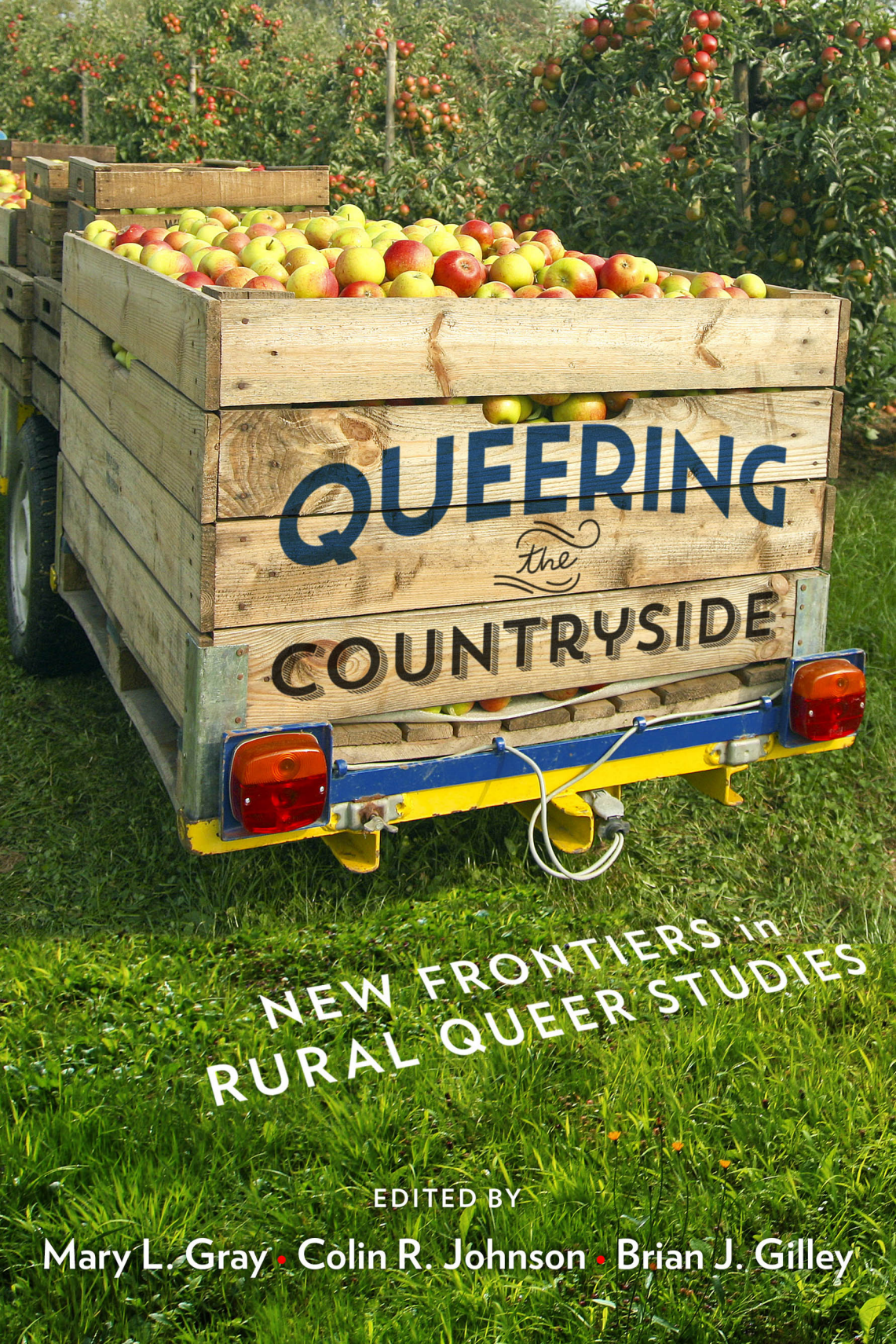

NEW FRONTIERS in RURAL QUEER STUDIES

EDITED BY

Mary L. Gray • Colin R. Johnson • Brian J. Gilley

Queering the Countryside

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Out Back Home

An Exploration of LGBT Identities and Community in Rural Nova Scotia, Canada

KELLY BAKER

For some of us you can take the homo out of the country but you can't take the country out of the homo, and like a flock of geese in fall we eventually find our way back home.
—"A Rural Point of View," *Wayves Magazine*, Halifax, December 2008

This essay explores the identities and experiences of community among lesbians, gays, and transgendered people living in rural Nova Scotia, Eastern Canada. Based on fourteen interviews and participant observation, I consider how sexual identity is spatially constructed outside of the urban center, and uncover some of the ways in which rural LGBT identities and communities are experienced. Because academic and popular representations of rural areas often portray them as "backward" or "traditional"—and thus heterosexual—I look at participants' reasons for living outside the city. How do rural settings influence the ways rural LGBT individuals identify? Do those who decide to stay in, or return to, their rural hometowns feel integrated within their communities? Do they experience a sense of commonality with other people in their area? Is community actively sought? In examining such questions, I challenge the prevalent assumption that LGBT communities are inherently urban. I also circumvent the widespread depictions of rural areas as being ultimately homophobic and hostile to LGBT difference. Lastly, I highlight the ways rural nonheterosexuality works to challenge dominant notions of sexual identity, community, and rural space.

