Being Gay in Rural Spaces: The Curricula of Conservatism and Fundamentalism and Their Influence on Identity as a Gay Male by Jay Poole
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The Curricula of Conservatism and Fundamentalism and Their Influence on Identity as a Gay Male

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When one considers rural spaces, many images may come to mind: a long country road, a meadow, farms, a more “simple” life, traditional values, grandma’s house. Indeed, in America, rural spaces are often juxtaposed against those that seemingly represent urban spaces: diverse collections of people living in cities, centers of intellectualism, industry, finance, and manufacturing, and locations for glaring differences in wealth and ownership. For many, conceptualizing rural as opposite of urban becomes a frame for considering differences in value systems within the parameters of such spaces and, consequently, a location for conflict both at a conceptual level and a personal level. Rural and urban may be considered in terms related to states of mind, values, and beliefs with rural often linked to conservative, fundamentalist, or traditional frames versus liberal or radical frames, which are often associated with urban, regardless of geographic location. Herein, conservatism is conceptualized as an approach to the world grounded in stability of the status quo and fundamentalism is conceived as being grounded in reiterated traditions associated with dominant groups. Conservative value systems are often associated with homonegativity and navigation of such values becomes difficult as one begins to recognize that sexual identities may exist outside conservative boundaries (VanderStoep and Green 1988). Political position is influenced by value systems and conservative political agendas are linked to anti-gay policies, creating conflict between conservative and liberal or radical positions, which currently offer support for pro-gay policies (Henry and Reyna 2007). Thinking about sexualities, much like considering what constitutes rural, conjures up many representations of ways to be sexual, usually defined with some label and in the context of value systems, e.g. straight, gay, bisexual, or any number of descriptors.

In America, regardless of geographic locale, sexualities are often perceived to revolve around the coupling of the so-called opposite sexes, the male and female. Indeed, sexual being is constructed within a frame that privileges so-called
heteronormative sexualities, which often rely on the dominant/subordinate binary with power being located within traditional representations of masculinity and femininity as opposites. Thus, sexual identity is much more complex than simply responding to sexual desire. Being sexual also involves how one identifies with regard to gender and sex roles and the social and cultural beliefs and values that shape them. Questions about whether one is sexually passive or active are contextualized within traditionally conceived ideas about the masculine and feminine gender roles. From a postmodern perspective thinking in the binary is generally troublesome, as existence beyond its limits seems to have no place to locate. When one finds that sexual identity does not match the dominant frame of reference, a crisis of identity may occur. For instance, if one is born into and raised in a rural environment fraught with conservatism and fundamentalist approaches there is usually an expectation that identities will follow dominant frameworks and when they do not a complex process of rationalization, negotiation, and subversion may occur, often resulting in conflicts within family systems, communities, and interpersonal existence. This study seeks to explore the influences of conservatism and fundamentalism on males who have cultural and social roots in rural spaces, specifically the southern United States, and who claim gay identities.

**Research Design**

This study, responding to Otis' (2007) call for more research on sexual identities in rural areas in order to give voice to the unique experiences of those who reside in them, employs a feminist-influenced qualitative approach to explore how males, who are geographically located in rural spaces, namely, the southern area of the United States, developed their gay sexual identities. The participants in this study were all raised in households in the southern United States that espoused value systems based in traditional views of gender and sexuality and they were brought up within the context of conservative and fundamental religious beliefs; namely, a
literalist interpretation of scripture and the notion that one must be “saved” in order to have everlasting life (spiritual life beyond physical death). The participants are viewed as the experts in the study and their contributions are not intended to represent generalizations about all males who identify as gay; rather, the information they offer is intended to provoke and encourage further inquiry into the complexities of claiming identities within contexts that are not receptive to particular ways of being.

