

Queer Expectations: An Empirical Critique of Rural LGBT+ Narratives

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Abstract:	<p>Much of the body of literature on LGBT+ populations within the United States place urban areas and so-called "gayborhoods" as goals and eventualities, paralleling early U.S. studies on immigration. Using a multi-stage, mixed-methods approach, consisting of secondary analysis of the Pew 2013 Study of LGBT Persons (N=1,197) and in-depth interviews (35 gay men, 2 trans-identifying individuals, 1 heterosexual woman, and 2 lesbians), we found that rural LGBT+ residents engaged in both short-term and long-term travel to mitigate feelings of being spatially segregated from the loci of gay social life—what Ghaziani (2019) refers to as cultural archipelagos. However, rural residents also used their geographical location to resist dominant narratives about LGBT+ life. Some of our respondents felt that living in rural areas better situated them to be activists and advocates for LGBT+ rights, while others simply did not feel they could be comfortable within more urban contexts. These findings suggest that rural LGBT+ residents may have delinked their sexual selves with their cultural and political selves, thus illustrating the plurality of rural queer voices that exists. As we also argue, while residence category should be considered as influencing one's experience, care must be used to avoid overly deterministic accounts. Finally, this paper extends earlier work by Brekhus (2003), Mattson (2015), Ghaziani (2019) by presenting the meaningfulness of travel to and from queer cultural strongholds.</p>

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Queer Expectations: An Empirical Critique of Rural LGBT+ Narratives

For Peer Review

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3 ABSTRACT
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5 Much of the body of literature on LGBT+ populations within the United States place urban areas
6 and so-called “gayborhoods” as goals and eventualities, paralleling early U.S. studies on
7 immigration. Using a multi-stage, mixed-methods approach, consisting of secondary analysis of
8 the Pew 2013 Study of LGBT Persons (N=1,197) and in-depth interviews (35 gay men, 2 trans-
9 identifying individuals, 1 heterosexual woman, and 2 lesbians), we found that rural LGBT+
10 residents engaged in both short-term and long-term travel to mitigate feelings of being spatially
11 segregated from the loci of gay social life—what Ghaziani (2019) refers to as cultural
12 archipelagos. However, rural residents also used their geographical location to resist dominant
13 narratives about LGBT+ life. Some of our respondents felt that living in rural areas better
14 situated them to be activists and advocates for LGBT+ rights, while others simply did not feel
15 they could be comfortable within more urban contexts. These findings suggest that rural LGBT+
16 residents may have delinked their sexual selves with their cultural and political selves, thus
17 illustrating the plurality of rural queer voices that exists. As we also argue, while residence
18 category should be considered as influencing one’s experience, care must be used to avoid overly
19 deterministic accounts. Finally, this paper extends earlier work by Brekhus (2003), Mattson
20 (2015), Ghaziani (2019) by presenting the meaningfulness of travel to and from queer cultural
21 strongholds.
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3 INTRODUCTION
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6 Contemporary scholarship on LGBT+ identities contain a metronormative (see
7 Halberstam 2005) bias in how they situate their work¹. This critique can be extended back to
8 Kinsey's groundbreaking study where he recruited gay and lesbians by traveling to nearby urban
9 areas. The narrative that many researchers use to understand rural LGBT+ identity paints a
10 picture that sexual minorities are born in the rural and, after having come out in a hostile small-
11 town environment, flee for spaces where such identities are more normalized (Humphreys 1970,
12 1972; Weston 1991, Bell and Valentine 1995; Sylvestre 2019; Bell 2000). This is also the image
13 reified in film (e.g., *Milk*, *Dallas Buyers Club*), television (e.g., *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for*
14 *the Straight Guy*), literature (e.g., *Tales of the City*, *Stone Butch Blues*), and in other popular
15 discourses (see Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002). Against this dominant narrative are studies
16 which suggest a more nuanced process whereby those living in non-metro areas negotiate their
17 identity (Brekhus 1998, 2003), and in which some LGBT persons struggle to gain inclusion into
18 the areas they reside (see Coley 2018). This study answers the call for more empirical work to
19 deconstruct stereotypes and categories based on sexual orientation, to conduct work in non-metro
20 spaces (Stone 2018)², and to provide insight into the ways minorities migrate the self and their
21 geographies (Herring 2010).
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43 This paper utilizes ethnographic data on rural LGBT+ identity– and community-making
44 efforts from 2015 to 2019, and secondary data analysis of *The 2013 Survey of LGBT Americans*
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52 ¹ Some well-known scholars have attempted to overcome this bias, including Amin Ghaziani's article on "Lesbian
53 Geographies" from a 2010 issue of *Contexts* and a more recent piece in *City and Community* titled "Cultural
54 Archipelagos: New Direction in the Study of Sexuality and Space."

