GAY BY THE BAY:
FEELING QUEER, FEELING NEWFOUNDLAND

by

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Abstract

While growing up in rural Newfoundland, I often felt that my identities as a rural Newfoundland and a queer person were in conflict. Inspired by my own experiences and those of my loved ones, I began this research with the primary goal of documenting the experiences of rural Newfoundland’s queer youth in such a way that carefully maintained the autonomy of my participants and their voices. However, as the study progressed it became clear that my broad exploration was trying to answer one question: given the difficult – often painful and traumatic – experiences of queer youth in rural Newfoundland, could our identities as rural Newfoundlanders and queer people easily coexist?

This thesis attempts to document the experiences of queer rural Newfoundlanders while asking why and if the identities of queer and rural Newfoundlanders are irreconcilable. This work is based upon narratives and experiences I have collected from seven queer youth who have lived or are currently residing on Newfoundland’s rural west coast. I have coupled my participant’s narratives with my own in recognition that this research has been a profoundly personal act of introspection for me. I analyze our experiences in reference to structures of feeling, a concept coined by Marxist Raymond Williams to describe one way that culture and power interact.

My findings suggest that queer youth, from diverse backgrounds and of diverse identities, have extreme difficulty reconciling their identity as a rural Newfoundland with their queer identity. My findings also suggest that many queer youths in rural Newfoundland are as strongly affected by homonormativity and metronormativity as they are by cis-heterosexism and queerphobia. Finally, this research has shown that queer youth in rural Newfoundland, and likely elsewhere, would benefit from readily visible queerer forms of queerness.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Beginning with the Personal

I grew up as a queer person in a community with a population close to 300, not far from a larger centre of about 3600 people. I showed all the signs of being a well-adjusted queer teenager. I was heavily involved in youth leadership and advocacy groups, student leadership conferences, local youth groups and non-profit organizations, groups that represented youth on a provincial level, and I was passionately engaged with my academics. I was even student council president for two consecutive years. With all this on the surface, you might not expect that I was also a young person really struggling to come to terms with my queerness. I became involved with these organizations hoping to find escapes for myself. Leadership conferences brought me to high schools in larger provincial centers where I was able to meet other queer people. I found opportunities to travel to St. John’s, Newfoundland’s capital, and even Ottawa to help non-profit groups create youth-targeted programming. These activities gave me an opportunity to leave my isolated community and meet other queer people, and to experiment with my own queerness in spaces where I was not known. My community engagement and achievement were not signs of a well-adjusted queer youth: they were signs of me desperately trying to find my way out of my community and into “the world.”

1 It is worth noting that I was elected from the members of the student council, and not by the student body at large.
As I began my university studies, my interests shifted from anti-capitalist politics and economic theory, inspired by my working-class background, toward analyzing my own queerness, my own queer identity, and queerness in general. This also represented a time when I became more comfortable with my queer identity and increasingly less comfortable with my place in rural Newfoundland. I believe that this project represents the culmination of many of these thoughts and experiences. As such, this project cannot be said to have started during my graduate coursework, or even in my undergraduate work when I discovered queer theory. It did not even begin as a question. It began, at least consciously, in December of 2010, when I was 16, and I was outed to my father.