Rural Nova Scotia as a Case Study

As Nova Scotian historian Robin Metcalfe points out, Halifax has had a prominent history of gay and lesbian community organizing and activism in Canada.[1] But as a small city located in the Maritime provinces, Halifax's LGBT community has had to struggle to get its particular issues raised and its voice heard within the wider LGBT movement.[2] These issues have been even more difficult for LGBT communities in rural areas. Indeed, many of the problems faced by rural LGBT people are similar to the problems those in cities faced almost two decades prior; many rural LGBT communities are still relatively isolated and are struggling to establish networks and create spaces within which LGBT people feel safe.[3] And unlike many other Canadian provinces, Nova Scotia also continues to have a high percentage of rural dwellers: with a rural population of nearly 75 percent, Nova Scotia has the third highest rural population in the country.[4]

The socioeconomic status of rural Nova Scotia appears below the national, as well as provincial, urban average in a number of areas. The education level of rural Nova Scotians, for instance, is substantially lower than that of urban residents;[5] at the same time, unemployment rates in rural Nova Scotia are substantially higher than the national average for rural areas.[6] Incomes in Nova Scotia are also lower than the national average, and the gap between urban and rural incomes is larger than in any other province.[7] Fisheries and agriculture, two prominent industries for the region, have both experienced a sharp decline in recent years; while the number of people employed in fisheries has been decreasing, farm debt has, for the past thirteen years, been greater than farm receipts—and this gap is widening. And while total wages and salaries in the mining, oil, and gas industries have been increasing, the number of people employed in these industries has decreased. In recent years, however, multiple research initiatives have taken place to help bolster the development of healthy, sustainable communities throughout rural Nova Scotia. The Coastal Communities Network (CCN), along with the Rural Communities Impacting Policy project (RCIP), has been active in helping to "promot[e] the survival and enhancement" of the province's rural communities.[8] Official reports borne from such initiatives have lauded such Nova Scotian communities as having a strong sense of com-

munity spirit and community values, as well as a deep appreciation for those who work to strengthen them.[9]

During the summer of 2008, however, tensions emerged among a number of northern Nova Scotian counties when the mayor of Truro started what some have called a "rural trend" of refusing to raise the pride flag during Nova Scotia's gay pride week celebrations. Despite the fact that same-sex marriages have been legally recognized in Nova Scotia since September 24, 2004, the mayor, citing his religious convictions, stated that "God says 'I'm not in favor [of gay pride]' . . . and I have to look at it and say, I guess I'm not either."[10] Both Pictou and Cumberland counties followed, implementing policies that would prevent nongovernment flags from being flown on municipal poles. While the mayor's position may have confirmed for many the stereotyped beliefs surrounding small-town backwardness and oppressiveness, this incident, which received national attention, allowed the issues and experiences of rural LGBT Nova Scotians to gain visibility and recognition throughout Canada. It illuminated the fact that Nova Scotia contains a number of rural LGBT communities that are actively promoting acceptance and equality within their wider rural communities.

* * *

During the summer of 2008, I conducted fourteen interviews with individuals ranging from twenty-one to seventy-one years old. Of these, eight self-identified as lesbians, five self-identified as gay males, and one self-identified as transsexual. My sample was primarily within a working- and middle-class range. While seven of my participants were born and raised in rural Nova Scotia, two grew up in Halifax County and moved to rural Nova Scotia as young adults. Two others grew up in other provinces (rural Prince Edward Island and suburban Quebec), and the remaining three grew up in other countries (England, the United States, and the Netherlands).

Reflecting the fact that many communities throughout rural Nova Scotia are predominately white,[11] thirteen of my informants were white, while one was native. As Kennedy and Davis note, race and class have a crucial impact on individuals' perceptions and experiences of LGBT community.[12] Similarly, Creed and Ching explain that rural identity inflects, and is inflected by, other dimensions such as race, class, and gen-

der.[13] Containing only one non-white participant, my sample does not represent those rural LGBT individuals whose experiences and sexual identifications are inflected by nondominant racial and ethnic identities.

Since LGBT people in rural Nova Scotia are, to a certain extent, invisible and scattered, my method of recruitment was snowball sampling, which involved eliciting the assistance of my initial research participants and their acquaintances in order to build up my sample group. As Kennedy and Davis point out, this technique is often used among hidden populations, who are difficult for researchers to access.[14] This method proved particularly useful, as it allowed me to examine the interconnections and experiences of community that exist, on varying levels, among individuals dispersed throughout the province. Because my sample was small, it cannot be considered representative of rural LGBT people in Nova Scotia. However, anthropological studies based on individual cases routinely rely more heavily upon depth than breadth.[15] Often utilizing a variety of methods such as in-depth interviews, group interviews, and participant observation, anthropologists consider sample extensiveness to be less applicable to qualitative research; rather, sample size is considered adequate when repetitiveness in data occurs.[16]

My research was also multi-sited. While eight of my participants resided along various parts of the South Shore, six resided in more northern parts of Nova Scotia. Multi-sited research methods have emerged in response to both "empirical changes in the world" as well as new understandings of "the field."[17] Indeed, Green argues that "the field" must be understood not as something that is "effected once and for all" but as "an emerging process . . . made of social encounters."[18] As such, strategies of following various connections, associations, and relationships are at the "very heart" of multi-sited research.[19] Such methods therefore allowed me to investigate the social encounters which constituted rural Nova Scotia as "the field." Witnessing and engaging the various interconnections and networks among my participants, who are geographically dispersed, yet socially connected, was essential to my understanding of identity and community among LGBT individuals scattered throughout rural Nova Scotia.

