

Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies

Volume 12

Issue 1 *Queering Borders: Transnational
Feminist Perspectives on Global Heterosexism*

Article 4

6-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Wang, Sean H. (2014) "Encountering Metronormativity: Geographies of Queer Visibility in Central New York," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu/vol12/iss1/4>

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**ENCOUNTERING METRONORMATIVITY:
GEOGRAPHIES OF QUEER VISIBILITY IN
CENTRAL NEW YORK**

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In July of 2012, I drove from Syracuse, toward Chenango County. The few weeks prior had been filled with anxiety as I worked hard to make contacts with potential interviewees for my research project.¹ After two rounds of calls for participants of various private adoption agencies, non-profits, and county departments of social services that serve the gay and lesbian community around central New York, I finally was able to schedule an official interview with Josh, who works at a health-related non-profit. He and his fiancé, Todd, had been considering adoption, and they wanted to make some connections with an ‘expert’ in the field who might know the ins and outs of the local child welfare system.

Initially, I was quite hesitant. I confessed that I did not have any personal experience with local adoption agencies, and I was interested in speaking with gay and lesbian parents who had already adopted. Unfortunately, I was not having any luck getting on-the-record interviews, so we all agreed to meet.

Chenango County sits within the triangle made up of three interstate highways – I-81 connecting Syracuse and Binghamton to the south, I-90 the New York thruway, and I-88 that cuts northeast from Binghamton to the Capital Region.

Unlike the Finger Lakes to the southwest of Syracuse, which is famous for its wineries and Cornell University, Chenango County looks like an empty space on the map. It contains a number of state

forests and small towns. Todd, who is pursuing his graduate degree in human services, called Chenango County and much of the surrounding rural areas a “welfare county” (Interview, July 2012).

As I drove on U.S.-92 and later N.Y. Rt. 80, I was struck by the immediate change in landscapes – Syracuse’s deindustrialized core, followed by a zone of calm and quiet suburbs, quickly gave way to gently sloping fields, sparsely littered with barns and sheds. As a graduate student, I was literally driving out of place. The routes were connected by a string of small towns with a short main street, sundry storefronts, and a gas station. I could not help but think, “Are there really queer folks out here? More importantly, queer adoptive parents?”

It was not a surprise to learn during the interview that Josh and Todd shared some of my uneasiness. As a gay couple living in this rural area their experience with this uneasiness is vastly different than mine.

This article draws on my engagement with the non-metropolitan and the divergent queer subjectivities in central New York. On the one hand, the challenges of recruiting gay and lesbian adoptive parents for my project proved to be almost insurmountable, not because there were too few of them, but rather due to an almost universal reluctance to go on the record with an academic researcher.

The parents I contacted often expressed this reluctance in two ways: first, they questioned their own ability to make any contribution to my project; and second, they questioned the value of my project. These two responses often depend upon a discourse of normality and tolerance that hangs in delicate tension. For one to be tolerant, it is necessary to recognize a perceived negative difference, which contradicts the claim to normality. Such a discourse has been criticized by many radical queer theorists (Lehr, 1999; Duggan, 2003), though clearly there is an alternative politic

at work in my encounter with, for example, Josh and Todd. My first goal in this article, is to avoid generalizing a global queer politics, and instead look to the ways in which these gay and lesbian parents choose to be political everyday.

On the other hand, I resort to particular rural stereotypes to understand my fieldwork. As one based in Syracuse, Chenango County is on the outer edge among the places I went to for interviews.

As a researcher and an urban queer, to drive out is to profoundly displace myself. My displacement – and my affective reactions to it – reveals a largely metronormative subject position that recent queer engagement with the rural has been critiquing.

For Judith Halberstam, (2005, p. 22) “lonely rural landscapes feel laden with menace, and for many years non-urban areas were simply ‘out there,’ strange and distant horizons populated by hostile populations.” Halberstam perhaps dramatizes that fear of the rural, but it is precisely the image of those “horizons populated by hostile populations” that popular representations and media of non-metropolitan queer lives in the United States – *Boys Don’t Cry* (Halberstam, 2005, ch. 2) and *Brokeback Mountain* (Phillips & Watt, 2000) being two examples that have received the most attention.

Much of the political organizing around sexual rights implicitly depends upon this metronormative discourse as well. However, many people I talked to during official interviews and informal conversations, hotly contested this metronormative discourse. They argued that their mere presence residentially in these places should at the very least suggest that gay and lesbian lives are not universally metropolitan or universally queer, i.e. non-normative. My second goal, then, is to not dismiss them as either bad queer subjects who do not adhere to radical queer politics, or politically conservative participants in what Jasbir Puar (2007) calls

“homonationalism.” Rather, I want to explore how these people articulate their sexuality in non-metronormative ways; in other words, how do they articulate their sexuality in relations to their place *and* the dominant sexual politics in the U.S.?

As Geraldine Pratt (2004, p. 39) points out, there is always an “efficient” way to tell a story, but doing so risks overlooking “the interplay between local tactics and overall strategy” where openings for political resistance may be revealed. The efficient way to tell this story is to consider metronormativity as its overall strategy, i.e. a dominant discourse, that puts urban dwelling gays and lesbians versus their rural counterparts in political orientation.

Metronormativity masks the multiplicity of queer lives in places and renders particular forms of political action, especially those based in rural areas, invisible. Even when rural queer lives are being represented, they are always portrayed under metronormative terms (Spivak, 1988).

