shall come back to and explore the limitations of the colonial metaphor and how it is playing out in this research in detail in Chapter 4.

out the strands of these complex geographies and place them in a critical suspension that simultaneously influence each other and belie the reductive renderings of Appalachian histories, geographies and cultures that have historically been recognized as their complexion. Appalachia is a physical geography of mountain ranges and unparalleled bio-diversity that stretches from north to south across the near entirety of the Eastern United States (Wilson and Pillsbury 2006, Reece 2006). Appalachia is a political economy that locates 'Appalachia' within a range of the 'poorest' counties in the U.S. Indeed, the federally funded Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) demarcated the counties of poverty throughout the Appalachian ranges (and some that fall outside these ranges) in the 1960s (Billings and Blee 2000) in response to President Johnson's 'war on poverty' (Powell 2007). Appalachia is a missing character in American history, one constantly and productively present but surreptitiously invisible in its pages (Biggers 2006). Appalachia is currently a political geography of environmental activism revolving around public national debates on Mountain Top Removal (MTR – also known as 'Strip Mining') (Reece 2006). Appalachia is a cultural formation (or better described as a set of culturally negotiated and/or contested formations) that often spill past the borders of whatever this Appalachian thing is (Billings, Norman and Ledford 1999).

Yet Appalachia remains the unfortunate bearer of a violent history that is incredibly misunderstood, but one that nevertheless has a popular audience. The violent feudal wars: the Hatfields and the McCoys, as well as the Garrards and the Whites are often portrayed in the popular imaginary as the result of aggressive, ignorant rural savages with petty claims to social damages. Yet, these 'feuds' were battles of elite families fighting to maintain and hegemonize industrial positions within the mountains during the devastating economic depression of the 1860s. These were not isolated, idiosyncratic scuffles. These were incredibly entangled claims to monopoly for industries that were directly tapped into the broader American capitalist system (Billings and Blee 2000). The resulting disputes, erroneously represented through hillbilly iconography have endorsed the unabated and unchecked popular sentiment that Appalachian folk always tend toward ignorance, incorrigibility and violence (Blee and Billings 1999).

Because Appalachia and Appalachian folk are bound by and reduced to the misrepresentations, misinterpretations and mythical connections to cultural poverty idealized through the character of the 'hillbilly', Appalachia remains a difficult set of geographies and histories to uncover. Beside the popular representations that bind the Appalachian parody (blurring

the few truly empirical interrogations of its history), these historical misrepresentations make many Appalachian folk skeptical of 'Outsiders' wanting to 'know things' about them (Hinsdale, Lewis and Waller 1995). This silent resistance and consistent parody often works to erase Appalachia as a relevant set of cultural, political, social, economic and historical borders and practices. In the foreword to *Backtalk from Appalachia*, Ronald Eller has noted:

Always part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty, and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole. No other region of the United States today plays the role of the "other America" quite so persistently as Appalachia (Eller 1999: ix).

But what does Appalachia mean? How and where does it get its scripts? Is Appalachia similar and consistent throughout? How is Appalachian identity produced? Does this identity always recognize itself as 'Appalachian'? And on the other side, what do reductive stereotypes and representations about Appalachia *do* in and to Appalachia? How is the circumscription of Appalachian folk as always already uneducated, poor and violent damaging to the political and cultural geographies of Appalachia? How do these representations mask the social negotiations that constitute Appalachian space on the ground? What of variations within Appalachia?

In the late 1980s, 'difference' began to be theorized and entered the literature of Appalachian scholarship (Anglin 1999, Wilkinson 1999, Smith 1998, Maggard 1999, 1994, 1986, Oberhauser 1995). Through these literatures on difference, I have been framing analytics about Appalachia that highlight an encumbered yet culturally diverse Appalachian identity (Davis 2006, O'Brien 2004, Shackelford and Weinberg 1988), as well as the political struggles and moments of solidarity. While the recognition of these solidarities have been forged around labor exploitation, environmental degradation and cultural production, especially related to the coal industry (Reece 2006, Burch 2005, Deaton 2005, Montrie 2005, Scott 2005, 1995, Waage 2005, Buckley 2004, Hinsdale, Lewis and Waller 1995, Whishnant 1994, Fisher 1993), I will also argue that this solidarity is also present in the production of rural queer visibility *in* Central Appalachia (Gray 2009). I have been drawing on a literature of difference in and of Appalachia that looks critically at difference along multiple vectors (Obermiller and Howe 2004, Anglin 1999, Billings 1999, Giardina 1999, Lewis 1999), including gender and race.²

² For 'gender', see for example: Latimer and Oberhauser 2004, Wemer and Badagliacco 2004, Engelhardt 2003, Wilkinson 1999, Maggard 1999, 1994, 1986, Smith 1998, Oberhauser 1995.

Feminism has a long and distinct history in Appalachia (Engelhardt 2003). The role of women in domestic production is deeply embedded in the familial structures which were and still are important to how Appalachia re/produces itself, what Billings and Blee (2000) have called a “patriarchal moral economy.” Yet women also play a more dynamic and dramatic role than mere representations of male dominance and domestic divisions of labor might imply. Women were/are actively engaged in the production of arts & crafts and have had a formative impact on Appalachian music. But arguably the most notable role of women in Appalachia’s history is their role in the 20th century labor strikes around the coal industry (Biggers2006). Women’s ‘labor songs’, including activist music composers Hazel Dickens, Sarah Ogan Gunning and Aunt Molly Jackson are now infamous for their role in rallying union support during the early 20th century labor disputes. It has been argued that had it not been for women’s roles in organizing, executing and peopling picket lines, none of these labor battles would have been won (*Harlan Country USA*).

Racial difference also has a long history in Appalachia that is often disregarded in popular imaginaries. ‘Affrilachia’, a term that the poet Frank X Walker coined in a 1991 poem (2007a), has a long history of cultural and labor contributions to Appalachia. An Affrilachian aesthetic has been equally implicated in the production of Appalachian music and art and continues to do so (Burriss 2007, Ellis 2007, Conway 2003). The introduction of urban ‘hip-hop’ into Appalachia and the Affrilachian transformation of this musical form to suit the context of Appalachia and the Affrilachian condition (Good 2007) is part and parcel of an implicated Appalachia that is not isolated or merely directed by idiosyncrasies. Indeed, Appalachian music often sits at the fluid intersection of 16th century Anglo-Scottish and Irish music that was passed down from its original settlers, Native American Cherokee musical histories and forms, and African American musical styles. Specifically the fusion of African American blues/jazz and white Appalachian styles has yielded the widely popular and recognized ‘Blue Grass’ canon of folk music (Hansen 2009). These instances of feminism and racial diversity challenge the common images of backwardness and violence that come to represent Appalachia.

Appalachia is a misunderstood region. Because the Appalachian mountain ranges stretch between the northeast (as far up as Maine and Canada) and the southeast (as far down as Georgia and Alabama), it is impossible to define the entire region as a consistently cultural

For ‘race’, see for example: Burriss 2007, Ellis 2007, Good 2007, Walker 2007a, 2007b, 2000, Shurbutt 2005, Hayden 2004, Conway 2003, Hay 2003, Wilkinson 1999.

Appalachia. My research focuses on Central Appalachia and, to a lesser degree, Southern Appalachia. Northern Appalachia rarely finds itself in the cultural production of Appalachian backwardness. Generally, when we hear of Northern Appalachia, it is cast through the eco-tourism of the 'Appalachian trail' and the masculine exceptionalism of braving the harshest of environmental conditions. It is a 'nature' to conquer. Conversely, Central Appalachia (encompassing roughly Southwest Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Eastern Virginia, Eastern Kentucky and the northern portion of Eastern Tennessee) is the coal mining portion of Appalachia, as well as the most persistently impoverished throughout the ARC region (Billings and Blee 2000).

However, Southern Appalachia and Central Appalachia share some commonalities understood through the paradigm of 'Southern Culture' (Wilson and Pillsbury 2006), which is why there is a tangential connection in this research between Southern and Central Appalachia. But we must avoid the temptation to stabilize differing Appalachian cultures and identities within the rubrics of Northern, Central and Southern Appalachia. Variations within these exist. For example, a 'dry' country (such as Harlan where I did much of my field work) has a different set of social negotiations and spaces than a 'wet' or 'moist' county.³ My focus on Central Appalachia attempts to articulate particular relationships to rural life, social spaces, kinship structures and formations, Southern culture, urban migration and commuting, and how (rural) queer life manages these variables.

Appalachia is both a location from which identity can be drawn and an analytical apparatus that can be deployed to critically suspend and interrogate these variables. However, we must be careful not to conflate the two. Rural folk that are from and live in Appalachia do not necessarily identify as Appalachian, even as they are aware that they are *in* Appalachia. Distinct Appalachian identities are often found outside the region in cities such as Cincinnati, Ohio where the Appalachian economic migration of the 1940s and 1950s created marginalized/ghettoized communities that consolidated around attempts to maintain and cultivate cultural identities (Obermiller 1999). However, Appalachia can and does often become a political identity *in* Appalachia that is occupied in defense *of* Appalachia, through discursive formations such as culture, environment, economics and exterior representations (Powell 2007). I'm describing this kind of situated identity as 'Appalachianness'. Appalachianness speaks to an ethically driven

³ 'Dry' counties are those where local policies restrict alcohol consumption, including both bars and liquor stores. 'Wet' counties allow both, and 'moist' counties (such as Letcher County where Whitesburg is the county seat) only allow provisional spaces for bars to serve alcohol, but do not allow retail alcohol sales. I speak more of this on this distinction as it influences social spaces in Chapter 3.

political identity that sets in relief the representations that circumscribe Appalachia while resisting the strategies of these circumscriptions.

To come toward a critical working definition of Appalachia, we must recognize these variations that occur within Appalachia. There *are* self identified 'hillbillies', as there is a middle class, the poor, migrant workers and residents (both undocumented and legal), other forms of rural identity, politics of difference and socio-cultural negotiations (Lewis 1999). There is a rural Appalachia, at the same time that there is an urban Appalachia (Powell 2007, Obermiller 1999). These are as dialectically implicated in their co-constitution as any other rural/urban connections that I will be drawing on in this research. There is a 'Christian Appalachia', at the same time that there is a 'secular Appalachia'. And this 'Christian Appalachia' is similarly complex with different denominations that are not all Baptist and Evangelical. Not all Evangelical Christianity in Appalachia is radically 'fundamentalist' (Hinsdale, Lewis and Waller 1995, Biggers 2006). I do not attempt to do justice to the entire body of academic and political discourses on Appalachia. And I am not claiming to have laid out an exhaustive analysis of the literatures on Appalachia here. Determining 'what Appalachia is' is not the intention of this project.

'Appalachia' in this research rests in a sustained critical uncertainty that attempts to describe its complexion without reducing, romanticizing or fetishizing that complexion. I use Appalachia both as an analytical apparatus that constitutes political and cultural foreclosures for queer life around Appalachia, as well as 'Appalachianess' as an emerging form of political identity that is contingently wrapped up in its analytical limitations while nevertheless constituting sites for identity and political resistance. 'Appalachia' does script identity, but it is neither reducible nor directly transferable to the analytical devices that we use to interrogate and describe Appalachia. Analytical devices are important for analysis, but they are not necessarily the everyday conditions of the people about whom they describe. In this way, the Appalachia that I am most concerned with in this dissertation is a critique of the external representations of Appalachia that constitute these political and cultural foreclosures within the paradigm of 'queer visibility' and the movements and moments that challenge these representations. From this position, contingency is policy, variation the rule and social justice its goal.

I was at the Appalachian Studies Association conference in Maryville Tennessee in March, 2007. While networking with other Appalachian scholars and activists, I met Rema Keen – a lesbian – from Virginia who is part of the Appalachian Women's Alliance (AWA). The AWA is a

consortium of concerned Appalachian women of all ages who seek to bring awareness to and stop the discrimination of marginalized people in Appalachia. The following is the mission statement on their website:

The Appalachian Women's Alliance is a movement of women and girls in Appalachian communities who are raising consciousness and self-esteem, sharing leadership and power, developing a collective analysis, creating a common vision, and taking collective action. Challenging traditional stereotypes, we are black, white and Cherokee, wage earners and welfare mothers, *rural and urban, straight and gay*, seven to seventy, with and without traditional education. Together, we are working for economic justice, human rights and dignity, and safety for women and children in Appalachian communities. (<http://www.appalachianwomen.org>, my italics, accessed March 30, 2007)

As I was talking with her, we were discussing each other's interests. One of the instruments that the Alliance uses to combat discrimination is education and leadership training. A number of out-reach programs are in place that disseminate knowledge about different forms of inequity to create a space for social change. At the time, she was in the process of developing an out-reach program about LGBT issues and education on homophobia. As I explained to her what it is that I am doing, studying 'queer geographies' in Appalachia, she said to me, "It's time that someone does. It needs to be done." In deference to this urgency, let us now turn to a discussion on how we might begin to rethink our approach to a rural gay/trans Appalachian geography.

Sexuality and the rural dimension: contexts, theories and positions

This research relies upon and adds to the theoretical developments of queer theory as they have described sexual and gender identities and geographies (Knopp 2007, Valentine 2007, Oswin 2007, 2006, 2005, 2004, Knopp and Brown 2003, Puar, Rushbrook and Schein 2003, Puar 2001, Brown 2000). The literatures I am drawing on here reveal how the histories and geographies of LGBT politics have been cast through sexual lives and gender struggles that are specifically urban (Halberstam 2005). I further complicate this trajectory by also drawing on a burgeoning body of literature that brings into critical relief the lives of rural sexual and gender minorities (Gray 2009, Halberstam 2005, Knopp and Brown 2003, Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton 2000, Howard 1999, 1997, Sears 2001, 1991, Fellows 1996, Riordon 1996). It is important to note here that this research does *not* seek to claim that there is some neatly packaged and finished urban sexual politics (or any politics for that matter). If anything, by challenging and embracing a critique that destabilizes the metropolitan monopoly on gay sex/life/politics, the crisis points in this disruption can be seen as

already present. Indeed, this research seeks to destabilize the notion that there is in fact an *a priori* sexual politics that can only be metropolitan by analyzing the ways in which the urban and rural are mutually implicated.

What this research *does* claim is that the consolidation of the neoliberal gay project and its policing mechanisms sit in a privileged position over queer life. I argue that the normative claims (both hetero and homo) that define what sex and sexuality are, work to determine how these categories are circulated throughout culture and society (Sullivan 2003, Kirsch 2000, Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton 2000, Turner 2000, Jagose 1996, Foucault 1977, 1978). These assemblages constitute a form of 'queer power' that eclipses and ignores the historical and geographical contributions of rural queer life to the histories and geographies of sexual and gender minorities (Oswin 2004, Nast 2003, Duggan 2003, 2002). This research addresses the circulations, diffusions and transformations of the sexual discourses that constitute representations and marginalizations, distortions and exclusions of rural queer life. By complicating and destabilizing the trajectory of a historical LGBT political normalization, we open up new spaces for sex and sexuality to occur. To defend this argument and to make broader claims for the legitimacy of rural queer life, I will first set a brief history of the Gay Rights Politic to create the context for my challenge. I will then draw on two empirical studies – Knopp and Brown 2003 and Howard 1999 – to challenge this history and find a place within its pages for the emergence of Appalachian gay/trans sex/life/politics

The introduction to *Decentering Sexualities* (2000) states that there is a 'hidden geography' to Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978). What Foucault calls 'disciplinary' discourses enacted through law, medicine, religion, military, education, and so forth, are "concentrated in ... broadly speaking metropolitan areas" (Phillips and Watt 2000:1). This suggests that the machinery set into motion to pathologize, manage, and erase those who had come to be understood as sexual 'deviants' and 'perverts' continues to be reproduced through metropolitan voices and centers with urban geographies and histories. The production of sexual practices and desires as actual subject positions is how sexuality became part of the administration of political and social life: what Foucault calls biopolitics (1978). However, the irony of this scheme is that as same-sex desire entered into this emerging discourse of/on *sexuality* in the 19th century as, it paradoxically became a position from which to derive identity (Sullivan 2003, Jagose 1996). It is this moment where identity can be derived from a process of naming in linguistic terms one's

subject position – i.e. *homosexuality*⁴ – that a political counter-discourse could be and has been mounted in defense of those who seek to practice their sexuality in this (or as the canon has continued to expand, other) way(s) (Connell 2002, 2000, 1995, Wilchins 2004, Hemmings 2002, Fausto-Sterling 2000, Feinberg 1996, Bornstein 1994).

This does not mean there has not been struggle to come toward the political liberation of sexual minorities (Sullivan 2003, Hay 1996). But *homosexuality* became a position from which identity is derived precisely because of these biopolitical discourses which gave credence to same-sex practices and desires, in spite of their attempts to pathologize and criminalize them (Foucault 1978). LGBT emancipatory politics *have* been forged on this site of identity and its politicization through the State, institutional paradigms (medicine, psychology, criminology...), and the self- and public-policing mechanisms that these disciplinary paradigms encourage (Foucault 1977). This means that as gay men and lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people (to be limiting) have formed their sexual and gender identities around these discourses and practices, their lives have become intrinsically political precisely because their desires and practices come under the purview of the State (Foucault 1977, 1978).

The current U.S. sexual politics of the Gay Rights Movement evolved out of these sites of identity produced by sexual discourses that have spawned sexuality. The impulse to consolidate a political movement fomented in the early 1940s through the efforts of gay rights activists such as Harry Hay, and the Mattachine Society that he helped to initiate in 1948 (Hay 1996). While Hay believed that gay life should maintain a staunch position that defends our cultural distinctions and complexions. This seemed too reactionary to the queer palette of the time, and the ‘movement’ ultimately collapsed into the political narratives of an ‘assimilationist politics’ in the mid/late 1950s. Perceived as a necessary survival strategy, gay men and lesbians often sought to collapse their identities into heterosexual culture by keeping their sex lives private and invisible – ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ (Sullivan 2003, Hay 1996). Indeed, at the time, these gay folk self-labeled themselves as ‘homophiles’ rather than ‘homosexual’ to distance the sexual practices of sexual minorities from the function of desire (Sullivan 2003).

While there have always been tensions and disagreements on how to define and position our politics in a heterosexual world, the assimilationist complexion of these politics is what took root

⁴ However, in truth, the term ‘homosexual’ was coined in 1869 by Karl Maria Kertbeny as a means to advocate on behalf of sexual minorities. It was co-opted by Richard Kraft Ebing in 1886 in *Psychopathia Sexualis* as a means to consolidate the perceived ‘pathologies’ of the sodomite. I come back to this discussion in Chapter 5.

at the time. It seems that this assimilationist complexion has resurfaced (in new ways to be sure) and has been escalating since the mid-1990s. And these have been historically (if not presently) located in the metropolitan cities of the East (New York) and West Coasts (San Francisco) (Sullivan 2003, Kirsch 2000, Turner 2000, Jagose 1996, Hay 1996). There have been a handful of radical political mobilizations and historical ruptures that claimed a legitimate position for sexual and gender minorities and access to first class citizenship – among these are the earlier iterations of the Mattachine Society (under Harry Hay),⁵ the Daughters of Bilitis, Stonewall, Harvey Milk, ACT-UP, Queer Nation (Love 2007), and the struggles around HIV/AIDS in the 1980s (Watney 1987). Each of these has contributed to the creation of a limited space for gay life to be seen and ‘tolerated’.

We must also remember, as Jeff Jones’ (2000) reminds us, that these nascent political movements were also present in smaller cities (and possibly in non-metropolitan areas) prior to and during the consolidation of the Gay Rights Movement. The goals and strategies of these earlier movements often fought social erasure and had to actively struggle for visibility, in some places “decr[ying] the politics of privatization taking place in many American cities ... that aim, largely through re-zoning laws, to ‘clean-up’ public sexual spaces, such as pornographic shops, adult book stores, and sex clubs” (Spurlin 2000:182). In other words, these were strategies of erasing queer social worlds that the more radical brand of subversive and antagonistic queer politics were fighting at the time.

It is precisely because of this that we have to question whether or not the discourses, politics, aesthetics, and structures of the neoliberal gay project are appropriate to the study of rural sexual minorities (Bell and Valentine 1995, Knopp and Brown 2003, Bell 2000, Phillips and Watt 2000, Spurlin 2000). David Bell suggests that “the rural occupies a very particular, but very complex, location in the wider sociospatial economy of desire [where] the rural and the rustic figure as particular symbolic sites in discourses of the erotic” (2000:84). He goes on to elaborate on

⁵ Harry Hay was a staunch anti-assimilationist who believed that gay men should not be limited to the methods of heterosexism and heteronormativity to define or defend our position as legitimate social actors. He saw homosexuals as a ‘third gender’. He was also a Marxist scholar and activist. In the 1950s, when he was still active with Mattachine, he was often viewed as too reactionary. With the American Psychological Association’s demarcation of homosexuality as a ‘mental disorder’ in 1943 and the McCarthy communist witch-hunt of the 1950s, Hay’s continued association with the group was seen as dangerous to its continued efficacy. Hay stepped down of his own accord in 1953. He would go on in a self-described ‘exile’ in the American Southwest, developing ideas around queer spirituality with a small group of like-minded gay men that would ultimately yield the “first Spiritual Conference for Radical Fairies held Labor Day weekend in Arizona” (Hay 1996:362) in 1979. This would in turn establish the radical faerie movement throughout North America (and eventually into Europe and Australia).

specific symbolizations of rural erotica, specifically “*white trash erotics, bestiality, and naturism*” (Ibid 85, italics in original), all of which are bound up in the homo-eroticization of the ‘gay pastoral’ (Shuttleton 2000, Spurlin 2000). In these representations, a queer circumscription around the rural is brought into view. Ironically, this circumscription mirrors the heterosexist policing practices that sought to erase queer bodies just mentioned. Understanding this, we can begin to question the damages caused by rural representations that are altered, mitigated and consumed through metronormative sex/life/politics. I will return to this argument in detail in Chapter 4.

As the arguments of this dissertation unfold, they highlight how the neoliberal gay project seems to have reinstated a sense of ‘assimilationist’ politics through the policing mechanisms of its contours that continue to struggle to ‘fit’ within heterosexual worlds, rather than transform them (Cohen 1997). While these politics of normalization have had their successes, they often have little to do with the needs and concerns of the country queer (Bell 2000, Phillips and Watt 2000). Even while accepting the definitions of sexual and gender minority subjectivities I described above and the LGBT politics that have emerged from it, the urban/rural binary, as we shall continue to explore is insufficient to describe the complexity of rural queer life. We must be careful not to directly map the accomplishments of earlier iterations of the Gay Rights Movement and its consolidation into the neoliberal gay project onto the rural sensibilities and subjectivities of rural gay/trans folk (Knopp and Brown 2003, Howard 1999, 1997, Sears 2001, 1991). We have to question the machinery which reinforces a very specific, limited, and *urban* identity politics. Indeed, the identity politics of the so-called Gay Rights Movement and its metropolitan complexion are not entirely appropriate for the same-sex desires and alternative sexual and gender practices of rural environments (Bell and Valentine 1995, Knopp and Brown 2003, Bell 2000, Phillips and Watt 2000, Spurlin 2000).

Even as contemporary queer politics move toward broader more socially inclusive goals, such as equal treatment in the work place and access to housing and/or same sex marriage and adoption (Sullivan 2003, Hay 1996), these projects rarely touch upon the conditions and necessities of being queer and rural. These politics could certainly be beneficial to rural gay/trans folk. Indeed, many rural gay/trans folk migrate to cities in order to adopt the very principles and struggles that are at the heart of queer political projects (Knopp and Brown 2003). However, the objectives of these mobilizations are still couched in urban terms and urban forms of identity and do not necessarily have the capacity to deal with the complex of problems that rural gay/trans folk face in their current iteration (Howard 1999, 1997, Sears 2001, 1991, Fellows 1996, Riordan 1996).

Further, there are emerging rural queer political formations and visibilities – some of which are in Eastern Kentucky (Gray 2009) and Central Appalachia more broadly (such as the AWA described above) – that have yet to be recognized by the Gay Rights Movement. I will argue that there are many lessons from these political developments that could inform the national campaigns around sexual citizenship and its exclusions.

At some point, there is certainly a blurring of lines here. This research is at great pains to prove that while the urban and the rural are cast in circulations of power that have privileged metropolitan gay life, they are also fluid and dialectically implicated in each other, which forces us to rethink how we theorize their relationship. Regardless of the urban/rural dialectic, there is nonetheless something present in the rural that *is* different from the urban. One example of this, speaking to rural queer identity, correlates with differing and ambivalent attachments to how sexual identities used (or if they are used). This is evident in the work of John Howard (1999) on queer history in the rural South that claims that same-sex desire and practices have always existed in the South but the need, ability, and urgency to claim an identity has not.

In the second half of the twentieth century, male-male desire in Mississippi was well enmeshed in the patterns of everyday life. Men interested in intimate and sexual relations with other men found numerous opportunities to act on their desires, and did so within the primary institutions of the local community – home, church, school, and workplace. Never inherently hostile to homosexual activity, these institutions repeatedly fostered it (Ibid xi).

He goes on to mention that evangelical communities knew and understood that same sex desires and practices were viewed as sinful, but 1839 sodomy laws in rural Mississippi were ignored and these practices and desires became a taken-for-granted ‘vice’, “acknowledged and accommodated with a pervasive, deflective pretense of ignorance” (Ibid xi). It was the infiltration of urban discourses such as the American Psychological Association promoting homosexuality as a mental disorder in the 1940s (Ibson 2002:11) that brought anything that smacked of homophobia to the country. These urban discourses maligned rural areas against an *a priori* homosexuality by naming it. ‘Queer regionalism’,⁶ as defined by Robert Corber (1999) attaches its arguments to a perceived monolithic homophobia that exists in the country. It does so through the indefinite

⁶ The term ‘Queer Regionalism’ describes the exclusionary practices of metropolitan sexual (and gender) minority suspicions of Other sexual and gender minorities that come from places that are perceived as illegible by mainstream gay culture. This could be ‘rural’, ‘foreign’ or any other place that is perceived as threatening the security of ‘gay life’. This term was coined by Robert Corber (1999) and I shall be examining it further in the Chapter 4 and adding to it my spatial analytic through my term ‘homophobias of circumscription’.

suspension of rural gay/trans folk's subjectivity by the use of representational devices that reinforce metro-imaginaries of fear and loathing about the rural (Chapter 3). These exterior representations synecdochally iterate an intrinsic 'militarization' of rural places against sexual minorities that pervades popular culture, and this research refutes (Gray 2009, Herring 2006, Knopp and Brown 2003, Sears 2001, 1991, Howard 1999, 1997).

But these maligning forces notwithstanding, there is still a powerful refusal of, or at the very least a strong skepticism towards, urban queer identity politics in rural areas. In Knopp and Brown's study of the rural hinterlands of Seattle and Duluth, they uncovered a reverse sentiment to the intuitively understood notion of queer identity politics embedded in the idea that the urban is where the queer happens and the rural is where it is subverted. Through their interviews of gay men in Seattle and Duluth, it actually became apparent that while gay identity was associated with city living and remained taboo in non-city living, "...interviewees frequently actually associated gay identity with closetedness and associated unnamed same-sex desire in small and nonmetropolitan environments with freedom!" (2003:416). This suggests that many rural gay men (at least) find more problems related to the identity political struggles of urban gay men than they do in simply practicing same-sex desires without any explicit need or urgency to claim a sexual identity as such.

Knopp and Brown use the notion of "queer diffusions" (2003) as a means to circulate a panoply of social and sexual practices, cultural awarenesses and rural sensibilities, identity politics and ways of being. And these can be tracked along multiple axes and scales that move back and forth constantly linking one to the other and renegotiating the terms of their relationship(s).

The aim, quite simply, is not to draw definitive maps or come to 'objective' conclusions. Rather, it is to look at the question of queer diffusions in a way that is richer and potentially more empowering to those who are not participants in dominant cultures and discourses and who may occupy what are otherwise regarded as insignificant niches in a spatial hierarchy (Ibid 413).

Diffusion is quite simply "[t]he spread of a phenomenon over space and through time" (Jonston et al 2000:175). The way that Knopp and Brown are speaking of a queer diffusion here is much more nuanced than simply that gay and lesbian identity politics started in the city and then moved to the country after some cultural saturation. No, this diffusion is horizontal and boundless. They suggest that this diffusion is far more complex than a simply situated, hierarchically top-down flow of politics and identity. The linkages are dialectical and negotiated and as John Howard notes it is simply just

not appropriate to write off these rural queers (in his case rural Mississippi queers) as 'backward' (1999).

Knopp and Brown use this notion of diffusion to do at least two things. One, they make the untapped potential of a recrafted radical politics located within the intersection of a rural/urban queer platform. They note that while big cities like New York and Boston are still in strident arguments of queer involvement in perceived "family-oriented holiday parades", small towns such as Duluth have moved past this where "[t]he citizens of Duluth...are viewed as thinking that they are mainstreaming the queers, but the queers seem to feel much more strongly that they are *queering* the mainstream!" (2003:421). An example of this exists in the small rural Southern Appalachian town of Boone, North Carolina, where Appalachian State University has recently approved a Gay and Lesbian Studies minor for their undergraduate curriculum.⁷ In this quaint mountain town, High County Pride puts on a yearly 'GLBTIQA' pride event each June (http://www.highcountrypride.org/Home_Page.html, accessed March 24, 2010). Rural queer visibility at its finest, to be sure.

Two, the same politics and cultural achievements that result from these emerging alliances of hetero/homo cultures in small metropolitan/rural areas have the potential to reach, write, and reinforce state-wide legislative movements that support equality. They note that the "Duluth area state legislators [most of which represent rural areas] ... provide[d] pivotal support for the successful adoption of a strong statewide human-rights bill in [Minnesota] in 1993, whereas many Twin City area legislators [did not]" (Ibid 421). They attribute these emerging trends as a critical success. Examples of this in Central Appalachia exist in Mary L Gray's exciting new book: *Out in the Country: Youth, Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009). A particular example in her study germane to our current conversation is how rural gay/trans youth political movements from Eastern Kentucky have emerged to lobby the state legislature. These lobbying attempts have urged legislators to install the political infrastructure to aid in the construction of Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) in rural high schools in Kentucky. Working through these notions, we see that the institutional disciplining machines that have tempered and formed the queer politics of the 20th (and now 21st) century are still largely urban phenomena, and maybe the location of a truly radical, transformational grass roots politics is a rural one.

⁷ This was conferred to me in an email dated January 26, 2010 concerning a colloquium that I will be attending and presenting at ASU on June 13, 2010. This weekend subsequently corresponds with Boone's yearly gay pride festival.

This discussion reveals the critical role that the rural plays in constituting the urban. The way this research theorizes rurality in its complex relationship with the urban, demands that better attention be paid to how our rural cultures influence society. The cultural and political achievements laid out here should certainly not be taken as givens or universal. But they do allude to phenomenal potentials in the reconstitution of a civil liberties politic that has enormous breadth and should be taken very seriously. There is no denial that (at the very least) gay men and lesbians live in the country, have rural identities and function in very specific ways (Gray 2009, Knopp and Brown 2003, Howard 1997, 1999, Sears 2001, 1991, Fellows 1996, Riordan 1996, Bell and Valentine 1995). But the ways in which their histories and geographies are traced are indeed different and call for a different critical approach.

This poses a new set of questions. What are these differences that reflect the unique needs and desires of rural queer populations? Moreover, what are the roles and responsibilities of the larger political and public discourse to ameliorate, reveal and defend the legitimate needs that a rural queer nation(s) generates? It is clear that rethinking how we approach rural queer identity, indeed recognizing and beginning to understand in better terms what a rural queer identity actually is, is beneficial to us. This research addresses this critical lack by theorizing the ways in which the rural and urban are both distinct and linked. This approach should begin to offer us the ability to do critical research that seeks both to recognize different forms of queer life that are eclipsed by the neoliberal gay project, and to implicate these within the context of a broader set of queer histories and geographies. But, as I have been arguing here, we need to have a firm grasp on what forms of power are at play in these assemblages if we are to have any way of writing scholarship on, and/or doing activism for, rural queer Appalachia. To situate ourselves in these circulations of power, let us turn now to a discussion on neoliberalism and the neoliberal gay project.

Neoliberalisms: politics, homonormativity and the trappings of consumption

As the opening two sections of this review suggest, the differences between the urban and the rural are not so clearly defined. Even, what Appalachia is, as a set of both urban and rural geographies, is not so clearly defined. However, the practices that set the conditions for discriminatory regionalisms (including queer regionalisms) can be seen as emanating, in large part from the urban. Nevertheless, we should not forget the tendencies of the marginalized to collude with the conditions that marginalize them. I do not wish to venture down a path toward reifying the

urban in its relationship to the constitution of the rural. Many rural gay/trans folk find seamless, however contingent, entry points into the neoliberal gay project, and this should not be disregarded. Rural Appalachia is not contained. It is indeed influenced by the practices, representations, material conditions of the urban and urban life. But that should not imply a geography of dependence. To the extent that the rural does integrate urban styles and codes into its make-up, this integration happens contingently, often on the terms of the rural, and usually in hybrid and transformative ways.

My goal is to tease out what sets the conditions for adapting urban codes and styles into rural aesthetics and examine how these conditions set in contrast to the practices of the neoliberal gay project that circumscribes rural Appalachian space. I am not attempting to concentrate on the particulars of metropolitan gay geographies, while their presence is necessary. Nonetheless, because I cannot describe the rural without the urban, I want to be careful that the urban does not step in to claim its maintained dominance over the rural. This dissertation draws on the conditions set by the urban, critiques these conditions, and offers an analytic through which to scrutinize and imagine how a new set of possibilities for geographies of sexualities that includes rural Appalachian gay/trans folk might be thought about. But the urban *is* still a primary character in this story. So, to balance these stories without reinscribing urban privilege, I concentrate on one particular (global) metropolitan manifestation that interrogates the exterior representations of rural gay/trans folk and challenges the limitations of these representations. This should help us to see the crisis points in the neoliberal gay project and begin to set the stage for a critique of discriminatory regionalisms and queer regionalisms. This manifestation emanates from a broader political critique of liberal governmentality, neoliberalism and the consumption practices of late capitalism.

Neoliberalism, as a set of practices couched in global economies of empire, power and hegemony, disinvestment and deregulation, migration practices, labor exploitation, resource extraction and processing, is well established in geographic literatures (see for example Lerner, Le Heron and Lewis 2007, Peck 2004, Peet 2002, Hart 2002). I am using neoliberalism here to describe how the socio-economic and political practices of late capitalism keep hidden its ability to erase and/or render invisible the inequities that it creates (di Leonardo 2008). As well, I am using it to describe how these inequities are scripted through a broader terrain of liberalism that is uneven, multilateral, and unbounded – touching everything – in its ability to define what sex and sexuality is

and how to exclude alternative (illiberal) forms of intimacy (Povinelli 2002, 2006). Finally, I am using neoliberalism as an apparatus and form of liberal governmentality that scripts homonormative and metronormative consumption practices to constitute a particular type of gay identity for critique. It is in this 'liberal subjecthood' enabled through capitalist consumerism (Duggan 2002, 2003, Halberstam 2005) that the neoliberal gay subject emerges and willingly (if unwittingly) contributes to the heterogendered order of society and its social structures.

Heterosexism and heteronormativity are well established concepts in feminist and queer theories, methodologies and geographies (see for example Rich 1980). They speak to the ways in which dominate heterosexual culture scripts the social norms on which gender and sexual representations, articulations and performances are cast and policed. These hegemonic forms of sexual policing that form the infrastructure for heterosexual dominance (continuously) sets the stage on which sexual and gender marginalization occurs. What is less talked about, however, is what Lisa Duggan has described as the 'New Homonormativity' (2002, 2003): the ways in which gay life and the complicit queer politic of the Gay Rights Movement has crafted its own policing mechanisms. A number of feminist scholars have recognized the perpetual crisis of heterosexuality (see for example Yep and Cammacho 2004), which constantly requires an Other to define and reaffirm its superiority.⁸ Within the paradigm of the 'new homonormativity', one may ask whether there are similar crisis points reproduced in mainstream gay culture through the neoliberal gay project. How does the neoliberal gay project perpetuate a continued racism, sexism, homophobia (as well as what I am arguing is a queer regionalism)? Is 'gay' a new 'mythical norm [that] is in a constant state of crisis' (Ibid: 340)?

To get toward a critical working definition of the neoliberal gay project, we must look at the components I am using to describe its anatomy. Briefly speaking, the neoliberal gay project describes the practices that manage and set the conditions for 'proper' gay life and the assemblages that bracket these practices. The neoliberal gay project will be primarily defined as the structure that encompasses three interconnected positions: the complicit queer politic, homonormativity and metronormativity. The 'complicit queer politic' (Oswin 2004) shall come to stand in for the collusion that many sexual and gender minorities conform to in reproducing the politics of 'proper' gay life. 'Homonormativity' (Duggan 2002, 2003) further emphasizes the

⁸ I shall mount a discussion on the crises of heterosexuality and how heterosexism particularly through an understanding of heterosexual privilege scripts homophobia in Chapter 5.

practices of this collusion by highlighting how these forms of complicity meet up with neoliberalism and the consumption practices of late capitalism. And 'metronormativity' (Halberstam 2005) describes the styles by which homonormativity brackets the perceptions of the aesthetic, political, spatial and erotic symbols, codes and images of privileged, upper middle class, gay white men – these come to viscerally (and often unintentionally) represent the dominant position of the neoliberal gay subject. In this section, I will concentrate on homonormativity as the primary incubator for a neoliberal political complexion. I shall return to metronormativity and the complicit queer politic when we discuss the aesthetic policing of the neoliberal gay project in Chapter 4.

As gay life came to be consolidated under the Gay Rights Movement, the impulse to mainstream gay life inside a heterosexually dominated cultural and civic life meant normalizing and scripting gay life through the tools and techniques of a heterosexual imaginary (Sullivan 2003) – one drawn out of the capitalist practices of post-Enlightenment liberalism (Duggan 2002, Winnubst 2006). This has been a politically efficacious move in many ways: 1) Gay families and images of capitalist driven monogamous coupling, 2) the gay marriage debate which has eclipsed all other forms of queer politics, and 3) a general sensibility for conforming to contemporary consumption practices (among others) has indeed brought a, nonetheless contested, set of political accomplishments and consciousnesses to bear on the wider cultural politics of contemporary American life. All of these bring into relief the complexion of the archetypal mythology of the so called 'culture wars' (Duggan 2003). Yet, and while these accomplishments should not be dismissed, the consolidation itself has yielded a new set of normalizing practices that determine who falls inside and outside the borders of 'proper' gay life. These have been scripted from the metropolitan centers that have been given historic precedent and privilege in the writing and retelling of 20th century (American) gay history and geography. These variables constitute the conditions of homonormativity through and under which the neoliberal gay project is disseminated and supported.

For Duggan, homonormativity⁹ is bracketed and enabled by neoliberalism (2002, 2003). Neoliberalism is the set of economic and political strategies that emerged around the global

⁹ While I will be using the term 'homonormativity' and the literatures from which the term arises, I want to be careful not to overemphasize its effects. While the 'homonormative' certainly scripts 'proper' gay life and the spaces, politics, consumption practices, aesthetics and so on that constitute 'mainstream' gay culture (and of which I am critiquing here), I follow Kath Browne and Gavin Brown's warning and critique, in the epilogue of their edited volume, *Geographies of Sexualities* (Brown, Lim and Browne 2007, 215-220), of the use of homonormativity. This is also evident in Natalie Oswin's work on 'complicit queer futures' (2004). We must be careful not to gloss over, and maintain

restructuring of capital in the latter decades of the 20th century (di Leonardo 2008). It has hailed back into existence mythologies of 'self regulated' capital markets (reminiscent of classical economic models) that define economic and political participation through themes of merit, consumerism and a general disdain for public (marked governmental) intervention, including the oversight of those markets. It is bent on deregulation while it attempts to veil corporate domination. In this way, new forms of social policing emerge through rhetorics of 'success', personal responsibility and individual autonomy (Rose 1999, Dean 1999). This is further perpetuated through a continued romantic phantasmagoria with the 'American Dream'. Neoliberalism uncritically bolsters American exceptionalism that consolidates nationalism and national identity through conspicuous consumption (Puar 2007). 'Democracy' equals capitalism and 'freedom' and 'liberation' equal consumption (Rose 1999). Yet, the discourses that hail neoliberalism often belie the structural inefficiencies and diffuse violences present in capital. This elision whitewashes and renders irrelevant discourses on social justice, responsible consumption and the multilateral inequalities of marginalization through race, class, gender and gender orientation, sex and sexuality, ability, fitness, age and mental acuity across the globe.

For the neoliberal gay body then, gay identity and its social practices are encapsulated by the consumption practices and commodity fetishes of late capitalism. To be a contributor to 'proper' gay life is to conform to the aesthetic codes and styles sanctioned through queer consumption and by implication to 'buy in' to its markets. And it does so by conscripting the gay body to the acceptable practices and forms of heterosexism and heterogendered simulacra. As Duggan notes:

The neoliberal sexual politics of the IGF [Independent Gay Forum] might be termed *the new homonormativity* – it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising that possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (2003:50).

Unruly bodies, then, are crafted through the perceived transgression and nonconformist manifestations that resist the attempts to consolidate 'gay culture' through a liberationist politics of post-Enlightenment liberalism. I do want to reinforce, however, that this is a *perception* of

a critical ambivalence about the creative ways in which homonormative spaces are used. We also, neither want to overstate a reduction of those spaces into a new monolith of a queer hegemony. While we must remain critical of its effects – which is the purpose of this chapter – we must nevertheless be aware that even in the most normative of conditions, there is always variation.

transgression. Whether or not alternative forms of sexual and gender minorities that do not 'fit' into the borders of mainstream (homonormalized) gay culture are indeed transgressive – if they even perceive their outsideness as transgressive – is not at issue here. What is at issue, however, is how these perceived transgressive queer bodies constitute a fundamental threat to the (re)production of gay life *qua* gay life.

In metropolitan gay life, the strategies that consolidate this social formation are indelibly attached to urban subjectivities. In this equation, like other forms of social domination, the cues that protect the dominant figure (urban) within the categorical binary (urban/rural) falls off, disqualifying its subordinate (rural) and 'gay' thereby equals its urban manifestation. 'Gay' in this situation no longer has to account for itself. Just as 'white' disappears in white privilege and racial politics (Doane 2003), the urban forms of gay life become the invisible benchmark of queer life. These become naturalized to reproduce particular aesthetics, politics, and consumption practices. Other social formations (seemingly within the parameters of 'gay culture' at large) cannot be ultimately accounted for without fundamentally dismantling (or at the very least disrupting, but nevertheless threatening) the whole neoliberal gay project. The result of this unruly queer body that threatens the neoliberal gay project is the exclusion of those bodies. And as I shall explore in depth in Chapters 4 and 5, this exclusion is complex and complicated. Let us turn now to the complexity of bodies that emerge through and around these discourses and how they constitute what Elizabeth Povinelli calls 'the uneven distribution of flesh' (2006).

The carnal body: liberal multiculturalism and the uneven distribution of flesh

I wish to explore the complexity of bodies that are at play in these liberal subjectivities across the intersections of different scales, geographies and social worlds that constitute and are contested within a broader queer matrix for which I am ultimately advocating. This will help us to explain why and how neoliberalism as a social process comes to conjure queer bodies into existence and those that are excluded. The 'carnal body' or 'carnality' is the recent contribution of cultural/political anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli that highlights the political realities and cultural limitations of bodies as they are brought under the regulation(s) of liberal rhetorics and mythologies (2006). Carnality will help us to situate the neoliberal gay project within a broader critique of 'liberal multiculturalism' that romanticizes 'liberation' and often sits at problematic sites of 'liberal politics' through 'Western apologists' seeking to 'assuage guilt.' These forms of 'liberal multiculturalism' find

places for the marginalized under its purview, only authorizing features of the Other that do not offend the liberal palette (Povinelli 2002). This will help us to reveal the limitations that liberal definitions of intimacy impose upon intimacies that are perceived to threaten that structure (that is to say, liberal multiculturalism isn't necessarily friendly to alternative forms of intimacy).

Carnality also helps us to recognize the tensions that stretch, contort and complicate the production of bodies between the crisis points in the intersections of liberal and illiberal social worlds. And this is a crisis with no exterior. There is no exterior to liberalism (Povinelli 2006) – and while there is resistance to its strategies, these subjectivities are nevertheless formed in their counter-relation to liberalism. Carnality as a set of liberal assumptions (that bracket particular modes of being and subjectivity) meets up with the way I am using neoliberalism (as a set of consumption and aesthetic practices that police 'proper' gay life) where the neoliberal gay project constitutes an obverse social world to rural queer life. This obverse position – in the negotiation of rural and metropolitan social worlds – renders its features offensive and threatening, disqualifies these features and sets the conditions for the 'uneven distribution of flesh.' Carnality helps us to reveal these foreclosures, while carving out strategies for struggle within the ether of (neo)liberalism.

The carnal body is a body in between bodies – a body in between itself. The carnal body is a body that can neither escape its materiality nor the discourses that constitute it as a social entity. Yet, this body is reducible to neither. It is in the inseparability, yet inevitable intersection of the body as both a representation and a fleshy reality that the carnal body emerges. Indeed, Povinelli defines carnality as "the socially built space between flesh and environment" (2006:7). I wish to concentrate on two aspects of 'carnality' that contribute to our discussion on how she is deploying carnality toward a theoretical restructuring of the body through multiculturalism and its political foreclosures. The first contribution is in a reframing of the body that excavates the political in relation to the limitations, contradictions and conceits of liberal multiculturalism. The second is a description of how corporeality helps to script carnality that will be applied to describe how the neoliberal gay project comes into relief through the emergence of the carnal body and what is understood to be legitimate queerness and its intimacies. This will help us to negotiate and highlight its foreclosures.

For Povinelli, carnality emerges out of a broader critique of liberalism, liberal governmentality and the postcolonial other. In her initial interrogations, *The Cunning of Recognition*

(2002), her critique of liberal multiculturalism sets out to reveal how aboriginal bodies in Australia are filtered through, regulated by and differentiated within the reparative politics of Western 'apologists'. Her critique illuminates how these political maneuvers establish, interpret and police kinship and sexual regulations of the aboriginal body through the tensions stretched across indigenous social worlds and, what she terms, "liberal settler colonies". The "cunning of recognition" for Povinelli is in the ability for 'liberal settler colonies' to demarcate an incoherent and impossible set of identifications with some 'authentic' self that are then applied to and recognized as the indigenous, raced, gendered, sexed, and so on Other. Her primary critique of liberal multiculturalism is its tactics of domination that erase real social inequities while feigning inclusivity and diversity under the guise of self-determined meritocracy. She notes that the laws and traditions of Australian aboriginal people are respected under liberal doctrine so long as they are not seen as 'repugnant' (Ibid: 6).

This is certainly not the only critique of liberalism that examines the fantasies through which promises such as freedom, democracy and individual autonomy become contorted feigns for regulating consumption, organizing fear (of the Other), and inscribing the asymmetries among contested bodies that capitalism claims to erase (see for example, Brown 2006, Butler 2004b, Rose 1999, Winnubst 2006). It is important, however, to understand that liberalism for Povinelli (like many others) 'is not a thing'. It is, in her words, "a moving target", an undeterminable, morphing, and intractable set of discourses and ideologies that nevertheless become the constant "citation ... that motivat[es] logic and aspiration of dispersed and competing social and cultural experiments" (2006:13). Liberalism then becomes an enigma that has neither a target nor horizon, yet organizes bodies around particular logics that do not necessarily coincide with, but at the same time contribute to (even if negatively) the alternative social logics of different (illiberal) subjectivities.

Carnality arises as an evolving set of questions for Povinelli that attempt to attend to these contradictions that occur at the intersections of liberal governance and the problems of different kinds of social worlds and intimacy. In *The Empire of Love* (2006), her continued critique of liberalism focuses on how, what she calls, the "intimate event" correlates to diverging understandings of social care that happen at the site of intimacy between social actors and liberal expectations for 'proper' intimacy. She does this from a simultaneous occupation of the liberalism she seeks to critique (realizing precisely because liberalism is diffuse and multifarious, there really is no outside to what it touches) and the impossibility of a truly discreet Other (Ibid: 1) – or rather

from the paradox that the liberal Other is both at odds with and a product of liberal ideologies. The goal of carnality is not to write redemptive tales of social difference, but to criticize and reframe liberal fantasies of autonomous individuality through a set of analytical devices that reveal the insufficiency and culpability of liberal subject-hood.¹⁰

To get at a critical working understanding of carnality that satisfies its theoretical usefulness, we have to look at how Povinelli deals with 'corporeality' and how she differentiates it from 'carnality'. Corporeality is defined as the "juridical and political maneuver[s] of the flesh". Carnality, on the other hand, is the physical "mattering forth of these maneuvers" (Ibid: 7). The distinction seems at first glance to be merely semantic; however, the nuance with which she distinguishes the two has an indefinite impact on how we think about bodies, social relations, and alternative modalities of intimacy across different social worlds. Describing how she defines 'corporeality', she notes, "[t]he materiality of genealogy is what is behind, or before, the individual and the social – what material they inherit to work with and what can be given life or death..." (Ibid: 202). She continues that these material inheritances constitute a metaphysics that both constitute fantasies of hope for transcending flesh/discourse dichotomies and legitimizes disciplinary regimes through these fantasies (Ibid: 203). It is these fantasies that enact the carnal body, giving its physical existence meaning and through that meaning giving its imaginaries power to position the physical matter of the body in space as a social actor with accesses and denials to political, economic, cultural, historical, and geographical efficacy.

The distinction lies not in an explicit difference between the two, but rather how the physical manifestations of carnality are enabled in the complexity of corporeal fantasies that precede, produce, reinforce, and deploy "uneven constitutions of the flesh" (Ibid 203). Carnality is in the "mattering forth", the bringing into material existence corporeal fantasies. For Povinelli, the corporeal is the political maneuver whereas the carnal is the product of such maneuvers. Yet, while the carnal is this "physical mattering forth", precisely as a result of the 'mattering' itself, the carnal cannot be disentangled from the discourses, representations, and imaginations that constitute the material. Neither is reducible to the other, but they are nevertheless co-constitutive. She notes, "[w]hat interests me, and what I am trying to get at through the notion of carnality, as distinct from corporeality, is what is enabled – what becomes possible physically – at the moment when people

¹⁰ I shall come back to more detailed defense of avoiding rhetorics of redemption in the next chapter through a discussion on 'geographies of possibility'.

are so reduced and how these actual and possible carnal worlds help to secure the fiction of the intimate event and its genealogical other” (Ibid: 204).

