

From Websites to Wal-Mart: Youth, Identity Work, and the Queering of Boundary Publics in *Small Town, USA*

Mary L. Gray

Don was the first of his friends from the Highland Pride Alliance (HPA) to arrive at the donut shop attached to the Gas-n'-Go.¹ It was the only coffee place open after 6:00 p.m. in their small town of 3,000. Their usual group meeting space—the basement of the local public county library—was already booked with another community group.

HPA was slowly reviving as a community-wide social support group for local lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) people and their straight allies after languishing in the drama of its cofounders' breakup. More than thirty people now participated in larger, monthly HPA community fundraisers and picnics but fewer than ten regularly attended its organizational meetings. HPA's most active members were white, gay-identifying men between 17 and 22, although there were a few members in their late fifties and mid-sixties and participants as young as fourteen. The majority did not have steady incomes or concrete plans (not to mention local options) for schooling beyond high school. Several HPA participants had attended one or two semesters of community college in larger towns before running out of money and moving back to home. The group was not an official private not-for-profit 501(c)3 but they did their best to operate like the all-volunteer community-based organizations found in larger cities in their state.

When I began attending HPA meetings and events and getting to know its members and their social networks, the group had only recently reinstated bi-

weekly meetings and still didn't have a "routine of gathering" according to Don, HPA's president. At this particular meeting, talk of HPA's upcoming Halloween fundraiser seamlessly turned to casual gossip and chatter regarding this evening's after-meeting plans. Possibilities were bandied about and then dismissed as "too boring" or "too far away." Jay tossed out the idea of heading over to neighboring Springhaven, Kentucky—forty minutes due south—to do some drag at the Wal-Mart. The group's collective roar of affirming whoops and laughter drew the eyes of two bleach-blonde-haired women in their mid-twenties listlessly tending to the donut display case and coffee hot plates. Don met their tentative smiles with a large grin and a small princess-atop-a-float hand wave. Turning back to the group, he giggled, then purred softly, "Now, settle it down, y'all."

That boisterous LGBT-identifying young people scattered throughout rural Kentucky and its borders move between public libraries, Christian bookstores, gas stations, house parties, websites, and Wal-Mart may seem unexpected at first glance. Why the surprise? Well, it is true that we know very little about rural youth negotiating LGBT or questioning identities. Most literature frames queer youth sexualities and genders as an individual mental health issue (or crisis) rather than as vibrant, collectively negotiated identities.² Perhaps the overriding reason for our surprise at the sheer publicness and brash visibility of LGBT youth in Christian bookstores and Wal-Marts is that rural environments are presumed to be (more) hostile to queer desires and genders and, therefore rural LGBTQ-identifying youth (at least the self-respecting ones?) must have already left their small towns for the *big city*.³ The imagining of rural spaces as inhospitable to difference is commonplace. Perhaps, as Donna Smith suggests, "myths [about Northerners and Southerners] function . . . as ideological constructs set within binary oppositions."⁴ That is, urban sophistication, with its tolerance, even celebration, of its queer eyes needs an abject, rural red state Other to both confirm the liberalness of the city and signal the backwardness of the country.

To date, most historical and political renderings of queer life focus on the possibilities afforded by the public and private spaces of urban centers.⁵ Even within queer narratives of the recent rural past, private house parties serve as the central location of queer possibility and gathering—if any gathering is imagined possible at all.⁶ But, as Smith suggests, "[p]rojects that use region as a prism through which to analyze how gender, race, class, and religious identities intersect in the formation of queer identity . . . produce a more complex understanding of U.S. queer experiences and illuminate our understanding of how sexuality is constituted more generally in American culture and politics."⁷ The everyday lives of rural youth complicate dichotomies of rural and urban or private and public experience. I would argue that detailing the work involved in crafting sexual and gender identities from the supposed margins teaches us something intriguing about the processes, conditions, and meanings of modern queer subjectivities more broadly.⁸

The larger ethnographic project from which this discussion draws is meant to examine the lived experience of queer and questioning youth and interrogate

why we know so little about their lives. Through nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in rural parts of Kentucky and its border states, I looked at how rural young people use local support agencies, peer networks, and new media as sites and technologies for what I call “queer identity work”—the collective labor of identity construction that at once chips away at *and* stabilizes coherent gay and lesbian identity categories.⁹ I wanted to know how and in what ways this queer identity work is specifically gendered, classed, and raced in rural communities, and what difference the Internet makes to youth negotiating a “queer” sense of sexuality and gender in the rural United States. This approach offers a complement to the predominantly textual and historical accounts that dominate American studies of identity formation in the United States.¹⁰

What I argue here is that in order to understand the experiences and meanings of queer identities in rural places, we must rethink what constitutes “the public” in the rural United States. After I have set out an argument for adjusting the approach to understanding the rural public sphere, I will review two examples of the kinds of publics crafted by rural queer youth: namely, the building of very personal websites for public consumption and drag performances in the aisles of Wal-Mart. I will end with some final thoughts on both the resiliency and fragility of rural queer youth’s uses of publics.

