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Washington University
University College
American Culture Studies

MINDING THE GAP:

RETHINKING THE PERCEIVED DISJUNCTURE

BETWEEN RURALITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

by

Jessica Harris

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
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Introduction

While the indulgence of placing myself so explicitly remains somewhat off-putting, a brief explanation of my own experiences explains the ground from which the very basic questions in this thesis have sprung.

I had only ever been to Saint Louis, Missouri five or six times on day trips before moving there for undergraduate school in 2004. Outside of a few months spent in San Francisco, learning just how far money will not go in a large metropolitan area, my formative years were largely confined to the center and outskirts of the Ozark Mountains in central and southern Missouri. Unlike some typical fantasy of moving to the big city, as an out lesbian I had no real thought as to any opportunities or changes this move might afford my understanding of my sexual identity. It was not until I sat in on my first seminar course in Gender Studies that I began to feel a disconnect between the ways I understood myself as queer and the discourse around queer studies and LGBT lives and movements. I quickly realized that the source of this disconnect was my identification as a lesbian from a *rural* area.

For a project in that first class, I decided to do an annotated bibliography on the scholarship on rural queers. A thirty point, one week assignment set me on a research course that has no signs of letting up. I became obsessed with

understanding why I could not find texts that mirrored my own experiences. Furthermore, I was genuinely angered at the pervasive understanding of rural spaces as entirely without gay and lesbian citizens or intrinsically hostile to them and wondering why that was. The process of unpacking that question is the broadest aim of this thesis.

The main goal of “Minding the Gap: Rethinking the Perceived Disjuncture Between Rurality and Homosexuality” in general is to understand why the rural is perceived by many as endemically hostile to homosexuality and the implications of that perception. I ask why this notion is so pervasive and what understandings are mobilized to sustain it. Finally I ask what steps can be taken to begin to dismantle these perceptions.

The thesis uses two main chapters that work together to answer these questions. In chapter one, “They Can’t Believe We’re Gay: Metrocentrism, Normativity, and the Study of Rural Homosexuality,” I use a sampling of cross-disciplinary texts from the humanities and social sciences to place the focus not on any endemic character of rural areas but on a hegemonic, urban-based normative sexual identity that causes the rural to seem anachronistic to homosexuality. I trace the conflation of homosexuality with this normative identity in the social sciences texts to show that the broad categories where the authors find the rural as problematic stem from premising this normative sexuality in their analysis. I then throw these judgments into relief by using

three texts in the humanities that challenge notions of the rural as hostile to homosexuality by working from the rural identities out and not by trying to fit a hegemonic identity category onto rural spaces. Finally I discuss the possibilities for fostering more cross-disciplinary analysis on the topic by offering a critique of normative community as a common starting point.

Chapter two, “Narratives of Queer Legibility: Rurality and Popular Lesbian Fiction,” explores the same norms laid out in chapter one but in another discourse. This chapter uses a literary analysis of popular lesbian fiction, namely Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Fannie Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Café*, and the reception of the two novels to explain how such norms affect particular subjects like protagonists Molly Bolt and Idgie Threadgood. In particular, the chapter explores how two very similar characters, Molly and Idgie, are perceived differently due to their rural or urban setting. The chapter analyzes how the typical coming out narrative employed by Rita Mae Brown is mapped directly onto a pattern of rural to urban migration, making clear the participation in norms of interaction, information exchange, and community discussed in chapter one. The chapter goes on to further explore the use of gender as an explanation for the disjuncture between rurality and normative sexuality and the perception of sexual agency afforded to characters who move to more urban settings.

The two chapters are meant to talk to one another in particular ways that I would be remiss not to highlight. First, they explore the same norms in different mediums of discourse: scholarly, popular, and literary. In addition, chapter two is meant to answer a question of gender that goes largely unasked in chapter one. While the notion of the rural as a hostile space for homosexual identity formation is what is mobilized in chapter one to explain the perceived friction between rural spaces and homosexual identities, chapter two, in part, illustrates the ways in which a particular gendered reading can function in the same way – to fill the gaps left by that friction. Finally, it is my hope that, while chapter one remains highly theoretical, that a specific reading of the characters of Molly and Idgie can help ground those ideas. Taken as a whole they are meant to start answering some of the questions I began asking in that first seminar course for which I found no satisfactory answers. In this sense, I hope they join work by other scholars currently minding the gap that seems to exist between rural spaces and queer lives.

**They Can't Believe We're Gay:
Metrocentrism, Normativity, and the Study of Rural Homosexuality**

Standing in front of a whitewashed barn amidst a swath of rolling

Pennsylvania farmland, owner and farmer Christian Zinzendorf mused:

Gay people in the city...we've had many come here to visit. They think we're crazy. They really can't understand this [rural life]. To them, gayness means having a herd of gay guys around you... their life is so connected to their friends, clubs, going out together, and doing activities with other people, that when they see us here being almost completely isolated, they can't believe we are gay.¹

Christian was talking about his choice to live a "sexual-spiritual" life in a rural area for the 2004 documentary film, *Farm Family: In Search of Gay Life in Rural America*. The film features interviews with men living across Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Ohio, who seem to be united only by their claiming of some form of gay identity and their recounting of the subsequent anxiety of friends and family at their choices to live in a rural area. *Farm Family* brings nuance to its representation of gay men with various ties to the rural: those who move to rural areas by choice and those who live entire lives there; those who face continued homophobia and those who are met with relative acceptance; those who create extensive communities and those who remain relatively isolated.² While literature of homosexuality and studies of rurality continue to increase, academic analysis on the relationship between the

two has received short shrift. The texts that do focus on rural homosexuality often lack the varied representation of the film.

This essay explores the relative paucity of this topic in scholarly work. Moreover, it asks why, in a world of increasing interconnectedness among varying persons, places, and ideas, is the presence of gay men in the countryside still so appalling to Christian Zinzendorf's friends? Why is it that the rural seems so anachronistic to homosexuality that Christian's very existence there calls into question his gayness? What does this anxiety about rural homosexuality and the corresponding relatively scant amount of literature on the topic say about studies of homosexuality writ large?³

I bring these questions together in an analysis of a metrocentricism, a framework or focus situated in or on the urban that uses it as the measure for other spaces in scholarly work on rural homosexualities. Plagued by what Judith Halberstam calls the metronormative "lost binary" of the urban/rural in queer studies, these works engage in an "active disinterest in the productive potential of non-metropolitan sexualities and genders and identities."⁴ While many, like Halberstam, have remarked on metrocentric analyses of rural homosexuality, none have yet taken an extended look at the ways metrocentricism manifests discursively in the scholarship for clues to its persistence. I argue that studying the texts that evoke or avoid this framework reveals that the anxiety that the rural as a space for homosexuality engenders in

both the film and scholarly literature on the topic is not born out of a simple comparison of the rural with the urban. Rather it exposes the conflation of specific acts and desires with an urban-centered, normative homosexual identity that renders problematic or invisible any homosexuality outside its parameters. Metrocentric reactions to rural homosexuality are less about the “rural” or the “urban” per se and more about the sexual norms and practices predicated on opportunities made possible in urban spaces that shore up this dominant identity. Thus, I use the term metrocentric rather than Halberstam’s “metronormative.” As I see it, the norm plaguing the study of rural homosexuality is one of identity. It is that identity’s constitution in urban areas that makes it metrocentric.

Before analyzing how an anxiety about rural homosexuality is tied to these norms, it is important to understand what this anxiety is about. In section one, I look at examples of the sort of texts that mythologize rural homosexuals as “sad and lonely...as ‘stuck’ in a place that they would leave if they only could.”⁵ Rather than label these texts as “urban-centered” or “metronormative,” I contend their apprehension about rural homosexuality results from the conflation of acts or desires with a dominant identity. In the rural’s failure to mirror urban opportunities for developing a normed identity, it becomes a negative, lacking or impossible space for homosexuality that does not offer the sense of agency in identity formation that an urban elsewhere appears to. I

analyze this process in texts across several disciplines to evidence both its persistence and its widespread effects on critical understandings of the rural as a space for homosexuality. Because exposing a normative homosexuality is a chief aim of this paper, I use the terms “homosexual,” “gay,” or “lesbian” rather than “queers” or “queerness” unless the texts I cover do otherwise. Using this exposure, section one suggests that the picture of the “sad and lonely” rural homosexual is less about the rural as a homophobic or hostile space and more about the absence or difference of these normative markers.

The presence of a dominant, metrocentric homosexuality is pervasive but not exhaustive, and section two highlights three texts from gender and sexuality studies that avoid such a discourse. While I argue for the incorporation of the frameworks these scholars use to disrupt the conflation of acts and desires with a normative identity, ultimately section two serves as a basis for analyzing why such linkages are few and far between. I use their work as a jumping-off point for analyzing the continued absence of these ideas from the majority of work on rural homosexuality and the persistence of a seemingly “true” homosexuality that is constituted in the urban.

