

Introduction

Do you think anyone in his right mind would choose to be gay in Nebraska?

—**Bob Kerrey**, two-term Democratic senator, president emeritus of the New School for Social Research, and marriage equality advocate, in a 2012 speech to Nebraska voters, explaining how he knows that sexual orientation is not a choice

One of the most curious aspects of historical knowledge is the centrally important role that forgetting plays in its production. Indeed, if knowledge of the past was never lost by individuals or societies, there would be no compelling reason to write history. At the very least, whatever qualified as historical knowledge under such conditions would undoubtedly look very different from what typically passes for historical knowledge in our world, plagued as it is by amnesia. “Amnesia” may not be the best word to characterize the kind of forgetting that prompts the production of new historical knowledge, however, because, although it is assuredly selective, this forgetting is seldom arbitrary.

Consider the state of contemporary knowledge about same-sex intimacy and gender nonconformity in rural and small-town America. In their 1948 study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey and colleagues observed rather nonchalantly that “ranchmen, cattle men, prospectors, lumbermen, and farming groups in general” were all widely known to engage in same-sex sexual activities. “These are men who have faced the rigors of nature in the wild,” Kinsey explained. “They live on realities and on a minimum of theory.” For Kinsey, saying that these men lived “on realities and a minimum of theory” meant that they tended to sidestep the thorny issue of the relation of sex and identity in favor of a somewhat less troubled and troubling pragmatics of pleasure. “Such a background breeds the attitude that sex is sex,” Kinsey explained, “irrespective of the nature of the partner with whom the relation is had. . . . Such groups of hard-riding, hard-hitting assertive males would not tolerate the affections of some city groups that are involved in the homosexual [*sic*]; but this, as far as they can see, has little to do with the question of having sexual relations with other men.”¹

Like most people struggling to generalize about the meaning of experiences that are as particular as sex or feelings about sex, Kinsey clearly bears the mark of his own place in history. For example, while it makes sense that he does not mention women, given the fact that his comments were made in the context of a study that deals exclusively with male sexual behavior, his decision to characterize these particular men as “hard-riding,” “hard-hitting,” “assertive,” and notably realist betrays a fairly uncritical embrace of a very specific vision of American manhood and masculinity deeply rooted in a frontier mythology that historian Peter Boag contends had itself been actively cleansed of any trace of gender ambiguity by the time Kinsey made these observations.² Still, Kinsey eventually managed to get his point: “the highest frequencies of the homosexual which we have ever secured anywhere,” he wrote, “have been in particular rural communities in some of the more remote sections of the country. . . . This type of rural homosexuality contradicts the theory that homosexuality in itself is an urban product.”³

Because Kinsey characterized these findings as a contradiction of an existing theory regarding the origin of homosexuality, we can fairly assume that he expected that they would come as a surprise to many readers in 1948. Given the social and political climate of postwar America, it is easy to understand why. After all, as historian David K. Johnson has shown, at the time “perverts” and “sexual degenerates” were far more likely to be imagined sitting in desk chairs at the U.S. State Department’s offices in Washington, D.C., than occupying horse saddles.⁴ The interesting question for my purposes, however, is why this passage still seems surprising today, roughly three and half decades into the collective scholarly enterprise of writing the history of gender and sexuality in the United States and some sixty years after Kinsey pointed to a long and extensive history of same-sex sexual behavior and gender nonconformity in rural communities. To answer that question in anything except the most superficial manner, we must return to certain aspects of Kinsey’s statement, particularly his oblique reference to a “theory that homosexuality is itself an urban product” and his mobilization of the term “rural” itself. First, however, let me describe the scope of this book and explain the contribution it seeks to make.

This book argues that rural and small-town Americans witnessed a gradual normalization of the discourses of gender and sexuality over the course of the twentieth century. Specifically, it contends that an emerging discourse of sexuality permeated the American landscape during the first half of the twentieth century and in so doing transformed the way that many rural Americans made sense of gender and sexual behavior. Sometimes this transformation occurred when farmers encountered itinerant sex educators or rural social reformers bent on uplifting the “degenerate” countryside by ministering the gospel of moral and sexual hygiene. Other times it happened when young men from farming families enrolled in courses on selective breeding at land-grant colleges and universities—courses that quickly turned toward the subject of eugenics and the importance of monitoring sexual behavior in human beings. On still

other occasions it happened when rural women felt ashamed while perusing the pages of newspapers or ready-to-wear clothing catalogues and found mass-produced representations of feminine beauty that seemed in no way related to them, their bodies, or the conditions under which they lived and worked. All of these encounters caused rural Americans to question long-held beliefs about race, class, sex, and gender. Over time, such encounters also prompted many of them to reshape and reorder those beliefs in deference to an increasingly national sensibility about the meaning of sex and gender, a sensibility that typically was presented as being more modern and therefore superior to their own.