Locating LGBT People in Rural Space

The notion of space has become a useful lens through which to understand identity and community, as well as relations of power and oppression.[20] No longer seen as a backdrop or container for social relations, space is deemed crucial to the constitution and reproduction of social relations and identities.[21] The queering[22] of both public and private spaces is therefore understood as being crucial to the historical formation of early gay politics and collective identities.[23] Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, gay spaces such as bars, clubs, and cruising grounds created the possibility for collective consciousness, struggle, and activity.[24] The establishment of gay spaces, such as parades, cafes, centres, and neighborhoods, made it possible for political consciousness and movements for public recognition to emerge. They provided safety, visibility, and a sense of commonality,[25] eventually leading to a grassroots liberation movement and becoming the essential means of combating homophobia and maintaining a sense of collectivity.[26]

Work on LGBT identities and space has, however, been criticized for neglecting the important distinction between urban and rural space.[27] As Creed and Ching point out, work on space and identity "unquestionably posits an urbanized subject" without considering the vital role of its opposition—the rural or rustic.[28] This "cultural hierarchy" has overshadowed the significance of rural-based identities and has devalued, and sometimes erased, rural space.[29] For anthropologist Kath Weston, this hierarchy has also falsely located all LGBT people within the city and has overlooked their presence outside of it.[30]

Certainly, the social and economic conditions within many North American cities after World War II provided a space within which gay identity, collectivity, and politics could emerge.[31] The city, with its anonymity and heterogeneity, as well as its population size and density, has been theorized as a beacon of tolerance and the ideal arena for sexual outsiders.[32] The city may well have played this role historically, but in representations of urban and rural spaces, the latter is portrayed as inherently backward and oppressive,[33] with tales of isolation, prejudice, and physical violence being used to characterize the experiences of the LGBT people who live there.[34] Rural areas are often posited as "clos-

ets" and are deemed antithetical to the constitution of gay subjectivity.[35] Much writing about the lives of gay people has not only overlooked their presence outside of the city, but also discounted the significance of rural space in the construction and experience of LGBT identities.

Rural areas in Western countries face particular challenges with regard to global capitalism, and these challenges have influenced the mobility patterns and decisions taking place in these areas.[36] Rural areas of Canadian Maritime provinces have experienced particular migration patterns, with rural out-migration both a local and an international concern.[37] The social constructivist approach to rurality "emphasizes symbols and signs people imagine"[38]—that is, how people construct rural places and themselves as rural. It has been argued that this construction of rurality is integral to "the unique character of Canadian society" and "closely linked to natural resource extraction, modes of production, remoteness, rurality and the North."[39] The current social transformations that are occurring in rural Canada are informed by the processes of global capitalism and neoliberal policies. Rural Canada has also shown resilience through historical waves of industry, communities, and cultural traditions.[40] Rurality has been historically associated with strong social attachments,[41] characterized in part by a need to place people, as well as strong attachment to family and place.[42] Traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity also persist in rural areas,[43] which include occupational, gendered, and sexual identities.

Recent inquiry into the lives of rural LGBT people, albeit sparse, has, however, revealed a significant number of rural same-sex couples[44] and has uncovered large numbers of LGBT-identified individuals who live in small towns and enjoy doing so.[45] Many rural gays and lesbians have developed support networks that "facilitate . . . the creation of spatially disparate but strongly interwoven communities."[46] Developments in global communication technologies have bolstered this process, and phone lines, Internet, and satellite television have offered alternative ways in which rural LGBT people can locate, experience, and participate in various forms of community.[47]

This was certainly the case for the participants in my study. None of my participants spoke of having experienced any physical violence, and fewer than half (five) spoke of having directly experienced verbal

homophobia while living in rural Nova Scotia. Of those five who did experience verbal homophobia in their rural towns, two also reported having experienced homophobia (and to higher degrees) while living in the city. Of the remaining three who had experienced verbal homophobia, one had never lived in a city, while two had not been out until living in rural Nova Scotia. For participants, homophobia was not directly linked to rural space; rarely experienced, verbal homophobia manifested in both urban and rural areas.

All my interviewees experienced varying degrees—in some cases, surprisingly high degrees—of acceptance in their rural towns. For instance, Bonnie, who grew up in Prince Edward Island but came out in rural Nova Scotia, stated, "I live in . . . a very rural area. And everybody knows that I'm a lesbian. . . . And never once have I felt a homophobic neighbor. . . . It's been amazing actually. You'd think it would be different but, it's never been. . . . I've never felt any rejection. And so, that's kinda cool. Yeah." Gordon, who grew up in the Netherlands and also came out in rural Nova Scotia, echoed Bonnie's experience: "The town . . . has been very supportive in that we never experienced any backlash from the public. On the contrary, it has been a comfortable and indeed rewarding existence. When we married, people went out of their way to congratulate us!"

Experiences were surprisingly similar for those who moved to rural Nova Scotia after growing up and coming out elsewhere. While Wilson noted that "unknown outsiders are never welcomed in small towns,"[48] participants appeared to have had little trouble breaking through their "outsider" status. For instance, Manny, who grew up and came out in Dartmouth, said, "Compared to a lot of other places I've seen, yeah, here's good. . . . Sometimes you just get surprised by people." This was echoed by Betty, who grew up and came out near Halifax: "I feel like I'm a part of the community. . . . I'm sure 50 percent of the community knows who I am and they seem to like me and to have accepted me for what I am. It's not a problem. . . . I fit right in here, no problem at all." For Manny and Betty, relocating to rural Nova Scotia from their more urban hometowns was not made difficult by their nonheterosexuality; albeit "surprised," they felt as though they fit in and were accepted without trouble.

Experiences were also similar for those who continue to live in their rural hometowns. For instance, Donna, who grew up, came out, and continues to live in Yarmouth, observed:

> "This [coming out] was a long time ago, twenty years ago, and people were very upset at first, and very, very quickly people were just fine with it. I was very surprised. . . . [My parents] were and are very fundamentalist Christian, and I was kind of shocked by how easily they kind of adapted. . . . But everybody was very accepting, and it's been wonderful."

Charlotte, who was born and raised and came out in a rural area, had a similar experience:

> [When I came out] it was less difficult than I imagined it would be. You build up a certain thing in your mind of what you think things are going to be like . . . and you're young. . . . Back when you're so impressionable, back when you're trying to fit in, it's very difficult. . . . Going up into my twenties and thirties and forties I'm like 'to hell with 'em, I don't care' kinda thing. . . . At this point in my life, I'm just going to live my life. I'm too old to do otherwise. . . . Life is too short."

