

## Special Section

**Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires:  
Coming Out Online and the Remediation  
of the Coming-Out Story**

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*Drawing on a 19-month ethnographic study, this essay explores how rural young people weave digital-media-generated source materials into their identity work, particularly as they navigate the politics of visibility's master narrative event: "coming out." More so than in urban scenes where a critical mass of LGBTQ visibility is taken for granted, these stories resonate with the complex negotiation of visibility and family ties that consume rural young people's everyday lives. At the same time the amount rural youth absorb or rework these categories has everything to do with each person's capacity to enact and publicly assert them. This approach to studies of media effects calls for a deeply situated understanding of media engagements beyond reception of particular media texts.*

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**Introduction**

"I first started noticing that I was attracted to other girls when I was about 12 or 13. Before then, I can't even say that I knew gay people existed. But even when I was young I watched girls on TV and was amazed by them. I was over at my friend's house one night joking that I only watched *Baywatch* (my favorite show at the time) for the girls. After I said this, I realized it was true. It wasn't until about a year later, when I got on the Internet and found other people like me that I actually said to myself that I was bisexual. I've always been attracted to both sexes, but I found my true identity on the Internet."—Amy, age 15.

Amy, a white teenager living in the central region of the U.S. state of Kentucky, cited the discovery of an Internet forum for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer (LGBTQ) and questioning young people as a defining moment in understanding her own bisexual identity.<sup>1</sup> Similar to many of her rural peers, she found that online representations of LGBTQ lives seemed more pivotal to this shift in her identity than fictionalized LGBT narratives, such as *Baywatch*'s campy queer subtexts or *Queer as Folk* and *Will*

*and Grace's* out-and-proud gay and lesbian characters. Fictional representations of LGBTQ people in popular media have long been theorized as a potential remedy to LGBTQ cultural marginalization and a cause for LGBTQ people to celebrate (Gross, 2001; Gamson, 1998; Doty, 2000). Media visibility seemed a natural step in the progression for full rights and equal citizenship. Sociologist and feminist scholar Suzanna Walters convincingly argues, however, that LGBTQ visibility in the media means we are more widely seen but not necessarily better known (Walters, 2001). While more images of LGBTQ people certainly stream into Americans' lives through television, films, and the internet, the increase in visibility has not translated into progay stances at the voting booth or in the halls of Congress. Accordingly, youth, many of whom are fleshing out the boundaries and meanings of their identity, are no more likely to know themselves through these fictional images, particularly given how rarely they depict rural places, than a straight person looking to fictionalized characters to make sense of LGBTQ people's lives. That is not to say that images of LGBTQ characters in popular media didn't inform (and fuel) the queering of Amy's desires. But the narratives of authenticity, of queer realness, that she found online reading coming-out stories from teens both in her state and living worlds away, following news bulletins posted to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and PlanetOut websites, and outlets for buying rainbow flags, jewelry, pride rings, and stickers provided the grammar for a bisexual identity she eventually claimed as her own.

Engaging these online representations as a genre infuses them with what I refer to through out this essay as queer realness. I draw on Judith/Jack Halberstam's prescient definition of realness which s/he asserts is "not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its effects. . . . the term realness offsets any implications of inauthenticity. . . . realness actually describes less of an act of will and more of a desire to flaunt the unpredictability of social gendering" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 51). Rural youth appropriate queerness as a possibility that is disparaged not only in representations of the rural but also in mass media depictions of LGBTQ people.

In referring to these representations of realness as a distinct genre I am taking to heart media scholar Jason Mittell's call to examine media texts as "sites of discursive practice" (Mittell, 2001, 9). Instead of focusing on the aesthetic codes or features of the new media texts that might generically hold together I apply Mittell's practice of analyzing sets of themes and patterns that surface across media texts, the audience members' experiences of those texts, and industry practices that consistently produce and recycle these themes and patterns (Mittell, 2001, p. 19).<sup>2</sup>

In rural contexts, Internet-based texts found on commercial websites, other young people's homepages, and regional e-mail-based discussion lists, operate as a genre that queers realness. These texts lend materials to the labor of parsing out and responding to the expectations of LGBTQ visibility. Rural LGBTQ-identifying youth come to see themselves in terms made familiar through the narrative repetitions of

self-discovery and coming out found in this genre. These digitally produced texts circulate the politics of LGBTQ identity and center on visibility as a hegemonic grammar for the articulation of identity. How much rural youth absorb and rework these identity categories turns on each young person's material conditions, cultural context, and history. The accounts rural youth gave me of their reckoning with these genres highlight the recalcitrance of social categories like race, class, and kinship norms that trouble what we might uncritically attribute to the powers of the Internet.

Of the youth I spoke with, many shared the belief that their identities expressed inherent desires that they were born with but that remained buried under the baggage of community norms and expectations of "having a family and settling down" in traditional heterosexual fashion. Their narratives of having been "born this way" echoed popular cultural understandings of sexualities and genders as expressions of one's core being (Lancaster, 2003). Yet, arguably, Amy's identity didn't coalesce through isolated introspection and self-discovery. She described the year or so she spent online making sense of her love for *Baywatch* as a busy one "reading everything I could about gay people" and "hanging out in chat rooms talking with other kids about how they first knew they were gay and whether they thought I was gay or what words even made sense." Her processing of self-exploration, making sense of what "words even made sense," is in practice highly social. Amy's sense of what it means to be bisexual is, in practice, collectively organized through her interactions with what Bruno Latour calls "social actors"—from watching television shows and talking with friends, to surfing the Internet (Latour, 1996). From this perspective, rural youth sexualities and genders are best understood not as an unfolding state of biological fact confirmed in a moment of visually and textually-mediated recognition but residues of complicated dialogues—recirculations of coming-out narratives most notably—that increasingly involve digitally-mediated renderings of LGBTQ identities complete with particular ways to dress, look, and speak. Urban and suburban youth might come across commercially or subversively produced LGBTQ images posted along public transit routes, pinned to community boards at local coffee houses, or embodied in the presence of gay/straight alliances and other LGBTQ-advocacy organizations with offices around town. Rural youth, however, are unlikely to run across these images in their rural public spaces. As a result they are more reliant on venturing out of town and exploring media to find the words and practices culturally saturated with queer realness.

A blend of fictional television characters and conversations with friends served as critical materials for Amy's queer identity work. However, as her insights suggest, she found confirmation and a sense of "authentic" identity online. In this sense authenticity does not reside in Amy. It is a "manufactured" moment when "a place or event. . .conform[s] to an idealized representation of reality. . . a set of expectations regarding how such a thing out to look, sound, and feel" (Grazian 2003, p.10). Amy does not discover or possess her queer realness as much as she, like all of us, pursues a credible and sincere performance of that idealized representation

in hopes that it will “come off as natural and effortless” (Grazian, 2003, pp. 10-11). She notes that the absence of locally visible LGBTQ communities made it harder for her to precisely name—let alone act on—her attraction to both sexes. In the end, Amy’s bisexual identity coalesced from watching *Baywatch*, being teased by friends, and reading the Internet-based musings of other young people.