In making the case that rural and small-town Americans' thinking about gender and sexuality was gradually transformed over the course of the twentieth century, this book both builds on and largely concurs with much existing scholarship documenting what might be referred to as the heteronormalization of American culture as a whole. Where it differs from some of that scholarship, however, is in its insistence that, as a process, heteronormalization was neither a particularly smooth one in rural areas and small towns, nor uncontested. This book maintains that during the twentieth century's early decades, especially, what looks from today's perspective like decidedly queer behavior was anything but uncommon or unheard of in the hinterland. For example, certain populations, particularly populations of laboring rural men, regarded sex between men as acceptable if women were nowhere to be found. Similarly, in small towns, it was often assumed that one of the local tomboys or sissies might simply never outgrow their juvenile resistance to becoming a proper young lady or a well-mannered young gentleman. Later, during the Great Depression, when hundreds of thousands of young men from decimated farms and beleaguered small towns left home to work in Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps throughout the United States, they brought many of these attitudes with them. These men created an expansive homosocial world in which cross-dressing and eroticized horseplay were seen as largely unremarkable pastimes pursued in the context of an emergency work relief program that had, ironically, been created primarily to preserve their endangered manhood.

For their part, rural women remarked on the ways in which life on the farm blurred the line between masculinity and femininity, particularly when they found themselves engaged in precisely the same kind of strenuous labor as men. They talked about the "mannishness" brought on by drudgery and rural poverty rather than their own "female masculinity," an important feminist and queer refiguration of the idea of "mannishness" that today many butch women, some transmen, and lot of genderqueers regard as empowering.⁵ But even without having the late-twentieth-century concept of female masculinity at their disposal, early-twentieth-century American farm women certainly understood that one could be both female bodied and masculine at the same time.

Beyond combating selectively some of the amnesias that surround the history of gender and sexuality in rural and small-town America, this book seeks to remind readers of two other very important points. First, normalizing discourses

are always precisely that. They are not empirical descriptions of individual experience or lived reality, although they do significantly reshape experience and reality. Even when normalizing discourses succeed in effecting significant change in the world, they seldom yield changed realities that are entirely consistent and well ordered in an epistemological sense. Rather, vestiges and shades of whatever sex and gender ways were partially displaced by these normalizing discourses almost always continue to bleed through in the context of everyday life, sometimes long after an ascendant regime of knowledge has been widely accepted as the new “common sense.”

Second, if the views of rural and small-town Americans regarding the meaning of gender and sexuality were transformed during this period, they were hardly alone in this experience. In fact, most Americans’ views regarding the meaning of gender and sexuality were significantly transformed during the early decades of the twentieth century, including Americans who lived in major cities. It would therefore be a serious mistake to characterize whatever process of transformation rural and small-town life underwent during this period as a process of rural America being remade in the city’s image. If anything, it was a process of national normalization. If new views regarding the meaning of gender and sexuality were imposed from above, they were imposed on all Americans, albeit in different ways, depending on where they lived, and with differing effects. Such ideas were never imposed onto a blank slate, however. Rural and small-town Americans were never unaware that some people inhabited their bodies in slightly peculiar ways, or that others engaged in sexual conduct with members of the same sex. And they were certainly never without their own evolving beliefs about what these behaviors and dispositions meant when they encountered them.

History in the Wake of Gay Identity

Given Alfred Kinsey’s claim that “the highest frequencies of the homosexual which we have ever secured anywhere have been in particular rural communities in some of the more remote sections of the country,” one might have thought that the study of rural and small-town life would have figured prominently in the field of lesbian and gay social history from its inception. But like pioneers in any field, pioneers in the study of lesbian and gay social history first had to decide how to define their object of study, and some of the choices they made about how to do this actually had the effect of turning attention away from the countryside, at least temporarily.

For example, in 1979, pioneering gay historian John D’Emilio delivered a now famous lecture in which he called for “a new, more accurate” understanding of the history of lesbian and gay life in the United States.⁶ Published later as a now equally famous essay entitled “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” D’Emilio rejected the idea that “homosexuality” was a historically transcendent phenomenon. Instead, he argued that lesbian and gay history was properly the study

of lesbian and gay *identity*, identities that emerged in part because of the diminished importance of the family-based household economy as a unit of production under modern capitalism. Whereas women and men living under pre-capitalist conditions tended to remain within the “traditional” family because it was only there that they could find the means to survive, the growth of the wage labor system during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries allowed women and men who did not wish to create self-sustaining households of their own to seek their personal fortunes elsewhere. According to D’Emilio, this was a necessary precondition for the emergence of a distinctly modern form of gay identity because

only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity—an identity based on attraction to one’s own sex. By the end of the century, a class of men and women existed who recognized their erotic interest in their own sex, saw it as a trait that set them apart from the majority, and sought others like themselves.

By extension, D’Emilio reasoned, “It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on sexual identity.”⁷

Scholars have sometimes been critical of D’Emilio for promulgating a theory of lesbian and gay history that some see as having narrowed the scope of the field so dramatically that it could, if rigorously applied, disqualify as “lesbian and gay history” anything that happened outside a major American city before about 1900.⁸ This critique has some merit, but not because it accurately describes a serious flaw in D’Emilio’s theory. In fact, D’Emilio’s theory in no way precludes the possibility that same-sex sexual behavior and gender non-conformity took place outside of urban contexts. What it says is that the emergence of a distinctive lesbian and gay identity depended first and foremost on a mutual recognition of sameness among people harboring same-sex erotic desires. It also says that the likelihood of such mutual recognition occurring gradually increased as more and more people found themselves in closer and closer to proximity to one another as a result of urbanization wrought by capitalist development.