Working within a postmodern epistemological frame and using a qualitative methodology, an intentional sample of four males ranging in age from 34-51 years participated in interviews that relied on dialogue as a primary method of inquiry. The participants were recruited using snowball sampling and were selected based on the following criteria: they identified as male and gay, they were raised in the southern United States, they were from backgrounds that included traditional value systems, and they were willing to engage in the study. Interestingly, for several potential participants, there was great reluctance to participate; thus, the small sample. It is the intention of the author to continue recruiting participants in order to carry on this work. This study purposefully sought to disrupt boundaries between researchers and those who are researched in order to model an approach beyond traditional interviewing. Lather (1991) suggests that dialogue opens spaces for reflexivity and engagement that blurs the boundaries between knower and known, where knowledge is generated through reciprocation; thus, engaging in dialogue with the participants opened opportunities for the sharing of information and experiences rather than participants simply responding to questions with little to no engagement with the researcher, which is a more traditional approach to qualitative interviewing. The interviews, usually two hours in length, were recorded and transcribed by the author and reviewed with the participants for additional input and clarification of contents. During the research process, the author kept a
notebook for recording reflexive thoughts and observations. As transcriptions were read, notes about the interviews and research process were also read in order to inform thematic coding of the interviews. One theme that emerged during dialogues with the participants involved the influence of conservative and fundamental value systems on gay identities.

**Sex, Genders, and Sexualities**

As “male” and “female” roles and identities are reinforced and reiterated in American society, sexualities and gender roles associated with the two “sexes” are reified, packaged, and sold to the public in many forms. Based upon the socio-cultural dynamics of what is defined as male or female, gender has little to do with an individual’s biological sex, sexual identity or sexuality, though it is often woven tightly into the fabric of sex and sexuality (Butler 1990; Tarrant 2006). It is important to consider what is meant here by the terms gender, sex, femininity and masculinity.

As Lugg indicates, “Gender is an ongoing, life-long series of evolving performances. Sex is chromosomal” (Lugg 2007, 120). Indeed, science has complicated the notion that there are two biological sexes as research has revealed several “conditions” that are popularly referred to as “intersexed” (the presence of both “male” and “female” chromosomes and other sexual characteristics associated with biological definitions). While sex is supposedly biological and determined by simple tests, gender has more to do with identity and common notions of femininity and masculinity, often contextualized within particular value systems, e.g., traditional versus liberal. Gender does not always correspond to so-called biological sex.

Despite particular body parts or the presence of particular chromosomes, there are plural expressions of gender in American society. Traditionally, men are framed as
strong, stoic, rational, and “in charge,” while women are framed as emotional, passive, and loving nurturers. Conservative and fundamental ideology reflects such traditional definitions of men and women, perpetuated by beliefs that such characteristics represent the “natural” order of things (Ferber and Kimell 2004). Traditional gender and sexual roles begin to be troubled as gender and sexual practices disrupt what has been framed as “natural,” particularly when we see “men” who are sexually attracted to other “men” or who like to express themselves as “women” and “women” who are sexually attracted to other “women” or who like to express themselves as “men,” e.g. “drag queens” who perform particular expressions of gender for money and fame or “butches” who revel in androgynous appearances. There are people who live their entire lives expressing gender traits opposite of their supposed biological sex. Consideration must also be given to the fact that across America, in high schools, civic clubs, and community centers, particularly in traditionally defined rural areas, the performance of gender becomes entertainment in an effort to raise funds for some cause as football players (traditionally male) and cheerleaders (traditionally female) cross roles at pep rallies in the name of school spirit. There are “womanless weddings,” where males perform the roles associated with traditional marriage ceremonies including the female roles, and “womanless” beauty pageants where “men” engage in all the traditional events of beauty competitions. Indeed, curriculums of gender are often grounded in the traditionally defined masculine positioned against feminine, which emphasizes the underlying conflict between the two.

Regarding masculinity, Chafetz (1974) presents in descriptive terms seven areas that define masculinity. They are as follows:
1. Physical-virile, athletic, strong, brave. Unconcerned about appearance and aging
2. Functional-breadwinner, provider for family as well as mate
4. Emotional-unemotional, stoic, boys don’t cry

5. Intellectual-logical, intellectual, rational, objective, practical

6. Interpersonal-leader, dominating; disciplinarian; independent, free individualistic; demanding

7. Other Personal Characteristics-success-oriented, ambitious, aggressive, proud, egotistical; moral, trustworthy; decisive, competitive, uninhibited, adventurous.