Before going much further, it seems important to offer some working definition of “rural.” What constitutes a rural place is by no means a settled matter in the United States. It is both a qualitative, subjective experience of one’s surroundings and a quantitative object of accounting and scrutiny. There are three U.S. federal definitions of rurality from three separate administrative offices that converge to further complicate the picture. The Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) each play a hand in defining the rural.

The Bureau of the Census relies on population density for its definitions and its calculations are incorporated into the working definitions of both the OMB and USDA ERS. The Bureau designates areas containing 50,000 or more people organized around a central city with population densities of more than 1,000 people per square mile as urbanized areas (UAs). Under this definition, all individuals living in UAs and in locations with 2,500 or more people near a UA are considered urban. Urbanized clusters (UCS) were debuted in the 2000 Census as an additional unit of measure. This designation is used to describe aggregates of adjacent communities that collectively meet the UA threshold of population density (1,000 people/square mile) but lack a centralizing city. So, for example, a small town of 2,100 people with an adjacent, densely settled area of 500 people with a combined population of 2,600 would be designated a UC. The Bureau of the Census estimated in 2003 that an additional 5 million people were counted as part of the United State’s urban population by applying the new UC designation procedures. Without the rule changes, rural areas likely would have grown by almost 2 million people between 1990 and 2000. Instead, on paper if

not in people's self-perception, the U.S. rural population dropped from 62 to 59 million.

The OMB focuses on county lines rather than population densities. It uses a system of metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs)—based on standards it set in January 1980—to distinguish between metro (urban) and nonmetro (rural) communities. According to the OMB's definitions, each metro includes one city containing an urbanized area (as defined by the Bureau of the Census) and a total MSA population of at least 100,000 (75,000 in New England). These standards require that each MSA include the county in which the central city is located (the central county) and the neighboring counties it borders, if they are economically and socially linked to the central county. Any county not significantly tied to the MSA is labeled nonmetro.

Lastly, the USDA ERS—also using counties as its basic unit of measurement—applies rural-urban continuum codes to add granulation to the OMB metro and nonmetro categories. Metro counties are measured by population size. Nonmetro counties are calculated by their propinquity to MSAs.

By now it is probably clear that regardless of the federal definition in question, “[m]etro/urban areas can be defined using several criteria . . . once this is done, nonmetro/rural is then defined by exclusion—any area that is not metro/urban is nonmetro/rural,” as the General Accounting Office put it in 1993.¹¹ In other words, rural is what urban is not. Rules for distinguishing metro/urban areas are painstakingly marked while rural areas are cast as the outlying exceptions to these rules. The logic of definition by exclusion is an important principle at work in making sense of how the United States literally codes rurality.¹² It may seem schizophrenic that this country idealizes its rural farms and roots in rugged frontiering as it recasts census data to shrink rural population counts. To the contrary, it seems increasingly important to imagine rural places as quaint (and isolated) premodern (traditional) moments frozen in time by local defiance of change while modernity plays itself out in the refinement and advancement of urbane, cosmopolitan settings. Against such a backdrop, rural unemployment, underfunded public schools, and the erosion of already-thin public infrastructures of support—from healthcare to road maintenance—fade into one-dimensional accounts of “just how it is and always has been.”¹³ Rural conditions are cast as inadequacies in need of urban outreach instead of a bellwether for the nationwide dismantlement of public services.

Reflecting on his analysis of how important imagery of immigration and social mobility is to the greater symbolization of citizenship in the United States, sociologist Anselm Strauss wrote, “[T]he structural and interactional conditions that sustain these symbolizations are part and parcel of their [citizens'] interactions as individuals, as well as those of groups, organizations, and institutions . . . these interactions take place in economic, political, social, cultural, religious, legal, and artistic spheres.”¹⁴ The specific symbolization of urban spaces (like modernity itself) as dynamic, forward-thinking, brimming with potential requires a rural (Other) that is static, traditional, and inadequate. It is perhaps not surpris-

ing then that the stories told of rural sexualities and genders—if talked about at all—tend to tell the tale of repression in the face of tradition and conservatism that oversimplifies a far more complicated picture.