That is all undoubtedly true. Where D’Emilio’s theory becomes somewhat vague and therefore complicated is in its treatment of agency and intentionality. Because of the way he worded the passage quoted earlier it has never been entirely clear whether D’Emilio meant to imply that members of that “class of women and men” who “recognized their erotic interest in their own sex” were prompted to begin seeking out “others like themselves” *by* migrating from the country to the city or *because* they had already migrated from the country to the city for other reasons. It seems probable, at least to me, that D’Emilio meant

to allow for both possibilities, a rhetorical bet he hedged by casting capitalism's transformative effect in passive terms as one that "*has made possible* the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics of sexual identity." How one reads these things makes a difference, however, if not for purposes of the argument D'Emilio himself was trying to make, then certainly for the purpose of trying to decide where one might be more likely to uncover evidence of something like a "lesbian and gay" past.

In short, the problem with D'Emilio's theory has really never been D'Emilio's theory. In fact, "Capitalism and Gay Identity" was arguably an essay that needed to be written. Without D'Emilio's theoretically clarifying contribution, it seems unlikely that we would have even half of the scholarship dealing with lesbian and gay life in the United States that we have today—scholarship that has not only expanded our understanding of the past but also helped to create the intellectual and institutional conditions that enable its critique. This work also needed to happen because, in 1979, and for quite a while thereafter, it was in no way obvious that lesbian and gay identity had a history that could be explained in anything other than grossly pathologizing terms. D'Emilio's theory helped to change that.⁹

As D'Emilio has also noted, however, a lot has happened in the world since 1979. Among other things, a lot of men and women "came out of the closet" and in so doing further entrenched and elaborated the very sexual identity category that D'Emilio set out to historicize. A fairly high percentage of those went into the street at one point or another to demand fairness, justice, and social and political equality. Some of them even managed to win the fairness they sought, or a facsimile of it. Many of them also eventually died during the Reagan years, when the HIV/AIDS pandemic was shamefully ignored before being rhetorically transmuted from the public health crisis that it was, and still is, into a "gay disease" visited upon sodomites and perverts as rightful punishment for their mortal sins.

It is because of these historically specific events, I would argue, that "gay identity," the epistemological formation that D'Emilio and other historians initially set out to historicize, began to lose some of its appeal for some people as an accurate measure of what constitutes a "queer" life.¹⁰ In addition to the fact that the identity-affirming rhetoric of pride could do little to offset the daily turmoil and anguish associated with being lesbian or gay during the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it also became apparent to many that bodies and acts truly do matter as much as identities. This realization was particularly shattering for many lesbians and gay men in the sense that the exigencies of the moment actually seemed to encourage the disavowal of the sense of entitlement to sexual freedom that so many of them had worked so hard to secure during the heyday of lesbian and gay liberation in the 1970s. But I would suggest that this realization was also shattering to the very category of sexual identity itself, particularly once it became apparent that self-identified heterosexuals were contracting the "gay disease." (Whatever else can be said about HIV, the virus itself cannot

be accused of discriminating; it does not give a damn what you call yourself.) To be sure, identities of all sorts continued to be extremely important to people; in fact for some people, they became more important than ever. But for many others, identity also became something to try to work beyond, especially when doing so seemed to constitute the only remaining path toward building new social and political solidarities among the marginalized and disfranchised.¹¹

I hesitate to say that writing the history of sexual identity formation after (or in the midst of) the HIV/AIDS pandemic is barbaric, but I am also not sure that doing so can or should be our primary goal at this point in history either.¹² This is partly because gender and sexual identity's historical contingency is now a relatively well-established proposition, at least among scholars. But it is also because we have learned enough about "identity" over the past two decades to know that its lineaments are hellishly difficult to define, even in the present. Indeed, when identity is invoked as a category of historical analysis, there is always a hazard that the vagueness of that concept will be filled with unspoken assumptions about what it does or does not mean to possess an identity—assumptions that are necessarily conditioned by our own historical circumstances. These assumptions also have a tendency to feed back in a way that can cause us to mistake our own place in history and allow ourselves the privilege of demanding far more of others in the way of proof that they were or are somehow like us than we really have a right to expect.

For example, politicized self-consciousness is an excellent indicator of identity in many cases because people who are self-consciously politicized are usually happy to speak openly about themselves, their politics, and the relationship between the two. It does not necessarily follow, however, that people who are not obviously politicized in a certain fashion lack a sense of who or what they are. Nor does it even follow that the experiences of people who actively claim a particular identity category in a self-consciously politicized way are representative of the experiences of others who might also fit into that category, either because they would put themselves into it (for whatever reasons) or because others would effectively force them into it (usually for much more specific reasons).