Indeed, Chafetz’s descriptors seem to capture traditionalist notions of masculinity and work in tandem with the so-called feminine, which is traditionally conceived as “opposite” the masculine. Strength, fortitude, and reason are all situated firmly in the masculine and are often held in high esteem as characteristics of a “successful” person regardless of sex. Thus, the masculine and feminine with respect to traditionalism are well-defined, dominant, and revered as ways of being. Breaking away from traditionalism, gender, sexualities, and sex are conceived here as fluid and not as static concepts. Our human behaviors and their interpretation by those who witness them construct and reiterate ways of being and speak to how gender, sexualities, and sex are constructed, enacted, performed and contextualized. To be male or female means a pattern of behaviors must be engaged and read for the production of gender (Gause 2008). The following quotes speak to the intertwining of gender with sexualities with particular focus on traditionally defined gender roles and the anxiety created by and through them when one is negotiating identities:

Author [to P1]: Did you equate that [feeling bad about being gay] with being feminine? “Girly?” Was [the gender issue] the bad thing or was it the sex piece?
P1: yes [the gender issue—being effeminate was the bad piece] . . . and . . .

. . . I felt a lot of guilt with the sex piece . . .
P1: . . . I guess the effeminate part comes to mind . . . “sissiness” . . . I would stay away from that . . . even when I was a new teacher I would veer away from a student or anyone who seemed effeminate . . . It was so I would not be suspected . . . I have always had a problem with that . . .
P2: ... I tried to be more masculine and knew no one that was effeminate—my partner [first male/male relationship] was very masculine. I knew that “gay” was associated with being feminine. He wanted a “buddy” not a wife—we were supposed to be bachelors living together.

The patterns that define genders and sexualities both traditionally and in non-traditional and non-conformist ways are constructed and reconstructed as curricular endeavors and, through pedagogies, are delivered to pupils in many settings via texts, images, and other mediums. Values and belief systems seem to clash with practices as one examines how people act versus how they think they should act.

As Kinsey (1948; 1953) pointed out in his groundbreaking work on sexualities in males and females, people are engaged in any number of sexual ways of being despite the perception that there is a “normal” and “natural” way to be sexual. Indeed, sexualities defined within a context of normal and heterosexual sexualities are dominant in American cultures. Rasmussen, Rofes, and Talburt (2004) point out that “Normative frameworks, including heteronormative frameworks, are the scaffolding that holds in place an entire system of power and privilege that endeavors to regulate young people, people of color, queers, and women to the symbolic fringes of society” (3). It is so-called normal that allows the creation of so-called abnormal, which sets in motion a system of oppression contextualized in hierarchy and binarial paradigms with gender and sexuality being prominent in the discourse of what is and is not normal. Moral codes support this framework of normal and natural, and morality is often constructed from and through religious traditions. Here, there is particular interest in the experience of sexualities and gender identities within rural contexts, as it is often linked with traditionalism, fundamentalism, conservatism through religion and heterosexism, which perpetuates the notion and assumption that everyone is “straight” and all other
sexual and/or expressions are, at worst, diseased, deviant, and/or immoral and, at best, alternative or edgy.

**Religion**

It is impossible to discuss sexualities and curricula of fundamentalism and conservatism without discussing religion and its impact on what many believe to be moral behaviors and decision-making. Indeed, Christianity and many other religious doctrines, particularly fundamentalist Christian traditions, are built upon a Biblical narrative that emphasizes obedience, concern for others (though this has become selective), and the promise of an eternal life if one conducts one's self in a moral fashion. Interestingly and of utmost importance, the Bible is a guide, a text if you will, for how to live a moral life, particularly for those who adhere to fundamental perspectives (Harris 2008). Geographically, there are many areas that may be considered non-urban in the United States and many of those areas are thought to be grounded in fundamentalist religious beliefs and practices; however, one region in particular bears the distinction of being the “Bible Belt”: the South.