Young people like Amy spoke about representations they found online as both resonances of their own experiences as well as evidence that others like them existed beyond their small communities. Drawing on a 19-month ethnographic study of digital media use among rural LGBTQ, queer and questioning youth in the United States, this essay explores how rural young people weave media-generated source materials into their identity work, particularly as they master the politics of visibility’s master narrative event: “coming out.”<sup>3</sup> I argue that online representations, from noncommercial, youth-spun websites to subscription-based personal ads on for-profit media properties like PlanetOut and Gay.com, provide rural young people with materials for crafting what it means to “come out” as LGBTQ or questioning in rural contexts. To date, no studies have focused specifically on youth in the rural United States and their negotiations of a queer sense of self and the expectations of visibility that have become a feature of modern LGBTQ experience and popular culture.<sup>4</sup> This ethnography is an attempt to intervene and refocus our attention. Case studies of rural sexualities and genders offer fresh vantage points to consider the links between larger structural issues, such as statewide social service funding and regional race and class relations, media representations, and day-to-day processes of individual presentations and negotiations of identity.

### **Queering the Effects of Media Visibility**

If visibility is imagined to be the road to acceptance for LGBTQ-identifying people, much of that recognition circulates through representations in the media. Films, television characters, press accounts of social movements, AIDS reporting, plays, books, and the Internet are where most stories of queer desires transpire. These representations translate queer desires into LGBTQ-specific identities and give them a proper locale, typically the city. As such, media are the primary site of production for social knowledge of LGBTQ identities. It is where most people, including those who will come to identify as LGBTQ, first see or get to know LGBTQ people. In other words, media circulate the social grammar, appearance, and sites of LGBTQ-ness.

Arguably, media’s social force seems heightened (sometimes hyped?) in rural places not because of a complete absence of LGBTQ-identifying or queer-desiring individuals with whom rural youth might identify but because of the way rurality itself is depicted as antithetical to LGBTQ identities. Mass media consistently narrate rural LGBTQ identities as out of place, necessarily estranged from “authentic” (urban) queerness. These images teach rural youth to look anywhere but homeward for LGBTQ identities. Should we presume rural queer and questioning youth treat

new media technologies as the latest vehicles of escape? Is it possible that, for the rural youth who stay put, new media serve not primarily as “opportunities for the formation of new communities. . . spanning vast distances” but as opportunities to create and consolidate networks much closer to home that are otherwise absent from mass media representations? (Gross 2007, xi).

One of the difficulties in researching the role media play in the cultivation of a rural queer sensibility is that it is all too easy to fall back on the presumed properties of the technologies themselves to the exclusion of the social contexts that give technologies meaning.<sup>5</sup> Historically, technological innovations in the modern era simultaneously raise society’s hopes and stoke its fears (Drotner, 1992; Nye, 1990; Marvin, 1988; Sammond, 2005). But no technology comes prepackaged with a set of “good” or “bad” traits (Turner, 2006; Carey, 1989). Unfortunately, until the novelty of a “new technology” tapers off or is displaced by something newer, researchers and cultural critics of media effects alike cycle through fixations on the good, bad, and ugly that comes hidden inside the box—whether it is a radio, a television, or the Internet. This has produced a lineage of media scholarship tightly focused on communication technologies as things that produce effects rather than cultural elements of the complexity of human interactions and our relationships with/to innovation itself. These debates over media’s strong or weak effects rage on regardless of the media in question.

However, the tenor of these intellectual deliberations reaches a fervent pitch when questions turn to media’s potential influence on children. Young people have always been the screens onto which society projects its greatest fears (Waller, 1990; Seiter, 1993; Levine, 2002; Jenkins, 1998). More recently, with the advent of everything from MySpace to Gameboys, new technologies are presented in popular culture as sources of distraction, violence, or allure that threaten the sanctity and safety of children. Janice Levine argues that rather than accept the statistical reality that children are more vulnerable to sexual harm at the hands of immediate family members, society projects its fears onto strangers, seeing media as one of several tools used to lure unsuspecting children. A case in point is the “pedophile panic” that spurred the drafting of the 1996 Communications Decency Act (Levine, 2002, pp. 20–44). This panic led to institutionalizing parental surveillance through codes for films and music, as well as v-chips and Internet-filtering software. These preventative measures presume and perpetuate the notion that media have direct and very negative effects upon children. Prevention logic suggests one can curtail certain behaviors by regulating access to these media or the content of media itself. Of course, the reality is far more complicated.

### **Breaking the Media Effects Logic**

Media studies tend to approach the question of representations of social influence of media as a matter of impact. We think the medium itself carries certain properties and, therefore, inherent powers. New media promise to bring about change—slipping

it in around mass culture. We attach cultural weight to it as we look to blogs to address our mistrust of mainstream journalism or turn to distance learning to address the increasing costs of higher education. But new media are part of mass culture—the stories they circulate remediate the stories already out there. While new media studies can perpetuate what sociologist Claude Fischer diagnosed as media studies' penchant for "impact analysis," looking at rural young people's use of media offers us a different story (Fischer, 1992, p. 8). For example, we might be tempted to imagine that new media technologies allow rural gay kids to escape their rural communities and find refuge, and recognition, online. But framing the question like this leads us down a dead-end road of inquiry unable to explore how rural queer and questioning youth engage and transform media as they respond to expectations of visibility and the structures of familiarity that organize their offline experiences. Focusing on new media as spaces that produce online worlds fails to respond to the call of critical cyberculture scholars to examine how "[o]nline contexts permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into offline experience" (Baym, 2006, 86). Media scholars like Nancy Baym call on us to "recognize that the internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life" (Baym, 2006, p. 86).

What we learn from reception and audience studies in media studies, particularly work done from a youth-centered approach by theorists like Ellen Seiter and Sonia Livingstone, is that youth engage media in far more complicated ways than we assume (Seiter, 1999 and 2005; Livingstone, 2002 and 2008). Ellen Seiter, for example, pioneered scholarship in children's use of the media that worked to understand not only how children make meaning in their lives through their use of media but also how parental anxieties over children's media use spoke more broadly to societal tensions over what constituted "proper parenting," particularly the mother's role as moral guide. But much of the work on reception studies focuses tightly on the conditions for viewing, centered on the moment of reception itself. How can we break out of this narrow focus to see the more complicated relationships between media and their meaning rather than effects in our everyday lives? Seiter and Livingstone respond to and challenge work that assumes media are deleterious to kids based on presumptions about the particular effects of the medium. They apply an ethnographic and qualitative approach to complicate what "effects" might look like in the lives of young people by studying their everyday uses of media. They treat young people, much as work in new childhood studies and critical youth studies do, as active agents but also a culturally constructed demographic.

Another way for researchers to engage more complicated relationships between media and their meaning making is through ethnographic approaches that contextualize media engagements as part of a broader social terrain of experience. Performances of identities require tools. What tools are out there for rural youth to pick up if they seek to express a sense of self that doesn't square up with the heteronormative expectations around them? What allows for an iteration of a sexual or gender identity that is constructed in popular culture as antithetical to their rural

communities? What kind of visibility can be performed here and through what means? What are the limits of these iterations? What do we need to politically tweak to make queer sexualities and genders more habitable to rural youth? It might be specific enunciations of identity, or it might be creating a politics that does not see visibility as the primary goal, therefore, allowing an affinity and political kinship to take center stage.<sup>6</sup> Media engagements are one of many important discursive practices we integrate into our every day lives. Media analysis cannot confine itself to an effects or an impact-measuring project if it hopes to contribute to understanding media as part, rather than the center, of sociality. A rich examination of new media takes stock of how central it is, how it comes to be seen as meaningful, and when it seems less relevant. As new media scholar Nancy Baym argues “online spaces are constructed and the activities that people do online are intimately interwoven with the construction of the offline world and the activities and structures in which we participate, whether we are using the Internet or not” (Baym, 2006, p. 86). The questions then become: What role do media engagements play in people’s lives? When do they turn to media and when is it expendable background noise? When do media make a difference and what are the conditions that make these differences register as important or negligible? If we are to understand the relationship between media and young people’s sense of their sexualities and genders we need an approach that moves away from isolating media as conduits or contagions. Framing new media as a conduit or contagion limits our ability to understand complicated individual and collective engagements with media.