People are not necessarily "straight" simply because they do not identify as "gay" or "lesbian." To assume as much, either historically or contemporaneously, is the very definition of heteronormativity. Nor is it true that "gay" is a gay is a gay, to borrow a line from Gertrude Stein. It might be nice to think so, especially when one is knee deep in the process of trying to discern some kind of epistemological order in the chaotic mess that is the history of gender and sexuality. But ultimately, identities are always riven, unstable, and discursively entropic, which is why they must be performatively enacted and occasionally even performed to maintain what philosopher Judith Butler carefully refers to as their "substance," a term that simultaneously acknowledges both the reality and the epistemological contingency of identity.¹³ As Eve Sedgwick noted decades ago, "people are different."¹⁴ They are different because of the identities they share with others, and they are different despite them. Any history that

does not take this into account is not about the people we are or were, but rather the people we think we are supposed to be.

At the end of the day, the work that historians do when they write about gender and sexuality is itself a crucial part of the discourse of gender and sexuality. As a result, it is both bound by and constitutive of the same regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that it purports to examine. As such, we might say that gender and sexuality are not just socially constructed; they are also historiographically constructed. Because it emerged at a moment of historical convergence—a time when desires for both a new social history and a visible, politically viable gay and lesbian community were at their zenith—lesbian and gay historiography is indelibly marked by a particular set of political investments. And that is fine, especially when one considers how significantly our understanding of gender and sexuality's history in urban milieus has flourished over the past three decades, in no small part because of the principled insistence of people like John D'Emilio that we needed to explain better and more accurately the conditions under which lesbian and gay identity emerged. But the theoretical framework that D'Emilio initially devised nearly four decades ago cannot be relied on to explain everything. Nor can the historically specific political investments that gave rise to his theory be expected to single-handedly sustain the ongoing work of social, cultural, and political transformation in today's world—a world that D'Emilio himself has described as “turned,” in many ways for the better, but in some ways for the worse.¹⁵

The Rural Turn

I am not convinced that turnabout always constitutes fair play, but it seems justified in this case, given the fact that I have just spent several pages historicizing the field of lesbian and gay social history, as if I were not somehow implicated. I am.

Like many scholars, my initial interest in the subject I have chosen to research and write about in this book was autobiographical. I grew up in a small town in west-central Illinois and, depending on the context, I either identify as a gay man, dis-identify with the heteronormative logic of dominant culture under the sign queer, both, or am given no choice in the matter by people who (rightly, though maliciously) classify me as queer because I openly identify as a gay man. Like many minoritized people, I first started asking questions about the history of queer life in rural areas and small towns because, at that time, in the early to mid-1990s, I did not see my own experience reflected anywhere in what had already been written about lesbian and gay history.¹⁶ So I set out to change that. As it turned out, a number of other young or aspiring scholars working in various academic disciplines were feeling very much the same way: marginalized, written out, or at least not written in, and in the worst cases, publicly shamed because they continued to maintain what some lesbians and gay men characterized as a misplaced affection for rural and small-town life.

Over time, these individuals began to work actively against this current in the existing scholarship by cautioning other researchers not to assume that same-sex intimacy and gender nonconformity somehow belong to the city. In its earliest and most inchoate iteration, this warning took the form of collective impatience with some lesbians' and gay men's studied indifference or outright antipathy toward rural and small-town life. But over time it has started to coalesce into a coherent and remarkably persistent line of criticism that has managed not only to name the harm that urban exceptionalism does in the context of scholarship on gender and sexuality but also to draw attention to critical and political potential inherent in rural queer life.

For example, in 1994, anthropologist Kath Weston characterized the narrative of migration to cities as a kind of implicit mandate within contemporary lesbian and gay culture in the United States, albeit a surprisingly disappointing one in many cases. Ten years later, theorist J. Jack Halberstam recharacterized this narrative mandate as a distinctive form of normativity: "metonormativity." And then in 2010, literary and cultural critic Scott Herring managed to trace the origins of anti-metronormative critique back to queer culture itself by delineating a long-standing tradition of what he refers to as "queer anti-urbanism" within it. More recently, scholars such as Karen Tongson have begun to make strategic use of the additional conceptual space that the anti-metronormative critique has helped to create within queer studies by questioning the equally totalizing erasure of the suburban environment within much queer thought. In short, as an interdisciplinary field, queer studies has arguably witnessed something of a "rural turn" over the past decade.¹⁷

That turn is hardly complete, however. In a way, it has scarcely even begun. Although openly acknowledging urban-centeredness as one analytic limitation among others has become a common maneuver in scholarship dealing with gender and sexuality, the number of books and articles that actually manage to move beyond this gesture of self-qualification to deal explicitly with same-sex sexual behavior and gender nonconformity in rural and small-town contexts remains small, particularly compared with the extensive literature dealing with similar phenomena in urban environments. In addition, much of the scholarship that does move beyond the city is cast within disciplinary frameworks in a manner that can easily make it appear as if it is less about rurality per se than something else. In the context of literary criticism, for example, considerations of queerness in the work of authors such as Sarah Orne Jewett, William Faulkner, or Carson McCullers are more often read as commentaries on particular genres, including nineteenth-century literary naturalism and the southern gothic.¹⁸ Similarly, examinations of two-spirited people in various Native American cultures are seldom considered as being about rural life as such, even though migratory Native American societies clearly pre-date anything like urbanization in the conventional sense by centuries if not millennia, and despite the fact that the genocidal Indian removal campaigns of the mid-nineteenth century and subsequent creation of remotely sited reservations

virtually guaranteed that much of “Indian Country” would retain a decidedly rural character well into the twenty-first century.¹⁹