The southern United States is as synonymous with religious fundamentalism and right-wing conservatism as it is with rural geography. As Sears (1991) points out, Southerners as a group are predominately Christian and “often are more orthodox, their reading of the Bible is more literal, and their religious rituals are more flamboyant” (24). In a study conducted by Keiller (2010), right wing authoritarianism (RWA), which is often associated with fundamentalist and conservative Christian traditions and grounded in the notion that foundational principles are dominant, was found to be the strongest predictor of anti-gay attitudes and actions. Religion is a dominant thread in the tapestry of the lives of most Southerners and this is no exception for those Southerners who claim sexual and gender identities outside the boundaries of traditional, heteronormative contexts. Southern Baptists and United
Methodists combined account for the majority of the church population of the South and have for nearly two centuries (Sears 1991). The Southern Baptist denomination is predominant in the South with well over 42,000 churches nationwide according to the Southern Baptist Convention (Southern Baptist Convention 2009). Most importantly for this study/paper, the location of dominant models of gender roles and sexuality resides in religious spaces that have been constructed within the hegemony of the Christian church and in the South, the church represents orthodoxy, conservatism, and fundamentalism. Additionally, the foundation of morality within this context is built upon the church and in the South the moral code is reiterated through immersion in the teachings of the Bible as interpreted by the preachers and the family, who become the pedagogues of fundamentalism and conservatism. Thus, the curricula of conservatism and fundamentalism are taught both in the classroom of the family and the classroom of the church, spilling into the social systems that comprise the cultures associated with rural spaces. Being a good student of conservative and fundamental curriculum requires adherence to particular rules including rules about sexualities and gender identities that are contextualized in “normal” and “natural” ways of being. Transgressing these rules often becomes detrimental personally and socially, and creates conflict at many levels, not the least of which is the deep interpersonal conflict voiced here by the participants in this study.

For people who begin to negotiate normative and non-conformist gender and sexual identities, clashing with religion-based ideals occurs early in the process, resulting in a constant sense of avoiding deviance, shame, and isolation from what has been deemed natural and/or normal according to the moral code (Krondorfer 2009). Sex for pleasure continues to violate fundamental aspects of the moral curriculum, which emphasize the role of sex as primarily reproductive. As Katz (1995) reports, the use of the term “heterosexuality” did not emerge in medical literature until 1892.
and was, interestingly, a signifier of the perverse, referring to its use as a descriptor of sexual activity “divorced from reproductive imperatives” (Stokes 2005, 132). Defining such categories as heterosexual, homosexual, etc., became locations for identity and for those who do not or cannot identify within “normal” and “natural” frames, they must negotiate being un-natural, abnormal, and immoral (Downs 2007). Two of the participants in this study state:

P1: . . . I knew I was different and I knew from church that I was not supposed to like boys . . . but then, there was a comfort in that because I was not having sex with girls so I was not committing a sin . . . that would have been worse . . . but I was ashamed of liking boys sexually so I kept it a secret.
P3: Because of my being raised in a very religious family . . . it [being gay] was something that I fought and denied . . . I can remember actually praying that when I laid down at night that I would not wake up feeling the same way. It was a fear thing for me because of my religious upbringing . . . I was fearful of eternal damnation . . . that was . . . it was fear of rejection . . . if people know this about me they won’t like me . . .

Since American cultural ideals and practices are often contextualized within religious structures, the link between identity and conservative and fundamental morality exists within spaces that are defined by religion and religious doctrines and practices, particularly those in the southern United States or other geographic areas of the country where traditionalism is dominant; thus, shame and disgust are given space to exist and grow. Terrizi, Shook, and Ventis (2010) assert that disgust about homosexuality as potentially contaminating traditional social practices is associated with conservative value systems. Interestingly, efforts to negotiate shame and disgust seem to be grounded in the very traditions that contribute to them. As Participant 3 states:

P3: Well literally I tried to pray them away [feelings of attraction to males]. I remember playing head games with my self . . . I can remember masturbating thinking of other boys and being so ashamed of what I had done and saying to myself . . . I will never do that again . . .
. never again. So I would play these mind games to try to convince myself that that was not who I was.