55 ² Stone's analysis of LGBTQ research from 1996–2016 shows that 41% of the research conducted was in a major
56 city or multiple major cities (5) (N=77). Her work is very revealing about the body of research on LGBTQ life.
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3 conducted by the Pew Research Center³. The aim of this paper is to provide a more nuanced
4 narrative of rural LGBT+ people. While most studies present a narrative of gay migration out of
5 the rural into the urban, this paper echoes other social science reports that find such linear
6 narratives to be only partially accurate (Aldrich 2004; Knopp 1998; Annes and Redlin 2012;
7 Ghaziani 2010, 2019). Moreover, popular films and news reports have also stereotyped LGBT+
8 individuals who live in rural settings as either marginalized members who are victims of
9 harassment and discrimination, or who live a majority of their lives in the closet (Movement
10 Advancement Project 2019). Thus, our goal is to show how the rural remains a significant site
11 for study and to contribute to research on metronormativity. We do so by challenging binary
12 typologies that reduce residential options to the urban or the rural⁴.

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15 We begin with an overview of previous studies of gay enclaves and “gayborhoods,”
16 which link identity formation with place and community, much like studies of ethnic enclaves
17 and, despite continually incorporating additional facets of LGBT+ life, tend to overlook how
18 rural LGBT+ people from such identities. Next we review the studies that have been conducted
19 on non-metro LGBT+ identities. We then present descriptive qualitative data obtained from
20 ethnographic fieldwork over several years. Next, we attempt to square this qualitative data
21 against quantitative data collected by the Pew Research Center, split between metropolitan
22 statistical areas (MSAs) and non-metropolitan areas using the most recent definition from the
23 U.S. Office of Management and Budget. Lastly, we situate this paper within the larger body of
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51 ³ See Figure 1 for a summary of the Pew Survey of LGBT Americans (Pew 2013) data from N=1,197 persons. Our
52 ethnographic data came from a multi-sited ethnographic project. We also utilized in depth interviews with forty
53 LGBT+ identifying persons (35 gay men, 2 trans-identifying individuals, 1 heterosexual woman, and 2 lesbian
54 participants)

55 ⁴ We are thankful for an anonymous reviewer in helping to sharpen the aim and sophistication of our paper. We have
56 gladly adopted their framing of our work.
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3 research and how our work presented here informs conversations on LGBT+ identity, culture,
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5 geography, and politics.
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8 The study of subgroups, including scholarship of sexuality and LGBT+ identity, has long
9
10 been influenced by notions that such groups can only exist in dense pockets (see Fischer 1995).
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12 Many sociologists who “study down” have inadvertently assumed that those who have a non-
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14 normative or deviant identity in rural settings must continuously try to “pass” (see Goffman
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16 1963) as straight or cisgender, or flee to more densely populated areas (see Weston 1995). As a
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18 result, we know far more about subgroups in urban than non-urban or rural settings (see Herring
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20 2010; Ghaziani 2011; Ammaturo 2018; Drushel 2019)⁵. Moreover, as those who study
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22 subcultures have pointed out (Muggleton 2000), in the context of a global economy, subcultures
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24 and subgroups need not necessarily be bound to geographic contexts (Buckland 2002; Hodkinson
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26 2002).
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31 32 HISTORY AND CRITIQUES OF “GAYBORHOOD” STUDIES⁶ 33

34 The term “gayborhood” (see Ghaziani 2014) has become something of a buzzword in
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36 sociology for the network of social institutions catering towards LGBT+ persons such as
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38 Boystown in Chicago (Ghaziani 2014; Orne 2017), The Castro in San Francisco (Mattson 2015),
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40 or New York’s Greenwich Village (Warner 1999; Buckland 2002). However, sociology has a
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42 long history of studying these sexualized neighborhoods (see Humphreys 1970, 1972; Warren
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44 1974; Weinberg and Williams 1974). Such earlier studies of gay enclaves emerged out of
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46 symbolic interactionism and the interpretive paradigm of sociology (see Tannenbaum 1938;
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52 ⁵ The call for more studies of different LGBT+ experiences, especially those from rural areas, is a sentiment echoed
53 by scholars in public health and psychology (see Annes and Redlin 2012; Parent and Steede 2020).