In the final section, I bring the above discussions together by proposing an alternative to the temptation to attribute this persistence to disciplinary differences in the social sciences and humanities. I highlight the ways in which a specific type of social interaction or “community” more readily available in

urban areas becomes a key norm for scholars that are seeking to recoup rural gays and lesbians into a dominant identity. Partaking in this type of community comes with a sense of agency that then appears absent in rural areas. In example, the individual who actively joins a legible queer community and uses the various resources of that community has a sense of normative, recognizable agency that others do not. This is analyzed as a normative marker of a “true” homosexuality that fails to map cleanly onto rural spaces. I do this for two reasons. First, pointing out a specific practice, in this case a type of social interaction, that shores up a normative identity is a first step in understanding and breaking down its dominance. It is also a move away from talking only about identities and into specific practices that might transfer more easily across boundaries between the humanities and social sciences. Discussing the practices that maintain normative sexualities might help scholars across disciplines better understand why Christian and others like him cause such anxiety about their identities. Second, such an analysis adds to the growing discussion on norms within “non-normative” sexualities.⁶ This normative marker can be read as a socially sanctioned homosexual practice that erases or devalues homosexualities that do not appear to conform. Looking at the ways rural spaces do not conform to these sanctions opens up the rural’s potential as a productive site of challenge to these normalizing tendencies.

Thwarting *the* Gay Identity:

The Rural as Hostile/Impossible Space for Identity Formation

Key to understanding the anxieties that Christian and other rural homosexuals seem to arouse is to trace the ways in which the authors in this section, while ostensibly evaluating the rural as a space for homosexuality, are actually driven by a focus on an urban-centered, normative identity. Rather than drawing on representations of a homophobic, rural imaginary or personal recounts of homophobic treatment, these authors largely characterize the rural as a negative, lacking or impossible space for homosexuality based on the absence of opportunities for the construction and maintenance of a “true” homosexuality. These opportunities occur via interaction with specific persons, places, or information, herein referred to as identity work.

Identity work is a term that has been used in several ways, most frequently by gender and sexuality as variation on the definition laid out by Barbara Ponse in 1978 as the “processes and procedures engaged in by groups designed to effect change in the meanings of particular identities.”⁷ More recently, Arlene Stein has used the term in reference to the participation in a certain community, discourse, or process “conforming to historical and localized norms for ‘being’ a lesbian.”⁸ In this section, identity work functions to highlight the metrocentricity of normed notions of identity work, and ultimately, the ways in which engagement in types of identity work both lends a

problematic sense of agency to the fashioning an identity and becomes a chief signifier of normed homosexual identity.

To illustrate this, I take a brief look at four texts from various disciplines in the social sciences: sociologists A. Elfin Moses' and Janet Buckner's 1980 article "The Special Problems of Rural Gay Clients" examines the challenges helping professionals face in working with rural gay and lesbian clients; social geographer Jerry Lee Kramer's "Bachelor Farmers and Spinsters: Gay and Lesbian Identities and Communities in Rural North Dakota" is a study from 1995 on the effects of rural spaces on developmental processes of gays and lesbians; four articles published by psychologist Anthony D'Augelli from 1986 and 2006 examine the need for helping communities in rural areas; and social work scholar Linda McCarthy's 2000 article "Poppies in a Wheat Field: Exploring the Lives of Rural Lesbians" focuses on lesbian identity formation via focus group interviews.⁹ Even those studies that aim to disrupt the metropolitan focus of gay studies replicate the field's metrocentricity as is evidenced in the above texts that span disciplines and decades. Each of these authors acknowledges that the work on homosexuality preceding their own was largely urban-centered, and, in their own turn, each advocates for a study of homosexuality that engages the rural. Still, a hegemonic notion of homosexuality sets up certain parameters of identity in these texts: access to information and peers that bespeaks a specific homosexual identity fostered

through opportunities more readily available in urban areas. When not mirrored in the homosexualities these scholars analyze, such parameters make the rural seem a hostile place for its gay and lesbian residents.

One of the first ways this hostility manifests itself is in the reading of the rural as a lacking space. However, this lack is not simply due to the apparent absence of certain urban characteristics but is uniquely related to access to information redolent of a certain identity. The lack of particular institutions is only discussed if said institutions seem to foster opportunity to interact with other homosexuals or obtain information about homosexuality; what is troubling about rural areas is not that they lack a bookstore but that they lack a bookstore carrying gay-themed literature. For example, Moses and Buckner divide their article into sub-sections entitled “Lack of Information on Part of the Nongay Community,” “Isolation from the Gay Community,” and “Lack of Organizations and Services for Rural Gays.” Though they penned those in 1980, the titles would continue to read almost as a thematic guide for the majority of work on rural homosexuality to come after. All four texts referenced here find the rural as lacking for many of these same reasons. Linda McCarthy notes that part of the problem of rural gay life is that rural spaces lack “even the most basic resources such as gay newspapers and books.”¹⁰ D’Augelli discusses it in terms of the “limited social connections” to other homosexuals that rural gays and lesbians experience.¹¹ Finally, Kramer

structures his article around the notion that what separates the rural from the urban for homosexuals is the “availability and accuracy of locally obtainable information about...homosexuality.”¹² These lacks, whether social or informational, relate to the interaction of rural homosexuals with a dominant notion of homosexuality. The anxiety these authors have about the rural is articulated around foundational opportunities for identity work or agency in identity formation. Conflating homosexuality with a specific identity, these authors fear that without “accurate” and “obtainable” information about a “true” gay identity rural homosexuals will not make the connections necessary to partake in particular normative communities, interactions, or even styles of dress that would allow them to become legible as a gay person.

Scholars typically discuss the rural not only as lacking but as an overwhelmingly negative space for homosexuals; however, this stems from much more than the spatial differences between rural and urban areas. Rural areas are rendered negative because, lacking in the tools necessary for specific identity formation, they also appear not to house actual places of acceptance for homosexuals. The lack of information about a specific homosexuality, as D’Augelli puts it, leads to a resistance in forming places for this identity-based interaction.¹³ Among the places largely missed are gay bars, clubs, community centers, and bookstores that carry “gay-themed” literature. All are spaces more readily available in urban areas. Moses and Buckner point out that, when

lacking information about a specific homosexuality and interactions with others who fit into its identity category, it becomes hard for gay people to create or find these places.¹⁴ Similarly, McCarthy situates her research question around the ways lesbians may be affected by the absence of “tangible manifestations of that...visible social reference group [of homosexuals].”¹⁵ Whether termed as a “reference group” or simply a “place” of acceptance, both authors echo the sentiments of Kramer who notes that rural gay and lesbian lives are “structured around very limited opportunities for social or sexual interaction.”¹⁶ That is, without the aforementioned social and informational contacts key to acquiring a certain identity, the places that appear to cater to this identity also fail to form. Because these authors assume that the desires or acts of rural gays and lesbians necessitate a certain identity recognition that would need to engage in identity work in specific spaces such as gay bars or LGBT community centers, the rural as a space is taken to task for not allowing the “tangible manifestations” of gay identity that make that possible.¹⁷

What is lacking and what is negative about the rural exist in a symbiotic relationship. Lacking the information necessary to form a certain identity, the rural becomes a negative space that offers no recognizable place for interaction among a larger group of homosexuals (i.e. without one identifiable homosexual, interactions among many cannot form). In turn, the absence of such interactions becomes one of the tools for identity work that the rural lacks, working to

further hinder the formation of that identity. In other words, a specific tool for the formation and maintenance of a particular identity, interaction with other legible gay people, is subsumed as part of that identity. The identity work is conflated with the identity itself. Since it is seemingly short on information and interaction, the chief problem these scholars see in the rural, its impossibility as a space for homosexuality, is about the ways the rural is prohibitive to the formation of a certain homosexual identity. All four authors voice this anxiety in various ways. Kramer remarks that “the making or accepting [of] the connection between homosexual feelings or behaviors may be compromised...fewer men or women with homosexual feelings or behaviors may grow to attain a gay or lesbian identity.”¹⁸ Both Moses and Buckner and D’Augelli write that rural homosexuals might need outside help or urban influence to develop their gay identity.¹⁹ This thinking culminates in McCarthy’s warning that “coming out” involves the “gathering and integration of information...in rural areas, where such information is often inaccessible, the development of a gay identity may be thwarted.”²⁰ That is, the anxiety about whether or not rural gays and lesbians will “come out” in a certain way and claim a specific identity is displaced onto the rural space itself, since it appears to lack the opportunities to obtain this information. In privileging a “true” homosexuality as the only logical conclusion for individuals who display same-sex desires, engage in same-sex activities, or even self-identify as gay or

lesbian, the rural as a space becomes the rationalizing point for those individuals who exist outside the boundaries of this identity. Their outsider status is not attributed to the demarcating force of normative sexuality but to the rural space.

None of these authors argues for the invisibility of rural same-sex activity or of rural citizens who identify as lesbian or gay. Instead, what becomes invisible are certain metrocentric norms of the above mentioned places, persons, and information; particular tools for a particular identity formation. Much discourse on rural homosexuality becomes about the perceived absence of these norms and the loss of agency that accompanies it. To better understand the effects of a hegemonic, urban-based identity, I will turn briefly to several authors who explore the rural in ways divorced from any true marker of homosexuality. The differences between their studies and the work analyzed above throws into relief the impact such dominant identities have on depictions of the rural.

