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Rethinking the Closet

Queer Life in Rural Geographies

KATHERINE SCHWEIGHOFER

In our contemporary understanding of LGBTQ identities and communities, the binary of visible gay community versus closeted individuals is mapped on to American geographical and cultural divisions. Simply put, we associate urban with out and proud, and rural with closeted and homophobic. Scholars of queer rurality have explained this geography of the closet as one in which the rural United States “is made to function as a closet for urban sexualities” and “operates as America’s perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet.” One scholar has even specifically dubbed the state of Mississippi as the nation’s closet. This foundational “metronormativity” in LGBTQ identities and communities has been undermined by recent work in rural queer studies. This work emphasizes that representing the country as the closet elides flourishing LGBTQ communities and individuals in rural spaces. Additionally, the country-as-closet construct reinforces an urban definition of LGBTQ identity and visibility that may not be compatible with rural LGBTQ lifestyles, in effect rendering rural queer life impossible. This essay problematizes the metaphor of the closet relative to rural gay and lesbian identities to identify new directions for scholarship on queer identity and community. I challenge the closet’s reliance upon binary divisions between public and private space and visibility and invisibility by locating other forms of gay and lesbian community and identity that flourish across and beyond these binaries.

Given its centrality in this essay, a brief explanation of “the rural” is in order. Geographic identities are shaped as much by cultural ideologies as by physical landscapes, and the constructed division between the “country” and the “city” is a particularly powerful and naturalized formation in American culture. I turn to material that builds upon Ray-
mond Williams's early examinations of the British construction of “city” and “country”⁵ and reframes the rural idyll to reveal its homoerotic content, complicating the perceived sexual conservatism of rurality with evidence of an omnipresent queerness.⁶ In the United States, specific regionalisms produce a variety of ruralities from which scholars continue to tease out specific implications for queer identities.⁷ As Scott Herring points out, the distinction between urban and rural is “as much context-specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and . . . standardizing as it is geographically verifiable”⁸ Yet geographical identity clearly shapes the lived experiences of LGBT individuals, often prompting migrations, relocations, dislocations, circulations, and other movements between and within rural and urban spaces.⁹ Within the source material used here, respondents are predominantly located in the Upper Midwest and Appalachian regions, and the “rural” in which they live is characterized by small towns and unincorporated townships with sparse population density, an emphasis on crop and dairy farming, white working- and middle-class politics, and religious and social conservatism.

For source material, I have used collections that center first-person narration as evidence. Will Fellows's Farm Boys is an ethnographic collection of stories of gay-identified men who grew up on farms of various sizes in the Midwest. These men experienced adolescence between 1940 and 1980 and were in various stages of outness at the time of their interviews. Fellows found his subjects by placing ads in gay circulars in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Iowa City, effectively limiting his pool of interviewees to those men visiting, if not living, in these urban areas and thereby suggesting a metronormative bias to his study. Fellows addresses this and other restrictions on his narrators, including his realization that men who were completely in the closet were not easily found. His sample therefore skews to those who engage in visibly out gay communities to the extent that they have access to and read gay circulars. Thus closeted individuals in both rural and urban locales with similar farm-based upbringing were excluded from his collection, an omission that both suggests an area for future scholarship and, as will be explored in this essay, points to the problematic ways in which rural homosexualities are identified.

For a glimpse into the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women in rural spaces, I turn to three sources: Lesbian Land, Joyce Cheney's 1985 collection of narratives from women's land members, which is one of
the only publications on that movement;\textsuperscript{10} Country Women magazine, a periodical that ran for most of the 1970s and was written by and for women living in rural areas; and materials from the Lesbian Herstory Archives subject files.\textsuperscript{11} These sources provide a rare window into the life of rural-living lesbians between 1960 and 1990. As an additional geographic twist, many of Cheney's narrators originate from urban or suburban backgrounds and are drawn to the country as part of a radical lesbian feminist ethos; their readings of lesbian identity and the lives of the local women they encounter provide unique snapshots of the role of geography in women's identities.

As a point of contrast, Mary Gray's Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America (2010) provides a more recent perspective. Gray focuses on coming out and queer identity issues faced by a younger generation than Fellows and Cheney, as well as considering the impact of greater access to media on queer identities. Despite the availability of gay-themed entertainment and cultural resources such as PlanetOut.com, Brokeback Mountain, and Will & Grace for these teens, their stories reveal important problems with the concept of the closet for rural queer identities and offer a new generation's perspective on the teen struggles also described by Fellows's narrators.