54 ⁶ The first usage of “Gayborhood Studies,” as pointed out to us by an anonymous reviewer, appears as a running
55 header in Ghaziani, Amin. 2019a. “Methodological Problems and Possibility in Gayborhood Studies.” Pp. 103–120
56 in *Imagining Queer Methods*, edited by A. Ghaziani and M. Brim. New York: New York University Press.
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3 Lemert 1951; Kitsuse 1962; Becker 1963; Plummer 1979). These studies of human sexuality
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5 utilizing the interactionist framework sought to humanize LGBT+ persons and to dispel
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7 pervading theories and stereotypes painting them as mentally ill. This framework then provided a
8
9 useful, if not political, framework for researchers wanting to offer a counternarrative. One of the
10
11 important ideas to emerge from this scholarship is the notion that identity, sexuality, and
12
13 community are influenced by the spaces in which one resides (Annes and Redlin 2012). Urban
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15 gay enclaves, much like ethnic enclaves (see Wirth 1928; Brunner 2007), helped to normalize
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17 and develop a sexualized identity (Ghaziani 2010).
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22 More recent studies of “gayborhoods” look at the role that gentrification plays upon
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24 collective organizing (Ghaziani 2014), and also explore how acceptance of LGBT+ persons in
25
26 society is reflected in those who are able to participate in such spaces (Orne 2017). As these
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28 scholars argue, the introduction of gay marriage has raised a variety of questions as to what role
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30 exclusively gay institutions play for those for whom they are designed (Barrett and Pollack
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32 2005). They also explore how these politics play out in the everyday lives of participants, and in
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34 place-based institutions such as pride festivals and parades (McFarland Bruce 2016). Their work
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36 shows that, as legitimation and rights have been won by LGBT+ political leaders, the political
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38 aspects of traditionally gay institutions have declined, leading some to argue that we now live in
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40 a “post-gay” society (see Ghaziani 2014). However, as some of these scholars have pointed out
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42 many LGBT+-identifying persons still rely on such spaces, and the question of their decline is a
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44 matter of interpretation (Mattson 2015). Moreover, as we discuss in our description of rural
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46 LGBT+ life, even those living in rural areas are impacted and informed by urban gay enclaves.
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3 Alongside the abundant literature that exists on gay urban areas is an equally mature area
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5 of research on rural gay life. The narratives put forward by these studies suggests that rural
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7 LGBT+ persons face structural constraints that impact individuals differently, but ultimately
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9 cause most to migrate to urban areas where their identities are more tolerated (Weston 1995;
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11 Hubach et al. 2019; Giano et al. 2020; Armstrong et al. 2020). Other studies of rural cultures
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13 note that a heteronormative culture exists which calls upon LGBT+ persons to downplay their
14
15 identities, ultimately causing an erasure and marginalization of LGBT+ persons (Bell 2000;
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17 Boulden 2001). More recent studies, especially those on queer farming, note the
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19 heteropatriarchal social structure of rural areas and show how some LGBT+ persons try to
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21 overcome those obstacles (Leslie 2016, 2019; Wypler 2019; Hash and Marrow 2020). A third,
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23 and lesser known, area of research on non-urban areas puts forward the concept of identity
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25 commuters—whereby gay men living in suburbs and exurbs regularly commute into metro areas
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27 where they can highlight those aspects of themselves which may go uncelebrated in their less
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29 urban locales (Brekhus 2003; Sylvestre 2019).
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35 Despite this growth in scholarship, very few studies have explored the lives of rural
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37 LGBT+ persons (Stone 2018). A recent report estimates that as many as 5 percent of the LGBT+
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39 population, or 2.9–3.8 million people, reside in rural America (Movement Advance Project
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41 2013). Its authors go farther to argue that LGBT+ persons face the same issues that all rural
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43 residents face, including decreased access to health care, fewer educational opportunities,
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45 increased rates of unemployment, diminished access to affordable housing, and a variety of other
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47 issues (Meyer 2012, 2015; Movement Advance Project 2013)—with the added issues of
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49 managing their sexual and gender identities. This paper is an attempt to provide a limited
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51 descriptive account looking at the life course of rural LGBT+ participants and insight as to how
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3 these narratives are experienced on the ground (Kazyak 2011)⁷. We do this by asking about the
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5 significance of where they live, and why they live there.
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8 9 10 METHODS

11 We utilized a mixed-method approach in order to understand the differences and overlaps
12 that existed between LGBT+ persons living in rural and urban contexts. Specifically, we
13 conducted qualitative in-depth interviews, participant observation in LGBT+ organizations, and
14 secondary data analysis of analysis of the *The 2013 Survey of LGBT Americans* (Pew 2013). We
15 first allowed for themes to emerge from a qualitative analysis and then sought to explore those
16 themes within our survey data. While our qualitative study consisted of residents who considered
17 themselves to live in rural areas, we separated the survey data into those living in MSAs and
18 those living outside an MSA, defined as a place with at least one urbanized area with a
19 population of at least 50,000 people at their core (U.S. Office of Management and Budget
20 2010:37252). We used MSA to represent urban residents and non-MSA for rural residents. In
21 this way, the Pew data helped us triangulate the ethnographic data (Denzin 1978) and inform this
22 project in a more robust way than would be possible using only one of the two methods⁸. We
23 chose this methodological strategy in order to avoid essentializing categories of gay identity and
24 provide a more robust analysis of our data. In this way we wish to show the advantages of our
25 research design to encourage innovation among both qualitative and quantitative researchers.
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46 The Pew Survey of LGBT Americans (Pew 2013) collected data from N=1,197 self-
47 identified LGBT+ individuals living in the United States, 18 years of age or older. Of these,
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52 ⁷ We should mention U.S. government agencies, social services in other countries, and many other agencies have
53 called for more studies of rural areas and especially minority populations in rural areas. There is concern that
54 individuals living in those areas may go without necessary access to important psychological and health services.