Making Room for Difference: The Rural as Fostering Space for Identity Formation

Since the mid-1990s, several scholars have explored rural homosexuality under vastly different precepts with equally different conclusions. Historian John Howard, communications scholar Mary Gray, and sexuality and literature

theorist William J. Spurlin were some of the first to use theories of gender and sexuality, particularly queer theory, to destabilize any fixed notion of non-normative sexualities in rural spaces. The ways in which these authors characterize the rural expose the “productive power,” as Halberstam calls it, of sexualities in rural spaces. This is the same power that is largely erased or devalued, as in section one, when expected to mirror that of the urban. The absence of a hegemonic identity, constituted within the urban allows these scholars to see rural homosexuality under different but no less valued terms.²¹ Understanding the different discussion that takes place in these three works serves as a foundation for exploring the ways in which such texts might be set in conversation with those from section one.

The first of these, Howard’s 1999 *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, chronicles male queer life in the American south from 1945 to 1985. Howard analyzes the ways in which men who identify as gay and men who engage in same-sex activities or desires but do not identify as gay shape and are shaped by their rural setting.²² Instead of looking for a fixed notion of homosexual identity requiring access to specific information or interactions, he uses personal accounts and popular representations of homosexuality to analyze the ways rural spaces allowed for the creation of various homosexualities instead of being an overtly negative space for them. He argues that rural “men interested in intimate and sexual relations with other men found numerous

opportunities to act on their desires, and did so within the primary institutions of the local community...never entirely hostile to homosexual activity, these institutions repeatedly fostered it.”²³ Without an essential notion of what it is to be gay, his rural homosexual or man who desires other men is depicted differently from those discussed in section one. Among other things, he explores the ways the spaces of the home, church, school, and workplace fostered and were used to construct queer experiences rather than repress them. The roadside sexual foray, the home-based network of relatives and friends, and the homosocial church group, before deemed too infrequent, hostile, or devoid of same sex encounters, are seen anew as sites where rural homosexualities flourished. In addition, the logic that, in tight knit-communities of supposed close family and neighbor bonds where privacy is thought to be in short supply, rural gay residents are less able and less inclined to seek other homosexuals is challenged with an extensive chronicling of the ways that rural gay men reworked familial and friendship ties as networks for meeting distant gay relatives or peers.²⁴ In Howard’s book, the space of the automobile becomes as important as a local gay bar and familial connections become as important for meeting other homosexuals as those connections found in LGBT community centers. Perhaps one line captures the extent to which the rural space is completely redefined in Howard’s text: “Queer sex in Mississippi was not rare. Men-desiring-men were neither wholly isolated nor invisible...homosexuality

flourished between close friends and distant relatives; casual sex between strangers was clandestine but commonplace.”²⁵ Howard analyzes the difference in the rural not as a negative but as offering different sites and opportunities for the contestation and maintenance of an identity.

Like Howard’s study, the edited volume *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, uses theories of gender and sexuality to explore spatial dynamics in constructions of identities, asserting that “liminal, “in between,” and rural spaces may be the most problematic for hegemonic sexualities.²⁶ The book illustrates how separating acts or desires from a specific identity upsets the notion that opportunities in urban areas represent the peak of gay life against which all others are measured or defined. For example, William J. Spurlin’s chapter, “Remapping Same-Sex Desire: Queer Writing and Culture in the American Heartland,” looks at the position of the Midwest in queer scholarship vis-a-vis urban, coastal centers of queer experience. He juxtaposes the idea that the rural is a hostile place with recent writing by rural queers that critiques the notion that only in urban areas can one construct and experience a more “authentic” queer identity.²⁷ He also analyzes several social and historical factors, such as the hold white, upper-class men of urban areas have on gay spaces, that he finds contribute to the formation of a dominant, urban, coastal “queer” identity.²⁸ Much like Howard and in direct contrast to the authors in section one, rural spaces are seen by

Spurlin as allowing for difference not as negative by comparison to a normative identity. He asserts that “queer identity and queer culture, because they are not monolithic and homogeneous, but subject to history and social context (and therefore variable and contingent), are not self-evidently bound to urban coastal areas.”²⁹ Howard and Spurlin both make a crucial move away from “monolithic” or “homogenous” identities, thus dismantling two major aspects of a metrocentric analysis: the notion that the rural is a negative space and that homosexuality is founded on the information and interaction characteristic of urban areas.

A final alternative to a reading of rural homosexuality focused on an urban-centered, normative identity can be found in Mary L. Gray’s 2009 book, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*.³⁰ Hers is a study of rural, LGBTQ youth from a lens that also presumes no fixed essence of sexuality. Nor does she see the process of coming out and securing visibility as inextricably tied to urban spaces and therefore prohibitive to the formation of such identities in rural areas. Instead, she addresses a “politics of gay visibility” or the foregrounding of outness and visibility that organizes current queer identities and how rural queer youth negotiate these politics in their identity work.³¹ She immediately points out the effects of privileging the urban in defining this visibility:

The languages researchers use to describe rural queer experience often presumes pre-existing, yet alienated, gendered and sexual subjects who

seek... a connection to gay culture that exists in an urban elsewhere...by extension such representations frame rural queer-youth sexualities and genders as “lacking” or “incomplete.”³²

She counters this privileging with an analysis of several peer networks, public spaces, media, and service providers that serve to produce various queer identities in rural areas. In one chapter, she employs the notion of boundary publics, or moments of broader public engagement that are queered and used for identity work, to explore how rural queer youth are engaging in their communities in ways that dismantle this “lack” and illustrate that rural queer communities are far from invisible. She recounts the ways a group of rural kids use the aisles of a local Wal-Mart for drag shows. A space that serves both as a place to perform and claim visibility in relation to peers and customers but also, as one youth thought of it, a safe place where “no matter how much we bug people doing what we’re doing, we’re still customers too.”³³ In another example, a skate park attached to a rural Kentucky church intended as a safe “hang-out” option for young adults hosted local queer bands who played for groups of young people and became a gathering place for some of the local queer kids.³⁴ Alongside analyses of public parks and church basements accessed for LGBTQ group meetings and public websites used for various forms of communication among queers, such examples illustrate the types of interactions rural queer youth are having. Instead of labeling rural areas as lacking, Gray looks at the different ways rural queers engage in identity work – ways that are

certainly not invisible and that counter the notion that rural spaces are always “endemically hostile to or unable to make room for queer difference.”³⁵

Even as the authors in both sections write about ostensibly similar topics, it is as though Howard, Spurlin, and Gray are looking at entirely different spaces than their predecessors. There is a critical truth to this perception, for the latter are informed by theories of gender and sexuality that disrupt fixed notions of identity. Thus, they do not expect to find a set of identity parameters that those engaging in certain acts or desires must adhere to. Their analyses are not about the ways such an identity fails to map cleanly onto rural spaces; they do not work from a premised identity downward. Instead, they focus on the types of practices and identities formed there, from rural sexualities outward in revealing the complex agency required to maintain non-normative identities in rural areas. These authors discuss opportunities available for queer identity work that become visible when not expected to mirror urban counterparts. They explore the ways the rural can be a productive rather than prohibitive space and discuss the cultural and spatial specificities of homosexuality in rural areas rather than its overwhelming lack in relation to a normative identity. The “same” rural homosexuality from section one becomes largely divorced from a limiting connection with the urban, and the impact such a connection can have

on notions of the rural as a space for homosexuality is evidenced in the vastly different discussions that result.

Toward a Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue: Critiquing the Place of “Community” in Identity Formation

It would be nice to leave the ideas of the scholars in section two knowing that they have fundamentally changed the understandings around which scholars frame their discussions of rural homosexualities. This, however, is not the case. The last nine years have seen scholarship on this topic expand in unprecedented ways. Many articles have continued discussing rural lesbianism in conjunction with women’s separatist communities, while others have undertaken sociological community studies exploring the spatial aspects of gay identities.³⁶ These are joined by an ever-increasing discussion of homosexual identity among social geographers and by psychological studies focused on the “unique” situations of rural homosexuals.³⁷ Each address the aforementioned paucity of work on specifically rural homosexuality and continue to upset the hegemonic hold that the urban has on the study of sexuality writ large. Yet the majority of this work continues looking for a specific identity and does not incorporate any of the ideas mentioned by Gray, Howard, Spurlin or others. Indeed both McCarthy’s “Poppies” and D’Augelli’s “Coming Out, Visibility, and Creating Change” were published after the texts by Howard and Spurlin but

neither interact with their arguments. The absence of the ideas of scholars of gender and sexuality from the broader discourse on rural homosexuality evidences a much needed cross-disciplinary discussion on the subject. Such a dialogue might augment the impact of the notion that rural homosexualities can manifest themselves in varying ways from those of the urban and that that difference is not freighted by an inherent negativity.