The subtle difference that a “physical mattering forth” implies does not eliminate the importance of the corporeal for Povinelli, but rather casts a more nuanced interdependence between the body as a material object and how that is stretched in tension across and contested between different social worlds... (and their diverging sensibilities about how the flesh operates within socio-cultural systems, what kinds of contestations and asymmetries those produce, what kinds of histories and geographies are either eclipsed or foreclosed, geo-political strains of power, and so on). Through this, we can imagine the neoliberal project as the genealogy that corporeally sets the conditions for queer carnality and its fantasies. We can also imagine how the liberal foreclosures on what constitutes ‘legitimate’ intimacy (and ‘true love’ as the complexion of that intimacy) are scripted through the intimate event and the resulting foreclosures that disqualify rural queer life. In this way, rural queer life becomes the genealogical other and its foreclosures are in a constant production that the neoliberal gay project (intentionally or otherwise) uses to circumscribe and erase its existence.

In this chapter, I have draw together literatures for the development of a critical (and ambivalent) analytic for studying rural queer geographies in Appalachia. I have shown how the Othering of rural geographies is set in relief against fluid and dialectical interactions. I have discussed the complications of thinking ‘Appalachia’, concentrating on its contingencies and differences. I have taken the discussion through emerging debates on rural sexual subjectivities and geographies that reveal the dynamic linkages in these dialectical interactions. I have placed neoliberalism as a central force in the policing mechanisms of metropolitan gay life that draws circumscriptions around what it perceives to threaten it. And I have discussed how the (neo)liberal gay subject comes into existence in the tensions between liberal rhetoric, its material conditions and what it excludes. Let us now move on to a discussion in the next chapter how these are being methodologically deployed in this research.

Chapter 3: Queer(y)ing the Ethics of Research Methods: Ambivalence, Intimacy and Kinship

We must immediately question the effects that academic exposure of rural sex lives might have. Who will it benefit and who might it harm? Is it better to leave hidden those who wish to be invisible? As with any 'sensitive' social research, justification cannot solely rest on the filling of an empirical gap. Certainly, there are sound reasons for wanting to bring to light the harsh realities of rural life for many sexual dissidents, and perhaps even to 'give voice' to that life... at the same time, our understandings of the rural are enhanced by including perspectives from popular culture... An awareness of the many axes of 'difference' may also suggest the need to 'think the rural' in more fragmented, contingent and contested ways than totalizing tropes have thus far enabled.

– David Bell and Gill Valentine
Queer Country

I decided that we would keep control, like when outsiders came in, we would keep control of the outsiders and what we would get from them and what we would take from them and also what we would give them. Someone really had to get up to our standards to come here and do anything. We wouldn't just let anybody come in and take charge. I had seen that happen to a lot of little places in Appalachia, they were defeated by their own selves, by the same people who had helped them be independent had made them dependent again. So we had to be independent. So I know that we have to be in control. The people of Ivanhoe, whatever, if it is good or if it is bad, if it is a failure or if it is a huge success, it doesn't make a damn, the people of Ivanhoe have to be in charge, and if we fall flat on our faces, we will fall together, and if we get to the top of the world and huge successes, we will do it together. Whatever we do will be the people.

– Maxine Waller
Interview with Helen Lewis, January 10, 1988

Can someone take a picture of the 'real' Appalachia?

Elisa¹ owns a business in Whitesburg, Kentucky that she opened with her husband James. When they bought the building a few years ago, it came with an apartment attached to it on the second floor. Since their business has opened, they have refinished the apartment to accommodate travelers in and out of Whitesburg (especially those related to their business). Elisa is an active member of the community, encouraging all types of community engagement. Her former job was with Appalshop, a media and activist organization with a long history of advocacy on behalf of Appalachia and mountain folk. Since its inception in 1969, Appalshop has exposed a wide ranging audience (from Eastern Kentucky to New York City) to the cultural and political

¹ In Appendix I of this dissertation, I lay out the cast of characters that constitute my 'research participants' and the friendships/relationships/encounters that I have developed with them in the field over the course of my research. I will not be referencing any actual names of participants and have given them all pseudonyms. Any name that appears to describe an encounter with someone in the social networks that I have begun crafting shall be understood throughout this document to be referenced by their pseudonym that can be referenced in annotated form in Appendix I.

artifacts and ambitions of Appalachian folk by using a variety of media, programs and events. Of its many arts and music education programs, the Appalachian Media Institute (AMI) is one of many of this organization's accomplishments. It draws young film students who come from all over the region to hone their craft. Beyond Appalshop, Elisa is also on a number of committees for organizations throughout the region that promote, fund, and oversee different non-profit projects and programs aimed at community building and participation, as well as social justice and activism.

Western Kentucky University has a very well regarded photo-journalism school that draws students from across the country. Each year in the spring, a group of upper level students migrate to Whitesburg in Eastern Kentucky to spend a week photographing topics of their choice as they learn to develop 'story-telling' skills. Their task is to find a theme and record that theme during their visit. Some do 'church' related themes, some do 'high school football', some do 'community life' and many have done 'coal'. But it does not take long to realize that the students have a very stereotypical conception of what Appalachian life and culture is and means. I was in Whitesburg visiting Elisa last spring (2009) when these students arrived. Because of Elisa's history with community engagement and her desire to 'keep an eye' on these students, she offered the WKU students the accommodations of the apartment upstairs from her business. Brian, an employee of hers at the time, had been a former student of the program and had since moved to Whitesburg, offering an onsite means to 'baby-sit' their presence.

This student migration has gone on for a number of years and has not failed to evoke complaints from local residents. Each year as the students descend upon the mountain town, residents complain about their conduct and point out how little they understand about Appalachian life and culture. Many of them come with preconceived notions of what Appalachia *is* with little regard for the everyday lives of the folk who live in Whitesburg. 'Appalachia' is not technically the focus of the project, but it somehow becomes its complexion because of the ways students' preconceived notions are acted out in town. The motivations for their story arcs are often romantic, fetishized, or reductive. For a population already sensitive to these recurring tropes in their portrayal, this does not sit well. The problems are usually exacerbated by the fact that their professors seem to be equally unaware of Appalachian culture. Elisa notes the irony of a program that each year sets out to document a place that is all too well aware of what it means to be documented.

While we were in the midst of our discussions – sporadically interrupted by photography students coming in and out – she began to tell me another story that was relevant to the current student situation. A number of years ago, the rather famous ‘street magician’ David Blaine came to Whitesburg looking to put on a magic show. But not just any magic show. He wanted to put on a magic show for a ‘real’ Appalachian. This was made plain to Elisa through Blaine’s front man, who was asking her questions, trying to get a sense of the geography and where one would go to find a ‘real’ Appalachian. He asked her how they could “get up into a hollow” – she responded, “in a car.” She quickly recognized that he was talking about hillbillies. She suspected that this meant they were looking to dazzle a mountain man who had never seen magic before.

She explained to Blaine’s front man that if they were looking for ‘unsuspecting dupes,’ they weren’t going to find any; Whitesburg is a community that is aware and skeptical. And this comes from a long history of being misrepresented. She offered to put them on to the students from AMI if they were interested. They’re all ‘hollow kids’ as she described them, very talented film makers and documentarians. They certainly would be entertained. This was not satisfying for them; they wanted to know where they could run into something more ‘authentic’. She sent them to the Wal-Mart parking lot. She also called the AMI kids and told them that he was down there and they ought to go check him out. They did. Blaine refused to perform for them. Frustrated Blaine and his crew left.

Apparently trying to get lost in a hollow in an attempt to find *someone* that smacked of a ‘real hillbilly,’ they happened upon Pac Man (as he is lovingly referred to in town). Pac Man comes across as a simple man who is anything but simple. If you could describe anyone as a ‘hillbilly,’ he might be it. He lives in a small, weathered rustic house that oozes with preconceptions of Appalachian imagery. He was mowing his lawn when they found him. Pac Man is a huge fan of David Blaine. He watches his shows and spends ample amount of thought trying to deconstruct and figure out his tricks. *David Blaine* is standing in front of Pac Man. Pac Man plays along. Seeing this as an opportunity to get a front row, personal audience with a man he admires and putting on his best ‘dumb yokel,’ Pac Man lets David Blaine ‘astonish’ him. Elisa describes how Pac Man (like many Appalachian folk that understand what it means to be gazed upon as an object of interest) engages with the Socratic Method: playing dumb around an end game. David Blaine got to perform for a ‘real’ hillbilly and Pac Man got to let David Blaine perform for a ‘real’ hillbilly.

Since last year, the WKU students have come and gone again. I recently visited with Elisa and we talked about Brian, her employee who used to be a student. His first year, he was a student. The next year he was a technical advisor. Last year, he was both a resident and facilitator. Last year, he also realized just how problematic it actually is for WKU students coming from all over the country to 'document' the stories of Eastern Kentuckians. Having since moved, this year he returned as a faculty mentor and made it a priority to discuss with the students what it means to document other people's lives and the types of preconceptions that we often carry. Elisa was asked to speak at a round table discussion with them on the dangers of portraying reductive and fetishized renderings of Appalachian folk. She noted there were fewer complaints from other members of the community this year.

These two stories are emblematic of the reason that I have sought out experimental methods to conduct this research. If I am not to be met with skepticism on the one hand and Socratic ruse on the other, I must be willing to submit myself to the contours of what it means to be in Appalachian space. This doesn't make me Appalachian, but it makes me an ally, a confidante. And I take this allied position very seriously. There is no 'real' Appalachia. It is dangerous to pretend that there is. Rather, Appalachia might be thought of as a set of contingent geographies, cultural and kinship attachments, and sensibilities about living in the mountains. These geographies are as connected to global processes as any other cultural geography. It has been my goal then to establish and foster the allied development and responsibility of privileged folk (white, male, heterosexual, wealthy, able-bodied... urban). To do this, languages must be constructed that emphasize how racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism and discriminatory regionalisms damage society as a whole, while not fetishizing the forms about whom these discriminatory practices circumscribe.

What's at stake: the difficulties of research and experimental methodologies

This research has two primary goals. The first is to establish a critical stage on which to study rural sexual and gender minorities in Appalachia that remains ambivalent and avoids proscription. The second, following from the first, is to develop and deploy experimental methodologies that contend with the aspirations for critical stage setting by highlighting and reframing the limitations of studying underrepresented populations and the ethics involved in doing this. There are two reasons for this approach. The first, alluded to above, has to do with the

skepticism that many Appalachian folk have around people researching them. As I have explored in the previous chapter, Appalachia is a misunderstood geography and many people that live in Appalachia are aware of this.

The second reason for this approach – given that there is no substantial research on queer life in Appalachia – is because I do not want to impose what Appalachian gay/trans geographies might look like. Under these circumstances, it seemed more appropriate for me to establish and become an actor in queer social networks in Eastern Kentucky and to analyze these, than to do structured interviews and data collection that might have been read as obtrusive and threatening. To do this, I am drawing on autobiography, autoethnography, and discourse analysis to describe and manage an ambivalent approach that sets out to portray a particular kind of possibility. This possibility does not speak for all subjects of Queer Appalachia, but rather alludes to other possibilities while orienting an examination that does not overestimate the struggles of rural gay/trans Appalachians.

This chapter is divided into three parts to work through the challenges, limitations and possibilities of this type of experimental method/ology. The first part describes a critical justification for the theoretical positions that I am defending and that I began to allude to in the previous chapter. I define the terms ‘geography of possibility’ and ‘ambivalent analytic’, and describe how these are being used to manage and frame the interpretations of emerging queer geographies. It is difficult studying underrepresented populations (Alcoff 1991). I would argue that it is even more difficult to study underrepresented populations where there is no precedent for study. These theoretical terms are being used to organize these difficulties. The critical justification of these terms undergirds the ethical arguments that I will be making in the second part.

In this way, I am taking a methodological approach through my body as a research object that attempts to highlight the intimacies produced in the relationships that I created with my different research kin.² This approach is seen both as cautious and radical. It is cautious in that I am avoiding saying what queer life in Appalachia is. I wish to avoid being proscriptive. Rather, I

² I say ‘research kin’ throughout this chapter and dissertation tentatively. Kindred bonds that are produced in any set of social relations, but especially ones where human subjects research is a contingent factor, develop slowly and over time. ‘Kin’ describes the very real familial connections that I am making with my friends and family in Harlan, Kentucky. I feel that the term ‘participants’, ‘subjects’ and the like do not sufficiently highlight the growing intimacies that I share with them. For general purposes, ‘researched’, ‘human subjects’ and ‘research participants’ will be used in the conceptual development of these methods. When speaking directly about the participants in my study, research kin will be used to simultaneously bookmark the development of these kindred relations and highlight that these complexities do indeed exist.

would like to establish an argument for the very real presence of queer life in rural Appalachia that flies in the face of the homonormative impulse to script what gay life is or should be. It is radical in its avoidance of mapping the struggles of sexual and gender minorities onto Appalachia as a distinctly Appalachian problem. By critiquing the neoliberal gay project's exclusion of rural forms,³ the objective is to highlight other possibilities of being a sexual/gender minority. What we are left with then is a stage on which research can continue to operate without foreclosing on what those possibilities might be.

In part two, the arguments laid out in part one begin to draft a methodology of 'ethics as method' and to show how such an approach has constructed the researcher/researched relations with my research kin in Eastern Kentucky through a 'politics of intimacy'. The arguments sketched out through the terms 'ethics as method' and 'politics of intimacy' have three primary purposes: 1) to contribute to new strategies in the conduct of methodologies for geographical research that implicates the performances and entanglements that the researcher is embedded in as a result of conducting research, 2) to outline an argument that supports the assertion that reimagining these relations opens up new ways of producing knowledge – potentially creating political and kindred alliances for social and environmental justice,⁴ and 3) to describe how I am deploying these experimental methodologies in studying rural gay/trans folk in Central Appalachia.

To come toward an ethics as method through a politics of intimacy, I first attempt to assemble a definition of queer theory that (de)stabilizes assumptions about how research ethics ought to be deployed. I then take this definition and stretch out its ethical imperative for research and research methods by looking more closely at the ethical construction of researcher/researched relations. Looking at Participatory Action Research (PAR) becomes an optic through which to see ways for developing researcher/researched relationships that outline the types of alternative ethical questions that this queer ethic as method seeks to broach. As well, we can begin to imagine what a

³ We must be careful in our discussion of rural gay forms and their relationship to the urban. As we shall see in the next chapter, many rural forms are appropriated by mainstream gay culture and fetishized and commoditized for the purposes of gay consumption. However, these aesthetic approximations of rural gay life are theme-park renderings of images such as cowboys and farm boys that become homoerotic sites for desire. Nevertheless, the incorporation of these aestheticized rural forms usually do not coincide with the real lives of rural gay men. On the other side of this cautionary note, rural gay folk are not isolated from urban forms of queer representation, politics and consumption.

⁴ I am placing social and environmental justice together as a means to get at their inevitable coexistence. While the arguments in this chapter seem to lead more toward social justice and ethics, environmental justice and ethics is often, if not always, tethered to the social. The access to environmental resources, the protection from environmental degradation, the cultivation of environmental suffrage, and so on, all lead back to social justice and therefore should never be too far behind.

politics of intimacy might look like. Finally, I return to 'carnality' and a further examination of Elizabeth Povinelli's work on intimacy to frame the arguments for the emergence of 'queer ethics'.

In part three, I outline how these theoretical ambivalences and research ethics constitute a set of methods for collecting and analyzing data. I begin with data instruments and look at the management of my body in this research through autobiography, autoethnography and discourse analysis. Through autobiography, I highlight how I became interested in studying Appalachian gay/trans folk and how my life story becomes part of this research. Autoethnography will redirect this conversation to show how the queer social networks that I have begun to develop function through multiple voices and narratives that are not entirely my own. Finally, I will discuss how discourse analysis manages the interpretations of these narratives and other pertinent materials. From an examination of these data instruments, I shall turn to my research kin. I begin to explore how an ethics as method through a politics of intimacy maps onto my research and the interactions between me and my research kin in Eastern Kentucky. I sketch out brief descriptions of the actors in this rural queer geography and how they came to be a part of this research.

Part I: Justifying Ambivalence and Other Contemplations

I am a firm believer that theory *is* method. The ways in which we theoretically conceptualize the world directly informs the kinds of questions we ask, how we study those questions, our interpretations of the data we collect, and ultimately what we say and how we say it. While developing a definition of queer theory to apply to the methodological approaches with which I have engaged my research participants is the focus of this chapter, the method of queering 'stable' representations of particular social worlds will be an ongoing process throughout the development of this dissertation. In this way, concepts such as 'Appalachia', 'the rural', 'sexual minorities', 'mainstream gay culture' and so on will equally be destabilized and contextualized within a broader understanding of emerging social worlds.

Geographies of possibility: underrepresentation and open-ended conversations

Appalachian sexual and gender minorities are an underrepresented population that sits at the intersection of at least two other underrepresented populations: sexual/gender minorities and Appalachians. New and exciting research has begun to emerge on rural queer life (Halberstam 2005, Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton 2000), especially in the American South (Herring 2006, Howard

1999, 1997, Sears 2001, 1991). There *has* even been a limited handful of emerging scholarship on Appalachian rural queer life (Mann 2005, Gray 2009) and Appalachian sexualities more broadly (Massey 2007). Jeff Mann has written a poetry and prose book, titled *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* (2005) where he explores his own frustrations and struggles of being 'Appalachian and queer' as he moved away to a big city (Washington D.C.) and ultimately moved home to West Virginia. Mary L Gray's recent book, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009) explores the very real queer visibility and activism of rural and small town gay/trans youth in Eastern Kentucky and includes many of their impressions on how their lives are seen by metropolitan gay life. However, alongside this, there is still somewhat problematic research that focuses only on the crisis points in rural gay life emblematic of the work of Bernadette Barton.

I will critique Barton's claims around what she calls the 'toxic closet' and how she has mapped this onto an erroneous definition of the so called 'Bible Belt' in Chapter 7. In light of the inchoate critical scholarship in this area, I have become convinced that what this dissertation needs to be is that critical stage upon which to conduct the study of sexual and gender minorities in rural Appalachia. We need a stage that does not approbate what rural queer life is, let alone what rural queer life in Appalachia is. I firmly believe that to study rural queer life we must approach it on its terms. We can certainly craft analytics, but our analytics must remain flexible and fluid enough to not foreclose on the possibility *of* rural queer life. In this way, I have come to look for what I am calling 'geographies of possibility.' These can be real and imagined geographies, or more likely a combination of both. They are simultaneously prescient of emerging forms of queer life, aware of their transformations, cognizant of their visibilities, ambivalent yet open to their make-up, contingent in their readings, critical of their existing foreclosures, alert to present violences and homophobias, and radical in their destabilization of the forms of power and control present in the neoliberal gay project.

I am using the term 'possibility' here in this research to demarcate an open set of spatial practices that do not seek to reinforce the stereotypes that already circumscribe rural queer life. Geographies of possibility offer us the ability to keep the political praxis and influence of neoliberalism and the neoliberal gay project on the table for critical debate without reducing its variations, both its strengths and weaknesses. It recognizes that rural queer geographies are located within a broader set of neoliberal modalities and connections to the inefficiencies of post-

Enlightenment liberalism (Povinelli 2002, 2006). I draw on Elizabeth Povinelli here, stressing that our job as social scientists is not to write redemptive tales:

First, the options presented to those persons who choose, or must, live at the end of liberalism's tolerance and capitalism's trickle, are often not great options. To pretend they are is to ignore the actual harms that liberal forms of social tolerance and capital forms of life- and wealth- produce. Second, to wish for a redemptive narrative, to seek it, is to wish that social experiments fulfill rather than upset given conditions, that they emerge in a form that given conditions recognize as good... (2006:25).

Because there is no outside to what liberalism (as a "social experiment") touches, we must refrain from tales of redemption, acknowledging that such tales reify and justify its location within liberalism.

The struggles between sexual and gender minorities and the vitriolic voices of Evangelical regimes exist. A culture expressed through a fragile yet hyper-idealized sense of masculinity exists. Homophobias and homophobic violence exist. Displaced queer youth disowned by their families exist. Queer poverty exists based on any combination of the widening disparities of wealth in late capitalism, including: 1) the broader evacuation of living wage jobs across the nation and the globe stretching the 'middle class' to the point of rupture, 2) the failure of the Gay Rights Movement to recognize poverty in its politics, and 3) a continued and publically sanctioned exclusion from employment, medical treatment and comprehensive family health care coverage. All of these exist – as much in the city as they do in the country. Perhaps to varying degrees and with differing results, but the perceived 'reasons' that justify circumscribing rural queer life are already present in the city.

A geographies of possibility approach attempts to organize an ambivalent analytic that incorporates these struggles into its analysis without reducing its analysis to the effects of these struggles. It allows the opportunity to interrogate the subtler complexions of negotiating queer life across rural spaces and through rural queer networks. Geographies of possibility both accounts for the moments and sites of violent and dangerous homophobia, without saying the entirety of the rural is homophobic, let alone evenly distributed and in the same way. In this way, I am endorsing more nuanced interpretations of homophobia and its presence in rural areas. By recognizing these contingencies, we can put the good, the bad and the ugly about rural (queer) life up against each other without victimizing or valorizing what it means to be queer in rural space.

It seems all too tempting (as Bernadette Barton has done) to wax both heroic and tragic. 'Heroic,' in that rural gay/trans folk are understood to be forced to face 'coming out' stories that are always already located within the harshest violent and unforgiving of environments. These interpretations belie how 'coming out' in the rural is often met with a range of reactions and receptions from hostile resistance to differing progressions toward acceptance to warm embrace. But there is indeed a range of reactions and receptions. 'Tragic,' in that the rural is seen as a place where queer visibility is trapped in a sustained and indeterminate foreclosure that forever casts these 'violent' environments as monolithically homophobic and therefore closed to sexual and gender minorities. Yet this ignores a growing number of queer activist youth fighting for visibility and succeeding (Gray 2009). The political struggles of sexual and gender minorities are not 'owned' by the metropolitan complexion of the neoliberal gay project. But in either case – romanticizing or foreclosing their struggles – modalities of queer life find ways to function in their environments. Life is not reducible to its struggles. Life manages itself on the fringe. It is not devoid of struggle, but neither is it foreclosed by it.

I want to be careful though how I define the term 'possibility' here. There are two competing potential definitions of the term that need to be clarified. The first is a 'romantic' notion of possibility of which this research is attempting to avoid. The second is an 'ambivalent' position of possibility that seeks to uncover new potentials and spatial assemblages without foreclosing on the meanings of those potentials and assemblages. A romantic notion of rural sexual and gender minorities would potentially reify new representations that would keep rural gay/trans folk in the same exotic position that they currently occupy (a claim that I will explore in depth in Chapter 4). The purpose of geographies of possibility is to hold homophobia, homophobic practices and spaces in a critical suspension to brush off the rust of the 'enemy politics' that frame the 'culture wars' to build bridges that emphasize the support and development of ally participation and responsibility. In this way, we begin to break down the divisiveness that pits homosexuality against heterosexuality and search out new ways that expose how the privilege of the few in socio-political dominance (classed, raced, sexed, gendered, aged, abilitated and so on) damage society as a whole. An ambivalent analytic that will come to undergird this research should, I hope, keep us from straying down this path of fetish and hyperbole.

Over the rainbow and into the rabbit hole: ambivalence, scrutiny and warnings

I will be using the term 'ambivalence' a lot throughout this dissertation. I am drawing on Natalie Oswin's assertion that we must maintain an "ambivalent approach to queer geographies of normalization" (2005:81). While she is talking about the conflation of the upwardly mobile, gay white man as the solidified antagonist in the battle against the mainstream stereotyping of gay culture, her critique remains valid. There are indeed variations within this group of men and it is dangerous to ignore them – it gives them absolute power as the authorial voice of queer politics while it strips them of their subjectivity. Oswin is not saying that we should ignore the implications of this power for critical interrogation, but rather remember its variations, contradictions and materialities.

From the other direction, I wish to use ambivalence as a means to avoid 'normalizing' rural queer life. I am arguing here that its lessons are located in its unfixity. At this point in time there is not a dense enough visual rural queer population to police its borders. Because of this, its expressions and manifestations are misunderstood and misread, as well as open to sexual variations and politico-social formations in ways that metropolitan gay cultures may have overlooked. An ambivalent analytic allows us to see and analyze what is before us without foreclosing on those possibilities.

I am defining ambivalence as a 'sustained critical uncertainty.' I will come to rely heavily on this word to refrain from collapsing the abstract analytics (theory) that I am deploying with the everyday materialities (praxis) of the metaphors I shall come to critique, while still trying to see how they inform one another. By 'sustained', I mean that we maintain our critical uncertainty that never attempts to fix the peoples, histories and geographies about which we speak. By 'critical', I mean that we refrain from couching our arguments in ways that fetishize or romanticize their social formations, values and generalizability. And by 'uncertainty', I mean that we recognize that any social formation is historically and geographically specific and their management of struggle is complex, diffuse, striated, spatial, temporal, contradictory, fractal, visceral, material and embodied with no single author.

This definition also allows us to recognize the limitations of our analytical devices that sometimes become conflated with and mapped onto our subjects as their 'identities.' An analytic is just that... it may have a material root in what we study and it may not. It may allow us to dismantle the closet and its metaphorical/social limitations for 'coming out,' but it still remains a salient

metaphor, precisely because it still organizes material space regardless of its semantic limitations. As a point of fact, I *will* be dismantling the closet (Chapter 6). I will question its ability to simultaneously exclude the very people that it is supposed to embrace. Michael Brown, with compelling evidence has suggested that the 'closet' may be a dead metaphor (2000). And there are alluring reasons to think about promoting new metaphors to describe sexual discovery and what types of social formations they might take; a metaphor where we 'come in,' rather than 'come out' – embraced rather than banished.

However, this dangerously skirts the romantic, but it also frames a rather keen analytic. By dismantling the closet we can begin to think about more fluid approaches to its interpretation. We can imagine what other metaphors might look like without making a 'sales pitch.' And we can do this without mapping the theoretical analytic that questions the continued validity of the closet onto the everyday lives of (rural) gay/trans folk. In this way, we can recalibrate its interpretations without overdetermining and dismissing its continued usefulness.

I wish to make one last point on ambivalence in relation to the critical analysis I hope to mount here. I must remain ambivalent about myself. Because of many of the ethical problems I shall explore in part two, when initially embarking on this research I had to reconsider how I ordered my research questions, how I gathered data and how I interpreted their meaning(s). In this way, my body has been situated as a primary research object within the networks of gay friends and kin that I have begun to make. And there are a number of ambivalences that I must balance in reporting this research. First, the materiality of my body – flesh stretched between competing social worlds (Povinelli 2006) – requires that I both examine my emotive connections to the research while resisting the temptation to allow in a romantic, 'redeeming' voice. Second, to the extent that I am acting as a mouthpiece for Appalachian sexual and gender minorities, I must maintain an absolutely rigorous flexibility that does not approbate what those sexual and gender orientations might be.

Third, I must recognize the distance I place between myself and the rural gay/trans folk that I have come to be involved with in Eastern Kentucky. The act of writing in an academic voice already speaks above and beyond the subject of this research. To maintain an ambivalent reading of the geographies of possibility that I begin to lay out here requires both careful and thoughtful analysis in its writing and translation in its dissemination. I fully bear the responsibility of this burden, which further adds to the necessity of ambivalent readings. Another way to assist in

navigating the loftiness of academic speak, this dissertation will slip in and out of narrative voice and analytic voice to frame different kinds of descriptions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I recognize that I am marked different as a gay man *in* Appalachia, rather than a gay man *of* Appalachia. I stick out. And even if I was *of* Appalachia, I would still have to recognize my privilege as a researcher.

Yet, the inescapability of all of these conditions has perhaps been the primary motivator for my direct involvement as a research object. By recognizing both my limitations and privileges as a researcher and to use those as both methodological tools and an ethical compass, I am able to craft a critical narrative that satisfies both my connections to these social networks and my desire to write a fair story about queer life in Appalachia. I became an active member of these networks to do this. While a quick reading might mistake this to mean that this is not an 'authentic' Appalachian gay/trans social network – it is influenced by my 'outsideness' and my 'urbanness' and is therefore contaminated. My response would be: What is 'Appalachia'? What would 'Appalachian authenticity' look like? What does it mean to call something 'Appalachian'? Where does 'Appalachia' as a set of indentifying practices begin and 'Appalachia' as an analytical apparatus end? Nevertheless, from the outside to the inside, the ability to create a network, however 'hybrid' already defends my larger argument, that queer life is possible in Appalachia. But being a part of that network in relationship to the research that I am laying out here requires that we think through its ethics and those ethics influence that constitution of research methodologies. In the next part, I shall lay out these ethical arguments

Part II: Queer Theory, Ethics and Intimate Politics

Drafting a politics of intimacy through an ethics as method

Because of the political foreclosures that I will be describing in detail in Chapters 4 and 5, I have come to realize that I am allowed to have a political project in my research. I am allowed to speak for those whose voices have been silenced. While this political project is contingent and negotiated with my research kin, friends and allies, I am allowed through the reflexive implication that entangles me into their lives to 'perform myself' (Denzin 2003). And that performance, as I have described above is indelible to reporting on it. The political economy of mutual desires, affects, aspirations, and investments of the population that I am studying is allowed to be so. And I am not merely observing an American subculture in the Enlightenment sense of the 'gaze' (Rose

1993, Cosgrove 1984), but engaging this research group along multiple vectors of political aspirations and kinship making (Povinelli 2006).

However such a revelation, what might be called a 'politics of intimacy' necessarily raises a particular set of questions about ethics and the ethical, and methods and methodologies.⁵ In relation to human subjects research and the population that I am studying, the very formation of a research project is an ethical undertaking (Madison 2005:80-90). It seems to go without saying that methods are inherently ethical. What questions do we ask? How do we ask them? What types of interactions do we have with our participants while collecting data? How are we a part of that data collection? How do we organize, analyze and disseminate our findings? These are questions of method, all with ethical implications. But what if we flip the paradigm (certainly without dismissing its original orientation) and say ethics are inherently methodological? What kinds of questions do we end up with? How do we negotiate an ethical terrain that places our own ethical formations under scrutiny, while investigating other ethical formations? What parts of ourselves do we subvert, highlight, lay exposed in light of the comingling of ethical backgrounds and confounding complexities that studying human subjects place before us? How do we negotiate our emotional lives with the entanglements and attachments of a living research project? These are all questions of ethics that are inherently methodological.

It is in this rational flip of the ethical and the methodological, of ethics and methods, as a means to constitute complex researcher/researched relations, that the queer enters as a technique to explore such assemblages. Every time we engage human subjects in research, we face the values, norms and ethical formations of our participants. This is not to say that the values, norms and ethical formations of our participants are necessarily 'good' or unproblematic (Massey 1994). But, it does mean that the ability to form lines of communication, forums for negotiation, connections of understanding, perspectives on difference, claims for justice, the possibility to create new kinds of kinship and political alliances demand that the researcher can establish trust and common linkages through a complex set of terms, both his/her own and his/her participants'. By taking into account this 'ethics as method', a will to the co-production of knowledge generates

⁵ I am distinguishing method from methodology and ethics from the ethical to nail down a vocabulary and distinguish the two. Methodology and the ethical stand as the set of strategies that define a set of theoretical and material positions from which I am arguing, as well as the approach to which I am queering geographical and human subjects research. Methods and ethics are the deployable tactics of those strategies. Ethical constructions and ethical formations will be mentioned, as necessary, to allude to specific manifestations of ethics; ethical entanglements between the researcher and researched in the former and preexisting ethical positionality in the latter.

an embedded ethical terrain that is innately queer precisely in its vivisection of the researcher/researched relationship, filling the void with blurred boundaries, new ethical constructions, and political potentials.

Why Queer Theory?

The title for this chapter draws heavily on J.K. Gibson-Graham's 1999 piece *Queer(y)ing Capitalism*, in which they make a methodological claim to the fundamental ability of queer theory to make broader interrogations for radical politics and research. The quirky way in which the term 'queer(y)ing' catches the imagination, by deploying a double meaning that folds back on itself, elegantly maneuvers the playfulness with which queer theory destabilizes our social worlds and reinforces the seriousness of such a maneuver. The 'y' in parentheses excavates the inquisitiveness of the 'queer' by showing that 'to queer' (i.e. queering) is equally to adjudicate a query or question. And such queries are not merely questions of self-evident closed-end logics, but questions that fundamentally deterritorialize the function of the question itself, querying not only the nature of the question, but also the contexts, contingencies and contradictions that make the question worth asking in the first place. Through such interrogations, the possibility for alternative social worlds – their ethical constructions, politics and intimacies – materialize out of the destabilized and shifting fractures in dominant discourses.

Queer theory has, since its inception in the late 1980s/early 1990s, stretched the boundaries of sex, sexuality and gender; particularly in the ways these relate to queer bodies and the multiple possibilities in which sexuality and gender are (can be) deployed. Queer theory has revealed how the contingency of the matrix through which sexuality and gender are conjured intensifies at the intersections of competing social worlds. It has done so through the work of scholars such as Teresa de Laurentis (1991, 1990, 1987, 1986) who jokingly coined the term 'queer theory' as the title of a conference she organized in February 1990 at the University of California, Santa Cruz (Halperin 2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, 1993), Judith Butler (2004, 1999[1990], 1993, 1990), David Halperin (2003, 2002, 1995, 1990), Michael Warner (1999, 1993), Leo Bersani (2000a, 2000b, 1995) and others drawing on the 'post' turn in social theory and the social sciences/humanities in the emerging relationships between 'the new feminism' and gay and lesbian studies. Indeed, Larry Knopp notes:

As a project, queer geographies have been deconstructive and critical, and suspicious of certainties, universal truths, and ontological imaginations about the way the world works that are mechanistic or instrumental. Arguably, they are also part of a larger project, shared by some strains of contemporary feminist geography, of critically drawing on humanistic philosophies and epistemologies and redefining human geography in ways that seek to bridge the division between social scientific and other ways of studying human phenomena (Knopp 2007:48-49).

Before we delve into queer theory, let us briefly recognize its limitations. Queer theory is not an uncontested set of analytical orientations. Like other critiques of post-structural theories, queer theory's emphasis on the linguistic assemblages that constitute sexual subjectivity disconnects that subjectivity from the material conditions of life. According to Adam Green, this disconnect 'lapse[s] into a discursively burdened textual idealism that glosses over the institutional character of sexual identity and the shared social roles that sexual actors play' (Green 2002:522). This is a valid critique and highlights the divergence of 'queer studies' from 'gay and lesbian studies' as queer theory emerged in the late 1980s. However, in my estimation, this gulf is beginning to close. For example, the vanguard of queer geographies has opened up new avenues for recognizing the analytical salience of queer theory to describe competing social worlds, while not dismissing the necessity for material readings of their description (see for example Browne, Lim and Brown 2007, Browne and Nash forthcoming). I follow suit with this latter development. For my purposes, I shall concentrate on a working definition of queer theory and come back to its material implications when exploring 'queer ethics' below.

As queer theory has come into its own as a set of academic discourses, its methodological potential for understanding human subjectivity not only through an optic of sexualized/gendered constructions, but also other social formations has become ever more apparent. Recently, a handful of other possibilities for queer theory have emerged within and alongside the realm of gender and sexual minorities (see for example Puar 2007, 2001, Puar, Rushbrook and Schein 2003, Butler 2005, Warner 2002, Gibson-Graham 1999). These possibilities highlight how sex and sexuality are both always present and intensified in socio-sexual assemblages (Puar 2007) and therefore salient to their analysis. In referencing Sedgwick, Gibson-Graham notes that "Breaking apart these associations [that maintain normative understandings] is the theoretical job of 'queering' sexuality and its representations" (1999:81). They then apply this definition to conventional understandings of late capitalism. In this way, the queer is that which disrupts the norm, disarticulates its representations, and finds new, if not shifting and unstable ways, to imagine how they go together.

By highlighting Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'Christmas effect', Gibson-Graham is able to show methodologically how queer theory can/should apply to applications beyond sex and sexuality to interrogate the political, economic and other aspects of social life. For Sedgwick, the 'Christmas effect' (1993:5-9) is the 'depressing' set of circumstances (Gibson-Graham 1999:80) which brings the multiple voices such as the Church, State, markets, media, and so on into a monolithic voice aiming toward the expectation of a similar predictable outcome (in this case Christmas). She likens these predictable outcomes to the predictability that society places on sexuality. In this, a similar constellation of sexual attributes such as biological sex, gender identity, masculinity or femininity, sexual orientation, sexual fantasies, political and/or cultural affiliation align to result in linear, staid understandings of what and how one should be. If you are straight, your sexual determinations are determined by oppositional gender dyads, procreational functions and the like. If you are gay, your sexual determinations are determined by your masculinity or femininity and a sexual desire that resembles oppositional gender dyads (maintaining the masculine/feminine binary), a lack of desire to rear children, and the like. These are the fundamental premises that she criticizes as the delimiting factor(s) of socio-sexual possibilities that, as one of the original scholars of queer theory, she sought to destabilize.

Gibson-Graham takes this premise to open up a queer theory potential for dislocating capitalism as an always already monolithic formation with hegemonic effects:

More generally, Sedgwick's vision calls into question the project of representing societies and economies as hegemonic formations. What if we were to depict social existence *at loose ends with itself*, in Sedgwick's terms, rather than producing social representations in which everything is part of the same complex and, therefore, ultimately 'means the same thing' (e.g. capitalist hegemony)? *What might be the advantages of representing a rich and prolific disarray?* (1999:81, my italics).

Working through Gibson-Graham's use of the 'queer' defines a mission for queer theory that looks past (while not forgetting) sex, sexuality and gender to become a methodological tool that ambivalently accepts and explores the realities and political potentials of a "rich and prolific disarray." By placing a premium on the multiple ways in which the queer brings contingency and possibility to the surface, they are advocating a robust queer theory with political potentials for social and environmental justice. "For queer theorists unwilling to accept that it is a 'heterosexual' world in which queers may gain a toehold but will still be ultimately marginal or minoritised (sic),

various forms of queerness are everywhere to be found. The domain of the ‘normal’ retreats to the social and theoretical horizon” (1999:84).

If by queer, we mean to disrupt, parse out, critically analyze, and fold together new and overlapping intersections on which difference and social justice can occur, we have met the threshold of a new kind of ethics in research. The “various forms of queerness” that exist between the tenuous connections of dominant discourses *is* the potential to radically redirect the trajectories of social and environmental justice and re-craft the ways in which we relate as geographers to our human subjects. If we can reframe the fundamental set of relations that bind the researcher to the researched – cultivate its intimacies – a potential politics arises that brings new kinds of awarenesses and contingencies for geographical research into view. In this way, ethics can be thought of as method; queer ethics as method breaks apart the shell of a certain set of research taboos that limit a researcher’s ability to relate, co-produce knowledge, and indeed embed themselves within the intricate sets of intimacies that human relations produce.

First and foremost, these methodologies are about accepting the inevitable entanglements present in human subjects research. And these entanglements do have intimate bonds that are forged between the researcher and researched that would be present in other forms of social networking. It is being argued here that these methods are slow, built over time, require intimacy, and must be critically ambivalent in their reading(s). By drawing on the theoretical approaches of queer theory, the ability to establish these intimacies sets both the critical stage that I have been arguing for and begins to plot out the “rich and prolific disarray” that Gibson-Graham advocates. These entanglements highlight a multitude of unexplored and unrecognized possibilities for queer theory and queer methodologies, but ones that are nevertheless beginning to emerge (for example, Browne and Nash, forthcoming).

This definition of queer theory and its methodological implications marks out the approach that I am using to delineate a queer ethics as method and to map those ethics onto the political implications of the intimacies produced in research. It should be noted, however that these methodologies and epistemologies for queer geographies in many ways mirror those of contemporary feminist approaches. Speaking on the connections between feminist and queer geographies, Larry Knopp notes:

Arguably, each grew out of a set of social exclusions based on essentialized constructions of gender and sexuality... These constructions were, and largely remain, features of social systems

predicated on hierarchies of difference that also include class, race, ethnicity, physical “ability” and “disability”, and age, inter alia. Hence feminist geographies are products, substantially, of feminist theories and politics of women’s oppression, and of gender, as taken up by geographers, whereas queer geographies are products of queer theories and politics of sexual subjects’ oppression and of sexuality, again as interpreted by geographers (2007:47).

These methodologies are marked as ‘queer’ in this research, not as a means to distance or distinguish them from feminist geographies, but rather to note the political character of sexual politics that constitute the questions and complexion of this research. In this way, as the ethical constructions that I will be talking about play out on the ground, they are intensified in the sexual discourses that circumscribe rural sexual and gender minorities. Let us turn now to how we might use this definition of queer theory and methods to interrogate how they interact with intimacy and inform different forms of research methodologies.

Relating to our participants: action, intimacy and consent

The intimacies of research are an inevitable condition of studying human subjects. I am arguing that these can be deployed methodologically to queer geographical research. A potential for new kinds of knowledges, politics, and social worlds lie in the embedding and activating of the intimacies attached to the researcher/researched relation. A ‘politics of intimacy’ as an outcome and progenitor of research becomes a queer project in its disruption of normative considerations for research relationships stretched in tension between and reinforced through sexual discourses and politics. Challenging the impossible set of interpersonal cleavages that exist in these normative considerations allows for an ethical understanding of the dynamics that occur in human relations to leverage a significant influence, if not driving force, on our methodologies.

The closest to a sustained precedent for a methodological/ethical intervention into the contingent and negotiated constructions of researcher/researched relations falls in line with the work of participatory methodologies. The research of scholars such as Paul Cloke (2002), Rachel Pain (2006, 2004, 2003, 2001) with Peter Francis (2003), and Elizabeth Povinelli (2006)⁶ has developed new kinds of political economies where mutual desires, affects, aspirations, and investments have begun to blur the boundaries between the researcher and the researched. What

⁶ I am referencing Elizabeth Povinelli in this list, not as an explicit contributor to discussions on participatory methods, of which Rachel Pain and Paul Cloke have specifically been a part, but rather as one that implicitly engages participant action in her research that I draw on heavily here in the constitution of an ethics as method and politics of intimacy below.

a queer ethics as method potentially gains from participatory research (PR) and participatory action research (PAR) is how these methods blur the lines between the researcher and the researched – often past recognition. PR and more recently PAR implicate the relationship between the researcher and the researched by deconstructing observatory understandings of research and explicitly deploying an understanding that the research produced is both between and through the researcher and the researched. This means that knowledge produced through research is reflexively dependent on the researcher/researched relationship that fundamentally deterritorializes any aspect that witnesses research as hierarchical (Blake 2007, Bradley 2007, Cahill, Sultana and Pain 2007, Elwood 2007, Pain 2004, 2003, Pain and Francis 2003).

However, while the complexity in the relations constructed as a result of research can be excavated through PR and PAR, the intimacies of those relations still remain largely unexamined (Bondi 2005). An example of these intimacies of researcher/researched relations comes to mind in the research of Gavin Brown. His dissertation research looked at a range of socio-sexual geographies and public sex environments of gay males in London (2008, 2004). In his ‘observant participation’ research – interrogating the negotiations of public sex spaces – he engaged with aspects of gay and queer men’s lives that sought to examine the complexity of queer life beyond mainstream commercial gay ‘scenes.’ Using his preexisting relationships, he acted as an ‘active participant’ in these spaces. In an email Gavin wrote to me on September 10, 2008 to clarify his point on ‘observant participation’ and how he viewed himself as a participant in that role, he wrote:

I was researching... sites (within the area where I lived) where I was already recognised as a participant. This was observant participation not participant observation, in many ways. The ethical perspective I adopted was primarily concerned with acknowledging and respecting the ethical norms of those sites and their users, rather than imposing more established ‘research ethics’ that might have been disruptive to those sites and more threatening and potentially harmful to the other participants in them. This approach highlights the entanglement of those spaces (and my participation in them) with the rest of my life in the neighbourhood at that time – *my choice to prioritise a reflective attention to the quotidian ethics of my relationships with friends, colleagues, neighbours and lovers, over conventional research ethics* (in those circumstances, where the two potentially clache [sic.] or jarred with each other). (my italics)

His role as an actor in this research was not his primary method. But his “reflective attention” to his relationships “with friends, colleagues, neighbours and lovers” begins to delve into the ethics and intimacies that I am describing. What do we learn about social realities when the positionality and performance of the researcher is reflected upon through these intimacies? How do

we better understand ourselves, our desire, our sex and sexualities through research when the researcher is also recognized as a sexual actor within the borders of the researcher/researched relation? While his relationship with these 'research participants' were preexisting, can we think about the multiplicity of intimacies that exist in researcher/researched relations and use them for the production of knowledge?

But intimacy implies some uncomfortable ideas about the nature of research, what it is supposed to do and notions of 'harm' to research subjects. We can see this in the commonly used academic quip, 'going native' when the perceived lines of propriety that distinguish the researcher from the researched are breeched. And this sets in relief at least two concerns. The first questions the validity in reporting the research as empirical, 'honest' and 'objective.' If the researcher is in intimate and perhaps even kin-like relationships, can he/she remain critical? In describing my own justification for doing this research, I have described at length above how an ambivalent analytic helps to monitor this limitation. The second speaks to notions of 'harm' to human subjects – especially underrepresented populations. If a researcher is exploring these intimacies – not merely as a by-product of the relation itself but constitutive of the research – do they dangerously expose these participants? Is there some type of 'cultural contamination' present? In other words, does the introduction of new types of social relations, especially those constituted through research undermine the integrity of a cultural formation? But these assumptions fail to recognize the agency of human subjects. As I argued above, we are not reducible to our struggles and to assume that we are overlooks the complexities of social life.

These complications that give form to these types of constraint orbit liberal notions of consent. Consent becomes a conspicuous villain to the oversight of research ethics that often dismiss or disqualify these intimacies with no empirical proof that these policing strategies actually diminish 'harm' (Mueller 2007: 810). Consent is a seemingly innocuous conceit of post-Enlightenment liberalism. This conceit functions on the premise that there is some discreet autonomous individuality, what David Butz has called "an individuated liberal humanist research subject" (2008). This 'subject' is constructed to be independent of the structures that delineate who has the ability to consent and who does not. Indeed, consent is itself a social process by which social technologies predetermine the moral/ethical compass on which consent is allowed to function (Schaffner 2002, 2005). To say that I consent only means that I have accepted my place within a dominant social structure that will lead me in the directions I am meant to follow. If I fall

outside the margins of 'he who is able to consent', or my consent is somehow crippled because of my position in society – children in many situations, marginalized and underrepresented populations, the elderly and infirm, animals, and so on – my consent no longer matters because my consent is either not mine to give or invariably incapacitated.

This critique of consent and how it has been mapped onto understandings of how researcher/researched relations are constituted raises questions about what consent is and how we give it. What does it mean when we give it? What do we lose when we give it? (Butz 2008). Working through Hester Parr's critique of consent in relation to 'overt' and 'covert' ethnography, Alison Bain and Catherine Nash note, "how the simplistic distinction between covert ethnography as 'bad' because it is non-consensual and overt ethnography as 'good' because it is open and consensual is problematic because it positions these research practices in opposition, when they should be understood as inherently intertwined..." (2006:103). The entanglements constructed through the comingling of ethical formations abrogate the necessity for explicit notions of consent. If we consider consent to be less about a hinge around which ethical constructions pivot and more as a complex set of negotiations that work on and through the bodies that enter into a set of social relations (not limited to research), then the constraints of consent evaporate and the resulting set of relations are open to new possibilities in the production of knowledge, politics and intimacy.

I want to be careful not to imply that political intimacies are the only way to conduct research. I am carving out one niche through a particular experimental methodology that works to illuminate my research. I am not arguing for the dissolution of other quantitative and qualitative methodological forms and I am not arguing that this form that I am advocating is better. I am arguing for a space where this type of intimacy and ethics can comingle with other ways of doing research. And I am arguing for a methodology that has political stakes for activism and social justice. If the argument that the knowledge resulting from research is a production rather than an observation can be defended, then we do not have to stretch far to imagine the political in research. Ruminating on the classical feminist slogan from the 1960s and 70s that the 'personal is political' and its 1980s reframing as the 'political is personal' (Mohanty 1989-90:204), the augmentation toward a politics of intimacy that moves past the site of the individual and toward the constitution of an ethically entangled network of dynamic and negotiated relations does not trail far behind.

The nature of the researcher/researched relationship through the intimacies and ethical constructions of a queered research that I have been working toward can be an avenue for a reimagined political activism. If power and knowledge are indelibly linked through their co-constitutive circulations (Foucault 1980, 1977, 1978), and their political implications for transforming those circulations holds the potential to manumit marginalized and underrepresented groups, then a politics of intimacy may be able to organize these ambitions. If this is the case and it can be accepted that geographers engaging human subjects in research are a part of the intimacies produced at the intersections of researcher/researched relations as a means to leverage social and environmental justice, then what might those ethical constructions look like and how do we come toward them?

Toward a queer ethics for research

I am advocating for a queer ethics as method enacted through the radical notion of a queer attachment to the bonds created through research. This is a formation contingent in its make-up, negotiated in its deployment, and destabilizing in its ability to form new trajectories of social and environmental justice. It is what Norman Denzin (2003) calls an “indigenous research ethic,” deployed from a methodology that he defines as “performative ethics.” “Because it expresses and embodies moral ties to the community, the performative view of meaning serves to legitimate indigenous worldviews. Meaning and resistance are embodied in the act of performance itself” (245). I would argue that this stretches past the narrowness of the term ‘indigenous’ to expand to all social science research that burdens itself with the marginalized and excluded, with social and environmental justice. Yet the ethical imperative tethers us to our participants through the intimacies produced in research in a way that stretches past binomial interpretations and obliterates the fundamental definition of researcher/researched, transforming it into something unnamable and uniquely special for which researcher/researched can only stand in as a phantom bookmark.

It is not so easy, however, to just say that as researchers we can merely submit or ‘play along’ with our research participants as if our own ethical formations, social anxieties, and personal reservations have no say in what we do and how we do it. Alison Bain and Catherine Nash (2006) have contemplated this complexity in relating to their research subjects at a “queer bathhouse event” in Toronto, Canada. The ‘Pussy Palace’ was designed as a women’s only space to allow for

'uninhibited' sexual exploration. In their essay on the embodiment of the researcher as a "contested site of knowledge production," they note:

Several informants asked us directly whether we had participated in any of the sexual activities that had been planned by the organizers... The authoritative queer gaze of several of the organizers whom we had interviewed identified us as researchers, observers and outsiders... Did the organizers interpret our bodies as researchers as unruly and disruptive bodies because of all of our apparent inhibitions and reservations? (104).