The experiences of queer youth in rural communities are particularly useful for rethinking the complexity of a rural public sphere. Rich literatures theorize both the idyllic public sphere most notably described by Habermas and responsive counterpublics—and here I am thinking of the work of Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner in particular.¹⁵ But, I would argue that neither the classic public sphere nor counterpublics accounts for the experiences of rural queer and questioning youth. Youth categorically cannot enter the discursive arena of the public sphere on an equal footing: they are not autonomous (sexual/gender/state) citizens or “social peers” to their adult counterparts; rural youth in particular live in conditions thin on “privacy” and short on public spaces in which to amass. Most critically, rural queer youth do not have access to the material or social capital to establish their own freestanding counterpublics of gay-owned or occupied neighborhoods, bookstores, gyms, or bars. Indeed, the rural communities I worked in had no bars because they were located in “dry” counties where liquor could not be legally sold. Additionally, few residents had the disposable income for gym memberships or social leisure we associate with middle-class urban or suburban living. Therefore, with the material conditions of U.S. rural, predominantly white working poor in mind, I want to offer the notion of “boundary publics” to better address the infrastructural specificities of rural communities.

I define boundary publics as iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that happen both on the outskirts and at the center(s) of the more traditionally recognized and validated public sphere of civic deliberation.¹⁶ These experiences of boundary publics travel and circulate through the super stores, churches, and other *de facto* public spaces of the rural United States and ricochet across new media sites produced by and for rural youth. Boundary publics offer moments of occupation for queer identity work and praxis to challenge local and universal expectations of queer invisibility. Rather than thinking of boundary publics as tangible buildings or specific streets, I suggest that we imagine boundary publics as strategies for space-making and constitutive processes for the queering of identity.

Perhaps my first example of a boundary public reads as less conspicuous, maybe even quasi-private: the personal website of a young person I met named AJ. AJ is a white, female-to-male trans-identifying teenager living in a town of 6,000 in Kentucky. Often in our conversations, I had to prompt him to repeat what he had just said as he spoke at a nearly inaudible whisper. But, AJ’s voice booms on the website he has created to chronicle his hormone therapy and sexual reassignment surgery. A month after we met, AJ turned eighteen and immediately started physically transforming his body to match his sense of gender identity. He learned that it was possible to change oneself from female to male from watching a Discovery Channel documentary.¹⁷ Since that day, he and his mother have driven monthly, sometimes more, to the university-based hospital two hours

north of their town to access the healthcare services for AJ's sex reassignment surgery.

When asked why he feels the need to document his transition, AJ responded, "the main purpose of my website was to help other transmen like myself, because there are some websites with either not enough information or the information/pictures are not free and I wanted to give people all the free info and pictures that I could." At different times in our conversations, AJ also spoke of the central role his web-journaling played as a personal resource. It allowed him to, as he put it, "think out loud" to himself and mull through his own anxieties about sex reassignment surgery and what it would mean to him to become the boy he felt he had always been.

While I don't have the space to discuss AJ's experiences at length in this article, it is pertinent to note how AJ's personal website serves as a boundary public. His journaling and graphic, online documentation of physical transition extend his changing gender identity both into and beyond his rural town. His website features: updates on his mental and emotional well-being written as monthly journals; an "about me" section providing a brief introduction to AJ and his feelings about his own gender identity and its origins; a "Gallery of T-effects" that documents AJ's use of testosterone hormone therapies from detailed pictures of his top (double mastectomy) surgery, photos of his growing hair organized by body area, and mp3 files of his voice recorded at monthly intervals to demonstrate the deepening affects of testosterone; a complete listing of his doctors and surgery prices; a "links" page with hyperlinks to friends' websites and various transgender resource sites; and a third party commercial form-generated "guestbook" feature with entries from the last two years of the website's existence.

AJ's mother wrote the first entry in his viewable guestbook: "Great work on your site especially the educational part and family part. Remember we love you, kid. Mom!" AJ's guestbook is filled with similar remarks from his local friends and aunts on his mother's side of the family living in Ohio. But there are also comments from an international network of acquaintances and friends made through trans-friendly Internet-based chat rooms, organizational web-based mailing lists such as FTM International, and transgender support groups based in the Kentuckiana region.