These sources are particularly useful here because they are primarily, and in some cases entirely, told in the participants' own words; instead of being written about, these rural gays and lesbians are writing about themselves. It should also be noted that the source material used here addresses primarily a Midwestern, white, Protestant and Catholic, mostly male, middle- and working-class experience, and the resulting analysis likely applies best to this particular setting. Despite intentional efforts to add women's perspectives to this analysis, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women's experiences differ from those of gay and bisexual men in ways that often leave a less readily apparent historical record of their communities and lives. Additionally, the identities, relationships, and closet/coming out experiences of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit Native Americans, Southerners and Westerners, people of color, itinerant or poor persons, or transgender persons in rural spaces will differ from the stories driving this analysis. These stories of queer experience in rural space I suspect further destabilize the structure of the closet, and deserve future exploration.
worse tale than the one before of family and friends’ reactions to the news. Recounting the details of one’s time in the closet and coming out moment(s) also often affirms or provides a space for sharing parts of an individual’s past that he or she may otherwise prefer to avoid, stories of changed relationships, hurtful memories, or feelings of disconnection and unbelonging. Coming out stories provide a space to engage with potentially difficult pasts and find positive connections with the present.

This tradition of sharing stories creates not just individual history that is valued by other LGBT community members, but a larger communal history of resistance and perseverance in the face of oppression. LGBT histories are full of coming out stories, and readers often connect to the material through their own experiences. The entire LGBT movement has been given a closet/coming out story as well; historians frequently refer to the movement’s more visible moments (Stonewall and sometimes the Compton’s Cafeteria riots\(^\text{19}\)) as coming-out moments, with earlier decades (particularly the 1940s–1960s) as times characterized by secrecy, hiding, and loneliness. Ironically, although the closet metaphor is usually intended to acknowledge and respect the difficulties faced by earlier queer generations, it also forces individuals who lived beyond an in/out binary into an anachronistic closet, instead of truly reflecting the way sexuality shaped their lived identity.

Lesbians and gay men establish a personal history through coming out stories that resonates with and grounds them in a collective past, something they are precluded from within heteronormative culture. Finding a sense of belonging might heal years of feeling out of place, of constantly feeling different and uncomfortable. Though the community exists primarily in opposition to the closet—the individuals who are “out” primarily make up the community—it is also dependent upon the closet as its originating location (a state of not knowing or presumed heterosexuality must by definition precede a state of known homosexuality). The binary is also not a clean division, as individuals exist at various states of outness, might have to come out over and over again,\(^\text{20}\) and may move in and out of participation in the community. As Diana Fuss so simply put it, “the problem of course with the inside/outside rhetoric . . . is that such polemics disguise the fact that most of us are both inside and outside at the same time.”\(^\text{21}\) LGBT groups and organizations
recognize this complexity and are thus often sensitive to privacy and the need for secrecy. In some ways, LGBT communities might be seen as the logical outcome of the closet, the very result of groups of people making the same decision to come out. The closet can equally be seen as the result of a visible LGBT community—if there are some people who are noticeably and publicly queer, then those LGBT individuals who are not visible become a group in need of a separate designation. Thus the closet and visible LGBT communities operate in a mutually reinforcing relationship through which individuals may move back and forth over time and space.  

Public Space, Private Space: Breaking apart the Rural Closet

As part of the structure of contemporary lesbian and gay identity, coming out of the closet requires several elements. Mary Gray suggests that “discovering a sense of one’s queer self requires three things: the privacy to explore one’s queer differences . . . a visible [queer] community . . . and the safe space to express queer difference.”

Under scrutiny here is the first item on Gray’s list, privacy. Secrecy, private space, and time to oneself are critical to the closet’s functionality. The queer individual, whether youth or adult, might write in journals, draw pictures, or reflect on questions concerning desire and identity. She might collect clues to existing constructions of gay identity, including porn, pulp fiction, mementos from same-sex crushes or experiences, or even sexological literature. Secret stashes, time to pore over them, and time spent in quiet reflection all require physical and emotional space not always available in busy households or small residences. Fellows’s Midwestern farm boys talk extensively about their lack of privacy as children and teens in the 1950s through the 1980s. For many, life on the farm entailed almost zero privacy. Constantly being surrounded by family members, often sharing a bedroom and usually a bed, meant no individual could lay claim to a private physical space. Several narrators spoke of the fear that their siblings, particularly brothers, might reveal shared sexual experiences or find treasured queer items. On family-run farms, the intense workload meant everyone had to chip in, often resulting in morning-till-night cycles of chores. School offered a respite from farm work for children, but certainly not any sort of privacy or individual time. Instead, school
often heightened young gay men's exposure to others who might detect their queerness.