In the context of disciplinary history, this problem is equally acute. While historians have in some ways taken a leadership role in challenging metronormative assumptions about the spatial parameters of queer life in the United States, much of their work over the last decade or so clearly bears the imprint of the historical profession’s customary habit of understanding and representing the world in terms of periods and regions.²⁰ Thus even some of the studies that have taught us the most about the history of same-sex sexual behavior and gender nonconformity in rural and small-town contexts are still liable to readings that subsume their contributions on this level into other analytic categories. For example, John Howard’s field-defining *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* is *arguably* a study of queer life in rural America during the mid-twentieth century, but it is *indisputably* a study of queer life in the American South.²¹ Similarly, the work of scholars such as Susan Lee Johnson and Peter Boag deals partly with the history of same-sex sexual behavior and gender nonconformity in remotely situated logging and mining camps in states such as Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, but it is typically characterized by others and themselves as contributing to western history rather than rural history.²² Indeed, regional imaginaries operate centrally in the historical accounts that all three of these scholars have provided, which is simultaneously entirely appropriate and thoroughly indicative of one of the major conceptual challenges this book addresses. Something about the concept of the rural environment simply does not stick in quite the same way that other analytic categories do.

Why, this book asks in part, is the idea of the “rural” so difficult to work with in and of itself, and why does it so often end up taking a conceptual backseat relative to other frames of reference in scholarship dealing with the history of gender and sexuality in the United States, particularly given the fact that the critique metronormativity has been so widely embraced? Furthermore, what would it mean to insist on rurality’s categorical salience in the ongoing work of investigating the history of queer life in the United States?

The Epistemology of the Rural

In her field-defining book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, noted literary critic and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observed, “Anyone working gay and lesbian studies, in a culture where same-sex desire is still structured by its distinctive public/private status, at once marginal and central, as *the* open secret, discovers that the line between straining at truths that prove to be imbecilically self-evident, on the one hand, and on the other hand tossing off commonplaces that turn out to retain their power to galvanize and divide, is weirdly unpredictable.” Although much has changed in the field of lesbian and gay studies and the world since Sedgwick made these remarks back in 1990, the dynamic she describes has not: doing work in this area still entails contending with the

weirdly unpredictable possibility that one will either bore people to death, offend them deeply, or both. Nevertheless, Sedgwick rightly insisted at the time that “it’s only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative.”²³

In this section of the introduction, I make two claims. Let me begin with the one that seems more likely to bore.

If it has at times been difficult for scholars to contemplate what a history of queer life in rural America might look like because their own historical circumstances made the privileging of identity as an analytic category seem not only prudent but also necessary, doing so has also been difficult because the very idea of the “rural” is vexed at an epistemological level. This is because the terms “urban” and “rural” describe very different things. Since the words are often used as antonyms, this statement will probably come as little surprise. But antonymy is not quite the kind of difference that I mean. What I mean is that they are qualitatively different, not in the sense that they are qualitatively opposite terms, like “tall” and “short,” but in the sense that they are qualitatively mismatched, like “apples” and “oranges.” The fact that apples and oranges are both fruits may make them seem like a reasonable pairing, but they do not form an antonymous dichotomy, since one could just as easily substitute kiwi fruit for oranges. As such, they form what Eve Sedgwick might call a *binarism*: a pair of terms that operate as if they are exact opposites when, in fact, they are not. Beyond asserting “opposite-ness” in place of difference, binarisms also help to neutralize our awareness of power differentials by obscuring the fact that one term is almost always valorized in relation to the other. Thus, difference becomes evidence of natural complementarity while relative privilege is reduced to “mere” difference.

Under this formulation, determining whether “urban” or “rural” is the more valorized of the two often depends on the context in which these terms are used. Where the practice of writing the history of gender and sexuality is concerned, however, I would argue that “urban,” or metropolitan, has functioned very much as the valorized term. Whatever their advantages or disadvantages may be as actual places in which to live, cities are valorized as spaces in a conceptual sense to the extent that their demographic density and geographic specificity make it relatively easy—and I stress the term *relatively*—to analyze and discuss them as social systems that change over time. Because the scale of modern urban life is both that of the individual and that of the masses, whatever happens in cities seems to register as being meaningful on both a personal and social level. When discussing urban space, it is comparatively easy to leap from extreme specificity to broad generality without even necessarily noticing that one is doing so. For example, one riot becomes a turning point in the history of group consciousness; one bar becomes the geographical epicenter of a movement.²⁴ By contrast, the sense of geographical enormity that the term “rural” implies often seems to make whatever “it” is too vague and too demographically diffuse to qualify as legitimately representative of anything

in any historical sense. The very vastness that the term's nonmetropolitan otherness suggests often seems to have the effect of rendering the territory that it describes completely irrelevant with respect to what might reasonably be considered American "society" as a whole.²⁵ As such, anything that happens "there"—wherever "there" may be—seems either premature or belated, overly local or under-ly national, too banal, or so *in extremis* that it simply cannot, or ought not, bear the weight of social or historiographical generalization. If the rural is often seen as being conceptually too small or too big to organize meaningful historical claims around, the urban is usually regarded as being appropriately scaled for the purpose of making generalizable claims on the strength of numerous examples.