So far in this paragraph, I have told a very efficient story, one that I am comfortable with theoretically for the most part. But, I find this story lacking in practice. For one, it makes sense to summarize stories efficiently, but telling an efficient story necessarily precludes attending to the multiplicities of identities and affects. Pratt (2004, p. 40) effectively highlights the importance of messy stories, especially since they reveal categories as “relational constructs” with “[c]omplex geographies... woven throughout.”

This article is my effort to tell a less-than-efficient story about the practices of queer politics in central New York. First, I trace how metronormativity becomes hegemonic in academic discourses about queer people, specifically in my home discipline of geography. I then draw on my collaboration with a local non-profit organization to complicate the binaries constructed in metronormativity. This collaboration demonstrates the various dimensions in which queer political organizing – especially in a

place like central New York – may work against, in concert, and sideways of metronormativity to achieve particular ends. It also reveals the divergent queer subjectivities involved in queer political organizing. Finally, I suggest that a critical engagement with the term “ordinary” might lead to an alternative vision of queer politics, specifically in non-metropolitan places.

The Origin Story

Judith Halberstam, a queer cultural theorist, identifies metronormativity through reading the dominant narratives of queer lives in the U.S. In gay and lesbian narratives, coming out is often enabled, or followed, by moving away from home into a large city, where the presence of other gays and lesbians allows for sexual exploration. In these instances, to come into one’s own sexuality – what David Bell (2000, p. 84) calls “metrosexuality” – often necessitates a “concomitant representation of the rural as essentially either ‘hostile’ or ‘idyllic’” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 36). In other words, to be a proper queer sexual subject is to be *metrosexual*; that is, away from hostile heterosexuals and leaving the childhood innocence behind.

Halberstam argues that metrosexuality is largely a temporal narrative. One loses childhood innocence, achieves sexual maturity, and eventually leaves home in search of sexual partner(s). Metronormativity, however, “maps a story of [queer] migration onto the coming-out narrative” so that the narrative becomes explicitly spatial, “within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance” – the urban – “after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” – the rural (p. 36-37). Metronormativity naturalizes the spatial aspect of this narrative so that “it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from closet case to out and proud” (p. 37). As such, the rural is always devalued while the urban is conflated with queer visibility. In a metronormative narrative, the urban and queer visibility are naturally associated

with the mobility of queer subjects in space across urban/rural boundaries and the social relations that determine such mobility (Cresswell, 2010).

I found metronormativity to be a productive lens to think through academic knowledge on queer lives in the U.S., especially those produced by geographers. Although Halberstam drew primarily from popular culture in her analysis, academic knowledge constitutes a significant portion of narratives of queer lives in the U.S. For example, Alfred Kinsey's research on sexual behaviors from the late 1930s to the 1950s remains in the public consciousness (Brown & Fee, 2003). Thus, it seems appropriate to subject academic knowledge production to the same scrutiny as popular representations. Furthermore, metronormativity is fundamentally a geographical concept and, as I will demonstrate below, structures much of the writing on queer people by geographers.

There is now diverse and vibrant literature on sexuality and space within the discipline of geography. I will point to several key texts in order to sketch out the production of metronormativity in this intellectual chronology.

For any chronology, it is essential to pay attention to its origin story. The origin story becomes a foundation to the formation of discourse. For sexuality and space, although there had been some engagements very early on with sex and sexuality by geographers (e.g. Symanski, 1974), most point to the interests in understanding "gay ghettos" as its origin story.

In the introduction to *Mapping Desire*, David Bell and Gill Valentine (1995, p. 4) identify a few isolated attempts in the 1970s, largely copying the Chicago school of urban sociology, to map out these gay ghettos. Bell and Valentine criticizes these early studies "for their patronizing, moralistic and 'straight' approach to lesbian and gay social and sexual relations," especially on relatively

visible gay and lesbian commercial spaces such as the bars, as they were mostly done by “researchers unable to or uninterested in getting their hands dirty talking to informants” (p. 4-5).

In the 1980s, this intellectual engagement with gay ghettos intensified, but unlike the aforementioned attempts, geographers such as Manuel Castells (1983; Castells & Murphy, 1982) and Larry Knopp (1987; 1990a, b; 1992; Lauria and Knopp 1985) were keen to avoid telling an efficient story of marginalization. Initially, the growing residential concentrations of gay men alongside gay businesses was explained by rural-to-urban migration and coming out (Bell and Valentine, 1995, p. 4; Brown, Browne, & Lim, 2007, p. 6). However, the residential influx of gay men accelerated gentrification so that many gay ghettos are ghettos in name only. These gay men are, in Martin Manalansan’s (2013) words, “ghetto fabulous” because they no longer suffer from the effects of economic exploitation and only remain spatially ghettoized. The American political system also provided incentives for gay men to remain residentially concentrated, through which they could pack the “gay vote” for formal political representation (Knopp, 1990b). This origin story of sexuality and space literature is very much animated by an engagement with urban homosexuality. As Bell and Valentine (1995, p. 5) summarize, “The impact that gay communities have on the urban fabric at a neighborhood level has been at the heart of much of the recent US work on sexualities.”