In turn, both the hold of the urban over studies of homosexuality and the tendency to imagine the rural as an unsatisfactory counterpart to an urban other might be more substantively dismantled. The negativity characterizing rural homosexuality might be traded for an analysis less weighted by such categorically valued terms as positive or negative, lacking or true, and the idea of the rural as an impasse on the road to true homosexuality might be replaced by an exploration of the intricacies of the rural as home for the persons encountered there. In all, the important questions asked by these authors about coping strategies and identity formation in rural areas could come together around an arguably more “rural” homosexuality than one that is still demarcated by comparison to a metrocentric, normative identity.

In recent years, several scholars have discussed the problematic conflation of desires and acts with a hegemonic identity. Yet when it comes to rural spaces, many of those who attempt to break down the hold of the urban over studies of sexuality still evoke an urban-centered, “true” homosexuality.

The persistence of such thinking has not gone unnoticed. The majority of works on rural homosexuality come from the social sciences. Several scholars attribute the persistence of this identity-based thinking to a reticence in the social sciences to dismantle relationships between fixed identities and sexualities and actual acts and desires.³⁸ When studying rural homosexuality, attributing this persistence to disciplinary frameworks offers no new paths to disrupting its hegemonic hold. Neither does simply pointing out that scholarship renders the rural as lacking, negative, or impossible for homosexuality. If one of the main goals of queer studies is, as Robert J. Corber and Stephen Velocchi put it, to dismantle the “institutions, discourses, and practices” that maintain binaries and shore up fixed sexualities and identities, a different approach is needed.³⁹ Scholars should continue discussing the ways in which the conflation of desires and acts into normative identities happens. The specific areas where some strive to recoup the rural into a dominant homosexuality need to become the focus and the conflation of identity work and identity needs to be further discussed. In reference to rural homosexualities, one way of doing this is to focus on the commonalities of specific anxieties the rural seems to provoke.

Returning briefly to the works of D’Augelli, Kramer, McCarthy, and Moses and Buckner, I argue that the areas they are most anxious about in forming a specific homosexuality in rural spaces revolve around specific types

of social interaction where large groups of people come together frequently around a shared identity. This interaction takes place in institutions such as bars, community centers, or coffee shops that are all reminiscent of urban gay enclaves. Often discussed as “community,” the absence of this interaction is problematic for the formation of an identity constituted in its offerings. Moses and Buckner are concerned that the rural homosexual is unable to find a community of acceptance in rural areas.⁴⁰ Kramer struggles with the sheer distance, 250 miles, to the nearest gay or lesbian organization, as one of the factors behind infrequent “social and sexual interactions” among groups of rural gays and lesbians.⁴¹ For McCarthy, the lack of information hinders possibilities of “identifying with even the most basic political issues or with any sense of *common* identity.”⁴² Each premises the spaces and chances for communal interaction as the point where the rural fails to sustain a certain homosexual identity. Perhaps D’Augelli’s experience in a rural area displays this focus best. He sets out to augment a gay community that he sees as insufficient for encouraging the development of homosexual identity. In doing so he looks in various places for gay men and women to work with. He finds the only foundation to build upon, besides the local lesbian potlucks, to be a “gay undergraduate student organization of three members, a ‘gay/bisexual men’s support group,’ of which there are five members, a dance club that [is] ‘gay’ every Monday, and many closeted LGB people.”⁴³ While he notes that the gay

community in his town is “invisible,” these same social gatherings are ironically what he anchors his new community in. Because these various organizations and gay club nights are smaller in number and, at times, less frequent, they do not emulate opportunities for interaction found in urban areas. In danger of hindering the development of homosexuality, their very possibility as sites of identity formation is erased. D’Augelli aims to create a “gay community” where he sees none. This focus highlights the point that the identity work reflected in this type of interaction becomes a privileged marker for a normative homosexuality.

This is not to argue that communal interaction is unessential to identity work, but that there is a seeming fetish with one type of social interaction, one that coincides with a “true” homosexuality, one that is constituted in mainstream, urban areas, and one that has become problematically hegemonic for studies of rural homosexuality. It is a social interaction among numbers of legible homosexuals that appears to allow for the exchange of information, discourse, and socialization redolent of Pense’s notion of identity work. To make the connection between the anxieties of these authors and an urban-based model of “community” more visible, one might reconsider the spaces where the rural breaks down for gays and lesbians, areas characterized by the negative, the lacking, and the impossible/invisible, as a definition of what would fill these lacks: the permanent gay space rather than the sporadic, the larger group rather

than the smaller, the public gay bar and community center rather than the home-based function. Indeed, aspects of the rural that provoke such anxiety are due to the absence of a certain type of salient “community” that reflects some if not all of these opportunities for identity work and produces an identifiable sense of agency and shared identity.

Gray, Howard, and Spurlin illustrate the ways in which multiple interactions among homosexuals *are* formed in rural spaces. Howard rethinks the hostile role of family-oriented communities and churches for their power as communal and networking spaces for rural gay men. Similarly, Spurlin challenges the notion that urban spaces foster gay identity or community in a better way than rural spaces, and Gray discusses several specific sites, such as the church skate park, that reconfigure notions of where and how queer identity work is taking place in rural areas. Yet the stronghold that urban types of such interaction have on current notions of homosexuality continues to push scholars to evaluate the rural in metrocentric terms, and for them, the area where the rural breaks down as a space for homosexuality is in a specific type of communal interaction necessary for forming one gay identity. This shores up a normative notion of identity in the study and becomes privileged as a marker for homosexuality. However, recognizing this privileging can serve as a challenge to its normative power and contribute to growing discussions of homonormativity. Scholars such as Lisa Duggan, David Halperin, Michael

Werner, and Sherri Inness have discussed various margins such norms are causing to develop in studies of already marginalized sexualities.⁴⁴ The discourse on rural homosexuality is a prime example of how some of these norms are playing themselves out and is a site for their construction and circulation.

Recognizing the norms of “community” at work within the study of rural homosexuality is one way to begin dismantling them. While this might restore some of the productive power of rural spaces that Halberstam notes, a power evidenced by Howard, Spurlin, and Gray, I want to close with a discussion of another productive potential for the rural. Returning to Christian’s statement that opened this essay, he notes that among his friends’ chief concerns was that the rural did not provide an opportunity for interactions between “herds” of gay men, a statement reiterated by several of the men in the documentary. This speaks to the types of interaction privileged by some of the authors discussed in this essay. Indeed, what Christian points out as a need for “clubs, going out together, and doing activities with other people” is redolent of the types of interaction -- bars, community organizations, groups in bookstores -- that many scholars find problematically lacking in the rural. This further evidences the persistent power of this type of interaction as a defining marker for homosexuality. Yet Christian responds that his life as a gay man in a rural area is “more than that.”⁴⁵ He directly challenges the notion that homosexuality is

necessitated or defined by a certain form of interaction, and in so doing, opens up the discussion of the rural as a particularly productive space for the challenging of such norms. Rural areas have smaller populations and fewer commercialized spaces for information exchange and interaction. Often without large economic bases, large areas of land may remain undeveloped or devoted to agriculture and therefore cannot function as traditional spaces for communal interaction. There may be no bar, bookstore, or community center within a hundred miles, regardless of whether it seems to cater specifically to heterosexuals or homosexuals. For Christian, frequently having “herds” of gay men around him is simply not an option in an already sparsely populated area. Because of this, the rural becomes a particularly productive place for forming alternatives to norms of social interaction. In this vein, the “more” Christian speaks of can be read as bespeaking both an alternative form of “community” and a challenge to the privileging of social interaction as a chief marker of homosexual identity.

The relationship between public communal spaces and homosexual identity is a critical part of this, and its interaction with questions of what rural “public” spheres are is something I hope to explore further. For now, as discussions about norms of homosexuality move forward, scholars must continue to analyze the place of specific “communities” or social interactions in that dialogue. The widespread negative reaction, from scholars in varying

disciplines and from the family and friends of the men interviewed in *Farm Family*, to the rural as a space for homosexuality evidences the power such a norm can have on understandings of both identities and spaces. Sections one and two illustrate just how different the rural can look depending on what norms are, or are not, expected. Furthermore, scholars need to take more notice of the rural's potential for unsettling such norms – for exploring the “more” that Christian speaks of. The interstices of the rural where dominant norms fail to map cleanly must be recognized as productive sites of challenge, as alternatives to the hegemonic identity constituted in those interactions. When scholars engage with the norms that constitute specific identities, they can more fully analyze this productive power and begin to untangle the complicated forces at work behind why Christian and other rural homosexuals like him are so hard to believe.