Now on to the claim that seems more likely to galvanize and offend.

Although histories of gender and sexuality that take particular urban spaces as their first organizing principle will probably always end up appearing to make more sense than histories that take the rural in its place, this does not necessarily mean that they are more accurate. What it means is that the scale of the narratives such histories tend to lay out are often easier to grasp in a conceptual sense. Unlike "rural areas," cities are both particular places and representative spaces. For this reason, historians will always be able to justify focusing sustained attention on particular urban social systems.²⁶ So long as there remains space on library shelves to house them, every book that meticulously documents the rise of lesbian and gay culture in an American city will represent a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the history of gender and sexuality in the United States.

The stakes are somewhat different when one moves beyond the halls of the college or university, however. Outside of academe, Americans continue to clash bitterly over homosexuality's proper place in American culture. If Richard Nixon attempted to stoke the conservative imaginary in 1969 by positing the existence of a "silent majority," conservatives today often invoke rural and small-town America for much the same purpose. The difference, as Lauren Berlant has noted, is that simple majoritarianism no longer serves as the basis on which conservatives make claims for the urgency or legitimacy of their positions. Rather, they draw heavily on the minoritarian logic of the American Civil Rights Movement, depicting themselves and their conservative ideology as benighted, besieged, and at the mercy of powerful "special interests" that threaten to drive them to extinction.²⁷ Rurality serves a crucial function within this polemic.

Precisely because the term "rural" evokes the image of a sprawling geography that is either in a state of precipitous population decline or already devoid of human life, it is the perfect spatial homologue for right-wing polemic. On one hand, rural life is depicted as what is most typically American, if by "typical" one means that form of life characteristic of the most number of square miles. On the other hand, rural life is also depicted as increasingly untenable, a threatened form of existence preserved by a struggling minority under constant siege

by the forces of globalization. I have no particular objection to either of these representations of nonmetropolitan life in the United States today, since both are accurate to some degree. What does concern me, however, is the alarming ease with which right-wing pundits seem to be able to mobilize the connotative extremities of the term “rural” to further a heteronormative, and often down-right homophobic, political agenda.

For example, on August 22, 2001, a *Washington Post* article reported that the number of same-sex couples in the United States had exceeded half a million for the first time. Demographers agreed that this number underrepresented the true size of the lesbian and gay population in the United States, since it did not include either members of same-sex couples who had elected not to report their relationship as a “domestic partnership” or single lesbians and gay men. What it clearly did represent, however, was a threefold increase over similar statistics gathered ten years earlier. Already on guard, conservative pundits fired back, insisting that the “homosexual lifestyle” remained a regrettable “choice” of a geographically isolated minority. Speaking on behalf of the Family Research Council, Kristin Hansen noted that “What we’ve seen in the numbers thus far is that homosexuals are located by and large in urban areas. The fact that they are located mostly in cities does not indicate that homosexuality is widespread.”²⁸ Given the fact that more than three quarters of all Americans live in statistically urban areas today, one is naturally left to wonder what it *does* indicate.

One thing that it certainly suggests is that the discourse of sexuality in the modern United States is a profoundly spatial one. Precisely because the discourse of sexual identity has evolved over the last century in spatial terms—because *where* Americans find themselves has come to play such an important role in determining what kind of people they are free to become—the solvency of political claims that are organized around the issue of sexual identity is likely to be strengthened or weakened by the subtlest shift in emphasis in arguments about what does and does not constitute the “norm” where American geography is concerned.

In this case, for example, Hansen exploits a doubleness of meaning in the word “widespread.” On one hand, the term denotes commonality or typicality; on the other, it denotes spatial or geographical diffuseness. Since some form of nominally urban existence is, in fact, the norm for a vast majority of Americans today, she can’t single out lesbians and gay men as being *uncommon* simply because many of them live in cities. What she can do, however, is pull a major rhetorical fast one by smuggling one denotation of the term “widespread” into the sentence on the back of another. What her statement effectively does is shift the term’s denotative emphasis midstream. In so doing, it refigures urban-ness as a sign of *spatial* minoritarianism, rather than the demographically majoritarian characteristic that it actually is in the United States.

This kind of spatio-rhetorical slippage happens all the time in American political discourse, and it happens on both the right and the left. Given how

important spatial metaphorization is to the way we think, this should probably come as no surprise. It should be cause for some concern, however, because it is precisely this sort of minute, scarcely perceptible indeterminacy in language that seems to have provided political pundits on both the right and the left with some of the rhetorical room they have needed to spin the debate over, say, gay marriage into a profoundly regionalizing national referendum on the fate of American democracy that often resembles nothing so much in its gravity or tone as an eighteenth-century shouting match between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.