For Charlotte, the fear and anxiety she experienced while coming out was tied not to rural or urban space, but to her age. Because she came out in her early twenties, a time when she felt "impressionable" and was "trying to fit in," her own fears and anxieties made coming out more difficult. However, as she got older, and was "out" to all of her friends and family, she stopped "car[ing] what Joe Blow here down the street thinks" and was able to just live her life. She believes that when one is young, "you think you have something to lose, but you really don't. Because your parents love you unconditionally."

Indeed, the highest degrees of verbal homophobia were cited by some of my youngest participants—Randy and Kat, both twenty-three. Both came out in high school and were close friends throughout their junior and senior high school years. Though both had positive experiences coming out to family, both had very negative experiences of coming out and being gay in school. With regard to his family, Randy stated: "They've always really known; they knew I was going to be gay . . . so it

was easy for me. They already knew, so it was just a matter of me admitting it." At school, however, Randy had a more negative experience: "It's like you have to hide it at all times. If you don't, then, it's not going to be good. So you try to hide it as much as possible. And you know what's coming, you know immediately what's coming, and it's like constant shit." Kat spoke of a similar high school experience: "I didn't understand like, when everyone [classmates] realized I was gay, why was it all 'oh she's gay, let's make fun of her.' . . . It was horrible. . . . It's like the next day all of a sudden you wake up . . . and everybody you know, and everybody you don't even know, is calling you gay."

For both participants, their high school peers and classmates were the primary source of homophobia and hostility. Upon leaving high school, people's attitudes appeared to have changed dramatically. Randy explained:

> "Since like, high school . . . it's been a lot better. Like, a lot more people have accepted it, like, when working . . . and whatnot, nobody ever says anything, like I've never had anyone since I left high school call me a fag or anything. . . . It just finally goes away and you're like 'fuuuck I can just breathe now.' But things are comfortable now I find."

Participants' experiences therefore contradicted prominent understandings of rural space; often perceived as backward, traditional, and homophobic, rural areas provided my participants with varying levels of tolerance and acceptance. For those who did recount experiences of homophobia, it was associated with peers and classmates at school. Older participants, who came out after high school, cited little to no homophobia, while younger participants—those in their early twenties—noted its absence after high school.

Accessing LGBT Identities and Communities in Rural Space

Isolation, Weston points out, is often conceived as the "customary starting point" in claiming or constructing an LGBT identity.[49] The sense of being "different" or "the only one" is often prevalent in one's discovery of his or her LGBT sexuality.[50] Isolation can be especially salient for those LGBT people living in rural areas. One's discovery of gayness, or

what Weston calls "the gay imaginary," is often dependent upon access to print, television, and other media.[51] This often requires, especially for those who came out prior to the Internet Age, access to certain resources such as libraries, bookstores, and movie theaters—many of which are located in urban centers.[52] For those who came out during the Internet Age, the Internet was a primary means by which LGBT identities were constructed. The Internet has become a significant vehicle through which individuals—especially those who are relatively isolated—can come out, be politically active, find community, and establish LGBT identities.[53] It allows LGBT youth and adults alike to expand their local LGBT worlds and feel included within imagined LGBT communities beyond their hometown.[54]

When asked about the importance of the Internet, James, twenty-two, noted, "I wanted to know about safe sex, about the [gay] lifestyle, I wanted to fit into something. I wanted something that was me, and I found it online. I connected with people, and it made me feel normal." This was echoed by Dot, a sixty-two-year-old transsexual woman, who stated: "The Internet was probably my savior." Lacking a substantial face-to-face community, many participants utilized the Internet to construct and experience their own sexual identities and forms of belonging.[55] The Internet also helped participants break through rural isolation and access a community that is often linked to urban space.

As Valentine and Skelton point out, finding "the scene" or community is important insofar as it not only facilitates the construction of self-identities, but also offers one a space within which others can provide validation.[56] For many LGBT individuals, the LGBT community represents the first space of belonging; it offers them a chance to exist outside of the heteronormative world within which they often feel marginalized.[57] The search for community, however, often necessitates a symbolic and sometimes physical journey through space.[58] "Like" others, Weston notes, immediately become spatially located—not only is there "some*one* like me," but that someone is "out there some*where*."[59] For those born and raised in rural areas, that initial "somewhere" is usually thought to be a city.[60]

At some point, many of my rural-born participants ventured to the city in search of LGBT community. They saw the anonymity, size, and

heterogeneity of cities as promising a general acceptance of "difference" not found in rural areas. Accordingly, Weston notes that the combination within cities of physical proximity and social distance, or, indifference, has been theorized as a politics of tolerance; differences are by default generally accepted, or at the very least, tolerated.[61] As Gray points out, cities themselves are built on the "aggregation . . . of differentiated interests."[62] Charlotte, fifty-eight, associated the city with a general acceptance of "difference" or eccentricity:

> "You gotta understand . . . in a small community, when you find out you are different, you think you are the only one. . . . I mean, Halifax is a city, so actually you can go up and see somebody dressed very eccentrically or differently, or whatever, it's the norm. You come down here, and if you see something that's different, it's like, everybody looks. . . . Here, everybody over the years, after being a small town all your life, you get to know everybody. . . . Yeah, if you were in the city you'd go and do your own thing, and nobody stops to take the time to give a darn one way or the other. But here, you have to be careful."

For Charlotte, the anonymity and "big population" of the city were linked to the increased acceptance of overall diversity, in direct contrast to her small community, where everyone quickly got to know everyone else. Because of their close social proximity in a small community, those who were different had to be careful not to overtly assert their difference, whereas those in the city were free to "go and do [their] own thing."