Here, prayer is used in an attempt to reshape identity. Thus, a practice associated with the tradition that fuels shame and disgust about identity is used to combat it. Perhaps this is evidence that decoupling one’s moral framework from one’s identity is extremely complex and a location for conflict and confusion, raising questions about other options for reconciling moral frames and identities. Conservative and fundamentalist curriculums, as often practiced in the South, are not confined to church or family and often the person who is struggling with identity concerns finds no refuge. School seems to be another location for learning about identities and it is not delinked from cultural and social influences.

Apple (2001) suggests that American public education has been drastically influenced by conservatism and religious fundamentalism; thus, academic curriculum is colored by what is supposed to be held within the confines of the church and/or familial religious practices, e.g., the ongoing debate about the inclusion of creationism or divine intervention when discussing human evolution in the classroom. School is a space where norms and mores are reiterated and where straying outside cultural and social boundaries can be dangerous as illustrated in this exchange:

Author [to P4]: When the kids called you names in school, what emotionally happened?
P4: I shut off . . . totally shut off . . . at school, socially, interacting with other kids I felt friendless . . . I felt utterly undesirable, I mean it was a struggle every single day, I mean starting in probably first or second grade I have these memories of being made fun of and my reaction was to just shut it out, I mean I was just miserable and I mean . . . it came out in a lot of other ways . . . I had stomach problems, I would not go to the bathroom at school because I was afraid of being beaten up, though it never happened... that still has never happened, getting beaten up, but that fear was there . . . I was so afraid of that . . . I had a
horrible school phobia, once in 1st grade and again in 5th grade . . . it was . . . I would try to jump from my parent’s moving car on the way to school and the principal would have to restrain me to keep me from bolting from school and, as an adult talking about it with my parents, my parents were always afraid that I was being abused or something like that . . .

This participant’s experience at school demonstrates the intense anxiety and fear that can be associated with the school environment and begins to reflect how one’s very existence becomes shameful. As mentioned earlier, the ongoing debate about creationism, divine intervention, and evolution is central, particularly in the South, with regard to how humans came to exist and in defining the natural order of things, e.g., the relationship between humans and other animals and the relationship between males and females.

**The Curriculum of Creationism**

Pre-modern thought has as its focus the explanation of phenomena based on control exerted upon humanity by a higher power. Monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) that emerged out of patriarchal societies often assert that God is without gender, nevertheless use the male pronouns (He, Him, His) when referring to God.

The narratives of Biblical creation reinforce a scenario where males are the first to be made by the higher power, followed by females. In the Bible, one of the predominant sacred texts in Western cultures, the narrative names the first man Adam and the first woman Eve with the woman’s defiance of God being the location of the moral downfall of all humanity. Unlike the strong and powerful Adam, Eve was, according to fundamentalist readings of the story, vulnerable, weak, and subject to poor decision-making. Interestingly, the creation story that so many who are reared in fundamentalist environments hear over and over again emphasized the
supposition that Adam and Eve had no knowledge of their nudity prior to Eve’s consumption of the fruit of the Tree of Life; thus, they were filled with shame about nudity and presumably sex once the fruit had been consumed. It is this linking of nudity (awareness of the physical body), sexuality, and shame that becomes intriguing and important as one reflects on how one may become shameful about one’s body and its engagement with others sexually. The participants in this study spoke about the conflict between natural, normal, unnatural and abnormal as noted below:

P2: I had my first adult sexual experience with another man at 22-23 and even then I felt really ashamed afterwards. It was not normal. I mean, the Bible says it [sex] should be between a man and a woman. P1 [reflecting on having sex with men]: . . . I let my parents down because I did not do the “normal” thing.

Author [to P2]: Was it [same sex sexual experiences as a teenager] “abnormal?”

P2: Yea . . . it was, in my mind [it was] abnormal . . . something that I should not be doing. But I really liked it!