As Halberstam suggests, Knopp attempts to draw out the social relations that co-produce geography, e.g. urban neighborhoods, and sexuality, e.g. gay men, within capitalism. In two articles (Knopp, 1990a; b), he looked at the gentrification patterns in New Orleans and real estate investments made by childless gay men. He found aggressive investment and targeted marketing strategies directed towards, developed by and through, a network of relatively affluent gay men. Early comers among them were able to buy cheap, dilapidated housing and flip them for a profit to other gay men looking to relocate. This exchange of money and real

estate was lubricated and sped up by the extensive social network among affluent gay men; these personal connections enabled words of a house on sale to get out quicker than usual and for the sellers to target desirable buyers, i.e. other gay men. However, this process priced out many original residents in and around the French Quarter, and was looked upon with mixed feelings by local, working-class gay men.

On the one hand, they recognized the growing concentration of gay men and the visibility and clout it brought, which might provide a means to greater political representation but on the other hand, if they were not able to remain in, or buy into, the neighborhood, then any benefits they might receive from increased political representation would be limited at best.

This research demonstrates at least two key points. First, it again confirms Halberstam's suggestion that scholars must pay attention to the imbricated sets of social relations. As the ambivalence of working-class gay men suggests, sexuality is but one set of social relations at work in shaping the constitution of New Orleans as a place. Second, it reinforces the assertion that any set of social relations, sexuality included, is inherently geographical. Part of the aforementioned ambivalence arises precisely from the geographical mismatch among political representation, sexuality-based communities, and residential locations.

Knopp (1992, p. 652) considers this research "the first step in a much more ambitious and comprehensive theoretical project" that identifies "specific ways in which sexuality is implicated in the spatial constitution of society and, simultaneously, specific ways in which space and place are implicated in the constitution of sexual practices and sexual identity." In other words, sexuality – or any set of social relations – is not a mere additive to geography; rather, they are always co-constituted. Coupling the ways in which sexuality works in and through capitalist spatial arrangements (of which gentrified gay ghettos are a prime example) with panoptic

heterosexism, Knopp concluded that “struggles over sexual relations manifest themselves spatially in ways that extend beyond their mere organization in space” because “sexual codings of space and sexual symbols in space also become material constituents in the structuration of space” (p. 664). Although much of Knopp’s research is urban-centered, his argument of the co-constitution of sexuality and geography suggests that if the geography is different, then sexuality, and struggles over it, would be constituted differently (and vice versa).

If the origin story of the sexuality and space literature is urban-centered, as I have suggested above, then it is necessary to explore what metronormativity masks and overlooks within it. One major exclusion is a gendered analysis of sexuality, was what Brown, Browne, and Lim (2007, p. 7) aptly called “(re)placing lesbians in geography.” Much like how heterosexism imagines itself as the entirety of society, so does sexism in geography of sexuality.

The gay ghettos are largely populated by gay men, and Castells (1983, p. 140 cited in Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 5) “has claimed that the absence of similar territorially based lesbian communities reflects the fact that ‘women are poorer than gay men and have less choice in terms of work and location’.” Maxine Wolfe (1992, p. 151) argued that there were fewer lesbian commercial spaces because women had less economic power, and lesbian bars tended to have short life span without “a consistent physical location.” Lauria and Knopp (1985) acknowledged the pervasive white, male, and middle-class gay identity, but posited that heterosexism and the construction of masculinity meant that gay men tended to be more oppressed “*as men* in relation to heterosexual men” compared to lesbians in relation to heterosexual women (Brown, Browne, & Lim 2007, p. 7). Thus, gay men were more likely to appropriate urban spaces as homogeneously gay to shelter against that greater oppression.

This discursive appropriation of gay urban spaces is problematic and is contested by geographers. For one, these explanations offered above do not attempt to challenge the economic structures that oppress lesbian women through both sexism and homophobia. Jayne Egerton (1990 cited in Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 7) called the lack of permanent housing “the single most chronic practical problem’ facing many lesbians.” This shortcoming led Knopp (1994) to later argue for a greater recognition for these economic oppressions in geographers’ works on social justice. Brown, Browne, and Lim (2007, p. 7) used Ettore (1978) as a very early example to challenge the perception that lesbians did not participate in urban politics.

These are some of the issues excluded from the urban-centered, gay men-dominated origin story. Furthermore, Bell and Valentine (1995, p. 6) argued that Castells did not find visible lesbian urban communities because he simply did not know where to look. Linda Peake (1993) and Gill Valentine (1993a, b, c; 1995) both found lesbian ghettos in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a small English town, respectively, but they were constituted differently from gay ghettos that Castells and Knopp found. There are very few lesbian commercial spaces, and the lesbian spaces tend to be exclusively residential, more spread out, and visible only for those in the know from personal networks.

Outside of the home, Valentine (1993c) argued that lesbian geography consists of complex “time-space strategies” where different groups assigned different meanings at different times. Thus, there were no essentially gay spaces like a gay bar. These lesbian ghettos are relational and “leave no trace of their sexualities on the landscape” (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 6). This observation forces us to consider gay ghettos as the anomaly rather than the norm, and to move away from an obsession over the visibility of sexuality, as “the reality is that most gay men and lesbians live and work not in these gay spaces but in the ‘straight’

world where they face prejudice, discrimination and queer-bashing” (p. 7).

This visibility of sexuality, where there are literal traces of sexuality on the landscape, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Knopp has shown that visibility can be an effective political strategy for gaining recognition. On the other hand, this focus on urban visibility – which metronormativity depends on to discursively make the anomaly appear the norm – necessarily obscures sexual relations that are not visible in the landscape (or at least visible in the same way). Feminists have critiqued this over-reliance on vision and considered alternative ways to conceptualize vision (e.g. Kwan 2002).