For many born-and-raised rural participants, the city—Halifax—therefore offered a symbolic, and in some instances, real, space for forming community. As Charlotte also noted:

> "It wasn't until I was older that we went into the city; we used to go to some of the dances up there. That's how I really got into it, finding out . . . when the conferences were and going to the dances and stuff like that. Meeting so many [lesbians], and just feeling like I was home. I just felt, the very first time I went, I just felt 'I'm home, this is where I'm supposed to be.'"

Similarly, Betty, age fifty, said, "I had to go into Halifax to try to find my own kind. . . . I thought, 'Yup, that's where I need to start.'" This was also the case for James, twenty-three, who "thought [the city] was infested with gay people. . . . A gaytopia." For these participants, the city, and Halifax in particular, served as a symbolic homeland—an anchor for the LGBT community.

Limitations of Urban LGBT Community

"In relationship to an urban homeland," Weston writes, "individuals constructed themselves as 'gay people': sexual subjects in search of others like themselves."[63] Many journeys into this homeland, however, do not result in the discovery of the "Promised Land." Rather, some find the urban community to be "insular and exclusionary."[64] At the same time, the community is also divided by gender, ethnicity, age, and class.[65] Access to and inclusion within the urban LGBT community is therefore dependent on factors outside of claiming LGBT identities.[66] The search for community thus extends far beyond simply entering the space of the city.

For instance, after moving to Halifax at eighteen and finding his way into the community, twenty-three-year-old James said that "[the gay community] met my ideals for a while; I did a lot of partying. Education made me see it differently, though. It's really subdivided—I had to identify with a type [of gay person] and live with it." For James, simply claiming a gay identity and being in the space of urban gay clubs did not grant him immediate inclusion into the community. Because the community was "subdivided," he had to negotiate his own identity—as a particular type of gay person—so that he could feel as though he fit in.

For some participants, disappointment or dissatisfaction with the urban community was framed as a contrast between urban and rural space. Charlotte, fifty-eight, spent only two years living in Halifax. However, she traveled between her small town and Halifax, attending many dances and conferences. As previously noted, Charlotte, upon first visiting the city, felt like she was "home"; however, as a "little ol' small-town girl," Charlotte found that she did not necessarily fit in with the urban lesbian-feminist community:

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

For Charlotte, entrance into the urban lesbian-feminist community involved an entirely new urban lifestyle. As a "country bumpkin" and a "farmer's daughter," she did not have the knowledge and language associated with 1970s lesbian feminism; nor was she acquainted with urban culture and cuisine. For Charlotte, acceptance into Halifax's lesbian-feminist community was not only dependent upon a being in the right space and having the right identity; it necessitated a certain amount of "cultural capital"[67]—that is, a certain kind of knowledge, a certain vocabulary, and a certain type of taste. Although she identified as a lesbian, because she was born and raised on a farm, Charlotte lacked the necessary prerequisites for being included into the urban lesbian-feminist community and felt as though she "didn't really meet up to their standards."

The urban LGBT community was also seen by some, especially gay men, as a space of particular danger. As Valentine and Skelton point out, urban LGBT communities present gendered vulnerabilities to lesbians and gay men.[68] Gay male spaces, for instance, can be extremely sexualized and can present many risks with regard to drug abuse and unsafe sexual practices.[69]As Manny pointed out: "Yeah, here [in my small town] I'd say is . . . a little more safer, yeah. By a long shot. . . . In the city, like, I know the younger you are the more pedophiles cling to you. . . . You've got your pedophiles, your gay bashers. . . . It's just ridiculous. But here seems a lot less." This notion of urban danger was also cited by Chris:

> "Gay communities are more settled in rural places. You have a partner, you're settled, you live a basic life as opposed to parties, sex, and

> drugs. . . . The [urban] gay community is very promiscuous, with sex parties . . . [and] it's spreading to rural areas. . . . Young gay men move to Halifax and get caught up in it, have sex with three guys in one day. . . . With subcultures, people lose that 'we're part of a larger community.' . . . It's self-destructive."

For Manny and Chris, the city posed a number of dangers, such as "pedophiles," "gay bashers," and hypersexualized and drug-infested subcultures—dangers they did not consider to be inherent to rural areas. The dense population and increased number of gays, while on the one hand promoting acceptance and community, could, on the other hand, create particular urban dangers, especially for gay men.

Rural Identity, Acceptance, and Community Interdependence

As both Williams and Scott note, tensions between rural and urban life rose in the modern era of industrial capitalism, when the city became associated with progress and modernity.[70] Cast as "folksy" and "irrational,"[71] rural areas were perceived and often experienced as being bound by tradition, while cities were associated with linear progress and deemed "the brain of the whole society."[72] The deeply rooted opposition between urban and rural space therefore became highly significant in the construction of identity. Manifested in everyday "mundane cultural activities," such as music, food, and recreation, it helped to generate personal and social identification.[73]

Wilson points out that rural places are often "riddled with insider/outsider social structures,"[74] with the key to survival being social conformity and community interdependence.[75] In his book exploring the lives of LGBT people in rural Canada, Michael Riordon similarly observes that many rural LGBT people find that they are judged primarily by their farming abilities, their community involvement, and their roles as good neighbors.[76] Indeed, social involvement and community participation are strongly embraced within rural communities and are the primary means by which respect and reciprocity are achieved.[77] Certainly, while rural areas do contain varying levels of homophobia, the power of small-town loyalty and familial ties should not be overlooked.[78] In

places built upon solidarity, familiarity, and belonging, and where familiar locals are valued above any other identity claim, such ties work to transform the "stranger" into someone who is both recognizable and familiar.[79]

This is especially true for those who were born and raised, and continue to live, in their rural hometowns. For instance, discussing her experiences of coming out, Donna said:

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

For Donna, because she had been an active member of the rural community throughout her entire life, she was "totally accepted." Moreover, people even went out of their way to make her feel accepted.