To address this need for a more relational method to understanding media, I suggest concentrating on studies of media “in situ.” I borrow the notion of “in situ” from the archeological study of material artifacts. The term literally means “in place.” Archaeologists use this phrase to describe an artifact at the point of its unearthing or sighting, one that is still embedded in a deposit suggesting its age and cultural context. The concept of “in situ” embodies more than description of the artifact and its location, in this case, beyond the moment of reception. Although similar to media ethnographies of audience reception, my approach radically de-centers media as the focus of study. Instead of examining audiences’ reactions to specific programs or websites, I attempt to map the relationship between rural young people’s experiences of a cluster of media engagements and a milieu that is constitutive of its meaning. An in situ approach to media takes as the object of study the processes and understandings of new media among people within the context of their use. This approach requires tracing the circulations and layers of socioeconomic status, race relations, and location in the lives of the people I met that make their media engagements meaningful to them. A media in situ approach focuses on how media engagements fit into a larger mosaic of collective identity work. This approach does not assume a singular message or effect is (or can be) conveyed or transmitted.

## Theorizing Youth: Applying Critical Youth Studies to Queer Youth Identity Work in a Digital Age

Researchers typically assume rural youth lack the resources, capacity, and support to actively foster difference in the seeming homogeneity of their small towns (Faulkner and Lindsey, 2004; Flint, 2004; Snively, 2004). Rather than presume an absence of critical materials for identity formation, I draw on a sociological tradition that theorizes identity as a deeply social, contextual, and collective achievement rather than a psychological expression of an internal process of integration. Far from being the reflection of an inner drive, I argue that youth identities are cultural assemblages that work with the materials on hand.<sup>7</sup> My approach is deeply informed by the scholarship that falls under the rubric of New Childhood Studies and critical youth studies (Adler and Adler, 1998; Corsaro, 1997; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Jenks and Prout, 1998; Lesko, 2001; Qvortrup, 1994).

New Childhood Studies take adult researchers (perhaps many of today's parents) to task for uncritically applying a developmental paradigm that frames young people's identity practices as playful experimentation rather than seeing these practices as ways of being in the world (Qvortrup, 1994). Children and adolescents' articulations of identity are interpreted strictly as rites of passage, paths youth travel on their way to adulthood. Under this rubric, young people's experiences of identity are simultaneously understood as the blossoming of an individual's unique character and, paradoxically, the timely appearance of universal characteristics particular to a phase of the human life course. New Childhood Studies challenges researchers to work against ahistorical, apolitical accounts and universalizing developmental models of children and adolescents. In its place, New Childhood Studies offer a critical analysis of the "socially constructed nature of childhood and adolescence" replete with the cultural baggage of adult-centered views of the world (Best, 2007, p. 11).<sup>8</sup>

More recently, building on the work of New Childhood Studies, critical youth studies uses the insights and tools of cultural studies and critical studies in race, sexuality, and gender to engage children and adolescents as active agents and independent social actors rather than passive "subjects-in-the-making" (Best, 2007, p. 11). This approach attempts to foreground how power dynamics, including the researcher's relationship to youth participants, produce the cultural knowledge that shapes our understandings of young people. Working from this premise, critical youth scholars seek to acknowledge adults, children, and adolescents as cultural participants working in and through a dense network of power relations. This is particularly the case when it comes to the culturally charged discussion of youth sexuality. As Susan Driver argues, in reflecting on her own pioneering research examining queer youth's exploration of sexual desire through digital video, youth research must respond to and work against the heteronormative "conventional codes of academic knowledge" that "render ambiguous, indirect, and unstable ways of signifying [queer sexual] desire invisible" (Driver, 2007, p. 308).

Studying rural queer and questioning youth identity formations builds on New Childhood Studies and critical youth studies in two important ways. Unlike the independence and self-determination that define the queer youth political culture of national LGBTQ youth advocacy programs or queer-specific, urban-based resources and social services, rural young people's engagements with LGBTQ politics are marked by their interdependence with familiar queer adult advocates and non-LGBTQ allies. Since the 1990s and the visibility of "gay youth" as a cultural category, city-based queer youth activists envisioned their work as autonomous from that of adult queer activists (even though it was contingent on capital trickling down from adults). Rural queer and questioning youth have neither the peers nor the local tax base to imagine such independent political power. This echoes the broader disenfranchisement that challenges all rural-based political organizing efforts. As a result, studying rural queer youth identities requires critical scholars of youth culture to complicate youth-centered research models to account for adults' active participation in the construction of rural queer youth identity and community.

Secondly, I investigate rural queer youth identities as performative, socially mediated moments of being and becoming, or as queer theorist Lisa Duggan puts it, identity construction as a "process in which contrasting 'stories' of the self and others—stories of difference—are told, appropriated, and retold as stories of location in the social world of structured inequalities" (Duggan, 1993, p. 793). I work against privileging youth experience in ways that could inadvertently essentialize queerness as a stable state of being that some youth possess.<sup>9</sup> Instead, I legitimize rural young people's claims to queer identities as, by definition, always more than "just a phase" or "experimentation" while questioning the presumption that identities ever start with or settle down to rest in the hands of individuals. My own use of the metaphor of collective labor in a discussion of youth identity—talking about identity as work shared among many rather than the play of any one individual—is meant to recognize that the assembly and articulation of one's sense of self like any other social action is, as sociologist Anselm Strauss puts it, "work [that] always occurs in contexts" (Strauss, 1993, p. 95–97). I define queer identity work as the collective labor of crafting, articulating, and pushing the boundaries of identities. I frame youth sexualities and genders as labor carried out among and through people, places, media texts, and a host of other circuitous routes. Treating identity as work highlights the dynamic strategies youth and their allies must employ as they contend with the politics of visibility across these various work sites. It also acknowledges how political economies of gay and lesbian life intersect with consumption practices to produce genres of realness available for queer identity work. These materials are often commercial products themselves hardly original or removed from the processes of commoditization. However, as queer scholars such as Jose Estaban Munoz and Alex Doty have argued, audiences often rework hegemonic media representations through polysemic practices of queering and disidentification (Munoz, 1999; Doty, 1993). I argue that rural youth do the collective labor of identity work differently than their urban counterparts not because rural queer youth have it inherently harder but

because they confront different heteronormative/homophobic burdens and different identifications with the commercially mediated identities available to them. As a result, they bear the weight of a politics of visibility that, I argue, was built for city living.

### **Imagined Terrain of Online Queerness**

If there are any consistencies to the online sites rural youth such as Amy turned to, it would be that Mogenic, a nonprofit website produced in Australia by and for youth, was one of the more commonly cited destinations beyond Gay.com and Planetout.com. Mogenic's collections of coming-out stories, found on its message boards, were particularly popular. Other sites mentioned were *Oasis Magazine Online*, the Advocates for Youth website, the Advocates for Youth LGBTQ youth project, and the website for the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). This is by no means a comprehensive listing of the sites of queer realness rural youth plumbed. In fact, the list is too disparate to be of much use. Youth were just as likely to mention cruising the gay and lesbian sections of Yahoo as any LGBTQ-specific site. The meaning and use rural young people found in these sites are not easily discernible from the content of the sites themselves. The realities of new media access in rural U.S. communities further complicating any efforts to sum up the resources available to rural youth.