Simultaneously, the isolation and space of farm life created pockets of privacy, or at least opportunities for making private moments. Some farm boys spoke of being able to disappear into fields, barns, or the woods during chore times for a respite from their families. The large number of family members might mean it was easier to sneak off, as busy parents lost track of who was doing what. Increased numbers of siblings meant more sources of information on sexuality and desire, and a few men even mentioned having other gay siblings. Yet the isolation of individual farms and farming communities meant a higher level of homogeneity and an intensification of focus on difference. Young gay men felt high levels of scrutiny from neighbors and community members who knew who they were, what their car looked like, and who their parents were.

Rural farm life thus creates spaces that are simultaneously extremely public and private. A wide-open back pasture, with no one watching but a few grazing horses or cows, is a space that defies clear public/private divides. These places are always available, yet must be sought out by the queerly desiring subject. They are both far from the hustle and bustle of everyday family life, yet structurally central to that world. Remote fields, empty barns, or a stretch of woods might become just as conducive to queer sexual exploration as San Francisco's Castro or New York's Greenwich Village.

This type of queer space is not limited to farms, but might also appear in small cities with rural characteristics. Brown's analysis of the gay club scene in Christchurch demonstrates how urban/rural and public/private lines are blurred; these clubs are urban enough to be easily identifiable as gay community (they are anonymous, public, within particular city blocks), yet they also present contradictory elements (people know one another, the clubs are private and hard to find) that suggest something more complicated. If spaces like the back pastures and the Christchurch clubs are queerly both public and private, if they are both rural and urban, hidden and visible, then they undermine our cultural expectations for the spatialization of homosexual identities and communities. The closet model, in its strict adherence to in/out, private/public divides, does not allow for these sorts of queer spaces, and this
limitation suggests that the closet model is not only metronormative but also homonormative, reinforcing a notion of gay life as striving toward a heteronormative married consumer lifestyle. If the closet is a major structuring element in identifying LGBT communities, and it cannot conceive of queer geographies, then it also cannot imagine the queer identities and communities that circulate in those spaces. Queering the rural closet allows us to imagine that two farm boys having sex in a back field are using both the public and private elements of that space to create their own gay community, even if it is one that is difficult to align with dominant notions of LGBT community centers and pride parades. Slowly, the rural closet begins to break apart.

“Everybody Said They Were Brothers”: The Rural Closet’s Visible Invisibility

Woven into the closet’s public/private divide is the binary of visibility and invisibility. Coming out of the closet is understood as a proclamation in which one makes publically known one’s desires, thereby becoming a visible member of the LGBT community. Yet this visibility binary, in ways similar to the public/private space binary, is problematized by the lived realities of gay rural existence. Returning to Fellows’s Farm Boys makes this clear.

One trend among the Farm Boys narrators was the pattern of recognition by the people around them. Even prior to modern-day media bombardment by Queer Eye, Will & Grace, and other TV shows awash in gay culture stereotypes, certain family members often developed suspicions about a young boy’s sexual identity. Mothers in particular seemed to pay more attention to the gendered behavior and potential sexual identity of their children than fathers, siblings, or other relatives. Many of Fellows’s farm boys believed that their mothers knew they were gay long before they knew themselves, perhaps as a result of the increased time spent caring for children that fell to women in a gendered division of labor. They recall being treated differently than their brothers, mothers protectively intervening when their gender deviance was being policed, or coming out to their mother who simply nodded in agreement, as if she had been waiting for the official declaration for years. Mothers and grandmothers often encouraged boys whom they suspected to be gay
to explore traditionally feminine activities, such as gardening, sewing, or knitting, or welcomed the additional help with household labor. Certainly not all children have mothers who recognize or defend their queer behavior but many found refuge under the care of women. Mothers kept young children in the home with them, and even those sent to work in fields or barns for the day would return to her care at meal-times and in the evening. As families grew larger, mothers had even more reason for keeping a male child working with her throughout the day, if only to deal with the unending household labor; some mothers even created chores to keep a particularly effeminate boy near her side instead of sending him to the group of fathers, uncles, and older male siblings working in fields.