Narratives of Queer Legibility:

Rurality and Popular Lesbian Fiction

Arguably two of the most popular lesbian novels to date, Rita Mae Brown's 1977 *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Fannie Flagg's 1987 *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Cafe*, continue to leave their mark everywhere from discussions boards and fan sites to film adaptations and countless critical journals. The two main characters of the novels, Molly Bolt and Idgie Threadgood respectively, are strikingly similar and identified by readers as lesbians for many of the same reasons. However, as the Oscar-winning film version of *Fried Green Tomatoes* was released into theatres in 1991, it sparked an ongoing storm of arguments over the legibility of the novel, the film, and Idgie Threadgood as lesbian that never surfaced about *Rubyfruit Jungle*. In the broadest sense this chapter is concerned with understanding the relationship between rurality and queer legibility that underscores these reactions. It aims to further unpack the effects of hegemonic, normative identity as it freights the movement between spaces, both rural and urban, and demarcates the understanding of sexuality and gender in these spaces.

This chapter builds upon the arguments made in the preceding chapter that depictions of rural spaces as anachronistic with homosexuality are actually about a normative homosexual identity that is predicated upon opportunities in

urban spaces. By analyzing the classic coming-out narrative employed by Rita Mae Brown as it is mapped onto a narrative rural to urban migration vis-à-vis the narrative structure of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, I reveal the ways in which normative notions of sexuality allow two startlingly similar characters to be read as outsiders in two very different ways: Molly by the legibility of her non-normative *sexuality* and Idgie by her non-normative *gender*. In other words, I reveal the ways in which the process of rural to urban migration works with normative notions of sexual identity to allow for certain of Molly Bolt's characteristics to be read as lesbian, while similar characteristics are read as gender difference for Idgie.

This chapter is structured in three sections. The first serves to contextualize the above arguments by recounting the two novels in terms of the striking similarities between the two protagonists before going on to briefly explain the popular and critical struggle that emerged around Idgie's possibility as a lesbian character. The goal of this section is to reveal the commonalities between Idgie and Molly to ultimately throw into relief the differences that are discussed in sections two and three. In section two, I draw on the coming out narrative structure of *Rubyfruit* as it differs from that of *Fried Green Tomatoes*. I argue that Molly's process of becoming legible as a lesbian, indeed of coming out, necessitates a particular rural to urban migration that allows for her participation in the exchange of information and interaction about and among a

community of groups of legible queer people in particular institutions. Since Idgie never leaves her small, rural town, her legibility as a lesbian is made suspect by not being able to take part in these urban-based norms of identity. Finally, section three focuses on the two novels as picaresque narratives and, in particular, their use of anti-hero protagonists of outsider status. While writing Idgie and Molly as picaresque protagonists allows for a general reading of them as non-normative, the final section reveals the ways in which the movement between rural and urban spaces allows for Molly's outsider status to be read as queer or lesbian while Idgie's is largely read as a type of gender variance.

Similar Characters, Different Receptions: Contextualizing Molly and Idgie

Before discussing what the differences between Idgie and Molly reveal about the readings of the two characters and about the place of the rural setting in those readings, it is first important to establish why looking at the two characters vis a vis is important rather than looking at Idgie's character in isolation. Simply put, throughout a majority of the two novels, Idgie Threadgood and Molly Bolt might easily be mistaken for the same character. Many of the characteristics cited in reference to Molly's sexuality also find home in the character of Idgie Threadgood, namely the propensity to wear "masculine" attire, to complicate traditional gender roles, and to exist as an outside in her community. Comparing these similarities not only reveals why the two are so fruitfully discussed in tandem, but also lends context to the

debates over *Fried Green Tomatoes* that I will review later. Most importantly, these similarities throw into relief the key differences in the two novels that I later discuss as causing the differing reactions to the novels.

One of the most obvious similarities between Idgie and Molly is that both dress in more masculine attire than other female characters in the novels. Sage Russell points out in her review of *Fried Green Tomatoes* that, “Idgie...doesn’t appear in a dress or a skirt after the age of 11 – in short the very model of a dyke.”⁴⁶ Whether constituting the “very model of a dyke”, many of these observations are backed up by the text. Idgie passionately hates wearing a dress, and as narrator Ninny points out:

Idgie was always in overalls and barefooted...she would have ruined any nice dresses, going up and down trees like she did, and she was always going hunting or fishing with Buddy and her brothers...you’d swear she was a little boy.⁴⁷

Similarly, Molly chooses boy playmates and shuns dresses that might make her look like a “sissy”.⁴⁸ Early on in the story she gets into more than one argument with her step-mother for not dressing appropriately, and when a close friend dies, Molly remarks that her dead friend is better off because she will not have to wear a dress ever again.

In addition to wearing clothes usually gendered masculine, Idgie and Molly actively challenge traditional gender roles in their daily lives. Russell points out that Idgie lives “life on her own terms” by actively challenging traditional gender roles. She fights to run and own her own business in the early twentieth century, raises a son with another woman, refuses to exclude African Americans from both her life and her café, stands against the KKK, and refuses to attend the church in her tiny, Bible-belt town. Molly too refuses to be told what to do or how to live based on her gender. As a child, when Molly’s friend points out that only boys can be doctors she becomes very angry and replies that “bein’ a girl don’t matter” to her when it comes to choosing a career.⁴⁹ She engages in the activities she enjoys even though they are not activities her female peers enjoy: playing in the dirt, riding motorcycles, wrestling, and fighting. Her resistance to boundaries follows her into adulthood. As a senior in college, when her professor, who dislikes female students, refuses to allow her to use equipment to film her final project, she simply steals what she needs and returns it after she is finished.⁵⁰

Rather than engage in typical childhood play as their peers do, and rather than spend time with female peers, both also flock to and find solace in nature and in their independence. Idgie spends the majority of her life outdoors engaging in activities stereotypically reserved for boys: climbing trees, fishing, playing with guns, and enjoying nature. Not only is it where she has fun, but it

is where she takes solace during hard times. When Idgie's brother is killed she disappears alone into the woods for several months.⁵¹ Even the narrator blatantly points out that there is something about Idgie that is like a "wild animal".⁵² Similarly, Molly too retreats to the woods for both play and solitude. The only punishment her adoptive mother uses that works on Molly is to try and keep her inside, out of nature and scolding her for her choice of male counterparts. Molly's adoptive mother also makes a habit of referring to her as a "savage animal."⁵³ Both novels put forth images of their characters as girls who are extremely engaged in play typical of boys and are closer to nature and other men than female counterparts.

The characters are further othered in several ways. The first page of *Rubyfruit Jungle* has Molly observing that she did not "know anything about [her] own beginnings until [she] was seven" when she "learned [she] was a bastard."⁵⁴ This further places Molly outside traditional social norms as Molly is set up in the plot as different from the beginning of her life. While not a bastard, Idgie experiences this same type of othering. After the death of her best friend and brother, Buddy, instead of mourning with the rest of the town, Idgie disappears and rejects all close, human contact.⁵⁵ Not only does she not mourn "properly," but she surrounds herself with the company of social outsiders: African Americans who live on the other side of town, hobos, and moonshiners.

Despite the obvious similarities in the two characters, their critical and popular reception has varied widely. Just after its publication, *Rubyfruit Jungle* became a word-of-mouth bestseller. Touted as the “most widely read lesbian novel ever written,” the book continues to top critical and popular rankings for LGBTQ literature.⁵⁶ In 2009 Publishing Triangle had a panel of several well-known gay and lesbian authors vote on the top 100 lesbian and gay novels of all time on which *Rubyfruit* was number nineteen.⁵⁷ Its publication took its place in *The Advocate* in 2000 as one of approximately twenty milestones for lesbian literary history.⁵⁸ Critics have discussed its enduring appeal and fans continue to vote it into the top of various rankings of lesbian literature.⁵⁹ Unfailingly, reactions to Rita Mae Brown’s novel have fallen overwhelmingly along these positive lines.

While *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Café* has received many similar accolades, they are only a small part of a large and ongoing discussion about the novel sparked by the release of its film adaptation. As media scholar Naomi Rockler writes, the film “sparked controversy over Idgie and Ruth’s sexual identity” because it arguably deleted some scenes and altered others to make the characters, particularly that of Idgie, less identifiable as lesbians.⁶⁰ Dubbed one of the “straightest lesbian films of all time,” the film was criticized in contemporary media journal *JumpCut* for similar reasons.⁶¹ Critiques like these helped spark an ongoing debate about the nature of the novel, as both

articles fall back on close readings of Flagg's original novel for evidence of Idgie's sexual identity and of the sexual nature of her relationship with Ruth.