As AJ's website illustrates, use of Internet technologies can register as both a private experience and a suspended moment of public engagement. When rural youth browse websites, they in one instance may be sneaking off to locations unimaginable to their offline peers. But, when they create and post to their own websites, as AJ does to document his physical transition through hormones and reconstructive surgery, they are creating a sense of public recognition through the expression of their experiences. AJ created a detailed website giving the browser access to photos of his leg hair, recordings of his voice changing, and at various stages of the website, photos of his clitoris as it grew with testosterone, expressing a desire to help other people like himself who needed to know "how

it's done." The personal is political for AJ in a way that could not be expressed locally without creating a forum fraught with logistical, financial, and emotional complexities. The website became a way for him to locally embody the transperson he was becoming in the absence of locations in his town for expressing or sharing the intimacy of that process with others. And it also became his way for circulating the knowledge he was accumulating from others about what it meant—for him—to be a transsexual. AJ's website serves as a means to connect with others like him outside of his community and assert his trans presence in his community.

I want to turn now to my second example of a boundary public: the aisles of the Springhaven, Kentucky, Wal-Mart. It is the only business open 24 hours within 80 miles of the Highland Pride Alliance's core members. I found out about the popularity of this Wal-Mart when I asked a local teen what they did for fun: "Most gay people around the county, we all go to McDonald's," Clayton said with exuberance. He added casually, "and, then most people all haul up together in big carloads, put on some drag, runway walk the Super Wal-Mart in Springhaven and walk around for about five hours with people almost having heart attacks and conniption fits cause we're running around . . . we take pictures of us all and have fun with our little getaway from living in rural Kentucky."

When I asked other area youth about their experiences at Wal-Mart, it became clear that this had practically—and fairly recently—become a rite of passage for those entering the local gay scene. Jay recalled his initiation this way, "The first time I was with them, we all put on these furry jackets and we walked through the aisles. That was fun. Me and all my friends, we all gather up several cars and now we go once or twice a month." While one, shy young woman said she hadn't been, she suggested that it was only a matter of time, "I have to figure out how to get off work one of these nights. The group always seems to be going when I've got a swing shift and I can't drop my hours right now."

When probed to describe how they happened to choose Wal-Mart as a social gathering spot, most of the young people present couldn't really remember the details of the first outing nor did they understand my noticeable surprise. To them, the Wal-Mart Super Center seemed an obvious place to hang out. As Don put it, "why wouldn't we go there?! It's the best place to find stuff to do drag. They've got all the wigs and make up and tight clothes and stuff. Besides, no matter how much we bug people doing what we're doing, we're still customers too. And we have friends who work there who won't let nothing happen to us if they see any trouble start."

Such comments situate Wal-Mart as a model boundary public for HPA members. Yes, it is a fabulous place to do drag complete with runways and basic drag gear. Beyond that though is the positioning of Wal-Mart as a welcoming place to all customers. No matter which Wal-Mart one enters, so the assumption goes, national guidelines that mandate the professional and friendly treatment of "guests" can also accommodate youth doing something as queer as drag in Wal-Mart's aisles. Because these young people are readable as consumer

citizens—white, predominantly male locals with enough pocket money to buy the accessories they use to glamorize themselves and young enough to suggest they will grow out of their foolishness—the logic of capital will not bar them from participation in this twist on the Habermasian public sphere. Additionally, Wal-Mart’s then recent instatement of employee domestic partnership benefits registered among gay-identifying youth that Wal-Mart was, as Clayton put it, “a tolerant place where they could expect to be accepted.” The boundary public of Wal-Mart was made all the more imaginable by the presence of friends working at the Super Center seen as having the authority to step in if their consumer citizenship was challenged. Without question the race and class status of these young people matters. In a county where more than 96% of the residents are white and the majority live just above the U.S. poverty line, these youth are reasonably recognizable consumers. The youths’ whiteness and normative class presentation (wearing styles available at Wal-Mart but nothing that signals urban chic) secure their status as “locals” and, thus, play a pivotal role in the viability of Wal-Mart as a boundary public for their queer identity work.

Youth in HPA turned the mega-one-stop shopping locale of Wal-Mart into a favorite gathering place for their post-meeting social activities. Also, the group’s website regularly featured photos snapped against Wal-Mart’s aisles. HPA members struck poses in their most memorable outfits amidst a backdrop of other shoppers browsing the roll-back-the-prices bins of clothes and hair care products. Importantly, HPA’s sojourns to the Super Center were not complete without the posting of the group’s photos to the HPA website. According to the HPA’s page hit counter, these photos of the drag outings were the most visited pages of the site—most likely frequented by the members reveling in their fabulous outfits. HPA had transformed Wal-Mart into its own meeting space, drag revue, and shopping excursion seamlessly rolled into one.