Under metronormativity, not only did nonmetropolitan accounts of sexuality become obscured, so too did nonmetropolitan accounts in academic discourse. As the sexuality and space literature comes to understand the city as a space appropriated by gay men, sexism and urban gay identity work to push lesbians (who, in reality, obviously live in all sorts of places, urban and rural) and nonmetropolitan expressions of sexuality out of place out of sight. Metronormativity functions precisely in such a way so that metropolitan accounts of sexuality appear as the entirety of possible sexual expressions, and in doing so, obscure other, nonmetropolitan accounts.

De-Centring Sexualities is an attempt to make visible those places where (queer) sexuality may be visible in different ways. In their introduction, Phillips and Watt (2000) drew on *Brokeback Mountain* to demonstrate a sexuality that is rooted in a particular place. While mainstream media praised the movie for its portrayal of universal love, Phillips and Watt insisted that the sexuality in it was not universal. It was not a gay story either, as Jack and Ennis, the protagonists, did not subscribe to, nor practice metronormative gay sexuality. Rather, their sexuality took a form made possible by Wyoming, and they must “stand [their fate],” and this means not

only putting up with things as they are, but also standing his ground, refusing outsiders' identities and politics, discourse and practice. This is specific, not generic ground" (Phillips & Watt, 2000, p. 3). If Wyoming, as Phillips and Watt suggested, fixes sexual lives on its own terms, then at the very least it asserts "a militant particularism that disrupts the imperializing tendencies of metropolitan (regulatory and liberatory) voices" and, at its most radical potential, "might speak to other places, disrupting and reconfiguring politics and representation of sexuality that have assumed hegemonic status," such as metronormativity (ibid.). It is in this spirit that Natalie Oswin (2008, p. 96) urged queer theorists to "abandon[...] the search for an inherently radical queer subject and turn[...] attention to the advancement of a critical approach to the workings of sexual normativities and non-normativities."

Metronormativity, as a dominant discourse, fixes complex social relations in place. It over-determines these social relations into a series of corresponding binaries: urban/rural, progressive/conservative, queer/straight. Hence, a knee-jerk impulse to resist metronormativity tends to be individualistic and runs to its other extreme: romanticizing rural lives is equally careless, both analytically and politically, as demonizing.

Using the American underclass colloquially known as "white trash" as an example, Halberstam (2005, p. 39) shows that its formation involves diverse sets of social relations, and within them "rural queers in particular may participate in certain orders of bigotry (like racism or political conservatism) while being victimized and punished by others (like homophobia and sexism)." What she advocates for is to follow these sets of social relations, as metronormativity "also can shed light on the strangely similar constructions of nonmetropolitan queer sexualities in the United States and nonmetropolitan sexualities in other parts of the world" (p. 37), a challenge that Puar (2007) takes on much more fully.

These diverse sets of social relations and interactions that Halberstam gestures toward here allow us to see the production of hegemony. Metronormativity does not become hegemonic because dissenting and contradictory accounts do not exist. Rather, within a hegemonic discursive formation, certain accounts become inflated as if they are universal while others are marginalized and overlooked. Although the kind of militant particularism that Phillips and Watt suggested might be an effective resistance against metronormativity, it still operates on metronormative terms by fixing social relations in place. In the following section, I explore how queer people negotiate these complex social relations in political organizing through a vignette.

Queer Political Organizing: A Vignette

I first became involved with the Queer Families Development Project (QFDP)ⁱⁱ in March 2012, when I attended one of its adoption information sessions in Albany. Now in its second decade, QFDP was formally founded in the early 2000s when an informal group of gay and lesbian parents in central New York applied for and received a grant from the New York State Department of Health (NYDOH) to improve the delivery of local LGBT health services. QFDP's current director, Colleen, was part of the initial group, and she became its first full-time employee. At its founding, QFDP formalized the network of queer families in central New York under the banner of Rainbow Families, and used the grant to launch the Queer Families Health Initiative. Since then, it has expanded into education and training for both prospective queer parents and social service providers. I met Colleen at the information session and explained my research interests, and she generously allowed me access to QFDP's e-mail listservs. After my second information session in Ithaca, she recruited me into QFDP's community advisory board, and I began attending board meetings over conference calls.

2012 was a tumultuous year for QFDP. Since its founding, QFDP had been housed under the Schiene Institute, another non-profit organization that provides infertility and genetic counseling. Schiene provided the institutional overhead and grant management support, but QFDP retained its autonomy. Over the years, however, it became apparent that QFDP's affiliation with Schiene often caused confusion among its targeted service population.

At the same time, QFDP's funding from the NYDOH was about to run out. The timing of the grant renewal application allowed QFDP to begin exploring the possibility of severing its affiliation with Schiene and either become entirely independent or secure another institutional affiliation. QFDP also co-launched an initiative with Mothers United, another non-profit organization in central New York. Specifically targeted toward the child welfare system, the initiative's goal was to formalize and strengthen the relationships between queer families and social service providers. Syracuse became the base for this initiative due to its location – smack in the middle of New York. In fact, the series of adoption information sessions I attended was this new initiative's first events. For QFDP, then, this grant renewal application must satisfy a number of criteria. It must account for QFDP's territorial expansion of service delivery and accurately represent its diversified targeted population. The grant, if renewed, had to either sustain QFDP on its own, or prove to be acceptable for a new affiliation. It was under these changing circumstances that the community advisory board began meeting in October 2012.