In today's rural communities, young children—and their families—are more than ever connected to a worldwide network of media, entertainment, news, and pop culture information flow. Cell phones, Internet, magazines, movies, and television funnel an incredible volume of information on gay "lifestyles" and LGBTQ identity to children and adolescents, particularly those searching for it. As a result, many gay and lesbian teens raised in rural spaces today no longer suffer from the information gap that Fellows's narrators describe. Instead of not knowing about homosexuality, today's LGBTQ kids often already know who and what they are from a very young age. In her ethnography on the impact of media on queer rural youth, Mary Gray's teen narrators address their visibility in an age of hypervisibility. The result of their own self-recognition, combined with increasingly visible LGBTQ media representations, is that these teens grow up in communities where the lack of privacy means everyone "always already knows" they are queer. She writes, "Most of the youth I spoke with talked about their unacknowledged status as the 'town gay kid.' As one 15-year-old from a township of 3,000 noted, 'What do I have to be afraid of? Someone finding out? They all know.'" Yet despite this high level of visibility, gay and lesbian youth are simultaneously expected to remain what Gray calls "functionally invisible." Not expressing affection for a same-sex partner in public, not dressing or acting in gender deviant ways, not being "too gay"—in short, actively working to make themselves invisible—are the unspoken rules these teens feel pressure to follow. Gray writes that these "tensions among familiarity, visibility, and knowability . . . shape public recogni-
tion in rural settings.” Despite what seems an unjust system of social pressure on vulnerable gay and lesbian youth, the fluid visibility these teens demonstrate and the lives they create between visibility and invisibility are also undermining the very system that restrains them; for each gay youth who decides exactly when and where he “swishes,” the expectation that gay individuals are always easily identified by such behavior is further undermined. The structural relationship between hetero- and homosexual that requires that homosexuality reveal itself is upset by the selective visibility/invisibility of these rural gay teens.

This demand for invisibility that Gray’s teens negotiate demonstrates the inconsistency of the visibility characteristic of the closet model in dictating the behavior of rural gay and lesbian identities. One of Fellows’s narrators describes varying levels of gay and lesbian invisibility in his Midwestern town:

“There were two women that lived together in our town, and they were accepted by the community. Mom said, ‘Well, one of them’s got to be the man.’ So I realized as a kid that women did that, but there weren’t any men that I knew of. There were two guys, two miles from us, that lived together for years and died together, but as a kid I just passed that off. When Dad needed help at harvest time he told me to go get them, because they didn’t have a car. Everybody said they were brothers, but they didn’t have the same last name.”

The politics of visibility, of who becomes identified as queer and who flies below the radar, is complicated by the social structures of small towns. Other hierarchies and power dynamics—family connections, class status, gender, local conflicts and disputes between neighbors—play a large role, and perhaps may be more likely to determine the level of acceptable gay or lesbian visibility than any particular gendered or sexual behavior.

The demand for gay invisibility described by Gray’s contemporary teens echoes that faced by Fellows’s narrators as much as forty years prior. Some of the farm boys suggested that invisibility meant they had trouble understanding their desires and difference; without basic information and a definition of homosexuality, much less visible gay or lesbian role models in their communities, some of these men spoke of
feeling confused for a long time. Others were able to find information on homosexuality, yet still felt confused. For many of these men who were born and raised in rural areas, learning about what they perceived as urban-based, flamboyant, swishy, effeminate, and in-your-face gay gender identities left them feeling even more isolated and out of place. "It seemed like I was the peg that didn't fit. I wasn't a queen; I didn't like to dish. I always tended to feel more at home with some of my non-gay friends. I still feel that way, but less so."31 Fellows writes of a double alienation, of rural-raised gay men feeling they do not belong in their rural communities of origin and then finding they feel equally out of place in urban-based gay communities.

Other scholars note similar experiences. In a study of gay and lesbian subjects from rural areas in San Francisco, Kath Weston found large numbers eventually returned to rural living as a result of a similar feeling of incompatibility with urban gay cultures.32 A fair amount of this discomfort seems to stem from differences in public/private boundaries and flamboyant gender-deviant behavior. One narrator addressed both in explaining his perspective, "I don't go for guys who are trying to prove a point by holding hands and walking through the mall. ... I would never take part in a gay pride parade. If I see somebody being ostentatious ... I think it's too much. I believe in being yourself, but there's a proper time."33 Ironically, for individuals who bemoaned living in communities described as involving no privacy and extremely limited gay visibility, these men end up policing their own behavior, enforcing the same restraints on visibility that some of them found oppressive and difficult to negotiate as younger teens.