Sociologists' Paul DiMaggio and Eszter Hargittai make a compelling case that as diffusion of new media accelerates analyses of the digital divide, previously defined in binary terms of technology's presence or absence, must consider "the dimensions of inequality" that delineate new media use (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001, p. 8).<sup>10</sup> DiMaggio and Hargittai's findings suggest that as information and communication technologies make their way into all corners of the globe through Internet cafés, schools, and government offices, researchers must pay even greater attention to conditions that reproduce social inequality through gradations in access as equipment, personal and confidential use, skills, and social support among new media users (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001, p. 8). For example, rural youth involved in this study had universal access to the Internet through computers available at their schools. Their state governments had invested heavily in school-based access through federal grants. But these grants also included some of the most sophisticated web-monitoring and filtering software available. Rural youth could not use their school's resources to examine the discourses circulating online about nonheteronormative gender or sexual identities because resources that discussed sexuality were summarily blocked. Even when young people reported being able to circumvent the filtering software they did so at great risk as their passcodes for accessing school computers logged their browsing, email, and chat exchanges. Poverty and unemployment levels also dictated who might have access to a personal computer at home. Most of the working poor to lower middleclass youth I interviewed shared their computers with family members. Even in cases where they had autonomous home access, youth frequently had only the most rudimentary ability to read more than text-based sites

as most of the regions involved in my research offer only dial-up service. A 2000 national study of access to broadband technologies indicated that only 5% of towns with populations below 10,000 had point of presence Internet service providers or other infrastructures critical to providing high-speed services (Malecki, 2003, p. 204). Cable and digital subscriber line (DSL) services are still largely unavailable in rural Appalachia.<sup>11</sup> This speaks to the importance of considering not just the availability of new media to rural queer and questioning youth but also the limits of that access for a range of reasons.

Regardless of issues of access, youth must continually search for queer representations of realness as the Internet is always changing, constantly displacing reliable locations for the kinds of reflections of realness they seek. But, even though at times difficult to track down, realness found in online narratives as compared to fictional accounts in film and television indexes the limits of mass culture's ability to bring visibility to LGBTQ-identifying people in rural communities. They find comfort and familiarity in the narratives of realness circulating online. More so than fictional characters situated in urban scenes where a critical mass of LGBTQ visibility is taken for granted, these stories resonate with the complex negotiation of visibility and maintaining family ties that consume rural young people's everyday lives. These digitally circulated representations of LGBTQ identity categories interpellate rural queer youth by laying down a basic narrative for the articulation of identity. At the same time the amount rural youth absorb or rework these categories has everything to do with each young person's capacity to enact and publicly assert these categories. This approach to studies of media's effects calls for a deeply situated understanding of media engagements beyond the reception of particular media texts.

### **Queer Realness**

A media in situ approach applied to this fieldwork shows us rural queer youth prioritizing particular genres of media engagement. Rural youth used the Internet, particularly engagements with youth-spun web sites and personal ads on commercial media properties like Gay.com, to confirm the existence of queerness beyond their locales and strategize about how to bring that queerness home to roost. These genres as "discursive practices" are clearly experienced as sources of information and, to some extent, unmediated truth about and for LGBTQ-identifying people (Friedman, 2006; Mittell, 2001; Hanks, 1987; Bauman, 1986). However, genres of queer realness are not defined by the aesthetic codes they might share as digital texts.<sup>12</sup> What distinguishes and clusters internet-based personals, search engine results, coming-out stories, and chat rooms as genres of queer realness is that they provide moments of storytelling that transform how rural youth think and talk about their identities. As Richard Bauman notes, "[w]hen one looks to the social practices by which social life is accomplished, one finds—with surprising frequency—people telling stories to each other, as a means of giving cognitive and emotional coherence to experience,

constructing and negotiating social identity” (Bauman, 1986, p. 113). Rural youth are in the thick of these negotiations.

Darrin, a gay-identifying 17-year-old from an agricultural town of 6,100 people sees web sites, like the commercial portal, PlanetOut.com, as, “a place to feel at least somewhat at home.” He adds, “but then I have to figure out how to make that home here too, you know? Chat rooms give me a place to go when I don’t feel I can connect to others where I am.” Amanda, a 14-year-old from Kentonnessee, describes her experiences online as “pretty much the only place I can Google stuff or say my true feelings and not have everyone know about it.” Darrin and Amanda’s mention of commercial LGBTQ portals and search engines suggest that these genres offer a boundary public—a sense of place and the tools to find more resources—for their identity work.<sup>13</sup> For example, Sarah, a 17-year-old from a town of 12,000 along the Ohio River separating Indiana and Kentucky, notes:

When I’m on these sites, I like to read others’ stories and experiences. I use web sites and search engines, like Google, most because they give the most info. I like personal stories, people’s coming-out stories. How their family reacted. Going online and reading things from Betty DeGeneres [mother of lesbian comedian Ellen DeGeneres] on PlanetOut, where she does a little column. Trying to be as much of a sponge as I can when it comes to other people and their situations and how they handled themselves in those situations. . . using their experiences as possibilities for my own.

PlanetOut, and its popular business partner the internet portal Gay.com, draw millions of visitors monthly.<sup>14</sup> PlanetOut, like other commercial sites that cater to community-specific niche markets, prominently promotes community areas and rotates spotlighted personal profiles along with designated message boards and chat rooms targeting youth, women, men, and a range of sexual and gender identities.<sup>15</sup> LGBTQ-specific news and entertainment refresh each time one brings up the site’s main page. Sarah’s perusing and information sifting is familiar to all of us. Sarah prioritized searching for coming-out stories and how-to’s that could help her talk to family members about her queer identity. Sarah, like most of the youth I met, didn’t want to escape from rural Kentucky. In part her desire to stay put was because of her close ties with family but she, like several other youth I interviewed, also had no funds to leave her hometown and no educational training or particularly marketable job skills to make moving anything but a frightening prospect. Instead, she wanted to refashion her local circumstances with the help of what she discovered online. As I discuss elsewhere, “family” represents a social safety net that is otherwise absent from the public infrastructure of impoverished rural communities (Gray, forthcoming). Because this ethnographic study focused on youth who hadn’t run away or been kicked out of their homes, what I learned about the conditions for queering identity and publics in rural communities came from young people who either did not want to leave their small towns or could not muster the means to do so.<sup>16</sup> Most were also minors and, therefore, had limited resources and legal rights to independence.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, most of these young people were financially dependent on their parents. More broadly, despite their queer identity work, their communities embraced them because of their ties to local families. As such, families were primary sources of emotional and material support as well as social recognition and (albeit sometimes begrudged) acceptance. Narratives that conveyed how to handle family anger, disappointment, and potential rejection were particularly important to these young people. Youth, like Sarah, were heavily invested in finding the commensurability between the tangible social worlds of their families and the referential connections to online LGBTQ communities. Sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani called “audiences that are not obviously on the scene,” like the ones Sarah encountered through her websurfing, “reference groups” (Shibutani, 1962, p. 129). He argued that we orient and adjust our behaviors according to the reference group we envision. This process is complicated if one is at once learning about and seeking out markers of these reference groups. Rural youth needed to make their identities fit within the framework of “family.”