55 ⁸ This is not unlike the methodological approach advanced by Weinberg and Williams (1974), later echoed by
56 Ghaziani (2019).
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3 1,076 people comprised the urban portion of the sample and 121 people comprised the rural
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5 portion of the sample. Figure 1 provides a summary of important demographic variables. Our
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7 ethnographic data came from a multi-sited ethnographic project analyzing how rural and urban
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9 LGBT+ persons differed in their relationships with their geographies. Moreover, much of this
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11 data also comes from “red” states in the Midwest known for antigay sentiments of residents and
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13 political party leaders (Kansas, Indiana, and Missouri).
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17 This qualitative component consisted of interviews with forty LGBT+ identifying
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19 persons (35 gay men, 2 trans-identifying individuals, 1 heterosexual woman, and 2 lesbian
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21 participants)⁹, 150 informal interviews during fieldwork, and participant observation at LGBT+
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23 community events over several years. The qualitative sample was obtained using a convenience-
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25 based snowball sample and as such is biased based on the researchers’ own access (Denzin
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27 1978). In order to gain entry to the field the first author volunteered his time at organizations in
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29 rural areas of the Midwest, and also maintained relationships in nearby metropolitan cities—
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31 including serving as the assistant to the executive director of a Pride Festival for two consecutive
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33 years¹⁰. Because he grew up in the Midwest¹¹, he was able to utilize his knowledge of small town
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35 life to gain entry access and ultimately data for this study, and he also traveled frequently back to
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37 the region which helped in data collection. In one small town he was introduced to the local
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46 ⁹ The respondents in the qualitative portion were mostly white, and only four of them were people of color. This
47 both reflects the lack of diversity in rural areas, but also the bias of the researchers’ personal networks. Respondents
48 skewed older and were mostly middle class.

49 ¹⁰ He spent a total of three years in Kansas, one year at another small midwestern town, and was an active
50 participant in the Kansas City Pride Festival. He actively maintains many of these relationships, which his
51 participants note “is a Midwestern quality.”

52 ¹¹ In Indianapolis he volunteered for gay pride organizations, promoted events within gay nightclubs, and was a
53 photojournalist for the city’s gay newspaper. This enabled him to navigate the complexities of rural gay life. While
54 many sociologists might have had difficulty in maintaining facework (see Goffman 1967:5) due to the shock at the
55 conservative, or even libertarian, political orientation of some LGBT+ persons; this was something he had
56 previously encountered, and it did not shock him. One could argue, living in the Midwest at a time when coming out
57 was a life-or-death decision, that this has given him a strong “poker face” in such environments.

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3 “gatekeeper” who organized local community events, so his status as a complete insider (Adler
4 and Adler 1987) helped him by providing contacts from which to draw upon for interviews, gave
5 him knowledge about how to seek out “LGBT+ communities” where he was a new resident, and
6 provided him with a way of communicating with his participants that signaled he was “wise”
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8 (see Goffman 1963).
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15 Interviews were kept largely conversational but usually began with, “Tell me about life in
16 [X city].” Follow-up questions such as “Where do you go to experience gay community,”
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18 “Have you ever been to a gay bar,” “How do you deal with living in [X city],” or “Do you ever
19 go to X [nearest metropolitan city, and/or name of largest gay club]?” This strategy allowed the
20 participant to reflect on their own life and engage in a more relaxed dialogue—not unlike the
21 approaches suggested by Ellis and Berger (2001). When possible, he utilized public spaces or the
22 respondent’s homes as spaces to conduct interviews. The formal gatherings where he was
23 involved in fieldwork acted as spaces where he could recruit potential research subjects. Even in
24 small Midwestern cities, there tended to be some kind of communal gathering by which other
25 LGBT+ or straight allies could connect. Moreover, his role was often announced and clearly
26 communicated to many of the members well in advance of his attendance—so as not to mislead.
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41 In the case of one town, the population size was such that he became interwoven into the
42 local fabric of everyday life (population 30,432 as of 2018). The town contained 2 bar
43 restaurants, 2 coffee shops, and was somewhat limited in places of interaction, so running into
44 “the gay professor” was unavoidable. Among the LGBT+ residents he became the “professor
45 studying gay life,” in the words of one respondent, and his presence helped facilitate researcher
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3 rapport with my subjects¹². While navigating the perils of the academic job market, he was able
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5 to take various positions that allowed him to stay in the Heartland region. This allowed him to
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7 maintain ties and connections with those he had met, and in many cases to conduct follow-up
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9 interviews¹³.
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19 Based on extant literature we had three questions we sought to explore. Our first research
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21 question was: To what extent do rural residents leave non-metro areas for more urban areas? To
22
23 explore this, we analyzed the ages which LGBT+ persons came out to a close friend or family
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25 member by metro and non-metro residence (we explore the limitations and implications of this
26
27 below)¹⁴. Our second research question was: What role does geography play in one's
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29 conceptualization of identity? Using the survey data we looked at how rural and urban
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31 individuals conceptualized their identities (positive, negative, no difference), and used the
32
33 qualitative interviews to help us contextualize these findings. Finally, we were interested in
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35 looking at the qualitative variations that existed in non-metro LGBT+ individuals choosing to
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37 stay in non-metro areas. We ran crosstabulations using Pearson's Chi-Square test and all results
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48 ¹² Also, based on his own reflections, this much smaller town made it much easier to establish relations with
49 potential research subjects. The most difficult areas were the exurbs which tended to be more spread out, and whose
50 gay population skewed predominately younger due to their status as college towns.

51 ¹³ Even once he had concluded his work in one area, he would occasionally run into participants from other cities—
52 as was the case in early 2020 when he met some of them at a protest rally. In the Midwest, as will be discussed later,
53 traveling long distances is not an unusual occurrence. Moreover, social media played a role in the maintenance of
54 these friendships across long distances.