The experiences of AJ, HPA at Wal-Mart, and other rural queer and questioning youth in this study challenge the prevailing sense that rural terrains are void of visible non-heteronormative genders and sexualities. Contrary to Angelia Wilson’s unequivocal assertion that “[f]or gay men and lesbians who actively choose to live in small Southern towns, the rural idyll can be an isolating nightmare” and that “silence” is the price to be paid for the “familiarity of surroundings,” visibility is central to the experience of identity for the youth I met.¹⁸ Additionally, the incorporation of new media into young people’s local space-making projects defies the argument that these technologies simply provide escape from tormenting or bleak offline worlds, liberating bodies from physical locations.

These young people also illustrate the public nature of “queer identity work” in rural places and the importance of considering where this work takes place. This is a particularly productive direction for the study of youth and the examination of sexualities and genders. Often, the queer identity practices of young people are framed as playful experimentation or performance. In framing sexualities and genders as discourses of labor moving between people and places,

we can more effectively grasp the contemporary experiences, conditions, and expressions of identity. Identity from this perspective then reads as a dialogue rather than a reflection of a fixed essence or reality. It refuses the inclination to be lodged in a singular person, place, or thing. Analytically, rural youth show us that queer identity work in rural places is differently but not necessarily less declarative than the pronouncements associated with urban LGBT communities. In short, contemporary identity work needs a public no matter where you live. As public spaces atrophy in the wake of increasing privatization, youth respond by suturing the possibilities for public identity work to be found in new media like web-based journals and group websites and the commercial zones of Wal-Mart. I argue here that what this work looks like deeply depends on one's surroundings, challenging queer theorists on our uncritical use of urban paradigms.

In closing I want to make clear that even though boundary publics mediate the availability of publics to rural queer and questioning youth, they don't circumvent or neutralize the very real possibility of violence faced for queerly standing out. In other words, rural communities are not unproblematic, idyllic spaces for queer and questioning youth engaged in identity projects. These publics can be compromised. For example, AJ has since taken down his more graphic photo essays after a heated conversation with a relative who berated him for potentially embarrassing his family; and, HPA members experienced their share of angry epithets in the Wal-Mart parking lot. But, arguably these rural boundary publics are no more compromised by familial pressures to conform and the violence of heteronormativity more broadly than any other cultural space in the United States. Rather, the threats are different in rural communities depending on class, race, age, religious affiliation, and a host of other conditions. As the youth I spoke with often noted, the threats were not anonymous. They knew very well the relatives or neighbors most likely to harass them. They faced the same threats everyday at family dinners and the county school. The fragility of boundary publics rural queer youth craft comes from their necessary engagement with the broader public sphere. This embroilment of publics while at times harrying is productive—it brings rural LGBT youth social worlds into being, shapes their boundaries, and sharpens their definition. Their queer identity work mediates both a sense of privacy, so critical to self-definition, and the publicity needed for testing out and validating constructions of selves.

What kinds of places do youth have to queer and be queered in the rural United States? Do new media change or affect or help us rethink these spaces? The social interactions of queer youth challenge the presumption that rural queer publics are unsustainable or poor imitations when compared to an urban queer scene. There are particular queer publics that rural youth bring into being, but they are brought about in ways and locations one might not likely expect. Rather than countering or rebuffing the mainstream or general public sphere, these queer publics occupy the centers and margins of rural communities. Queer rural youth absorb, recycle, and recuperate these spaces to make them, albeit temporarily,

address their needs. And, in increasingly complicated ways, these young people take up new media to augment their queer identity work.

Boundary publics can be understood as liberating and impermanent. Indeed, it is the fragility produced by these competing qualities that make boundary publics such productive locations of rural queer youth identity work. Each example of boundary publics discussed above illustrates that, against a backdrop of increasingly privatized and impoverished structural conditions of the rural United States and the racial and class politics that shape and are shaped by these conditions, queer youth and their allies visibly—and vibrantly—work the boundaries of public spaces available to them. My hope is that this research contributes to a growing body of materially grounded studies of both new media use and sexual and gender experience and highlights what rural queer youth new media use can teach us about the politics of identity and how to better serve their needs.

Notes

1. The names of all persons, places, and organizations are pseudonyms and some community details have been changed or are composites of several locations to secure the anonymity of young people involved in this research.