In the last decade, discussion boards, scholarly articles, and even youtube.com videos have surfaced to defend the placement of Idgie in a lesbian identity category and the premier place of lesbianism in the storyline. For example, the popular online literature discussion board *BookVenue.com* still hosts an active thread from 1991 where readers cite everything from Idgie's dress to the character's role as parent to Ruth's son as signs of her sexual identity.⁶² The film was honored with a GLAAD award for the "best depiction of lesbians on film" in 1991 based admittedly on the intentions of the original novel.⁶³ Even mainstream critics such as Roger Ebert came out in defense of both the novel and film as having clear lesbian storylines.⁶⁴

In response to the rush of defense against the novel's supposed original intentions, just as many voiced contrary opinions. John Anderson of *Newsday* argued that the novel did not have a lesbian storyline, instead "it's one of friendship and the kind of strength of character it sometimes takes to live one's own life to one's own satisfaction."⁶⁵ The same book reviews and discussion threads praising the representation of lesbianism in the novel are equally littered with devoted fans of the book who, while loving the storyline, saw no evidence of lesbianism in the characters of their relationship. Even Flagg herself felt the

need to respond to the tauting of her book as a “lesbian novel” by stating that, “it’s a story about love and friendship...the sexuality is unimportant.”⁶⁶

The struggle over whether or not *Fried Green Tomatoes* is a lesbian novel hinges on the main character Idgie. Within debates over the nature of the novel, critics and fans alike began a discourse on whether or not she could be placed in a lesbian identity category. Rockler’s article mentioned above draws on the work of Adrienne Rich to argue for Idgie’s placement along Rich’s lesbian continuum: “Rich’s definition of a lesbian is much broader than [director] Avnet’s or Flagg’s...they fail to see the connection between intimacy and sexuality and in doing so are unable to see the erotic nature of Idgie’s and Ruth’s love.”⁶⁷ *Out in the Mountains*, a Vermont newspaper for LGBT communities weighs in on the debate about Idgie’s sexual identity by claiming her lesbianism not vis a vis her relationship with Ruth but by her attitude and dress.

The question of whether Idgie should or should not be considered a lesbian character concerns me less here than the factors underlying the struggle with categorically placing her identity. Setting up the similarities of the characters provides a base upon which to discuss the differences between the two novels that seem to prompt this struggle. First among these differences is the fact that Rita Mae Brown has explicitly written a coming out narrative that hinges on a pattern of rural to urban migration that is not present in *Fried Green*

Tomatoes. This key difference in the novel explains, in part, why two very similar characters are perceived so differently and the role of the rural in that perception.

Mapping the Coming Out Narrative: Rural to Urban Migration and Legibility

Rita Mae Brown begins *Rubyfruit Jungle* by noting that Molly Bolt has started her life in a “rural dot outside of York, Pennsylvania.”⁶⁸ Once moving to a slightly larger suburb in Florida, Molly becomes determined to use any means necessary, namely an education, to get herself to the big city. Molly’s process towards coming out is mapped directly onto a narrative of rural to urban migration in the novel. In her rural town, Molly is clearly marked as an outsider. It is only with movement between these spaces that her difference becomes legible as part of a sexual identity. This section illustrates this movement and the participation in urban-based norms of information exchange, interaction, and community that it allows Molly to participate in. While similar interactions and a sense of community develop for Idgie, their failure to mirror these norms explains not only part of why Idgie is a problematic character in terms of lesbian legibility but also how one of the most obvious catalysts to legibility in a normative sense, coming out, is predicated upon opportunities in urban areas.

In her first movement, to a slightly larger Florida suburb, Molly begins to recognize some sense of sexual difference and be called out by others as queer. While she had kissed another girl in her hometown, it is only once she moves to the larger suburb, where there is a larger population including other recognizably queer people, that she is called queer by several other characters. Her cousin Leroy, after experimenting with some gay men in the town, calls Molly out as queer.⁶⁹ Carolyn, Molly's friend at her new school, had been involved with a lesbian during her summer camp, and it is with Carolyn that Molly has her first sexual experience and notes for the first time that she is physically attracted to women.⁷⁰ While Molly prefers to call herself "polymorphous" instead of queer or lesbian, her first interactions with other queer people become a catalyst for recognition of the possibilities of obtaining a queer identity and only have sexual relations with other women.⁷¹

After her initial sexual forays, Molly takes a scholarship to larger Gainesville, Florida, and the institutions of this city provide her with changes to interact with other lesbians and, albeit briefly, with a recognizable gay and lesbian community. Her roommate, Faye, who has sexual forays with men and women, initiates her to the local gay and lesbian bar scene to which Molly reacts enthusiastically: "As we sat down, I glanced in the direction of the dance floor and the men were dancing with each other and the women were dancing with other women. I had a sudden urge to clap my hands in frenzied applause,

but suppressed it because I knew no one would understand.”⁷² The bar allows Molly to meet other lesbians near her college campus. Her enjoyment of the local bar scene marks her as available to Faye, and the two become involved in a relationship for nearly a year. Interactions with Faye and with the lesbian and gay community prompt Molly, for the first time, to claim a queer identity. When she and Faye are asked if they were gay before college, Molly quickly responds that “Faye wasn’t but I was.”⁷³

Molly and Faye’s relationship is met with dislike by others in their dormitory, and when Faye’s father pulls her out of school, Molly hitches her way to New York City. Once there, she quickly makes use of the recognizable spaces to meet other gays and lesbians. Her first friend in New York, a homeless young gay man, takes her out several nights in a row to the popular lesbian bars in the city. From there, the circle of queer people she knows only widens as she befriends everyone from homeless gays, to queer students, and famous lesbian actresses in art shows, house parties, and clubs.⁷⁴ After a few months in the city, Molly no longer needs to be shown around and begins asking women out, showing others around, and boasting about her knowledge of the local lesbian scene. Once fully immersed in the local lesbian community, she comes out as a “bona fide lesbian.”⁷⁵

Molly’s progression from being known as a “wild animal” in her small town, to referring to herself as polymorphous, queer, and finally a “bona fide

lesbian” occurs rather quickly in the story (from around the age of 6 to the age of 19). Her identity development is clearly advanced with each move she makes to a larger, urban area. It is in these spaces that she can increasingly engage in information exchange about where to find not only gay and lesbian bookstores and clubs but interact with groups of gays and lesbians and engage in a community of other recognizably queer people. As illustrated above, her experiences with these people and communities catalyze the stages of her coming out and the ways in which she articulates her identity. In this case, the process of coming out, of becoming legible as a lesbian, necessitates a process of rural to urban migration that offers such interactions and communities.

While the path taken by Molly is clearly not available to Idgie in 1920’s southern Alabama, one might assume that audiences struggle to categorically identify Idgie as a lesbian because, having never really left her rural town, she does not find acceptance or persons within whom to confide her desires. This is not the case. Idgie and her partner Ruth find several areas of acceptance and build a community that includes persons marked as sexual outsiders; however, since these communities do not mirror the normative ones discussed above, they problematize Idgie’s recognition as a lesbian.

Idgie is born and raised in tiny Whistle Stop, Alabama where a large part of the population is related to her by blood or by marriage. Idgie leaves the town only once in order to bring her lover, or according to some her friend,

home from an abusive marriage. Needless to say, with early 20th century rural Alabama as the setting, Flagg did not dot the landscape with bars or clubs catering to anyone, let alone those engaging in same-sex desire or sexual activity, but Idgie does find similar atmospheres near Whistle Stop. Chief among them is the Wagon Wheel Club and Camp, a small set of shacks by the river where local men and women go to party, fish, and drink bootlegged alcohol. It is clear in the book that this is also where alternative sexual activity of various kinds finds a home. Not only do the men in the club bring their mistresses, but much time is spent discussing the owner's daughter Eva and her sexual promiscuity: "Eva was as easy with her body as she was with everything else...she had slept with whomever she pleased, when she pleased."⁷⁶ While Eva is ostracized in town, she is loved at the Wagon Wheel. Idgie, too, finds a home there. Whether getting into wrestling matches, smoking, and playing poker or dancing and mooning over first Eva and then Ruth, the club is where she spends a majority of her time. It is also where she brings Ruth for nights out, and their obvious closeness and distance from male partners is never questioned.

Idgie also spends quite a bit of time on the side of town where the African Americans, poor whites, and hobos make a home. She regularly spends time with friends there discussing her life with Ruth and their son Buddy, and is never met with anything but acceptance. In addition, Idgie also goes through

many of the same struggles dealing with her feelings as does Molly; however, she confides in her mother and in Eva about her feelings for Ruth, and it is those people that initiate Idgie to the Wagon Wheel and encourage her to settle down with Ruth.

Just Like Huck Finn: Gender Identity versus Sexual Identity in Rural and Urban Spaces

A final key to understanding what the two novels can tell us about the relationship between rurality and sexual identity is in recognizing the picaresque narrative structure present in both novels. The picaresque is loosely understood as a coming of age narrative about the humorous adventures of a roguish anti-hero. While the picaresque consists of many other characteristics, key here is that the anti-hero usually assumes some form of outsider status socially. One thinks immediately of that infamous picaresque character Huck Finn, positioned as an outsider in several ways, including his upbringing in a non-nuclear family and his close friendship with Jim. Interestingly, both Idgie and Molly are compared to Huck by several critics. Harper Lee reviewed *Fried Green Tomatoes* and referred to Idgie as someone the “original Huckleberry Finn” would have tried to marry.⁷⁷ Elsewhere she is described as a “Huck-Finnish tomboy.”⁷⁸ Molly is called “a genuine female descendant of Huckleberry Finn.”⁷⁹

Similar though they may seem, a closer look at these comparisons, particularly the ways in which Molly seems to escape the comparison with age and Idgie does not, reveals another layer to the relationship between the rural and the readings of these characters. In specific, Molly's rural to urban migration pattern allows her outsider status and by extension many of things reminiscent of Huck to eventually indicate a type of sexual agency and lend her character legibility as a queer person, while the comparison for Idgie gets conflated with a particular type of gendered and not as part of a sexual identity.