55 ¹⁴ The assumption here being that our survey data participants would come out, leave, and reappear as older adults.
56 This pattern, suggested by existing literature, was a pattern reflected in our data. While in an ideal world a
57 longitudinal analysis would be more appropriate, we were limited by the available data.
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3 present below came back statistically significant to $p < .05$. We discuss the implications and
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5 impacts of this in our conclusion.
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8 FINDINGS 9

10 The Pew Survey found that most LGBT+ persons did not consider their residence to be
11 located in a gayborhood (95.0% of rural respondents and 86.5% of urban respondents).
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13 Moreover, an overwhelming majority of both rural (92.1%) and urban (83.2%) residents were
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15 also likely to have never lived in a gayborhood. However, as our respondents discussed in
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17 interviews, they drew upon such spaces in important ways that helped maintain their sense of self
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19 and connection to a larger LGBT+ community. While the literature on the LGBT+ life discourse
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21 promotes a narrative described in the above literature review (see Weston 1995), both our
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23 qualitative and quantitative data suggest it is not the norm. Instead, we found a wide range of
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25 behaviors which suggest the story is more complicated, and illustrate how these individuals
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27 overcame their geographical limits.
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34 *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* 35 36

37 What we found in both datasets was a pattern reflected in the work of Brekhus (2003) and
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39 Mattson (2015), in which individuals attach their identity to a nearby gay space from which they
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41 draw their identity. These “identity commuters” (Brekhus 2003:3, 27, 85) engage in travel and
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43 seek to overcome their geographical limitations by becoming “weekend warriors,” expressing
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45 themselves by commuting into the cities on weekends but living most of their lives in more rural
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47 settings. Our respondents will travel very far distances in order to participate in the cultural
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49 activities more readily found in the confines of gayborhoods. This phenomenon wasn’t simply
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51 found in the suburbs but was also present in rural settings far removed from major metropolitan
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53 areas.
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3 Most of the rural participants we interviewed took short trips to a nearby city with a
4 “gayborhood.” For instance, several of our interviewees who were enrolled in degree programs
5 in state schools in Kansas, would often travel to nearby Kansas City. This involved finding a
6 designated driver for the 120-mile ride home, though we also spoke to those who somehow made
7 the long commute home safely. When asked about the extraordinary lengths to which some of
8 our participants would go to in order to take part in gay life, they articulated a desire to go out
9 and be around other gay people, to dance, find love (however fleeting), and participate in “gay
10 culture.” We found examples of individuals driving halfway across the state of Kansas, ferrying
11 several hours across Lake Michigan into Chicago’s Boystown neighborhood, and others who
12 would ride by train or bus in order to be able to participate. The longer and more cumbersome
13 the commute, the shorter and infrequent the duration. For some, this commute was a biannual
14 event, and for others it was a weekly adventure.
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31 We also found three individuals who had engaged in this form of commute for most of
32 their adult life.
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36 I live across the river and, on the weekend, I take the ferry over to go out drinking,
37 dancing, and meet a cute boy. Sometimes I’ll go to [name of local gay bath] or get a
38 cheap hotel room somewhere. There aren’t many gay people where I live and the city
39 gives me more variety. For me, it’s about having fun. I work for a gravel company so
40 there really aren’t many options for me over here jobwise, so I have to live where I live.
41 Also, I’ve got family and other [non-gay] friends there. It’s where my life is. (gay man,
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53 This quote also reflects findings from the Pew survey when respondents were asked questions
54 about their relationship with their city or town. While urban LGBT+ people were more likely to
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3 choose a city in which to live based on how accepting of LGBT+ people they perceived it
4 (14.9%, compared with 5.8% of rural respondents), rural respondents were far more likely to say
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6 it was not a reason they live where they do (80.8%, compared with 68.8% of urban respondents).
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8 Likewise, rural respondents saw less acceptance of LGBT+ people in their cities or towns—
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10 45.9% of them said they saw “only a little” or no acceptance of LGBT+ people in their cities or
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12 towns, where just 26.3% of their urban counterparts thought so of their locations. Thus, the
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14 stubborn narrative remains: that LGBT+ **social** life exists almost exclusively in urban
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16 environments, which is more of an aspiration to privileged statuses, as those areas tend to be
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18 among the most gentrified, and have higher costs of living.
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25 Although some may question the rationality of driving hours for community—and some
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27 of our interviewees did so by equating themselves with sex-crazed individuals—within the
28
29 narratives of those we interviewed, we found snippets of explanatory statements for these
30
31 decisions. **Some respondents spoke of pent-up anxiety and stress from living in rural areas and**
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33 **argued that their travel was “something I do when it [the stress] gets so bad I can’t take it**
34
35 **anymore” (gay man, 45, single).** Others however, deflected questions about their identity
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37 commute, saying they only “did it to remind (themselves) why (they) disliked gay culture” (gay
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39 man, 35, married). Yet, in many instances where respondents deflected such accusations that
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41 they might find something therapeutic to gay culture, we found jovial images of them on
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43 Facebook or heard stories secondhand about their involvement in gay culture. Even if they did
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45 not derive pleasure from such spaces, clearly there is either a pressure to participate, or some
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47 kind of hidden pleasure exists for them.
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53 Secondly, we also found that urban and rural LGBT+ persons differ in how they
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55 conceptualize their identities (see table 2). When asked if their identity was something they saw
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3 as a positive element in their lives, 37.9% of urban residents responded affirmatively while only
4
5 24.8% of rural counterparts agreed with that statement. The biggest difference we saw was
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7 among those who said that their sexual orientation or gender identity did not make much of a
8
9 difference in their lives—68.6% of rural respondents indicated no difference, while only 57.4%
10
11 of urban respondents comprised this category. This echoes differences we saw in how LGBT+
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13 persons in more rural settings saw themselves politically (discussed below). In our interviews
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15 with rural LGBT+ persons, they understood their sexual identities as something that was
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17 secondary in their lives, and also felt that it shouldn't define all aspects of their lives.
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25 [TABLE 2 HERE]
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31 *Easy Come Easy Go* 32 33