2. For the most part, the fields of clinical and developmental psychology, public health, and social work dominate research on the lived experiences of queer and questioning youth. See the exemplary yet understandably medicalizing work of Anthony R. D'Augelli and Charlotte Patterson, *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities and Youth: Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Margaret Rosario, J. Hunter, S. Maguen, M. Gwadz, and R. Smith, "The coming out process and its adaptational and health-related associations among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths: stipulation and exploration of a model," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 29 (2001): 133-160; and Gary Remafedi, *Death By Denial: Studies Of Suicide In Gay And Lesbian Teenagers* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 2001); groundbreaking studies by Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer, *Children Of Horizons: How Gay and Lesbian Teens Are Leading A New Way Out Of The Closet* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) and the ongoing clinically-based research of Ritch Savin-Williams in "... And Then I Became Gay": *Young Men's Stories* (New York: Routledge, 1998) and *The New Gay Teenager* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2006) are exceptions to an otherwise pathologizing, individualizing approach to queer youth experience.

3. Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU Press, 1999) offers an example of a complicated yet critical assessment of the violence endemic to rural communities.

4. Donna Smith in John Howard, *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 378.

5. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) are paradigmatic texts in gay and lesbian history. Both privilege urban locations as pivotal to post-World War II gay and lesbian identity formation. While both authors attempt to qualify their arguments so as not to negate the role of the rural in modern U.S. identity formations they simply do not take up queer rurality. As few authors have attempted to address this gap in the literature, "urbaness" has become synonymous with "gay."

6. See John Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Press, 2001), John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), and William Fellows, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

7. Smith in Howard, *Carryin' On*, 378.

8. The reference to modernity draws particularly on the work of Anthony Giddens in *Modernity And Self-Identity: Self And Society In The Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991) and *The Transformation Of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, And Eroticism In Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992) and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992). The modern or contemporary project of identity, by their formulations, is indelibly marked by the logic of late capital circulations. There are other theories of modernity worth considering here. See the exhaustive and generative review of the question of modernity by Ulrich Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

9. I am indebted to the work of Barbara Ponse, *Identities In The Lesbian World: The Social Construction Of Self* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978) and other studies in sexuality research that draw on a symbolic interactionist framework. See the work of Kenneth Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995) as an exemplar of the approach cited above.

10. John Howard, *Carrin' On*, Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, *Out in the South* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), Angelia R. Wilson, *Below the Belt* (New York: Cassell Press, 2000), E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

11. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Rural Development: Profile of Rural Areas*, Fact Sheet for Congressional Requestors, GAO/RCED-93-40FS, (Washington, DC: General Accounting Office, 1993), 26-30.

12. This observation draws in part from arguments made by structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brook Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963) and *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). In posing the notion of “binary oppositions”—such as universal/particular, raw/cooked—Lévi-Strauss complexly articulated the cultural mediation of dualities. Often misread as reinforcing inherent structural polarity in cultural experience, Lévi-Strauss’s arguments actually theorized the symbolic interaction and constitutive process embedded in the crafting of opposites. Although she does not reference Lévi-Strauss, Judith Butler makes a similar case in mapping how normative gender and heterosexuality rely on their cultural opposites to make sense. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Thinking Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Not surprisingly, Lévi-Strauss’s thinking compliments the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead, Anselm Strauss, and other sociologists cited in my book-length project. Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and the Politics of Gay Visibility in Rural America* (New York: NYU Press, forthcoming).

13. For beautifully detailed accounts of the dichotomies that define the rural United States, see Pem Davidson Buck, *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power, and Privilege in Kentucky* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in An “Other” America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Ann E. Kingsolver, *NAFTA Stories: Fears and Hopes in Mexico and the United States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

14. Anselm Strauss, *Continual Permutations of Action* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993), 162.

15. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 109-142, and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2002).

16. I am drawing on the work of Susan Leigh Star and her notion of boundary objects found most recently articulated in *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) co-authored with Geof Bowker and Star’s single-authored treatment of the subject, *Boundary Objects and the Poetics of Infrastructure* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming).

17. The documentary, *What Sex Am I*, produced in 1985 and directed by Lee Grant, repeatedly aired on the regional Discovery Channel cable feed the year before I met AJ. An account of AJ and other trans-identifying young people’s media engagements with this documentary and what I call “genres of realness” can be found in my forthcoming book, *Out in the Country*.

18. Wilson, *Below the Belt*, 136.