In general, comparisons between Huck and Molly are made during her childhood. In addition, the characteristics that belie her outsider status are that, early on, she wears "masculine" attire, that she exhibits an atypical affection for her female peers, and that "as she grows to realize she's different, [she] decides not to apologize for that...in no time she mesmerizes the head cheerleader...and captivates a gorgeous bourbon-guzzling heiress."⁸⁰ However, as she moves to bigger cities the hallmarks of her character that prompted such comparisons, her more masculine dress and her propensity for getting in trouble and challenging traditional gender roles, become less indicative of any sort of gender transgression and more a part of identifying her sexuality as queer or lesbian. Her cousin Leroy, after experimenting with local gay men in their Florida suburb, points out that Molly is queer because she engages in typically male activities like motorcycle riding and by her dress stating that, "it's time

you started worrying about your hair and doing those things girls are supposed to do.”⁸¹ Later, in the same suburban town, it is noted by her friends that they are not lesbians because “lesbians are boyish and athletic”; however Molly is called out as queer because she is athletic, wears more masculine attire, and “doesn’t act like a girl.”⁸² Once Molly moves into areas where other out queer people are present, her attitude and masculine attire quickly mark her as queer as well.

Perhaps more importantly, as Molly moves to New York her style of dress changes in favor of less masculine attire and her transgression of traditional gender roles is largely confined to assuring her place as a serious film director at New York University. Indeed, at one point Molly dresses so feminine that a woman she is trying to seduce questions Molly’s lesbianism.⁸³ By this time, however, Molly has found herself accepted within an extended community of lesbians and gay men. If Molly is to be read as a true picaresque character though the end of the novel, one that maintains her outsider status, that status becomes marked by her legibility as a lesbian and participation in a community of non-heterosexual people. Furthermore, the ability Molly has to retire such masculine dress and blatant challenge of gender roles lets her outsider status move from drawing on a sense of gendered agency in her life to one of sexual agency. This agency is even further reinforced as Molly eventually becomes the person to initiate others into her community in New

York. Finding herself amidst increasingly large queer communities allows her outsider status to be read not as strictly gendered but as part of a non-normative sexual identity.

For Idgie, the comparisons to Huck draw on an entirely different set of characteristics and have different ramifications. It is no coincidence that the above reviewers used the references to Huck and Idgie in tandem with the term tomboy. Elsewhere she is called the “tomboy next door, a distaff of Huck Finn.”⁸⁴ Idgie’s status as an outsider in her picaresque narrative, indeed what seems to prompt comparisons of her character to Huck Finn, is not a difference that becomes read as a sexual one a la Molly, but gets inscribed onto her gender, something I refer to as the “tomboy factor.”

In much the same way as Molly, Idgie’s comparisons to Huck lie in her masculine dress and her propensity to challenge traditional roles, characteristics made apparent in section one. Idgie not only dresses like a “boy” and surrounds herself with male counterparts but plays the role of father to Ruth’s son Buddy. However, because Idgie is more often seen romping in the woods, fishing, or hopping trains, her choice of dress and male friends seems necessitated by her rural setting. Pants and tennis shoes make much quicker work of trudging through an overgrown forest than skirts or heels do. In addition, Idgie’s dress and behavior never change throughout the course of the novel. She continues to wear a short haircut and brogans while fighting to run her own business and

make a life with Ruth through the end of the novel. Because Idgie's activities in a rural setting necessitate a certain type of dress and because she never changes her appearance, Idgie's agency in *choosing* challenge gender roles in this way is obscured. It becomes a necessitated gender variance in order to engage in the activities she enjoys. Molly's character was able to become more conventionally feminine as her narrative moved forward, lending a sense of choice to her gender variance that can be missed when reading Idgie's character. Molly's masculine dress are not so easily absorbed into the landscape of Gainesville, Florida or New York City as they are for Idgie in Whistlestop, Alabama.

The discussion of Idgie as a Huck Finn-esque tomboy also illustrates the effects of normative notions of sexuality on recognizing not only lesbian characters but also sexual agency in rural spaces. Due to the rural setting of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Idgie's outsider status, that which prompts comparisons to Huck, becomes solely about her gender where Molly's becomes about her sexuality. The time and place of the novel prevent Idgie from being able to participate in urban-based norms of sexual identity. Rather than connections to other queer people, Idgie's connections are made early in life. Many of her friends at the Wagon Wheel have known her since birth. While many of her friends exist as outsider to the community by virtue of their class or sexuality, it is only Eva who appears to show some sexual interest in members of the same

sex, namely Idgie. This leaves Idgie and Ruth as the only recognizable same-sex couple. Not being in the presence of other recognizable “queers” makes readings of Idgie as a tomboy who simply likes the companionship of Ruth and other outsiders an easier reading to make. Though Idgie does leave Whistlestop to facilitate Ruth’s return, her agency in novel is more easily read as gendered than as sexual.

Whether necessitated by her rural setting or obscured by the absence of other identifiable queers, Idgie’s character cannot mirror the normative notions of homosexual identity that Molly’s can. A closer look at the relationship between the rural and the struggle to see Idgie as a lesbian, illustrates the strong ties between urbanity and normative homosexual identity. Where the absence of such norms of interaction and community gets attributed to the hostility of the rural by many scholars in chapter one, here it is gender that is used by the above reviewers to explain the disjuncture between norms of identity and rural spaces. The tomboy factor becomes a reading that is easily mobilized rather than taking apart the more complex reasons why Idgie, for many, cannot be a lesbian character.⁸⁵

Rather than drawing on the scholarly discourse about rural homosexuality as chapter one does, this chapter uses another layer of discourse,

that of popular lesbian novels and their reception, to further explore the relationship between rurality and non-normative sexual identity. It reveals how these issues play out on the level of a subject, like Molly or Idgie, rather than an amorphous group of rural homosexuals. The case of Molly provides a window onto the ways in which traditional coming out narratives and paths to legibility are mapped onto rural to urban migration patterns and the imagined changes that freight movement between such spaces. In addition, the case of Idgie points out the use of gender as an alternative explanation mobilized to ignore or explain away the friction between rural spaces and normative sexuality. Her story also reveals how the rural can be used to interpret sexual agency as gendered agency at best or as a byproduct of circumstance as worst. In sum, rethinking these narratives and the roles of gender, sexuality and rurality within them helps to further unpack the implications of the norms first discussed in chapter one and the complicated and ongoing process of critically minding the gaps that surface in the disjuncture between rurality and normative sexuality.

Conclusion

Much of the inspiration for this project comes not only from my experiences as a rural queer and moving to a metropolitan area for education but also from the reactions of others to starting a dialogue about non-normative sexualities and rural areas. This project continues to necessitate traditional discussion both within and outside of academia. From academic conferences and talks with faculty and other graduate students to conversations with non-academic friends, many of whom live in rural areas, one thing remains fairly constant. Upon hearing about my project, the response is typically a question similar to, *are there rural queers or do those things go together*. While some also respond with a slightly less noticeable wince or double take, perhaps the most troubling responses come from many who, for one reason or another, do not see why a dialogue about queers in *rural* areas is needed or should be any different from those focused on urban areas. The reactions to this work are indicative of, among other things, the pervasiveness of norms discussed in this project and the importance of doing work that not only recognizes the presence of rural queers but the importance of studying the relationship between space and sexuality.

I quickly realized that many gender studies scholars reacted in the above ways and that some who fell in traditional social sciences disciplines were, at times, remarkably supportive and clear about the possibilities of this research.

This became part of the reasoning behind rethinking the perceived split between humanities and social sciences scholars among work on rural queers, and my attempt foster a common dialogue around community rather than accepting disciplinary differences. In addition, understanding the ways in which norms of sexuality become so pervasive and effective in relation to the above reactions became a large part of the driving force behind chapter two. “Narratives of Queer Legibility: Rurality and Popular Lesbian Fiction” is partly an effort at understanding the place of these ideas in various cultural narratives. Together, the chapters begin to think about the relationship between normative sexualities and rural spaces and in doing so critically analyze the ways in which normative notions of sexuality relate to the reactions to this project.

In conclusion, I want to consider briefly the implications of this project in order to shed light on where to place this thesis within a broader context. Taking into consideration some of the key question raised in “Minding the Gap: Rethinking the Perceived Disjuncture Between Rurality and Homosexuality,” I plan to move normative notions of community to the center of my analysis. Working on “Minding the Gap” made clear to me the relationship between both various norms and a hegemonic notion of sexuality as well as between identity work and community. I believe rural spaces can teach scholars of sexuality many things, among which is a new way to understand the place of community in understandings sexuality and to question why and how it has been privileged

in queer identity formation. Part of this discussion, I hope, will continue to explore the role of community in the politics of queer visibility and agency.