34 One of the phenomena discussed in the Movement Advancement Project report, titled
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36 *Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America* (2019), is the number of LGBT+
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38 individuals who eventually return to rural areas. While the Pew data are not longitudinal, they do
39
40 provide at least some support that such a pattern exists. Upon analysis, we found that rural
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42 LGBT+ persons were more likely to have come out of the closet to a close friend or family
43
44 member at both younger and older ages than their urban counterparts (see table 1). However,
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46 while only a slight difference existed in those out at 19 years old or younger (47.4% non-metro
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48 versus 41.5% metro), the largest gap was between those aged 20 and 39 years of age (37.9%
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50 non-metro versus 51.3% metro). There was also a higher percentage of those aged 40 or older
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52 who lived in rural areas (14.7% non-metro versus 7.2% metro).
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3 [TABLE 3 HERE]
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6 While these data provide only a brief glimpse into the LGBT+ life course, we believe this
7 particular finding could possibly suggest the existence of additional strain experienced by both
8 young and older LGBT+ persons in rural areas. In the case of those who came out at younger
9 ages, they may have experienced pressure to resolve the cognitive dissonance common while
10 remaining in the closet. In the case of those who came out much later, they may have
11 experienced pressure to conform or pass as straight or cisgender. We suggest here that the
12 pressures of the closet are not uniform or universally distributed, and we should take care to
13 avoid essentializing LGBT+ people in this way. While, of course, there are narratives about older
14 people in rural areas feeling empowered later in life and eventually coming out, our findings here
15 suggest, at the very least, an emerging pattern which we explored in further detail during the
16 qualitative phase of this project.
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32 We found several examples of individuals who had come out, migrated to an urban area,
33 and intended to return to a rural area at some point. While the people we interviewed felt that the
34 experience of living in a large metro area was important to their overall sense of self, most of the
35 individuals we talked to longed for what they felt were more positive qualities that come from
36 living in a small town. In the words of one of our respondents:
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44 I moved here (to Chicago) from a small town in Ohio to find a husband. That is the only
45 reason I'm here. However, as progressive as the city is, there are still areas that need
46 improvement, which is why I'm working within my law firm to make it more inclusive
47 by having them do little things like ask people gender pronouns....But home will always
48 be home and, hopefully one day, I will be able to move back after I've found the person I
49 want to spend the rest of my life with. (gay man, 25, single)
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3 While the dominant narrative found in much of the literature on LGBT+ identity discourse
4 suggests that LGBT+ individuals have far less success in rural areas of finding a partner (see
5 Oswald 2003), the Pew survey showed that they were more likely to be legally married (24.8%
6 compared to 18.6% of urban LGBT+ persons) while urban respondents were more likely to be
7 cohabitating but not married (26.4%, compared with 19.8% of rural respondents). This reflects
8 some of the divisions we found among those in our qualitative sample—rural interviewees
9 placed a high value on monogamy while many of those we interviewed from urban areas were
10 more willing to consider alternative living arrangements and relationships (e.g., polyamorous and
11 open relationships). However, this finding also coincides with the experiences of some of our
12 participants, like the one above, where they move to the city to find a partner in order to
13 eventually return to their hometowns.
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29 We interviewed six men who were retired or semi-retired, who discussed how this
30 migratory process, and quests for romance, had unfolded in their lives. The narrative they
31 constructed was that of leaving the rural places of their birth (often in search of a partner), but
32 that they ultimately chose to return to their hometowns.
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39 We [the diners' group] have all moved away at some point [to major urban areas] but
40 eventually returned to Whistlestop. I lived in Chicago for a while, and was highly active
41 in the leather scene up there. It was a fun time of my life that I look back on fondly, but I
42 came back to live here to take care of my mother who died and, by then, I had
43 reestablished myself here and didn't feel like moving back up [to Chicago] would be very
44 productive. More importantly, this place is familiar and slower paced, which suits me
45 better. If I need to go away, Chicago is relatively close by train. (gay man, 65, single)
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3 Almost all those whose stories were like this one were upwardly-mobile, middle-class, gay,
4 white, and professional men. Moreover, even the more socially liberal-minded individuals
5 (politically, culturally, and sexually) reflected a desire for some of the *gemeinschaft* qualities that
6 urban sociologists have often used to describe small communities: close personal connections
7 with others, slower pace of life, politeness, and less densely populated living areas.
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15 Finally, there were several individuals for whom living in rural areas became a source of
16 activism in itself:
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20 I'm an educator, I'm a trans woman, and I've chosen to stay here in [name of city],
21 Kansas because, at least here, I know what I'm getting. If you don't already know, the
22 town is considered a "blue dot" in a sea of red but I've lost jobs here and faced all kind of
23 discrimination. I've been made fun of here, so why do I stay? I stay because I feel like
24 my presence here makes a difference. As a trans person I'm always going to have to deal
25 with people discriminating against me. I chose to stay here because, at least here, I can
26 make a difference. Also, I feel like I'm more accepted here because I can be more
27 selective about who I chose to let in my life. Also, it's got somewhat of a music scene,
28 which is important to me. (trans woman, 45, partnered)
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42 We met a variety of individuals who reflected the sentiments above across the LGBT+ spectrum.
43 They noted that, while large urban areas would allow them access to a community, it came at the
44 price of anonymity. In more rural settings, these individuals recognized that their visibility in and
45 of itself made them political activists by giving them a greater voice within their communities.
46 However, they also recognized that, while they might have a great platform for being heard, they
47 often lacked the resources that might be available to them in urban areas. Our findings here
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3 match findings expressed by Coley (2018), that rural LGBT+ individuals do not passively accept
4 their experiences.
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8 *Counternarratives and Those Left Behind*
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11 While non-metro residents in the Pew survey were less likely to engage in traditional
12 forms of LGBT+ community or social movement activities (participating in pride marches,
13 protests, etc.), which may be, in part, due to a lack of availability, in the qualitative phase of this
14 project, they were still critical of an overarching gay rights movement¹⁵. We found, in part, that
15 these individuals were more aware of LGBT+ history, and much more willing to engage in
16 critical debate on the status of LGBT+ culture. Most, if not all, of the individuals we interviewed
17 who felt this way were the most marginalized based on their class position—and thus unable to
18 utilize some of the other strategies described above. As one of our interview subjects recalled
19 attending a Human Rights Campaign fundraising event organized in Washington D.C., where
20 she met a high-ranking leader:
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35 She looked at me and shook my hand and said, “Thank you so much. We need you out
36 there in Kansas badly!”
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40 I looked back and said, “Thank me? I’ve been there my whole life. We are the ones who
41 need you in Kansas. You are the ones who forgot about us!” (lesbian, 35, married)
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45 This quote exemplifies our respondents’ feelings of being left behind by a movement that
46 seemed to both fail to understand them and fail to provide them with assistance.
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¹⁵ Not unlike Peter Hennen’s (2004) ethnography of the Radical Faerie movement.
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3 Our interview participants also rejected urban gay culture, even if they drew upon a
4 cultural capital informed by urban LGBT+ culture. For example, two 45-year-old men chose to
5 remain in a semi-rural setting because of the freedoms it presented them:
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10 ... We like living in the rural because we own our own property. We can be naked and
11 mow the grass if we want on our tractor. Out here we don't have to "be gay" and, by that,
12 I mean going to bars, bitching about how bad we have it in comparison to other cities, or
13 judge people based on what they are wearing. I'm too old for that and, frankly, me and
14 my partner are over it. We participate in our own way and in our own time. Instead of
15 traveling to the city, we spend our time and money traveling to gay resort locations like
16 Palm Springs or Puerto Vallarta (gay men, 45, married).
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27 Moreover, because the nearest major metro area lacks a sufficient enough gay population to have
28 much of a leather community, these two individuals still faced a stigmatized identity (Goffman
29 1963). Thus for them, at least, living in a more rural setting gave them a freedom from the stigma
30 that they might receive elsewhere due to their lifestyle and their ages. It also allowed them to
31 enjoy the benefits of marriage while also allowing them to use their commuting identity in a
32 more privileged sense.
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45 **Conclusion**