In this instance of the complexity of the relationship between the researcher and researched, the cultivation of this particular mode of knowledge production is encumbered by a sense of reservation on the one side and skepticism on the other. Bain and Nash's vexation and hesitation to 'perform' as a participant in this sex space (even while there seems to have been expectation that they should) alludes to the tightrope that researchers walk in relation to their privilege as researchers. In performing as active participants in 'research space,' what lines must be drawn to avoid exploitation? While there is no truly unencumbered research relationship – these negotiations cannot operate outside the realm of the personal and are in a multifaceted state of slippages, evolutions and comfortabilities.

The affective impacts of research on the researcher are scantily talked about (Bondi 2005:231). There is no denying that when research is done, the researcher enters into a particular relationship with the researched and that relationship evokes emotional responses. There is a long history (or perhaps mythology), as Liz Bondi points out, of "partitioning emotion and research" that is beginning to come under scrutiny. The emotive bonds and affective ties that research produces can no longer be overlooked. We are affected by our research and the participants we research are affected by us. This burgeoning discussion of a dynamic/entangled researcher/researched relationship has to come to bear on how we constitute ethics to understand the deeply embedded nuances and complexities that are produced as a result of research and what those mean. Obligation to our participants mapped through a certain set of attachments that result from engaging in human subjects research – different forms of intimacy with them – serves to produce a kind of kinship (Povinelli 2006) that cannot be ignored.

To examine these kinship making potentials and their materialities as they help to inform ethics and intimacies in these methods, let us return to Elizabeth Povinelli's use of 'carnality.' In *The Empire of Love* (2006), Povinelli wages a critique against 'Western' notions of the immutability

of 'love' in contradistinction to other (illiberal) forms of intimacy. In this critique, she sketches out a notion of kinship that applies to how she has become entangled with an aboriginal tribe in Belyuen, Australia over the past 20 years through the course of her research and her more recent affiliation with the queer kinship making of radical faeries in the United States.⁷ She approaches each differently in how they constitute kinship making and what that means for inclusion to kinship ties. Exemplifying how these exsanguinated forms of kinship produce particular kinds of obligation for these two very different groups to whom she is affiliated result in a particular set of obligatory attachments, intimacies and ethical imperatives. Speaking on how Elizabeth Wilson elaborates on Freud and 'obligation', she notes:

What Wilson suggests, and what is conceptually useful here, is that Freud is attempting to sketch a system of governance in which the mutual constitution of soma and psyche, flesh and discourse, are no longer captured by the usual mechanics of 'cause and effect, origin and derivation.' They are instead the literal material of each other, different from each other but mutually obliged rather than caused or affected, *vulnerable to* rather than *subject of* (Povinelli 2006:9 italics in original).

This passage speaks primarily to the site of the body constituted through an irreducible entanglement of flesh and discourse. However, we can read this to suggest that as the researcher/researched relationship develops through discourses that constitute the flesh, the dynamics of that constitution simultaneously materialize discourse into a mutually entangled vulnerability of bodies engaged in intimate interactions. It is in this mutually entangled vulnerability that the emergence of intimacies craft new ethical constructions that transform and shape new social worlds.

Thinking through Povinelli's use of the carnal here does two things: First, it helps to assuage the problem of textual idealism surrounding queer theory that I alluded to above by drawing the real and imagined about bodies back together. Second, in that materiality, an intimacy emerges that I am arguing outlines a productive politics for queer research. In this, intimacy and ethics begin to merge through the mutual entanglements that are embodied in these materialities. And these material intimacies and ethics constitute the borders of new kinds of geographies –

⁷ I am also tethered to the kinship ties and intimacies of the radical faeries in Tennessee. This connection primarily derives out of the personal attachments to this group of queer bodies where diverging and diverse forms of sexual citizenship are practiced and celebrated. The radical faeries are not a movement *per se*, but rather, as Povinelli notes, "a set of allegiances to a moving and contested set of qualities and stances toward normative masculinity and sociality" (23). While I do not draw on them directly as participants in this research, it should be noted that as a set of queer spaces and assemblages, they do occur in the region I am studying and further disrupt the notion of isolation and political impotency in relation to rural sexual and gender minorities.

geographies of possibility are formed at the intersections of competing social worlds. These geographies can comply with, challenge or transform the liberal ether in which they are found and made. As I stated in Chapter 2, carnality arises as an evolving set of questions for Povinelli that attempt to attend to the contradictions that occur at the intersections of liberal governance and the problems of different kinds of social worlds and intimacy. What becomes salient in her critique is that in liberalism's seeming ubiquity, there *is* space to challenge its structures and limitations, while (and perhaps by) exacting alternative forms of intimacy and ethics.

Her critique of liberal governmentality adds to and illuminates the complexities of these materialities as we develop an ethics as method for queering geographical research. This critique of liberalism highlights how different forms of exceptionalism privilege particular intimate formations as 'legitimate' through the western fantasy of 'True' love while excluding others (175-236). If we can take this critique as an entry point into exacting and advocating for new forms *of* intimacy, a space begins to emerge to elucidate new kinds of political voices and interventions that destabilize dominant discourses *on* intimacy. By explicating the complexities of bodily intimacies and interactions through the material/rhetorical reality of the flesh, conventional mythologies of discretion for research relationships are cracked open and laid bare to be filled with a new kind of research relationship – one reliant upon the intimacies and ethical constructions of the researcher and the researched. An ethics as method that I have been tracing here simultaneously constitutes and strengthens these political intimacies while rendering new kinds of ethical and intimate relationships.

Part III: Techniques for a Politics of Intimacy

Thus far I have outlined a conceptual argument for emergent forms of research relations through the bonds of intimacy and the political spaces those produce. I have urged that these politics of intimacy are deployed by connections and overlaps between and across the ethical formations of the researcher and the researched. In so doing, I have made the claim that ethics should be thought of methodologically to cultivate the intimacies created through these entanglements. In my discussion on difference in the previous chapter, I alluded to how the exception sets the rule in Appalachia as much as it does anywhere else. But because my body *is* marked as a research instrument, I am compelled to lay out some ground rules for its 'reading'. In this final part, I wish to discuss how the entanglements that are emerging with my own research

kin, friends, and allies are beginning to form in Eastern Kentucky. To do this, I first take a look at the data instruments that I use in this dissertation and how they are being analyzed. I then begin to describe the primary relationships that I have begun to foster in Eastern Kentucky that constitute my research kin, friends and allies.

Body management and critical foundations: autobiography, autoethnography and discourse analysis

What does it mean to be an object of one's own research? And how does autobiography factor? There are certainly valid claims for autoethnography (even one that debatably states that autoethnography is always already 'queer' (Jones and Adams, forthcoming)). But when does autoethnography turn into autobiography? Is there a difference? Is autobiography in social science research desirable? How does autobiography move in and out of autoethnography? How does autoethnography move in and out of autobiography? Autobiography does seem to encompass one person and their life stories, but aren't those lives also situated in social contexts with people, places and events? Autoethnography attempts to position the body of the researcher in the act of research to describe social contexts, but isn't positioning that body in a social context where lives are negotiated and managed already autobiographical? For my part, this research draws heavily on both autobiography and autoethnography.

There is a story to tell about a geography that I am helping to produce even while I am in the midst of describing it. I came to this research for personal reasons. I had grown dissatisfied with the 'mainstreaming' of gay culture and its submission to the consumption practices of late capitalism (tracked through these pages as the neoliberal gay project). I had grown weary of the aesthetic policing of gay life so that its successful iterations all began to blur into one indeterminate thing while paradoxically reifying the cleavages between its categories (G – L – B – T). This certainly has to do with the people with whom and the places where I hung out, as well as my own tastes, styles and perceptions. Nonetheless, I continue to be interested in looking at what other forms of queer life are out there and what those might look like. I became interested in studying sexual and gender minorities in rural and small town Appalachia because it had never been done before. Or at least the research that has begun to surface in the past few years (Gray 2009, Massey 2007, Mann 2005) has been limited and understudied. I chose this research because it is part of a personal quest to explore as many possibilities of queer life that I can. And I have become

endeared to my research kin, friends, and allies in Eastern Kentucky. And while these relationships are still developing they are nevertheless part of my biography, and my biography helps to script how these interactions are unfolding.

At the same time, this *is* autoethnography. I am not speaking only for myself. And I am neither the only character in these stories nor their only focus. I am enmeshed in multiple networks that connect through and across my body. And these networks have many different branches, contexts and contingencies. Some touch, others do not, some are made aware to others by describing parts of my research. I have friends and colleagues in Lexington, Kentucky, who have come there from different parts of Eastern Kentucky. I have a more research, activist oriented network of friends and allies between and in Whitesburg and Hazard, Kentucky. I have research kin in Harlan, Kentucky. I have my radical faerie friends and family in Central Tennessee. These are friends, kin, and confidantes. They are as important to the complexion of the stories and emerging geographies laid out here as any story I tell about myself. Lines may blur, but they do not altogether vanish. While I have become quite close with the folk that I came across in my encounters, I also have many political and academic ambitions. I am attempting to maintain the integrity of the research while cultivating the fidelity of my connections with it. I am now a part of these actors' lives, and they are now a part of mine.

Autobiography and autoethnography seem to be two sides of the same coin. Both are stories told from a self, positioned in social relations. Indeed, Deirdre McKay has noted, "Personal and autobiographical responses to ethnographic descriptions can also be described as autoethnographic" (2002:195). I want to maintain the distinction however, as I am drawing on a particular argument that offers new insight into the potentials of autoethnographic methodologies. Mary Louis Pratt is one of the first scholars to use autoethnography that she described as "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms" (1992:7, italics in original). She goes on to describe these 18th century colonial technologies of speech by the colonized as a means by which to create a dialogue between controlled territories and the metropole. She explains that these are not 'authentic' voices in the sense that we would think of 'pure' culture. Rather, they were provocative strategies to both collaborate with the conqueror and appropriate the terms of conquest.

David Butz and Kathryn Besio have drawn on this historical intentionality to expand the implications for Pratt's description of autoethnography for applications in contemporary research.

They note that there are two different understandings of autoethnography. The first and more common understanding is that which places the researcher as a central actor in the conduct of research, explicitly drawing on his/her “positionality, involvement and experience.” Rather, Butz and Besio opt to concentrate on another aspect of autoethnography, one less recognized and closer to Pratt’s definition:

Autoethnography is not something researchers do, but something their research subjects do that they may want to study. It is an intentional process leading to an intentional representation, which may of course, have unintended effects. The intent is to strategically alter the way an audience of dominant outsiders understands the subordinate group, and beyond that, to push back to some extent against the shove of domination. Thus, it has strategic ambitions beyond simple translation. It is an inseparable mix of accommodation (Butz and Besio 2004:353).

In this way, autoethnography is not so much about the researcher and unresolved angst and tensions between researcher/researched relations but about the means by which marginalized groups craft their own voices in counter-distinction to the dominant groups that silence them. In this way, autoethnography is more concerned with lost voices and how their iterations strike political and life strategies on the fringe.

Yet in the methodologies and ethical strategies that I have been alluding to throughout this chapter, I have maintained as a central component of this research that I am not merely an interpreter, but one of its central actors. For this, I want to preserve my distinction as a research object and my role in the geography about which I speak through autobiography. McKay has noted that “identifying a researcher’s autobiography as ‘data’ produces an account of the research that contextualizes research more broadly. Yet, where researchers offer autobiographical detail in their writing, but separate their stories from those of their respondents, the terms of the exchange remain outside the analysis” (2002:194). To heed her warning, I am applying autobiography to Norman Denzin’s notion of performance ethnography: “Performance approaches to knowing insist on immediacy and involvement. They consist of partial, plural, incomplete, and contingent understandings, not analytic distance of detachment, the hallmarks of the textual and positivist paradigms” (2003:8).

In this way, my autobiographical accounts are constantly intersecting with autoethnographical accounts. The way I am using it, autoethnography helps us to excavate missing bodies, voices, and spaces, and to position them in contradistinction to the dominant discourses that foreclose on their possibilities. Autobiography, as a description of my role in these

challenges, refers to my attachment to the people and places that have become endeared to me. There is nevertheless a danger that should be evident throughout these discussions wherein emotional connections are allowed to overlap with analytical and political ambitions. A delicate balance must be struck and maintained. My personal reasons for doing this research are about bringing to light the means by which rural gay/trans folk are circumscribed by the discourses and the subsequent practices of the neoliberal gay project. It is my ambition to make initial stabs at dismantling the conditions set by the neoliberal gay project and to imagine the possibilities that exist outside of it.

According to Gillian Rose: “Doing a discourse analysis assumes that you are concerned with the discursive production of some kind of authoritative account – and perhaps too about how that account was or is contested – and with the social practices both in which that production is embedded and which it itself produces” (2001:142). Discourse analysis does help us to manage some of these problems between the blurring of autoethnography and autobiography. It allows the opportunity to read my body as a script, discursively formed in the relations of my research kin, friends and allies. My body is being (re)shaped by the transformations of this research. And this process is being interpreted in a manner that does not conflate my body and its relationship to this particular rural queer geography while neither proscribing what rural queer geographies are. In this way, I attempt to avoid idealizing my body, while nevertheless maintaining rigorous analysis of its readings. I lay out examples of personal experiences and stories told to me during my time in Eastern Kentucky and contextualize them both in my relationship to them and in the analytics that I am developing here.

But in light of the larger constellations of discourses, images and discursive formations that fall under the critique of this dissertation, I shall also use discourse analysis as the fundamental function of an ambivalent analytic to buttress the critical stage I am attempting to craft. This is accomplished in a number of ways: 1) I set the theoretical conditions for studying rural sexual and gender minorities. 2) I analyze existing texts, art and film to reveal the exterior representations of rural queer life and the political foreclosures those create. 3) I question the claims on both sides, queer theory and gay and lesbian studies – identity is both unfixed and materially defined. 4) I look to the possibilities of rural queer geographies for radically transforming approaches to queer history, geography, identity and culture. 5) In the potentials of these transformations, I make broader claims for political change and redirection through an intimate politics of ally development

and responsibility. It becomes my task then to interrogate and suggest changes in the divisiveness of identity politics without evacuating the need for identity in politics.

Research participants or kin? Kindred relations and a politics of the intimate

Recognizing that I am an active participant in this rural queer geography, my sexuality – being a gay man from suburban Ohio and living a mostly metropolitan life – is indelibly mapped onto this research. Not forgetting my privileges as a researcher, being open and candid about my sexuality, casting a critical eye on metropolitan discourses on rural queer sex/life/politics, I have been able to accomplish a number of things. These include: 1) positioning myself as a research object, 2) recognizing how I am marked ‘different’ from other sexual minorities in the region, 3) creating access points through other sexual minorities to negotiate the conversations between myself and the rural gay/trans/allied folk that I have come to rely on in conducting and reporting this research, and 4) carving out a space for an ‘ambivalent analytic’ when researching sexual and gender minority folk in the region that does not seek to reduce, conflate, or determine what it means to be queer in the country and the kinds of possibilities that opens up.

Through these practices, I have begun to develop relationships in different parts of Eastern Kentucky and throughout the region that range from kinship making and familial intimacies to allied friendship and political advocacy. I am defining kinship as a network of intimacy and care with recognized and obligated connections to its participants. While the friends and political allies that I have made often share many of the same characteristics, the primary distinction is in the recognition itself. In Harlan, some of the relationships that I have developed have long lasting implications for caring for one another across time and space. In this network, I have been recognized as a kinsperson – I have been called ‘family’ by them. By becoming a member of this family network, I enjoy its benefits and protections. Kinship is an important mode of cultural production in Appalachia that I will argue is in many ways ‘queer.’ I argue that as a ‘social technology’ kinship guides the means by which social relations are cast in productive and transformational ways in Appalachia, even while there are still problematic attributes of patriarchy still attached to its deployment. I will come back to ‘kinship’ and what Kath Weston calls ‘families we choose’ in detail in Chapter 6.

The stories that animate this research come from a number of sites, scales, and intersections. I draw on my research kin in Harlan County, Kentucky, to highlight how intimacy is

attached to place making. I draw on stories told to me by friends throughout the region to bracket and analyze the spatiality of homophobia in Appalachia. I draw on stories from and with my political allies in Whitesburg, Kentucky, to outline differing forms of rural queer and contested social spaces. I draw on friends and colleagues in Lexington, Kentucky (originally from different parts of Appalachia) to expose the contradictions that constitute the metropolitan gay circumscription of rural queer life. Parallel with this, I also use different media representations of the rural and rural queer life and how they aid in these circumscriptions.

I came into these relations through differing means, as well as different types of engagements and emotional connections. I want to highlight two of these. First, I want to lay out my relationship to Harlan County and the kinship connections that I have begun to form there. Second, I want to describe my relationship to Whitesburg, Kentucky and the political and advocacy research (both present and future) that is emerging from there, specifically what has come to be referred to as the *Gay Bar Project*. These two sites are the ones that I am most connected to in this research. I have also formed other relationships in differing capacities to the queer sex/life/politics of the region. Some of these include my Lexington colleagues and friends, my connections to the radical faeries in rural Central Tennessee, and ongoing academic and political social networking in the region with other scholars engaging Appalachian sexual and gender minorities. However, Harlan and Whitesburg represent the two primary nodes for these stories. But they also constitute two different types of relations.

It should be noted that there are telling differences between Harlan and Whitesburg. These differences do inform differences in my relationships to these places and associated actors. One aspect of this involves Harlan County being a 'dry' county while Letcher County is a 'moist' county (there are bars but no retail sale of liquor). This lends itself to the emergence of a very different set of social spaces. For instance, in Harlan, shared spaces are often much more conservative than in Whitesburg and often (but not always) they are religious in their makeup. Harlan does have a small youth artist scene and for a while they had a public space called the 'Artist Attic'⁸ located on the top floor of the old courthouse building, downtown. Whitesburg, on the other hand, certainly has its religious organizations, events and social spaces, but the presence of Appalshop (it seems) has led to a different kind of self-awareness about being in and of Appalachia that scripts a sense of

⁸ When I first moved to Harlan, the Artist Attic was closed for renovations. It briefly reopened, but the couple that ran it were in the process of moving out of Harlan. I do not know if it is still operating.

pride about cultural achievement and performance. Again, this is also present in Harlan, marked by different parades, festivals and events, but it doesn't seem to have the same intensity of organization and presence.

While this contributes to the different kinds of relations I have with and in these sites, I want to lay out here a central 'cast of characters' for each. I will limit these lists to the actors that have the most critical impact on my connections to kinship and allied relations. A more extensive list of my research participants is available in Appendix I. In Harlan, I have a burgeoning family that can be analytically described through the ways in which kinship works as a social technology in Appalachia (Billings and Blee 2000:159) and what Kath Weston calls 'families we choose' (1991). I shall come back to explore these concepts in Chapter 6. In Whitesburg, I have close friendships that have developed out of similar political sensibilities and ambitions for both queer social justice and other forms of social and environmental justice germane to the region. This is particularly present in one relationship that I have developed around a shared research interest in the concept 'gay bar' in rural (and urban) social spaces for Appalachian gay/trans folk.

Harlan Connections

My connections to Harlan have been largely crafted through Andrew. There are other friendships that I have made in Harlan on my own; however the ones that I now consider to be my family were made through his introductions. The people that I consider family are on a short list that doesn't actually include Andrew. I lived in Harlan for nine months between July 2008 and April 2009 – Andrew was my boyfriend between March 2008 and August 2008. I met him over the course of preliminary research. A friend of mine from Richmond, Kentucky, told me I should look Andrew up online because he lived in Eastern Kentucky and thought he would be good to talk to about my research. After a few conversations online, we switched over to the telephone and spoke on and off for a year. We fell out of touch for a number of months and when we started talking again a flirtation crept in that lead to our first date on February 29, 2008. We met, liked each other and started dating. We stayed together for six months (four while I was still living in Lexington and two after I had moved to Harlan). It was not a pleasant break-up, but the core set of friends that he initially put me on to have become part of my family and I, theirs:

- **Brent** was the first friend that Andrew introduced me to. I met him with his partner at the time at Southeast Community and Technical College in Cumberland (Harlan County),

Kentucky. We have remained good friends throughout. He was my confidante after Andrew and I split up. He would come over to my apartment and we would sit and talk about things. He was also having problems with his partner at the time, so we both became each other's relationship sounding boards. He always made sure that I knew he considered me family and I did the same.

- **Robyn** is my hair stylist, friend, gossip buddy and confidante. Andrew introduced me to him during one of my initial trips to the area. He and his business partner own a hair salon on the outskirts of town. It is a two story building; they rent the ground floor to a gym. The front of the second floor is the salon and in the back is a two bedroom apartment that Robyn lives in. Robyn is a nurturing soul that has deep roots in the community. Robyn also has a quick sharp wit and he is not afraid to discuss 'gay issues' with anyone that comes to his salon. But then, most of those that come to his salon expect it. Robyn is often considered by many to be a mentoring, pseudo-parental figure to many of the youth (gay and straight) about town. I have become closest to him and the core family members that I am attached to in Harlan are Robyn, Diane and George.
- **Diane and George** are a married bisexual couple with a two and a half year old son. Diane was in a relationship with a woman when they met, but they fell in love, got married and maintain their bisexual identities. Robyn has a long familial history with Diane and George even though they are not 'blood related.' Andrew introduced me to Diane when I was looking for a place to live. Diane is an office assistant in the finance lending company that my landlord owns on the first floor of the building that I lived in. George studies critical Biblical scholarship and they are both active members of their church. On a recent trip to Harlan, George dubbed me with my new 'diva' name: Mizz Detamore (he likes my last name). When I lived in Harlan, the three of us (and others) would go on weekend trips to Johnson City to the gay bar there. When Andrew and I broke up, Diane told me that the best thing he ever gave her was me.
- **Kevin** is Diane's brother. He is a precocious straight kid of 19. When we would travel down to Johnson City, Tennessee, to go to the gay dance club, he liked to come with us. One of his closest friends from high school often does drag there. Kevin and I became smoking buddies when we were out. He seemed to idolize me and we always had fun conversations. He is a lot like a little brother to me.

Whitesburg Connections

I came to meet Elisa through a colleague of mine in Lexington. Elisa and I both have similar interests in looking at issues related to sexual and gender minorities in the region. I have become close friends with her and her husband, James. They are both allied confidantes. Elisa is an activist and organizer for a number of committees, boards and nonprofit organizations in Eastern Kentucky and Tennessee. In the process of getting to know Elisa and James, I have been to a number of social gatherings that they have had. However, I don't have as deep of a connection to Whitesburg as I do to Harlan. I mention Elisa because of her presence in this research. There are a number of stories presented here that have either been conversations I have had with her, social experiences or both. She *has* introduced me to a number of friends that come into relief in these stories, but my friendship and working relationship with her is my primary connection to Whitesburg.

Elisa and I have been in different discussions about research and art-activism projects for queer life and visibility in Eastern Kentucky. Most notably, we have been in conversations about developing a project documenting rural queer social space through the concept 'gay bar' and what we're calling 'queer safe zones.' The Gay Bar Project endeavors to examine and document through photography, oral histories and geographical context the dynamics and complexities of the concept 'gay bar' in rural and small town Central Appalachia. Recognizing that sexual and gender identity as a complex set of social negotiations, we are interested in examining different types of 'acceptance' and different levels of 'visibility' in different types of social spaces. We plan to look at the confluence and reciprocal relationship between urban 'out' spaces that provide open venues for sexual minority expression, and rural/small town 'negotiated' spaces that operate through rural identifications and sensibilities – different kinds of socio-sexual expressions at the intersection of 'straight' and 'queer' social worlds. We hope to paint a portrait of how rural/small town sexual and gender minorities in Central Appalachia make use of both of these spatial typologies to satisfy the multiple aspects of queer identity for rural folk. An example, or 'experiment' as we called it at the time, will be explored at the end of Chapter 6

These connections across Harlan and Whitesburg set the stage for this research. They constitute one particular Appalachian queer geography of which I am the central nodal point. By concentrating on the development of these relationships and what they have taught me about rural

queer life – its visibilities and potentials – the possibility for other of Appalachian queer geographies is made plain. There are other actors at play (such as those in Lexington, Kentucky) and they do come in and out of these stories. But these primary connections in Harlan and Whitesburg establish the networks through which these other actors come into focus. Throughout, I will be drawing on stories and conversations that came about while negotiating and situating myself in these social relations. The examples that I will be drawing on bring to light the arguments that I am making. There are missing and unfinished stories in progress that are not present. These stories are prescient to other relevant topics in this research, such as the impact of the internet on transforming queer social geographies in Eastern Kentucky. But for the purposes of this dissertation they are currently theoretically underdeveloped and unnecessary to fulfill its arguments. I will lay some of these out in Chapter 7 for future research.

Chapter 4: Representing Rural Erotica: Hillbillies, Cowboys, and Other Queer Untouchables

Oh for God sake, a hillbilly has his way with one fat guy in Deliverance and suddenly people think that's all hillbillies do.

– Cletus Delroy Spuckler,
The Simpsons

Nothing, apparently, unsettles metropolitan gay men more than the sight of “white trash” boys cloaked in Confederate flags.

– Scott Herring,
Caravaggio's Rednecks

There are gay people in Eastern Kentucky?

The titular Bar Complex, noted for its three bars, the Gilded Cage show room, Johnny Angel Discotheque, and the Living Room Lounge, is a gay bar with a long history in downtown Lexington, Kentucky.¹ On no particular Saturday night in 2007, I was there with my former roommate and close friend, Wade on a usual night out. As we were socializing in the Living Room Lounge, we met a guy visiting from out of town. After introducing ourselves, we negotiated the conversation with the routine pleasantries of where one is from. He revealed that he was from Atlanta, I shared that I originally came from Ohio, and Wade revealed that he was from Magoffin County, in Eastern Kentucky. He looked at Wade and said, “I’m sorry, but you’re cute, at least you made it out alive!” The conversation quickly devolved into seemingly innocuous pot-shots at my roommate’s expense about incest and bestiality, toothless meth-addicts and illiteracy, and all of the uniformed, despicable ways that Appalachian folk are usually represented euphemized in his sentiment, “you’re cute, good thing you got out!”

My roommate kept his composure the best he could (primarily by biting his tongue and swaying ever so imperceptibly back and forth). I did my best to defend Eastern Kentucky folk, describing how it is part of my research to study the nuances and contingencies with which sexual and gender minorities in the region negotiate and produce spaces in these rural places. I was predictably welcomed with the ‘Oh, really? There are gay people in Eastern Kentucky?’ type comments that I usually receive when describing what I study as a critical human geographer.

¹ Jeff Jones lays out a comprehensive historical timeline of the Bar Complex, also known as ‘the Bar’ and sometimes referred to as the ‘Cha-Cha Palace’ by older patrons in appendix 4 of his dissertation on the histories and geographies of gay life in Lexington, Kentucky between 1930 and 1999 (2001:212-216). The ‘Gilded Cage’, ‘Living Room Lounge’ and ‘Jonny Angels’ are anamnestic remnants of a long history of changing names, ownership and useages of the two conjoined buildings at 224 and 226 East Main Street in downtown Lexington that slowly began to consolidate into a distinctly ‘gay space’ around 1963 that would come to be known as the Bar Complex.

Later on, after we had left and were walking back to our apartment, Wade relayed to me how angry he was about the way his home, and indeed, he himself was being defamed to his face.

This was the first time that I had witnessed first-hand the ways in which gay men from Appalachia, now in the city, must simultaneously contend with their gay identities and the conflicts posed by their rural identities. Another friend of mine, Jason from Pikeville, Kentucky has also noted to me how when people find out about where he is from he must negotiate a set of interpersonal discourses that constitute him as Other within the 'queer spaces' that he has come to enjoy as a gay man in Lexington.² And disclosure becomes a constituent element of this negotiation. Gay men from Appalachia often find that there seems to be an expectation in these encounters that you 'ought to be ashamed' of being from the mountains. In this way, there is an active expectation that the Appalachian queer should willingly participate in, without insult, their own erasure.

In most ways, Wade conforms to the consumption standards of urban gay men. Because he is considered 'cute' and he is still relatively young, he has been able to 'pass' as a 'proper' gay man in Lexington queer space and has never had to explicitly display his home-place (or 'Appalachianess') to other gay folk on a regular basis. So, for him, the encounter at the Bar was more than disparaging his home; it was a threat that brought into question his ability to continue passing. Wade *is* 'out' to his family in Magoffin County, and while his relationship with his mother has had tense moments around his sexuality, he remains very close with his mother. Nevertheless, 'Appalachianess' (marked as hillbilly and backward) is not something that he identifies with and therefore it becomes a site of contention for him when he is cast in relief to negative assumptions about Appalachia. He became subject of discrimination and humiliation at the site of disclosure, but it is a site that is usually kept well hidden for him.

Conversely, Jason tries to actively occupy his Appalachianess in these encounters. The way he describes the process by which he is looked down upon for being Appalachian can be thought of as complex, shifting and incomplete. While he openly bares his Appalachianess in these situations (often as much for his amusement at people's reaction to him in gay space as it is a way to position himself strategically to defend Appalachian space), some of these reactions can be uncomfortable and silent, and some can even be (seemingly) hostile. He has noted that in many

² He has also noted to me that even while Lexington is not in a part of Kentucky that would be considered Appalachia, he considers Lexington to be an Appalachian city in that he always seems to meet many gay men in Lexington that are also from Eastern Kentucky (or other parts of Appalachia).

of these cases, for him, because he is a graduate student studying 19th century male homosexuality and prostitution in Britain – because he has moved away from Pike County and in many ways he is a cosmopolite – he does not always, necessarily feel a total rejection in these encounters. But the limited acceptance that he sometimes experiences as a perceived result of academic achievements is always taken ‘with a grain of salt.’

Erasing bodies: defining the problem

What is at stake in these encounters is the erasure of bodies (Casper and Moore 2009). And it is not simply the bodies of those rural queer folk that come to the city from the country – but also the effects that the (mis)appropriations and contortions of rural (gay) life have on rural gay folk who stay in the country. Thus, Natalie Oswin has argued that “stereotypes inevitably do so much more than we think they do [which ultimately demands] that we take a more ambivalent approach to queer geographies of normalization” (2004:81). In this ambivalence, a critical space for analysis can be crafted that holds the multiple marginalities of sexual and gender minorities up against and in constant negotiation with the exclusions drawn through the normalization of a ‘complicit queer’ (Ibid.) politic. Maintaining ambivalence about these ‘normalization’ practices allows us to be critical of the processes that seek to bind the cultural representations of queer life in particular ways, especially around queer consumption and its practices (Hennesey 1994/95), without foreclosing the multiplicity of possibilities for queer life, which do indeed include rural to urban queer migration.

Regardless of the effects (and violence) located at the individual sites of rural discrimination against Appalachian sexual and gender minorities, the stereotype itself mobilizes a whole complex of exclusions, erasures and foreclosures, both within rural Appalachia and in the cities to which many Appalachian sexual and gender minorities migrate. The underlying source of this urban hostility toward the ‘country queer’ (Bell and Valentine 1995) seems to stem from an internalized sense of fear that emerges around popular images of the rural and how that is perceived to threaten gay life (Herring 2006). Movies and television, jokes and novelty toys, all render rural places as something Other, something not right, something savage, naïve or both (Massey 2007). And in the representation of that savage naivety are the makings of an interpolated homophobia that creates exclusions and erasures of the country queer body. And it is not merely a homophobia that comes to represent these exclusions, but a homophobia that creates the

conditions for this kind of homophobia to occur.³ On the one hand, there is a perceived homophobia about Appalachia that casts it as immutable and monolithic. On the other hand, by making the country queer accountable for this perceived homophobia perpetuates another homophobia, one interior to the mainstream gay community itself that is attached to those sexual and gender minorities that are either from or remain in the country.

This practice of perceiving the rural as evil has many effects in both the urban and the rural that limit the full range of possibilities for sexual and gender minority experience in at least five ways that this research can account for. 1) It is an Orientalization of the rural that perpetuates a disdain for rural places, allowing urban sexual and gender minorities to continue to look down on those who come from the country. 2) By emphasizing rural homophobia to the point of hyperbole, it deemphasizes the ways that homophobia still operates in the city. 3) Through a very limited set of definitions of how one can be gay (implying that being gay involves living in or moving to the city), it misinterprets and misrepresents what it is actually like to be a sexual and gender minority in the country. 4) By rendering rural gay life completely other or invisible, these discourses shut down the possibility for recognition of gay rural strengths and struggles. 5) Finally, through all of this marginalization of the rural as a place where gay ‘can’t happen’, the voices of sexual minorities are silenced.

The denial of rural gay folk has a double-sided effect. Obviously and immediately, we can recognize the material exclusions that are emblematic of the encounters with me and Wade, as well as the experiences of Jason. This is an on-site denial, one bound up with the materiality of the event of being/becoming excluded. The less readily perceivable denial is a denial by proxy. It is a denial that fundamentally disqualifies rural places as sites for legitimate queer life. In this way, the urban monopoly on gay sex/life/politics and the spaces those produce limit the political voices and claims to social justice of rural gay/trans folk. If the rural is not a place where gay can happen, then it need not be a front on which to argue a political position on sexual and gender minority issues. In this way, I seek to challenge Bernadette Barton’s (2009) contribution on the “Toxic Closet” that equates being gay in this nebulous thing called the “Bible Belt” with a horrific and unabashedly traumatic set of experiences that seem to have no vanishing point. By casting *all* coming out

³ I will be using homophobia in this chapter to mark a particular type of rural queer exclusion. *This* ‘homophobia’ that I shall be talking about throughout this chapter will be more related to the internal politics and tensions in mainstream gay life. The terrain on which this homophobia creates the conditions *for* homophobia will be further interrogated in depth in the next chapter for its implications in spatializing homophobic practices, or what I will call the ‘homophobias of circumscription.’

experiences within this stymied framework, urban gay culture's already negative predispositions on the rural become reified, while further distancing the country queer from social justice.

In this sense, the urban monopoly on gay sex/life/politics, reinforced through a sense of fear and loathing of the rural, enacts a void, a no-man's land, a non-place where the inhabitants are untouchable. This is in effect an erasure of the body. The stories that open this chapter set the broader socio-political field on which this dissertation is being written. The stated goal of this research is to carve out a space, both politically and academically, in which research and advocacy on rural Appalachian sexual and gender minorities can occur. Before we can attempt to muster an argument for the possibility for gay life to exist in Appalachia and in rural places more broadly, we must first interrogate its foreclosures. This chapter establishes a link between the visual representations of Appalachian sexualities and the political foreclosures that result from these representations and how they affect rural gay/trans folk. Starting in the city is not about reinscribing and privileging metropolitan gay life, but rather to trace how the biases against rural queer life manifest in the city and how those are translated into foreclosures in the country.

This chapter will be divided into three parts to organize the arguments that highlight these bodily erasures. In the first of these, I will attempt to construct a critical analytic drawing heavily on Edward Said's rendering of the colonizing effects of Orientalism (1978) and how the neoliberal gay project constructs the boundaries that constitute the country queer as Other. The second of these parts will delve into a discourse analysis of a selection of these representations and foreclosures. I will do this in two ways, the first will craft a critique interior to the metropolitan audiences of the neoliberal gay project framed in their aversion to 'rednecks' and redneck iconography⁴ and the second will draw on the external representations that I argue help to script these aversions. Drawing on Scott Herring's, *Caravaggio's Rednecks* (2006), which analyzes the photography of Michael Meads and his homoerotic representations of the 'Deep South', I explore the ways in which urban gay culture finds these images and other images of the rural (regardless of its relationship to homosexuality) as abject. This analysis then turns to the movies *Deliverance* and *Brokeback Mountain* to reveal how cinema (which has both defined and confined rural sexual

⁴ The iconography of the redneck is useful here in our discussion of the conspicuous omission of the hillbilly for urban gay consumption because in many ways these two iconic figures, 'redneck' and 'hillbilly' align in cultural perceptions that script many similar traits, as well as, similar aversions that I will be exploring here through the work of the artist Michael Meads.

subjectivity)⁵ sets in relief the rural discriminations in the mainstream gay communities that I have begun to critique here. In the final part and by way of the possibility for transformation, I briefly look at the films, *The Laramie Project* and the documentary *Small Town Gay Bar* to allude to the complexities and spatialities of homophobias that I will be interrogating in the next chapter.

Part I: Orientalisms and the problems of representation: finding the ‘Untouchable’

I’ve used the term ‘untouchable’ here in the title strategically to broach a particular set of tactics that produce the exotic Othering of rural folk. ‘Untouchable’ is a term that means different things in different contexts. The dictionary definition defines the term as “a person disregarded or shunned by society or a particular group; social outcast: *political untouchables*” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/untouchable>, referenced 1/1/2009). I would extend this definition to encompass the discourses and practices that embody the representations that bring social actors under the purview of being ‘untouchable’. In this way, it is being used to highlight the universalizing effects urban representations of rural existences do to rural existence. ‘Untouchable’ is a disembodied figure, something so detached from its material conditions that its representations are conflated and collapsed into these material conditions to synecdochically stand for the social actors that come to be understood in this manner.

To highlight this, I draw upon Giorgio Agamben and his notion of *homo sacer*, sacred man, he who may be killed with impunity (1998). For Agamben, this figure is neither inside, nor outside the law, but is rather suspended from the law. Without a direct relationship to the law, *homo sacer* is always the exception to the law and therefore necessarily becomes expendable life. The metaphor of *homo sacer* touches down on the way I am using the term ‘untouchable’ here precisely in the exclusionary suspension along the crisis points of the neoliberal gay project that foreclose upon the representations of rural sexual desire and their actual materialities. If we can imagine the normalizing practices of the neoliberal gay project as a set of ‘laws’, then we can also imagine how those ‘laws’ can come to exclude those whom would seemingly participate within the

⁵ While an actually existing ‘rural sexual subjectivity’ is potentially a dubious and reductive essentialism, on its own terms, I am nevertheless using it here to move past and break open the urban bias and omission of the rural when it comes to the history (and politics) of ‘Gay Rights’. In this way, rural sexual subjectivity must be approached on its own terms and in a way that envisages the nuances, struggles, and specificities of all sexual subjectivities (especially as they apply to sexual and gender minorities) to sketch out a geographical terrain of sexual subjectivity that is diverse, striated and incomplete. Establishing another categorical sexual position is not the intent of this project, but rather to draw suspect the domain of an *a priori* sexual categorization, and rethink the locus from which a progressive socio-sexual politics must stem.

borders of the group 'gay culture' yet nevertheless fall outside its established boundaries. This creates outlaws, untouchables, those that are neither subject of the norms that consolidate gay culture nor privy to its benefits.

Orientalism as defined by Edward Said can help us to refine our discussion on this suspension and offer us a set of analytical tools to critique the constitution of untouchables that I am attaching to Appalachian sexual and gender minorities.

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (1978:3).

'Orientalism' is a term that has been around for a long time, but one that Edward Said in 1978 extended the definition of and reoriented it (pun intended) toward the process by which the Orient was produced in its counter-relation to the Occident, East versus West. The claim that he made, that henceforth radically transformed Social Theory, is that the way the East related to the West, Asia to Europe, was fundamentally crafted through a European optic that appropriated the images, symbols, texts, artifacts and so on of the East, interpreted these images, symbols, texts, and artifacts through a Western argot and named these interpretations Eastern.

What's more, the wrenching of the East's ability to speak for itself (in a geo-politics of European colonial expansion) disempowered the East and gave the West the authority to dominate it. He states:

It is clear, I hope, that my concern with authority [lies in the analysis that] its exteriority... describes. I do not think that this idea can be overemphasized. *Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West...* The principal product of this exteriority is of course representations... My analysis of the Orientalist text therefore places emphasis on... such representations *as representations*, not as 'natural' depictions of the Orient... (1978:20-21, my italics)

It is directly in the exteriority of the Orientalist project that the Oriental subject is simultaneously stabilized and erased. The Oriental subject is stabilized in the sense that speaking for the Orient produces an object for Occidental consumption that can be recognized and understood by the Occident within spatial, temporal and cultural relations that reinforce dominant strains of power. At

the same time, this subject is erased in that it allows this new Oriental object, not only the inability to speak for itself, but to remain as an abject Other that may be consumed or disposed of, exoticized or reviled (or some combination of these) without threatening the dominant social order, a form of exclusion that indefinitely suspends the subjectivity of the Oriental object.

Interchange East for rural (Appalachia) and West for urban, and my intentions become clear. It is through this metaphor of Orientalism, a speaking for, a rendering through, and an authorized exclusion from, that rural life becomes an exotic, Oriental, 'untouchable', Other, and all of the exclusions that these terms encompass in relation to the urban centers of conventional gay sex/life/politics.

...it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will or intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do) (1978:12, italics in original).

I wish to be careful not to paint in overstated, broad postcolonialist strokes here in my discussion of representing rural sexual subjectivity from the outside. A direct colonialism implies a targeted move toward occupying and/or controlling the Other. What this passage suggests, and what is useful here within the borders of the colonial metaphor, is that the power structures that constitute the representations of the Other are diffuse, inconsistent and ambiguous. There are certainly direct and egregious effects that play out materially, but there is no single, locatable author of power and violence. Power and violence are then a social process with complex and often contradictory negotiations.

I am arguing, in the context of Appalachian sexual and gender minorities, that there is indeed an occupation of sorts – a set of fear and loathing that constitutes the country queer as an abject and unruly body that threatens harm to gay life. However, this is also a fractured and incomplete position. There is no political debate and there's very little scholarly debate on the issues raised on, by and/or against rural sexual and gender minorities. While this exteriority does create political foreclosures and constitutes spatial and social boundaries, its effects are usually seen in discreet events where one's Appalachianness is called into relief and are rarely seen as

outwardly hostile. In other words, its violence is subtle with no single, locatable author. The problem lies in the constitution of a new kind of homophobia, one drawn from the urban centers and reproduced in diffuse and ambiguous ways, while nonetheless reiterating the aesthetic codes and images that script and police gay sex/life/politics as an urban phenomena.

Yet, we should note that in the process of moving from the country to the city, many sexual and gender minorities are able to conform to and find a limited space within the neoliberal gay project in at least three ways. The first could be described as 'passing'. Passing is the ability to mask differences within particular social contexts that allows one to move seamlessly between these spaces without drawing attention to what makes them different and possibly abject within one or more of those contexts (Feinberg 1996). The second could be described as an active, expected, often public and complicit erasure of one's rural subjectivity ('buying in' to the complicit queer politic) – one certainly present in the story about Wade and me when there was a crisis related to 'passing' for him. In this scenario the impulse to apologize and contribute to the marginalization of rurality is expected to be colluded *with* and *by* the rural sexual subject.⁶ Finally, such as with the case of Jason, the ability to occupy one's ruralness as a resistant strategy that is marginally tolerated in relationship to other life accomplishments can help to set that particular gay body apart. In this way, the rural gay body becomes an exception to the rule – a meritocratic beacon of American exceptionalism that is allowed to contingently exist within the gay matrix, so long as their ruralness remains an idiosyncratic back-drop.

Nevertheless, rural sexualities and their regulation(s) are often cast from an exteriority that limits the full range of sexual possibility once espoused by the Gay Rights Movement.⁷ These representations that frame the rural sexual subject as abject rally the appropriations and misrepresentations of rural sexual subjectivities linking them to particular moral dogmatisms, liberatory expectations, and consumption practices attached to the neoliberal gay project. On the one hand, there is the consumption and aesthetic altering of Western cowboys appropriated for urban homoeroticization (Graham 2005), the erotic innocence of Midwestern farm boys (Riordan 1996), and the pastoral virtue, purity and sexual naiveté often attached to the 'gay pastoral'

⁶ I will be using the terms 'rural sexual subject' and 'rural sexual object' to describe the different positionalities in relation to the exoticization of rural sexual and gender minorities. While, a 'sexual subject' or a 'sexual object' does not necessarily imply the sexuality of the subject/object, as a form of short hand and for the purposes of this research, 'rural sexual subject' and 'rural sexual object' will be considered to imply those who broadly fall under the category of sexual and gender minority and are not-Heterosexual.

⁷ Robert Corber, in his article *Queer Regionalism* discusses how the ... the 'Gay Rights Movement' moving away from the sex and pleasure of the body as its political focus.

(Shuttleton 2000). On the other hand, there is the reviling and the violent reduction of migrant hippies and their radical socio-sexual grass-roots political colonization (such as the Radical Faerie movement) (Povinelli 2006), savage hillbilly depredation, incest, bestiality, rape, and so on (Massey 2007), white trash misogyny and irresponsibility (Bell and Valentine 1995), and the homophobic militarization of Southern rednecks (Herring 2006). These imagined geographies of rural sexualities encapsulated by a relentless exteriority, rarely, if ever actually touch, or at the very least appropriately contextualize these representations with the material realities and sexual sensibilities of rural actors. Further, many of the representations that collapse the rural as always already homophobic *are* present in the city. Indeed the fundamentalist/extremist Evangelical voices that baldly and publicly admonish homosexuality *are* metropolitan voices and not rural ones, even as they come to stand through the 'country aesthetic' to appear rural.

If we were to think through the processes by which rural (Appalachian) sexual and gender minorities come to be further marginalized within mainstream gay culture for their ruralness, we could mark two locations through and from which the perpetuation of this marginalization emanates. The first is obviously gay culture itself – everything that I have been alluding to thus far and will explore in substantive detail in the next section through the visceral abjection to Michael Meads' 'redneck queers.' But gay culture does not exist in a vacuum. It gets its cultural cues from somewhere. I am arguing here, that many of these cultural cues that predispose gay culture to fear and loathing of the rural come from many of the texts, codes and images that exist and are produced in the larger American cultural context.

So, if we go back to Said, speaking about how representation (exteriorly positioned) mobilizes and authorizes a view of the Other, we can see where a pending critique of the movies *Brokeback Mountain* and *Deliverance* comes into play and how these films have been able to form and influence a complex social imaginary about the rural and sexuality:

as early as Aeschylus' play *The Persians* the Orient is transformed from a very far distant and often threatening Otherness into figures that are relatively familiar (in Aeschylus' case, grieving Asiatic women). The dramatic immediacy of representation in *The Persians* obscures the fact that the audience is watching a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient. ... The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original (1978:21).

In this instance, a play written nearly 2,500 years ago already shows how different forms of human media begin to script and authorize views of the Other. And it does so through a thin and plastic set of aesthetic approximations and exaggerations. In a similar sense, as we shall explore further below, the movies *Deliverance* and *Brokeback Mountain* use devices perceived to be rural in a manner that come to represent the rural (Southern Appalachia and Wyoming). Respectively, these movies help to authorize views that Appalachian sexuality is so base and violent that it becomes impenetrably inhospitable and dangerous for gay/trans folk and that the rural is a place where 'queers are killed.'

As I began to discuss through the 'untouchable' figure, these abjections emanate from an ambiguous and diffuse form of power and violence with no single, locatable author. In this way, as the rural sexual subject becomes the 'Oriental object' for Occidental consumption, these ambiguous circulations of power become open to, align with and are actively influenced by the disposability of the rural sexual object. Rural images, codes and symbols come under the purview of a general impulse to consume and/or dispose of these images, codes and symbols. They can be fetishized, appropriated and transformed to parody *rural* homoeroticism while ironically resembling *urban* homoeroticism. They can be altogether reviled, disposed of and/or dispossessed. Or they can compose some complex combination of these. Even to the extent however, that rural representations are brought into urban homoerotic aesthetics, they are usually unrepresentative of the actual rural subjects they depict and are always cast through a distancing that exoticizes the rural sexual subject into an object for urban consumption/disposal.

In the following two sections, I will attempt a substantive examination of the two locations that I have just outlined above. The first will continue from the critique of the neoliberal gay project and the construction of metronormativity emblemized in the urban displeasure of Michael Meads' neo-Confederate homoeroticism. Following this, I shall turn my critique on American cinema as an example of a particular location from where dramatic representations of rural queer life and Appalachian sexual savagery have entered and become emblazoned in the American imaginary.

Part II: Representations of the Other: the paradox of a present absence

The conspicuous absence of the hillbilly in rural erotics

In April of 2008, at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, in Boston, I became engaged in a conversation that ultimately influenced the theoretical

underpinnings of this chapter as well as the theoretical approach to this research at large. I presented preliminary findings on the spatialization of homophobia and its impacts on rural Appalachia⁸ in a session sponsored by the Sexuality and Space Specialty Group, the Rural Geography Specialty Group, and the Cultural Geography Specialty Group titled, *Feminine, Masculine, and Queer Identities in Rural Space*. In that session, the co-organizer, Brandon Haddock delivered a paper titled, *Rough and Ready: The Gay Male Image in Rural America*. In this paper, he discussed the iconography of the 'Great Plains' America and the limitations of the cowboy mystique. He discussed how urban gay culture has appropriated this image for homoerotic consumption that belies the real lives of gay men and lesbians that live in the rural West.

As I listened to his critique, it struck me that the hillbilly, the canonical image of Appalachian 'backwardness,' is conspicuously missing from the appropriative practices of the neoliberal gay project. At first glance, these two forms of consumption, one of appropriation and the other of aversion, seem to sit at odds with each other. If mainstream gay culture *does* use rural images in certain ways to romanticize and enact its sense of sexual experience and desire, is there really a fear of the rural? Could it simply be that this is merely a process of selective style, a matter of taste, and the hillbilly doesn't fit the bill? Do the consumption expectations of the neoliberal gay project find the images of 'poverty' that are usually attached to the hillbilly unpalatable? Is it easier to 'class up' the cowboy, while there is no foreseeable way to do this with the hillbilly? But looking at this closer, especially in reference to the consumption/disposal paradigm that I have been tracking here, we find relatively quickly that these two practices, consumption and disposal, are two sides of the same coin. They have similar methodologies in that the representations that frame desire (on the side of the cowboy) and loathing (on the side of the hillbilly) both distort the realities and subjectivities of these rural sexual and gender minority folk.