In aiming not to collapse all rural spaces into one dialogue and in further grounding the theories put forth in this thesis, I hope to conduct ethnographic fieldwork with queers in the Ozark mountains. I want this side of the project to explore alternative notions of community and of community's place in identity. In addition, I want to explore the role of public and private spaces in hegemonic notions of community and the question of what public spaces in rural areas are. Finally, I will expand the notion of agency and linear coming-out narratives explored in chapter two, into discussions of modernity/backwardness in relation to the ways rural queers in the Ozarks articulate their identities. When combined with the theories I have started to explore in "Minding the Gap" and the more centralized discussion of community I plan to undertake, it is my hope that a study of rural queers will eventually prompt a much difference response than the ones above – the process of minding the gap between rurality and normative sexuality will go from being a questionable possibility to necessary dialogue.

¹ *Farm Family: In Search of Gay Life in Rural America*, DVD, directed by Tom Murray (2003: T Joe Murray Films, 2004).

² Ibid.

³ On terminology: For sake of clarity, I use the term rural in one of two ways. In staying true to the texts reviewed, the term appears as used in the context of each article. When using the term outside of these confines, the rural is defined as any area with less than 500 people per square mile mirroring that of the Bureau of the Census. However, this is only a loose definition due to the various incarnations of the

rural that move beyond sheer population numbers and into perceived lifestyles and identities that may or may not be tied to space.

⁴ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 36

⁶ Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality 1986*, edited by Carol S. Vance (Boston: Routledge, 2000), 17.

⁷ Ponse, Barbara. *Identities in the Lesbian World: The Social Construction of Self*. Westport (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1978), 91.

⁸ Stein, Arlene. *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California-Berkeley Press, 1997), 67.

⁹ A. Elfin Moses and Janet A. Buckner, "The Special Problems of Rural Gay Clients," *Human Services in Rural Environments* 5, no. 5 (1980), 22; Jerry Lee Kramer, "Bachelor Farmers and Spinsters: Gay and lesbian identities and Communities in Rural North Dakota," in *Mapping Desires: Geographies of Sexualities*, edited by David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), 185; Anthony D'Augelli, "Gay Women, Men, and Families in Rural Settings: Toward the Development of Helping Communities," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 15, no 1 (1987): 76; Anthony D'Augelli, "Social Support Patterns of Lesbian Women in a Rural Helping Network," *Journal of Rural Community Psychology* 8.1 (1987): 12; Anthony D'Augelli, "Lesbian Women in rural Helping Network: Exploring Informal Helping Resources," *Women and Therapy* 8, no. 1 (1989): 119; Antony D'Augelli, "Coming Out, Visibility, and Creating change: Empowering Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People in a Rural University Community," *American Journal of Psychology* 37 (2006), 203; Linda McCarthy, "Poppies in a Wheat Field: Exploring Lives of Rural Lesbians," *Journal of Homosexuality* 39, no. 1 (2000), 75.

¹⁰ McCarthy 205

¹¹ D'Augelli, "Gay Women," 83

¹² Kramer 208

¹³ D'Augelli 204

¹⁴ Moses and Buckner 173

¹⁵ McCarthy 77

¹⁶ Kramer 206

¹⁷ McCarthy 76

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 211, emphasis in original

¹⁹ D'Augelli 204; Moses and Buckner 175

²⁰ McCarthy 81

²¹ For similar discussions of rural sexualities see Colin Johnson, "Columbia's Orient: Gender, Geography, and the Invention of Sexuality in Rural America" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2003).

²² John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), 10.

²³ *Ibid* xi

²⁴ *Ibid* 44

²⁵ *ibid* xiii

²⁶ Richard Phillips, editor, *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representation Beyond the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

²⁷ *ibid* 183

²⁸ *ibid* 192

²⁹ *ibid* 192

³⁰ Mary Gray, *Out in the County: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

³¹ *ibid* 38

³² *ibid* 10

³³ *ibid* 98

³⁴ *ibid* 101

³⁵ Gray 30

³⁶ See for example: Kenneth Kirkey, "Men in the Valley: Gay Male Life on the Suburban-Rural Fringe," *Journal of Rural Studies* 17 (2001): 421-441; Catriona Sandilands, "Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature," *Organization & Environment* 15, no. 2 (2002): 131-195; Eric Swank et. al. "Explaining Comfort with Homosexuality in Rural America," 51, no.2 (2006): 39-56; Louise Meijering, Paulus Huigen, and Bettina Van Hoven, "Intentional Communities in Rural Spaces," *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 98, no. 1 (2006): 42-52.

³⁷ See for example: Larry Knopp, "Ontologies of Place, Placelessness, and Movement: Queer Quests for Identity and Their Impacts on Contemporary Geographic Thought," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 11, no.1 (2004): 122-134; Jo Little and Ruth Panelli, "Gender Research and Rural Geography," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 10, no.3 (2003): 281-289; K Quinn, "Rural suicide and same-sex attracted youth: issues, interventions and implications for rural consellers," *Rural and Remote Health* 222 (2003); J Edwards, "Invisibility, safety and psycho-social distress among same-sex attracted women in rural South Australia," *Rural and Remote Health* 25 (2004); Deborah Bray Preston et. al., "The Influence of Stigma on the Sexual Risk Behavior of Rural Men Who Have Sex with Men," *AIDS Education and Prevention* 16, no.4 (2004): 291-303.

³⁸ See for example: Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi, "Introduction," in *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4

⁴⁰ Moses and Buckner 173

⁴¹ Kramer 206

⁴² McCarthy 80 emphasis mine

⁴³ D'Augelli, "Coming Out, Visibility" 204

⁴⁴ See Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Sheri A. Inness *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and Representation of Lesbian Life* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Lisa Duggan *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

⁴⁵ Murray, *Farm Family*

⁴⁶ Sage Russell, "Fried Green Tomatoes: A Review," *Out in the Mountains: Vermont's Newspaper for Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals*. March 1992, <http://www.mountainpridemedia.org/oitm/issues/1992/03march1992/article11.html>, (accessed March 1, 2010): 3.

⁴⁷ Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1987), 34.

⁴⁸ Rita Mae Brown, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (New York: Bantam, 1977), 26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 191

⁵¹ Flagg 37

⁵² *Ibid.*, 80

⁵³ Brown 30

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3; for more information on the relationship between bastard characters and lesbianism see Esther Saxon's "Lesbian Bastard Heroes: The Uses of Illgitimacy for Modern Lesbian Fiction and Identity," *Women: A Cultural Review* 16, no.1 (2005): 33-51.

⁵⁵ Flagg 80

⁵⁶ Brown back cover

⁵⁷ Publishing Triangle, "100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels," <http://www.publishingtriangle.org/100best.asp> (accessed March 1, 2010).

⁵⁸ Robert L. Pela, "Our Lesbian Roots," *Advocate*, august, 15 2000.

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- ⁵⁹ See the following: "Top 10 Lesbian and Gay Novels," GLBTQ, <http://www.glbtq.com/discussion/viewtopic.php?t=66&start=45> (accessed March 1, 2010); J. Aldrin, "10 Lesbian Novels," Amazon, <http://www.amazon.com/10-Lesbian-Novels/lm/RA63U5YU1HS2> (accessed March 1, 2010).
- ⁶⁰ Naomi Rockler, "A Wall on the Lesbian Continuum: Polysemy and Fried Green Tomatoes," *Journal of Women's Studies in Communication* 24 (2001):1.
- ⁶¹ Lu Vickers, "Fried Green Tomatoes; Excuse me, did we see the same movie," *Jump Cut*, 30:1 (1994): 25-30.
- ⁶² The Book Venue, "Fried Green Tomatoes", Geek Venue, <http://www.powells.com/biblio/9780553278866?&PID=32442> (accessed March 1, 2010).
- ⁶³ Vickers 29
- ⁶⁴ *ibid* 29
- ⁶⁵ Rockler 1
- ⁶⁶ Vickers 33
- ⁶⁷ Rocker 10-11
- ⁶⁸ Brown 3
- ⁶⁹ Brown 51
- ⁷⁰ Brown 60
- ⁷¹ Brown 85
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 92
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 95
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 121-123
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 153
- ⁷⁶ Flagg 94-95
- ⁷⁷ Flagg back cover
- ⁷⁸ Heather Picker, "Fried Green Tomatoes," The Movie Site, http://www.that-movie-site.com/reviews/fried_green_tomatoes.htm (accessed March 1, 2010)
- ⁷⁹ Brown back cover
- ⁸⁰ Publisher Synopsis: Rubyfruit Jungle, Barnes and Noble, search.barnesandnoble.com/Rubyfruit-Jungle/Rita-Mae-Brown/e/97805563278866 (accessed March 1, 2010).
- ⁸¹ Brown 51
- ⁸² Brown 84
- ⁸³ Brown 153
- ⁸⁴ Rita Kempley, "Fried Green Tomatoes," *Washington Post*, January 10, 1992, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/friedgreentomatoespg13kempley_a0a28a.htm, (accessed March 1, 2010).
- ⁸⁵ I do want to note that substantial literature exists on lesbian reading strategies, and these strategies can obviously allow this gender variance to be read a sexual one by certain audiences.

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