Of course, one way to defuse the power that geography holds over our thinking about gender and sexuality might be to abandon the idea that we are engaged in a “culture war” at all so that we can return to the language of socioeconomic class, a suggestion that has been made by historian and cultural critic Thomas Frank, among others.²⁹ However, it is not at all clear that such a strategy would work. We cannot simply de-laminate the history of American political consciousness, scraping off the episodes of social conflict that followed the demise of the New Deal order like so many layers of dingy varnish. We cannot simply ask people to forget that they have spent decades, even lifetimes, imagining their political solidarities in cultural rather than economic terms. Nor can we ask people to forget things like gender, sexuality, and religiosity when they enter the voting booth.

For better or worse, the discourse of class in the United States has been largely subsumed over the last half-century by the discourse of identity politics. At the very least, it has been irreversibly transformed—restructured and reworked by both the right and the left to such an extent that poverty and privilege are already both racialized and gendered issues.³⁰ They are sexualized and spatialized as well, though seldom in accordance with any logic that can be easily unpacked by acknowledging what feminist theorists might call “intersectionality.”³¹ This peculiar form of popular reasoning works laterally by way of free association. Thus, the problem of urban poverty is a black one, the problem of black poverty is a female one, and the problem of female poverty is a heterosexual one, understood primarily in terms of whether women are able to care for children. Similarly, urban privilege is white, white privilege is male, and male privilege is heterosexual—unless, of course, it isn’t, in which case the entire chain of associations falls apart.

It is here, I think, in the epistemological breach created by the enigmatic figure of the privileged white male homosexual, that geography asserts itself most aggressively as a means of explaining something that otherwise cannot be explained within the logic of heteronormativity. By this logic, if some gay white men have gotten away with achieving economic privilege in the United States, it must be because of some loophole in a system that otherwise seems extraordinarily efficient at keeping all people in their place. It certainly cannot be because gay white men are white and male, since one of the primary disincentives that heteronormativity attaches to homosexuality is the threat that

it will discredit or devalue all other forms of social and cultural privilege. Nor can it be the result of their nonreproductive sexuality—first, because it violates the most basic premise of heteronormativity to suggest that under certain circumstances homosexuality might actually have some advantages and, second, because heteronormativity actually purports to offer privilege as a bribe to those who agree to channel their sexuality toward reproductive ends within the context of “traditional” marriage. How, then, does one account for a Will Truman, or a Carson Kressley, or any of the other privileged gay white male figures whose images have become so ubiquitous in mainstream American media over the past fifteen years that many now consider homosexuality to be a “lifestyle” of the rich and famous?³² The answer is simple: you blame it on Rio. Or, in the American case, you blame it on New York, Chicago, San Francisco, or any other notably urban place.

Many Americans embrace a bizarre and largely unspoken form of logic whereby the supposedly analogical proposition, urban is to the homosexual as heterosexuality is to the rural, is actually understood as making some degree of sense. This proposition “works,” I think, because what most people *believe* they are saying is that urban is to homosexual as rural is to heterosexual—an equally bizarre proposition in many ways, but one that at least follows some of the dictates of formal logic. The first proposition does not, however, as any vaguely competent logician will immediately recognize.

For one thing, it is out of order. Even if we assume that the terms “urban” and “rural” correspond to one another in something like the manner in which the terms “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” do and are therefore analogous, that is not what the first formulation proposes. Rather, what it implies is that the urban is somehow constitutive of that kind of person who qualifies as a homosexual in the same way that heterosexuality as such is somehow constitutive of what constitutes the rural, and that these two relationships are somehow the same. In the pseudo-sensible rendition of this logic, like is compared with like and the relationship that structures each of the set comparisons is said to be similar or the same. In the non-sensible version, a sexuality is compared to a geography and the relationship between them is said to be causal or inherent. At least that is how the relationship between sexuality and geography often is represented in the context of American popular culture, where the very idea of homosexuality in “rural” space serves as the premise for predictable tragedy or an endlessly reiterable joke.

So, for example, when Hollywood screenwriter Paul Rudnick wanted to establish for film-going audiences that they were watching a comedy about a gay man living in the least homosexual place in America, he chose a small town in Indiana. Specifically, he decided to set his script for Frank Oz’s 1997 film *In & Out* in the fictional Hoosier village of Greenleaf. The movie, which follows the mayhem that ensues when Howard Brackett (Kevin Kline), a much-beloved English teacher at the local high school, is inadvertently outed by one of his former students on national television, virtually depends for its comedic coherence



Figure I.1 Peter Malloy (Tom Selleck) quizzing Howard Brackett (Kevin Kline) about the work of gay icon Barbra Streisand in a DVD screen capture from the “Homosection” scene of the film *In & Out*, written by Paul Rudnick and directed by Frank Oz, Los Angeles, Paramount Pictures, 1997. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

on the fact that the film is set in a small midwestern hamlet.³³ *In & Out* makes considerable hay out of the fact that small-town Hoosiers are apparently devoid of one very important modern instinct: gaydar. While the film takes pains from its very first scene to communicate to the audience that Howard Brackett is gentle, fastidious, and maybe just a bit *too* cultured and refined—in short, and failing only a lisp or a mincing walk, the ur-stereotypical gay man—no one in the town has apparently ever entertained the idea that he might actually be gay. Crucially, this includes Howard Brackett himself. Indeed, it is only after he is essentially tricked into demonstrating his suspiciously cosmopolitan knowledge of the diva Barbara Streisand’s musical oeuvre that Howard seriously begins to contemplate the possibility that he might be homosexual (see Figure I.1). “What was Barbra Streisand’s eighth album?” asks Peter Malloy (Tom Selleck), a visiting tabloid journalist, in one of the film’s more amusing scenes. Howard immediately replies: “*Color Me Barbra*.” “Stud,” says Malloy, a goading confirmation that they are both correct, Howard in his response, Malloy in his conviction that Brackett is gay. “Everybody knows that!” Howard protests. “Everybody where?” Malloy inquires rhetorically. “The little gay bar on the prairie?”