Closet Resistance

In addition to privacy and models of queer desire that might enable awareness of one's gay or lesbian identity, the model of the closet also depends upon not just identifying as gay, but on gayness being a major focus of one's identity. Two cases illustrate the conflict with this element of the closet model.

The closet, on a basic level, requires identification as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.34 Yet nearly all of Fellows's narrators spoke of sexual contact with other men and boys that was never discussed or acknowl-
edged, and certainly was not identified as “gay” or “homosexual.” At times these relationships took the shape of long-term affairs. Other men included stories of unacknowledged and unpursued homosexual desire shared with various men in their lives. In fact, Fellow’s collection suggests that a great many rural men were having sex with other men who never acknowledged their queer desires, much less incorporated any sort of homosexuality into their identities. Urban-focused sex researchers and outreach programs have designated these men as “MSM,” short for “men who have sex with men,” eking out a space not clearly delineated as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. However, MSM are often viewed as closeted about their sexual activities and queer identities, particularly by the heterosexual mainstream and (out) homosexual communities. The hetero-/homo-binary demands these individuals be classified somewhere within the schema, even if they problematize both heterosexuality and homosexuality. MSM and men with unacknowledged homosexual desires also upset the notion of the closet because they disrupt the narrative movement of the trope—the concept of the closet does not apply if there is nothing to reveal or no change is imminent. Someone who does not see an identity element at play or does not incorporate homosexual sex acts into an understanding of self cannot be said to be in the closet. At the same time, individuals having homosexual sex without claiming gay or bisexual identities do not operate separately from the construct of the closet, as they are woven into the social and sexual networks of closeted and out individuals. Without individuals seeing themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, they cannot engage in the closet’s narrative of coming out, even if they are up front (“out”) about their sexual practices.

A second group of rural gays and lesbians pose a slightly different challenge to the closet, however. This group may be more directly a product of the cultural specificity of small-town rural existence, particularly for earlier generations. These individuals are fully aware of lesbian and gay elements as part of their identities, but choose to identify themselves primarily as something else—farmers, mothers, church deacons, writers, land owners, and so on. They actively resist “coming out” because they see sexuality as private, because they do not identify with urban, gender-non-normative stereotypes of gay and lesbian identity, or because other parts of their identities are much more central.
Again, as with MSM, this group is very difficult to identify in literature, specifically because they are resisting a searchable identity category. With rural women in particular, finding first-person accounts from those who might engage in lesbian sexual activity, relationships, politics, or community membership and still do not identify as lesbians or queer women is difficult, but not because they are not present. Additionally, the demands of rural or agricultural living often meant a different set of gendered expectations for women than their urban or suburban counterparts experienced. As the time period under consideration also overlaps with the second-wave feminist and lesbian rights movements, rural women often appear as a confusing mélange of rural gender patterns, feminism, lesbian activism, and staunch pioneer independence. Glimpses into the lives of these women can be found, however, in a handful of places. Country Women, a magazine published from 1973 to 1980 is one. Country Women was “devoted half to sharing the personal experiences of women living in the country and half to exchanging new found skills with each other” and quickly became a point of connection for women with a variety of sexual identities who were interested in meeting others through farming and rural living. Connections like those in Country Women flourished in the 1970s and 1980s among some radical feminists who believed rural spaces offered an opportunity to escape the constraints of patriarchy. The lesbian separatist movement and the rural-based “lesbian land” movement included women who identified as lesbian as well as those who preferred “political lesbianism,” meaning they dedicated their energies to other women but refrained from sexual relationships with them. Lesbian land collectives founded during this time period were usually populated by women from cities, who often found themselves quickly in need of the knowledge and skills of local women. In an archive of writings from the lesbian land movement, one new country resident wrote about her beginnings as a dairy farmer, thankful for the network of women she stumbled in to: “The women from the Christmas tree farm come down to teach us to butcher. The vet’s receptionist answers questions the vet cannot.” Another new country resident relied on assistance from both straight and lesbian neighbors: “Other neighbors could care less that a lot of us are lesbians. They help me out a lot. We get our eggs from them,
and they helped me when my goat got sick. . . . It was nice that first winter, to have a set of wimmin on the land that aren’t close friends, and yet they’re there for support. Neighbors who happen to be dykes.”