By that time, I had concluded my research fieldwork, and Colleen asked if I could use census data to prepare some report for QFDP's grant renewal application. The application would be submitted under NYDOH's funding request for application (RFA) "Health and Human Services for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Individuals, Families and Communities."ⁱⁱⁱ Census data, Colleen wrote, "will help us make the case that there's an audience for our proposed programs, and hopefully say something about their

geographic location" (pers. comm.). Not only demonstrating the audience but its geographic location was an important agenda because QFDP targeted a particular component of the RFA, to provide "statewide coordination of LGBT-related activities" that must enhance the current available "information and technical assistance to New York state agencies" and culminate in an "annual conference."^{iv} In order to secure funding for the next five years for QFDP's geographic expansion, then, it had to demonstrate to the NYDOH that a need existed in central New York, and that QFDP could adequately meet that need.

Since board members were not personally involved in preparing the application, I did not have access to it. Hence, I provided preliminary statistics and maps on same-sex households by manipulating data on the Census Bureau's American FactFinder tool online.^v I assumed that the data would be self-explanatory, but a series of e-mail exchanges followed where John, QFDP's volunteer grant writer, and I attempted to determine what presentation of data would be the most correct but also the most beneficial to the application.

Our first debate centered on just how many households we were counting as QFDP's potential clients. Excluding the New York City-counties, there were 22,906 same-sex couples in New York State, and 8,317 of them – approximately 36.3% – had children (which included both households with "own children" and those with anyone under the age of 18). QFDP, then, "serves (at least has a mailing list of) 7.2% of all same-sex coupled families with children in NY State outside of NYC (as recorded by the [2010] census)" (pers. comm.). Based on the statistics, John wanted to insert this conclusion into the application – "Disclaimer: the census is wrong. It under-samples same-sex couples in general, and does not provide any way to track single LGBT parents with children at all" (ibid.).

John's conclusion from the data got the demographer in me all riled up. I pointed out that it is impossible for the Census to "under-sample" because "by definition it is an 100% sample of the population" (pers. comm.). I knew he meant "under-count," but even so, the conclusion was still problematic because by all accounts the 2010 Census actually over-counted same-sex couples (O'Connell and Feliz 2011). Plus, the counts of same-sex couples that we just generated could include all sorts of household structure that did not correspond to QFDP's targeted population since the data was broken into categories based on the presence of all children and not just *own* children. Wouldn't it make more sense to be more specific about what kinds of families QFDP was serving and give a correspondingly specific demographic profile? John disagreed. He implied that I was "boxed in," perhaps governmentally as Brown and Knopp (2006) suggested, by my demography training. Showing "total [same-sex] households with children data for NY State broken down by county" ensured that we included not only as many families as possible to demonstrate the need for QFDP's services, but also did not miss out on any families with arrangements and structures that the census form might have excluded, John argued (pers. comm.).

Concerned with the data we produced, I wrote a lengthy response that tried to simultaneously highlight the census' technical limitations and our own political agenda (pers. comm.):

Demographers also have two (annoying, in my opinion) tendencies: first, they are usually conservative in the sense that they would rather undercount than over count any population; this was a big sticking point especially for queer demography because the Census Bureau was quite aggressive in its error-correction for same-sex couples. Second, demographers like to have precise definitions and measurements for everything; this often results in quite exclusionary practices in counting queer families. For instance, the Census Bureau defines a "family" as something created through birth, marriage, or adoption. So a

same-sex couple with no other biological or adoptive relatives in the household would be counted as a "non-family household" (since "marriage" is not recognized at the federal level), in the same way that a college frat house is a "non-family household."

Those caveats out of the way, here are the differences among "related children under 18," "own children under 18," and "no own children under 18." These are definitions based on the children's relationships to the "householder," which is the usually the homeowner or whoever filled out the census forms (usually one partner among the couples). So "related children" cover any children that are related by, again, birth, marriage, or adoption. For same-sex households, we can always throw out the "marriage" criteria because of the state/federal issue. Note that related children can include grandchildren.

"Own children" and "no own children" are obviously subgroups within the "related children" category. "Own children" refer to the householder's own children by birth or adoption (this does not include grandchildren), whereas "no own children" refer to children with any other type of relationships (grandchildren, biological nieces and nephews, etc.). These definitions may create some difficulties for queer families. For example, say we have a lesbian couple and a child in the household. The child is biologically related to one of the moms, but the non-biological mom happens to be the one designated as the householder on the census form, and her second-parent adoption has not gone through yet. In this case, even though common sense tells us that the child is obviously an "own child," the Census Bureau would actually classify her as "no own child" because the non-biological, not-yet second-parent-adopted mom is the householder. There are plenty of other scenarios. In many ways, the Census in its current form is quite a restrictive and heteronormative exercise.

The reason I highlighted "own children" is because I have also been affected by demographers' tendency - it is the most "accurate" and "specific" category, and for a governmental grant application, it is the category that these agencies and a lot of formal studies/documents use. Glancing over the table quickly, this could potentially undercount same-sex families with children by about 10%. It certainly makes some sense to include both categories since we want to argue that there is a larger population for us to serve.

So I guess rhetorically there are two strategies.

1. Highlight "own children" and note that there may be undercount issues up to around 10% and list some of the same-sex families-specific issues that I raised above. This is the strategy most governmental agencies, NGOs, and peer-reviewed articles tend to use.