Following Said, we can assume that the cultural appropriations that bolster the images of the cowboy and the farm boy as homoerotic objects create dynamic niche markets for queer consumption, while these images nevertheless do not touch the experiences and material realities that animate the lives of gay cowboys and farm boys that live, work, have sex and desire in rural places (1978). As well, while the images of cowboys and farm boys may draw an erotic sense of desire out of mainstream gay culture, there is nonetheless a maintained ideology/mythology that

⁸ The contents of this presentation (under the same title) are the basis for an expanded discussion on homophobia explored in the next chapter.

the rural is monolithically set in its ways about the deployment of homophobia (Gray 2009, Howard 1999). In a way, one could glibly say, that at least in the case of Appalachia the lines of homophobia are drawn much more clearly, precisely because there is no active assumption of the hillbilly icon. The homophobia wrapped up in queer regionalism is far more certain for Appalachia. In this certainty of the homophobia of circumscription attached to Appalachia, a much more direct anti-(rural)homophobic politics might be mounted.

In either case, however, the exclusions, elisions and fantasies of these aesthetic appropriations aside, the queer regionalism that brackets the lives of rural sexual and gender minorities constitutes a kind of violence. It is a violence that evacuates the political agency of the country queer and cuts across multiple scales and social intersections that delimit mobility, complexity and self expression (Gray 2009, Sears 2001, Howard 1999, Smith 1997). However, it is a soft spoken violence. It is not one that is readily audible... until, however, the country queer stands up and speaks. Then it is another ball game, one in which the fear and loathing, along with a paradoxical sense of averse attraction surface in dynamic and (seemingly) contradictory ways.

Metropolitan abjection and Michael Meads' 'homoerotic redneck'

This complex, Orientalized relationship between the rural and the urban, as the former volleys for legitimacy and the latter continues to maintain dominance, comes together in a particularly poignant conversation in the metropolitan aversion to the photographic work of Michael Meads. While pitting himself in antagonistic opposition to metropolitan mainstream gay culture, the Alabama born, artist and photographer has stated in no uncertain terms, "I don't fit into gay culture, period. I don't get it" (Herring 2006:217). In an article, unnervingly and aptly titled, *Caravaggio's Rednecks* (2006), Scott Herring reveals how this cutting edge rural activist, gay man and artist was received with seemingly mixed reviews by a largely metropolitan gay audience. Covering the show *Eastaboga* that briefly showed in Chelsea, NYC (in the fall of 2002) and which was reproduced in a gallery on his website (www.michaelmeads.com) titled *Alabama Souvenirs*,⁹ Herring elaborates on

⁹ As of this writing (February 2010), the gallery *Alabama Souvenirs* is no longer available on his website and the Chelsea gallery that briefly showed *Eastaboga* has since closed (Herring 2006:219). But since the artist has moved to New Orleans, in which much of his work was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina (Ibid:234), the entire collection of *Eastaboga* has been collected and saved in the archives and galleries of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, in New Orleans LA. (<http://omsablog.blogspot.com/2009/04/michael-meads.html>, accessed February 11, 2010). It should also be noted, that while *Eastaboga* and *Alabama Souvenirs* emblemize a particular moment in the artists career that offer us a salient insight into the critique that I am making here, his larger body of work is not reducible to this case study.

how the 'blog spot' and media coverage of New York metropolitan gay audiences frame a seemingly incongruous set of reactions steeped in aversion that constitutes the characters in the images as abject.

Meads' photography choreographs immediately recognizable images of explicit male homoeroticism amidst the cultural iconography of neo-Confederate contemporary Southern culture. Some of these iconographic allusions that function as back-drops to his scenes include the use of the Confederate flag, swastikas,¹⁰ and distinctively rural and lower/working class settings. His work that for all intents and purposes is written from an elusive yet disturbingly provocative rural sexual subjectivity, i.e. it is a rendering of rural queer life in the South that speaks (in large part) for itself. It is in control of its authorship. What it is not in control of however, is its audience, an audience bent on using 'urban-oriented interpretive strategies' (Ibid) to decipher the images. Herring notes:

... when *Alabama Souvenirs* recalls gay male bodies such as "the hustler," "the bear", or "the Chelsea boy," Meads's [sic] images disappoint these "types"... Hence as the images fail to realize successful heteronormative bonds, they also refuse to conform to what Judith Halberstam memorably terms the "metronormativity" of urban, frequently white, queer culture, or the narratives, customs, and presumptions that often guide – and all too often dictate – the aesthetic, erotic, and affective lives of many gays, metropolitan or not (Ibid:219).

What is at stake in the strategies that seek to interpret these images is the ability to read into them a recognizable sense of gay life. Because, as rural images, these photographs do not represent a cross section of a perceived abject and hyper-sexualized heterosexuality (Massey 2007), because these images situate adjacent depictions of homosexual and erotic homosocial desire with cultural iconographies that are read as racist and always already homophobic, it is impossible for the matrix of the neoliberal gay project to incorporate Meads' work as its own. Herring continues, "...the photographs thus reproduce a rural space opposed to the collective visual ideologies that often ground and give meaning to urban gay 'imaginary homelands' such as New York City" (2006:219). By challenging the fundamental set of 'homeland' ideologies that

¹⁰ While these icons of the 'Deep South' might be read by anyone as base and abject, Meads argues that the use of these images maintains a, "disidentificatory difference that helps toxic images expand and become much more than quaint racisms" (Herring 2006:233). In this way, he sees these images as indelibly linked to the cultural practices and identifications of the South and while remaining critical of them, he opens up a discourse of difference and transformation through the reappropriation and reimagining of their meanings – in other words, he seeks to realign these images away from (without forgetting) their negative social history and give them an ambivalent productivity for their redefinition. To the extent that such a project is possible is debatable, but it nevertheless marks the motivation behind much of his work and feeds its provocative and subversive nature.

animate the character of Meads' images, for metro gay culture, there is no way to read, therefore, relate to the homoerotic nature of these images.

Yet, even in this presupposed abjection, the (urban) readings that mark these images are complex, striated and incomplete. There is a variation to their reading that must also be explored. In the 'popular gay and lesbian chat room', DataLounge, Herring tracked many of these disparities that highlight this abjection and found seemingly contradictory responses. These responses ranged from a curious yet beguiling allure, to the ambivalently confused, to an outright and often hostile rejection and distancing. The responses that Herring cultivated through his research and interactions in this chat venue, exemplify the complexity of responses that animate the aversion I am detailing here. Yet, while each seems to have its own position, they all consistently distance a metropolitan gay sensibility from the implications that undergird these images. I shall reference six of these statements and respond to them in kind:

"I think that Justin (my namesake) is totally hot, and... he is the top in the pair" (Ibid 218)

In this first statement, "Justin" attempts to identify himself ("my namesake") with the subject of the photograph that he references and recognizes a desirability in him that marks him as "hot." However, this statement quickly folds back on itself when he references the heterogenderd norms of 'top' and 'bottom' equating the rough masculinity of Justin as a dominate, 'butch' type that is the aggressive and penetrative leader when it comes to sex. While this would seem to be an innocuous assumption, it nevertheless reinscribes the urban neoliberal gay project. It does so by defining and confining (through a metropolitan interpretation) the sexual role of the participant in the image that conforms to the urban socio-political strategies that attempt to 'normalize' gay culture within the confines and comfortable toleration of the wider heterosexually dominated social matrix.

"These photographs are the direct descendents of beefcake [muscular male nude] photos of regular, poor men from the 1940s onward. Nobody would turn down being adored by somebody they respected, and the gay photographer/poor straight guy dynamic is a tried and true example of that" (Ibid 218, brackets in the original).

In the second statement, the statement's author quickly tries to locate these images within a broader imaginary of the history of homoerotic art (without any context for the association).¹¹ By invoking the beefcake photos and buff gay male sex images of the 1940s and 1950s, reminiscent of the erotically provocative drawings and paintings of artists such as Tom of Finland, there seems to be an argument for creating a sincere legibility for the country queer. But by equating the subjects of these images with the "poor straight guy" who would readily and willingly allow someone to lavish attention on him, implying that some form of compensation is a key component of consent, evacuates the possibility that these young men might themselves be homosexual – or perhaps (and what is potentially most frightening to the metro gay observer) altogether sexually ambivalent.

"Did these fellas know they were doing gay jack-off pictures for their buddy?" (Ibid 218).

In the third statement, the 'hustler' typology becomes even more evident. Through the careless equating of the photographs' subjects with "gay jack-off pictures" and collapsing the interactions between the "fellas" and Meads into a "buddy" relationship, it is implied that Meads has somehow duped these men into performing homoerotically for him. One must then assume that if these young men did "know what they were doing," then Meads must be taking on the role of 'Sugar Daddy', a gay patron and benefactor, also marked as predator. Yet if the perceived homophobic violence of the Southern redneck maintains its salience, then these young men must have known and are therefore in a compensatory relationship with the artist. This completes the 'hustler' stereotype, a straight, 'gay for pay' opportunist out for money. Yet what is still consistently denied is the sexual subjectivity of Meads' boys. Indeed, Meads contends that the young men in these images were/are friends of his and the images that ultimately make up the collection were part of his private collection taken within the contours of their mutual relations.

"Is he married to a woman so that these guys couldn't imagine he was queer despite the way he was asking them to pose? Or are these guys actually gay? Is this a glimpse into gay life in the rural south? The guys get heavier and heavier, turn into bears and radical fairy types and suck each other during gay fishing or hunting trips? I mean what gives?" (Ibid 218).

¹¹ Indeed, Herring notes that 'Meads is quite adamant that his art's connection to these urban photographers and their realistic docuprojects is negligible' (Ibid 220).

In the fourth statement, uncertainty quickly yields frustration as the author tries to figure out how these men are moving between 'straight' and 'gay': "is he [Meads] married to a woman?," "are these guys actually gay?," "is this a glimpse of gay life in the rural south?" In the first of these questions, Meads needs to be drawn as a 'closeted' married guy, so that his entrance into social contact with them is veiled in silence and secrecy – one of predatory deception. In the second two questions, skepticism is marked by a limited and doubtful query into the full-on homosexuality of the cohort, drawing uncomfortably into question the 'closet' and how gay identity is crafted. The reification of the 'closet' metaphor emerges as the determining logic¹² for 'figuring these men out.' As a categorical system of recognition (Brown 2000, Sedgwick 1990) – for metropolitan gay life at least – the 'closet' has come to represent the natural progression through which all sexual and gender minorities must pass in order to claim their right and place as a legible social actor. For his part, he does his best to make them 'fit' into recognizable sub-categories ('radical fairies' and 'bears') to sketch out some form of legibility with which to read these bodies. Yet then he turns this possibility down, and opts for the possibility of 'fuck and suck' straight boys 'getting off' during fishing trips (something we see in *Brokeback Mountain*). Because the bodies of these men can be read as neither straight nor gay the inability for the metro gay viewer to see past the closet as an organizing logic confounds all sense of understanding ultimately resulting in a shrug of dismissal: 'what gives?'

"What is this? Art? Kink? I don't get it" (Ibid 219).

"Ew... makes me gald I don't live in the redneck states. Those guys have nasty beer bellies by the time they hit 23. Sad." (Ibid 218).

Finally, the fifth and sixth statements, even while they come from different authors, can be analyzed together. Both of these statements emblemize a revulsion marked with the fear of personal threat read as 'insulting' the palette of 'proper' gay life. In the first of these, Herring comments on the author as "one lone male, disgruntled with all of these explanations" (Ibid 219), who quickly 'logged off' of the chat room once he had his say. The passage is marked with indignant confusion. By trying to locate the meaning of these images through the polarity of art and kink and foreclosing on the possibility for dialogue by quickly dissembling, "I don't get it" negates

¹² I shall returned to a detailed conversation on the closet in the next chapter.

the original inquiry and renders these bodies irrelevant and further inscribes a territorial claim to what constitutes gay life. This irreverence and irrelevance (and possibly a sense of threat) is further marked by his quick exit of the conversation. The second of these two passages, can be read as a punchline to the first, “I don’t get it.” The “ew” already establishes a distasteful revulsion that is elaborated through the emphasis on his (fortunate) distance from those “redneck states.” Through the next move of casting the rural gay body as unfit, resolved in one word through acrimonious pity (“Sad.”), the legitimacy, agency and possibility of the rural queer body is erased from view as a defensive strategy to refrain from having to recognize that this body might actually exist.

From the seemingly innocuous to the outright hostile, it becomes evident that there *is* a prevailing sentiment that orders the logic of the neoliberal gay project. Homonormativity sets its conditions, the complicit queer politic promises its benefits and metronormativity renders its aesthetics. The frustration of *not* having a point of entry into these images – not being able to relate to them – render them foreign, exotic and dangerous. What is at play in these photographs has a twofold interplay with my arguments:

First, Meads’ work is drawn out of an obdurately self-aware subjectivity. It enunciates its position from an active voice that recognizes and revels in the aversion of (this particular) audience. In that resistance an alternative possibility for gay sex/life/politics is crafted in the fissure. At first glance, this could be read as an evacuation of my original hypothesis about Orientalism and the ‘untouchable’ figure that brackets the consumption and/or disposal of rural queer images and codes that I have come to rely on as I outline this web of power. Yet, even if these images have emerged of their own voice, and do not resemble the appropriations that would make them accessible to metro gay audiences, these metro gay audiences still hold the interpretive privilege, what Herring calls “urban-oriented interpretive strategies,” that delimit their meaning. In this way, the subjects become objects and those objects become abject. And it is this abjection that continues to hold the rural exotic Other – redneck, hillbilly, cowboy, farm boy or otherwise – at the disposable purview of the neoliberal gay subject. Whether or not Meads’ work speaks for itself, in terms of border crossing between the rural and the urban, the urban still manages to use its privilege as *the* definition of gay sex/life/politics and to accept or deny these images into its canon.

Second, however, and what becomes salient for my broader argument about the possibility for sexual and gender minorities to live their lives in rural places stems directly from this subjective voice. Because these *are* written in the voice of the rural sexual subject, there is the visible

emergence of a challenge to the mainstream that cannot be ignored. As the stated purpose of this dissertation is to mark out and leave open the questions of possibility for geographies of sexualities, a voice that speaks up for itself amidst its own silencing alludes to that possibility. Meads' work is both idyllic and subversive, a means to challenge urban queer hegemony while creating scenes that surpass and perhaps overdetermine rural queer life. But in the reaction to this, the revulsion to the images clearly begins to demarcate the crisis points along which the neoliberal gay project is in constant threat of unraveling.

We do have to be careful, however, that Meads' work and others of its ilk do not come to stand in for the constitution of rural sexual subjectivity, i.e. rural gay life. We must resist the romantic notion that somehow these images represent an 'authentic' view of rural sexual subjectivity. Herring warns of this when he states:

While I wholeheartedly agree with Halberstam that "some other epistemology than the closet governs sexual mores in small towns and wide-open rural areas," and while I acknowledge the odious racial politics that structure the lives of some of Meads's photographic subjects, I present these photographic objects as something more – and something less – than an authentic glimpse into gay life in the neo-Confederate rural South. Because I feel such a critical move tames the queerer aspects of this art, I want us to think beyond conventional readings of historical exclusions, inclusion, or excoriation for these visual bodies, since Meads does so as well. As I show, his images negotiate – only to bewilder – standard identity for contemporary metro viewers. The uneasiness that Meads's images provoke is thus best read as a reply to the taxonomic presumptions that, consciously or not, steer many urban queer imagined communities today, and the archive's illegibility must be seen as an attack on both the historicized narratives that structure this U.S. metropolitan gay identity in particular, and a westernized gay identity in general. (Ibid 220)

Meads' work, through the disruptive poses and provocative dissonance present in *Eastaboga* and *Alabama Souvenirs*, attempts to dismantle *a priori* sexual categorization. And it does so within a complex spatiality that recognizes desire and expression while framing it in the cultural and racial tensions still present in the South. But these images should be recognized for their subversive and transgressive qualities as well as their artistic and creative qualities, *not* as material representations of an actually existing rural queer life. These images are staged and they are staged in a manner that is intended to provoke.

While these images that frame and mobilize a metropolitan aversion – *both* marked through the aesthetic appropriation and urban retooling of the cowboy mystique and farm boy drag *and* the apparent revulsion and hostile distancing of the redneck (and I am arguing, hillbilly) icons – the impulse toward the abject must stem from somewhere. And that somewhere has to come from

both inside and outside mainstream gay culture. While, I have done a lot of the work here to begin to explain an 'inside' to this form of queer regionalism, I now wish to turn to the forces that work from outside-in, that help to buttress and legitimize the claim that the rural is indeed monolithically homophobic.

Media (mis)representations: a cinematic tromp through pigs, rape and death

In a 2007 article in the *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, titled *Appalachian Stereotypes: Cultural History, Gender and Sexual Rhetoric*, Carissa Massey claims: "Images of Appalachians as stereotypes have circulated in American visual culture for over two centuries, crafted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings and imagery by travelers, surveyors, preachers, scholars, and authors of fiction" (124). Constituting Appalachia as Other, collapsing its cultural variations into that representation of Other (hillbilly), evacuating the agency of Appalachians *through* the consolidation of representational images, and determining and eschewing their sexual practices as aberrant has a long history (Ballard 1999). Equally long in history, in American media (at least), has been the representation of 'sexual dissidents', finding them out and exploiting them as degraded, immoral and destructive or silly, amusing and disposable (Russo 1985).

I am putting these two representations together here because they feed each other: the abject sexual savage of Appalachian depravity and the wasted, disposable life of the queer. While neither of these should be seen as absolute, their generalizability does hold traction for creating an argument in favor of dismantling these images and their political foreclosures. To do this, I will concentrate on two movies in this section, *Deliverance* and *Brokeback Mountain*, that I see holding powerful sway on public opinion of rural places. I will start with the former, where a bestial savagery marks a sexual terrain that is so violent and frightening that gay people just "can't be able to survive there." I shall then move on to analyze the latter where the rural might be seen as a place where "queers are killed."

Deliverance

The rendering of the hillbilly mountain man as an always already violent and deviant sexual actor is no better emblemized than by the movie *Deliverance*. Directed by John Boorman in 1972, this film is based on the novel of the same title released two years earlier by James Dickey, who also wrote the screenplay for the movie. The movie concentrates on a cast of four

characters, Lewis (Burt Reynolds), Ed (Jon Voigt), Bobby (Ned Beatty) and Drew (Ronnie Cox). These four characters sit in fluctuating gradations between and across city boys, concerned environmentalists, political dissidents, adventure eco-tourists and men that are seemingly reaching varying degrees of mid-life crises, that have come to be resolved through a weekend of 'back to nature'¹³ homosocial bonding. Lewis, who performs from a location of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2000, 1995), social critic and the romantic patriotic purity of 'founding father' rhetorics who originally explored these 'untamed lands', becomes the *de facto* leader of the group. From the onset of the tumultuous adventure, he states, "sometimes you have to lose yourself to find yourself," lost in reveries of social change and personal transformation.

The movie opens with the disembodied monologue of Lewis that frames scenes of Mountain Top Removal over the course of the opening credits. The monologue launches a social critique of the consumption practices of Americans that require the continuous exploitation of dirty fuel sources that are destroying the environment and the inevitable failure of the system. This sentiment is codified when Lewis remarks, "I think the machines are going to fail, the political systems are going to fail, and a few men are going to take to the hills and start over" (Dickey 1970). To prove this, the men set out to 'conquer the untainted wildness' of the fictional Cahulawassee River (played by the Chattanooga River in the movie) that runs through an amorphous and overdetermined 'Appalachian' South. The severity with which this adventure takes place is in the pending flooding of the river to support the progress of coal-based strip-mining.

However, this social commentary quickly evaporates and the irony of 'starting over in the hills' begins to set in as the four men 'lose their way' and find an equally inhospitable environment that destabilizes Lewis' critique of the political and economic systems of the United States. As the monologue resolves into the opening scene, the men pull into a backwoods gas station seeking to hire men to assist them down to an entry point on the river and then to tow their cars to the damn at the fictional town of 'Aintry'¹⁴ where they plan to disembark. In my estimation, Dickey's choice of

¹³ I shall come to an argument on 'nature' in the next chapter, as I attempt to contextualize the 'Nature' trope's role in reifying the paradigmatic patriarchies of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2000, 1995) and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Both of these are certainly reified in this movie as well, but this critique is unnecessary to lay out its implication in Appalachian circumscription that I am concerned with here.

¹⁴ Map searches of 'Aintry' yield two street names in Louisville, Kentucky: Aintree Way, Louisville, Jefferson, KY 40220 and Aintree Ct, Louisville, Jefferson, KY 40220 (<http://maps.google.com/maps, entry = 'Aintry'>, accessed February 25, 2010). There is however, an Aintree County, Georgia, (<http://maps.google.com/maps, entry = 'Aintree County, Georgia'>) which I am assuming the author drew on when writing the book. However, this county sits just outside of metropolitan Atlanta which begs questions to what Appalachia is this movie/novel speaking? The characters are from Atlanta, but with the proximity of the country to the city, even in the 1970s, I question the validity of the geographical proximities of

'Aintry' foreshadows the mountains as a foreclosed space to these men by playfully negating 'entry' (Lewis' evident motivation for the trip). As the scene unfolds, the four men are met with indifference, which quickly evokes frustration and comments about "genetic deficiencies" implied from inbreeding. Road weary and itchy, Drew pulls out his guitar and leans against the car, playing as a young boy, marked as dumb and retarded (or possibly autistic), imitates every note and rhythm that he strums. This quickly yields the iconic song *Dueling Banjos* which sets the counter stage to the danger and carnage that awaits them as the 'slow kid' impressively keeps up with Drew.

These inbreeding images are immediately reinforced when they stumble upon a farmhouse after they left the gas station, unable to find the hired help they were seeking. As Ed peeks through a window of the house to see a wrinkled, desolate and seemingly dispossessed old woman staring off into space the frame pans down to observe a young girl of 7 or 8 lying, as if broken on the couch, drooling looking equally as despondent and (implied) mentally retarded. Inbreeding is a recurrent theme throughout the film that brackets the make-up of mountain folk. Nevertheless, two men approach them on the farm, wondering what these 'outsiders' are doing and are eventually hired after some tense haggling. The two men follow them with a tow truck down the country path to the entry point in the river where they embark. A pleasant first day of canoeing leaves the men confident and secure with their decision to accompany Lewis on this venture. After camping the first night, somewhere down the river from where they began, Ed and Bobby, and Lewis and Drew pair off and set down river in separate canoes.

Ed and Bobby pull ashore to catch a break. On shore, immediately Ed notices a couple of men lurking in the trees just up the bank from them. The men approach and quickly become belligerent towards Ed and Bobby. As they try to reason with the two indeterminate, yet violently articulated mountain men, they are seized at gun point. Ed is strapped to a tree by a belt around his neck. Bobby is told to "drop them pants," with which he hesitantly complies. But as the looming rape becomes more apparent, his hesitancy turns to denial and fear and as he attempts to run away, one of the men chases after him and tackles him. On top of Bobby's naked body, the mountain man tells him, "You look just like a hog, gimme a ride boy." As Bobby collapses under his weight, the mountain man anally penetrates him from behind while screaming in his ear, "Squeal

city and country in this allusion. In this way, I believe that James Dickey's choice to use 'Aintry,' which is marked as a location in the story implying a specific town or place, is metaphorical and not literal. As the violence of this movie unfolds, the three characters do make it to Aintry and then are told to "never return."

like a pig.” Bobby makes painfully grunted attempts to comply while his rapist squeals “squeeeeeeeee” in high pitched tones into his ear.

After Bobby’s rape, they switch their attention to Ed, exasperated, horrified and ready to pass out from his make-shift noose. The two mountain men debate what to do with him. The other man (not Bobby’s rapist) retorts, “he’s sure got a purdy mouth.” But just as their next attempt at rape begins, Lewis emerges from the woods to shoot the original perpetrator through the chest with bow and arrow. The other runs off... The remainder of the movie focuses on their struggle with having killed a man and what to do with him, survival strategies to get out of this ‘place of no return,’ the fact there is another one out there seeking to exact revenge, their unraveling wits as they face the wild indifference of the river breaking their boats and their bodies (indeed the river ultimately claims Drew as his conscience cannot bear the burden of disposing of the hillbilly’s body and throws himself from the boat into the rapids), and how to handle the incident when they reach Ainty.

The rape of Bobby invokes a metaphorical illustration of bestiality that delegitimizes any claim to an actual Appalachian sexuality that is not always already violent. Through the use of incest as a datum to string together kinship, sex and sexuality, and the volatility between these, Appalachian sexuality is further evacuated of any redeeming qualities. The hillbilly figure comes to embody through these representations a complex of voracious and unfair characteristics. Violence, bestiality, incest, incorrigibility, malaise, dim-wittedness, savagery, vagariousness, and the list could go on. These represent some of the qualities that substitute for the lives of actual hillbillies.¹⁵ There is no scholarly literature that can support these claims. And to the extent that these ‘truisms’ come to represent the hillbilly, their manifestations are often taken out of context and do not resolve the fact that these are exceptions and not the rule (Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton 2000). And the portrayal of them as such proliferate the rural, when I would argue that the presence of violence in these particular sexual forms is no more prevalent in rural areas than it is in the urban/suburban. And to the same end, the embattlement of homophobia in heterosexist, patriarchal culture is not more or less prevalent in rural areas than it is in urban areas (Gray 2009, Mann 2005). However

¹⁵ The term ‘hillbilly’, like ‘gay’, ‘queer’, and all reclaimed pejorative monikers of their ilk, has been itself reclaimed in recent years. Out of this, a nascent ‘hillbilly pride’ movement has begun to develop. ‘Hillbilly Days’ in Pikeville, Kentucky each year, the Music, Arts, Recreation and Sustainability (MARS) Festival on Pine Mountain, and Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky (a non-profit multi-disciplinary arts and education center that concentrates on and critically celebrates the ‘local cultures’ of Appalachia) are examples of a burgeoning and consolidating identity of resistance in Central Appalachia.

the rendering of rural sexuality as violent has rendered an untrue or at least incomplete portrayal of all rural areas as intrinsically hostile toward sexual minorities (Howard 1999).

Almost 40 years since its release, *Deliverance* still holds powerful sway in the American imaginary about how rural folk (mountain men in particular) are understood. Infamous lines from the movie such as “drop them pants,” “squeal like a pig,” “gimme a ride boy,” and “you sure gotta purdy mouth” are still uttered by city folk to this day (Massey 2007). And these sayings have become such an integrated part of popular American culture that adolescents and young adults who have never seen the movie are still able to understand and reproduce. Novelty toys such as ‘Bubba teeth’ or ‘Billy Bob teeth’ are available for purchase on the internet (for example 4billybobteeth.com) and in department stores and costume shops (especially around Halloween). This particular novelty toy directly reflects the way that the teeth of local folk in the movie are portrayed and continues to this day to act as the punch-line to the representations of the unhygienic, incestuous and irresponsible practices of hillbilly folk.

In the wake of these violent renderings, the attachment of rural sexuality to what could be described as the ‘Deliverancization’ of Appalachian sexual subjectivity and the exoticization of rural sexual subjectivities more broadly must be broken. These forms of violent sexualities are 1) privileged as being violent, 2) the exception to the rule, 3) never interrogated past the violent moment itself, and 4) not only erroneous and reductive, but entirely disempowering to the sexual actors that become Othered as untouchable through these representations. Massey claims that when it comes to representations of sex in Appalachia, sexuality is often rendered as hyper-sexual, bestial and violent or as a naïve, but nevertheless exoticized from the outside as objects for consumption (2007). Examples of this include Elli Mae from the *Beverly Hillbillies*, as the “dichotomous [characterization] of women... [are reflected] as both sexy and somewhat virginal” (Ibid 133), a woman possessed of sexuality that does not have the capacity to ‘know’ what to do with it, to the more modern iteration of Daisy Duke (and her infamous and synecdochically tight, short, cut-off jean shorts) from the 1980s television show *The Dukes of Hazard*. Both of these represent the exotic objectification of Appalachian women.

These representations are highly marked by class. In her 2009 ABC special *A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains*, Diane Sawyer set out to ‘portray’ the devastation of poverty in Appalachia. Intentional or not, she reified these sexual iterations even while this was not the intent

or content of her program.¹⁶ By reifying the 'white trash' culture of the hillbilly, connections can be made to what David Bell has referred to as 'white trash' erotics (2000). Through poverty portrayed as both endemic *and* cultural, the white trash aesthetic is imbued with domestic violence, disempowered women, depravity and ignorance that become mapped on to the sexual practices of rural Appalachian folk. This Deliverancization of Appalachian sexualities renders illegitimate the sexual subjectivities of Appalachians in general through these notions of white-trash erotics, bestiality, rape and incest, violence, poor motherhood skills and so on.

In this illegitimization, for sexual and gender minorities at least, they must either be rescued from Appalachian subjectivity by an appropriate and necessary migration to cities where their cultural affiliations must be apologized for, self-deprecatingly disqualified and otherwise erased or managed by other means of personal accomplishment (as with the examples of Wade and Jason) or (for those who remain in the country) condemned by indefinitely suspending the sexual subjectivity of Appalachia as always already violent, deviant, and immutable. Sexual and gender minorities in rural places could be seen as 'marooned' in this sense, where their bodies are marked for impeding violence and death. From this violent queer death drive, let us turn this critique now to *Brokeback Mountain* for an example of how 'queer death' is inevitable in rural places.

Brokeback Mountain

In 2005, Ang Lee (straight guy) directed *Brokeback Mountain* based on the 1997 short-story by Annie Proulx (straight woman). This academy acclaimed movie featured Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenthal) and Ennis del Mar (the late Heath Ledger) (both straight guys), two clandestine lovers caught between their desire for one another and the roles and expectations of rural life and masculinity in Midwestern Wyoming. The unlikely lovers meet while sheep-herding in the summer

¹⁶ This program created an immediate reaction from Appalachian folk who thought the representations were unfair and overly reductive. See for example, Eastern Kentucky Sounds Off On "A Hidden America," Marie Luby of WMYT News, posted February 26, 2009 (<http://www.wkyt.com/wymtnews/headlines/39682722.html>, accessed January 15, 2010). Sawyer's new term "Mountain Dew mouth" which represents Appalachian mother's as ignorant, giving their children only soda that rots their teeth, reinforce images of 'white trash culture'. Indeed, she filmed much of this 'special on poverty' in Harlan County where I lived for nine months while doing this research. I had conversations with friends there that explained how they took her and her film crew to the Laurels, a housing development that, for better or worse, is made up of middle class homes that closely resemble a suburban gated community. It was noted that while she had her film crew with her, they shot *no* footage of the Laurels. It did not resemble the 'type' of poverty that she wanted to show and was therefore cast as irrelevant. But in that irrelevance, she mapped the 'type' of yokel, white-trash poverty that she sought out to capture on to Appalachia at large.

of 1963. During the isolating ordeal, the two men, together and alone, are in charge of supervising a herd of sheep. The movie implies that Jack is the more 'curious' (sexually) of the two, but they nevertheless, on one cold night, end up in each other's arms and an awkward, passionate sexual encounter ensues. From this, the two become intimately connected. This begins to unravel toward the end of the summer when Jack's expectation that they might find a way to be together is dashed by Ennis' skeptical and pragmatic ennui. As an innocently instigated wrestling match turns frustrated and violent, their last moment on the mountain, their last physical contact, is a fistfight where blood is transferred to both of their shirts.

After their first experience on Brokeback Mountain, they both go off and marry women, fulfilling their expected roles. Within a couple of years, however, Jack, having moved to Texas and longing for the touch of his companion, reunites with Ennis. This quickly becomes an extended extra-marital and interstate affair that lasts nearly two decades. Ennis' wife discovers their passion and intimacy for each other from the outset. The first moment Jack arrives, she catches a peak through a curtain and glimpses the two in a passionate embrace, kissing. While this ultimately seals the fate of their marriage, ending in divorce, she maintains obedient silence. The two men begin on their monthly 'fishing trips,' in which the two return to Brokeback Mountain, camp, fish, have sex and enjoy the connection that they share with one another. Yet as they begin to get older and Jack becomes more vexed by their time apart, he urges Ennis to reconsider moving with him to start their own ranch together, which leads to an argument that will (again) be their last encounter, this time for good. The infamous line, "I wish I could quit you," uttered by Ennis, simultaneously echoes the desperate frustration of being unable to be more than occasional lovers and ends their extended liaison in an exasperated dispute.

Shortly after this final exchange between the two lovers, Jack Twist is gruesomely murdered in Texas. Ennis discovers the murder of his lover when a post card he sends to Jack returns in the mail with "deceased" written on it. He confronts Jack's wife through a cryptically vague and terse phone conversation where she describes how a tire blew up in his face while trying to repair it. However the juxtaposition of the deflective phone conversation spliced with images of Jack being attacked by a group of men, one smashing his groin with the heel of his boot, while another brutally beats his face with a tire iron tells a different story, one Ennis seems to understand immediately: he was killed for being queer. Ennis goes to visit Jack's parents (on the ranch where Jack wanted to start a life with Ennis) to try and retrieve his ashes. Jack's father

refuses, but his mother allows Ennis access to Jack's room. In a small closet, Ennis finds the two shirts that they had been wearing when they fought all those years ago, still spattered with blood, Jack's underneath Ennis' draped on top, both on the same hanger. The movie ends with Ennis reflecting on their relationship through the perpetuity of two intertwined shirts.

At first glance, it is tempting to see this movie as a 'gay love story.' Or at least that was the way that mainstream media hyped the movie when it hit the big screen in 2005. However, on critical reflection, it is impossible to cast this as a gay love story for at least two reasons. First, the lovers portrayed in this drama are bounded by the constraints of being *of Wyoming*. Their love is not transferable in any legible way (Phillips and Watt 2000). Second, and precisely because of the first, this movie is *not* emblematic of the types of homophobic violence that many rural gay subjects understand or recognize of their lives, sexual experiences or encounters with actual homophobic violence in the country (Gray 2009).

While certainly an intriguing and moving piece of cinema, we cannot read this film without examining the set of contextual contingencies in which it finds itself. The media hype surrounding the release of *Brokeback Mountain*, as the first mainstream 'gay love story' undermines the sensitive and subtle nature of the dynamics of the relationship between Jack and Ennis. Certainly, these are two men that have fallen passionately in love with one another, and that love stretches across time and space in dynamic, intricate and intimate ways. But does 'gay' accurately describe this relationship?

By emblemizing 'gay' relationships, in this movie, as subversive, clandestine and expendable the experiences of Jack and Ennis are likened more to a Shakespearean tragedy than a love story. Indeed by encapsulating this relationship as a gay relationship, we miss what is actually going on between the two lovers. Richard Phillips and Diane Watt, commenting on the short story before it was made into a movie, note:

The characters in this story are not gay for they are not possessed of sexual orientations that are transferable and generalizable to others of their sex – the relationship between Jack and Ennis is a one-off, love between two people... It would be inconceivable for Jack and Ennis to get up and go to New York or San Francisco, for example, they are of Wyoming, as is their love (2000:3).

What becomes salient in this critique is that this 'love' is *of Wyoming*. It is a love not bound by the spatial markers and political practices of the Gay Rights Movement.¹⁷ It is a love forged in the bonds of a deep intimacy and mapped onto conflicting ideals and performances of rural Midwestern masculinity.

By framing this story as a love story between two 'closeted' gay men, urban expectations of liberatory practices are mapped onto their love affair, while the specificities of the embodiment of masculinity in which they find themselves are erased. Yet at the same time that it can be critically argued that it is erroneous to make this 'look like' a gay story, the moment the closet trope is able to claim these men as 'closeted' is the moment that Wyoming and the Midwestern ruralness in which it finds itself becomes accountable for homophobia. The death of Jack Twist was certainly a homophobic one, but can we make this homophobia represent a blanket homophobia that then synecdochically stands in for Wyoming? And what happens when metropolitan gay men, eager to have their first 'mainstream gay love story' see a place where it becomes quite clear that 'gay' can't happen (one must 'stay in the closet') or your life is in danger, a place where queers are killed?

Following Judith Halberstam, the 'closet' as an organizing logic for sexual liberation does not and cannot apply here (2005). The 'closet' metaphor assumes 1) there is a distinct homosexual body that must be liberated and 2) all people 'want' to be liberated and become so in the same way, by 'coming out' (Brown 2000, Sedgwick 1990). However, as we begin to see the world in its complex relations to sex, sexuality and culture, emblemized through the love of Jack and Ennis, the 'closet' is not a readily transferable, let alone translatable ideology that can describe all sexual experiences, all sexual subjectivities in all places at all times. Yet, in spite of the impulse to read these lovers as 'closeted gay men,' there is still a limited opportunity to read into this movie the subversiveness of queer love in the country. However, we must be careful of how we craft the

¹⁷ However, we should note here that the movie starts in the early 1960s and ends in the early 1980s. The Stonewall riots happened in 1969 in New York City. By the early 1970s the Gay Rights Movement had begun to codify, especially with the political savvy of Harvey Milk, who (in an attempt to demand that the city council stop allowing law enforcement to harass gay men in the streets or to turn a 'blind eye' when homophobic violence was occurring) mobilized the Castro, a 'gay ghetto' in San Francisco, to elect its first openly gay city councilman. Through email correspondence with our local LGBT email listserv, Jeff Jones (also see his 2001 dissertation) has urged queer Kentuckians to recognize the micro-politics of Gay Rights in American gay history that took place all across the country from small (rural) towns to other 'big cities' before, during and after Stonewall. To assume that some form of gay politics had not reached the rural 'backwoods' of Wyoming (or Texas where Jack was actually killed) is specious and most likely historically inaccurate. Whether or not these politics would intersect with Jack and Ennis' story is moot. By eliding this fact, in both the short story and its cinematic rendering, undermines the political economy of queer visibility that has far reaching implications. This elision further cements the anachronistic historic fallacy that the rural is an evil place of death for queer people and that it has no place in gay history.

connections of self awareness to that love. Both men are aware that their sexual desires for each other are highly policed and their interactions with each other are scripted by this awareness. Yet the subversiveness sits at the intersection of their deep love for one another and its transcendence of culturally policed heterosexual boundaries.

Nonetheless, in spite of this 'fairer' reading of their love in relation to queer identity, the movie still draws problematic connections with queer life and queer death. First and foremost, bookending their love around Jack's death reifies the circumscription of rural places as 'militarized zones' for gay/trans folk. This is certainly not to say that these types of deaths from homophobic violence do not happen in rural places. We shall see this in the next section through the *Laramie Project*, which dramatizes the events that happened immediately following the *actual* death of Matthew Shepherd in Laramie, Wyoming in 1998. But because of the complexity, internal conflict and strife that arises in the town through the (inter)national media coverage of the incident compels us to remain ambivalent of rural homophobia.

In deference to an emerging rural sexual *subjectivity* that we explored in Michael Meads' photographs and as a transition to our concluding comments in this chapter, let us briefly turn to a rural critique of this movie. In Mary Gray's recent book, *Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009), she interviews a young man, Shaun from rural Eastern Kentucky. She comments that when they first met, he was an active member of the Highland Pride Alliance (HPA) and engaged in efforts to establish Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) in local rural public schools. In a conversation that they had about *Brokeback Mountain*, he claimed in no uncertain terms that the movie was "ridiculous." He commented that people do not lurk about killing people just because they're queer. And everyone 'knows' someone that is. It is not uncommon for two men to live together and for the community to recognize it, even if their sexuality is not publicly discussed. He went on to describe how rural gay folk 'know' who to be around and who not to be around, where the safe places are and where places are not so safe (2009 98-118). Interestingly enough, these simple survival strategies described by Shaun as a rural sexual subject *are* transferable to other places including metropolitan areas, but somehow the images present in *Brokeback Mountain* – the desperate logic of the closet, the inability for domestic consolidation, and the material violence itself do not.

Part III: Framing ambivalent possibilities?

I want to reemphasize that these representations that I have concentrated on throughout this chapter are not absolute and complete. They do emanate from the city, and as we saw with the work of Michael Meads, voices can emerge amongst the deafening silence. There *is* room to challenge these notions, and there *are* a nascent handful of film projects that add a layer of depth and complexity to these negations that should be noticed. In deference to these, I would like to briefly outline two movies that do this. *The Laramie Project* portrays the complexity of social feelings around the death of Matthew Shepherd that are far from consistent. And *Small Town Gay Bar* examines the existence, resistance and historical traction of gay bars and social space in rural Mississippi since (at least) the 1970s.

The Laramie Project

The tragedy of Matthew Shepherd highlights the limitations of the foreclosures that I have outlined in this chapter. In *The Laramie Project* (2002), based on his original play, writer/director Moisés Kaufman draws on an 'all-star cast' to highlight the aftermath of Matthew Shepherd's brutal attack and ultimate death in Laramie, Wyoming (October 7-12, 1998). Matthew's death came from the complications that he sustained during his brutal beating, days after the initial attack in which a media storm circumscribed the town. Lead by Kaufman (played by Nestor Carbonell in the movie), the movie/play portrays an experimental theatre troop's attempt to go to Laramie, Wyoming after the dust had settled from the media frenzy to research the incident and write on their struggles. When the troop first arrived in town, they were faced with a bevy of reactions from hostility and anger (they no longer wished to have their 'dirty laundry' aired) to ambivalent skepticism (they believe in a 'live and let live' philosophy and wanted to challenge the media portrayal of their town) to open appreciation (they wanted to share the real emotional struggle they had and the political actions that they took in response to Matthew's death), but *all* of them were concerned about the 'type' of story they would tell.

Through the interviews and interactions with the town's folk, insecurities quickly set in with the theatre troop. They were also concerned with what they portrayed. The result was a reflexive narrative that placed the bodies of the troop at the center of this interrogation along with Laramie. The movie/play does not show an active drama of the death of Matthew Shepherd. Rather, it slips in and out of the stories that unfold during the media frenzy and the troop's experiences

interviewing the town's folk and their own internal conflicts. Matthew Shepherd is not present in the movie/play, except that his life is drawn in the contours of the stories told about him. His is made as a body in relief to the rural contexts in which he is placed, marked by both uncertainty and confidence.

This contingent reading on homophobia, homophobic violence, the closet and rural places forces us to rethink how we conceptualize homophobia in rural places and perhaps more broadly. While there are certainly homophobic attitudes and reticence to accept it as a legitimate 'life-style' no one, with the exception of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church (who showed up to protest his funeral as well as the court trial of the two young men that had attacked him) agreed with what happened to him. But if the rural is a place where queers go to die, how can a 'live and let live' attitude evacuate this sentiment? And further by portraying the very real activism of the town's folk that followed his death, how do we account for something that is apparently not supposed to exist in the country?

Small Town Gay Bar

But there are gay people in the country. Directed by Malcom Ingram and produced by Kevin Smith, the documentary *Small Town Gay Bar* (2007) focuses on *Rumors*, a gay bar in rural Mississippi. The movie portrays the love and importance of having this openly gay space in rural places where many gay/trans folk felt that they had no alternative social outlets. What becomes apparent throughout the course of the film is how this space, in this particular place offers a sense of solidarity and community networking. *Small Town Gay Bar* is a candid portrayal of rural life and gay social existence. The presence of queer voices is not only encouraging, but shows the extent to which rural queer visibility is beginning to claim its voice. But in that reclamation, we must be cautious. We do not want to draw geographies of redemption. For better or for worse, homophobia exists in rural places. And there is still intact a neoliberal gay complex that requires scrutiny in the exclusions it produces.

What does it mean to have representations of your sexual subjectivity emanate from outside of the position where it emerges and is practiced? Is there really a rural sexual subjectivity? How does such a subjectivity function? Where does it get its scripts? What are its scripts? In the process of interaction between the center and the margin, dominance and submission, does a rural sexual subjectivity become more complicated, integrating aspects of urban sexual subjectivity into

its contours? What then becomes of the relationship between the rural and the urban in the constitution of sexual subjectivity? And while these sexual subjectivities are shifting and transforming on both sides,¹⁸ how do urban representations of rural erotica, whether for consumption or revulsion, but always parodied, affect the ability for rural sexual and gender minorities to constitute and struggle for their own sense of and sensibilities about sex and sexuality?

In this chapter, I have attempted to point out how the metronormative and homonormative imaginaries that script 'proper' gay sex/life/politics cast rural sexual actors as untouchable through the effects and foreclosures that erase their bodies as 'legitimate.' In this suspension, we have explored how suspicion and fear of rural queer life lends meaning to these foreclosures. I have argued that representations of rural erotica are problematically located within a sphere dominated by the interpretations and foreclosures of metropolitan voices and what I have called the neoliberal gay project. I have also argued that, within this matrix, there is room for possibility. These foreclosures cannot fully account for the ways in which rural sexual and gender minorities live their lives, desire, have sex and create the intimate and affective bonds that define not only how their sexual selves are scripted, but how personal awareness of sexual dissonance transform these scripts. In the next chapter, I will launch a critique of homophobia dead on, challenging its assumptions and creating a new critical definition. From there, I will examine how homophobia functions within the borders of my research through the networks and discussions that I have had with my friends and research participants in Eastern Kentucky.

¹⁸ This is neither a positive nor a negative statement. Those of us that like to attach ourselves to subversive politics have the tendency to romanticize 'transformation' as an *a priori* a good thing. But if we consider the ways in which homonormativity and metronormativity script 'proper' gay life, then we are also faced with new typologies of hegemony that exert new kinds of power that foreclose on different ranges of people – people, that on the surface, one would assume are a part of the group from which they are being excluded.

Chapter 5: (Re)Thinking Homophobia: Rurality and Queerness in Central Appalachia

Well... I've been close enough to the case to know many of the people. I have a daughter that works in the sheriff's department. As for the gay issue... uh... I don't give a damn, one way or the other. As long as they don't bother me. And even if they did, I'd just say, "no thank you". And that's the attitude of most of the Laramie population. They might poke one, in a bar situation, you know, they been drinking, and they might actually smack one in the mouth. But then they just turn and walk away. Laramie is live and let live.

– Marge Murray
The Laramie Project

*Besides... most of the stream poisoning happens in Appalachia and the only people it affects are the one remaining group that everybody still feels comfortable making fun of... hillbillies...
...Hahaha, hillbillies are poor.*

– Steven Colbert,
The Colbert Report, January 18, 2010

A tale of two gay spaces

On Sunday morning at 2a.m. (otherwise known as Saturday night), February 17, 2008, in Lexington, Kentucky, a 37 year old man was attacked while leaving the Bang nightclub. The Bang (formerly Crossings)¹ is a gay bar located in the heart of downtown on Limestone Street directly across from the Courthouse. He was on his way to his car, parked in the lot next to the bar, when a couple of men began shouting pejorative gay slurs and assaulted him. They punched him numerous times in the face and he was sent to the University of Kentucky hospital to be treated for what was classified as 'minor' facial injuries (Herald-Leader 2008). Lexington is generally understood within the city and the region to be 'gay friendly' and was designated in March 2007 by *Advocate* magazine as one of the top 10 best small urban cities in the US for LGBT folk and their families to live. Yet the story garnered limited coverage and speculations over whether or not the attack was indeed a 'hate crime' have been left unresolved. That night the Bang was having a fund-raiser for Moveable Feast, a program sponsored by Aids Volunteers of Lexington that supplies food and support for people living with HIV.

On Saturday afternoon, March 15, 2008, I was in Harlan, Kentucky. I went to the local Wal-Mart to meet up with Andrew, whom I had just started seeing at the time, to visit from Lexington and spend the weekend with him. Due to a tense relationship with his father, with whom he was

¹ Since this incident, the Bang has changed ownership and retaken its original name, Crossings. Like the Bar Complex, Crossings has a deep history in Lexington gay life. Opening in 1989, Crossings ... leather... blah Reference Jeff Jones' dissertation here on the timeline of the Crossing – also, note the contemporary history of its change from Crossings to Bang and back to Crossings.

living at the time, we were forced to meet in a public place. We had planned to get a hotel room and have a romantic weekend with each other during the overture of what would become a six month relationship. We devised a plan where his father's lady friend (who was also in town from Lexington for the weekend) would bring him the 20 miles from Cumberland (still Harlan County) to the Wal-Mart in Harlan (town) while she was running errands. My cell phone was out of service in the area and it had been raining pretty hard that afternoon. While waiting, wondering and worrying, I had no way of knowing that complications in our plan would delay our meeting, but I nevertheless waited for him for what would become four hours.

As I waited there, in the vestibule, I was ogled by a couple of boys who made a number of passes, eyeing me, moving on, and then coming back for more. After about an hour long dance of curious peeks, one of the boys, Travis, asked what I was doing and introduced himself. I explained that I was waiting on a 'friend' and he ended up knowing Andrew (which confirmed for him my sexuality) and I ended up telling him about my research and he revealed to me that he considers himself 'bi'. Travis and his friend (a 'gay friendly' straight boy) were struck by the two and half hour drive I had made from Lexington. They graciously (and perhaps eagerly) decided to hang out and wait with me. While I was there, we toured the store and Travis introduced me to many of the Wal-Mart employees, finding my name an exciting, even exotic, tid-bit of information to pass on to everyone we met. The girls that worked at the Subway in Wal-Mart were exceptionally keen on me. And the one, whispering to my escort in devious undertones glancing in my direction with a mock-discretion, exclaimed, 'Damn why are all the hot guys gay!' I couldn't help but be drawn in. Beside the ego stroking of someone finding me desirable, it meant that 1) there are gay men in this place and they are not altogether invisible and 2) the homophobia I encountered, as my first real experience in the field was nothing more than the mockishly coy gender norms of a deflated flirtation, displaced by the disclosure of my sexuality.

These two separate stories might seem to have nothing in common. Yet, they are placed together here to make a very specific point. An otherwise, acclaimed 'gay-friendly' city is still witness to violent homophobia. Meanwhile, at a Wal-Mart² amidst the folds of an Appalachian hollow (intriguingly framed by the surrounding mountains), I found hospitality, and a hospitality adamant on defining its terms in collusion with my sexuality. I certainly recognize that I was and am

² And it's funny because Wal-Mart is the last place the neoliberal critic in me expected to find an endearing experience that welcomed me into this place. But then again, neoliberal critiques of places, such as Wal-Mart, while not altogether missing the mark, have the tendency to be at the very least classist with an urban bias.

marked differently than other gay folk in the area. It was quite obvious that I was not from there. Garishly dressed and clearly displaced, I was an outsider. And my new friend Travis (abandoned in reveries of 'escaping' to California) was tellingly sympathetic to an outsider's voice. But the important moment to take away is the tension with which such stories torque the urban/rural binary and the popular understanding that rural places are 'bad' for gay people. Even in deference to *my* outsideness and *his* escapist sympathies, this exchange shows not only that gay life can happen in rural/small town Appalachia, but that gay spaces are also in a continuous and evolving mode of production. That this queer space emerged at the site of this encounter challenges what I shall call a 'homophobia of circumscription'³ that is cast through what Robert Corber has described as 'queer regionalism' (1999). In this way I seek to dismantle the queer regionalisms that constitute their circumscription, develop an optic for reading homophobia as a set of spatial practices and social processes (that both constrain and shape queer space), and contextualize the homophobic practices of Appalachia without overdetermining what that homophobia might be.