The emphasis Shibutani puts on references to presumed but not present queer others is poetically illustrated among young people who use new media for what they refer to as “research.” Joseph, for one, describes his early efforts to understand his attraction to boys this way: “When I was 11 or 12 years old, I started getting crushes on people, and I started going to search engines [on the internet] and doing research about it. . . I just started doing research, and I found out what everything meant and that I was gay.”

Justin, another 15-year-old questioning youth from a small Kentucky town (4,500) on the Kentucky-Ohio border describes his research this way:

When I first got the Internet, my main goal was. . . I was about 13, I guess. . . of course, pornography ‘cause I heard boys at school talking about it. When I first started, I would go lookin’ for main places and they would have lesbians and gays in separate categories. Finally, I realized they [lesbians and gays] had their own [websites]. I had to search. It really was work. It was really, really hard to get onto these websites ‘cause some of them had a block, and you’d have to hunt around for the ones that were free. Sometimes, you’d wait for a picture to download for 5 minutes! I was risking getting caught so I wanted to find something I really wanted to see!

The internet presented both opportunities and challenges to Justin’s research agenda. It required him to weigh his desires against the risk of exposure. He balanced the covertness and patience needed to find queer realness—primarily on personal listings on gay and lesbian-specific web sites—with his need to view something he could not see in his daily life.

Josh also talks about the internet as a means to explore his new community:

I was so uneducated about the gay life. I knew almost nothing. I mean like, gay terminology. People on the internet would use something and I’d be like, ‘What is that?’ I didn’t know. I didn’t have a computer at home. I mean, I knew about a few things from other friends but most of them were, like things, you know, like how to

act in a bar. Well, this is a dry county and we don't have any bars. And I don't think there's much in the Western Kentucky area where I'm from for gay people.

Josh doesn't attribute his ignorance of gay life to his rural surroundings. Indeed, Josh is no more "ignorant" than any young person steeped in the heteronormative world that shapes our lives. He recognizes that local places and people can provide some of the references he craves, but he also knows his lack of internet access limits his ability to connect with them. Josh continues:

Online you're able to meet a lot more people than you are off-line. You may get five people at a Tri-State meeting [regional LGBTQ advocacy agency] one day and they may know two other people, so there's like 15 there. Online, I can talk to maybe 20 GLBT people in an hour! Since I live in a small town, where I know very few gay people, it gives me a sense that the gay community is small but when you get on the internet you realize the gay community is everywhere and it's huge!

Rural youth use genres of queer realness to symbolize and actualize their connections to a larger network of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transpeople. They also use these media engagements with genres of queer realness to bring their performances home, anchor them locally, and transform them into experiences of self/senses of identity that can and do happen to youth "just like them."

Some young people seamlessly integrate genres of queer realness into their construction of identity but this is not always the case. To incorporate genres of queer realness into an imagined sense of self, youth must traverse a dense terrain of other social realities. They must weigh how doable or desirable such realness is. As Shibutani notes, "each person performs for some kind of audience; in the drama of life, as in the theater, conduct is oriented toward certain people whose judgment is deemed important" (Shibutani, 1962, p. 129). Our inevitable alignments with multiple audiences lead us, as Shibutani puts it, to "violate the norms of one reference group no matter what [we] do" (Shibutani, 1962, p. 141). Disrupting (or queering) the norm stands out in rural communities where the audience is oriented towards presumptions of familiarity.

### **The Case of Brandon: Negotiating Queer Realness and Rural Racism**

Brandon and I e-mailed several times about his desire to share his story of growing up as an African American in rural Central Kentucky. Brandon is a self-effacing, yet confident, first-year student at a small college a few hours from his hometown. He contacted me after reading an online announcement about my research project forwarded to him by a friend involved with their campus LGBTQ student group. We met for the first time in an activities room tucked in the north wing of his campus' student union. As Brandon waved effusively to people, everyone—from custodians to students to administrators—returned his greeting with a smile and a buoyant, "Hey there, B." After graduating from a Catholic high school in a town of 5,000, he had become a respected leader on campus and was particularly known for his work as the president of the campus's Black Student Caucus.

Brandon and I talked for nearly an hour about the organizing he did around race issues at his high school. He laughed loudly but his voice belied exasperation as he recalled those early leadership experiences. “Any black student at my high school knew that they were representing black with a capital ‘B.’ . . . We were coming from two or three counties from around the region but when we got to school, we became an instant community . . . I used to joke with my best friend, Lana, that we were the NAACP, BET, and NBA all rolled into one!”

Few people knew of Brandon’s same-sex yearnings other than a young man on campus he had dated briefly and a smattering of friends he knew through online chat rooms and instant messaging. He had come out as bisexual to his friends in the Black Student Caucus only two weeks earlier. “I set them up really. I suggested we play a game of ‘20 questions’ with the goal of sharing something with each other we’d never told anyone else. I’ve never been in a relationship with a girl here on campus and it didn’t take my friends long to ask the obvious, ‘Are you gay?’” Brandon said he felt more “whole” since what he dubbed “the big reveal”:

It, well, I was just feeling so split. The pressure to tell someone just seemed there all the time. It really became an issue for me beginning of this semester when the LGBTQ [student] group needed some help doing an HIV awareness project and approached the [Black Student] Caucus but the other members were like, ‘I don’t want to work with the gay group!’ . . . and I felt like such a fake pretending like I had nothing in common with these people [in the LGBTQ student group]. . . I didn’t feel like I could ignore the political struggles of a group I basically belonged to—even if no one knew—what kind of civil rights leader would I be?

I asked Brandon how his student activism and political organizing affected his sexual feelings and identity. He gathered his thoughts and said:

I’ve thought about this a lot lately. I’ve known for some time that I was attracted to both males and females. . . since probably sophomore year in high school. . . [long pause] . . . but, I guess . . . well, I felt like I had to choose between being Black, I had to be either an African American student leader or labeled the ‘gay guy’ and I saw what happened to kids labeled ‘gay’. . . I don’t think I could have handled being rejected by other black kids. Being black was more important to me.

Brandon wondered aloud whether the pressure he felt to appear heterosexual would have been tempered if he’d attended a more racially diverse high school. His high school was in one of the few, nonurban areas of Kentucky with a sizeable, visible, and well-established African American middle class. The rural communities surrounding Brandon’s are typical of the racial makeup of rural Kentucky more broadly which are 90%–96% white. In a town of less than 3,000, this can mean literally one family of color keeps a town from registering as exclusively white. Similar to neighboring West Virginia, Kentucky has no adjacent townships of all or mostly Black communities. Communities of color, predominantly African American but increasingly Latino families, live in relatively segregated neighborhoods in the metro poles of Louisville, Lexington, and Bowling Green. But, there are a few towns often associated with military bases and factories with sizeable African American

populations. To respect Brandon's request for confidentiality, I do not specify the town or region in which he grew up. However, he does live in one of several communities where race relations have long been addressed by a powerful though small community of African Americans in coalition with White civil rights and labor organizers (Fosl, 2002; Buck, 2001).