46 Overall, this study suggests a more nuanced conceptualization of the dominant LGBT+
47 life course narrative (see Weston 1991, 1995). We found the migration out of the rural and into
48 the urban to be one of several patterns, and that many individuals chose to stay in rural
49 environments. Those individuals who stayed did so for a variety of reasons, including finding the
50 qualities of smaller more rural settings more favorable, the ability to have a greater impact upon
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3 their community, and because they did not wish to leave the places where they had spent most of
4 their lives. Moreover, as our findings show, respondents engaged in a myriad of strategies to
5 negotiate their geography, including identity commuting, engaging in political activism, and
6 shifting the emphasis of their conceptions of self to other non-sexualized aspects of themselves.
7 This finding is important as it reminds us that behaviors and culture are not synonymous.
8 However, some of the participants we invited to view a draft of this manuscript confessed to us
9 that they wished their geography didn't force them to make these choices. Our respondents
10 reflected a disconnect from stereotypes of gay culture promoted in mass media and saw their
11 geographical location as a resistance strategy.

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25 Both Mattson (2015) and Brekhus (2003) have shown that even if a person does not live
26 in a "gayborhood," they may anchor part of themselves there and draw upon its resources to gain
27 cultural capital to help construct their gay identities. Thus, they take the cultural capital of queer
28 spaces back to their more rural homes, which may help explain homogeneity of gay culture in
29 rural areas. However, this ability to "commute" was one most often engaged in by those who
30 occupied some form of privilege. This paper advances our understandings of identity and place
31 making by expanding upon these notions, but also illustrates both the lengths to which people
32 will travel to express their identity and the psychological satisfaction that may be derived from
33 such expressions, and the role that social class plays in identity maintenance and construction.
34 Thus, we expand upon Ghaziani's (2019) arguments by highlighting how our participants travel
35 to urban queer cultural archipelagos for short- and long-term periods.