2. Go for both categories and argue that we want to serve queer families in the broadest sense, and point out some the Census Bureau's technical and heteronormative ways that actually prevent us from doing the best job to serve our intended populations.

No. 2 is certainly my own political position, but it also depends on Colleen's past experiences with DoH. If this were a publicly-available report, I would strongly argue for No. 2, but since the imperative here is to secure the grant, there's more room for maneuvering.

For John, picking the criteria that provided the highest estimates of same-sex households would satisfy both practical and political goals. Practically, it demonstrates a huge need for QFDP's services and increases the likelihood of grant renewal. Politically, by prioritizing the desire to include as many types of queer families as possible over the desire to reduce over-count, QFDP can signal that they welcome queer families in all shapes and forms. I was torn, however, between the same political commitment and my desire to produce "good data."

It turned out that we were not the only people struggling with whom to count for the grant application. During the community advisory board conference call in October 2012, it was announced that QFDP had secured a new affiliation. Starting from October 2013, QFDP would be affiliated with a local college's gender and sexuality studies program. Going independent and securing its own offices and grant administrators were too costly, and affiliating with an educational institution would better reflect QFDP's mission than Schiene. This change, despite being presented as incredibly positive, nonetheless prompted deep reflections, especially from long-time board members. As part of the grant application, QFDP must evaluate the need for their services. Those needs had changed. Might we need to revisit QFDP's mission as well?

Here is QFDP's mission:

The Queer Families Development Project is dedicated to helping lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) people in upstate NY achieve their goals of building and sustaining healthy families. We do this by providing support, advocacy, information, and access to community and sensitive health care and services.

The Project envisions itself as a leader in bringing about a State of New York in which LGBTQ families are valued and feel safe enough to be visible in our communities. We are physically and emotionally healthy and legally secure. We live without fear, stigma or isolation.

"Sustaining healthy families" requires an environment that is "safe enough to be visible in our communities... without... isolation." Upon reflecting on the mission, Peg, a long-time board member, commented: "It's become much more acceptable to become LGB. We need to drill down and find where the pockets of intolerance are. We need to find out what places we are needed more than other places."

But where were these pockets of intolerance? Rural areas, it turned out. Later, I was asked if the census data could be sorted based on urban/rural designations or, better yet, shown on a map. I expressed my concerns about this operation. For one, the threshold to be counted as an urban area by the Census Bureau was incredibly low; 50,000 residents were the low threshold to be considered a city. Highlighting urban regions on a map would cover large parts of New York. Instead, following *The Gay and Lesbian Atlas* (2004), a prominent publication that calculated and mapped the concentration of gay and lesbian couples in the U.S. with 2000 Census data, I made a similar one for New York State with 2010 Census data (Figure 1).^{vi} I was troubled, however. I felt that with or without this map, rural areas had already been targeted as "pockets of intolerance" where "we are needed" anyway, but the map gave the board material justifications for those target strategies. High visibility on the map was equated with high visibility in real life and, by extension, places where we could feel "safe enough." This is certainly an attitude informed by metronormativity. Moreover, visibility (on the map or otherwise) seemed to imply that we no longer lived in isolation. Here, geographic proximity is made to imply social proximity and, by extension, the completion of political activism. Indeed, we could now move elsewhere to those "pockets of intolerance" since, as John pointed out during the conference call, "We can now focus on the more mundane aspects of parenting."

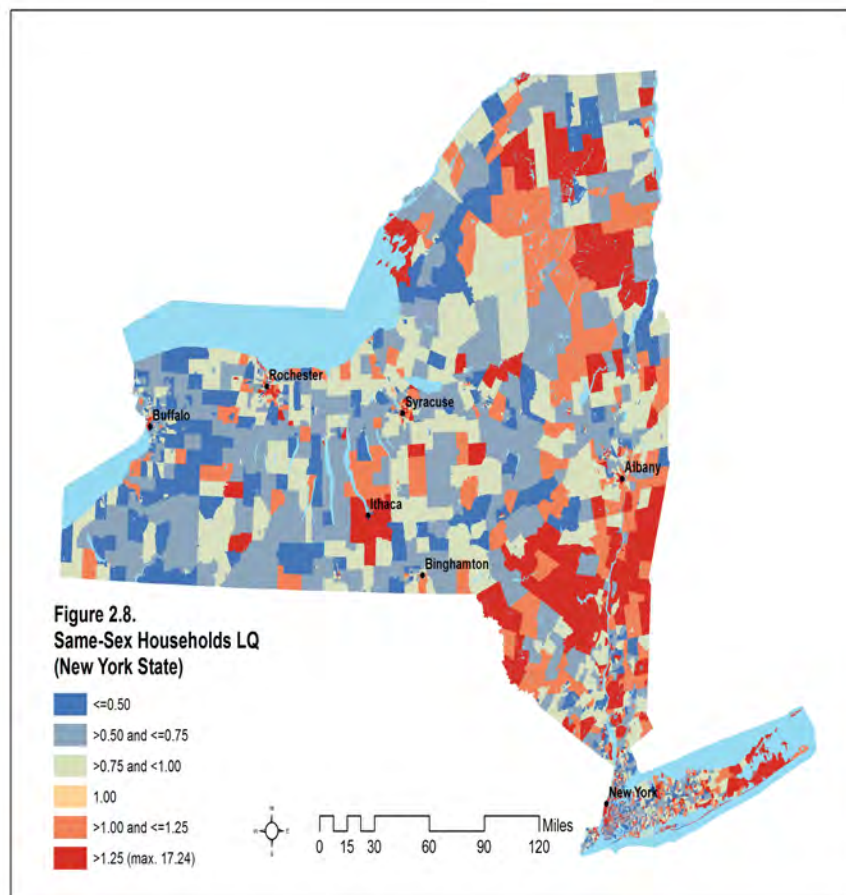


Figure 1. The Concentration of Gay and Lesbian Couples in New York State (reproduced from Figure 2.8 in Wang, 2013, p. 67)