This last quip (Malloy’s invocation of a mythical “little gay bar on the prairie”) is one that almost always elicits peals of laughter from viewers, regardless of how they identify—straight, gay, or otherwise. It does so because the juxta-

position of a gay bar and *Little House on the Prairie*, Michael Landon's epic televisual adaptation of Laura Ingalls Wilder's beloved Little House book series, strikes almost everyone as inherently absurd in much the same way that Ang Lee's 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain* registers with many people as being inherently sad—not because the latter deals with the theme of unrequited love, but rather because it deals with the theme of unrequited love between two men who live and work in rural Wyoming. In short, and, despite scholars' considerable efforts thus far, the queer rural past remains stuck somewhere between the unlikely and the unlikeable in the context of the American historical imaginary. The purpose of this book is to try to dislodge it, or least one version of it, from that unenviable position.

A Queer Rural History

In case it is not yet clear, this book is not conceptualized as a disciplinary social history of lesbian and gay life in rural America, and it should not be read in that way. Rather, it is an exercise in “queer historicism,” a term recently proposed by literary scholar Susan McCabe.³⁴ For me, the difference between a disciplinary historical approach to the study of sexuality and a queer historical approach comes down to two main factors: queer historicism's distrust of identity as an analytic category and its strategic designs on the present—designs that differ in subtle but important ways from those of most disciplinary social historians.

Traditionally, disciplinary scholarship that deals with the social history of sexuality has been primarily interested in the question of how Americans became who and what they supposedly are: heterosexuals and homosexuals, straights and gays. By contrast, queer historicist work is far more interested in reminding people of the many forms of gender and sexual difference that had to be given up or bracketed into inconsequentiality to forge a sexual epistemology that organizes everything and everybody into one of exactly two categories. Queer historicist work might also be said to mourn this particular historical development as a reduction of erotic and political possibility in a way that most social historical accounts do not, given the fact that they actually tend to present the epistemological consolidation of minoritized sexual identity categories as a condition of both erotic and political possibility. In their own ways, both approaches are unsettling to heteronormative assumptions about the past, and both tend to be explicitly anti-homophobic. But they are different in practice, and they yield different insights.

For example, whereas disciplinary social history uses evidence of historical alterity where sex and sexuality are concerned to demonstrate that sexual identity, as we understand it, was constructed over time, queer historicism might be said to use evidence of gender and sexual alterity across time to demonstrate that identity, as it is typically understood today, accounts for remarkably little about what people actually do with their bodies and desires in the present or the past. This is not to say that the business of describing trajectories of

historical causality is unimportant to queer historicist work as I understand it. But it is to say that the business of describing historical causality is not exactly its point. Rather, the point of queer historicism is to expand what I, and many others, regard as the insufferably cramped logic of modern sexual identitarianism by demonstrating not only that the current state of affairs has not always been what it is today but also that it need not be what it is today and actually in some respects is not, even today, what we imagine it to be.

One might contend that even social constructionist approaches that privilege identity formation can have the same effect because demonstrating that identity categories are historically contingent formations proves that they are neither natural nor immutable. But this argument minimizes the extent to which even social constructionist approaches tend to stabilize certain assumptions in the process of destabilizing others. For example, as historian Brock Thompson reminds us in his study of queer life in Arkansas, perfectly defensible claims about the dynamism of modern lesbian and gay identity formation as a historical process in urban spaces sometimes get turned around and read as proof that everyone else everywhere else was somehow behind. Yet, as Thompson rightly insists, queer life in places like Arkansas “was never behind; Arkansas never played catch-up to modern alternatives found elsewhere in the nation. Rather,” he contends, “Arkansas offered and operated under specific social and cultural conditions that shaped it as an alternative modernity.”³⁵

Because metropolitan space has proven to be so obviously and overwhelmingly significant to the story of modern lesbian and gay identity formation, there continues to be an assumption among many that nonmetropolitan space can and should be treated as anterior to that story in a temporal, geographical, and conceptual sense. In lieu of specific evidence to the contrary, it still feels safe to many people to assume that rural Americans simply didn’t talk about same-sex sexual behavior or gender nonconformity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Or, if they did, what they had to say about these matters was probably more similar than not to what comparably situated people would say today. But this truism—this rural repressive hypothesis, for lack of a better description—misses the mark because it assumes incorrectly that nothing ever changes in rural America.³⁶ But, as we will see, things have changed in rural America, sometimes in ways that resemble very closely the ways things changed in urban America during this same period, and sometimes in ways that do not. This book considers all of these changes.