The 'last socially acceptable form of discrimination'

By opening this chapter with a negative image of the city and a positive image of Harlan, I run the risk of romanticizing Appalachia. This is not my intention and I want to state, in no uncertain terms, that this is farthest from the truth. What I do want to do, however, is to develop a spatial logic that adds contingency to homophobic practices and disarticulates the queer regionalisms through which the rural is often (if not always) cast as a monolithic, always already insufferable place of intolerable bigots and narrow-minded simpletons; a place where fundamentalist evangelicalism has wrenched a homophobic landscape of no return. And in the case of Central Appalachia, the 'Deliverance' view of violent bestial sex and rabid mountain-men tempered across the foaming mouths of evangelical preachers has done nothing if not render Appalachia as a

³ All forms of discrimination use circumscription as a means to delimit social mobility, marginalize groups, distinguish their differences and use them as ammunition against the discriminated group. As a point of order, and to make my point, I'm marking out a specific circumscription here that is internal to the gay community that stands in contradistinction to other forms of homophobic circumscription, whether they are active/violent, latent/passive, or internalized. I shall use the term 'active' to describe apparent, clear cut and (both physically and/or mentally) violent homophobias. I will be using the term 'latent' to describe the subtle, diffuse and institutionalized homophobias that continue to bracket heterosexual privilege. And I will be using the term 'internalized' homophobia to describe the effects of homophobic processes on and within the queer body. This shall lead me to discuss 'homophobias of circumscription' by which I mean the homophobias that are produced inside gay culture directed at and carving out exclusions for the unruly bodies in its ranks.

militarized zone for sexual and gender minorities. But to dismantle these views, we need a critical working definition of homophobia.

What is homophobia? Where does it come from? What does it do? Who does it affect and how does it get translated and mapped onto the bodies of homosexuals? And what of transphobia?⁴ How might both of these be thought of as spatial practices and social processes that belie the normative understanding that homophobia is a discreetly targeted formation that seeks, from a top-down hostility, to strike out against the body of the queer subject? How might thinking about homophobias as both social *and* spatial help us to reveal how institutional homophobias circumscribe queer life? Indeed, how might the spatial practices of homophobia reveal to us, not merely its own geographies, but how 'internalized' homophobia directs, scripts and shapes the production of queer space? And how are these internalized homophobias related to and mutually reinforced through 'active' and 'latent' homophobias? Due to a lack of spatial analysis into the social processes that set the conditions for homophobia, are we at a point where we can understand what it is and where it comes from – let alone how to look at homophobia in rural places?

A majority of the literatures that investigate homophobia are relegated to the behavioral sciences that frame homophobias as a set of pathologies (see for example Kantor 2009, Russell and Bohan 2006, Hillier and Harrison 2004). By pathologizing homophobia, much of the social circumstances that script its meanings and processes are reduced to effects at the sites of individuals or violent encounters (Van der Meer 2003, see also Reilly and Rudd 2007, Ward 2005, Pheonix, Frosh and Pattman 2003). By emphasizing the individual character of homophobia as 'active' and/or 'internalized,' the relationship of 'latent' or institutionalized homophobias to heterosexual privilege and practices, as well as their spatialities have often been left unconsidered (Hubbard 2007). However, to the extent that 'latent' homophobias are addressed for their institutional character, they are usually policy and/or politically driven within the rubrics that establish the neoliberal gay project which already accepts a determined set of explanations for homophobia, and have yet to take its complexity seriously in their interrogations (Meezan and Martin 2003).

⁴ For the purposes of streamlining this conversation, I will collapse these two phobias, homo- and trans-, into the single term 'homophobia'. I remain cognizant that the forms and structures that organize these two discriminatory processes are different in many ways and have differing effects. Indeed there has been very little public debate surrounding transphobia and while homophobia has been vetted (while nevertheless unresolved) in the public sphere – the lack of debate on transphobia does and has left the transbody in increasingly higher risk of threat for violence.

When homophobia *is* present in social science research, either critically or as a given condition for queer space, it is often implied rather than directly engaged. The bulk of this research generally focuses on the 'closet' as an organizing logic for sexual identity rather than homophobia and heteronormativity that do not map neatly onto the closet (Brown 2000:10). There is a limited canon of social sciences and humanities work that directly addresses homophobia (see for example Blumenfeld 1992). Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that homophobia is the 'last socially acceptable form of discrimination' (Fone 2000). Yet even here, this often policy driven scholarship does not sufficiently interrogate its social and spatial processes that both constrains and shapes queer space (Brown 2000). And there is very little literature that deconstructs and interrogates homophobia for its social character *and* spatial implications (Hubbard 2007, see also Hamilton 2007, McConaghy).

'Fag(got),' 'queer,' 'homo,' 'cock-sucker,' and a constellation of bitter pejoratives fall off the tongues of American teenagers, young adults, adults, and even the elderly as if these terms did not and do not circumscribe an entire segment of the population.⁵ A current iteration of 'innocuous' homophobia seems nearly ubiquitous in American high schools. Saying 'that's so gay' apparently means something is stupid, boring or otherwise irrelevant (Rasmussen 2004). I have personally come across this in my own family, as well as by a number of gay youth that have submitted to this practice with neither awareness nor concern for how this circumscribes gay folk (including them). A recent episode of the irreverent cartoon comedy television show, *South Park* highlights the use of the word 'fag' to *not* mean gay people, but rather to redefine the term to circumscribe a *different* cohort of people (in the context of this episode, a gang of motorcycle bikers) as stupid or lame.

It might seem that redefining a derogatory word would destigmatize it. Yet by co-opting this word from the outside and redefining its meaning without the voices that these words marginalize, evacuates and erases the historical conditions that set the meanings and violences of these terms. However, as scholars working through the problems of homophobia and in deference to these terms and their continued usage, we must be careful when claiming homophobia to be *the* 'last socially acceptable form of discrimination' (Fone 2000). I do agree that homophobia remains a socially acceptable form of open (and often violent) hostility, but every form of discrimination

⁵ 'Hip-hop' culture has a notorious history with flagrant homophobic lyrics and images (at least as they are portrayed in public). There is a recent practice within this culture that has emerged as a 'knee-jerk' reactionary response to certain social situations. When someone does something that they perceive will be perceived in any way as effeminate, they immediately retort 'no-homo'. 'No-homo' is supposed to evacuate the perception of effeminacy that might be read as 'homosexual'.

always has something on deck to replace (or even enhance) it. And as the opening quote by Steven Colbert from a segment on Mountain Top Removal facetiously suggests, discriminatory regionalism drawn through the character of the hillbilly is alive and well.

The caricature of the hillbilly is equally a salient source of open discrimination that is still marked by its social character. This throws into relief my efforts in the previous chapter to illustrate how the representations through popular culture of the hillbilly script the meanings and motivations of these discriminatory regionalisms. For political movements to challenge these forms of discrimination, it my contention that to combat homophobia (as well as sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, discriminatory regionalism and so on), we must work through an intimate politics of allied development and responsibility to reveal how these discriminatory practices hurt society as a whole (Udis-Kessler 1992). I will come back to a discussion of the responsibility of allies and advocates as a necessary politics in chapter 7.

By claiming that something is a 'last socially acceptable form of discrimination,' the claim itself becomes a reactionary restriction that evacuates the subtleties and contingencies of the practice it critiques. It marks it as endemic. And it deemphasizes other 'socially acceptable' forms of discrimination like those waged against disabled bodies, fat bodies, developmentally challenged bodies, and to be certain the hillbilly body. We overemphasize homophobia by marking it as the 'last socially acceptable form of discrimination.' Through that overemphasis, we feed its effects, overlook its nuances and altogether eclipse other forms of discrimination. With hyperbolic zeal, we sidestep hybrid forms of homophobias that are crafted at the intersection(s) of multiple marginal positions. In the case of this research, these 'last socially acceptable forms of discrimination' are both argued from the location of the homosexual *and* the hillbilly. As these two marginalized positions meet up, they link together to form the *next* 'last socially acceptable form of discrimination': the 'queerbilly.'⁶

The aim of this chapter is to directly analyze, deconstruct and reframe the spatial processes that determine homophobia. I shall do this in three parts. Part one has two goals: 1) to dismantle and demystify the idea that homophobia is distinctly and solely a religious problem and

⁶ I want to be careful not to conflate hillbilly life with queer life in Appalachia, or any other form of life for that matter. To assume that *all* small town and rural folk who live in Appalachia are hillbillies belies the variation and complexity of the make-up of Appalachia that described in chapter 1. There are indeed 'hillbillies' to the extent that a group of rurally minded mountain folk have reclaimed the moniker and made it their own. I am focusing on this term 'queerbilly' as an entry point into these variations because of the salience of the term as a recognizable figure *and* its subversive potential to attach itself to a burgeoning and quickly growing Hillbilly Pride movement. For the moment, 'queerbilly' remains analytical and I will come back to a critical working definition of the term in the next chapter.

2) to show that heterosexual privilege actually sets the conditions for homophobia through differing modalities of religious and secular homophobias. Part two will draw into relief the queer regionalisms through homophobias of circumscription that I began describing in the previous chapter. I will explain how a homophobia crafted within 'gay culture' that is redirected toward marginalized members of its group is homophobic. I will then question the ways in which rhetorics on the closet inaccurately describe 'sexual discovery' in rural places and how dismantling the closet opens up a spatial analytic that can redirect conversations about homophobia. Part three will then locate how homophobia functions as a spatial practice in Appalachia. From there, I will close the chapter with an exploration of examples of homophobia I came across in the field and how they are positioned within the new analytic that I attempt to craft here. This should illustrate a dynamic homophobia in the region that should help us to craft better understandings of place and place-making that I will explore in the next chapter.

Part I: (Dis)locating homophobias and redirecting the conversation

To discuss the forms of homophobia present in Appalachia, we need a critical working definition of homophobia that first examines its broader applications and implications. I am going to be making a potentially controversial claim that homophobia is not specifically attached to Christian rhetoric. I am going to claim that the Bible and Biblical references are not only fallacious but are equally not themselves the source of homophobia. It is my contention that continuing with a Biblically privileged understanding of homophobia not only misses the features that undergird homophobia, but limits the possibilities for Christians to be a part of the conversation that combats its effects. Rather, I argue that through the distortions and misrepresentations that set Biblical claims to anti-homosexual arguments, both on the side of Christians that use these claims, as well as the political critiques that divisively pit homophobia as a Christian problem does not sufficiently address how heterosexual privilege sets the conditions for homophobia to exist. I believe that to create a discourse on homophobia that combats the oft rendered Christian homophobia as the vanguard of American homophobia, we have to challenge these popular claims.

By (re)thinking the legitimacy of the claims that position homophobia in Christian rhetoric and (re)locating homophobia in the conditions set by heterosexual privilege, I hope to emphasize the gravity for allied development and responsibility in combating homophobia while leaving open a space for Christians to be included in that conversation. I am not attempting to downplay the role of

the Bible as a means to construct homophobic arguments. But thinking through the scholarship of critical Biblical studies offers us a means to recalibrate homophobic meaning, set these distortions into relief, and craft a debate for political, social and cultural transformation.

By analytically dislocating homophobia from Christian rhetoric through discourse analysis, we can begin to get at the finer nuances and contradictions that animate the socialities and spatialities of homophobia in secular society, while carving out a space for rational debate. I do not expect that this argument will be taken up by Christian *or* secular homophobes or even convince them that homophobia is wrong, base, or itself 'evil'. But they are not my target audience. My target audience are those – Christian, secular or otherwise – willing to accept the terms and responsibilities for combating homophobia (as well as other forms of discrimination) through languages that state in no uncertain terms that the evacuation of all forms of privilege is paramount to a social justice project. I feel that it is incumbent upon me to lay out this argument because most of my research kin in this study are Christian and they are engaging in these debates. And through these productive engagements an everyday politics of queer visibility exists, which is the topic of my next chapter.

The Christian argument

'Gay culture' has a tortured relationship with Christianity. The idea that homophobia has a particularly Christian or religious origin is a common held belief amongst many in the 'gay community.' It is often remarked by many in the 'gay community' that the emergence of fear and loathing that surrounds sexual and gender minorities emanates from a distinctly and discreetly Judeo-Christian (and more recently Islamic) bias (Fone 2000). This is not altogether without precedent. Historically, much of the political rhetoric against homosexuality has been couched in Christian terms by Christians. This has resulted in a separation of 'Church and gay bar,' where 'gay' and 'Christian' are not viewed as compatible entities. This is evident in Bernadette Barton's work on the 'Toxic Closet' that conflates the dogmatic practices of evangelical radicalism with the so called 'Bible Belt,' and then allows that to stand in as the driving force of homophobia and violence when coming out of the closet (2009).⁷ But this belief (however it materially manifests) has problematic implications that I will explore throughout this section.

⁷ See my discussion in chapter 7 for an in depth analysis of the problems revolving the approach to her research of 'gay being' in this so called 'Bible Belt'. As well, my research kin Diane and George are married, bisexual and Evangelical Christians, in the Church of God. As I will describe in the next chapter, we have had explicit conversations

Purportedly, the Bible lays out, as incontrovertible proof, that 'God's word' has claimed in no uncertain terms that 'homosexuality' is (apparently) the deadliest of sins and therefore repugnant to society. This sentiment has been refuted by popular critiques about the 'past-and-presentness' of the juridical Laws in the Bible and how could, would or should they be enforced today. Alongside this, newer critical Biblical studies question the validity of anti-homosexual claims in the Bible and have taken the historical and political contexts in which these passages were written, as well as the shifting and narrowed palimpsest of their interpretations, lost in translation from the original Hebrew and Greek, to highlight the speciousness of such claims.

For example, in chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus (Torah/Old Testament), verses 22 and 13 respectively, seemingly state in no uncertain terms that to "lie with mankind" as "with womankind" is an "abomination" (18:22) and in turn, those who submit to such a "detestable" act shall be put to death and their blood is on *their* hands (20:13) (Helminiak 2000:51). Popularly, the Leviticus justification is dismissed because of other references to juridical practices within these chapters. Some of these Laws include: daughters may be sold into slavery, marriage, and are basically property; eating shellfish is also an 'abomination'; and (to be crass) it is righteous for one to burn a cow publicly before God and in open air.⁸ These claims are ludicrous to most contemporary sensibilities, and it is argued: How can 'Christians' pick and choose which of these Laws to ratify? As well, this is Old Testament – how do these Laws meet up with Jesus' teachings? Yet, while the popular strategy to annul Christian homophobia has its productive (and certainly welcomed, allied) moments, critical scholarship has questioned the complex of Christian homophobia and has made compelling claims that attempt to disqualify the very mention of homosexuality and homosexual themes in the Bible.

Continuing with Leviticus as an example, some of these claims include that: 1) these passages were written as Jewish 'Law' after fleeing from Egypt and therefore are *not* questions of ethics and morality, but *were* rather a means to consolidate the Jewish nation in deference to the Diaspora. 2) As well, the translation of the Hebrew that has ultimately yielded the term

on the role of Christianity in the production of homophobia. George has become an emerging activist and scholar of critical Biblical studies and is in the process of becoming a licensed minister with the Church of God. While they face anti-homosexual arguments frequently, according to Diane, they have usually been in the context of rational debate and she does not feel that we should not underestimate the role of these types of debates when attempting to transform Christian homophobia.

⁸ The 'blogosphere' of the internet has numerous examples of these arguments that deflate the idea that the Bible 'condemns' homosexuality. For example visit: <http://www.soulforce.org/article/homosexuality-bible-gay-christian> (accessed April 12, 2010).

'abomination' has been poorly and misleadingly translated. Hebrew scholars that have commented on this, claim that a closer translation would resemble 'impurity' (Helminiak 2000: 53-58). This again reinforces the argument that the juridicality of these Laws has little to do with moral condemnation and actually references the political identity of the Jewish nation at the time of the Diaspora. 3) Also the *subject* of these passages has come into question – some think that this has to do with striking the boundaries of incest and this was not so much about 'homosexual' acts *per se*, but rather keeping brothers from having sex with each other (Carmichael 1997). 4) And in a similar vein, It has been argued (which is prescient to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah) that these admonitions against what would come to be recognized as 'homosexuality' in the Bible can neither reference nor connect these same sex practices with what we understand as contemporary gay life today and its cultural and social meanings (Cannon 2009, Helminiak 2000, Carmichael 1997). In this way, these critiques of same sex practices in the Bible were about the indignity and violence of male rape, a common wartime strategy at the time to humiliate one's enemy (Sodom and Gomorrah),⁹ as well as circumscribe and mitigate what we would recognize today as pederasty (an active part of ancient Greek culture at the time) (Helminiak 2000:43) that today is admonished as and collapsed into 'pedophilia.'

Let us take a brief side note into the history of the term 'homosexuality'. The term was invented by the "Austrian born Hungarian journalist, memoirist and human rights campaigner," Karl Maria Kertbeny in 1869. According to Jim Burroway, in an online 'blogspot' article from May 6, 2008, titled *Today In History: The Love That Dares Not Speak Its Name Gets A Name*:

Kertbeny reportedly became interested in homosexuality when a close friend committed suicide after being blackmailed by an extortionist. Kertbeny later said that this, combined with his "instinctive drive to take issue with every injustice" — as a Hungarian, he knew what it was to be a minority in Vienna — drove him to advocate for civil rights for gay people. (<http://www.boxturtlebulletin.com/2008/05/06/1942>, accessed February 21, 2010)

The original intent of the term was liberation and human rights. Almost 20 years later, having a term to pilfer, Richard Kraft Ebing, an Austro-German sexologist and psychiatrist wrote

⁹ The irony here is that the US government (and other military regimes to be sure) still use practices within the purview of 'enhanced' interrogation techniques in an age of military detention facilities and the so-called 'War on Terror' that constitute 'same-sex' rape. These practices are meant to humiliate and dehumanize the prisoner-subject. Yet this continued practice of violent sexual torture does not have a public critique for its location within some perverse and 'unnatural' homosexual matrix, it goes unchecked (Puar 2007). Meanwhile, we gay folk are still trapped in a perverse sodomization of our sexual practices as if Sodom and Gomorrah has anything to do with us (Fone 2000).

Psychopathia Sexualis in 1886 (Archer 2002). In this book, the term 'homosexual' becomes codified as the scientific term for the study of the psychological make-up and pathology of men who have sex with men. Through the new social technologies of sexology and psychoanalysis, the biomedicalization and psychopathologization of the new 'homosexual'¹⁰ materialized a recognizable figure to which Christian rhetoric was able to co-opt and attach its vitriol. The homosexual subject was transformed into something brash and dangerous. Indeed terms such as 'sodomite,' 'homosexual' and 'homosexuality' have been inserted wholesale into different translations of the Bible throughout history (Cannon 2009) as a means to consolidate and legitimize the so-called 'evidence' of anti-homosexuality in the Bible.

The Leviticus passages *are* about circumscribing and managing the sex and sexual subjectivities (at the time) of the Jewish people. *But* these sexual subjectivities are not directly transferable to all sexual subjectivities in all places at all times. Homosexuality the way we understand it today does not translate to the Bible because when the Bible was written there was no recognizable thing (or at the very least archived so that we can reference and interpret its practices) that could be described as homosexual. As these same sex references are laid out in the Bible, the practices don't match up, the social conditions don't match up, the motivations for engaging in same sex don't match up – in general, the Bible has *nothing* to say on queer life. Over two millennia of (re)translating scripture and sanctioning certain writings while omitting others – one is quickly aware of the editorial process that has gone into casting the policing mechanisms of homophobia throughout Christianity (at least).

It does not take a sleight of hand to reveal the dry-rot in Christian-Biblical anti-homosexual arguments. In some sects of Christianity, this blind spot is irrelevant to their homophobic project and these arguments would have little effect. The target audience of this hypothesis is not these folk – their opinions are often set and impenetrable. Arguing with a group of people that refuse to engage in debate is an exercise in futility. By using critical arguments to develop allied relations, we undermine their arguments and eventually their vitriolic head-banging should evaporate when there is no one left interested in what they have to say. This will not be an easy process, but as we shall see in the next chapter, not all Christians are homophobic. Even to the extent that they are homophobic, this is not necessarily endemic to their position on it. If these arguments are not

¹⁰ Bert Archer has noted that *Psychopathia Sexualis* was highly policed in the first half of the 20th century in the United States, and in order to be able to procure a copy, one had to be a 'registered pervert' and have a doctor's note from a professionally recognized psychiatrist (2002:85).

always already endemic and there are indeed spaces for rational debate, how does homophobia continuously reproduce itself? The simple answer would be those folk I just argued to whom I am not speaking. But what is their justification for homophobia beyond the handful of scriptural passages that they maniacally cling to in their attempt to invalidate homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation and social position? I am arguing that the same conditions that underscore secular homophobia also set the conditions that maintain Christian homophobia. But that raises for us a number of other questions.

While Christian homophobia is as morally and socially repugnant as 'homosexuality' seems to be to many Christians, we must also ask how is it that secular modes of homophobia exist in mainstream secular society? Do these secular modes work against or with Christian homophobia? How does secular homophobia remain so vehemently pernicious? What are the justifications for perpetuating homophobia and homophobic practices/spaces in a context where rhetorics on the Bible are moot, or at the very least underplayed? How is it that secular voices, from politicians all the way down to the lowest common citizen, manage to bracket homosexuality as an antisocial practice that can be related and even equated with crime, drug abuse, pedophilia and prostitution (Kantor 2009:11)? Equally striking, how do these pathologized features that collapse the homosexual with criminals, drug abusers, pedophiles and prostitutes stand in contrast to Biblical interpretations of moral turpitude *in* secular society? And while criminals, drug abusers, pedophiles and prostitutes deserve their own critical space for social and moral inquiry, what are the motivations for collapsing the features of such vastly disparate groups? And how can we account for homophobia in atheist communities and ideologies? How is it that some of the moral condemnations present in the Bible, specifically the argument that homosexuality is 'unnatural', translate to a few in the atheist community, and secular society more broadly?

Secular homophobia(s)

Throughout the 20th century to the present (at least), the homosexual and his/her emerging gay culture(s) have remained indelible threats to heterosexual culture that continue to provoke violent and reactionary sanctions against our very right to exist. Examples include, the American Psychological Association (APA) describing 'homosexuality' as a mental disorder in the 1940s iteration of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). While in 1973, the APA removed this passage from the DSM and qualitatively changed its position on homosexuality

(Fone 2000:414), the most current iteration of the DSM still marks the orientation of gender minorities as 'Gender Dysphoric Disorder' (Zucker and Spitzer 2005). In the 1970s, Anita Bryant and her band of fear mongering malcontents mounted a national movement out of Dade County, Florida to 'save the children' from 'homosexual depravity' (Helminiac 2000:24).¹¹ The emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s confirmed that the homosexual body is disease ridden, morally bankrupt and without social relevance (Watney 1987).¹² While some recent 'positive' media images of gay life (marked urban, middle class and white) on television shows such as *Ellen*,¹³ *Will & Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, (among others) help to assuage heterosexual fears of gay peoples, it does so by normalizing, romanticizing, softening and heterogendering the contours of gay life to seem palatable for, if not altogether resembling heterosexual life.

Homosexuality, by its very nature, challenges the heterogendered order of society.¹⁴ By throwing into relief the very liminality of heterosexual culture – by showing that there are other ways of ordering sexual desire, pairings and groupings, homosexuality poses a very real threat to the continued consolidation of heterosexual life and culture and the privileges that it has secured. Foucault has pointed this out to us in the *History of Sexuality, vol. 1*. With the pathologization of women, children, adulterous men and sodomites, manufactured through the medical profession, psychology, the police/prison industry, education systems and so on, the control of sexual

¹¹ This is where the base notion that homosexuals and gay culture 'recruit' children into their ranks enters popular discourse in describing how one 'becomes' gay. This was seen as a threat to children with predatory homosexuals lurking around every corner to convert them into the homosexual 'lifestyle'. Gay primary and secondary teachers in particular, took the heat from this – it was argued that gay teachers will convince students that it is 'okay' to be gay. And while, I would argue (as a gay college instructor currently teaching a Gender and Women's Studies course) that (some) 'gay teachers' are teaching that it is okay to be a sexual and gender minority, it is not meant as a means to 'recruit' new homosexuals.

¹² This can certainly be witnessed in President Ronald Reagan's active denial to even recognize, let alone allocate funds for research on AIDS during the dawn of the pandemic. He simply took a negative stance on homosexuality, turned his back and deemed gay life irrelevant to society (Christiansen and Hanson 1996).

¹³ There are two sides to Ellen here. There's Ellen (The Ellen DeGeneres Show), her current daytime talk show. For the most part, this show's innocuous and conspicuous homosexuality gives it broad appeal. But what still hangs out there and what is often not remembered is her sit-com that aired between 1994-1998, also called *Ellen*. In the penultimate season (and arguably why the show failed after its last), Ellen 'came out' to Oprah Winfrey (playing a psychologist) in the episode. This was a revolutionary moment in gay/queer television. On mainstream television in primetime, the first coming out story was told to the entire nation. I remember working for gay restaurant in Cincinnati at the time and what a big deal it was. This was a groundbreaking moment in 1997 where our visibility was cemented as a legitimate and transformational political project that was not going anywhere.

¹⁴ Near the end of his life, Foucault made a provocative claim. In an interview on his position on homosexual sex/life/politics, he noted that it is not the 'sex act itself' that disturbs the social order, but rather "the homosexual mode of life" which he associated with "the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force" (Bersani 2001:351). What I take this to mean is that people are not afraid of sex – they are afraid of the visibility described as a 'lifestyle' to circumscribe both what that produces as a visible culture and potentially destroys of the existing social order. If we can accept this claim, then it seems there is indeed an implicit spatiality to homophobia that has neither been sufficiently interrogated nor recognizes the role of heterosexual privilege in its contours.

practices sought to seek out, disclose and purge sexual dissidents. Indeed this process, Foucault has argued, created the 'homosexual' as a distinct 'species' by heterosexual culture (1978:43) and in turn marking 'heterosexuals' a species by default. This biopoliticization of life, as the citizen-subject came under the purview of the State and its institutionalized set of disciplinary mechanisms through a diffuse and socially policed web of power relations intended to restore and maintain the social order of heterosexuality. Ironically, heterosexuals trying to 'manage' sexual dissidents, hailed into existence their own Achilles' heel.

While the controlling mechanisms of the hysterical woman, masturbating child and adulterous man have for the most part faded into the background, homosexuals continue to be marked as a primary target. Because homosexuality challenges the gendered and sexed order of heterosexuality, the very conditions of that challenge threaten to unravel the desperate grasp that heterosexuality maintains for its claim on social dominance. Take for example the current debate on same-sex marriage. The argument is that gay marriage will fundamentally undermine the institution of marriage. *And they're right.*¹⁵ Marriage, as a transhistorical and transcultural institution – even across its differing variations – organizes (hetero)gendered relations.¹⁶ In the late 1877, the anthropologist Lewis H Morgan (Morgan 1964, Engels 1973) marked out the differing, (and as he couched them) 'evolutionary' modes of familial formations as he attempted to belie many of the racist ideologies at the time that bracketed indigenous cultures as 'subhuman' and fixed. To do this, he traced out a trajectory from indigenous/primitive to advanced/civil societies. In this

¹⁵ While the subversive complexion of this argument might imply that the gay marriage debate is a 'good' thing, its current iteration brackets and reinforces white class privilege, and our current political environment is not capable of dealing with the subtlety of such an argument. Maybe in the future such a political strategy can be mounted, but in the meantime, I remain ambivalent on same-sex marriage. This ambivalence emanates from a stalled political project that has forgotten whom it represents. Indeed we need a Marxist critique of marriage that places marriage back in its historical context and reveals just how much class and white privilege is buttressed through the use of marriage as a State sponsored institution. While I believe that this institution, since it is being offered and does mark citizenship, should be offered to everyone so long as it is offered, I think that a better politics would seek out the rights and privileges of marriage for *all* and not just the politically inclined and economically solvent. However, it remains a salient and useful example for parsing out just what is at threat for heterosexual life.

¹⁶ Some of these variations do themselves include an approximation of same-sex coupling with bodies that might be considered transgendered by Western standards. Looking to the indigenous cultures of the American Southwest – the 'two-spirit' figure, occupying both genders had socially sanctioned same-sex partnerships (marriages). In this way, while still nominally what Western culture might consider 'heterogendered', the gender hierarchy went: men, female men, male women and women (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 1997). The sad irony of these social forms is that as these public debates around homosexuality are unfolding, especially the marriage debate, in white and class privileged American culture and as many of these indigenous American cultures have attempted to assimilate to popular American culture as a set of survival strategies, for many of these tribes, the traditional practice of revering the 'two-spirit' body and recognizing their partnerships have evaporated and sexual and gender minority Native Americans find themselves up against similar types of discrimination (homophobia) that was once unheard of.

evolutionary model, as family structures seemingly 'progressed' toward monogamous couplets, he claimed that new 'social technologies' were added to each 'evolutionary step.'

An evolutionary model of familial forms is specious by today's theoretical standards as it reifies monogamous kinship structures and assumes that *all* family forms will eventually become monogamous. Yet what remains useful for us here is that when Morgan reached the monogamous ("monogamian") married kinship structure, the social technology added to society was property. Property is the underlying function of monogamous marriage for this kinship structure and is the only means to support it (Winnubst 2006:202-208). And those propertied relations establish the links between gendered divisions of labor, gendered identities, understandings of family (marked as 'with children') and bestow upon the married couple incredible power and (male) privilege (Naples 2004). For homosexuals to get 'married' – for homosexuals to challenge the gender order that defines marriage roles – ultimately threatens its (heterosexed) male dominated interests and undermines the institution by wrenching its control away from men.

My point in this argument is not to let the Bible or the way that it has been used off the hook. It is also not my intention to create a hyper-antagonistic, separatist, anti-heterosexuality argument where our only alternative is alienation (there are indeed variations in the heterosexual matrix and I am very fond of my straight allies, family and friends). As I stated above and will explore further in chapter 7, an intimate politics of social transformation requires allies and advocates as it draws into relief the continued problem of different modes of privilege. To get at this, I am questioning the public rhetoric that conflates the Bible with homophobia in light of the growing support of Christian allies (Doupe 1992). This should help us to look at the finer spatialities and socialities that enable homophobia through heterosexual privilege. But if the Bible sets the complexion for a particular type of anti-homosexual argument, drawn from unexamined 'anti-homosexual' passages in the Bible and further, in secular society there is a cloaked relationship and maintained distance between these Biblical justifications and secular explanations, what exactly does secular society use as ammunition for their argument? One word: 'Nature'.

For secular society to continuously maintain a mythical homophobia that is not reflexively linked to its own limitations, it must naturalize its heterosexual position becoming the obverse position in a diametric that constitutes homosexuality as 'unnatural'. Yet, because secular arguments are bound by (at least the pretense of) scientific/rational inquiry there is no moral axiom on which to hang its hat – it must seek an explanation that stands to reason. By co-opting

evolutionary science on the human species and equating all bare life (Agamben 1998) functions with self preservation and procreation, it renders homosexuality aberrant and unnecessary to sustain human life. This reduction belies the complexity of social life.¹⁷ The function of sex for the human animal becomes misrepresented through these rhetorics that equate and reduce male 'parts' and female 'parts' with 'plumbing' that are 'naturally' suited for one another. Further, it egregiously realigns heterogendered hegemonies, what Adrienne Rich has described in her seminal article on lesbian feminism as "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980). By recasting the vectors of homophobia through 'nature', the subordination of women is brought back into relief through its assumption that sex is first and foremost procreative, ergo always already penetrative. *What* a better argument to reinforce the heterogendered relations of marriage?

Nature, in this case (as with most), has seemingly two sides to it. On the one hand, it sets the conditions for material existence. It *is* spatial and temporal existence, the ether of the universe. And to be sure, the only certainty in nature is complexity, unfixity, variation and *uncertainty* (Anderson 1999). On the other hand, it establishes the value structures that constitute human and social organization. It sets the conditions for the metaphysical interpretation of humans' relationship to the universe. In this way, nature acts as a function to consolidate, determine and distribute the meaning of life (Nightingale 2003). However, if in the former, 'entropic' nature equals chaos and uncertainty, and in the latter, 'determined' nature equals structure and social order, how do these two meet up? Often, it seems, the 'determined' brand of nature, co-opting the material conditions of nature *qua* entropy to invalidate 'social interventionist' arguments in its make-up, strip it of its entropic conditions and collapse the two to mean the same – 'Nature' (the obverse of 'unnatural'). It is from this position that these rhetorics are able to script homophobic practices and spaces.¹⁸ Ironically, and reaffirming the entropic in nature, these two are uneasy and chaotic bed fellows

¹⁷ Indeed, the 'unnatural' argument on 'homosexuality' is becoming increasingly subject of its own dry-rot. More and more evidence reveals that nearly all species on the planet engage in some form of same sex genital contact within their social matrices. Further these practices are not aberrant but often structural to the fungible cohesion of social groups. These cohesive strategies strengthen the emotive bonds, as well as the social hierarchies of the group that both consolidate and deploy group survival strategies (Sommer and Vasey 2006).

¹⁸ While 'homophobia' is the most current discriminatory iteration that *nature* discourses use to circumscribe sexual and gender minorities, 'Nature' has been at the vanguard of multiple deployments of violence, circumscription and death throughout history. For example, the mind/body dichotomy, emblemized by Descartes infamous passage *cogito ergo sum*, codified asymmetrical gender relations during the Enlightenment and constituted women's bodies as natural: prone, fertile and for cultivation (Detamore 2010). As well, naturalizing race through the use of the Linnaean classificatory system during the late 18th century and throughout the 19th highlighted and established a superior intellect and civility to European whites, while 'naturally' predisposing people of color into varying degrees of sloth, vagary and savagery, which in turn gave structure, meaning and purpose to racism (Driver 2001).

precisely because for all of the attempts to make 'Nature' describe reality as discreet and contained, there is always something waiting in the wings to contaminate it.

Unfortunately, however, and in deference to the very real homophobias that Christianity has helped to produce, religious dogma has become the vanguard of American homophobia. But as the Bible rightly (but incompletely) represents its public persona and as we have explored here that this may not actually set the conditions for homophobia, what are the limitations of concentrating on Christianity in relation to homophobia? And how do we treat, or even account for the nominal, yet very real and growing coalition of Christian allies and advocates? How do we account for the lives of many gay/trans folk who happen *to be* Christian? If the Bible is one (of many) methods of homophobia and it is *heterosexuality* that sets its terms and conditions are there other homophobias missing here? Are there other motivations for constituting homophobic spaces and practices that are hidden from view? There is indeed secular homophobia – fueled by a maniacal, yet not altogether displaced fear of the evacuation of heterosexual privilege. What else is at play in the scripting of homophobia? Further, to which I am ultimately getting at... how do we account for homophobias of circumscription that are crafted by and internally directed at gay culture itself?

Part II: Other modes of homophobia and the closet

Queer regionalism and homophobias of circumscription

Many of us in the 'gay community' are quick to judge and condemn places, people and practices that we perceive to threaten our ability to maintain the identities we have struggled for. As we explored in the previous chapter, popular media and culture continuously cast rural places as naïve, backward, provincial, or (in the case of Appalachia), outright violent places. We are told that the country is an 'evil' place for gay/trans folk to live – it simply is not possible. Movies such as *Deliverance* that show Appalachian sexuality as wild and bestial, or *Brokeback Mountain* that sketch out in no uncertain terms that the country is a place where queers are killed, confirm that the country must be an evil place.

At first glance, one might ask why is it necessary to mark out the regional discrimination of rural Appalachian sexual and gender minorities, or queer regionalism, as a 'homophobia of circumscription'? Can two subcultures on different sides of a similarly contained marginality discriminate against each other on the basis of their common marginality? Are new dominant

groups formed in the power/resistance strategies of these tensions? Can a gay man be homophobic?¹⁹ And how is queer regionalism homophobic? Homophobia is bracketed by sex, sexuality, gender (and gender orientation in relation to transphobia), desire, sexual practices, social taboos, repugnance and violence. It is marked by “the personal, the interpersonal, the institutional, and the cultural” (Blumenfeld 1992:3). Are these factors present in queer regionalism to actually constitute it as ‘homophobia’ and not merely a discriminatory regionalism? In the previous chapter, I was at pains to sketch out a nuanced (and contingent) analysis of how sexual and erotic codes, practices and images of the rural (cowboys, farm boys, hillbillies, rednecks...) are co-opted by the homonormative effects of metronormative gay culture and transformed into artificial approximations that may be consumed or disposed of at will. I want to mark out how this is actually homophobic.

Discrimination that is based on socially built features and attributes of contiguous groups is banked on targeting what makes that group distinguishable. The distinguishing feature that constitutes the marginalization of the group (blackness, femaleness, gayness, and so on) and the effects/violence of discriminating against that feature are not necessarily exclusively discernable. Every marker of every category has variations. Personal variations constitute taste and style that enable and enact desire. Sometimes these variations create new linkages and common bonds that are able to consolidate ‘subcultures’ (Halberstam 2005:159). In queer life these might include ‘bear’ culture, ‘leather’ culture and ‘transculture’.²⁰ They elaborate and expand the aesthetic, political and cultural possibilities of the larger group. However, using other modes of privilege (i.e. whiteness, maleness, wealth...) a dominant segment of the group is often able to foment, which in turn begins scripting the borders of the group at large. And the group at large does not always receive or acknowledge new variations (or even old ones that give the group a ‘bad name’) as a ‘good thing’ (Ibid 36-38). Indeed, in the 1990s it was in vogue for white, gay, urban, upper middle class, professional men, coupled in heterogendered simulacra, to distinguish themselves from ‘drag queens’ and criticize them as the embarrassing ‘black sheep’ of gay culture, brash and nonrepresentative of the ‘real’ gay culture – meanwhile reifying and consolidating the Gay Rights

¹⁹ While there are types of ‘internalized’ homophobias that are not only about shaping queer space, but have individually reflexive characteristics related to shame, self worth and hatred, and the consistent denial of one’s legitimacy in a group that they have been socialized not to associate with (Russell and Bohan 2006), I shall concentrate on group related homophobias as they constitute this circumscription that I am alluding to here.

²⁰ Indeed the three that I have marked out here each have their own corresponding ‘Pride flags’ independent of , but supplemental to the ‘Rainbow Pride flag’ of the larger LGBT culture. There are of course other subgroups that consolidate, fluctuate, diversify, and so on – some of these yield formal movements with flags and some do not.

Movement to conform to and benefit the new upwardly mobile 'gay white men' with garishly disposable incomes (Gamson 1998).

Over time, leather culture and bear culture have been integrated into the larger gay culture, so that you can see their presence at Pride events. This might be attributed to the fact that leather and bear cultures most nearly resemble a significant portion of gay male sex practices and social spaces in the United States of the 1970s (Wright 2001) – they've been around awhile. In a similar vein, transculture is becoming more visible, but its entrance into the 'scene' is still highly marked by internal discrimination (transphobia) that circumscribes their abilities to function within gay culture. Indeed the fact that they are attached to 'gay' culture already misrepresents their struggles – while sexuality *is* a struggle for them (there are gay trans folk) sexuality is not the primary concern of their struggle. Gender orientation is *not* sexual orientation (Bornstein 1994). Further, there is as much variation within transculture as there is within the tensions and manipulations of the neoliberal gay project. However, their needs and struggles are in many ways so completely different from gay culture that finding a voice within the Gay Rights Movement has not only been difficult and stifling but in many ways outright hostile.

Nevertheless, these nominal alliances aside, subgroups often maintain completely separate spaces – there are indeed Leather/Bear bars²¹ and social spaces. There *is* blurring between these (porous) spaces and boundaries, but the idea that these different spaces exist contemporaneously not only speaks to the variations which occur in sexual categorization (i.e. Homosexuality) but also to the tastes and styles that become bracketed and disqualified by the neoliberal gay project. And this ultimately serves to alienate subgroups (i.e. dyke, transgender, genderqueer, radical faerie, bear, leather, twink/daddy, and so on *ad infinitum*). But what marks the differences within and tensions between these subgroups *is* the erotic. Erotic style, taste and desire give meaning to the subgroup but also cast a distinguishing characteristic that can be exploited by the dominant group, should the erotic codes, symbols and practices of the subgroup be considered offensive (Povinelli 2002:6). If their practices do not 'offend', they 'pass' and their erotic codes become part of the 'fabric' of the neoliberal gay project as a quaint difference that 'proves' our diversity. Should their practices offend the gay palette, they are summarily rejected

²¹ Crossings (formerly Bang, formerly Crossings) that opens this chapter has historically been a Leather/fetish bar (Jones 2001).

and gaining entry into the gay matrix is done piecemeal and at the expense of purging and apologizing for offensive attributes.

In the case of rural Appalachian sexual and gender minorities, the queer regionalism that displaces their fundamental ability to 'fit in' and move between rural space and urban space seamlessly is circumscribed by a metronormative aversion of the country and by association rural gay/trans folk (Halberstam 2005). But it is not merely that they are rural that establishes this distinction. How sex and sexuality is cast exteriorly for and mapped on to the rural constitutes the basis for this discrimination. And there are two simultaneous Orientalisms at play in this reduction. For one, the idealization and exoticization of hillbillies (and cohort) as erotic consumables (implying their disposability) wrenches the sexual subjectivity from the Appalachian sexual/gender minority, disqualifies it and then summarily rejects it. So, at the site of the erotic, sexuality is a key component and source of this discrimination. Second, the underlying fear that constructs and maps a densely violent homophobia on to an Appalachian terrain is tethered to the policing functions of homophobia that shape queer space. It is a negative shaping of space, whereby Appalachia becomes circumscribed and the possibility for queer space to occur only happens on the outside of these boundaries. At the site of fear, sexually driven violence becomes the source of hostility. And the possibility for queer space to emerge in these places is negated.

What is at stake in these discriminatory practices is the reification of a particular vision for the metronormalization of gay life through the policing mechanisms of the neoliberal gay project. Like other class struggles, rich white gay men have a lot to lose by shifting the focus of our politics to poverty, disability, race, gender orientation and other invisible markers of queerness that remain subverted and threaten class privilege. But through the popular and appropriative practices of rural iconography that inscribe untenable differences between the so-called urban/rural binary and constitute these differences as exotic and expendable, a homophobia of circumscription is not only an effect of these practices but the conditions on which they are enabled. And it is indeed homophobia, not merely a discriminatory regionalism because the primary source of the discriminatory practices are crafted through the cartoonish sexualities made to represent rural folk, and the fear and loathing that come to synecdochically constitute those sexual positionalities as threatening to the dominant sexual position. Just as heterosexually driven homophobia is marked by the fear of how same-sex desire threatens heterosexual life, the queer regionalism that I have begun to lay out here creates a homophobia of circumscription in response to the perceived threat

that rural sexual and gender minorities pose to the homonormative order and the neoliberal gay project.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how representation functions to create a particular type of Appalachian sexuality. The imaginaries of the neoliberal gay project have had the tendency to build a monolithic and impenetrable homophobia through the rural around these representations. Just because it is homophobia does not mean that it is not homophobic – the neoliberal gay project that polices ‘proper’ gay life can (and I argue does) homophobically circumscribe its subgroups (in this case toward rural gay/trans folk). And it does so by deploying similar types of violences and foreclosures emblematic of heteronormativity and straight social worlds. The urban/rural binary, then, is insufficient in determining the forms, focus and encounters of homophobia across a field of difference and variability. Homophobia certainly exists and in often violent ways in rural Appalachia. However, these forms are not monolithically binding and many of them reflect similar motivations and strategies as that of homophobia in the urban.²² It is my contention that this reveals not only the spatial and social variability of homophobia, but forces us to rethink its practices, processes and locations. How then, do these stylistic foreclosures scripted through metronormativity that ultimately constitute political foreclosures bracketed by homonormativity break down and reveal themselves at the site of rural homophobia?

Knock knock... who's there? The closet (who?)

In many ways, it is true that rural places do not offer the political and social spaces for the robust visual gay culture that we have come to know and expect as the bastion of ‘gay liberation’. Yet even here, we must be careful not to conflate rural places with a lack of queer visibility. It is a fallacy to whitewash the country as an entrenched and insufferable place where homophobia is a monolithic and impenetrable juggernaut that forces those ‘sad’ unfortunates into an implacable closet that seems to act more like a vault.²³ There *are indeed* social and political movements within

²² It is important to note, that while reports of homophobia are probably less likely to be reported in rural areas because of a lack of overall visibility and this will diminish our capacity to decipher the relative rates of urban and rural homophobia, this does not mean that homophobia is an urban or a rural problem, but rather a complex social problem that emanates from multiple sites and sources to create a striated terrain that is not always already recognizable.

²³ We could illustrate the futility of the ‘closet as vault’ metaphor that I am describing here and the expectation to find such a monolithically binding rural homophobia by remembering the Geraldo Rivera special that aired to colossal ratings in the late 1980s and also ended in colossal disappointment. After ‘discovering’ the vault of the infamous early 20th century gangster Al Capone, Rivera made an orgiastic spectacle to find out just what was inside. After an hour of power drills, construction dust and desperate speculation, there was absolutely nothing of note inside the vault. His expectations were dashed, and I am arguing here that the homophobic expectations of the neoliberal gay project

Appalachia that are attending to this problem. The Highlander Institute in New Market, Tennessee for example, has a long history of promoting and training activists for social justice and advocacy around class struggle and race in the region and the United States in general. With a commitment to social justice, the institute added sexual and gender minority issues to its mission statement in the 1990s.²⁴ An in-depth analysis of some more recent and emerging activism has been laid out and analyzed in Mary L Gray's recent book *Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009), which is sited in Central Appalachia (and Eastern Kentucky).

I have personally been privy to a handful of these moments and movements throughout the course of my research. Examples include: 1) Hazard Community and Technical College in Hazard, Kentucky has recently started a Gay/Straight Alliance across its campuses. 2) The Appalachian Research Council has been actively seeking proposals for queer art and activism projects in Eastern Kentucky. 3) Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina has recently approved and added a Gay and Lesbian Studies minor to its undergraduate curriculum and the quaint rural town of Boone has a Gay Pride event each June. 4) March 26-28, 2009 marked the first GLBTQ Conference with a theme of 'Queer Art/Queer Action: Politics of Possibility' at the University of North Carolina, Asheville. 5) And Appalachian Women's Alliance of Virginia has actively engaged in starting LGBT education programs through their organization to bring awareness about sexual and gender minorities to Virginia and the Central/Southern Appalachian region.

To begin to lay out a spatial terrain where these examples of Appalachian queer activism become legible, I seek to add to Michael Brown's work on the spatialization of the closet metaphor. In his 2000 book, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe*, he explores the competing, contradictory and often diverging logics and pragmatic parlances that organize the 'closet.' These logics bolster an understanding for gay identity that is in many ways celebratory, but nevertheless constricts the emergence and efficacy of the queer body. I want to explore this by reproducing here the opening passages of his book and briefly analyze how this fits with my arguments:

mapped onto rural geographies will be equally dashed as we begin to delve deeper into understanding the subtle nuances and life strategies of rural gay/trans folk when it comes to homophobia.

²⁴ A history of the Highlander Institute and their commitment to social and environmental justice can be accessed through their website: <http://www.highlandercenter.org/>

'The closet', Sedgwick writes, 'is the defining structure of gay oppression [in the 20th] century'. The boldness of this provocative claim must be understood in relation to the raw power its subject names. The closet is a term used to describe the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men. It describes their absence – and alludes to their ironic presence nonetheless – in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be. It is a sign that certainly embodies Foucault's notion of power/knowledge: that what and how one knows something is always already an exercise of power. Such power has typically been recognised [sic] as either homophobia or heteronormativity. The closet is an important term in queer theory and parlance because it conveys so simply and efficiently the specificity of oppression based on intersecting norms of gender/sexuality. It allows us to speak our anger and pain about lying, hiding, being silenced, and going unseen. The closet's ontological demands are exacting and exhaustive: that we cannot be in the world unless we are something we are not. And so it not only points to a lack of being in the world, it also signifies the inevitable oppression we face if we 'come out of the closet' either by choice or force (2000:1).

By coming toward an understanding of the closet as a set of (inter)personal negotiations, he reveals the paradoxical simplicity with which the closet scripts spatial practices. And he begins to allude to the limitations of the allure of this 'simplicity' by showing that the closet, acting as a metaphor of liberation/oppression collapses the complexity of such negotiations. Homophobia, in this sense is spatialized and recognized through the closet as a set of constricting practices that organize space on both sides of its threshold.

The gay body is both oppressed by being *in* and *out* of the closet. To be 'in the closet' is not to be one's 'true,' 'authentic' self. To be 'out of the closet,' one enters into the social denial of their legitimacy. By challenging this ontologization and its effects, we begin to see a fractal, fissured closet that becomes a moving and morphing space that one must constantly come out of, constantly stay in, or some combination of these. As we begin to see the closet as it organizes the neoliberal gay project and the social negotiations and disclosures that bracket its oppression and homophobic assumptions, we are left with complex geographies of sexualities that cannot be disentangled from the spatial processes that constitute its function. However, what Brown is ultimately getting at, what Judith Halberstam (2005) adds to by questioning the epistemological limitations of the closet metaphor in rural space, and what I am hoping to add to this discussion through the arguments that I am beginning to lay out here is that the closet (in its current iteration at least) must be torn down. It must be rethought in its relationship to homophobia and queer identity.²⁵ If we look to the metaphors that bind social existence, we have to recognize the spaces they produce to not only understand their effects, but to articulate their discrepancies and nuances.

²⁵ I will come back to this argument through the closing political/theoretical arguments and potentiality for rural queer geographies to radically change how we approach geographies of sexualities in chapter 7. I am not altogether

Part III: Constructions of homophobia: beyond the Appalachian parody

(Re)locating homophobia in queer/Appalachian spatial practices

So far, I have been working from a broader definition of homophobia that draws on multiple socialities and spatialities that does not assume that homophobia is always already Christian but can be crafted internally from the consumption and heterogendered practices of the neoliberal gay project. Through this, I have attempted to highlight how the undergirding structure of homophobia is heterosexual privilege itself and how homophobia is used to bracket queer subjectivity and blunt its edges. Further, I have discussed the limitations of the closet as its ontologies do not necessarily meet up with the practical life strategies of everyday gay/trans folk in the country. I have also made the argument that similar to the ways in which heterosexuality is 'threatened' by homosexuality, mainstream gay culture perceives itself to have as much at stake. In the constructed differences between country gay/trans folk and city gay/trans folk, the country queer is seen equally threatening to 'gay life' as the dangerous and precarious places from whence they came. And further, to see the country queer attempt to move in and out of these 'dangerous spaces' is similarly perceived as a threat undermining the conditions of 'gay life'.