This political strategy is dangerous in two interlocking ways. First, it metronormatively equates places with low proximity to large queer population as pockets of intolerance, and places with high proximity as places safe enough. We see this process' real effects in terms of resource allocation, in this case QFDP's service deliveries. Second, it considers the "mundane aspects of parenting" apolitical, when in fact the basis of politics is always mundane daily actions. It is our daily social interactions that determine the quality of our relationships and shape social attitudes, *not* statistics

on a map. Seeing mundane actions as apolitical is harmful everywhere, urban and rural alike. In urban areas, where supposedly political interventions have been completed, board members who were themselves queer parents still identified a number of pressing issues – persistent legal and financial challenges, growing older and the increasing need for affordable healthcare, the need to engage older children and accommodate their social needs, bullying in schools, etc. They are all mundane issues that we must continue our political actions so they can improve.

Conversely, it is impossible to combat intolerant *ideas* in rural areas. Instead, we are always combating intolerant *actions* – mundane and daily, but incredibly harmful regardless. When asked what kinds of services were required in northern rural New York, Gary, a small-town physician, replied: "Making social connections for our kids, either locally or online. Making sure that kids of all ages are accommodated for. Making sure that people know what services are available from us or other organizations." They are all mundane tasks that have little to do with the stereotypical "pockets of intolerance." For Gary, then, the maps that accompanied the grant renewal application may serve a practical end, but in the process they sacrificed the opportunity to represent real needs of rural queer families. Instead, the maps substituted "pockets of intolerance" for these real needs in order to tap into metronormativity's representational power.

I was nonetheless happy to learn that QFDP's application had a successful conclusion. In June 2013, Colleen received official confirmation from the NYDOH that QFDP was selected to receive funding for the next five years, until 2018. The grant ensured that QFDP's many programs, including information sessions vital for recruiting queer foster and adoptive parents, would continue at least for the time being. But it would be incorrect to characterize the application process as an unmitigated success. As the exchange between John, me and the discussion at the community advisory

board suggest, we all struggled with how to be successful based on multiple criteria. Statistics and maps played a crucial role in securing the grant, but they are certainly not politically neutral products. In this case, complicated manipulations of statistics and cartography helped reinforce metronormativity by proclaiming rural areas in central New York “pockets of intolerance.” In this process, we were all implicated in this suspect politics, but they prove to be persuasive strategies for gaining political recognition and financial support.

Making Spaces for Ordinary Families

So far, I have argued that the sexuality and space literature in geography is metronormative in the sense that its origin in studies of metropolitan sexuality has become hegemonic. Through the vignette of my collaboration with QFDP, I also presented a particular case where queer activists use metronormative strategies in order to secure financial support. Here, I want to emphasize the possibility of an alternative to metronormative politics through a discussion of the ordinary. It seems to me that Gary’s comments from the vignette are key to that alternative.

Demographically, people's coming out narratives are incredibly varied, and revealing this variety makes metronormativity – the mapping of “a story of [queer rural-to-urban] migration onto the coming-out narrative” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 36) – a much more difficult myth to sustain. Furthermore, queer families’ ordinary experiences and challenges – like the ones Gary suggested during the board’s conference call – allow us to re-imagine what constitutes resistance in queer politics.

Knopp and Brown (2003, p. 413) suggested that “a rather wide range of interventions can constitute ‘resistance,’” and different queer narratives, as “simple survival strategies[,] can be as meaningful and important in people's lives as revolutionary social change.” In practice, it “is not so much whether an act is or is not

'resistance' but rather which *dimensions* of an act or intervention have some counterhegemonic power or effect, even while in other respects, or viewed from different perspectives or social locations, they may be quite reinforcing of dominant structures of power" (ibid.). We can read Gary's comments, then, as some of those "simple survival strategies" for queer families in central New York.

What I wish to gesture toward here, at the end of this article, is the political potential from reclaiming the ordinary. For queer families, being ordinary does not have to mean being heteronormative. Rather than starting from an overarching political strategy of resistance, we must envision ordinary futures for everyone. As my initial reactions suggest, it is tempting to hear queer parents in central New York describe themselves as ordinary families – "just like everyone else" – and think that heteronormativity is at work. While that could be the case in some instances, I hope that I have at the very least troubled that notion in this article. Instead, queer theory and sexuality geography should reclaim a critical understanding of the term ordinary.

In this last section, then, I will provide a brief sketch of the history of the term ordinary, and explore how it helps us unpack queer political organizing in non-metropolitan places. Here, I imagine ordinary as one of those keywords in "two connected senses: they are significant, indicative words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought" (Williams, 1985, p. 15). Ordinary is a keyword because queer is often thought of as extraordinary, or in a binary opposite of political. As such, its colloquial usage reflects a form of thought that relies on restrictive binaries. But by historicizing and transforming the term, there is the potential to transform the form of thought, interpretations, and activities as well.^{vii}

In his seminal essay "Culture is Ordinary" (1958), Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams argues that culture must be lived in

order to be meaningful, and its meanings are constantly re-made by the very act of living itself. Williams saw the Marxist debates that not only artificially separate base and superstructure, but also privilege the economy in that binary as incredibly damaging to the left political organizing. This construction of the binary results in political organizing from the left that either focused exclusively on economic policies or cultural transformations, believing that the other side would follow. Williams saw this as detrimental to leftist politics because culture, if directed and prescribed, loses its lived quality (much like the planned and directed Soviet “culture”).