Although Janis did not move to rural Nova Scotia until she was in her twenties, she attributes her hard work and community involvement as granting her respect and acceptance within the rural community. As she observed:

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

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

Contesting the Closet Model

Within the "closet model" of sexual identity,[80] LGBT subjectivity initially lies dormant, "awaiting only the right set of circumstances to emerge."[81] Such circumstances have often been situated within an urban location;[82] establishing a core lesbian or gay identity has often coincided with the construction of urban subcultures and has involved an integration "into the dense social networks of an exclusive outsider world."[83] As such, "the rural" has often been conceptualized as a closet for "authentic" urban sexual identities.[84] LGBT identities that exist in rural areas are often portrayed as and thought to be "out of place."[85]

Halberstam points out, however, that not all LGBT people leave home to become LGBT. Thus, we must consider the possibilities that "the condition of 'staying put'" may offer in terms of producing alternative or complex LGBT subjectivities.[86] Indeed, the politics of visibility that underlie modern, authentic LGBT identities, are, as Gray observes, "tailor-made" for urban space.[87] The familial reliance, local power dynamics, class relations, and cultural marginalization inherent to rural areas renders them ill-suited for such politics.[88] Rural sexual communities must therefore be understood as a "complex interactive model of space, embodiment, locality, and desire."[89] Rural LGBT people may not position sexuality as the "definitive characteristic of self."[90] Rather, as Gray argues, they may enact a "politics of rural recognition," which privileges one's credentials as "just another local" and denounces claims of difference.[91] Rather than simply being "out and proud," they may express their nonheterosexuality within and through the norms of their communities.

For instance, Chris, who teaches high school in the same town in which he grew up, stated: "Ninety-nine percent of my students have

been supportive. . . . I mean, [their families] knew me since they were born. It [being gay] doesn't make me different." For Chris, the fact that his students and their families have known him all his life has earned him support and acceptance. Being gay does not set him apart from the community. "I don't let that aspect define me," he said. Chris's claims to sameness, inherent within Gray's "politics of rural recognition,"[92] undermine the privileging of sexual difference as a defining element of the self in much urban LGBT identity politics. In a similar vein, Betty pointed out: "They seem to like me and to have accepted me for what I am, it's not a problem. But I'm not out there 'I'm lesbian,' I'm just me. I'm just, you know . . . you probably wouldn't even know [that I was a lesbian] if I was in a crowd, you know how you can tell sometimes." For Betty, sexuality is not the definitive aspect of her identity, and she makes no effort to make her sexuality blatantly obvious. Rather, as she said, "I'm just me." While most of the rural community is aware of and has accepted her sexuality, she does not feel the need to be overt or blatant about it. Bonnie also echoed these feelings:

> "I was never one to be, you know, rash and overt about my orientation. . . . So you know, I didn't push the envelope. . . . Everybody knows that I'm a lesbian. . . . I don't shy away from being who I am but I am also not overt about my being queer. It's within a context of neighborliness and friendships and just kind of sharing, you know, going to community events at the local hall, and you know, being a part of the community."

Although Bonnie is not in the closet and does not shy away from being herself, she neither overly displays nor announces her sexual difference. Rather, the importance for her sense of self lies in the rural values of "neighborliness," "friendships," and "community events." Thus, Bonnie values her sexuality without building her life around it; she approaches it as an identity thread, rather than a core identity.[93] Such an approach, Halberstam points out, does not necessarily signify the closet.[94] Rather, for some rural LGBT people, the spatial construction and experience of LGBT identities in nonurban contexts may defy or complicate dominant conceptions of the closet model.[95] LGBT identities may be negotiated so as not to undermine other elements of one's identity. Rural locality shapes Bonnie's sense of her own sexual identity; framed within a

socio-spatial context of rurality, Bonnie's self-described lesbian/queer identity emerges through a rural sense of being "another local," which is entwined with rural values such as neighborliness and community, where difference carries limited value and familiarity is prized.

Certainly, identity politics operationalize identity as a "crucial ground of experience, a course of social knowledge, and a basis for activism"; they rely on collective identification as a mode of political empowerment.[96] So while the current goals and achievements of the gay movement revolve around acceptance and assimilation, they also include the right to be different and to be legitimated based upon that difference.[97] Visibility politics draw upon this assertion and champion the "out-ness" and visibility of this difference as instrumental in achieving such legitimation and liberation. Rural subjectivities, however, are inherently incompatible with such visibility claims. While the internal makeup of cities, or what urban sociologist Georg Simmel referred to as "the conditions of metropolitan life,"[98] revolve around the conglomeration of large numbers of people with diverse interests and perspectives, rural areas, in contrast, are governed by sameness and familiarity and are organized around an appreciation for solidarity, which is expressed through blending in.[99] Rooted particularly in family connections, familiarity and belonging are central to the structures of rural life. While much urban LGBT visibility politics, at their very tamest, center on the different-but-equal paradigm, rural LGBT visibility politics involve a delicate balance of nonheterosexuality and localness, putting forth a logic of different-but-similar.

At the same time, however, some participants pointed out the perceived problem of rural LGBT invisibility. Drawing upon dominant notions of sexual identity and community, where sexuality is perceived as constituting selfhood, many cited the importance of visibility in achieving acceptance for LGBT communities—especially those in rural areas. For instance, Dot asked: "How can we improve things in rural districts? Visibility. If we're not seen, we can't be appreciated. . . . How we're seen is how we grow." This idea was echoed by Gordon, who said that "one major problem is that not all members of our community are willing to 'come out' of their proverbial closets and give assistance. This is true of [his town] as well as any other community in this province and elsewhere. Numbers do matter."