Brandon felt his white and Black friends accepted him because of his middle-class upbringing, which as he said, "put them all in the same kinds of clothes, neighborhoods, and high school classes." He felt he quickly rose to assume a leadership position as class president in his high school because of the ease with which he moved between his circle of white and Black friends. His high school had a history of welcoming discussions about race and social justice, so Brandon had room to advance projects like extensive Black History Month celebrations and forums on racially motivated hate crimes happening elsewhere in the state and across the border in Indiana. But when it came to opening up about his attraction to boys, he kept his feelings confined to a small circle of friends he talked to exclusively online:

High school was a continuous battle between self-recognition or self-destruction. . . . It was a constant thing. . . . I realized that graduating from college, making achievements, all of that might not matter if people found out I was attracted to guys. So that was the sad part—why try to do good things if it wouldn't 'count' 'cause I liked males? I think that was the reaction that most people in my life—family and friends—would have had. I wasn't courageous enough at that point to, like some of the people that I knew, to just go against the grain and come out. I think it was an ostracizing reaction for me to have, but it helped me survive this far.

One way to interpret Brandon's turmoil is that he sees his sexual desires as threatening to his closeness to family and friends and affirmation at school. Brandon does not possess the unequivocal self-acceptance and "sense of integrity and entitlement" that sociologist Steven Seidman defines as the "postcloseted gay sensibility" of today's gay youth identity (Seidman, 2004, p. 75). Brandon's relationship to a bisexual identity is more complicated. Seidman does not suggest all gay people are "beyond the closet," but does claim that in this unprecedented age of gay visibility most gay Americans "live outside the social framework of the closet" (Seidman, 2004, p. 9).

But as anthropologist Martin Manalansan argues in his ethnography of gay Filipino men's negotiation of sexual identity and diasporic life, gay identity in the United States is "founded on a kind of individuation that is separate from familial and kin bonds and obligations" and "predicated on the use of verbal language as the medium in which selfhood can be expressed" that do not have parallels or translate seamlessly in the social organization of Filipino life in the diaspora (Manalansan, 2003, p. 23). Brandon's struggle is as much with these generic expectations of distance between gay identity and family as with heterosexism. Brandon must reconcile the demands of distancing Manalansan describes as fundamental to U.S. gay identity and his need to maintain family ties and recognition as a local African American leader. Seidman suggests that the identity negotiations Brandon confronts are exceptions

to the rule attributable to the challenges individuals face when they must synthesize sexual identities and racial or other core identities (Seidman, 2004, p. 43). But this is hardly a small number of individuals raising the question: Why are those who privilege gay visibility valorized as “beyond the closet” and youth of color, rural young people, and other individuals with core identities vying for recognition seen as in denial? Seidman’s liberationist approach configures the closet as the residue of a past “social system of heterosexual domination” that can be conquered through choosing recognition and coming out (Seidman, 2004, p. 217–18 n.10). For rural youth, particularly rural youth of color like Brandon, the politics of LGBTQ visibility do not provide greater access to unequivocal pleasures of acceptance and identification and put at risk the necessities of familiarity.

Brandon expressed ambivalence about coming out to his friends and family but did find solace and a way to negotiate the expectations of visibility through what he called his “gay outlet”:

The summer before my junior year, I got work as a station assistant at our local public radio station. I spent evenings stocking and entering things into a database in the basement of the station. The computer I worked on had internet access, no filters like the computers at school, which I wouldn’t have touched with a 10-foot pole! So one night, I don’t even know what I typed in; I just found chat rooms with guys looking to hook up with other guys. But I also found websites about political stuff. . . there was a whole world of people talking about being bisexual. . . well, not as many people talking about that but at least I could see places that were for people like me. . . this was my gay outlet. . . I could read personals, stories about people my age telling their parents about their feelings. . . I could even find rooms for chatting with people living near my hometown!

For Brandon, reading online personals and coming-out stories was a way to experience what coming out to his parents might feel like at a time when his ability to talk about his bisexuality seemed incompatible with his identity as a young, progressive African American student leader in rural Kentucky. Ironically, his online explorations reinforced the racial reality of his daily life:

You know, no matter how many times I went into the Kentucky chat rooms on Gay.com or looked at personals on places like PlanetOut, I never once saw another black kid my age living in my area. . . I didn’t find anything for Black kids anywhere! Maybe that says more about my computer skills? [laughs] I don’t know if that means I’m the only one—I doubt it. . . all of the personals I read either said they were white guys looking for white guys or race didn’t matter. . . but it matters a lot to me!

Youth, like Brandon, use new media to temporarily patch the incongruence or alienation between their sexual desires and other social worlds. They must reckon this mending, however, with the resources locally available to continue their identity work. Brandon’s “gay outlets” attended to parts of his experiences of identity. These engagements with genres of queer realness also reminded him that while “gay outlets” could offer the promise of connection with others “like him,” these others would necessarily reproduce the segregation and racism of his surroundings.

### **The case of John W.: negotiating gay identity and queer desire**

John W. generously made room for us to sit down by clearing away stacks of sheet music and leftover coffee cups from his weathered, plaid couch. He offered a quick apology for the apartment's disarray. "Sorry, the dudes I live with are kind of pigs." We met shortly after he answered my call for participants that circulated through his college diversity coalition's e-mail list. John W.'s tattoos and facial piercings together with the safety pins holding his jeans together fit the moniker of "progressive punk rocker" he proudly claimed. He had recently declared himself "gay" but he wasn't sure if that identity resonated deeply with him.

A 19-year-old white middle class college student, John W. grew up in a factory town of 10,000 and prided himself on being one of the "edgy kids." He continues to commute on weekends from the college he attends to his hometown. Of his high school, he says, "There really weren't too many different kinds of kids. There were the jocks, which I tried to be. There were the smart kids and a few African American kids." John W. grew up in a strict Catholic household where sexual desires were not discussed. He recalls memories from as early as 5 years old when he realized that tying himself to his backyard swing set and hanging from its bars sexually excited him. "I really didn't know what bondage was at that point. Sometimes I even say that maybe my sexual attraction is more towards bondage than male or female." He found friends early on with whom he could share and act out some of these desires: "I don't know if the other cliques got into a little bit more of the alternative lifestyle of having sex or doing sexual things than my group of friends. I would probably think that my group of people was more apt to doing things a little bit different because we were different in the first place." In describing his forays into sexual play, John W. continued:

I had this friend; I think he's straight. But he would come over, and we would get drunk. We just started tying each other up. I was between 15 and 16. One time we were at his house and we were looking at a *Playboy* and then there was like a couple pictures in the back of some guys lifting weights, and he was like, "Do you like that?" "Yeah." He asked me if he could do me up the butt, so I was like, "Okay, sure." As soon as he came and pulled out, he was like, "What have I done? I can't do this again." I haven't talked to him in a while. We didn't leave on bad terms. That's just when I started wondering if maybe I was gay.

John W. singles out his move to a midsized college town and subsequent access to the internet as the means through which he acquired what he described as the language for his innate desires:

In high school, I didn't really have too much access to the internet because it was newer at the time and slower and, of course, all the school computers had software trackers and filters on them. We didn't have a computer at home either. When I came to college, my sophomore year I got a computer, so I had instant access to the internet. Before I had a computer I didn't have any sense of what I'd find online. I just typed in so many things on the computer and just learned about what to type in, what to find. I think with Gay.com I probably just typed in www.gay.com, like

randomly, and found that this was the access to all the perverts like me. That's when I started learning about bondage and the terms, what BDSM was and S&M, and I just, I can't remember how I started looking for groups.