Drawing from Williams’ intellectual tradition, many critical geographers have engaged with ordinary in their works, in context ranging from urban spaces and planning (Robinson, 2006; Amin & Graham, 1997) to agricultural labor and the production of landscape (Mitchell, 1994). Although there are differences among their approaches, these engagements all insist on the fact that ordinary cannot be taken for granted; instead, one must query how ordinary is made.

In political geography, the term ordinary has allowed for an integrative understanding of the personal and the political in everyday life. In a recent article, Lynn Staeheli and colleagues (2012) used ordinary to extend the concept of citizenship into daily life – not only are our lives increasingly politicized through the active deployment of the term citizenship, the concrete tasks of living our lives have become more strenuous as well due to neoliberal restructuring and militarization. Using the rhetoric around undocumented immigrants and “DREAMers” as their starting point, Staeheli et al. were able to produce a more nuanced understanding of these two terms, citizenship (especially with its historical baggage and its hegemonic usage nowadays) and ordinary (as both produced and productive).

For Staeheli et al., citizenship (and other political categories) must be ordinary in both senses of the term – it is routine and standard

(i.e. produced), but it also invokes order and authority in everyday life (i.e. productive). Considering citizenship as ordinary, then, is to consider the ways in which law and daily life are intertwined and shape individual experiences.

This understanding of ordinary drastically transforms the conditions of possibility for queer political organizing. Ordinary trains our attention to the politics in daily life, and in this framework queer parents are truly ordinary, just like everyone else. Instead of clinging onto constructed binaries that bind queer with the urban, and seeing queer parents as heteronormative (cf. Lewin, 2009), we must interpret these actions and family formations as ordinary – as produced and productive. Queer political organizing also must be ordinary since it is possible everywhere (but in different conditions).^{viii}

What is at stake, then, is the way we understand social change and making a better life. Queer theory and sexuality geography must take ordinary life seriously, and some have already produced excellent scholarship in that direction recently (see Muller Myrdahl, 2013). As Avery Gordon (2004) suggests, utopia is not – and should never be – extraordinary; it must be an ordinary undertaking, in our practices and in our imaginations. To be ordinary is to constantly negotiate these complex social relations, something that all queer families and activists do. In this spirit, perhaps some “simple survival strategies” for queer families may emerge from this article.

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Footnotes

ⁱ This article is part of research done for my master's thesis, which is generously supported by the Department of Geography at Syracuse University. The research protocol, titled Political Geographies of Gay Adoption, was approved by the Office of Research Integrity and Protections, Syracuse University, IRB # 12-094. In accordance with the research protocol, all names in this article are pseudonyms unless otherwise noted.

ⁱⁱ This is a pseudonym. I use pseudonyms for local non-profit organizations for many of the same reasons why I use pseudonyms when quoting research participants. Although most research participants waived confidentiality at the time of the interview, and I encouraged them to contact me if they wanted to amend or retract (parts of) their interviews, I had not had a chance to circulate this thesis among all of them. Specifically regarding local non-profit organizations, although my observations and participations of them occurred in (mostly) public settings, their small sizes potentially made relevant individuals within them identifiable. Thus, although I will name large institutions like the New York State Department of Health or the Onondaga County Department of Social Services, I will instead use pseudonyms for local non-profit organizations. In all cases, I will use pseudonyms whenever I quote a particular individual (unless their statements were published and publicly available). This is a common practice in development research and collaborations with non-profit organizations, where large institutions like the World Bank (and its reports) will be named directly, but pseudonyms are used for smaller and/or local institutions where individuals could be easily identifiable. For a more detailed discussion of the politics of using pseudonyms, see Sangtin and Nagar (2006, Introduction).

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.health.ny.gov/funding/rfa/inactive/1207260121/index.htm>

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<http://www.health.ny.gov/funding/rfa/inactive/1207260121/1207260121.pdf>

^v <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>

^{vi} *The Gay and Lesbian Atlas* (2004) has been critiqued by many critical population geographers; see Brown and Knopp (2006) for example. As I have argued elsewhere (Wang, 2013, ch. 2), much of Gates and Ost's (2004) methodology relies on metronormativity as well.

^{vii} Keywords, as a critical methodology developed by Raymond Williams (1985), is increasingly being picked up by scholars outside of Marxist theory. For an excellent example, see Burgett and Hendler (2007).

^{viii} Without relying too much on Marxist theory, I am really writing about how structure *determines* agency. As Marx wrote, “Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1852, ch. 1). Many criticize Marxist theory for being structurally determinist, based on this famous passage, but as Raymond Williams (1973) pointed out, these critiques miss the nuanced meaning of the word determine. There are at least two ways to understand determination: the first being the “notion of an external cause which totally predicts or prefigures, indeed totally controls a subsequent activity” and the second being the “notion of determination as setting limits, exerting pressures” (p. 32). Although the first is far more common in our colloquial usage, when Marx used the word determine he almost always meant the second.