This is evident in Jeff Mann's 2005 poetry and prose book, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, on being gay in and of the mountains when he states:

Last summer at Lost River, I experienced prejudice of a different sort, reminding me of what an off creature I am, cultural amphibian, insisting on both worlds, Appalachian and queer. John and I were enjoying barbeque at another gay-owned establishment and chatting with a male couple from DC, when one of them said, "Well, you two can't be from West Virginia. You seem too literate." I smiled stiffly and raised my hand. "West Virginia here. I'm from Summers County. I teach Appalachian Studies at Virginia Tech." He had enough grace to be at least mildly embarrassed (Mann 2005:xiv).

I briefly argued in the previous chapter that there *are* a limited set of ways for some rural sexual and gender minorities to be 'tolerated' in urban gay space. I do want to reinforce this sentiment here so that we avoid running the risk of reifying this thing that I have come to call the neoliberal gay project. The critique of the neoliberal gay project and its features (a complicit queer politic, homonormativity and metronormativity) is a critique of the socially negotiated and organized

convinced, as Michael Brown states that the closet may be a 'dead metaphor (2000:28). Pragmatically and on the ground, the closet does still organize the everyday lives of gay/trans folk, both in the city and the country. However, I do agree with both Brown and Halberstam that we must rethink its epistemologies. And this, I will argue may be the radical contribution that rural queer geographies might offer us – a contingent closet with shifting epistemologies that obliterates its claim as an ontological given.

assemblages that privilege some, while disadvantaging others. However, we *do not* want to allow these circulations enabled by these assemblages to stand in for individuals as independent authors of queer regionalism. We *must* remain ambivalent (Oswin 2003).

Nonetheless, the prevailing complexion of a metronormatively couched 'gay culture' through the homonormalizing practices of the neoliberal gay project continues to maintain stark and abysmal boundaries between what is considered 'acceptable' forms of gay sex/life/politics, and those that are constituted as threats to that order. In the passage above, Jeff and John were on their own 'turf' when this encounter took place. This allowed them some authority that they might not otherwise have had. Had the spatial organization of this encounter been the other way around, the scenario might have played out differently. Yet the flash of embarrassment, played out through the blushing deference that this is indeed Jeff's 'turf' highlights these constructed separations that maintain these boundaries. As this scenario played out on the ground, maybe this might have been seen as a learning experience and the blushing Washingtonian walks away with the ability to enlighten others. But that the conditions were in place for the blush to happen allude to the broader set of queer regionalisms that bind urban perceptions of the country queer.

In the process of tracking this argument, a spatiality begins to emerge that has a complex, striated, and incomplete interconnectivity to how queer spaces are produced, how they are maintained, how rural queer folk recognize and negotiate 'safe' and 'dangerous' people, places and pathways (Gray 2009), as well as regional and varying geographical striations and complexions of homophobia. With a critical working definition of homophobia that wrenches its contingencies away from a neoliberally privileged vanishing point, we can begin to analyze how some of these encounters operate and are negotiated in rural Appalachian space. As we begin to disentangle the tentacles of the neoliberal gay project from actually existing forms of homophobia in the country, let us restate and ruminate for a moment on Marge Murray's statement from the *Laramie Project* that opens this chapter. There is I think, a complex and ambivalent homophobia working through this passage that begs analysis and offers us an entry point for spatializing homophobia in Appalachia.

Marge Murray (played by Frances Sternhagen in the movie) is the mother of the officer who found Matthew Shepherd tied to a fence and left for dead in the open pastures on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming on October 7, 1998. Matthew Shepherd was HIV+ and her daughter became exposed to the virus while attempting to disentangle him from the wire fence on which he was strung. She was subsequently, aggressively treated with antiretroviral medications immediately

following her attempt to rescue him. As it was dramatized in the movie, this statement was given during her initial interaction with the theatre troop:

Well... I've been close enough to the case to know many of the people. I have a daughter that works in the sheriff's department. As for the gay issue... uh... I don't give a damn, one way or the other. As long as they don't bother me. And even if they did, I'd just say, "no thank you". And that's the attitude of most of the Laramie population. They might poke one, in a bar situation, you know, they been drinking, and they might actually smack one in the mouth. But then they just turn and walk away. Laramie is live and let live (*The Laramie Project* 2002).

This statement is rife with ambivalence and contradiction. Her daughter eventually tested 'negative' as a result of the antiretroviral cocktails. Nevertheless, one might think that because her daughter's life was threatened as a result for simply coming in contact with a gay body, she would have had far more disparaging things to say about 'them gays'. Yet her claim for a 'libertine' Laramie has a blurred and double sided effect.

On the one hand, its subtleties bring the contingencies of rural queer negotiations into relief. 'I don't give a damn', and 'Laramie is live and let live' are emblematic of a complexion of libertarian indifference that belies notions of a blanket rural homophobia. On the other hand, it nevertheless reinforces that there is indeed homophobia in Laramie. And this homophobia has an active if underplayed component of violence that treats the gay body as a contingent object that has limited agency and a devalued position within humanity. 'As long as they don't bother me' and 'They might poke one, in a bar situation ... and they might actually smack one in the mouth' are drawn through the suspicions of the 'legitimacy' of gay bodies and reinforces heterosexual privilege. What is striking here, however, is the resolve with which she simultaneously offers and denies queer space in Laramie, distancing herself but not altogether foreclosing on its possibilities. So, if we can begin to see how homophobia starts to fill out spatial boundaries and their varying levels of hostility, we can begin to question the whole complex of the neoliberal gay project that maintains an arm's length between itself and Appalachian rural sexual and gender minorities.

For example, one evening, I was hanging out with my friend and kin, Robyn. He was my hairstylist in Harlan, and I would often schedule appointments right before he closed shop, so that we could hang out and chat, smoke cigarettes and have a laugh. His apartment was directly behind the hair salon he owned with his business partner and we would slip through the door that separated his work space from his home space and settle in for an evening of stories – and he tells the best stories. This particular night, he told me a story about being in the Harlan Wal-Mart

parking lot one day. There were other people around, while a car load of rambunctious young men drove by and yelled 'fag' at him. According to his retelling of the story, he looked them down and said, "Fag... really? That's the best you can do. If you're going to insult me, the least you could say is I give a bad blow job or something, but 'fag', as if everyone in Harlan doesn't know I'm gay." All the onlookers began chuckling. There was some nervous suspicion by those standing nearby that Robyn had somehow pushed the boundaries too far, but nevertheless, he diffused a situation. And how his sexuality is mapped onto Harlan is indelible to his place in it.

Robyn's salon is ripe with stories about people that live in Harlan – family, kinship, gossip, gay life. And everyone knows that he is gay. Throughout our encounters with one another, we've been discussing a number of things about how 'home' is made and what place means and where gay people fit into this mess. Robyn believes very strongly in family ties and connections, even those that surpass sanguine kinship. In fact, he gave me a pillow that his grandmother made for him, that had embroidered onto it 'Before you can have wings, you must have roots'. This stands as a mantra for him, and while he never apologizes for his sexuality, he still manages to be one of the most well respected persons in town. We shall explore these sentiments further below, as well as in the next chapter when I begin to lay out some of the strategies that constitute queer place-making in Harlan and Eastern Kentucky more broadly. But I mention this here to contextualize the ambivalence that happens at these sites of homophobia and how they are diffused through spatial attachments and social networks that come to embody rural places. For the remainder of the chapter, I am going to pull out some of these examples of homophobia and contextualize how they have come to be negotiated at the particular sites of homophobia and how those begin to create the construction of queer space/place that I will focus on in the next chapter.

Homophobia: the good, the bad and the what? That's right, transformation

Martin: on being a Physician Assistant

My first attempt at 'interviewing' a 'subject' was Martin. I met him online in an internet chat room and I was coming into town to visit with Andrew; Martin agreed to meet with me. This was my first real conversation about what it means to be gay in the country and I was nervous. But, I had committed to a paper at the April of 2008, annual professional meeting of the Association of American Geographers (by the same title of this chapter) about thinking through homophobia spatially. I figured that I needed to deliver not only relevant information but to ground it in some

'real' evidence to successfully make my point. So, Martin and I exchanged phone numbers online and I called when I said I would, in Harlan. I was worried that he would 'back out' on me at the last minute but he still agreed to meet with me. He asked me to meet him at a gas station on State route 119. He would meet me there and I would follow him back to his place. It was on the same road that my hotel was on, so it was easy to find and within fifteen minutes. Still nervous, I met him at the gas station and followed him back into the hollow, up the hill and to his place. He lived there with his partner of seven years. Their house blushed with middle class privilege.

When I first met Martin, his partner was out of town. We sat down at the kitchen table, as he told me about John and I fumbled to make conversation. I asked him about homophobia in broad terms at first that he couldn't really relate to. He told me that there are some things about being in the country that can make one wary. The pejorative slurs that he has generally received in the past have been from 'rabble rousing' teenagers, often in groups and at a safe distance (much like Robyn's incident at Wal-Mart described briefly above). He said that he doesn't feel, however, that he's ever been directly 'targeted'. He's sure that people talk about him behind his back, but that's only because he hears them talking about others behind their backs. Gossip is a pastime for the rural folk of Harlan County according to Martin. However, he says that there is also an 'I'll leave you alone, if you leave me alone' mentality that mitigates social strangeness. But he couldn't attribute much more to this when describing 'homophobia' that he's experienced in Harlan.

Intrigued by an already more nuanced understanding of homophobia in Harlan, I wanted to dig deeper and find an even more intricate layer of subtle homophobias. I was beginning to feel more comfortable, so I was able to start refining my questions. I settled into asking him more narrative based questions about what he does and if being gay interferes with that. Then he began to tell me his story... Martin is a physician's assistant (PA) at a local clinic. His partner does hospital administration and often travels out of town to conferences. Martin has lived in Harlan County all of his life, only leaving briefly to go to school in Barbourville and Lexington. At the time when he got his PA license, this was a new medical field in Kentucky and the legislature had just established the legal infrastructure to support it. He was among the first Kentucky cohort of this profession. He has been a PA for more than 30 years and he's been in two major relationships; one of 27 years and his current of 7.

Being in the social health care system in Harlan County, he is an extremely public figure and he is openly gay at work. He told me that being openly gay at work has been an asset to him.

Clients that he has never seen before actively seek him out. They feel that because he is gay that whatever embarrassing ailment that requires the necessity to visit a PA, he won't judge them and they can be more open about their 'condition'. As well, the tightness with which 'family' is articulated in Harlan does a great deal to mitigate social strangeness that also helps manage homophobic terrains. Once you're kin, you're kin and there's not a lot that will cut those bonds. He's always been close with his family and he is 'out' to them. They have been close with both of his partners. His father gets lonely now that Martin's mother passed away. He's in his 80s and calls his son frequently. Indeed, he took one of these calls while I patiently, yet reverently sat waiting. They are very close.

In this first example of homophobia, there are some subtle points of note. First, homophobia is a textured and socially negotiated set of social processes that do not always end in violence – or at least the kinds of violence that always already mitigate social mobility and respect. And to the extent that they do, they are neither always easily read as homophobic nor black and white. Nevertheless, Martin's 'openness' at work still marks him as a 'gay man'. Homophobia is still operating in this scenario. It is doing so from differing points of collusion that open up the opportunity for homosexuality that begins to carve out access points between straight and queer social worlds. While the expectation that a 'gay man' would somehow have a better understanding of the social struggles that might help to ameliorate the embarrassment that may come with certain ailments, the assertion still operates on the assumption that all gay men experience struggle in the same way. By being openly gay in this assemblage of PA/client relations, he has already shared an 'embarrassing secret' with them, so that they might feel more comfortable sharing the embarrassment of their own ailments with him. The underlying assumption is that there is shame in being gay, even if the result is people trying to form moments of connection between two 'shared' perceptions of shame. That this struggle can be read as empathy can be reductive. Do all gay men experience struggle in the same way? Does this offer us a connection between other kinds of struggle? Is it appropriate to read queer struggle into the types of empathy that these PA clients are seeking? Notwithstanding, this complexity begs a reading that brings these contingent and negotiated homophobias into relief. However, a look at an example from the 'darkside' of homophobia compels us to remain both ambivalent *and* vigilant in our ambition to open up new kinds of political spaces for rural Appalachian sexual and gender minorities.

Donnie: violence on a highway

I have never met Donnie personally. Elisa introduced me to Norma while I was in Whitesburg one Thursday evening working on ideas and issues related to the concept 'gay bar'²⁶ and generally 'hanging out' at the 'open mic night' in Whitesburg's bar/café/coffee shop. Norma is a communications professor on the main campus of Hazard Community and Technical College (HCTC) in Hazard, Kentucky. HCTC has six campuses in the contiguous Eastern Kentucky counties of Perry (Hazard), Knott (Hindman), Breathitt (Jackson) and Leslie (Hyden). Perry County includes its main campus, an allied health college and a vocational technologies college. The Knott, Breathitt and Leslie county campuses are satellite campuses to supplement Hazard's main campus. While I was in Whitesburg, Norma and I began having discussions about establishing a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) throughout HCTC's six campuses. She told me about interested students and asked if she could have permission to give my email address to one of her students to contact me so that we could begin discussions on what a community college GSA in Eastern Kentucky might need.²⁷

Donnie originally was under the impression that I was doing a 'documentary' on gay life in Eastern Kentucky. His first email discussed how his professor, Norma had put him in contact with me and that he would be willing to participate in any way that he could. I returned his email with a description of what Elisa and my 'gay bar' project is about, what Norma and I had discussed about starting a GSA at HCTC and a broader description of my dissertation research. He emailed me back and said that he would like to be involved – to 'let him know'. A little over a week after our introductory emails, he sent me an email seeking legal advice on an incident that he had, involving a police officer that quickly turned into a wildly inappropriate display of homophobia on the side of a county highway in Eastern Kentucky. The email consisted of a brief call for help and the reproduction of a letter that he had drafted to anyone that would hear his plea.

On an evening in March of 2009, Donnie was riding home from the grocery store and passed through a 'routine' police roadblock. He showed the county officer his requested license and insurance verification and was hailed through. Upon returning home and unpacking his groceries, he realized that he had forgotten to buy plastic cups and decided that he would take the trip back 'out of the hollow' to correct his oversight. When he tried to come back through the

²⁶ I will come back to this conversation in the next chapter.

²⁷ Unfortunately, schedule conflicts did not allow me to be as involved with organizing the HCTC GSA as I would have liked to have been. But, I do know that it is up and running as of fall semester 2009.

roadblock from the other direction, he was greeted by a Kentucky State Police (KSP) officer. As Donnie states in his letter, 'I advised him that I had already shown the county officer my information and asked him if he needed to see it again. He did not even look at my information and told me to pull my car behind another car sitting there. I did so.' Donnie waited for approximately twenty minutes in his car, pulled off to the side of the road, while the KSP and county officers stood back, huddled together talking amongst each other.

When the KSP officer finally returned, he asked for Donnie's license and asked him why he was on this stretch of road again so soon. Donnie explained to him that he forgot the plastic cups, had dropped his boyfriend off at home and was returning to the convenience store (which his mother owns) to pick up the item and return home. At this point, the officer asked him to step out of his car. He remembers his 'mistake' when he recounts, 'I did not mean to say anything about me having a boyfriend because I have experienced harassment from just [such] people in this area before but never from an official'. He recognizes that he left himself exposed as he goes on to describe how this exposure quickly evolved into a despicable encounter of disrespect and homophobic violence.

Donnie's dread was noticeable, visibly shaking and in an attempt to displace his obvious discomfort, he described to the officer how he is nervous around police officers so that maybe his fear around the officer might not be read through his sexuality. The officer performed a visual 'field sobriety' test on Donnie, would not disclose his findings and then returned to his gaggle of on-looking police officers to laugh with each other and point back in Donnie's direction. From here, as Donnie describes:

[The KSP officer] returned to my vehicle and asked me to step outside of my vehicle. I did so. [The officer] then asked me to walk a straight line one foot in front of the other. I did this and did not trip or fall or anything.

[The officer] returned back to around where his vehicle and the county police vehicles were parked and was talking with the other officers. When he returned he asked me to take one hand and touch the opposite sides toe [the sole of his foot] bringing my foot up behind me and alternate hands and repeat this 6 times. I did so.

[The officer] then asked me to take my finger and do the 1234, 4321 on my fingers sobriety test I did this. After doing this Officer Frasier returned to his vehicle and was talking with the other officers laughing. He again returned and asked me to do 10 jumping jacks and clap. I did this.

Around this time I said "Officer I swear to you I am not under the influence at all if I was I would have had my boyfriend drive me." He didn't verbally respond, he returned to the other officers and began talking lowly, glaring at me and laughing again. [The officer] asked me to walk over to where the vehicles were parked, I did so. At this time he said "OK boy if you can do 10

push ups I will let you go home.” At this point I knew this was no longer a routine sobriety test this had turned into harassment based on my sexual orientation (or that is what I strongly believe.) At this point he began his humiliating and demeaning tasks for me to do which were watched by oncoming traffic while the other officers laughed along with him.

After completing the ‘sobriety field’ tests with Donnie with an obvious zeal for humiliating this young man, he then had Donnie perform another series of humiliating ‘tests’ designed to de-humanize Donnie as a person. The first of these, the officer had Donnie point to the ground and say ‘rock’. Then he had him point to the sky and say ‘star’. It was Donnie’s task to put these two directives together into a continuous motion of pointing up and down, saying ‘rock’ and ‘star’, reminiscent of the disco dancing iconography of the movie, *Saturday Night Fever*.

From this demeaning task to the next, the officer asked Donnie to walk backwards toward the officer’s car, scraping the balls of his feet on the ground as he did so to replicate Michael Jackson’s *Moonwalk*, the iconic dance performed throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. He explains, ‘I was scared that this torture would never end or if it did end that it would have been a horrible outcome. My mind was racing with images of the “Matthew Shepherd” mixed with a “Rodney King” type of situation, because if an officer was laughing at you and making you do such ridiculous things for his own entertainment what else might he do?’ These images of homophobic and racist violence began to overcome Donnie, while the ‘*Moonwalk*’ routine resolved into another humiliating task. Donnie was asked to kick out his leg straight out with his arm outstretched toward his toes, where the KSP officer ‘informed [Donnie] to do this “like a cheerleader” with an evil smirk’.

After the KSP officer had milked his amusement, to his fellow officers’ complicit enjoyment, he told Donnie if he could ‘catch his license’, that he could go home to his ‘friend’. The KSP officer teased Donnie, making movements to imitate tossing the piece of plastic as if he was playing with a dog to ‘fetch’. He finally released the plastic identification card into the air and Donnie was desperately able to grab it. The officer then told him to go home. Donnie left with tears in his eyes feeling humiliated, de-humanized and exasperated. He felt the ‘demeanor’ of the officer change as soon as he inadvertently disclosed his sexuality by referencing his boyfriend which led to the atrocities and clearly questionable professionalism of this Kentucky State Police officer. All of these were marked by an active and violent homophobia. And he didn’t know what to do because he had been told all of his life to listen to the authorities that they are there to ‘protect you’. This should have never happened. Pushups, jumping jacks, mock dancing, fetching a license like a dog, all mimetically smack of the bestial violence in *Deliverance*. And Donnie knew that his ‘civil rights’

were being violated and he is a brave young man because he points out in no uncertain circumstances at the end of his letter that he is 'not doing this for attention or financial gain, I am trying to get this out in the open or in the courts so that maybe through my suffering no one else will have to go through what I did'.

A topical reading of this might tempt us to look at its awfulness and again think how terrible it must be to be gay in Appalachia. 'One cannot be gay here!' But as we have tracked so far, this is the extreme end of a broader terrain of homophobic spaces and processes that force us to wrestle with the entire complex of homophobia, not just its isolated sites of violence. To do this, we must also recognize these processes through an analytic that draws the connections between an urban/rural reflexivity, interconnectedness and co-constitution, as well as a geographical/historical contingency, variability and ambivalence. To highlight these already existing contingencies, there is an agency that shows through Donnie rather quickly. That I found out about this incident because he was seeking my help to get legal advice already alludes to a queer visibility in the country that cannot be ignored. What's more, Donnie has put up a webpage singling out this officer with a photograph of him to make others aware of both this KSP officer and homophobic police brutality.²⁸ While we can speculate that homophobic violence in the country may be underreported due to a lack of visibility to the extent by which urban gay visibility has come to be understood, rural queer visibility still needs attention. He did not hide from homophobia as a 'monolithic rural homophobia' might suggest, but actively sought advice from others. This will lead us to our final example of homophobia to conclude this chapter, where not just the actual site of homophobia becomes suspect, but how this homophobic incident has excited a 'mini-coalitional' response, including a District Court Judge and a Harlan County Sheriff to rally behind the victim of homophobia.

Robyn: into the rabbit hole...

One of the things that I liked to do while I was living in Harlan was visit Robyn in his salon and just hang out, watch him cut hair, smoke cigarettes and gossip with all the ladies of Harlan (and sometimes their husbands too). As I stated above, Robyn always has good stories to tell. One time, amidst the gossip, he told a group of us there that apparently a group of teenagers had posted a 'Top 5' list of the 'most beautiful women' in Harlan on a news and blog website that also

²⁸ In an effort to maintain the anonymity of this informant, I shall not reference the actual website that this webpage has been posted to.

offers local 'forums and polls' to be created, *Topix.com*. Robyn was amongst the people on that list. When I first heard this, I thought this was an innocuous and playful way to connect the importance of Robyn as a person that everyone wants to be friends with to his position as a respected member of Harlan. As I thought more about this, I was aware of the homophobic and heterogendered assumptions at work that allowed Robyn (who does have long blonde hair and in many ways can come across as a powerful female figure) to be read as a woman. However, he *does* identify as a proud, strong gay man. Nevertheless, I allowed this to be the extent of my analysis at the time until I recently visited Robyn and he updated me on the goings on of this website post.

When Robyn first told me this story, he didn't have a computer or internet access for that matter. He had only come to be aware of the post through the secondhand recounting of younger friends of his that told him the story. I decided that it had been too long since I had seen my confidante and kinfolk and in early February, 2010 I took a weekend trip down to Harlan from Lexington to visit him. Since I had left Harlan almost a year prior, Robyn has purchased a computer and has become 'online ready'. When he started researching the website that he knew he was posted on, he began to read some of the most despicable homophobic statements that have ever been directed at him in his 45 years. While I was down in Harlan visiting almost a year after I had left, he told me this story.

When Robyn was finally aware of what people were saying about him online, he was flabbergasted. Robyn grew up with a military father that was not accepting of his sexuality and had a number of violent incidents as a result. Robyn knows homophobic violence, has grown up around it and knows how to avoid its thorns. But to read some of the awful things that people were posting about him in response to this 'forum post' was truly upsetting. There were references to the local young men that Robyn is affiliated with, suggesting pedophilic relations. Robyn is close with many young people. He is a mentor, 'auntie', confidante to these young people and he considers them his 'kids'. They hang out with him often and he gives advice and encouragement. To have these relationships disparaged in this way was not only fallacious, but grossly ignorant and homophobic. It reifies the assumptions that all gay relations with young folk are always already predatory.

Of the other sentiments levied against Robyn's character. It was noted that he should 'die', That he must be on 'crack' and that there is no room for this type of 'depravity' in Harlan. This all smacks of the homophobic insecurities and perceived threats to heterosexual life that conjure queer life as always already 'wasted' and irrelevant. There is no way to tell who posted these

statements. Whether or not these responses to this post were from people that live in Harlan, outsiders or some combination is unclear. But what is clear is how Robyn decided to handle this 'hate crime' and the potential dangers that it posed. He decided that he had to do something. Initially, he tried to call the company that owned Topix.com located in California. It took him a great deal of effort to find a phone number for the website company, let alone that it is located in California.²⁹ He was greeted with a computer automated menu that gave him a limited number of useless items meant to send the caller to other useless computer directed menus. Nowhere on the line was the option to speak to a real person made available. When it came to waging complaints, the ambient, humanless voice simply tells the caller that if this is the police or legal counsel, or if you were calling to report a complaint to 'please leave a message at the tone'.

An attorney friend of his, equally appalled by this wrote a letter to the company, acting as third party representation, on Robyn's behalf. In this letter she urged Topix.com to write a letter of apology, take down the post that had the hate speech, and to take measures to ensure that such a 'hate crime' would never happen again. Their response was vague and limited. In the process of representing Robyn to get this webpost removed, a District Circuit Court judge who lives in Harlan, as well as the Harlan County Sheriff, both stood up on Robyn's behalf. They wrote letters describing how Robyn is a valued member of their community and to allow this type of slanderous hate speech to occur and remain on their website is an outrage to their community and should not be tolerated by any company of this sort. Personal representation, third party representation, high level political character references – none evoked the immediacy that their response required. I spoke with Robyn again at the beginning of April 2010 and apparently the website has put up some

²⁹ Indeed, I attempted myself to find telephone access to them on their website, www.Topix.com. The only link one can find is a small link at the bottom of the page that says 'Feedback?'. When you select this, a 'pop up' dialogue box allows you to select from a number of options to contact the website. Among these is 'report inappropriate forum post'. You may even pay \$19.99 to have your request reviewed 'priority', however they state in no uncertain terms that the conditions of their response are nominal:

'Thanks for using the Topix feedback system. All feedback submitted is reviewed by the Topix team. Due to the high volume, Topix is unable to respond individually to all feedback. If you wish to place your submission in a priority queue to be reviewed before general feedback submissions, please select "Priority Review" from the drop-down menu.

Please select your type of feedback below, and be sure to fill out the required fields as completely as possible. Submissions that do not contain complete information cannot be processed (and cannot be refunded in the case of Priority Review).'

By stressing the conditions of their uninvolved involvement in addressing questionable and slanderous material, they defer to heavy volume as the source of their inability to action. And they have not made the attempts that many other websites (sexually explicit websites especially) of this sort have already done to manage these sorts of abuse and behavior.

sort of 'filter' that has completely removed Robyn's name and reference to him from the website, but there has been no apology.

Located in California, perceived to be the 'liberal, hippy, political-correctness state', Robyn noted how ironic it is. Ironic in that, if California lived up its perception, this *would* have been seen as a 'hate crime' and this would have been met with apologetic diligence and zeal. Rather, Robyn's solidarity emanates from home. And not only from close friends, but by high level Harlan social and political types that rallied behind his defense. What does this tell us about homophobia in the rural? How can we persist in thinking that homophobia in rural places is forever foreclosed? What lessons do we learn about homophobia from the differing ways that political intimacies script differing reactions to homophobic violence? And *we all* have lessons to learn from it. How do we account for one instance of clear police brutality and homophobia and then in another instance the 'Law' becomes a character witness for a site of homophobic violence that stretches across an entire continent?

There is certainly an imaginary that the visible LGBT(IQQA) culture(s) of the city are somehow 'liberated' based on the liminally accepted visibility they have acquired. While at this point in history it would be a pretty difficult bubble to pop, all truisms have some element of truth. The aggregate density that metropolitan gay cultures have produced is not only impressive but does offer an insulating protection for those that choose to come under its purview. And a visible culture is a sign of struggle, conflict and evolution. The fact that this is not present in most parts of the rural does require some careful thought. But we have also explored how queer life in rural Central Appalachia *is* visible. It is a different kind of visibility and it does not always require lavish representations and reproductions (while not foreclosing on them either) 'to do' itself. Rural queer life manages to function on its own.

There simply is no empirical evidence to support the claims that the rural is somehow more homophobic, more violent than the city. Evidence (such as Barton's) that does exist is anecdotal and leading. While I recognize that I am moving in and out of discourse analysis and anecdote – discussion and narrative, I believe that I have made every attempt to minimize the impressions of these outcomes and remain critical of their implications. I am highlighting the 'rabbit hole' and once inside, perceptions change. I refuse to limit the political agency of the rural by mapping overdetermined claims of homophobia onto the rural and calling them a rural problem. Does the

rabbit hole go deep enough for us to glimpse an opposite world, where the homophobias we expected to find actually come from somewhere else?

Back to the beginning

By way of conclusion, I want to go back to where I began to ask some questions for us to (re)theorize homophobia. What are the limits of thinking homophobia in the rural? It is not that it is not there. Indeed, it is; just as it is here, around us. It stretches from the city to the country in complex, unpredictable and diffuse ways. We are all touched by the latent, active and internalized effects of homophobia (and this statement does include heterosexuals). But can we find a new discourse on homophobia and its impacts? I am arguing here for a spatial analysis, one that does not disregard its individual effects as it touches down, but that nevertheless seeks to interrogate a spatial terrain, in which homophobia is not seen merely in the explosive moments of particular violences, but one that has contingent, negotiated, and contradictory boundaries that are neither limited nor reinforced by the urban/rural binary. I will end this chapter with one more tale of (less than) homophobia.

I did end up meeting Andrew that day at Wal-Mart that opened me up to Harlan, Kentucky. Andrew later told me that, Linda, his father's friend who was supposed to drop him off in Harlan had changed her plans and decided not to go. He never showed up to Wal-Mart and after I had waited the four hours, the only thing I could think to do was drive to the last place I knew that I could get cell phone service. So, I drove the hour or so back to the interstate toward Lexington. When I got to Corbin, Kentucky, near interstate 75, which was always that last place on my trek between Lexington and Harlan that I had cell phone service, there were at least five voice messages from him stating the change in plans, hoping that he'd be able to get a hold of me, and he was now at his mother's in Cumberland. Now able to call him, I was able to turn around, go back the hour and a half to Cumberland and we were able to have our weekend together.

Since I was not allowed to stay at Andrew's father's house for reasons explained above, when I would come down we would rent a motel room on State route 119 between Cumberland and Harlan. The rooms were cheap and we got used to them. This motel is well known for the ATV (all-terrain vehicle) clubs that often congregate there to use the vast paved lot as an ATV track. It's a quaint little place with some apparent history. Harlan County is a 'dry county', but Cumberland as an incorporated town is not. This rural highway motel sits just outside the Cumberland

incorporation line heading toward Harlan (City). Apparently at one point, so the rumors are told, the (former?) owner of the motel (before there was a motel) put in an application with the town of Cumberland to annex the land into the small county district that he owned so that a 'tavern' could be opened. For a brief moment, this bar was allowed to operate. To keep down drinking and driving, the owner established the motel for people to spend the night. However, some drunken brawls, complaints from some of the neighbors and a police scenario ended up shutting the bar down and its provisional liquor license revoked. The bar was transformed into the ATV lodge and Plaza Motel was born.

The motel reeks from a history as a drunk 'flop house'. The floors are ceramic tile, the walls are non-stick materials and it has all of the markings of a space that has been 'hosed down' a number of times. Andrew and I usually got the same room on the same floor. Each room had a large picture window in the center veiled with operable curtains. One late morning, Andrew and I were lying on the bed together cuddling, unaware that the curtain was slightly open. The wife (and co-owner) was pushing her cleaning cart past our room that morning. I am pretty sure that she was able to sneak a peek of us. Later on, Andrew decided that he wanted some coffee and there was none in the room. He went down to the office to get some. The owner asked him questions about where we were from. He told her that he was from Cumberland and that I was visiting him from Lexington. Andrew liked to call me a 'professor' when he described to people what I do in Lexington. I did my best to correct him, but let it slide mostly. After telling her where we were from and that we were visiting each other, she winked and smiled and gave him coffee.

Even though our time together was brief, I learned a lot from my relationship with Andrew. And my understanding of many of the experiences that I had in Harlan benefited from my relationship with him. Now that we have labored over these pages to show a different side to homophobia, dismantle its assumptions, and encourage a nuanced reading of its social processes and the spaces it produces, we can turn now to some ways in which place is made. In the next chapter, I turn to the space and place-making potential of the rural queer subject. That Andrew was able to talk with the co-owner of the motel in a not overly disclosed, not overly discreet manner speaks to the ways that place start to be made. Homophobia doesn't altogether go away, but it doesn't altogether have to for the production of queer space. We have already learned these lessons in metro gay culture – now, it's time to learn from rural gay/trans folk. They have much to teach us.

Chapter 6: Queering the Hollow: Sexuality, Rurality and Place-making in Eastern Kentucky

All contemporary processes of identity formation, regardless of where they take place, involve a disorientation of the self. A dialogue ensues, as one's sense of bewilderment sorts through connections with others (or otherness) perceived to possess the kind of difference that resonates with one's own ambivalence... And through every moment in the flow of these processes, social meanings of 'self', 'bewilderment', 'other', and 'difference' are in the thick of the action. ...places, often glossed over or presumed to be passive backdrops, are also central to the understanding and articulation of identities.

– Mary L Gray
Youth, Media and Queer Visibility

Confessions of a pink sequin purse: somewhere between homophobia and place-making

There was a bizarre and violent incident that happened in my apartment building one night when I was living in Harlan. My neighbors had house guests staying with them. I didn't know about this until after the incident happened. I was sitting in my apartment in Harlan, relaxing and watching a movie. At some point, I heard a disturbance across the hall and I thought it was my neighbors having a 'lover's quarrel.' But it quickly began to escalate and I heard the door swing open and the ruckus move down the hall. I cracked my door to listen and it was now coming from around the corner, down the hall, and in the stairwell to the street, where I heard a woman bargaining with God to 'not let him die,' saying that she 'would do anything'. I meekly ventured out to see, peeking around the corner to notice a significant pool of blood with a leg stretched out in it.

I was frightened, but I thought I needed to see if they needed my help. As I moved toward the stairwell, the pleading woman was helping a rather brawny man up, through the hallway and back into the apartment across from me. His face had been brutally beaten, his right eye purple and swollen shut, blood running from his mouth (from what I would later discover was a split tongue). I offered to help and told the woman that she should not let him go to sleep. At the very least he was in shock and he probably had a concussion. She thanked me and said that they would be fine. I went back to my apartment and couldn't settle in. I felt that I needed to go check on them again; the woman looked like she was in shock as well. Just as I was getting up to walk toward the door, there was a knock. My neighbors Wendy and Rick, a young married couple, had returned home. They wanted to apologize and see if I knew what had happened. I went next door with them and strongly suggested that they go to the emergency room. The woman protested, but Rick agreed and they went to the hospital

They returned from the emergency room after a while with the police, for whom I couldn't answer many questions. I told them what little I knew and what I had witnessed. However, I had found out that the man and the woman were a couple. Apparently, her son (a military trained boxer) climbed in through the back window, chased him through the building to the bottom of the front stairwell, and proceeded to beat him mercilessly before escaping into the street. The couple were both oxycontin addicts and she was the only one with a prescription.¹ Times were good when the prescription was filled, but when times were bad, she unleashed her male kinfolk on him to keep him from 'bumming her stash.' And this was not the first time. The time prior, her brother did this for her.

After the police had left and we were sure that everything had settled down for the night, my neighbors pursued a conversation with me. I was a bit reticent in relation to the violence that just occurred outside my apartment. Violence has a funny way of erupting internalized homophobias. The queer body as it is both politically and physically located in social processes is constantly self aware of how and where it moves through space. Because there is a constant awareness that homophobic violence could strike when you least expect it, there is a risk to queer visibility. There is a risk to trusting those around us with our well-being. And perhaps the 'stranger danger' attached to urban forms of violent homophobia draw this into a different kind of relief to which I was reacting. Mary Gray (2009) has noted that urban forms of violent homophobia are often anonymous, whereas rural forms of homophobia are more intimately cast through people one would be acquainted with. And these forms of intimate violence are understood in how the rural queer body negotiates visibility and movement through space. I didn't necessarily have this context to flash against what was happening at the time.

Nevertheless, I wanted to take the opportunity to get to know them. They were my neighbors and I was trying to figure out how to do queer life in Harlan, Kentucky. It seemed like getting to know my neighbors was a part of that place-making process. Remaining skeptical, I sat down with them in the hallway between our apartments, discussing things, smoking cigarettes, and

¹ Every truism is founded in some truth. Oxycontin, sometimes referred to as 'hillbilly crack' is a very real problem in many parts of rural Appalachia. But there are a number of caveats that we have to accept in relationship to this problem. First, oxycontin drug addiction is probably the most prevalent in the region, but that doesn't make it altogether endemic. Second, just like in other social geographies where poverty plays a major role, drug abuse can rise. Third, leading from the second however, the poor are not the only people on the planet with drug problems. Drug addiction can affect every segment of the population including those divided by class. Among these, the rich and wealthy often have invisible drug abuses that our culture does not often recognize, while pathologizing poverty as always already cultural and therefore always already prone to drug addiction.

getting to know each other. They were in Harlan for a few months while taking a break from the road. Rick was a truck driver who had moved to a small town near Canton, Ohio, as a boy and still had family in Harlan. Wendy traveled with him on the road; they lived out of their truck. As their questions began to probe my background, I was initially reticent to reveal too much. With the violent event of the evening, my continued suspicion of their intentions was not fully quelled – it was in fact their responsibility that the self-sabotaging couple with a penchant for drug abuse and violence was in the building to begin with. I told them that I was a graduate student in geography at the University of Kentucky and that I was in the area doing research, but my disclosure started out sparse and guarded. Yet I could feel that they were probing for something, but they were friendly enough and their persistence seemed sincere. Finally with a lingering inkling of trepidation, I told them that I was in the area studying gay life (although I did not directly reveal my own sexual orientation). Flood gates erupted as they began to gush about their love of ‘gay people.’

Wendy told me about her father, a gay man living with HIV in Middlesboro, Kentucky (a town on the border of Tennessee about 45 minutes from Harlan). He had come out while still married to her mother, but they remained married until her death. She loved her father very much and was always looking for ‘suitable partners’ for him. The most colorful story, however, was about their big gay trucker friend, Al. I found out more about trucker culture than I could have ever known. Each truck is marked with an identification number that becomes a second form of identity on the road. When at truck stops, these numbers reveal which friends and acquaintances are around. It is how they maintain social networks. They are close with Al, and Rick described to me how he would be teased by his friend to have sex with him – cats, mice and sleeping wives, sex play and straight boys. They would stay up long hours talking. It would get late and Al would imply that Rick’s wife was asleep and he should ‘spend the night.’ And of course, the *coup de gras*: everywhere Al goes, he carries a pink sequin purse and in that purse are two things: a dildo and a hand gun.

Their deep affection for their loved ones moved me. I was eventually able to tell them the story about Andrew’s and my break-up. He had left me four months prior and I was still somewhat hurt by it. They were a sympathetic ear and I was struck by how unlikely this event was. The problems of representations of homophobia in Appalachia that I discussed in the previous two chapters are lost on these types of serendipitous encounters that result in an endearing form of place-making in what even I, at the time, perceived to be unlikely. Whatever influenced Rick and Wendy’s kindness and interest, they made it an effort to be kind and interested in a way that only

my straight allies, friends, and family have ever been able. That I was able to find straight allies in a situation that scripted my body to caution speaks to the dynamics of queer visibility in Appalachia that is not limited to being forced to make queer networks within a limited paradigm of other gay/trans folk. And in that brief moment, my own internalized homophobia dissolved and I found myself at the intersection of rural queer place-making. The stories that we told each other animate our connections to Harlan and how we understood our place in it, at the time.

It was unfortunate that I was unable to maintain contact with them. News of the event the night before reached my landlord. He owns the building and has a finance lending company on the first floor. He was not interested in having 'barn yard brawls' in his building, furthermore next to his business. He asked them to leave immediately and gave them a week to vacate. I was unable to have another opportunity to discuss with them the intricacies of their experiences with gay and lesbian people. It is a relationship that I lament I did not get to explore further. Did their history in Ohio offer them some insight that left them predisposed for being endeared to gay folk? Or was it their life on the road and the gay trucker friends that they made and loved? But they also must have spent a great deal of time in Eastern Kentucky because Wendy is very close with her father. And the parts of Ohio they said they are from are small town and pretty rural. Plus, there seems to be a rather scripted sense of masculinity and its expectations in trucker culture. What else could be at play here?

While I may never be able to probe for answers, there is still much to learn from the experience. Kinship as a mode of social technology has a deeply layered and intricate set of meanings for most folk in Appalachia. I am describing kinship as a social technology because there is a socialization to ways in which family is perceived that maps on to other forms of social networking and intimacies. The ways in which kinship functions as a mode of relating to other people exceeds sanguine notions of kinship. This social technology also indelibly impacts place and place-making. The meaning of family and its obligation are critical in these interrogations. This story speaks to that social technology through the ways in which Rick and Wendy were able to accept me, draw me in and share intimate details of their lives with someone they had just met. Or at least in a moment where we just started to get to know each other. And after I was able to settle my nerves about the earlier violence, I became open to this type of intimacy.

In this chapter, I discuss how identity and place-making intersect with queer and Appalachian kinship making and Appalachian (queer) social space(s). It is divided into three parts.

In the first of these, I begin by discussing the interconnectivity of place and home and their problems and contradictions. I then discuss 'queer kinship' and how it might be understood in relation to Appalachian modalities of kinship-making and what Kath Weston has described as the 'families we choose' (1991). I take this understanding of queer kinship and apply it to the 'tradeoff' that I have begun to theorize between the protections offered by metro-gay culture and those offered by an emerging rural gay culture. In the second part, queer place-making is examined in its relationship to queer visibility and the negotiation of queer social networks. I first look at what queer space is by analyzing existing literatures and how it is theorized in relation to rural queer place-making. I then apply these insights to an analysis of how my research kin, friends and allies have begun to form the bonds that might be considered rural queer kinship through the types of social networks in which they are operating. In part three, I explore the porous borders of rural queer place-making as they are connected to cosmopolitan ideals of global interconnectivity and queer mobility. I take this opportunity to discuss two examples of rural queer social spaces: one that highlights a form of metropolitan commuting for experiencing open visual queer spaces and one that looks at the constitution of 'queer safe zones' in rural social space.

Part I: Beyond queering kinship: social technologies and 'families we choose'

There's no place like 'home', there's no home like 'place'?

Patricia Price argues that places are "thoroughly socially constructed" and "place *qua* place does not exist" (2004:4). Instead, she argues that it is through the social narratives and processes by which human societies conjure 'place' that places come into the world and hold value and meaning. But places are not merely stories that we tell each other. Price notes, "space and time can only arise from the experience of place" (Ibid 11), which suggests a requirement of bodies in its constitution and negotiations. Places are necessarily a part of the rhetorical circularity that sutures the flesh back to the environment (and vice versa). In the opening abstract to their edited volume *Places Through the Body* (1998), Heidi Nast and Steve Pile note:

It is relatively easy to imagine how bodies labour to make places and how the social conditions and physical form of a place might shape particular kinds of bodies. It is much more difficult to think about how bodies and places simultaneously and creatively make one another. Body parts, for example are mapped onto spatial processes and places in culturally specific ways: in Western countries it is not unusual to say the bowels of the earth, the eye of the storm, the spine of a book, or the foot of a mountain. Similarly, spatial processes and landscape features are mapped onto human processes and bodies: an earthy person, a stormy marriage, a person who is a bookworm,

or a person built like a rock. There is something remarkable about this transformation of bodies into places and places into bodies: something, that is, which is not easy to imagine (Nast and Pile 1998:i).

This passage suggests that there is an interdependency between the ways in which places constitute bodies and the ways in which bodies produce place. The two are indelibly interconnected. Much in the same way that Povinelli forces us to think about the interconnected irreducibility of flesh and discourse (2006), bodies and places are both interconnected and irreducible. For a place to exist presupposes that there are bodies at work. For bodies to exist presupposes that they are sited, negotiated and contested in and between places.

The ways in which places are mapped onto bodies and bodies are mapped onto places produce the attachments that place holds for social and cultural geographies. A politics of place is nothing if not the attempt to hold onto, bolster, and authenticate the 'meanings' that constitute mythical notions of what a place is or should be. But the mythos of the notion of place is not merely a fantasy of place, but rather the tensions between the memories, traditions and artifacts of a place and its constant stretching beyond its boundaries to become a more than sum of its parts. Places are not limited to their physical locations; their meanings are transportable and transformable over space and time. Often, these meanings about place, which orbit kinship, support and care, produce notions of 'home.'

However, 'home' – especially in its relation to place – is a tricky concept. It is often idealized through the notions of safety, comfort, and care that become mimetically attached to material environments in which they have been built up over time. And 'home' is important because we often find the need to seek out the promises of its protection. In the mythos of 'place,' home often stands out as its most recognizable synecdoche, even while its connections to the features of place are loose and uncertain. Susan Bordo, Binnie Klein and Marilyn Silverman note:

[H]ome is imaged [sic] as the safe harbor, where one will calm down, reconstitute, regain composure, remember and therefore potentially reexperience oneself as a competent entity traveling through space. Home becomes a floating anchor. Memories can soothe; the infant's thumb recalls the mother's breast. But is home a place? What if the sense of safety does not refer to a place at all but to a collection of objects, feelings, bodies? (Bordo, Klein and Silverman 1998:75-76).

While the meanings of 'home' and 'place' seem to be transferable, are they as interdependently linked as bodies seem to be to place and place-making? I am going to offer a contingent 'yes.'

While the “collection of objects, feelings, bodies” are mobile concepts that travel with us, they are also sited in places (even if in contradictory ways). Sometimes the locations of ‘home’ change, transforming their meanings. Sometimes the locations stay the same. In either case, ‘home’ as a set of familial and kinship attachments is always produced in the negotiations that also constitute places. Their discursive linkages often align to stabilize understandings of ‘home’ and ‘place,’ but they are not reducible concepts.

In contradistinction to its mythical promises, ‘home’ can sometimes be a violent and stifling place – one that we are constantly trying to flee, but one that we ironically try to reproduce with others through new assemblages and meanings of ‘home’ elsewhere. Because ‘home’ and ‘place’ are not reducible concepts, we can imagine the multiple contradictions and ambiguities that separate ‘home’ from ‘place.’ These contradictions reveal the complexity that many sexual and gender minorities (rural and urban) face when dealing with family and managing ‘coming out’ stories. In this way, how do we account for places in/from exile and the desire to ‘come home’? As well, how should we think about those that are in ‘exile,’ but do not actually leave their ‘home’ places? How do we account for the interdependencies of ‘home’ and ‘place’ that are negotiated along intersectional lines including class, race, gender and gender orientation, sex and sexuality, ability, age, personal variation, regional specificity and so on that contribute to the uneven distribution of home and place? And further still, what impact do emerging resistance strategies from marginalized groups say about ‘exile’ and ‘home’ in relation to place, place-making and place efficacy? How do we account for the places of the marginalized that are made in seemingly unlikely zones?

The impulse to ‘come home’ from exile – whether self imposed or otherwise – speaks to the internalized senses of place that we grow up with and in many ways never leave us. Certainly, some rural gay/trans folk leave home, never returning and have no desire to do so. At the same time, many gay/trans folk also stay in the country and make their home and place-making possibilities in these places, while often exploring urban queer spaces in commuting for ‘special events’ – such as weekend trips to the gay bar in Johnson City, Tennessee, for example. And there are many rural gay/trans folk still, that do leave, go to urban areas for prolonged periods of time, explore their queer identities in these places, long to come home and often do. This is the thrust of Jeff Mann’s book, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men* (2005). Through his poetry and prose, he describes his longing for home in exile, living for years in Washington DC. And he indeed returns

home and builds himself a life in West Virginia. A particular example of this comes to mind, in the story of a transwoman from Eastern Kentucky that had moved away and found an unexpected surprise when returning home to visit.

One day in Robyn's salon, he told me a story about Gwyneth. Gwyneth is a transwoman living in Eastern Kentucky who has visited Robyn's salon on occasion to have her hair cut and styled. She was beautiful, Robyn told me, and he had "a lot of fun doing her hair," for which she tipped him 250 percent. During the usual salon banter that Robyn is adept at instigating, Gwyneth told him about her husband, Roger, and how she became married to the man of her dreams.' Originally from Mount Sterling, Kentucky, Gwyneth had left home in her early twenties to become a traveling nurse and had lived all over the country. She had been a traveling nurse for more than twenty years but one night while visiting home, she attended a party that would change her life. A "distinguished older gentleman" (Roger) took an interest in her. Roger's interest in Gwyneth scripted their activities for the evening as they engaged in introductory, but apparently stimulating, conversation. Roger made it clear to her that he wanted to see her again while she was in town.

The next day Roger and Gwyneth met for coffee and true to (her) form, she made clear to him from the outset that she must be frank and revealed that she was a transgendered woman. She explained to him how she is completely comfortable with who and what she is and wanted to be upfront with him so there would be no surprises.. Roger told her that he was unsure – he had never encountered a situation like this. Regardless, he emphasized that she was the type of person that he wanted in his life, whether they became lovers or remained friends. Roger admired her candor and courage, and they indeed became lovers. They went to Upstate New York during that brief moment in 2004 when Jason West, the rebellious young mayor of New Paltz, attempted to challenge state law by offering marriage licenses to same-sex and gender minority couples; he conducted their ceremony.² Gwyneth commented to Robyn: she had lived in Hawaii, she had lived all over – it was ironic that she had to come home to Kentucky to find what she was looking for. Gwyneth and Roger had been married for four years when Robyn relayed this story to me. They live in Mount Sterling, where they have a farm and are, apparently, very happy.

² For a discussion on his bold move in 2004 to exact same-sex marriage licenses and conduct the ceremonies, see his interview by Owen Thompson on May 14, 2004 on Upside Down World: <http://upside-downworld.org/WestInterview.htm>, accessed April 10, 2010.

What is queer kinship? What is Appalachian kinship?

Kath Weston notes in *Families We Choose* that “Two presuppositions lend a dubious credence to [the imaginaries that disqualify gay families]: the belief that gay men and lesbians do not have children or establish lasting relationships, and the belief that they invariably alienate adoptive and blood kin once their sexual identities become known” (1991:22). These imaginaries have the tendency to cleave to the notion that kinship is first and foremost about procreation, downplaying the ways in which society organizes the care of self and others through complex familial structures (both as a point of policy and cultural representations). She goes on to claim:

What gay kinship ideologies challenge is not the concept of procreation that informs kinship in the United States, but the belief that procreation *alone* constitutes kinship, and that ‘nonbiological’ ties must be patterned after a biological model (like adoption) or forfeit any claim to kinship status (Ibid 34).