Similarly, Betty pointed out, "It's quite amazing how many [gay people] there are [in my town]. . . . But it's kind of unfortunate. . . . I think people are still kind of afraid [to come out]. Not me, but they are." Similarly, Manny, who said, "I find here that they are very low-key, like, it's like they don't want a lot of people to find out. . . . Why? I don't know." For these participants, acceptance can be achieved only through visibility and being "out" about one's sexuality; in their minds, LGBT identities should not be maneuvered around or negotiated. While they know a number of LGBT individuals within their communities who are afraid of potential rejection and are thus closeted, such fear, they believe, is not warranted. Rather, it is the responsibility of such closeted individuals to be out and visible and help raise awareness of LGBT issues within their communities.

Conclusion

My research has drawn attention to, and attempted to fill, some of the gaps that currently exist within the literature regarding rural LGBT identities and experience. Since preliminary work on this topic has focused on rural contexts in the United States,[100] it is important to address this gap as it exists in the Canadian context, and examine how rural LGBT individuals approach and negotiate their sexual identities, as well as establish and maintain a sense of community, in a province whose rural population remains at nearly 75 percent. In the context of Nova Scotia, the rural/urban binary played a pivotal role in shaping participants' identities and experiences. A rural or "small town" life appealed to urban- and rural-born LGBT people alike. Often perceived as backward and homophobic, rural areas, for the participants of this study, were a source of varying levels of acceptance, as well as community, both rural and LGBT.

At the same time, the isolation of rural life required, in some cases, additional effort to find or access LGBT community. For some, this involved physically going to the city. Regardless, for my participants, a sense of LGBT community provided a sense of collectivity, reassurance, and acceptance. Accessed through books, Internet, and, eventually, face-to-face contact, a sense of LGBT community helped both urban and rural participants, especially those from older generations, to break

through isolation. For some participants, LGBT community was assumed to be inherently urban; some did travel to the city to find their "own kind." However, for others, LGBT community was experienced most intensely within the rural setting. Having spent varying amounts of time in the city, many rural participants did not actually feel part of the imagined urban community; experienced as exclusionary, insular, and in some cases, dangerous, the urban LGBT community was not always the "homeland" it was promised to be. Class and cultural differences between urban and rural LGBT people overshadowed the sharing of a truly common LGBT identity.

There was, however, evidence of pressures to conform. Some participants noted the closeted nature of many rural LGBT individuals, while others appeared to negotiate their nonheterosexuality or their difference as a way to foster inclusion within the rural community. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the construction and experience of LGBT identities takes a different shape in rural space and can work to complicate dominant models—such as the closet model—of sexual identity and community. Indeed, highly informed by notions of rural interdependency and reciprocity, some participants challenged the closet model, as well as a conception of identity in which sexuality is seen as being fundamentally characteristic of one's self.

Increased media attention is also being paid to LGBT issues. Thus, the changing perceptions of rural heterosexuals ought to be examined. For instance, many participants spoke of the significance of public policy like gay marriage in "humanizing" LGBT people, especially those in small towns. As Bonnie explained: "Within the conservative general population of the rural area . . . the fact that legislation has it now that same-sex couples can marry . . . we're normalizing those relationships. . . . The more we kind of normalize it, the more community and society is going to accept it."

With the development of technology, the lines between urban and rural space are also being increasingly blurred. Indeed, conceptions of "the rural" have shifted dramatically; no longer conceived of as "separate" and "self-contained,"[101] rural and urban spaces are increasingly overlapping.[102] For instance, Nova Scotia has taken extra steps to bolster the development of sustainable rural communities and connect rural and urban space. The Broadband for Rural Nova Scotia initiative, for

example, which was completed at the end of 2009, delivered high-speed Internet access to all Nova Scotians, making Nova Scotia one "of the most connected jurisdictions in North America."[103] A bulwark of urbanization,[104] the Internet will provide all rural Nova Scotians with access to various services that were previously unavailable to them.

As a result, Nova Scotia's urban and rural LGBT communities are also becoming increasingly blurred. Available at many locations throughout rural Nova Scotia, *Wayves*, a Halifax-based LGBT newspaper, has recently become available online.[105] Atlantic Canada's source of both rural and urban LGBT-related news and activities, *Wayves* has taken great strides to bridge urban-rural gaps, including hosting a series of LGBT town hall meetings, geared at "discuss[ing] Atlantic Canada's emerging rural rainbow communities, the joys and problems of country living, and how LGBT media can best report and further celebrate [rural LGBT people's] lives."[106] Vehicles of globalization such as television, print media, and the Internet have thus changed the face of rural life and are offering unique opportunities to reexamine the relationship among LGBT identities, community, and urban and rural spaces.

NOTES

1 Metcalfe and Bruhm, eds., *Queer Looking, Queer Acting*.

2 Ibid.

3 Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, 308.

4 *Rural Report: Demographics*, Rural Communities Impacting Policy Report, October 2003, http://www.ruralnovascotia.ca/RCIP/Demographics/Demographics.htm#PopulationOfCountyByAge.

5 According to the 2001 census, 11% of rural Nova Scotians had less than a grade nine education, compared to only 4% of urban Nova Scotians. In rural Nova Scotia (including Cape Breton County), 41% did not have a high school diploma, compared to only 25% in Halifax Regional Municipality. Ibid., 8.

6 While the Canadian average is 7.7%, rural regions in Nova Scotia experience a much higher unemployment rate. For example, the unemployment rates range from 7.8% in the Annapolis Valley to 17.0% in Cape Breton. Ibid., 37, 21.