Web sites were critical to John W's process of naming his desires but they also played an important part in his search for local belonging in communities of practice organized around his new identity:

Three or four years ago you'd have a hard time finding something to do with leather or bondage or whatever around here, but now about every weekend there's a party. So the internet has allowed all that to come forth. . . before I met my boyfriend [at the campus LGBTQ group], I was actively involved with a BDSM bondage group that met in South Central Kentucky area. I would travel and play around with male and females—mostly safe sex. I was actively involved with that group.

For John W., claiming a gay identity was a means towards a more salient identity. As he notes, "I have to emphasize that my sexual interests are a big part of who I am, and my attraction for men. . . I don't know. I'm not all that sure that I feel gay like the other guys I meet who are gay. Like my current boyfriend, he's really gay, wants to settle down with one other guy and isn't into bondage at all." When asked how he was different from other gay men his age, John W. responded that from reading websites and negotiating his current relationship he had the sense that being gay came packaged with a set of expectations, such as monogamy and normality "like working at a regular job and settling down."

As John W. saw it, "bondage just comes with a desire to play with other people. I'm not just out to have sex. I'm fulfilling this internal need." Identifying as "gay" made it easier for him to find other men with whom to have the intimacy and sexual connection he desired even if a gay identity did not squarely fit his sense of self and his range of desires:

Gay.com really isn't that great for me because a lot of people aren't into bondage. But I go to the "Kentucky" chat room because you know that you're probably going to find somebody near you. A lot of people will travel two or three hours to meet somebody. You can't just like hit on a guy on campus 'cause you don't know. I can find people on campus that I would have maybe one-night stands, but I really didn't have fun because there was no bondage. If I didn't have access to computers, I don't know what I would do.

The web sites and online communities John W. finds don't confirm an identity for him. Rather, he picks up definitions to pragmatically serve his sexual desires. This process of sorting through the available terms led to his identity as a young gay man. But his gay identity is an approximation. He has ambivalence with the category "gay" but he finds utility in it. Digital representations of what it means to be "gay" have been undeniably vital to Brandon's sexuality. But they also underscore the frustration of what philosopher Kenneth Burke long ago noted, "to define or determine a thing is to mark its boundaries" (Burke, 1969, p. 24).

## Conclusion

Until recently, Brandon felt his bisexuality was incommensurate with his racial identity. John W. questions whether his identification with bondage fits with his understanding of “gay.” Presuming that rural youth in the United States are isolated from LGBTQ identity formation, from the processes that can queer one’s normative sense of self, ignores how identities settle on our skin. The politics of LGBTQ visibility compel Brandon and John W. to put sexual identity ahead of their familial, racial, and queer desires. But, Brandon and John W. teach us that we need to change our perception of the closet as an open or shut door. Closets are, in part, shaped by the “compulsory heterosexuality” that structures our everyday interactions (Rich 1980). Culturally, we all work under the assumption that individuals are heterosexual (and ‘male’ or ‘female’) until “proven” otherwise. Rural communities’ material dependencies on structures of familiarity and the value placed on conformity as a sign of solidarity intensify the visibility of compulsory heterosexuality’s hegemonic sexual and gender norms. Brandon’s experience of what is commonly referred to as “the closet” challenges Seidman’s assertions of or hopes for an America beyond the closet as long as we hitch a generic and universalizing logic of visibility to queer difference.

Like most teens, Brandon and John W. grew up with gay visibility readily available in the media. They knew what “gay” meant but it was an identity category otherwise conspicuously unfamiliar to and popularly depicted as out of place in their rural surroundings. Both Brandon and John W. searched for identities that would lend authenticity to their own desires but that they could also experience locally. But identities, as rhetorician and AIDS activist Cindy Patton has argued, “suture those who take them up to specific moral duties” (Patton, 1993, p. 147). The ascribed moral duties of visibility and normative sexual mores that Brandon and John W. associated with the genre of “gay” realness that they found online conflicted with the moral duties that already deeply engrossed them locally. The genre of “gay” available to them as a commodity through online coming-out narratives and personal ads provided partial relief to their search for realness. However, the packaging of gay identity’s “auxiliary characteristics,” those hegemonic behaviors and affective dispositions represented as integral to the status role of “gay” read as incommensurate with other pieces of their sense of self (Brekhus 2003). Their rural locales did not present them with options to tune out this dissonance. This is not a case of the internet opening netherworlds of desire and identification unavailable in the everyday lives of rural queer youth. Instead Brandon and John W.’s engagements with genres of queer realness demonstrate the dialectical production of modern LGBTQ identities that, by definition, draw on narratives driven by a politics of visibility.

Narratives of isolation reflect the ascendancy and dominance of a self-discovery/disclosure paradigm that structures not only LGBTQ lives but also modern notions of how identities work (Seidman, 2004; Giddens, 1992, p. 200). What we call “the closet” springs from the idea that identities are waiting to be discovered and

unfold from the inside out. Authenticity hinges on erasing the traces of others from our work to become who we “really” are. To leave the traces of social interaction visible is to compromise our claims to authenticity and self-determination (Giddens, 1992, p. 185). Genres that queer realness simultaneously expand and consolidate the possibilities of identity by prompting youth to rework the unmarked categories of heterosexual, male, and female; embrace their burgeoning non-normative desires; and then rearticulate LGBTQ identities as “real,” “natural,” “unmediated,” and “authentic.” In this sense, identity, even the most intimate, personal senses of self, can be explored as deeply social and highly mediated. With this in mind, how might we shift from imagining rural young people’s sexualities and genders are unfolding states of essential being stunted by what we presume they lack? How might we come to see identities (theirs and ours) as a cultural process akin to what philosopher Gil Deleuze characterizes as the folding in from the outside?

The transformative power of self-identification to organize politics, culture, and intimacy depends on countless others. Social identities as agents of change are not isolatable to individual bodies or locations. Highly dynamic dialogues between local, material conditions and modern, commercial renderings of LGBTQ identities produce particular ways to dress, speak, and look for rural youth. For the youth with whom I worked, representations of the real—online coming-out stories and electronic personal ads in particular—were crucial. These genres of queer realness expand their sense of place, home, and belonging within queer social worlds.

Beyond a moment of visibility provided by mainstream television and film, genres of queer realness circulate compelling images of peers on a similar quest for verity and viability. This validation is particularly pressing in rural areas where community members rely on being known and knowable—familiar—to people around them. Internet-based genres of queer realness offer rural youth possibilities for both recognition and acknowledgement of seeking that recognition in places one is presumed to already be familiar. This genre of realness has the power to authenticate queerness through the textual and visual rhetoric of LGBTQ visibility that is (seemingly) real and tangible somewhere if not easily found in a small town. But how is the increased visibility of queer realness through media discourses taken up in people’s lives? What are the practical applications of these media texts and discourses? What do these youth do with the expectations of visibility that are so central to the identity politics of the LGBTQ social movement? Instead of trying to gauge how media effects impact individuals, we should look at everyday uses and practices of media engagement.