Many of these neighborly rural women are soon revealed to be lesbians as well, often helping connect newcomers to substantial networks of lesbian women. (“There are ten lesbians that we know of within 80 miles.”) Others, though, are less easily understood, but still affecting women exploring feminism and lesbianism. New rural resident Barbara Lightner described one woman she met as both incredibly similar to herself but also strikingly different, “Thelma: never been out of the state. Never stepped out of her role. Living way back in, down such a long gravel road, where so few come to tell her of her own fine strength.” Here the lack of mobility and lack of visibly enacted feminism of a local woman both reinforce a rural stereotype (she “never stepped out of her role”) while simultaneously problematizing the author’s assumption that any strong woman would actively seek out others and not remain “hidden down such a long gravel road.” Though we cannot know if Thelma identified as a lesbian, she lived in queer ways that seemed unimaginable to urban lesbians.

The snapshot of Thelma echoes a 1995 article that was published in a gay and lesbian periodical and took issue with representations of rural lesbians. Author Lee Lynch responded specifically to a survey of lesbian readers, presumably by the magazine, which was so poorly organized that it did not identify any lesbians living in nonurban spaces. Lynch countered the assumption that this meant there were no such lesbians by explaining that reasons for living in rural spaces could include a desire not to get involved in lesbian community: “It’s cheaper and I can spend a little more time writing. The air is clean. It’s easier to be a hermit. I like the distance from gays and straights alike. I like the independent spirits of my peers. It smells like pine trees.” Lynch’s passionate essay went on to record an extensive list of roles occupied by lesbians in the country, “We have: editors, realtors, teachers, entrepreneurs, retirees, artists and writers, performers, big businesswomen, bus drivers. . . . Don’t tell me that there are no dykes in the country.” Other women writing about their fellow rural lesbians took a similar approach; one women’s land included the following membership:
We have two owners of wimmin-owned alternative business, an architecture student who uses this as her vacation home, and wimmin truckers who are here a week and then away a week. We have a machinist, a woman with inherited money, and an artist who makes a living with her art. We have old-time dykes and dykes who came out thru feminism.

Lynch and others made their point that the country has plenty of lesbians, yet by identifying them via their professions, they suggested these women might have chosen not to identify as lesbian, preferring to be seen as a teacher, for example. In Lynch's self-description, it is clear that she was both out of the closet (she was publishing a piece about her lesbian identity in a national magazine) but also simultaneously preferred the privacy and lack of visibility she found in quiet rurality. Lynch's essay suggests the concept of the closet may not be useful at all for understanding the identities of lesbian and queer rural women like her.

Rural space permits many more variations of queer lifestyles than one might presume: there are individuals who engage in nonheterosexual sex acts with no apparent impact on their ostensibly heterosexual identities and those who may well recognize their sexuality as gay or lesbian, yet choose to prioritize other aspects of their identities. Mary Gray addresses the politics of visibility and outness in reflecting on her experiences with queer youth in Kentucky and Indiana, noting that "rural youth do the collective labor of identity work differently than their urban counterparts not because rural queer youth have it inherently harder, but because they confront different heteronormative/homophobic burdens. They also bear the weight of a politics of visibility that...was built for city living." This visibility—being out—is not only a metronormative phenomenon with limited applicability for rural gay and lesbian experiences, but in its monolithic application, it erases the possibility of other types of queer existence. Building upon the theme of the country-as-closet explored earlier, Gray writes, "A politics of visibility needs the rural (or some otherness, some place) languishing in its shadow to sustain its status as an unquestionable achievement rather than a strategy that privileges the view of some by eliding the vantage point of others." Despite the injustice perpetuated by the invisibility of the rural queer subject, complex queer lives and experience nevertheless thrive in this "shadow" of visible, urban LGBT identity.
Beyond the Closet

If the closet contains too many metronormative elements to function as a useful metaphor for rural gay and lesbian identity, how might we address diverse sexualities and identities in rural spaces? Given the above concerns, we need a model that does not rely on urban concepts of privacy and space or on a monolithic model of the gay or lesbian lifestyle. It must be separate from narratives of child-to-adult growth, rework the visibility/invisibility binary, and find a way to better incorporate other identity elements and different lifestyle patterns. It must not demand homosexuality as the primary identity element.