Queer kinship and gay familial formations have been in constant and tense political debates with the fundamentalist (Christian) Right in the United States. This debate has been going on since at least the 1970s and seems to have escalated over the course of the past decade in relations to debates around gay marriage and/or State recognized civil unions. It is exclaimed again and again by organizations such as *Focus on the Family*, *Americans for Truth About Homosexuality* and *The Family Foundation* in Kentucky (to name a few) that gay families are not only illegitimate, but also threaten to undermine the continued solvency of the family as a social institution.

Nevertheless, queer kinship has used the tools available to forge romantic and intimate bonds of care that humans, as social creatures, usually require for survival. As ‘gay ghettos’ began to consolidate in the 1970s in major metropolitan areas, our communities became large, extended networks of familial care. As this practice formed and maintained these networks, the use of the term ‘family’ (in context) also began to be used as a means to recognize and point out other gay/trans folk around us. Saying “he must be family,” from a distance, implied that he must be gay (a practice also commonly referred to as ‘gay-dar’). While, the use of the term ‘family’ in mainstream gay parlance is beginning to wane as younger cohorts of gay/trans youth have begun to transition out older cohorts in our communities, its ability to reproduce this collective memory of queer kinship and care speaks to a continued recognition that queer kinship is almost always a form of creative kinship that adjusts to changing social and political strategies. Queer kinship often finds itself in the realm of creative kinship precisely because it has been historically disqualified and

has until recent decades been forced to find its terms and conditions solely on the fringes of social exile. Discussing a conversation she had with one of her informants, Weston notes:

Jennifer Bauman maintained that as a gay person, “you’re already on the edge, so you’ve got more room to be whatever you want to be. And to create. There’s more space on the edge.” What to do with all that “space”? “I create my own traditions,” she replied (Ibid 110).

We do have to be careful not to dismiss the romantic complexion this statement takes. Families and kinship formations are not as individually scripted as this passage implies. Weston notes this by drawing on Marx to show that “men make their own history,” but not *outside* the context of history and the constraints it places on the ability to make decisions. She goes on to critique these sentiments by describing how ‘choice,’ far from being open to possibility, has the tendency to reify differences along classed, raced, gendered, sexed and aged lines. But there is nevertheless a transformational possibility here and, by placing the sites of these transformations at the edge of society, on the fringe, there may be a chance to forge alliances with other alternative forms of kinship making.

Throughout this research, I have come to understand kinship in Appalachia as not merely the boundaries that establish and maintain sanguine kinship lines, but also as a set of social technologies that inform the depth of bonds constituted in broader practices of social networking. Kinship in Appalachia seems to have two sides to it. On the one hand, far from being the genetic deformation and mental deficiencies perpetuated through contemporary representations of ‘incest’ and ‘in-breeding’ often ascribed to Appalachian folk (Shelby 1999:156), Appalachian kinship, like many other forms of rural kinship is crafted through a sense of loyalty, fidelity and belonging (Billings and Blee 2000:159, see also Hinsdale, Lewis and Waller 1995, Scott 1995, Shackelford and Weinberg 1988). On the other hand, kinship is the technology in Appalachia that mitigates social strangeness. In this way, and unlike more rigid interpretations of sanguine kinship, Appalachian kinship borders are often porous to extended familial relations that exist outside of direct blood relations.

The conditions for a kind of ‘communal’ kinship in Appalachia that inform the modality of kinship’s current iterations have a long history. Prior to the introduction of industries such as coal mining, and without roads and other means of communication, family involvement and participation was crucial to the life strategies of early to mid-19th century Appalachian cultures. Parceling

packages was often done through honor codes – you could leave a letter or package by a specific tree and it was the obligation of passing horsemen to pick up and deliver these parcels (Shackelford and Weinberg 1988:83). A culture of reciprocal obligation managed through kinship was not just a form of identity, it was a necessary life strategy:

Life revolved around the family. Families relied upon one another to provide schools, churches, and law enforcement, to clear land, build barns, pull teeth, and rear orphan children. When someone living deep in a hollow became seriously ill, family members would convert the dining-room table into a stretcher, cover it with a corn-shuck mattress and carry the patient through forests and creeks to the mouth of the hollow. There kinfolks or neighbors who had been alerted to the trouble would carry the stretcher five or ten more miles, where they were relieved by another ambulance team. This continued until the patient reached a hospital, which might be thirty miles or more from his home. One member of the family would have made the entire journey with him; scores of other people would have helped (Ibid 1988:18).

With the rugged terrain of the mountains and limited economic activities (such as seasonal logging), travel between different towns and hollows was difficult and subsistence familial agriculture was prevalent. These agricultural formations were highly gendered and constitute what Billings and Blee have described as a “patriarchal moral economy” (2000:157-207). One in which the voices and interests of men are given dominance in most iterations of kinship.

Nevertheless, Appalachian kinship has always played a central role in the complexion of Appalachian life and culture. And because this notion of care and obligation stretches past the sanguine family to encompass other ways of relating to friends and neighbors, as well as outsiders that are accepted into its folds, notions of familiarity and fidelity run deep. And the forms that these kinship networks take often shift and transform to meet different challenges. As the coal industry, for example, began to take root in Central Appalachia as the primary industry and source of employment, the lines of kinship were often redrawn. Most notably, in the moments when labor disputes in the coal mines emerged, new borders for kinship were drawn around the economic exploitation of the lower classes. Often coal mining families intermarried to establish new kinship lines and networks of care. As Shauna Scott notes, “Local miners [in Harlan County, Kentucky] used kinship as an idiom to express class and union solidarity, often referring to their co-workers as “brothers”” (1995:113). In this instance, kinship works as a means to care for those that are exploited by the disturbances of labor exploitations, as well as consolidate political and social movements within the region.

Because of these shifting and transformative qualities, I am arguing that, in a limited way, the social structures that constitute and still animate Appalachian kinship remain radically resistant to contemporary strains of family production. Their variations do remain highly devotional (i.e. solidarity and fidelity with sanguine family and Christian faith structures), as well as asymmetrically gendered and largely homophobic – limitations which denote (often severe) restrictions on personal agency. And these limitations must remain in critical suspension if the potential for these forms of Appalachian kinship are to continue to transform, in response to shifting modes of social organization. There seems to be a flexibility and breadth in the constitution of Appalachian kinship structures that stretches past contemporary imaginaries of the ‘proper’ American family marked as ‘traditional’ and ‘nuclear.’ Because one does not necessarily need to be ‘blood’ related in order to be considered kin, there is a ‘queerness’ to Appalachian kinship that should not be ignored.

One particular example comes to mind. On a Friday in late April 2008, I went down to Harlan to pick up Andrew to travel down to Tennessee to attend the Spring Festival of the radical faeries at Short Mountain Sanctuary. Andrew’s friend, Lori’s sister, was getting married earlier that day and he asked me to come down to attend. Lori’s mom, Evelyn had asked Andrew to play piano for the wedding and he wanted me to be there. So, I went, picked Andrew up, and we met Lori and her mom at the church. Andrew introduced me to Evelyn and she warmly embraced me. As Andrew was setting up and the church was flustered with pre-wedding last minute arrangements, Evelyn asked me to participate (briefly) in the ceremony. Just prior to the procession, Evelyn wanted me to unroll ceremoniously a volute of fabric from the altar to the entry arch on which the bride would progress down the aisle. I was a bit shocked and hesitant, but I agreed. Having just met her, she knew two things about me: I’m queer and I was Andrew’s boyfriend. With this understanding in the balance, I got to participate in a wedding ceremony for a family I had never met before.

The trust that was bestowed upon me had everything to do with my relationship to Andrew at the time. Lori is Andrew’s best friend, and he is considered family by Lori and her family. That Evelyn was able to read us as a ‘couple’ at the intersection of this kinship relationship gave me *de facto* kinship status by which I was asked to participate in her daughter’s wedding. This would seem to fly in the face of dominant discourses on family, especially those by the Christian Right. These discourses continue to hail the ‘nuclear family’ as the legitimate complexion of family and lament its slow demise. Oddly enough, the nuclear family has always been in crisis, has never

been traditional, and has enjoyed a short and fated existence (at least as the dominant form of American families) (Heath 2009). But precisely because these Appalachian kinship technologies (even as they are managed through Christian identity and rhetoric) fall so far off center from what the so called 'Christian family' advocates endorse, there is a queering of this dominant discourse. What family is, how it operates and what it means are destabilized and subject to a different set of expectations. And because a part of this destabilization is about managing social strangeness through the connections and bonds of non-sanguine kinship, we can imagine opportunities for further queering Appalachian kinship through the constitution of "families we choose."

Tradeoffs and survival strategies

Because I have been arguing that I am developing kindred relations in rural Appalachia, it has been a hypothesis of mine that there are indeed tradeoffs between gay living in the country and gay living in the city. In the city, or at least those cities that have established gay communities, an aggregate density affords openly safe spaces, (limited) social and health resources, and the allure of a perceived vibrant and politically active 'gay culture.' However, the city can often be an alienating and isolating place. As I have discussed throughout, mainstream gay culture often polices its ranks with expectations of 'proper' gay life that in many cases requires the erasure of certain aspects of selfhood, such as being from rural Appalachia. While the country does not offer the breadth of safe spaces and visible culture that the city has, in Appalachia at least, there is a way in which 'kinship' operates as a social technology that informs how social networks are formed and maintained both within the confines of the 'sanguine' family and in other social relations. Like other forms of negotiating city/county living, for sexual and gender minorities, the trade-off is not in any overt shifting from one type of group protection to another, but rather the trade between competitive social networking and intimate social loyalty.

We are working from the assumption that there are notable differences in 'style' between urban queer cultures and rural queer cultures in Central Appalachia. While some places within the region are more 'progressive' than others, the ways in which rural queer life is managed in the country versus the city betray distinct differences. For one, the city offers an aggregate density of other gay/trans folk that are, to a greater extent, 'out' and visible. This aggregate density has a number of benefits: 1) greater access to other gay/trans folk for social, romantic and intimate exchanges, 2) the ability to explore aspects of one's queer identity more publicly and to engage in

and contribute to a culture that orbits explicitly sexual identity, and 3) a more insulated protective buffer from different forms of homophobic violence. To differing degrees, these benefits do exist in the country, but with diminished intensity. Yet in the city, the ways in which competitive social networking functions for gay sex/life/politics can serve to displace the rural queer body from finding spaces of which they can feel truly a part. The social 'cliques' that emerge within urban frameworks are often difficult to penetrate, leaving many outside and alone. With the metro-gay skepticism around rural places that often force rural gay/trans bodies to subvert their ruralness to 'fit in' can also work to alienate and disenfranchise rural gay/trans folk from different aspects of social and intimate satisfaction (Knopp and Brown 2003).

The tradeoff for sexual and gender minorities in the country seems to revolve around the loyalty of kinship and the intimacies those produce. While it would be false to say that this is universal, kinship networks in Central Appalachia have a prolific depth to their character that cannot be overlooked. Even to the extent that sexual and gender minorities are teased or 'razzed' by their families in homophobic ways (and not always without physical violence), these same family formations close rank around their kin when outsiders attempt similar homophobic violations. Further, as Mary Gray notes, rural gay/trans folk are very aware of who is homophobically violent and how to avoid those situations *and* there is still homophobic violence in the city often in the form of anonymous attacks:

[T]his violence [in the country] is notably most often experienced as intimate, exacted by those [gay/trans] youth presume they know rather than the random acts of property damage or 'stranger danger' that pervades the psyches of most queer urban dwellers bashed outside populous city nightclubs. The one critical advantage Shaun [a gay youth in Eastern Kentucky] saw to the distinct quality of violence that permeates his community was that, as he put it, 'I know who I need to avoid. I've been working to steer clear of those people all my life (Gray 2009:115).

The depth of kinship relationships, how kinship as a social technology maps onto other forms of intimate relations (whether those be friendships or romantic, just between sexual/gender minorities or between straight folk and gay/trans folk), and what those mean for the attachment to the bonds of place that are garnered in an Appalachian context, constitute a particular form of protection and acceptance for rural gay/trans folk in the region. In other words, Appalachian modes of kinship as a social technology also inform and reinforce the benefits of "families we choose."

It is through these differing functions of protection and care between metropolitan gay/trans cultures and rural gay/trans cultures in Appalachia that I propose this tradeoff. An

aggregate density in the city does offer benefits for social protection, but its current complexions usually exclude rural queer life by delimiting what it considers to be suitable gay life. The rural offers a less explicit layer of protection that the type of metro-gay visual culture affords but counters with a deeply ingrained sense of kinship and familiarity.

Now, I do not want to be misinterpreted. It is not always already easy to be gay in Appalachia. And these kinship formations are not necessarily evenly distributed. There is definitely a Christian moralizing effect on what it means, and how one can or cannot be gay. There are gay youth tossed to the streets, those who become homeless and forced to find their own survival strategies.³ There are people that are 'Out' in the sense that they openly accept a gay identity, but are not necessarily visually expressed in the ways that metro-gay culture has come to expect that gay identity ought to be. And equal to those who are 'Out,' are those who maintain a straight identity (often while married with children) while engaging in same-sex practices under the radar. But notions of how family works – the investments, obligations and affections mapped onto a broad set of social networks that work outside and above conventional notions of sanguine kinship – continue to mitigate the struggles that many sexual and gender minorities in the region face.

Part II: Appalachian queer place-making: visibility and social networks

Making rural queer space: bodies in place

There is no denying that the place-making capabilities and possibilities in urban areas have produced the robust visual culture that has infiltrated popular culture. This has stabilized the position of the neoliberal gay project that this research has sought to critique. According to Judith Halberstam, "'Queer Space' refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics" (2005:6). Because these counterpublics exceed the borders and typologies of metropolitan gay sex/life/politics, we are now seeking out multiple counterpublics under the queer paradigm. But the emergence of social tolerance around sexual and gender minorities has been limited and as Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda

³ See my discussion in the next chapter on future research for a discussion on the ways in which suicide and homelessness are present in gay/trans youth populations in Appalachia. I have had discussions with Robyn on this problem and while I was living in Harlan, I met a young lesbian couple that had become homeless as a result of 'coming out' to their families. One of the young ladies had entered into prostitution as part of their survival strategy.

Retter have noted, “In the past decade, improvements in life in communalities of sexual minorities have progressed unevenly” (Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter 1997:5).

An urban biased monopoly on queer culture has trumped the existence of sexual and gender minority possibilities and places in rural settings (Spurlin 2000). Representations of rural erotica (which I discussed in Chapter 4) have been appropriated, translated, and mapped onto mainstream gay consumption. These commodified fetishes of urban cowboys and naïve farm boys, or bestial mountain men and homophobic rednecks, neither touch the reality of these places nor offer them a place in the political spotlight for their voices to be heard. And these political foreclosures operate from homophobias of circumscription and queer regionalism (which I discussed in Chapter 5). I now wish to explore how the resistance and agency of Appalachian gay/trans folk (alluded to in the examples of Appalachian homophobia from the previous chapter) constitute queer space, queer place and queer visibility in Appalachia. While they are certainly immersed in the uneven distribution of queer place-making, I am arguing here that their agency and accomplishments should not go unnoticed.

Diane Watt and Richard Phillips suggest in the introduction of *(De)Centering Sexualities* (2000) that the socio-sexual manifestations of urban sexual categories and forms as they relate to conventional (i.e. urban) Gay Rights politics do not map on neatly to the ‘in-between’ and ‘liminal’ spaces of sexual Otherness that exist in rural and small town spaces in the so-called ‘core’ regions of North America, Europe, and Australia. They go on to propose that “these spaces may be of great significance, with respect to representations and politics of sexualities, for it is in such spaces that hegemonic sexualities may be least stable” (Ibid 2000:1). These in-between, liminal spaces – the rural, small-town terrains that constitute the destabilizing of hegemonic sexuality – are nothing if not connected to the spatial processes and cultural specificities that are linked to place and the ways that it gets mapped onto identity. This suggests that rural places are deeply implicated in the ways that bonds and attachments, cultural values and sensibilities, potential hazards and pitfalls, are formed, negotiated, and maintained across different types of sexual boundaries. In other words, we cannot consider the ways in which sexual and gender minorities exist outside of the metropole (and the possibilities that they offer us for a new kind of transgressive sexual politics) without critically considering the places in which they occur and the peculiar cultural patterns and dangers that emerge from these places.

While Halberstam notes the linkages of queer space to queer place-making and the conditions of postmodernity and 'queer counterpublics,' what actually goes into the constitution of queer space and its transformative, as well as limited potentials? Jean-Ulrick Désert suggests that:

Queer space is in large part the function of wishful thinking or desires that become solidified: a seduction of the reading of space where queerness, at a few brief points and for some fleeting moments, dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape. The observer's complicity is key in allowing a public site to be co-opted in part or completely. So compelling is this seduction that a general consensus or collective belief emerges among queers and nonqueers alike (Désert 1997:21).

In this definition of queer space, the constitution of space itself is unstable and relies on this instability, even while it attempts to solidify geographical formations. The benefit of this reading rests not in its emphasis on the "fleeting moments" of queer space, but rather in the opportunities that those fleeting moments open for us in the transformation of public spaces and discourses. Queer space then, is not about stabilizing the function of social space, but transforming it through and across the crisis points in dominant social narratives. The danger in allowing queer space to be seen as stable is that after the queer moment has fled, what is left over becomes a new kind of dominant narrative (i.e. the neoliberal gay project).

The transformational potential in queer space and queer place-making is in its ability to re-script the narratives that limit the interpretations of social spaces and their meanings. In making this claim, I am drawing on Diane Watt and Richard Phillips's assertion that 'gay' in rural space *is* 'queer' (2000). My gay friends and kin in the region identify as 'gay.' 'Gay' in this instance constitutes a queer politics because it destabilizes social and cultural norms. As a nascent set of visible politics and strategies, it fundamentally challenges the dominant narratives in Appalachia around sex and sexuality, gender typologies and notions of hegemonic masculinity while carving out new kinds of spaces where none previously existed. "Just as queer identities are constructed within the context of heteronormativity, queer places have been forged within spaces not originally intended for gay use" (Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter 1997:295). But how does queer space intersect with queer place-making and what does that mean for rural queer visibility?

Queer places are always formed by a mixture of accidental and purposeful (though often unevenly articulated) forces. In this century, sites of queer presence ambiguously overlap the public and private. The intermediate zones survive by their populations' consciously chosen strategies of invisibility and visibility, defense, and expansion. The construction of queer sties, both unstructured

spaces for spontaneous contact and key institutions, has many facets: social, cultural, economic, and political (Ibid:295).

It would seem that queer place-making as a constituent element of queer space is crafted through a complex negotiation of institutional features, social and cultural sensibilities, the need for defensive borders and a precarious overlap of public and private.

These structures, then, as they consolidate to form particular types of spatial relationships (and redefinitions) in rural social settings, converge at the intersections of competing ('straight' and 'gay') social worlds. In these intersections, queer places emerge through the negotiations that disrupt, parse out and reorganize the connections that make social spaces. These shouldn't be thought of as discreet and resolved spaces. New allies are formed between rural hetero- and homo- socialities, at the same time that moralist enemies of queer life are invigorated to condemn its realities. But it should be remembered that this is uneven as well. Queer life and its discontents do not exist in a vacuum. Other social equipment and technologies inform the degree to which rural queer life is met with resistance in particular places. Dry/wet counties, the depth and rigidity of religiosity in a community, right/left leaning political persuasions, economic disparities and so on all inform how community level social spaces receive or reject (or a combination of) the emergence of rural queer life. These negotiations also affect the extent to which rural queer visibility is present or absent in any particular place. But these visible forms are often, if not always articulated in relation to the broader socialities that constitute a sense of place in rural environments.

Jeff Mann remarks on this power-of-place, expressed through notions of family, home-cooking, and a need to be close to the mountains, and how it intersects with his own gay identity and Appalachian identity. Ruminating on a passage in *Storming Heaven*, by Denise Giardina, "Heaven is where everyone you love is in one place," he contemplates the contradictions and complexities of being gay in rural Appalachia. His vexations vacillate between his love of the mountains, and the struggles he went through growing up as a young boy targeted as the 'queer kid' in the mountains of West Virginia.

My compromise has been to live in university towns in Appalachia: Morgantown, West Virginia, for thirteen years, now Blacksburg, Virginia, for the last fifteen. In such towns, I can feel safe in a liberal, intellectual atmosphere. As an academic, I can even combine my seemingly contradictory passions and teach both gay and lesbian literature and Appalachian studies. And I can stay in the mountains, close to what remains of my family, for, as Loyal Jones so eloquently points out in his

famous essay, 'Appalachian Values', we hill folk are powerfully attached to our native places and our kin' (2005:xii)

It is this powerful attachment to 'native places' and 'kin' that often drive a sense of place in Appalachia and this is as equally true for gay/trans folk as it is for straight folk.

However, it is interesting to note that Mann feels the need to compromise in order to have both. On the one hand, his longing to be 'home' requires a return to the mountains. On the other hand, 'home' is simultaneously in and not in Hinton, West Virginia. In Hinton, he still feels uncomfortable around his sexuality when he visits. Rather, it is in the safety that a "liberal college town" produces. Yet somehow, in his interpretation, Morgantown, West Virginia, and then his move to Blacksburg, Virginia, equals 'home' for him, even while there are great distances between his new home and Hinton where he was born and raised. This again speaks to the transmutability of 'home,' which does not always have to be directly attached to a physical location, but can redirect its affect to give the new location similar homelike complexions in the constitution of place. Substitution is possible.

Places can be substituted for home and home can come to stand in for places. In psychoanalytic terms, 'home' is bound by its perpetual absence. We only come to understand home in relation to being displaced from it and how that becomes complicated by a set of memories and impressions that remind us what we thought home was (or ought to have been). Suneeta Peres da Costa suggests, "that it is in [the] tension between loss and the cultural imaginary that a pertinent distinction between 'homesickness' and 'homelessness' can be described" (1999:77). To be homeless is to be in utter displacement and despair. Homesickness, on the other hand, a longing for a 'return' to home, is bound by the images and impressions of home that we produce and constantly attempt to reproduce – that which is permanently just outside of our grasp. This sets the conditions for our longing to translate home from one place to the next, without having to be in that specific place to reproduce it. The perpetual lack of a home outside of our grasp motivates and organizes our understandings of 'home,' bracketing our desire to be (or not to be) around particular cultural artifacts and people that become the synecdoche of home.

For most folk in rural Appalachia, for better or for worse, the mountains and hollows, social geographies, kinship networks, home cooking and mom, a Christian sense of God and good-will, become indelibly mapped onto their sense of home, regardless of whether they stay or leave; regardless of whether they are straight or gay. What do we get when we look at these particular

types of attachment to place as they intersect with sexual and gender minority desires and practices? How do these desires and practices negotiate notions of home and place? What are the visibilities of these desires and practices and how do they function in environments that already reveal the limitations of the closet? In other words, how does a metaphor that falsely assumes a clean break with sexual ambiguity after you cross its threshold get mitigated and transformed in the practices, processes, and negotiations that constitute rural queer visibility? And what are their forms of visibility?

Appalachian queer visibility and place-making: a brief geography of queer Harlan

What are the connections between place-making and visibility? They both speak to particular types of recognition and boundaries. Places do not always have to be visible, but being able to see these places helps to legitimize their presence by staking claims to space. Visibility does not always have to be place specific, but having places to be visible in often helps to establish the emotive connections and bonds to a place that translate into its defense. I am still at a disadvantage when it comes to figuring out how to ‘read’ these spatial relationships, in terms of who and what spaces to avoid, when I am actually in Harlan. I do, however, have my own learned techniques of avoiding dangerous situations. On the one hand, I still operate with a sense of naiveté based on what I understand to be dangerous. On the other hand, I am still at a loss in figuring out how I do or do not factor in certain dangerous scenarios. But I am learning and the relationships that I have developed in Harlan and Whitesburg help.

As I argued extensively in Chapter 5, homophobia scripts queer bodies and space. Where to go, where not to go; when to disclose, when not to disclose; with whom to associate, who to avoid – these are the everyday negotiations that gay/trans folk, urban and rural, must navigate on a day-to-day basis in order to remain safe. Because I did not initially know the rules of engagement in Harlan, I relied heavily on Andrew to establish the social network that has become my kin. I want to turn this discussion toward a description of this geography that I find myself in the midst of helping to produce and how that contributes to place-making and rural queer visibility. There is, in my estimation a very real ‘gay pride’ in Harlan. The gay folk⁴ that I have come across and those that have become my kinfolk are involved in the everyday (re)production of queerness. While there

⁴ I have not had the opportunity to personally meet any rural trans folk in my relationship to Harlan, I have continuously attached them to these conversations so that there is a critical understanding of their presence.

has been no organized political movement within the Harlan networks in which I have been involved (that I am aware of), the everyday resistance strategies that my kin and friends have engaged as both survival techniques and intimate bonding with other kin, friends and allies does reveal an everyday politics of allied networks and support.

In terms of place-making and my location in it, I should start at the beginning where I first happened upon Harlan. After finally deciding that we would attempt a date, I went down to meet Andrew for the first time on February 29, 2008. It was a Friday, and Andrew's father was going out of town for the night to see a basketball game. When we first met, the chemistry from our phone conversations seemed to translate and we went to his favorite restaurant for Chinese food. Everyone that I have come across in Harlan states that this is the best Chinese food anywhere, with examples of places where it's not so good: Middlesboro, Kingsport, *Georgia*... After we ate, we went back to his father's place. Andrew played a number of songs for me on his guitar and his piano, introduced me to songs that he was in the process of writing, and gave me his demo CD. After that night, I would go down about every two weeks or so until I finally moved there in July.

Preparing for the same AAG presentation on homophobia that brought me together with Martin, I was planning to meet Brent. I also met Brent online and he agreed to meet me at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKCTC) in Cumberland. Andrew knew Brent and had not seen him in a long while. So, Andrew came along with me, and it did help ease some of my anxiety about meeting him. In the middle of the main building, we happened upon Brent. The moment he caught sight of Andrew, boisterous exclamations and greetings echoed through the lobby. Just prior to meeting Brent, Andrew and I had decided that we were officially 'boyfriends.' It was nice to hear Andrew tell Brent this as he explained why he was with me. There was an abundance of catching up gossip and there was no censorship, or even an inkling that we should somehow mask our queerness in this space. There was an immediate chemistry between Brent and I and he hugged me profusely before we left. Brent and I have remained close.

Brent is an impressive character actually in his everyday politics. Brent is HIV+ and while I was living in Harlan, he entered into a four year college in a nearby county to become a medical/clinical technician. He was the first (open) HIV+ student to ever go to this school and as a result, he was able to get the school to write new policies to accommodate HIV+ students. This

kind of trailblazing is quite profound. He taught the college about HIV and what the needs of 'poz'⁵ students are. And he exacted change. Another person that I am extremely close to is also recognized for having similar 'trailblazing' effects.

I was recently having a conversation with Diane about Evangelical Christianity, homosexuality and Robyn. Diane noted that Robyn has been a key figure in renegotiating the lines for accepting (or at least tolerating) gay/trans folk in Harlan. Robyn has adamantly positioned himself as a gay man that will be nothing but himself for the world. From our personal discussions, I can interpolate at least two influences on his self assurance and active visibility. First, he has come up with a certain kind of Christian more that values both self determination and a deep sense of care and obligation. Second, he grew up with a military father that exacted strict discipline (sometimes to the point of violence). He told me once that in his teenage years, when he had first come out that his father held him up against the wall by his throat, tossing epithets to the effect of "no son of mine is going to be queer." It was his mother that positioned herself next to the melee and told her husband to let Robyn go, or she would pack up the kids and leave.

Robyn is an important person in Harlan because he is so well known and respected. Now in his mid-40s, Robyn has been 'out' most of his life. In high school, he had a boyfriend that was a football player. He knows a great many dirty secrets of local men who found themselves in same-sex indiscretions in their youth (mostly because he was a participant). He has been in four relationships – all of which he considers to be the great loves of his life. However, he no longer desires to be in a relationship. He keeps around him close friends, family and lovers. He gossips like it is his job and in many ways it is. However, the stories that come out of his salon are always told with at least the pretense of discretion. From the endearing to the raunchy, from heartfelt tears over his ailing and aging friends and family to gay sex, straight sex and any kind of sex and local scandal in between. Because his salon has become a hub for queer space and place-making, these stories help to animate queer Harlan, while becoming an everyday strategy for promoting and engaging in discourses that breed acceptance of queer life in Harlan.

As Diane and my conversation shifted more decidedly on Evangelical Christianity, she noted a comment that her pastor said to her when her relationship with Robyn came up one time. He told her that he went to high school with Robyn and that he is a wonderful human being and to

⁵ 'Poz' is common parlance in HIV+ communities to describe themselves. One of the primary circulations is a magazine of the same name.

tell Robyn that he had said hello. Diane made it clear that her pastor knew that he is gay. This reinforces Robyn's location in Harlan as a respected figure that is helping to negotiate the lines between queer and straight social worlds. And religion – a Christian sense of God – is tethered to these negotiations.

Diane and George belong to the Church of God, which is an Evangelical Pentecostal denomination of Christianity. She noted with some ambivalence the kinds of conversations that she has had with her pastor and his wife. Diane is incredibly loyal to her faith and she does have some frustrations with the way in which her church approaches homosexuality, but she's careful to make sure that it is understood that this is not a violent homophobia. Rather, there is rational debate going on between her and her husband and some the members of her congregation. While this denomination does have negative views on homosexuality, this congregation (at least) does not engage in divisive and antagonistic targeting of gay/trans folk. It's not in their vernacular.

She noted to me one particular conversation that she had with the pastor's wife. In the midst of their conversation, the pastor's wife made it clear that in their interpretation of the Bible, homosexuality is a sin and sinners must repent but that the sinner is still loved. Diane then set up a scenario for her to illuminate the contradiction and double-standard in her statement. Diane claimed, if we love the sinner, how is it that two young men in love are not allowed to hold hands when the congregation leaves church to go out for their Sunday gatherings. The pastor's wife responded that that would inappropriate behavior in this situation. Diane countered by saying, how is it that a young man and woman, "shacking up," is able to get away with this behavior – isn't this a sin also? The pastor's wife found this to be a valid point, however, she maintained her "love the sinner, hate the sin" argument and said that all sin must be preyed upon. But she did recognize the need to contemplate the double standard.

As our conversation continued, she was frustrated with the inability to have this kind of rational debate with most of the congregation. But she also noted that even though they may not be interested in debating the finer points of homosexuality and sin that there is no overt animosity toward gay folk (trans folk may be a little more difficult to talk about). We began discussing the critical Biblical studies that George has been doing – talking about it through the ideas of (mis)interpretation and (mis)translation that attempt to disqualify the mention of homosexuality *qua* homosexuality in the Bible. The discursive production of ambivalence that rests in this debate that Diane and George have rationally engaged with their pastor speaks to a complexity and

sophistication that are not often afforded to ideas about homosexuality and rural places. Or at least, that in this type of ambivalence, critical inquiry and rational debate has a presence.

And this presence of critical thought has been recurrent throughout my relationship with Diane, George and Robyn. On the same recent trip to Harlan that yielded this conversation, the three of us met up for dinner. We went to the “best Chinese restaurant” anywhere, ever. As we were sitting there, chatting, grazing on Chinese food, sexuality and gender identity came up (and it was not me who brought it up). George, Diane and Robyn were talking about Ru Paul’s show on Logo, *Drag Race*, lamenting on the characters they like and don’t like. Unexpectedly, this conversation swung toward the social construction of gender, how gender orientation and sexual orientation are often conflated and misunderstood. And this was not a volume-conscious conversation. There were other families around, listening or not listening to our conversations, and we were never made to feel uncomfortable or gawked at. It was a queer family homecoming. They miss having me around on a regular basis and I miss being around on a regular basis.

While Andrew helped me establish these connections, I have been able to develop them into relationships on my own. The level of care that my kinsfolk have taken up for me in worrying about me, thinking about me, missing me, considering me is comforting. I feel like I am at home in Harlan when I am with them. And the ways in which these intimacies translate into both place-making and queer visibility has astounding implications for how queer sex/life/politics is intensified at the intersection of competing social worlds. When I first moved to Harlan, I would have never thought that it would be ok to have this kind of queer family outing amidst heterosexual families. This highlights what Richard Middleton has described as the “complex transaction between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’” (Middleton 2007:47). There are aspects of Southern hospitality (tradition) intersecting with a cosmopolitan (modern) sense of contact with the Other that defy metropolitan readings of rural life, practices and desires.

Part III: Rural queer mobility, cosmopolitanism and the functional practices of gay bars

Rural queer mobility and its cosmopolitan complexion

The borders of the rural, especially in relation to sexual identity and practices are porous and shifting (Knopp and Brown 2003, Oswin 2007, 2008). The queer diffusions that Larry Knopp and Michael Brown discuss in their study of the rural hinterlands of Seattle and Duluth already allude to a rural queer mobility that oscillates between varying degrees of movement in and out of

the urban. And at the same time that there are varying degrees of moving in and out of the urban, there are also varying degrees of motivation. Some see the city as a place of refuge, some see it as an access point to attach themselves to the identity politics of the Gay Rights Movement and some see it as a place where they can acquire an education and then return back to the country. Some stay in the city for extended periods of time – some never return, some do – and some go for short trips to visit gay bars and other types of queer identified spaces. Or the reasons for moving in and out of the city could have nothing to do with sexual identity. But for whatever reason and in whatever manner rural gay/trans folk engage with the city, we must be careful how we script this narrative of rural queer mobility.

People move for many different reasons – from the economic and political to the social and personal. However, when we move from one place to the other it does not mean that we leave behind or forget where we come from. The places that we come from are marked on our bodies just as if they had been tattooed; they are part of our identity. I want to concentrate on two of these forms of mobility. I want to briefly discuss ideas about rural to urban migration (in terms of staying in metro spaces for extended periods). This form of rural queer mobility has been alluded to throughout this dissertation and is highly misunderstood by metropolitan gay culture. Then, I want to concentrate on two forms of rural queer mobility that seem to have a more subtle cosmopolitan complexion; one that explores moving in and out of city spaces as a means for recreation and exploring aspects of queer identity and social networking, and one that looks at aspects of rural to rural mobility in the constitution of ‘queer safe zones’ at the intersection of rural queer and straight social worlds. These two forms that I am discussing should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but entangled into a complex of rural queer mobilities and modalities.

According to Judith Halberstam, the closet as an organizing logic of sexual identity (and practices) for metronormative gay culture not only scripts how one is supposed to reference and understand sexual discovery, but also the narratives of rural to urban queer migration. As she puts it:

The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative. While the story of coming out tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town’ is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy. Since each narrative bears the same structure, it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from

closet to out and proud. As Howard comments in *Men Like That*, the rural is made to function as a closet for urban sexualities in most accounts of rural queer migration (2005:36-37).

In this way, there is an understanding that queer liberation always ends up in the city, that it *must* use the city as a backdrop for its performance. Country = 'closet', city = 'out and proud'. But what is important to note is how much more complex rural queer migration actually is. Halberstam goes on to state, "In reality, many queers from rural or small towns move to the city of necessity, and then yearn to leave the urban area and return to their small towns; and many recount complicated stories of love, sex and community in their small-town lives that belie the closet model" (Ibid 37).

These sentiments have been contextualized elsewhere throughout this dissertation. Jeff Mann's (2005) compulsion to leave home as a young man because of the homophobia that he directly encountered in his hometown in West Virginia. He lived in Washington DC for over a decade before returning to the mountains to make his home. My friends Wade and Jason that open Chapter 4 have been in direct confrontations that mark the country as their 'closet.' When my roommate Wade was assaulted for being from Eastern Kentucky, the implication and expectation was that he should apologize for being from there and leave his rural history behind so that he could be a 'proper' gay man in the city. But the fact that they have moved to the city, and for all intents and purposes intend to stay (for how long, who knows) should not disqualify them from their ability to be both in the city and from the country. And from a slightly different angle, my friend Martin, who described how he became a Physician Assistant, made it clear that his intentions were always to return home to Harlan. He lived in Lexington to do graduate work, but it was never his intention to stay there. From time to time, he and his partner John make sporadic trips to Lexington or Johnson City when they want a weekend trip, but they lament no loss for having stayed and built their home in Harlan County.

But there is also a cosmopolitan complexion to these movements and mobilities that should not be ignored. I have argued that the urban/rural binary is insufficient when describing rural queer subjectivity precisely because the boundaries between the rural and urban are dialectically implicated in each other and their borders are porous. For example, when Andrew first introduced me to Robyn in his salon, he was cutting and coloring the hair of a beautiful young woman who was a high fashion model with a top agency in New York City. This young model and her mother are both from Harlan County and have a long history with Robyn. But that a high fashion model that has traveled the world from Paris to Milan, still frequently returns home (as much to have

Robyn cut and style her hair as to stay close with her family and her boyfriend that also lives in Harlan), speaks to a cosmopolitanism that further stretches the skein perceivably separating the rural from the urban. While this young model is a straight woman (and a gay ally), she nevertheless emblemizes the complexity of sensibilities that script movements in and out of city and country life.

Cosmopolitanism reflects what Walter Dignolo has described as “planetary conviviality” (2002:157). The idea, as he counters it to globalization that constitutes a “set of designs to manage the world” through the continuous unfolding of capital, understands itself in a complex terrain of cultural diversity and contact. In theory, cosmopolitanism advocates plurality, mobilizes multiple interactions, and sets in relief the cultural diversity of the planet as it flows through and across different spatial and temporal constructs (Bhabha 1999, Robbins 1998, Wood 1998). Ironically, as the cosmopolitan conviviality that is supposedly attached to cosmopolitan modes of mobility and interaction have congealed into cultural formations, the plurality with which it is usually associated becomes circumscribed by particular aesthetic modes of production that place limits on the ‘differences’ that do not suit its ‘culturally sophisticated’ palette. There is a paradox in its cultural iterations that mark the cosmopolite as the jet setting, urban nomad operating through petty bourgeois elitism and a metronormative commodity aesthetic (Söderström 2006, Appadurai 1996). This gives cosmopolitanism a classed, aesthetic and regionalized specificity that privileges metropolitan sex/life/politics and discards the rural as a legitimate interlocutor between different cultural forms and negotiations.

However, there is still a use value to cosmopolitanism that can be applied to rural queer mobility precisely because of its movement in and out of rural and urban spaces and its integration (and hybridization) of certain aspects of metropolitan gay aesthetics (Halberstam 2005). The rural does not exist in a vacuum and the promises that global modes of capitalist consumption and consumerism promote are not lost on rural voices. The rural exceeds its boundaries and the urban holds a purpose and a function for the deployment of identity. While there are certainly differences in style and tastes between the urban and the rural, just as the urban has appropriated and transformed images of the country to suit its consumptive needs, so does the rural. Rural gay/trans folk are aware of the effects of the neoliberal gay project and they know its promises. The city and the country are not disengaged and the urban images of homosexual identities and consumption practices do infiltrate and influence the construction of rural sexual identities.

Cosmopolitanism, then, describes a set of social and cultural negotiations between rural sensibilities and the desire to exceed and experience things outside of rural homelands. It should be noted that this is not true across the board, but there is nevertheless an understanding that there are other worlds beyond rural boundaries. Whether their sights are set for across the world (such as the NYC model), across the country (such as Travis' ambitions to escape to California mentioned in Chapter 4), or the one or two hour trip that it takes to get to the closest gay bar (rural, small town, or urban), the mobility of rural gay/trans folk is already tied up in the processes of cosmopolitan exchange that reflect metropolitan gay culture. We can see this intersectionality that highlights a cosmopolitan complexion in the constitution of rural sexual subjectivity through the concept 'gay bar'. Elisa and I have been working on ideas about how rural gay/trans folk come to understand and explore their queer identities. Queer identity, as should be apparent, has multiple facets that stretch across and between multiple locations and social worlds. The thrust of this interrogation that is germane to this discussion on rural mobility has been the ways in which urban (queer) social sites address particular aspects of (rural) queer identity versus rural (straight) social sites that address aspects of rural (queer) identity.

There are two aspects of the concept 'gay bar' that Elisa and I have been working through that I want to highlight here to animate two seemingly divergent forms of rural queer mobility. These two definitions will be applied to an example of each below, but should be seen as interconnected. Different aspects of queer visibility directly affect the types of spaces that rural gay/trans folk engage to explore different aspects of their identities. Elisa and I have argued that there is a confluence and reciprocal relationship between urban 'out' spaces that provide open venues for sexual minority expression and rural/small town 'negotiated' spaces that operate through rural identifications and sensibilities. The latter describes different kinds of socio-sexual expressions at the intersection of 'straight' and 'queer' social worlds. It is argued that there is a way in which rural Appalachian gay/trans folk make use of both of these spatial typologies to satisfy the multiple aspects of their queer identities.

'Gay bar' is noted as being a fluid concept of transformational spaces that constitute a set of social practices for sexual and (to a lesser extent) gender minorities. These spaces can be thought of as both contained spaces and/or negotiated terrains. The 'contained' definition of gay bar speaks to the (largely) urban gay and queer spaces that both animate and are animated by metropolitan visual queer culture. These are, generally speaking, safe spaces for gay/trans folk to

come and explore, practice and embody the cultural sensibilities of being a sexual/gender minority. In the urban, 'gay bar' represents a particularized and explicit set of social and political practices where the impulse to be 'out' (visibly queer) is celebrated through a rich tapestry of queer expressions and representations that have historically resulted in notions of 'Gay Pride.' Drag shows, discotheques, coffee shops, book stores and other forms of queer aesthetics and social practices characterize the nature of these spaces.

The 'negotiated' definition of gay bar functions as a social process by which the presence of gay/trans folk within these social spaces are moderated by a diminished emphasis on queer identity that renders it an inconsequential feature of those whom interact with straight folk. These negotiated spaces exist both in the urban and the rural, but their presence in rural places is far less recognized. In both contexts however, 'gay bar' works as a floating signifier to illustrate the means by which straight and queer social worlds intersect and interact in similar spaces. These spaces are still marked 'straight,' but there is nevertheless a queering of their makeup through an accepted (if contingent) allowance of sexual and gender minorities within their boundaries. In this way, 'gay bar' is a conceptual bookmark that highlights what could be called the constitution of 'queer safe zones.' Yet, because these are primarily heterosexual spaces, it is important to note that neither of the terms ('gay bar' or 'queer safe zones') could be directly applied to these negotiated social spaces without disrupting, if not altogether dismantling, the function of these spaces. These terms, like others in this research, remain analytical. Nonetheless, these queer safe zones are, generally speaking, safe spaces for rural gay/trans folk to come and practice the cultural sensibilities of being from the country. Different forms of 'redneck,' 'hillbilly,' 'rough and tumble' identifications, along with particular types of drink, music, and social activities, often conceptualized through notions of 'masculinity,' characterize these spaces.

(Dis)locating Appalachian queer space(s) and a 'gay bar experiment'

From these two different yet interconnected definitions of 'gay bar,' let us turn now to two examples that illustrate these understandings. The first of these, speaking to the 'urban' forms of 'contained' gay bar spaces, describes the trips to Johnson City, Tennessee, that I made with different members of my research kin and friends during my time in Harlan. The second of these depicts a night on the town in Hazard, Kentucky, that Elisa and I put together with her friend

Ronnie and that we have come to call the 'gay bar experiment'. I shall discuss and examine each in kind.

Example I: New Beginnings, Johnson City, Tennessee

Johnson City is a small city that sits in tight proximity to two other small cities (Bristol and Kingsport – also known as the 'Tri-Cities' area) in eastern Tennessee. It takes roughly an hour and a half to drive through the mountainous terrain of the narrow point of rural Virginia that tucks up between Kentucky and Tennessee in the Cumberland Gap region. In Johnson City, there are two gay bars: *New Beginnings* and *Pharaohs*. *New Beginnings* (or *New B's* as it also referred to) is the larger of the two. It is a discotheque with a dance floor, two side bars, and an outdoor space with window access to the inside bar. The first time I went, I had just recently moved to Harlan and Andrew had just begun introducing me to the friends that would become my kin. I was downstairs from my apartment chatting with Diane about whatever and she told me that it was her sister's birthday and they would be going to *New B's*. She told me that this weekend was their 'White Party' and if I could come down, I should dress in white and meet them there. I couldn't convince Andrew to come along, so I went by myself.

When I arrived, Diane was there as she said she would be with her husband George (this was our first time meeting). Robyn was there too, and a whole cast of other family and friends (mostly straight) from different parts of Harlan County. This was the first real opportunity that I had to socialize with Diane and Robyn, and I quickly became endeared to George as a friend and confidante – which would later spark some interesting critical Biblical conversations. What is fascinating about the crew that was there to celebrate Diane's sister's birthday, however, was their heterosexuality. While I just argued that rural to rural mobility scripts certain kinds of access points between straight and queer social worlds (in terms of constituting queer safe zones), here we have an instance in reverse where queer life is seen as something worth exploring by straight folk. Now, it should be noted that there is a different orientation to power here: gay/trans folk are forced to 'come up' to straight social worlds while the privilege of straight folk affords them the ability to 'come down' to queer social worlds. Nevertheless, that there are straight allies from Harlan at a gay bar – that the straight 'birthday girl' chose to celebrate her birthday in gay bar, speaks to these social negotiations in dynamic and contingent ways. What is revealed is a level of care marked by kinship and an impulse to recognize the legitimacy of queerness in rural life.

The first time I went down just for the night and returned home the same night. It would be several months before I would go back down. This speaks to the nature of these kinds of trips, which are generally geared toward 'special events'. When one is out drinking an hour or better from home, it is generally advisable to plan on staying the night or weekend in the city and return home once sober. But this also alludes to the accessibility of rural queer mobility. The travel costs of these trips, through things such as lodging and the fuel to get there, as well as the extended travel time, generally makes these trips less frequent. The next two times that I would go down would be on Saint Patrick's Day and Mardi Gras, both of which were accompanied by special 'party events' at New B's. However, on these trips, I went with friends.

On the first of the two subsequent trips, I went down with a friend I had made in Harlan, Jadan and his friend Jaden.⁶ These two both did amateur drag and we went down early so that they could go to their favorite wig shop and we could do other shopping for the trip. After a grueling afternoon of shopping and driving all over the tri-cities area, tromping about town with an audaciously queer visibility, we settled into a hotel room and began to get ready. Jadan and Jaden started the slow and tedious process of putting on their drag and I waited patiently for their help to do my hair. Since it was Mardi Gras, I decided for a punk rock look and Jaden helped me to put my hair up into a mohawk that stood straight up about eight inches. Diane and George eventually met us at the hotel room and they had brought with them Diane's little brother, Kevin. Kevin, a precocious straight kid of 18 (at the time), was amazed with my hair, awestruck, and as we were the only two smokers in the gay/bisexual/straight/drag queen soup that we were brewing, he and I became smoking buddies.

I had met Jadan online and we eventually hung out at my apartment and were generally buddies. Jadan was friends with Diane and George (and Robyn) before I had met him and Kevin and Jaden went to high school together and were rather close. Diane recently told me that Kevin used to be rather homophobic, but it was his friendship with Jaden that changed his perception of gay folk. That night we went out to New B's and had an incredible night out. There were drinks, dancing (sometimes with Kevin), banter, beautifully bedazzled serifs dancing on the sound boxes, dynamic and equally bedazzled drag performances, and a general sense of queerness and solidarity with friends. The Saint Patrick's Day party happened much the same way, with a few

⁶ In real life, these two friends of mine have the same name. For the purposes of clarity, I'm using a variation on a similar pseudonym to separate the two.

exceptions. Kevin went down with me and Jadan and I helped him pick out something 'green' to wear for the night. Kevin and I didn't stay the night, but actually went back with Diane and George after they had met us down there. And Kevin actually spent the night at my apartment that night; we stayed up chatting about life and whatnot. Kevin has become a little brother to me.

Through these connections, I have been able to explore multiple facets of rural queer life that exist at the intersection of urban and rural queer experience (through a rural lens). They have been opportunities to deepen the ties I have with my research kin. They have been a means for me to explore how straight life folds itself into the queer experience. As well, I have been able to make other acquaintances and connections at New B's. It should be noted that my experiences in these spaces are set up as one particular example about the ways in which rural gay/trans folk use urban spaces to constitute the expressions and explorations of their sexual and gender identities. But there are other possibilities and probabilities for these types of excursions.

For example, it has been recounted to me by friends at the Bar Complex in Lexington that it seems that initial trips to urban gay spaces are often 'scouting expeditions.' For rural gay men, they often take a handful of 'girlfriends' with them to 'scope out' a place. After a level of comfort is reached, they can be seen to arrive more frequently alone. At this point, the experience is often about the titillation of looking at other gay men, which can eventually lead to the encounter of meeting other gay men. Social awkwardness can abound in these early attempts at reaching out to other sexual and gender minorities. And these excursions are sometimes met with discriminating attitudes from urban gay men, with demeaning comments about the places that rural gay/trans folk come from. These are not universal factors that rural gay/trans folk face in the city, and usually as social networks emerge within these spaces, these incidences diminish – sometimes through the protection from new social networks and sometimes by a simple and growing recognition of who and what types of people to avoid. And sometimes, rural gay/trans folk learn how to 'pass'. Many times, as these excursions become less about meeting other gay men and move toward general social events, the 'girlfriends' reemerge, usually to meet the 'new friends.' Sometimes rural gay/trans folk become drag queens and commute back and forth to these venues every weekend to perform.

Regardless of the level of 'outness' of particular rural sexual and gender minorities, many rural gay/trans folk make trips to the city at varying intervals. These trips to the city can be generally thought of as momentary reprieves to explore aspects of their queer identities that are

not altogether available in the country. The frequency of these trips usually depends on the geographical distance from the city and the economic ability to take such trips. It is much easier for rural gay/trans folk who live within a nominal distance to a city to make more trips than those whose distance might make it difficult to go out for a night on the town and reasonably make it home safely within the same night. Yet, the relative infrequency of these trips generally means that a more local social outlet is required. Equally important to queer social networking in the city for rural gay/trans folk are the negotiations of social spaces in the small town and rural environments in which rural gay/trans folk live. It is to these assemblages and the constitution of 'queer safe zones' that we now turn.

Example II: A gay bar experiment, Hazard, Kentucky

After having thought through some of the ideas that Elisa and I wanted to explore in relationship to 'gay bar,' we decided to put our theories about rural to rural mobility to the test with what we have come to call the 'gay bar experiment.' On no particular Friday evening in August 2009, Elisa rallied her friend Ronnie to meet us in Hazard for a night on the town. Elisa had a friend and summer boarder living with her at the time. Suzanne is an advanced undergraduate student from New England who has been doing research on the emerging economies of the privatization of the prison industry and its presence in Appalachia as a new form of 'economic growth.' She was living with Elisa at the time. She agreed to be our 'designated driver' and drove us to Hazard so that we could start our experiment. On the way, we picked up Ronnie, who lives in the small town of Vicco, a little over half way from Whitesburg to Hazard.