Author: So how did liking it affect you?

P2: Well, that really screws with your head . . . to like something that you are not supposed to be doing . . . so, oh god . . . there was so much shame.

Inherent in the fundamentalist Christian creation story is the “natural” sexual coupling of males with females, at first for companionship and later, once Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, for the purpose of procreation in order to establish God’s greatest creation - humans; after all, Adam’s partner was Eve, not Steve. Obviously, same sex sexual activity does not result in the production of offspring; thus, opposite sex sexual activity is established as natural and normal, and gender roles are clearly defined with males being physically and mentally superior to females, who are contextualized within a shadow of contempt for breaking the rules set forth by God (Pagels 1988; Macgillivray 2008). Within the frame of the rural, if one presumes that rural includes moral codes based in
fundamentalist, conservative, and traditional Christian-based sexual and gender roles, sexuality is bound by roles that emphasize male-dominance, reproduction, and adherence to gender roles. Abandoning normal and natural sexualities and gender identities becomes a very serious matter and often a location for much angst and shame. Indeed, we see what happened to Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God; they were banished from the Garden of Eden (a rural space) into the cold cruel world where they faced lives of hardship. The quotes below illustrate the complexity of being unnatural or abnormal:

P1: But you know I guess the church has an influence on my thoughts about this [marriage] because it was drilled in me that it was a man and a woman . . . marriage [and sex] that is.
Author: [to P2] Do you think that at that time shame was a part of your reaction to this [religious pressure]? Was it there at all?
P2: Oh yea . . . it [church] was a major part . . . and there are still moments of shame . . . when you are raised in a fundamentalist environment . . . there are still moments.
Author: And is that shame about . . . what?
P2: I guess shame about not being so-called “normal.”
Author: So being “abnormal” then . . . would you use that word?
P2: Yea.

What becomes evident is a process of identifying as internally flawed as one wrestles with sexual identities in the context of the curricula of conservatism and fundamentalism. In an attempt to resolve this internal conflict with external mores what is it that one gives up? How do personal moral frameworks shift or reorganize to accommodate one’s immorality?

To abandon particular beliefs and practices in the South is to abandon God and his son Jesus (Cosner and Payne 2008). Doing this will jeopardize eternal life according to many Christian teachings. Currently, religious fundamentalism and evangelical Christianity play major roles in American politics with an emphasis on keeping a moral code that does not embrace differences (Feldman 2005). Indeed, the family in
America is often structured around Christian-based ideals and, as we have discussed, rural frames emphasize the nuclear family structure. So-called “family values” emerged in the 1990s in the political discourse surrounding morality and has remained a player on the political stage (Jakobsen 2000). For those with so-called rural points of view, the family unit is central and the hegemony of the family is structured within a heteronormative frame. “Alternative families” are not easily conceptualized or put into practice in rural spaces; thus, sexualities that promote alternative families are not accepted. Rural spaces are not forgiving with regard to differences that transcend the boundaries established by and through the curriculum of conservatism and fundamentalism.

**The Curriculum of Rural Spaces**

Those who are non-conformist with regard to sexual and gender identities often find it difficult and sometimes impossible to carve out an existence in spaces that adhere to conservative and fundamentalist ideologies (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Goldfarb 2006; Kendall and Martino 2006). Indeed, many people do exist in non-urban environments where they engage in a variety of sexual and gender practices; however, visibility of such “deviance” is often minimal (Bell and Valentine 1995; Gray 2009). Indeed, Gray (2009) points out that “metronormativity” contributes to the notion that gays/queers in rural spaces are somehow incomplete and in need of escape to the metropolis to fully realize their gayness/queerness. Certainly there are gays, lesbians, trans-people, queers, gender queers, bears, etc., who live happily in rural locales just as there are people in such locales who struggle with shame, anxiety, and isolation. In Fellows’ (1996) work *Farm Boys*, readers encounter the experiences of men who grew up on mid-western farms struggling with identities that did not fit into conservative and fundamentalist frames. The impact of gender roles contextualized in the rural is evident as one reads about conflicts between “farmwork” and “housework” and the struggles many of the people interviewed had
with negotiating their positions in and among these expected ways of being productive on the farm. Also, readers of Farm Boys will note that there was common silence about sexuality associated with life in a rural space; thus, one was left to negotiate sexuality within one’s own mind or within dark experimental spaces with a friend, neighbor, or family member. The curricula of fundamentalism and conservatism, while emphasizing individual freedoms, are careful to school pupils on the importance of value systems steeped in tradition. If one is acting non-traditionally, one is to keep such actions silent and/or invisible. Following is an excerpt from a conversation with a participant in this study:

Author: [to P3] Do you think that the culture you grew up in taught you about masculinity?
P3: Do you mean religion?
Author: [to P3] Well yes, and the values and beliefs of the “small town” in the South.
Author: Well yea . . . sure . . . especially the church piece . . .
Author: [to P3] Would you say that the preacher preached about how to be a man or was it more modeling . . . unspoken?
P3: Yes . . . unspoken . . . and now that you say that I remember . . . I was probably 13 or 14 years old and one day, you know when you walked out of church you shook hands with the preacher and I shook his hand and he said, “Wait a minute. This is how you need to shake hands. Put some firmness in it.” Because obviously my shake was too weak so he was demonstrating how to shake like a man.
Author: [to P3] Was there shame?
P3: Yes . . . because he was indirectly saying to me, “You are shaking hands like a girl.” And although he did not say that directly, that is what it felt like.

Another participant also brings voice to the notion of silence:

P1: There is shame in not doing the normal thing by having a wife and children, there is shame in being with another man sexually, there is shame about thinking that I have let my parents down . . . that I did not turn out to be what they wanted me to be . . . now my mama has asked twice about whether or not I liked women and I could not tell her the truth . . . daddy never mentioned it at all . . . and I wonder if he was ashamed and embarrassed at times . . . maybe he got over that . . .
I never mentioned it because I was ashamed of it. I have only told one of my sisters but I know my family knows it but I am too ashamed to talk about it . . . I guess you get to a point of why even say it . . . will it cause problems? It might embarrass them or make them feel a certain way . . . I think I am really protecting myself . . .

Of course, not all is silent in the world of rural sexual deviance as evidenced by such social/political groups as the Radical Faeries who embrace anti-establishment perspectives while adapting rural and environmentally-sustainable stances in the politics members promote (Morgensen 2009). Yet, the voices of sexual and gender non-conformists in rural spaces are often minimized or silenced as the construction of what and how one should be remains grounded in frames that do not embrace diversity, which has become a location for social and political discourse as the 21st century unfolds.

Discussion
Certainly, no one can say that sexualities will become drastically different in rural spaces or any other space for that matter; indeed, human sexual practice has probably remained fairly consistent throughout time. What does seem to change is the codification and level of visibility sexual and gender identities enjoy within any given historical period (Bolin and Whelehan 2009; Foucault 1978; Jefson 2005). In America, sexual and gender identities that do not conform to traditional identities have become increasingly visible over the past forty years with momentum building as the 21st century passes its first decade. Mainstream print and electronic media includes any number of representations of people who are sexually and gender non-conformists. Geographic boundaries that denote rural from urban, as well as boundaries established by and through value and belief systems have been under scrutiny even in conservative circles. Non-traditional characters abound on television, and though they are often stereotyped in their construction, they
represent new spaces for the presence of the other. Political debates are fueled with discussions about “gay marriage,” gays in the military, and gay families. While “queer” identifying people have not emerged in the limelight of the discourse related to gender identities and sexualities, they are, nonetheless, present in the discussion. Even geographically rural spaces experience enhanced visibility of sexual and gender non-conformity through television and Internet.