Opening up the closet allows us to broaden our understanding of what lesbian and gay identity in general might look like, and where it might be found. Here again, rural-based examples are fruitful. The practice of men cruising and engaging in sex acts in public bathrooms is prevalent in both urban and rural parts of the United States and internationally. Particularly in rural locations, public rest stops along highways are popular sites for men seeking sex with other men. These anonymous sexual encounters suggest an example of both a location and a community that informs and shapes queer (male) identities in ways not normally recognized by traditional definitions of identity and sexuality. Particularly in sparsely populated rural areas, where rest stops or other gay cruising sites may be fewer in number, the chances for recognizing or being recognized by someone is much greater. One of Fellows’s narrators recounts frequent visits to a local rest stop as part of his adolescent homosexual explorations and the complications to this secret pleasure caused by an encounter with the father of a classmate. Networks created by less-than-anonymous but never discussed sexual encounters are not understood as “gay community” in the same way as the rainbow-clad populations of twinks, leathermen, and drag queens parading down New York’s Fifth Avenue. Yet they are as much a part of rural gay lives and identities as those urban-based behaviors. David Bell and Gill Valentine briefly suggest something similar, noting that a “community of the cottage” (cruising for sex at rest stops is called “cottageing” in the United Kingdom) might exist among rural queer men, along the lines of a “community of the closet.” Bell and Valentine connect the binding ties of secrecy between those in the closet and those in
the rest stop. Yet the implication in equating those “communities” is that
the attendant notions of shame, misery, and loneliness that are associ­
ated with the closet must be similar for the rest stop. As some studies of
rest-stop culture have suggested, the “community of the cottage” is not
necessarily one of secrecy, shame, and loneliness; on the contrary, many
men find care and connection in brief moments of intimacy with oth­
ers, particularly when repeat visits result in smiles from familiar faces.51
These interactions might not fit a homonormative vision of a monoga­
mous, married couple, but these relationships are also not necessarily
meaningless to their participants.

Alternative versions of lesbian community sometimes occur through
nonsexual encounters. Lesbian periodicals, including magazines focused
on rural living such as Country Women and Maize, listed mailing ad­
dresses for “contact dykes” in the personals section. These women were
available for information on local lesbian community and resources; ac­
cording to some, they served as pen pals, tour guides, or friendly new
neighbors, enabling contact between women who otherwise would not
have found other lesbians to connect with. Taking the periodical-based
community a step further, many women on lesbian lands saw them­
selves as connected, pieces of a larger “Lesbian Nation” that empow­
ered women across space: “All across the country these islands of the
Amazon Nation exist, standing strong and proud, a sign of women’s
power. They offer the needed space for women to retreat to and regroup
when the pressures and paranoia of living in the patriarchy become too
overwhelming. . . . There are no boundaries in the Amazon Nation.”52
The “community of the catalog” and the Lesbian Nation pose additional
challenges to boundaries of space and time we expect of a lesbian or gay
community, as they foster lesbian identities and relationships without
necessarily sharing physical space or sexual contact—or even requir­
ing direct knowledge of one another. If different geographies of sexual­
ity pose different sets of constraints on the individuals within them, it
follows that the identities and communities produced cannot be read
through the same rubric. Whether through quick sex in a bathroom stall
or long-running written correspondence and visions of a network of
others doing the same, lesbians and gay men in rural spaces create their
own forms of identity and community, ones far outside any urban-based
expectation of the closet.
NOTES

1 In this piece, I aim to use terms like “LGBT” and “queer” with as much specificity as possible. Thus, I most often use “LGBT” to discuss broader queer communities and identities, but do so with recognition that the “B” and “T” individuals often experience these formations differently. As the examples used here are dominated by gay- and lesbian-identified individuals, but also include those who practice same-sex desire but may not identify as such, I will occasionally use “queer” to include these individuals. However, the “queer” used here does not necessarily indicate a particular radical political identity nor contemporary forms of nonbinary gender identity but instead references earlier meanings of “queer” as either an implication of homosexuality or sexually uncertain forms of oddity, deviance, or difference.