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51 These findings also illuminate our understanding of identity, geography, and culture in
52 some interesting ways. The above data suggested that for those living in non-metro spaces sexual
53 identity and social identity were something separate. Data from the Pew survey suggest that
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3 LGBT+ persons living in more rural settings see their identity as not making a difference in their
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5 lives—despite mountains of social research that suggest otherwise. We feel that this finding
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7 mirrors the work of Bell which notes that Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) found that gay
8
9 men in the rural treat sex as its own distinct behavior that had no influence on identity—similar
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11 findings were later observed by Boulden (2001). Additionally, respondents from our qualitative
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13 interviews reported a disconnect between a hedonistic gay culture and the smaller more
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15 communal atmosphere non-metro settings provided.
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20 Finally, the Pew data contained some interesting questions regarding political orientation,
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22 feelings about gun laws, and other issues. These items suggested LGBT+ persons living in rural
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24 areas were more conservative in their views than their urban counterparts. However, these
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26 findings were not statistically significant and are mentioned here to draw attention to some initial
27
28 early patterns worthy of future research. Additionally, new work should explore the extent to
29
30 which rural LGBT+ persons reflect qualities that are associated with “ruralness” such as mental
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32 illness, minority stress, and other health outcomes (Movement Advancement Project 2013).
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36 Anecdotally, we have talked to a wide range of clinicians in behavioral health fields who confirm
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38 seeing a high number of LGBT+ residents for substance abuse issues and a variety of other ills
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40 that may be the result of such repressive tendencies created by a desire to fit in. It is a shame that
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42 national public health scholars have been slow to consider the role of sexual orientation as they
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44 create their data collection tools (one notable exception to this is the work of Kristen Miller
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46 [2001]). Moreover, as seen in a recent report in the *New York Times* (see Thrasher 2019) the
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48 metronormative bias that exists in the body of research literature has also resulted in a lack of
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50 discussion regarding the health of those living in rural communities who may be facing a variety
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52 of issues that LGBT+ persons are more likely to experience.
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3 While some argue we live in a “post-gay” era, empirical studies remind us that visibility
4 does not always mean acceptance—persistent inequalities still exist (Allegretto and Arthur 2001;
5 Maddux 2011; Meyer 2012, 2015; Movement Advancement Project 2013). Moreover, arguments
6 that a post-gay era is emerging ignore the complexities of experience within LGBT+
7 communities. While some privileged LGBT+ persons may experience a post-gay climate of
8 acceptance, such notions discount the voices and narratives of rural persons. We also find that
9 advances in the study of gayborhoods and LGBT+ identity are unlikely to occur so long as
10 scholars keep asking, “whither the gayborhood?” Sociology is well poised to discuss what to do
11 about the real human suffering that is occurring within urban and rural areas (Carpiano et al.
12 2011; Bourne et al 2014; Fairman and Gogarty 2015; Crawford and Fawcett 2019). However, the
13 current literature tends to overemphasize the more carnivalesque aspects of LGBT+ culture. It is
14 perhaps within rural environments, where new possibilities for resistance can be found. As
15 community leaders, politicians, and academics continue advancing conversations on the status of
16 the gayborhood, they should consider increasing ways in which those who identify as LGBT+
17 persons have access to outlets which facilitate connecting with others like them. We recognize
18 the limits of this argument and also do not suggest diverting funding away from other areas, but
19 exploring ways in which both public and social health initiatives can be combined towards the
20 creation of healthier LGBT+ communities.
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For Peer Review

Table 1: Sample Demographics for Pew 2013 Survey of LGBT Americans

	Rural	Urban
Male	40 (33.3%)	515 (47.9%)
Female	80 (66.7%)	560 (53.6%)
Trans	5 (4.1%)	38 (3.5%)
Gay	19 (15.7%)	379 (35.2%)
Lesbian	27 (22.3%)	250 (23.2%)
Bisexual	70 (57.9%)	409 (38.0%)
Heterosexual	12 (10.0%)	71 (6.6%)
≤\$20,000	31 (26.3%)	194 (18.3%)
\$50,000–\$74,999	22 (18.6%)	176 (16.6%)
Some college	42 (34.7%)	385 (35.8%)
≥Bachelor's	54 (44.6%)	548 (50.9%)

Table 2: View Sexual/Gender identity as positive, negative, or making no difference

		MSA Status		Total
		Non-Metro	Metro	
Something positive	Count	30	406	436
	% within MSA Status	24.8%	37.9%	36.6%
Something negative	Count	8	63	71
	% within MSA Status	6.6%	5.9%	6.0%
Doesn't make much of a difference	Count	83	601	684
	% within MSA Status	68.6%	56.2%	57.4%
Total	Count	121	1070	1191
	% within MSA Status	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 3: Age Respondent First Came Out to a Close Friend or Family Member

			Non-metro	Metro
Age Range	0–19	Count	45	383
		% within MSA Status	47.4%	41.5%
	20–39	Count	36	473
		% within MSA Status	37.9%	51.3%
	40+	Count	14	66
		% within MSA Status	14.7%	7.2%
Total		Count	95	922
		% within MSA Status	100.0%	100.0%

Peer Review