As Gray (2009) points out, youth in rural locations are exploring queer sexual and gender spaces through the use of new and mass media. Indeed, the queer youth of today are probably no queerer in terms of sexual practices than youth fifty or one hundred years ago; yet, they enjoy the ability to easily access each other and those outside their geographies, which enables liberatory experiences. Kazyak (2008) asserts that increased visibility of gay identities in rural spaces has opened possibilities for more people to identify as gay in these locations. The participants in this study commented on the impact of media:

P4: . . . I remember having my first sexual feelings for guys was actually watching TV . . . what was it . . . Dynasty . . . when Alexis’ step-son almost kissed his boyfriend, and I was about 8 or 9 and that was the first time that I was like wow!
P1: . . . I remember going to see the movie Making Love and I loved it . . . there was hope for me . . . who knew it would take 30 years [to really accept myself] . . .
P3: . . . TV told me that “gay” was two men being together and so I claimed the gay identity because I was with another man who had a girlfriend as well and was much older than me. The people on TV were more effeminate and I was not that way so I felt different. I thought something was wrong with me to some extent because I was not like them. I had no one to talk to about it. I felt abnormal because I was attracted to men and wanted to be with them but I did not act the way they did on TV so it was very weird for me.
P1: . . . even the Milk film . . . it was profound . . . all he did . . . but I think that the “heterosexuals” would say oh, it is just another gay movie . . . you know that comes a lot from the fundamentalist . . . how I grew up . . . very strict . . .
P2: You know when I was growing up there were hardly any gay people on television or anywhere . . . I mean it was something when *Family* and *Dynasty* had gay characters. Now, there are gay characters everywhere and that is helpful to the younger people . . . and the Internet, you can just be whatever on there.

Indeed, television offers representation of gayness and other alternate identities, but the Internet has opened up another dimension of identity possibilities. Explorations of sexualities on the Internet are seemingly endless as people engage in cyber spaces unbound by physical limits.

One can simply close the bedroom door and be anything one can imagine via the Internet (Rebchook and Curotto 2007; Ross 2005). Thus, the Internet as pedagogy becomes a unique space for exploration of the between and beyond, particularly for those who may feel isolated or excluded in rural spaces through the curriculum of conservatism and fundamentalism. If one’s perspective is grounded in traditional, fundamentalist, and/or conservative frames, one is not likely to stray too far into experimental sexualities or gender identities without guilt and angst and certainly not in any public way. Indeed, the public face of rural sexualities remains steadfast in its heteronormative foundations even for those who are sexually non-conformist, e.g., the happy gay/lesbian “married” couple (Valverde 2006).

The discourse and conflict between traditionalists and non-traditionalists is evident in American cultural and social spaces and well as political spaces. Foundations rooted in puritanical belief systems and reinforced by Victorian era silence run deep and even in the new Millennium many find it difficult to abandon tradition. Here, interpersonal conflict and conflict with the social environment is explored with regard to sexual identity and growing up in conservative and fundamentalist environments. Traditionalism and conservatism thrive in rural spaces and reinforce a
curriculum that emphasizes values based in “acceptable” ways of being and being together, including how one can be sexually and how one can be with regard to gender. The participants in this study reflect the complex effects of conservative and fundamentalist value systems on the shaping of gay identities and their voices reflect the deep personal and social conflicts created by the clash between traditional and non-traditional ways of being. There is obviously a need for more understanding of what contributes to shaping identities.

Sexualities and gender identities in the rural often reflect traditional, fundamental, and conservative approaches. Rural sexualities and gender identities are located in perceptions, values, and beliefs rather than on maps and reiterated through curricula via pedagogies that reinforce particular and exclusive ways of being. Obviously, one cannot dismiss the impact of the country or the city for that matter on how one perceives; indeed, it is perception that opens up possibilities for new ways of being. It is within the realm of perception that the conflict between traditional and non-traditional identities may be explored and re-conceptualized. If perceptions can be altered, then possibilities for resolution may begin to be imagined. Perhaps the promise of the future truly lies in the abilities of people to critique and question what is known, how it became known, and what can be known. In imaginative spaces with curricula that emphasize plurality, sexualities and gender identities may take on shapes, forms, and practices that are not bound at all by rural, urban, or any other space.
References


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