2 Halberstam, A Queer Time and Place, 37.
3 Gray, Out in the Country, 4.
4 Howard, Men Like That, 63.
5 Williams, The Country and the City.
7 For examples, see regional analyses of the South in Johnson, Sweet Tea, and Howard, Men Like That; the “Queering the Middle: Race, Region, and a Queer Midwest,” special issue GLQ 20, nos. 1–2 (2014); the specifically western analysis in Bell, “Cowboy Love,” and even Anzaldua, Borderlands/La Frontera, for a southwest or border region-specific analysis.
8 Herring, Another Country, 8.
9 For work addressing lesbian and gay movements in and out of rural geography, see Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City”; Raimondo’s study of gay men dying of AIDS returning to rural family homes, “Corralling the Virus”; Oswald, “Who Am I in Relation to Them?”; Annes and Redlin, “Coming Out and Coming Back”; and even Hoffert’s recent memoir, Prairie Silence.
10 “Women’s land,” also called “lesbian land,” describes a movement from the 1970s and 1980s, which merged lesbian feminism, identity politics, environmentalism, anticapitalism, and a back-to-the-land, do-it-yourself ethos. Women, often from urban areas, relocated to rural spaces to live alone, in pairs, or in collectives as a strategy for escaping patriarchal oppression.
11 Lesbian Herstory Archives Subject Files, Lesbian Herstory Educational Fund (2004): reel 80–81, folder 07390, “land,” April 20, 2009. All sources from “land” subject file include the tag “land” in footnotes, while all sources from “rural lesbians” subject files include the tag “rural” in footnotes. Henceforth, all citations of materials from these archives will specify author, document title (if any), and either “land” or “rural.”
12 Kennedy, Ulrichs.
13 Tamashiro, “Coming Out.”
14 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 68.
15 Ibid., 69.

17 While Brown's study takes place in New Zealand, and not the Midwestern United States, there are striking similarities between Christchurch and many Midwestern small and mid-sized cities, such as Fort Wayne, Indiana, or Des Moines, Iowa. These include a small but moderately dense downtown, the strong presence of religious organizations in local culture, the "neighborly" or "small-town" attitude of citizens toward one another, and the social positioning of these small cities as secondary or outside U.S. metropolitan centers, which are often coastal, larger, and understood as more "modern" centers of culture and business.

18 Brown, *Closet Space*, 56. Brown notes the near absence of lesbian bars or commercial establishments, saying that his sources indicated women gathered in private homes, often via a dinner-party circuit (ibid., 81).


20 For example, as Judith Butler writes, "being 'out' must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as 'out'" ("Imitation and Gender Subordination," 16).


22 Fuss adds that coming out constructs both the closet as well as the "true" identity it reveals (Ibid., 4-5).


25 Ibid., 117.

26 Ibid., 172.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Fellows, *Farm Boys*, 69.

31 Ibid., 157.

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

33 Fellows, *Farm Boys*, 132.

34 Certainly trans people also come out (as trans as well as other identities); since trans coming out deals more centrally with sex and gender rather than sexuality, I'll set those coming-out experiences aside here.

35 For more on the impact of gender on an earlier generation of rural women, see Colin Johnson, "Hard Women," in his *Just Queer Folks*.


37 Also sometimes referred to as "women-identified women"

38 It should be noted that some women in the lesbian land movement came from the very rural spaces the collectives sought; these women brought particularly valuable experience in negotiating small-town and rural community dynamics, and often challenged middle-class urban-originating women to examine their classism. One trio of
rural-raised women determined to live in the country despite not owning land wrote, “our views of country living are decidedly political, and a combination of country working class / hick lower middle class” (Brown, Wright, and Dragon Fire, “Lesbians on Land without Land,” 169).


41 Panzarino, “Beechtree,” 44.

42 Lightner, “O! We Are Just Begun!,” 3, land.

43 Lee Lynch, In the Life, April 1995, rural.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Pelican and Hard, “Maud’s Land,” 93. All original spelling.

47 Gray, Out in the Country, 21.

48 Ibid., 9.

49 Fellows, Farm Boys, 293.

50 Bell and Valentine, “Queer Country,” 117.

51 Many of Fellows’ narrators spoke fondly of men whom they encountered in rest stops, saying they were caring and gentle, particularly when they were still new to gay sex. It should be noted, though, that rest stops in particular are not seen as places to find a boyfriend. For rest-stop culture analysis, see van Lieshout, “Leather Nights in the Woods,” and Flowers, Marriott, and Hart, “The Bars, the Bogs, and the Bushes.”

52 Mary O’Sullivan, “Politics of Wimmin’s Land,” n.d. land.