We started out at Applebee's in Hazard. It was a good place to get food and have our first drink. From the moment we entered and sat down at the bar, Ronnie was in the spotlight. At least two or three women came up to talk to him and coo over him. He is a very popular man in Hazard and Vicco. Also a hair dresser (and I've been told that he has sat on the town council of Vicco before), Ronnie is well known and loved. Elisa's brother-in-law, Greg was there. Greg has a 'roughneck,' 'good ole boy' feel of masculinity to him. Ronnie enjoys teasing him – facetious flirtations and the like. Greg is used to it and is as endeared to Ronnie in his stoic, butch masculinity as any of the women throwing themselves at Ronnie.

From dinner, the gay bar experiment truly began. We went to Fugates, a bar on the entire second floor of this former hotel that looks oddly like the grand old cruising paddle boats that would go up and down the Mississippi River in the 19th century. I was expecting an evening of the four of

us, myself, Elisa, Suzanne and Ronnie. Not long after arriving, the cavalry showed up. Ronnie had almost literally invited a gay bar to go with us. Ronnie had invited two gay couples and a lesbian friend along for the ride. We ended up with six gay men, two straight girls and one lesbian.⁷ Fugates caters to a middle age to older crowd and it was karaoke night. While we took up a rather large table in the back behind the karaoke machine, I could notice some lingering glances as if to ask, “What is going on over there?” But never once was anything pejoratively said to us or anything that smacked of looming violence. We moved throughout the bar when we needed to refill our drinks, we were rambunctious in our back corner (although the karaoke was so loud that no one could have heard us anyway), and we were left in peace to have our night together.

Not long after, we migrated to our next bar location. Originally, based on Elisa and my conversations, we were supposed to go the Brown Derby. The way Elisa described it, Gabby’s is a place that would not be appropriate for incorporating queer spaces into its borders, however Brown Derby is. Yet, a Kiss cover band was playing at the Duke’s of Hazard. It seemed to be the ‘must go’ of the night, so we went. The most audacious (and eerily historically accurate) portrayal of Kiss came with full make-up, silver platform shoes, long protruding tongues, and the dark space-age costumes that emblemize Kiss in the 1970s. I thought, “ooh, look, a drag show.” The crowd was into it and we sat down to enjoy the reimagining of Kiss. And they were quite convincing. Greg showed up as well and intermittently joined us (he was there with his own friends). While we did nothing flamboyant, we were marked queer. But that did stop people from chatting us up, getting us to dance and generally accepting us as other people in the crowd during a highly elaborate Kiss cover band set, ostensibly located in an average sports bar. It was starting to get late and we wanted to make it to one last bar. Ethan and Kyle were getting tired, and Kyle had to work in the morning, so they did not follow us to our final destination.

From Kiss to Bluegrass fusion, we headed back to Vicco to go to little hole in the wall dive called the Dawg House. There was a live band with a Bluegrass feel to it doing popular cover songs from the 1970s and 80s. In this bar, we let our hair down a bit more than we had in the previous two. Maybe it was the music, maybe it was the accumulating alcohol in our system, maybe it was the hospitality that seemed present – but we all got out there and did our thing. Elisa and Lisa danced together on the dance floor in a provocative manner. It was fun to watch the look on the local men’s faces – not quite ogling but definitely entranced. Toward the end of the night,

⁷ We’ll call couple number 1: Ethan and Kyle, couple number 2: Brad and Jacob, and our lesbian friend Lisa.

Jacob got cornered by a woman who wanted to talk to him about her love of gay people. There had been a tense dynamic growing between Jacob and Lisa. They both seemed to vie for his boyfriend, Brad's attention and apparently Lisa won. It was in a sense of frustrated defeat that Jacob sat there trying to avoid this woman was trying to engage him. I came over and sat down next to him. He was not amused and did not want to talk to her. In her simple way, she just wanted to express her admiration for him to be able to be out and proud and sure of himself. She told us of closeted folk she knows and how difficult it is for them. He looked over at me at one point and pleaded in silence to get him out of there. I wasn't quite sure how to intervene and I was interested in what she had to say. But not much longer; it was last call and we were all sent home.

The gay bar experiment in our eyes was an unmitigated success. It was one of the most enjoyable nights that I had had out in a long time. Our gaggle of queer rabble-rousers managed to infiltrate these straight spaces and were welcomed in them. Now, it should be noted that familiarity was certainly at play. I probably would not be able to reproduce this if I were to drag a group of queers down from Lexington to do the same thing. Ronnie's charismatic and well-known persona, along with Elisa and the other local folk in our gaggle (Suzanne and I were the guests), helped set the tone of these negotiations. Now this is not to say that if I were to come with a Lexington group that it would necessarily end in violence, but familiarity acts as an ether to lubricate the negotiations where queer and straight social worlds are intersecting.

In the concluding chapter to this dissertation, I will take what I have learned from rural queer place-making to make broader arguments for what we can learn from rural queer geographies. There is a political praxis to be gleaned from these experiences that speaks to a politics of allied responsibility and advocacy. It's not about being easy; it's about finding ways to make life work. These are not resolutions but negotiations. If we can get over liberal notions of autonomy and individual identity, what kinds of place-making possibilities are we left with? Indeed, when we get over identity as the only mode on which to levy our politics, what kinds of 'rich and prolific disarrays' (to use Gibson-Grahams term) will we find in its place? I am not calling for a fetishization and/or privileging of place over other spatial processes. However, I am seeking a more nuanced analysis of the intricacies that create the crisis moments between sexual desires and attachments to place alongside a radical political foresight into the transformation and renegotiations of liberal governmentality and what kinds of potentials that opens up for us in its stead.

Chapter 7: The Future of 'Queeridentity'? Praxis, Research and Politics

The blues is personal catastrophe lyrically expressed. ... It is... how do you generate an elegance of earned self togetherness so that you have a stick-to-it-ness in the face of the catastrophic and the calamitous and the horrendous and the scandalous and the monstrous?

– Cornell West
Interview, Examined Life

The relevant fact for politics is really that human nature is changeable. Human nature isn't good or evil. Human nature is, uh, constituted... it's constituted by how we act, how we... the histories... human nature is in fact... the history of habits and practices that are the result of past struggles, of past hierarchies, of past victories and defeats. And so... this is actually I think the key to rethinking revolution, is to... is to recognize that revolution is not just about a transformation for democracy. Revolution is really... revolution really requires a transformation of human nature, so that people are capable of democracy.

– Michael Hardt,
Interview, Examined Life

There's umpteen million examples of what the gay experience can be.

– Chris Freeman, Pansy Division,
Interview, Life in a Gay Rock Band

Preambles in brief

This dissertation is a work in progress. I find myself writing it as I am still a part of it. I have new friends and family that are now a part of my life as I am a part of theirs and we are transforming each other in our discussions and interactions. I stated from the outset that this dissertation is about establishing a critical stage on which to conduct research of rural queer geographies in Appalachia. I have not tried to define 'Queer Appalachia,' but rather allude to its possibility. By revealing my relationship to this group of people and how our social negotiations began to develop a queer network of friends and family highlights that possibility. This possibility implies other possibilities not yet explored. Exploring these possibilities expose where our politics for social justice has blind spots and exclusions. It is in these possibilities that new political strategies and advocates for social justice can be formed and reformed, learning from the lessons of each new possibility.

This research finds itself in conversation with a number of key debates in geography and beyond. First and foremost, this research is engaging with the recent developments in queer geography that are emphasizing the material conditions of things in relation to queer and

poststructural theories (see for example Browne, Lim and Browne 2007, Browne and Nash forthcoming). And to the extent that I am engaging with geographers that have done work on rural queer life (Knopp and Brown 2003, Phillips et al 2000, Bell and Valentine 1995), I am also engaging with interdisciplinary scholarship on rural queer studies (including Gray 2009, Halberstam 2005, Howard 1999, 1997, Sears 2001, 1991).

This dissertation expects to make a number of contributions to these debates (both within rural queer studies and beyond). First, this research explores an underrepresented and understudied population that has little critical precedent and demands scrupulous interrogation, so as to not further marginalize their already marginal positions (Gray 2009). Rural gay networks in Appalachia are different from other forms of gay networking, specifically metropolitan gay networks. Their ability to make places for themselves and divine a set of social strategies is not directly related to the ways in which metropolitan gay cultures have done in the past. These rural formations do not necessarily focus on distinguishing themselves from the rest of the community they are in, as much as they attempt to negotiate the complications of competing social worlds. But it is should be undeniably clear that gay/trans folk live their lives in the country, successfully in many cases.

Second, the experimental methodologies that animate this dissertation draw on a number of scholars working with participatory and reflexive methods (Butz and Besio 2004, Pain 2006, 2004, 2003, Denzin 2003, Povinelli 2006). I have used these here to make an argument for how intimacy can be used for productive uses in research and political advocacy, while demanding a rigorous fidelity to those being studied. Third, I have added a spatial layer to homophobia that is not often accounted for as it relates to privilege and social circumscription adding to the work of Michael Brown (2000) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990). Through the discussion on spatializing homophobia, I have explored new vectors of homophobia, specifically those that are internal to mainstream gay culture. To do this, I have also developed a new analytic that incorporates the work of Lisa Duggan (2003, 2002), Judith Halberstam (2005) and Natalie Oswin (2004) – what has been called here the ‘neoliberal gay project’ – to critique the consumption practices of mainstream gay culture and its relationship to neoliberalism.

In this final chapter, I want to ruminate on the political implications of this research and what lessons we should take away. I will do this in three parts. The first part will analyze the work of Bernadette Barton. This is not meant to single her out, but rather to place her rhetoric within the

neoliberal gay project that I have come to critique and to demonstrate why this is a dangerous line of interrogation. In this context, I will discuss what moving past the closet might mean and how such a movement might be achieved. In the second part, I will begin by discussing the lessons learned from this research and the writing of this dissertation. I will make some suggestions for where this research can lead for further study of sexual and gender minorities in Appalachia. Finally, part three will be a call to the political that requires the development of allied advocacy and responsibility.

Part I: Praxis

Waxing toxic: get your axes out boys and girls, we're going after the closet...

I attended Bernadette Barton's lecture *The Toxic Closet: Being Gay in the Bible Belt* at the University of Kentucky, sponsored by the OUTsource and the student chapter of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth¹ on April 6, 2008. She presented this paper of her ongoing study to an eager audience with standing room only. At the end of the lecture, I posed some questions to her about the problems with conflating 'Toxic,' 'Closet,' and THE 'Bible Belt.' This conflation not only belies the complexity and ambivalence often attached to 'coming out' stories, but it also problematically maps this form of homophobia as a distinctly rural (Southern/Appalachian) problem of the 'Bible Belt.' To the lay person (the majority of those who attended her lecture), the grotesque stories she uses to illustrate her point obfuscate these complexities; reading variations in these coming out stories becomes impossible. Indeed the sites of her 'study,' Eastern Kentucky and Texas, already calls into question the idea of a 'Bible Belt.' Holding these two sites as points within something called a Bible Belt renders absolute the homophobic practices of two distinctly different cultural, historical and geographical formations. Further, by fetishizing the closet as a mode of 'being,' she reifies homonormative views of selfhood and reflexivity and what it means to 'come out of the closet' in general, let alone in the country. This sidesteps the liberal conceits that constitute the closet as an effective metaphor to manage and accurately describe the sexual subjectivities of rural

¹ OUTsource is a sexual and gender minority resource center at the University of Kentucky that opened in April, 2007. Since its opening, it has been actively involved in sponsoring and organizing events that bring sexual and gender minority issues into relief for the broader university community. Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) is a non-profit, political and activist organization that concerns itself with social and environmental justice throughout the commonwealth. In deference to the allied development and responsibility discussion that opened this chapter, of the many concerns that KFTC is engaged with, such as Mountain Top Removal and environmental responsibility, issues around poverty in rural Kentucky, issues around poverty in urban Kentucky, among others, sexual and gender minority problems and struggles in also high up on their list of support.

sexual minorities (with nothing really to say or add to the self determining practices of rural trans folk).

When Barton set out to collect coming out stories of gay men and lesbians (a noble project indeed) within the nebulous ambiguity of this thing called the 'Bible Belt,' I do not believe that it is or was her intention to further marginalize rural sexual and gender minorities. I sincerely believe that it is her genuine pursuit to advocate on behalf of sexual and gender minorities everywhere. But intentions aside, going out and seeking the desolate, brutally violent, and disquieting homophobic 'coming out' stories of rural gay folk who happen to live in whatever this 'Bible Belt' thing is, produces a self-fulfilling prophecy. Further, by alluding to 'being' gay (i.e. gay being) through 'coming out,' her approach continuously reinscribes the 'closet' as the only means through which gay/trans folk (rural and urban) negotiate queer space and ignores other ways of 'being' for sexual and gender minorities. I do not seek to romanticize rural homophobia in Appalachia by dismissing the violence attached to 'coming out'. And it is important to collect and analyze violent and traumatic stories. Yet, geographical variation in these encounters is tantamount to their interpretation. By infiltrating these rural spaces enmeshed in the assumptions of the neoliberal gay project, and then mapping this homophobia *onto* this so called 'Bible Belt' as a distinct problem of the 'Bible Belt,' undermines the variations that exist within rural sexual and gender minority populations and further entrenches metropolitan aversion of the country.

Her position on the closet reifies and falls in line with the conceits of the neoliberal gay project that attempt to stabilize the categories that make up the ever growing acronym LGBTIQQA. By stabilizing these categories and the discreet binaries that synecdochically stand in for and determine the desiring practices of sexual and gender minorities, the arguments of the neoliberal gay project circumnavigate the real practices of rural queer life. These practices necessarily integrate and transform the meanings of these categories to take into account what it is to be rural *and* queer. The categories that group sexual and gender minority lives as LGBTIQQA are the transformational and contingent bookmarks of identity that are never truly resolved and must function within the social contexts which set the condition for their meanings (both personally and socially). Drawing on Michael Brown's work (which I analyzed in Chapter 5), the closet is a set of spatial practices that both constrains the subjectivity of sexual and gender minorities and helps to script certain types of homophobia. For the closet metaphor to appropriately describe what it means to come out in the country, its contours must be thought of as fractal and fissured,

constrained by while nevertheless altering the contexts that mitigate 'coming out'. To whom one 'comes out' and how often one engages in and/or refrains from 'coming out' is the social given of queer life and other forms of negotiating these transitions.

Further still, the neoliberal gay project's emphasis on Evangelical Christian rhetoric, emblematic of Barton's position, brackets the arguments for a blanket homophobia that overlooks what it actually means to be Christian in rural Appalachia. It overlooks what it means to be Christian *and* gay/trans in Appalachia. First of all, not *everyone* is Christian in Appalachia, let alone Evangelical. The Catholic Church for example, a minority denomination in the region, was relayed to me during my time in Harlan to be understood as a progressive voice for many issues that rural gay/trans folk run up against. In addition, not *all* Evangelical rhetoric is directly, intentionally, or even maliciously homophobic. There *are* Christian allies. Many of the Evangelical preachers she draws on in her justification for rural homophobia, such as Rick Warren and Fred Phelps, are so geographically dislocated from the places she is talking about that drawing connections between their voices and the voices of rural folk in Appalachia is specious at best. Not only has she collapsed the meaning of the closet for queer life, she has also collapsed the meaning of Christianity into violence, vitriol and homophobia. I explored at length in Chapter 5 how the Bible and its so called anti-homosexual passages are not the exclusive means of enacting homophobia, but rather a vector for delivering homophobia. I stand by this argument and to wrench agency away from all Christians in all places at all times for homophobic sentiments that many of them do not hold is a dangerous and egregious reduction.

But the political foreclosure is in the mapping itself. In challenging Barton's assumptions during the question and answer session of her talk, I first posed the problem of the closet as a reifying effect attached to the neoliberal gay project and its limitations in describing 'coming out' stories everywhere. But as a moment of concession, I allowed the question to be posed within the logic of what the closet has come to represent. If we take as given liberal definitions of the 'closet' and its social function as a spatially confining apparatus that must be broken open as a means of self awakening, then the closet is by its very definition 'toxic.' How do we account for the already existing toxicity of the closet and its enhanced capacity to contaminate rural queer life by also calling it 'toxic'? Through Brown's work, we have already explored how the closet is a 'double bind.' To be 'in the closet' is as equally binding as 'coming out of the closet.' The former is self denial, the latter is social marginality. But by tethering these two metaphorical strictures together, 'toxic' and

'closet,' she inadvertently attaches a new and more deeply entrenched double bind to the closet that hyperbolizes its toxicity by adding the moniker 'toxic' and making this a rural problem that is of the 'Bible Belt.'

This was my challenge to her during the question and answer section of her lecture, and to be fair, she did recognize the necessity of thinking through variation in rural queer sex/life/politics. But she nevertheless focuses on examples such as a young rural lesbian girl being chased after with a butcher knife by her mother when she was 'outed' by her younger sister (Barton 2009) while never exploring the means by which rural sexual and gender minorities manage their lives on the fringe. This type of rhetoric emblemizes a 'militarized zone' for rural sexual and gender minorities that I have attempted to systematically dismantle. This move implicates these hostile spaces as a rural issue and belies homophobic violence in the city, thereby limiting the possibility of allied (rural-urban) advocacy as we attempt to craft a political argument for the legitimacy of rural queer life. I speculate that she believes that these stories will garner sympathy, and it is possible that they will.

However, it is my estimation that these privileged, neoliberal rhetorics will only function to further embed the threat of the country queer as it is articulated across the crisis points of homonormative gay sex/life/politics and justify the assumptions that qualify metropolitan gay life as its ultimate complexion. Further, in my experience with advocacy groups such as OUTsource and the Violence, Intervention and Prevention (VIP) center on the University of Kentucky campus, ally development and responsibility is central to engaging in critical and transformative politics. The connections necessary for such development are stymied by the practice of entrenching absolute cleavages between Christianity and queer life. Such a move only further distances rural queer life from having political voices. In order to advocate on behalf of rural queer life (and other forms of queer racisms, regionalisms trans/inter/bi-phobias and so on), a rupture in the way we look at geographies of sexualities and a more radically intimate politics will be required.

The study of the geographies of sexualities in Appalachia is a nascent sub-sub-topic of rural queer spaces and people across a sparing degree of sub-sub-disciplines. Some of these include media studies (Gray 2009), creative writing (Mann 2005), the research groups at Appalachian State University, and a more broad survey of Appalachian sexualities (Massey 2007) among the other political and activist movements that I outlined in Chapter 5. However, to start from a position of disempowerment only continues the cycle of disempowerment. I feel compelled

to start by creating an equal footing. I hope that my research and this dissertation project begin to contribute to that conversation.

The closet as flesh: 'coming in' to the duvet?

As we have explored, the closet may not be the best metaphor to describe sexual subjectivity. To the extent that the closet maintains salience in the everyday lives of rural, as well as urban sexual and gender minorities, for academics studying rural gay/trans folk, we must radically transform our analytic of how the closet scripts space and recognize its contingencies. The closet may not be an altogether dead metaphor, but we must give its scripts much more fluid passages. What if rural queer geographies were to hold the clues to radically transforming queer theoretical methods and approaches? Can we do this within the material conditions in which they unfold? Can we think of the closet as a shifting and morphing epistemology that shapes the material conditions of queer life without affording it the status of a contained and determined ontology? I am going to explore this idea here through a sketch on what another metaphor of sexual discovery might look like.

Duvet covers are interesting things. They can be wonderfully beautiful – any color, texture and pattern that one can imagine. Inside a duvet one puts a comforter to sleep under. The comforter remains intact. The comforter underneath is warm and stable. The duvet acts as a protective barrier between the comforter and the dirt, sweat and other bodily fluids of the outside world. Duvets can be removed and laundered, they can be changed as the seasons pass, as they become threadbare and weary, or they can be changed simply as a matter of shifting tastes and styles. They can be personalized to the greatest extent that the imagination allows itself. And while the warmth of the duvet does not come from the duvet itself, it comes to act like a morphing and shifting skin that translates directly into the position of the comforter it houses just under its thin fabric. The duvet is shaped by the comforter. When the duvet and the comforter come together to mutually reinforce their contingent relationship, it becomes the outward appearance of the comforter. It's what we see; it's what we get used to when thinking about the comforter. Their meanings become intertwined and co-constitutive. Their mimetic relationship strengthens each other's place in the world; the duvet lends aesthetic styles and codes, as well as protection, to the comforter's warm functionality. The subjectivity of the comforter is constant, but the representation of identity shifts and morphs to negotiate the spaces in which the duvet finds itself.

I am drawing on this metaphor to make a point about the social meanings of sexual discovery and how that translates into identity. In this metaphor, I am considering the comforter *to be* the sexual subject – his or her desires and practices – while the duvet is the outward appearance or identity of that subject position. It is a metaphor of embrace rather than exclusion – ‘coming in,’ opposed to ‘coming out.’ At first glance, this metaphor is highly romantic. But then again, so is the closet, at least the way that it is used in the rhetoric of the neoliberal gay project. Nevertheless I am not altogether certain that it could ever directly stand in for the closet, but why can’t it? The closet is a toxic space. By liberal definitions, one is supposed to leave the closet behind. Why does the closet have to be left behind, especially when it is a part of us? It is our history. It is our struggle. It is how we’ve come to wrestle with our sexual and gender identities. Notwithstanding, we know that the closet *never* does leave us (Brown 2000). It always follows sexual and gender minorities, wherever we go. Because our sexual and gender subjectivities have very few legitimate social spaces, we are constantly in a mode of ‘coming out’ or ‘passing.’ The closet never ends at its threshold. And the closet reinforces the idea that we are concealed from sight.

Our bodies are invisible. Our bodies are irrelevant. This is the message of the closet. It has been a useful metaphor, but can we think of something better? Why do we have to come ‘out’? Why can’t we come ‘in’? Why are our sexual and gendered self-discoveries banked on their semantic exclusions? Heterosexuals get to come ‘in.’ There is no grand declaration of their sexuality. When they reach the point where they are ready to engage with their sexuality, society embraces that. It’s ritualized, not cannibalized. Why does the closet metaphor throw us into a gladiator’s ring of social marginality and homophobia? Recognizing that homophobia might not altogether go away (at least any time soon), why can’t our metaphor of sexual and gendered discovery embrace us, make us stronger, assure us that we are people too and deserve first class citizenship just like other people, not exclusion? Is there a way to rethink these thresholds? Recognizing that these thresholds follow us wherever we go in our current iteration of society, is there a way to integrate these thresholds into our sense of self that gives us the space to remember the struggles and pain that comes with being a sexual and gender minority, while allowing us to shape the contours that transform those struggles into a positive sense of self that does not constantly dwell on its pain and social erasure? Can the closet not only be with us, but *be* us?

I chose the duvet metaphor, not as a proscription – and not even as a sales pitch. It's pithy. But does it have real salience? Maybe – who knows? The metaphors that we use are powerful, but which metaphor we use should be personal. It's not about coming up with the next best metaphor; it's about critically thinking through the metaphors already set in place. What if our closet is just flesh? Not something that we move in and out of, one foot always on the threshold, but something that moves with us, that *is* us. What if the duvet metaphor that I have laid out here *does* give us a skein-like structure that not only moves with us but gives both meaning to and is reinforced by the substance underneath? And it is not a foreclosed closet. It can be changed. The categories by which we describe ourselves do not have to remain static and fixed things throughout the course of our lives. Now of course I run the risk of being criticized for saying that we can take identity on and off like a duvet cover. This is not what I am saying because the comforter *is* the substance. The comforter is more or less stable. And while it too can change, it does so slowly and over time across lifespans. The duvet is a persona. It's a simulacrum. It's a representation that shifts and moves based on the negotiations of the spaces that we're in. And who doesn't do that already anyway?

When Judith Butler set out to enable representation through performance and the gender parody, she was heavily criticized by lesbian feminists for using drag queens as an example of gender being a performance that could shift and change at will (Jagose 1996:86). The gist of the critique claimed that if gender is merely a performance, then one *should* be able to put gender on and off like clothing, right? So, can the battered wife simply put on another gender when her husband is beating her? Can the butch put on femme? It was an overly simplistic critique that overlooked the subtleties Butler was trying to get at. At the time and at the dawn of queer theory, the linguistic turn in the social sciences/humanities had Butler queer(y)ing the means by which representations of the body came to be enabled by subjects and how those 'fictions' entrench the power struggles of marginality. This was a necessary move if we were to understand the semantic strictures that have come to be reified as 'Natural.' If we are to fight 'Nature' arguments and the death that they produce, we have to begin by dismantling nature itself. By drawing gender *and* sex back together, while maintaining their distinction, and casting them both as social fictions, Butler was able to bring into relief the instability of 'natural binaries' constructed through 'Nature' (heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman, white/black...). Through this destabilization, we have

come toward being able to see all of the gradations in-between and possibly imagine ones we have not yet seen.

While there are certainly a great many things to criticize about Judith Butler, she laments the problem of the matter herself in the preface to *Bodies that Matter* (1993:ii). There is a lack of materiality in Butler's work, which idealizes subjectivity independent of the flesh in which it is encapsulated and enabled. And this emanates from the broader critique of queer theory at large, the critique that it waxes down the path of textual idealism and leaves behind the institutional character that embodies identity and practices (Green 2002, Stein and Plummer 1994). But I believe that scholars engaging with queer theory have begun to recognize the limitations of queer theory and have made initial attempts to attend to its problems by finding new ways to maintain its theoretical salience while drawing in the material – the *real* and the *imagined* bodies.

From here, a 'new queer theory' seems to be emerging with queer geographies at the vanguard of striking new pathways with queer theory and grounding it in the material world (see for example Browne, Lim and Browne 2007, Browne and Nash forthcoming). There are no queer theory geographers that I know of that would allow the body to 'hang in the wind' as a dangling signifier. But the lessons learned from queer theory, its strengths at busting open the semantic world and looking at the contingencies that put that world together, have indeed and should continue to inform the new material turn in queer geography. It is these developments in materializing queer geography that have been the basis of the approach that I have been working through here as I have attempted to craft arguments for new forms of advocacy, alliances and politics. We can have our textual idealism and eat it too. And to do this, we have to reclaim the languages that constitute the determined characters that embody gay and lesbian studies and transform them. In many ways this project is already under way as the acronym that brackets these characters expands to bring more sexual and gender minority folk into its folds (LGBT – / – Q – Q – A...). Maybe we can begin to rebuild the bridges that divide gay and lesbian studies and queer studies. But in this, we must also pay attention to the new materialities and disidentificatory politics as they are emerging through radically queer voices that are no longer satisfied with the stymied binary character of the categories by which we have come to define ourselves.

Does that mean that the categories go away? Not in my estimation, but they can be transformed, rethought, and given the space to breath. We can still use them so that we don't have an atomized set of 6.5 billion sexualities (and growing) with nothing to organize them. And to the

extent that the categories maintain their salience, even while they are expanding and growing, they must remain fluid and contingent. Their usefulness is in their contingency. To call myself a gay man does not mean that I have 'bought into' a strict manner of desire. It means that I have chosen an identity that organizes one aspect of sexual desire. It allows that one, gendered aspect to place a bookmark on my sexuality. From there, a constellation of other attributes that constitute my sexual desires can come into play without the threat of undermining the bookmarked identity. Body types, body parts, practices, voice timbres, smells, flavors, politics, style, and even fluid notions of gender can all intersect with my gay identity. And whether or not any of those violate the representation of what a 'gay identity' should be does not script, or alter, or even challenge my right to identify as a gay man. What's more, there are other ways I can identify throughout the course of my lifespan. I can identify by the fact that I am in an HIV+/- relationship. My identity can shift – or at least how I describe it. I start out a gay man, I shift to a queer, I fall into being a radical faerie, time goes by and maybe I find myself bisexual and then I find myself... There is use value in the categories because they do organize material relations, but there must also be possibility within and throughout their (trans)formations.

Part II: Research

Lessons from the edge of the universe

This dissertation is a work in progress that attempts to add to academic conversations that address the problems of our continued experiments with democracy as a means to organize human societies. If this experiment is to maintain any salience for a sustained approach to social and environmental justice, we must keep uncovering ways in which its current iterations are erasing bodies, silencing voices, and enacting violence. Neoliberalism and the ways in which it has manifested in cultural modes of production has (re)envisioned the biopolitical through its technologies, for the diffuse and social policing of its borders, and for the exclusion of some from its promises. This dissertation has tracked one vector of this policing mechanism. The neoliberal gay project as it has been defined throughout these pages constitutes a mode of social policing that excludes rural gay/trans folk from its accomplishments, politics, and protections. Ironically, there are indeed voices emerging from the silence and these are exciting and provocative voices that not only challenge the conceits of the neoliberal gay project but show us that there are many ways to be queer in the world. Gay/trans folk in the country are not unfortunates cast in exile, but

strong and dynamic social actors who make concessions, negotiate new lines of social organization and acceptance, and have lives, struggles, sex, concerns, happiness, crises and homophobic violence, and the sublime connections of familial intimacy.

Admittedly when I began this research, I was predisposed to taking a critical, ambivalent, and intimate approach to studying sexual and gender minorities in Appalachia. When I actually found myself in the field, however, I was not only pleasantly surprised that my hypotheses largely stood up (even while they were transforming), but I was also quite shocked to the extent with which queer visibility functions in Harlan County, Kentucky. Queer visibility and agency are functioning in Appalachia. And the fact that this queer visibility and agency is functioning in strikingly deep and intricate ways demands that our politics – of the so called Gay Rights Movement – recognize these complexities and bring serious, sober, and reflexive political representation for queer sex/life/politics to the country. To envision such a politics, we must re-envision what it means to be queer. We must do so by drawing on a more nuanced understanding of the assemblages that characterize queer life at the intersection of competing social worlds. Rather than writing horrific geographies of social atrocity (oppression) and/or romantic geographies of reprieve (redemption), a more interesting set of questions would examine the finer points of how life manages itself on the fringe, the kinds of intimacies produced in this management, and the implications of these lives for radical social justice. Our politics must work through an antagonism that draws our demands for social justice into relief, and this will require a radical rupture in the ways we talk about social justice. This can only be done through the development of allied responsibility and advocacy.

This is not to say that there is not frustration on the part of rural sexual and gender minorities who wish to have access to more of their 'kind.' Many rural sexual/gender minorities have a tortured relationship with their 'native' environments. Often times they are faced with which aspect of their identity, queer or rural, will trump the other? Some move to the city, some move to the city and return after a period of time, and many never leave. Of those that stay, some remain closeted, some only come out to a handful of people (not always their families), and some are completely 'out'. Of this latter group, to a greater or lesser extent, some are disowned and turned out by their families, some have a tenuous relationship with their families, and some find a surprising amount of acceptance within and from their families. Further still, for those that are turned out by their sanguine families, many find other means for constituting family through other types of relations (both gay and straight) that become entangled in a web of mutual care giving.

The project of recognizing these rural queer visibilities has already begun in many ways (see for example Gray 2009, Knopp and Brown 2003, Howard 1999, Sears 2001). But the lessons that gay/trans folk in Appalachia have to teach us can (and I argue will) have a profound impact on arguments for social justice, should we reframe our politics to demand social justice. In this dissertation research project, I have attempted to uncover some of these lessons. First and foremost, Appalachian gay/trans folk *are not* reducible to the images that have come to synecdochically stand in for the modes of life and existence that I explored in Chapter 4. They have lives and struggles too and they are just as complex as the social negotiations of other sexual and gender minority sex/life/politics. As well, as we have seen, homophobia is not as clear cut as it is often portrayed to be. Homophobia is not black and white, emanating from discreet moments of violence. Rather it is a spatial process of negotiations and contradictions that do indeed have violent effects, but also set the terms for negotiation (as Martin's story showed us in Chapter 5).

At the same time queer visibility in Appalachia is real, vibrant and alive, as can be seen in the forms of social networking and care that I experienced while developing kindred and allied relationships in Harlan and Whitesburg, Kentucky. Rural queer visibility may not function to the extent that the political and cultural history of metropolitan gay life has to form its visibilities, but nonetheless it has a real presence. What we have seen in Appalachia is that the iterations of rural queer sex/life/politics are in active negotiations with other aspects of identity (most notably rural identities) that highlight the complexities of how competing social worlds intersect. These may take on many different forms and they do not always have to make explicit claims for recognized gay spaces so much as they are queering everyday spaces. In many ways, it could be argued that rural queer space functions within the limitations of the production of queer space. I argued in Chapter 6 that queer space is transformative, momentary, and fleeting. There are recognizable gay spaces in the country – the gay bars explored in the documentary *Small Town Gay Bar*, the yearly June gay pride events in Boone, North Carolina, the new GSA network on the Hazard Community and Technical College campuses, among others – however, these are fewer and farther between than one would find in metropolitan spaces. The primary mode of queering momentary spaces through transformative interactions and encounters emblemizes the spirit of queer space by recognizing that not every emerging gay space has to be always already queer or stable.

Finally, as I argued in Chapter 6, the means through which intimacy orbits kinship, home and place-making technologies in Appalachia remind us of what an everyday politics of care looks

like. Or perhaps one way of rethinking what it ought to look like. While I was at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in Washington DC in April 2010 finishing up my final thoughts on this dissertation, I attended a session, *In Memoriam: Glen S Elder*, sponsored by the Sexuality and Space Specialty Group and the Africa Specialty Group. It was a moving panel session about the untimely death of Glen Elder at the age of 42. What kept coming up throughout the session is how he – as a white South African gay man studying issues around race, sexuality and gender in South Africa – continuously emphasized ‘geographies of care’. He emphasized the importance of recognizing our own privilege, positionality, and responsibility to care for one another and make social justice everybody’s problem. This struck me. It reminded of the everyday politics of family and care that come through in the relations of my kin, friends and allies in Eastern Kentucky. If we can learn from these, what possibilities for a future politic cast through a juridicality of care can we come toward? I think it is a thesis and political project of immanent importance.

Further research

In this act of caring, I believe that future research on gay/trans folk in Appalachia should be grounded in this level of care. This is necessary not only to excavate the possibility of recognizing, transforming and deploying these modalities of care in a broader political project, but to make sure that the process by which we need to dismantle negative stereotypes of rural gay/trans folk are not dismissed or sidestepped. This raises a number of questions for studying the country, particularly the Appalachian country queer. Some of these have been addressed throughout this dissertation but nevertheless include:

What do we gain from demarcating Appalachian space? What are the political, economic, geographical, historical, and cultural factors that constitute the boundaries of these spaces? Do these boundaries matter to queer life in Appalachia or is there a much more fluid constitution of boundaries? Is it a little of both? Do they hinder, support, and/or augment queer life? How do we deal with the differences in style between and across the urban and the rural? Indeed, how do we define the differences between the urban and the rural? Do the urban and the rural speak to each other across these differences or is there a breakdown in communication? Are the attributes that make the sites we chose generalizable to other locations within Appalachia or not? What are the limitations of not reaching out to the sites, spaces and places outside of a selected area for study? How do we define Appalachia, recognizing that there are multiple Appalachias operating

simultaneously and not always without conflict? How are the practices of Appalachian gay/trans folk 'Appalachian' or not? And what does that mean? Does an Appalachian identity necessarily factor? If so, how – or what does it mean if it doesn't? What other aspects and intersections of Appalachian subjectivity should we interrogate? How does class factor in rural queer life? How does race factor in rural queer life? What are the striations of religious opposition, as well as advocacy? Are these Appalachian problems, gay/trans problems, or both?

For my part, I have become interested in the effects of homelessness and suicide on gay/trans youth in rural Appalachia. Robyn and I were talking one afternoon while he was cutting my hair and he described to me the problems of queer youth in the area that are dispossessed by their families and made homeless. While I lived in Harlan, when Andrew and I were still together, we would sit in the alley behind my apartment during the warm summer evenings and he would play his guitar to any local kids that would wander by and listen. A young lesbian couple that stopped by a few times described to us one time how they had become homeless as a result of 'coming out' to their families. One of the two young ladies had entered into prostitution as a means to supplement their non-existent income. I think this is a real problem and as I have contemplated this problem, I also feel that looking at suicide in rural gay/trans youth is necessary as well. It seems that while they are not always directly implicated in one another, cursory literature reviews that I have done show a strong correlation.

I wish to raise questions around the problem of gay/trans youth homelessness/suicide in the city and the country that are unique to neither and have a prolonged lack of critical interrogation in both. Yet without losing site of the critique of how gay/trans life in rural Appalachia is summarily disqualified by mainstream gay culture, resources in rural (Central Appalachian) places to accommodate gay/trans youth issues are undeniably less adequate than their city counterparts (Woronoff, Estrada and Sommer 2006:103-110). Gay/trans kids in the country are not necessarily more or less prone to family violence and ostracization than those in the city; however, a lack of any resources for those that do experience family violence potentially put them at greater risk. With no support or social service networks to catch the fallout of being disowned from their kinship networks, rural gay/trans youth are in a precariously more vulnerable position. This is not about creating a more than/less than paradigm – who has the better health services, ergo whose gay/trans kids must be receiving better care and outreach. Issues related to gay/trans youth

homelessness and suicide are still met with a great deal of adversity and outright maliciousness in many, if not most cases in the city (Reck 2009, Bermudez 2009, Mottet and Ohle 2006).

In most studies, however, the social processes that contribute to gay/trans youth suicide and homelessness are inferred at best. Psychological approaches to youth suicide, which constitute the majority of existing studies and literatures, have the tendency to focus on the individual character of self harm, which in turn has the tendency to pathologize gay/trans youth (Fullager 2003). Indeed, Coffey asserts that the “history of this research has focused on the deficits for [the gay/trans youth] population” (2008:5), rather than paying attention to their resiliency, resourcefulness and creativity. It is well recognized that stress factors such as teasing and bullying, isolation, family disapproval and the like, as well as risk factors and behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, acting out in school and home settings and the like inform how gay/trans youth homelessness, suicide and suicide ideation emerge. However, what is less studied is how the processes that restrict and deny gay/trans identification in youth populations stretched across a multitude of social factors including class, race, ethnicity, gender, place and so on are not merely contributing factors but constitute the field on which gay/trans youth homelessness and suicide occurs. Michel Dorais in his study on gay male youth suicide in French Canada contends that studying gay youth suicide as a socially constructed phenomenon may better help us to grasp and craft preventative measures for this problem (2004:15).

For Simone Fulager, the question does not linger on suicide itself, but rather draws suicide into a broader conversation with life and death and how we talk about them. She notes, “[s]uicide as waste is implicated in a whole moral vocabulary about living and dying – tragically sad, incomprehensible, unforgivable, pathological, abnormal, unstable, selfish, morally reprehensible” (2003:292-293). She contends that the metaphor of value and (particularly) waste, attached to life and death, creates a double-binding paradox. Because life is always in forward momentum toward death, life cannot be ‘recouped’ through living it, and therefore the metaphysical site of value is constituted by a process of waste. Drawing on David Halperin, she notes that waste is uncertainty in relation to the value of our existence (Ibid 293). My future research will take this social process approach to dismantle the assumptions of pathologized rural gay/trans youth and look at strategies and techniques that we can deploy to offer resources and spaces for Appalachian gay/trans youth dealing with the pressures that orbit suicide and homelessness. This is a politics of intimacy through allied responsibility and advocacy that I am hoping can materialize policy throughout the

region by developing social networks and changing perceptions to make this everyone's responsibility.

Part III: Politics

Intimacy, advocacy, and the immanence of responsibility

The move toward social justice in late capitalism is still tethered to the delusion that liberal governmentality – its promises and different forms of citizenship – can be fixed. The liberal impulse to 'come out' of whatever closet you might never have known you were in, deceptive discourses on the efficacy of minority 'rights', and the flaccid and misleading rhetorics of 'freedom and democracy' that permeate contemporary American culture and fantasies of social redemption frame a liberal phantasmagoria. This phantasmagoria continues to elide the material realities and subjective contingencies that complicate the production of the queer body that exist outside the neoliberal gay project in its continuously fumbled attempt to manumit the marginalization of sexual and gender minorities. This research does recognize that neoliberalism has similar, if differing, effects on other bodies as well, such as female bodies, black bodies, poor bodies, (dis)abled bodies and their intersections.

By framing the political exigencies of contemporary life through an optic of liberation, the abstraction falls short of resolving the multitude of complexities that come to bear on marginalization by partitioning different aspects of identity and banking on the autonomy of the individual as the site of political and social action. While these all smack of the emergence of a utopian post-oppression, the liberal assumptions of a free wielding meritocracy have stagnated, resulting in an elitist politics of liberation benefiting only the politically situated and economically solvent. Meanwhile, late capitalism and its implications in, contributions to, and effects on these types of marginalizations – hailed into existence through neoliberalism and the global restructuring of capital – remains unchallenged in mainstream politics, lest one be called a 'liberal,' 'hippy,' 'communist,' or 'socialist.'

I seek to add to arguments that reframe the coordinates of contemporary neoliberal politics to look past the individual character that typify these maneuvers and refocus the impulse of liberation toward the contingencies and intimacies that are erased through a liberationist politics. For social justice to be taken seriously, it must be transformative. It must transform human nature in the way that Michael Hardts' opening quote demands. Society must become capable of

democracy. I don't think that it is at this point in time. To do this, we must develop advocates across the multiple lines of difference that exist in and between social categories and highlight the responsibilities of advocates (especially those on the privileged end of binaries, i.e. white people, men, heterosexuals, able bodied people, the wealthy and the urban) to fight on behalf of their marginalized Others. This is immanent to the production of politics.

For example, the Violence, Intervention and Prevention (VIP) Center on the University of Kentucky's campus is at the vanguard of just such a politics of intimacy through the everyday politics of violence against women (and men).

The Violence Intervention and Prevention (VIP) Center works with faculty, staff, students and community partners toward the mission of eliminating the perpetration of power-based personal violence including sexual assault, partner violence and stalking (http://www.uky.edu/StudentAffairs/VIPCenter/au_center.html, accessed April 16, 2010).

Particularly, for violence against women, this program is groundbreaking in its move toward bringing men into the debate. Men are often left out of conversations about women's issues (such as child birth and care, domestic violence and rape) (Gutmann 2007). VIP's argument is that men must be actively involved in changing their own minds about the gravity of these issues as well as change the minds of other men. Marked by their 'green dot' initiative, 'green dots' stand for moments where violence has been averted successfully and 'red dots' represent where complacency and apathy have allowed moments of violence to occur. This program seeks to distribute spatially, active intervention techniques at the sites of violence to reduce "power-based personal violence" through personal responsibility and advocacy.

Social justice is everybody's problem and everybody's issue. Until we can emphasize that homophobia, sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and regional discrimination (among other discriminations) harm human societies as a whole, there will be no significant social change of note. And this will require a popular understanding that privilege sets the conditions of these discriminations and that we must evacuate all forms of privilege to have a truly equitable society. We can't change policies until we've changed minds. This is the politics of intimacy. These are the geographies of care. It is an everyday politics of encounters at the contact points between differences. It is persuasion. It is ambivalent, yet concerned. It is not hung up on identity as a divisive set of reified and stable subjectivities. It accepts that any civil rights politic is every civil rights politic. The Gay Rights Movement is ill-fated so long as queer poverty, race, and disability

are not on its radar. And it is ill-fated if it does not begin to recognize its own internal discriminations – from the rural queer body to the lesbian body to the trans body to the genderqueer body to the bisexual body. Only a politics of difference through the conviviality of a sober and open cosmopolitanism will be able to finally address the limitations human societies place on privilege, exceptionalism, radical nationalisms, and a general ignorance of the Other. Do liberalism and liberal governmentality go away? Not in my estimation, but we can transform this governmentality and its ideology and remake them in an image that animates the potential for human possibility and solidarity.

APPENDIX 1

Cast of characters

This is a list of all of the characters that have been portrayed in the retelling of these stories. This is not an exhaustive list of everyone with whom I have had formative conversations. Rather, this is a list of everyone with whom I interacted that was included or referenced in this dissertation. All characters' names are a pseudonym to maintain the anonymity of each.

Harlan Crew:

Andrew was my boyfriend between March 2008 and August 2008. I met him over the course of preliminary research. A friend put me onto him and we began talking online. We quickly moved over to the telephone and spoke on and off for a year before deciding to meet for our first date on February 29, 2008. We met, liked each other and started dating. He lived in Harlan County and helped me with initially establishing contacts that would become the queer network of which I am currently a part.

Brent was the first friend that Andrew introduced me to. I met him with his partner at the time at Southeast Community and Technical College in Cumberland (Harlan County), Kentucky. We have remained good friends throughout. He was my confidante after Andrew and I split up. He would come over to my apartment and we would sit and talk about things. He was also having problems with his partner at the time, so we both became each other's relationship sounding boards. He always made sure that I knew he considered me family and I did the same.

Robyn is my hair stylist, friend, gossip buddy and confidante. Andrew introduced me to him during one of my initial trips to the area. He and his business partner own a hair salon on the outskirts of town. It is a two story building; they rent the ground floor to a gym. The front of the second floor is the salon and in the back is a two bedroom apartment that Robyn lives in. Robyn is a nurturing soul that has deep roots in the community. Robyn also has a quick sharp wit and he is not afraid to discuss 'gay issues' with anyone that comes to his salon. But then, most of those that come to his salon expect it. Robyn is often considered by many to be a mentoring, pseudo-parental figure to many of the youth (gay and straight) about town. I have become closest to him and the core family members that I am attached to in Harlan are Robyn, Diane and George.

Diane and George are a married bisexual couple with a two and a half year old son. Diane was in a relationship with a woman when they met, but they fell in love, got married and maintain their bisexual identities. Robyn has a long familial history with Diane and George even though they are not 'blood related.' Andrew introduced me to Diane when I was looking for a place to live. Diane is an office assistant in the finance lending company that my landlord owns on the first floor of the building that I lived in. George studies critical Biblical scholarship and they are both active members of their church. On a recent trip to Harlan, George dubbed me with my new 'diva' name: 'Mizz Detamore' (he likes my last name). When I lived in Harlan, the three of us (and others) would

go on weekend trips to Johnson City to the gay bar there. When Andrew and I broke up, Diane told me that the best thing he ever gave her was me.

Kevin is Diane's brother. He is a precocious straight kid of 19. When we would travel down to Johnson City, Tennessee, to go to the gay dance club, he liked to come with us. One of his closest friends from high school often does drag there. Kevin and I became smoking buddies when we were out. He seemed to idolize me and we always had fun conversations. He is a lot like a little brother to me.

Jadan and Jaden are two friends of mine that happen to have the same name. I met Jadan online while living in Harlan. We hung out in town a number of times. Most notably, he became a travel buddy for heading to New Beginnings (gay bar) in Johnson City, Tennessee. Jaden is a friend of Jadan and Kevin. Both Jadan and Jaden do amateur drag.

Travis is the first person (other than Andrew) that I met in Harlan. I met him at the Wal-Mart in town and in our initial interaction, it was disclosed what I was doing there. He knew my boyfriend Andrew and revealed to me that he was bisexual. We didn't hang out a lot, but I would see him from time to time. The first night after Andrew broke up with me, I ran into him and his friends and they hung out with me at my apartment.

Martin and John are a gay couple in the health care industry in Harlan. Martin is a Physician Assistant and John does hospital administration and is often traveling out of town to conferences. Martin was the first person that I interviewed in March 2008. I met Martin online and we made arrangements to meet. After I moved to Harlan, I hung out with Martin and John a few times at their home.

Rick and Wendy are a young married couple taking a few months off from the road to visit with family in the area. They were my neighbors for a short while. I did not get the chance to get to know them very well, but on one particular night they divulged their 'love of gay folk' to me after a rather upsetting event

Lori and Evelyn (Lori's mom) are extended family of Andrew. I hung out with them a number of times, but once when I was down in Harlan before I had moved there Andrew invited me to go with him to Lori's sister's wedding. While there, Evelyn asked me to participate in the wedding. I had just met her the afternoon of the wedding.

Gwyneth and Roger are a married couple in Mt Sterling, Kentucky. Gwyneth is a trans-woman and customer of Robyn. Gwyneth met her husband while visiting home. They fell in love and she subsequently moved back to Kentucky to be with him. They were married in Upstate New York in 2004 during a brief moment where the New Paltz mayor, Jason West offered marriages to same-sex and gender alternative couple before the state legislature sanctioned him.

Linda is Andrew's father's lady friend from Lexington that visits frequently. On the afternoon that I was supposed to meet up with Andrew at Wal-Mart, she was supposed to drop him off, but changed her plans resulting in a four hour long layover with Travis.

Whitesburg Crew:

Elisa and James are a married couple and close allied friends of mine in Whitesburg, Kentucky. I was introduced to Elisa through a colleague of mine. Elisa is an activist and organizer for a number of committees, boards and nonprofit organizations in Eastern Kentucky and Tennessee. She and I have been in discussions of research and art activism projects for queer life and visibility in Eastern Kentucky. Most notably, we have been in conversations about developing a project documenting rural queer social space through the concept 'gay bar.'

Suzanne is an advanced undergraduate student from New England that works with Appalshop in Whitesburg. She studies the private prison industry's infiltration of rural Appalachia as new prisons are being built as a mean of 'development.' She accompanied Elisa, Ronnie and I, as our designated driver for the 'gay bar experiment.'

Ronnie is a friend of mine that Elisa introduced me to. He is from a small town in between Whitesburg and Hazard. He is very outspoken (some might say flamboyant). He is a well respected and liked hairdresser. And it has also been mentioned to me about him that he has sat on the city council in his small hollow town. (couple number 1: Ethan and Kyle, couple number 2: Brad and Jacob, and our lesbian friend Lisa)

Norma is a professor of communication at Hazard Community and Technical College (HSTC). Elisa introduced her to me. We had a number of discussions about starting a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) at HCTC. She put me on to Donnie by giving him my email address.

Donnie is a student of Norma. I have never met him personally, but Norma asked if he could email me in regards to working on the GSA. We have had a number of email communications since then. The most notable of these is an incident where he sought my help in finding legal advice. He had been stopped by Kentucky State Police at a traffic check point and was subsequently homophobicly harassed.

Lexington Crew:

Jason is a colleague of mine. He is a proud gay man from Pikeville, Kentucky and we have had many conversations on what it means to be an Appalachian sexual minority in Lexington and the problems one faces.

Wade was my former roommate and good friend. He is an out gay man from Magoffin County. One night a few years ago we were out for the night and he was harassed by another gay man visiting from Atlanta for being gay and from Eastern Kentucky.

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