7 While residents of Halifax's earnings are on par with the Canadian average, incomes in the rest of Nova Scotia fall below it. Guysborough County's average employment income, for example, is only 53% of the Canadian average. Ibid., 16.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 30.

10 CBC News, "Truro in Gay Flag Flap," August 3, 2007, http://www. cbc.ca/ canada/ nova-scotia/ story/2007/08/03/truro-gay.html.

11 African-Canadians make up 2.2% of the total population, First Nations make up 1.9%, and other visible minorities (Chinese, South Asian, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West Asian, Korean, Japanese) make up 3.8%. *Rural Report: Demographics*, 8.

12 Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 16.

13 Creed and Ching, *Knowing Your Place*, 22.

14 Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 15.

15 Sobal, "Sample Extensiveness in Qualitative Nutrition Education Research," 185.

16 Ibid.

17 Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System," 97; Green, "Disrupting the Field," 413.

18 Green, "Disrupting the Field," 413.

19 Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System," 97.

20 Brown, *Closet Space*; Retter, Bouthillette, and Ingram, *Queers in Space*, 32.

21 Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space," 146.

22 I use the acronym "LGBT" for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered to refer to participants as a whole. I distinguish this from "queer," which I use to refer to academic usages of the term as part of Queer Theory, or in cases where participants self-identify as such.

23 Retter, Bouthillette, and Ingram, *Queers in Space*, 3; Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space."

24 D'Emilio, "Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco since World War II," 456–473; Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space."

25 Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space."

26 Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space."

27 Creed and Ching, *Knowing Your Place*, 7.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 41.

31 D'Emilio, "Gay Politics and Community," 458.

32 Bell and Valentine, "Queer Country," 114; Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 40; Phillips, Shuttleton, and Watt, eds., *De-Centering Sexualities*, 129.

33 Bell and Valentine, "Queer Country," 115; Little and Leyshon, "Embodied Rural Geographies," 269.

34 Smith and Mancoske, eds., *Rural Gays and Lesbians*, 4–6; Bell and Valentine, "Queer Country," 116–17.

35 Weston, "Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology," 339–67; Halberstam, "The Brandon Teena Archive," 159–69.

36 Hanson, *The Maritimer Way?*

37 Brown and Schafft, *Rural People & Communities in the 21st Century*.

38 Ibid., 5.

39 Parkins and Reed, Introduction, 5.

40 Ibid.

41 Williams, *The Country and the City*.

42 Young, "Maritime Gothic Sensibility."

43 Leach, "Producing Globalization"; Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space," 146.

44 Bell, "Farm Boys and Wild Men," 547–61; Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City."

45 Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks on Route 66!," 214.

46 Bell and Valentine, "Queer Country," 116.

47 Riordon, *Out Our Way*; Bell and Valentine, "Queer Country"; Wakeford, "New Technologies and 'Cyber-Queer' Research," 115–44.

48 Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks," 208.

49 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 34; Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks."

50 Ibid.

51 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 36; Riordon, *Out Our Way*; Bell and Valentine, "Queer Country"; Gray, *Out in the Country*.

52 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 36–37.

53 Wakeford, "New Technologies and 'Cyber-Queer' Research," 123; Gray, *Out in the Country*.

54 Gray, *Out in the Country*, 15.

55 Ibid., 128.

56 Valentine and Skelton, "Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself," 854.

57 Ibid., 855.

58 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City"; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory*.

59 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 39.

60 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City"; Halberstam, "Brandon Teena Archive"; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space"; Gray, *Out in the Country*.

61 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 23.

62 Gray, *Out in the Country*, 38.

63 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 49.

64 Valentine and Skelton, "Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself," 861.

65 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 49.

66 Valentine and Skelton, "Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself," 861; Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City."

67 Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," 71–112.

68 Valentine and Skelton, "Finding Oneself, Losing Oneself," 857.

69 Ibid.

70 Williams, *The Country and the City*; Scott, *Seeing like a State*.

71 Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory*, 14–15.

72 Scott, *Seeing like a State*, 112.

73 Creed and Ching, *Knowing Your Place*, 197, 3.

74 Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks," 208.

75 Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks"; Smith and Mancoske, *Rural Gays and Lesbians*, 17.

76 Riordon, *Out Our Way*, 47.

77 Smith and Mancoske, *Rural Gays and Lesbians*, 17; Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks," 208; McCarthy, "Poppies in a Wheat Field," 75–94.

78 Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks," 214.

79 Gray, *Out in the Country*, 31, 38–39.

80 Halberstam, "The Brandon Teena Archive," 163.

81 Ibid.

82 Halberstam, "The Brandon Teena Archive"; Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City"; Phillips, Shuttleton, and Watt, *De-Centering Sexualities*.

83 Seidman, *Beyond the Closet*, 11.

84 Bell and Valentine, "Queer Country"; Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks"; Halberstam, "Brandon Teena Archive," 163.

85 Gray, *Out in the Country*, 167.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., 30.

88 Ibid.

89 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 45.

90 Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks," 210.

91 Gray, *Out in the Country*, 37.

92 Ibid.

93 Seidman, *Beyond the Closet*, 89.

94 Halberstam, "The Brandon Teena Archive," 163.

95 Ibid., 89; Wilson, "Getting Your Kicks."

96 Halperin and Traub, eds., *Gay Shame*, 25.

97 Ibid., 3.

98 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 410.

99 Gray, *Out in the Country*, 38.

100 For example, Gray, *Out in the Country*.

101 Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 41; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 30.

102 Creed and Ching, *Knowing Your Place*, 2; Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 41–42.

103 Government of Nova Scotia, "Economic and Rural Development: Broadband for Rural Nova Scotia," 2009, http://www.gov.ns.ca/econ/broadband/updates/.

104 Lohr, "The Internet as an Influence on Urbanization."

105 *Wayves Magazine*, 2009, www.wayves.ca.

106 Ibid.