## Notes

- 1 The inclusion of “queer” and “questioning” in the name of the forum Amy found online was not an anomaly. Several of the most commonly cited youth-specific websites and discussion forums referenced queer and questioning if not in their titles then in their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). Arguably these terms,

typically left undefined, operated as umbrella terms or placeholders for a spectrum of sexual and gender identities and practices that these sites and their offline counterparts meant to include. While queer and questioning challenge heteronormative structures of teenage life in multiple ways they can also operate as stabilizing identity categories. So, for example, youth less able to reconcile their sense of self with essentializing discourses that position being gay, lesbian, bi, and trans as normative identities akin to being straight, queer, and questioning naming practices create space for ambivalence and resonance with resistance to not just heterosexuality but fixed LGBT identities as well. Yet articulating oneself as queer or questioning ironically still deploys the logic of identity categories, stabilizing, if only temporarily, what or who these youth see themselves to be. I use queer throughout this essay to signal my own desire to consider how a moniker that de-naturalizes norms associated with sexual and gender identities might also paradoxically operate as an identity category. In most cases, the youth involved in this study did not primarily identify as queer but used it as casual slang or a term of endearment for each other and a broader imagined community. Some youth did see themselves as consciously queering their community's norms, but far more used "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," or "transgender" as a noun to name a self-evident, core sense of their identity. Yet, despite efforts to stabilize and normalize their sense of self through concrete labels, rural LGBT-identifying youth and young people questioning their heterosexuality and gender identity necessarily disrupted (in effect, queered) their surroundings. Their mere presence defied local and national expectations no matter how much they might conform to the most normative gay and lesbian standards. In doing so, rural LGBT-identifying and questioning youth complicate critiques of "homonormativity"—gay and lesbian conformity and liberal appeals for acceptance—and perhaps signal the need for rethinking what homonormativity means in locales where even queers assume LGBT-identifying people are out of place. Drawing on scholar Shane Phelan, I maintain that the usefulness of the term "queer" may be that it names "an unstable identity process" (Phelan, 1997, p. 60) less intentionally claimed by individuals than unpredictably carried out through their interactions.

- 2 Mittell does not specifically have ethnographic studies of media in mind but his culturally situated notion of genre resonates with work in anthropology that examines how audiences and listeners interact with generic conventions. See the work of William Hanks (1987); Richard Bauman (1986); and more recently Sarah Friedman (2006) for exemplars of this approach to genres as discursive practices.
- 3 Fieldwork for this project took place between September 2001 and April 2003, and several short follow-up trips in the summers of 2004 and 2005. Thirty-four young people, ages 14–24 years old, provided most of the interview materials while a broader group of youth allowed me access to participation and observation of their day-to-day lives. I anchored my research in several small towns and rural communities most with populations between 900 and as large as 15,000 found in what is referred to by the U.S. Census and Appalachian Regional Commission as the Central Appalachian Region.
- 4 See Martin Meeker (2006) *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. This is

to-date, the only book-length analysis of communication on the formation of gay and lesbian communities. But it focuses primarily on flow of information to and from the urban space of the San Francisco Bay Area.

- 5 As media scholar Steve Jones recently argued that the Internet “comes to us at a screen’s remove should not remove from our consideration the realities (socially, politically, economically, or otherwise constructed) within which those who use it live and within which the hardware and software, markets and marketing operate” (Jones 2006, xv).
- 6 Lisa Duggan suggests just such an approach in her influential essay “Making It Perfectly Queer.” Duggan was citing (on p. 22) Donna Haraway’s 1985 reference to feminist Chela Sandoval’s use of the notion of “oppositional consciousness” to construct identities that resisted naturalization but sought, instead, a foundation of coalitional politics built through common cause in Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.”
- 7 For a representative sample of studies that approach identity as a sociological construction see Strauss (1959), Giddens (1991), Mead and Morris, (1934), and Goffman (1959); specific studies of youth identity include early studies by Margaret Mead (1932) and William Foote Whyte (1943). For studies specifically dealing with the career of homosexuals, see Laud Humphreys (1970) and later on lesbian identities, Barbara Ponse (1978). I also draw heavily on the more recent work of Wayne Brekhus (2003) and his concept of suburban gay male identities as transmutable categories that can serve as actions, objects, or characteristics depending on the social situation. I hope this project builds a serviceable bridge between interactionist/constructionist perspectives on identity and poststructuralist perspectives on subjectivity. For the latter, the self is much less coherent and more of a “consequence” of discourse and power. Arguably, an interactionist approach and conceptualization of identity makes a bit more room for agency and resistance. On this point, see Jane Flax (1990).
- 8 For a recent and thorough review of this literature and its implications for youth research see Amy Best’s introduction to *Representing Youth: Methodological Issues in Critical Youth Studies*.
- 9 Many readers will recognize that this approach to identity is indebted to the work of Judith Butler and her use of Esther Newton’s notion of performance as iterative acts that produce the chimera of a stable identity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. See also Barbara Smith’s work on the social construction of personal narrative in “Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories” (1981).
- 10 Also see DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001).
- 11 ConnectKentucky, “Internet and Broadband Use in Kentucky: Statewide Results from the 2005 County Level Technology Assessment Study” available at [www.connectkentucky.org](http://www.connectkentucky.org). For more on digital development in rural communities see Malecki (2005). For a more recent survey of broadband penetration see ConnectKentucky, “2007 Kentucky Technology Trends: Results of the 2007 ConnectKentucky Residential Survey” available at [www.connectkentucky.org](http://www.connectkentucky.org).
- 12 I draw from the work of scholars on drag and the importance of “realness” in performing gender as a category such as Butler (1990; 1993) as well as Judith Halberstam (1998) and the earlier work of Esther Newton (1972). Unlike hyperbolic

- performances of gender popularly associated with drag, “realness” seeks to embody rather than parody gender norms.
- 13 There is an ongoing, vibrant discussion of the critical role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the construction of spaces. For example, David Morley and Kevin Robins, in *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (1995), offer a theoretical analysis of how ICTs—particularly globally circulated mass media consumption—disrupt the traditional boundaries of the nation-state. These authors argue that ICTs afford a different kind of geography and assert corresponding global/local dialectics. Anthropologist Debra Spitulnik (2002) takes a more linguistic approach to the ways in which communicative practices and their everyday discursive engagements with media technologies, such as portable radios in Zambia, produce spaces of cultural mobility. Zizi Papacharissi, in “The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as Public Sphere.” *New Media and Society* 4, no. 1 (2002): 9–27, more recently argued that the virtual spaces of new media offer potential for a revival of the public sphere. See Michael Curry’s *The Work in the World: Geographical Practice and the Written Word* (1996) for a more provocative discussion of the distinction between “space” and “place” that bears heavily on the whether new media can be considered locations of any sort.
  - 14 PlanetOut and Gay.com merged in 2001. For a discussion of their business model Campbell (2005).
  - 15 See Campbell (2005), Gamson (2003), and Alexander (2002).
  - 16 Unfortunately, there are no studies that could provide a more in-depth discussion of the numbers of youth who leave or stay in rural communities in relation to the resources available to them to negotiate a queer sense of identity. The census data suggests a slow and steady “brain drain” from the parts of Appalachia where I did the bulk of my fieldwork but these data do not easily track the ebb and flow of specific young people in and out of the area or attempt to determine why some youth stay or leave, and the social, political, and economic factors that feed into these decisions.
  - 17 Studies from the late 1980s to present, such as Housing Assistance Council (2002); Hoover and Carter, “The Invisible Homeless: Non-Urban Homeless in Appalachian East Tennessee” (1991); Fitchen (1992); and Cloke, Johnson, and May (2007) have consistently shown that U.S. rural communities have few, and more often no, shelters, outreach programs, or minimal services. Homelessness is often invisible because individuals with insecure housing use car campers, parks, and private homes as temporary shelters and there are no centralized support services where these individuals could be counted.

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