I was in my room watching some T.V. show, I don’t know what. It was really stormy outside; it had been going back and forth between snowing and raining all night. My parents got home around one or two in the morning. I’m not sure where they were, at a friend’s house or something. When they got home I heard yelling and fighting, so I got up to see what was going on. Before I even got out of my bedroom I heard my dad yelling my name, angrily. A lot of the finer details are a bit of a blur, but he was yelling loudly, accusing me of being “a faggot,” “a queer,” of being gay. I’m not certain how he found out. I guess mom mentioned it by accident; I had told her earlier that year. I don’t want to go into extreme detail about what was said; I’ll simply say that my father disallowed my queerness, declared it impossible, improper, incorrect—a phase. I tried several times throughout his heterosexist hissy fit to retreat away from him, but every time I tried to leave the kitchen and go back to my bedroom he would block the way and continue yelling at me. He tried to blame my queerness on many different things: a cousin who had come out a few months earlier, being primarily raised by my mother while he was away working, and other just stupid nonsense ideas. My mom was standing nearby sobbing the entire time this was going on. Eventually I got around him and got back to my room, so I could just be away from him. I started texting my boyfriend at the time. I had met him while I was away at a leadership retreat and we had been doing a long-distance thing. He did his best to comfort me, as well as anyone could do over text, 200 kilometers away I guess. He decided that he was going to argue with his father to get the family car to come get me, even though the storm was pretty bad and the roads were absolute shit. His dad never gave him the car. But I packed a bag anyway, my computer and phone and their chargers—they were my connections to the other queer people I knew—and some clothes. I was going to go somewhere. I didn’t really have a plan though. My grandmother came
immediately to mind, and I assumed she would welcome me. Before I had even finished packing my bag I heard my dad start yelling again but it wasn’t at me this time. My grandmother must have heard him yelling; she lives just two houses over and had decided to come over to make sure everything was okay. She eventually argued her way past my dad who was yelling for her to leave and to mind her own business. She matter-of-factly told him that this was her business, thank you very much. She came to my door, which I had barricaded with my desk just in case dad tried to come into my room and yell at me some more. I let her in and she asked me a bunch of questions — if dad was normally like this, if anything like this had happened before — to which I answered no. This really did sort of come out of the blue. I knew dad was homophobic, but he had never behaved like this before. She left and told me I was welcome to go over there and stay at her house, and then left. Dad and I argued some more, especially when I tried to leave. Eventually, I just gave up, went into my room, put my desk against the door again, and texted my boyfriend while crying until he fell asleep. After that, I just cried alone until the sun came up and I was too tired to cry anymore. I — [I pause briefly.] I’m not - [I pause for a long time.] I’m not sure where my brother was during all this. Part of me thinks, hopes really, he was at a friend’s house. I always suspected he was gay too, and he has since come out, but I don’t remember if he was home. No one ever talks about that night. My dad came into my room the next day and muttered all kinds of apologies for yelling, but nothing for what he said. I think by that point it was okay though; I had already accepted that I would just have to be miserable until I could move away for university.

I would be lying if I said that I am comfortable sharing that narrative. I told that story during my interview with Devon, and I have opted to share it here because I think it is important in many ways. First, that moment in my life more than any other defines what it means, for me, to be queer in rural Newfoundland. While I always knew that queer people existed elsewhere— somewhere—and that I could lead a happy life as a queer person “out there, somewhere,” during my youth my rural home, to which I felt a great attachment, was beginning to feel more like a prison. This event defined what was possible in that prison. Second, this event unsettled my connection to my family and my home by making me feel more alone and isolated than I ever had. Any fantasies I had about it being easy to be queer in rural Newfoundland dissipated. Third and finally, it is one of the most traumatic memories I have, especially concerning my queerness. More
than anything, this memory explains a lot of the shame, anxiety, and anger I have felt, and in some ways continue to feel, because of my queer identity.

Growing up queerly in a town of 300 was nearly impossible. I did not know any other queer people until after I had accepted my queerness. A year before my father outing me, a cousin of mine came out—his parents didn’t react positively, but they did not do anything extreme either. Other than that, I knew of a queer boy that was several years older than me in the next town over, but he was not a part of my life in any way. Because of this isolation, I felt very alone after realizing I was queer. I actually remember the exact moment when I realized I am queer; here is that short narrative as I told it to Devon:

I was really young, in elementary school, I’m not sure if I was in grade four, five, or six. It was probably closer to grade six. I was lying in bed. I had this cherry red metal bunk bed. That’s not really an important detail I guess, but I had a lot of trouble sleeping around that age and so I used to spend a lot of time staring at it. One night I was lying there, and I was just thinking, I’m not sure, probably some very inarticulate thoughts about this girl that I thought I was supposed to have a crush on. My friend had a crush on her, and my parents were aware that she was a friend of mine and so they teased me a lot. I guess I just went along with it because I thought I was supposed to. So that night I guess I was just worrying about that. I was supposed to have a crush on her, but I didn’t. Not at all, and I’d never had a crush on any other girl either. But I did have a crush on this girl’s cousin. I never articulated in my head from that realization that I was queer in any way. Or maybe I did, I don’t know, but that realization didn’t translate into me behaving any different or into me having a different future than the one I had already imagined, because it couldn’t. Queerness was kind of unimaginable to me at that point, and all of that came later. But I did, at that point, realize, and I guess accept, that I am queer and that was really scary. It was later that that identity started to conflict with my identity as a rural Newfoundlander.

This moment is one that has been repetitively coming back to me, it will be important later. I am not sure if this moment would have been possible, or at least as easy as it was, if I had not already known that queerness was a possibility—that it was something that
existed, and that if I were “that way” I would not be the only one. The following passage is relayed from my memory, and was not shared in an interview with any of my participants:

I have a distinct memory that confuses me, from the Christmas season of 2004, when Canada was preparing to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide. I was sitting in my grandmother’s home with a large group of my immediate family, and my aunt and their ‘friend’ who were visiting from Nova Scotia. This really stands out in my memory as they rarely ever visited, once or twice after this maybe, but I can’t remember them before that. While I remember very little about the news broadcast (what self-respecting ten-year-old truly listens closely to such things?), I do clearly remember a comment that one of my aunts made. “Well Jes, it looks like we’ll be able to get married soon!” to which my aunt, who grew up on the island responded, “yeah maybe, but not here.” I was totally disarmed by the first comment: having never met a queer person I had never considered queerness as a plausible way of being, or even realized that they were a couple.

I wonder how much more of a challenge realizing my queerness and accepting it, at whatever shallow level I did when I was still in elementary school, would have been possible without knowing that my aunts were queer. For years, they were the only positive example of queer people available to me.

As I grew older I found opportunities to be queer by leaving my community and the surrounding area. I became involved with student leadership and youth advocacy groups, which offered me opportunities to escape the southwest coast of Newfoundland and travel elsewhere, where I didn’t need to be afraid of any larger social repercussions of being queer. These trips radically changed my teenage years. They allowed me to exist as an openly, out, queer person. To dress, speak, and behave in ways I was more comfortable with, and to interact with other queer youth and discover what it means to be queer, and what queerness meant for me in particular. These trips away from home also gave me access to queer youth from other parts of Newfoundland and facilitated some of
my first romantic and intimate relationships. Without these trips and opportunities to escape, my teenage years would have been considerably more lonely, taxing, and traumatic than they already were.

When I was old enough to leave for post-secondary school I did so without a second thought and moved to St. John’s, which was as far away as I could feasibly get from my rural home. While living there I came to a lot of realizations about myself and my queerness—and while this increased freedom allowed incredible personal growth, I also found myself missing rural Newfoundland. I transferred to Memorial University’s Grenfell campus the following year. Several factors motivated that decision, but one of the main reasons was that I could straddle the boundaries of rural and urban from Corner Brook, which still felt urban compared to my home town, but was decidedly rural when compared to St. John’s.

Later, when I had come to terms with my queerness and its place in rural Newfoundland (mostly that it has no place there), I was shocked by the Pulse massacre in Orlando Florida on June 12th, 2016 where a mass-shooter entered a queer bar on “Latin night” and took 49 lives, in addition to his own. The Pulse massacre had a bone-chilling effect on me, despite the fact that Florida was a world away. I was sitting at a camp table in the forest when I first heard about it, twenty kilometres from my home, getting sporadic and unreliable news updates on a cell phone struggling with a single bar of reception. Disconnected from the city, disconnected from any other queer people, I remember feeling numb. I remember feeling terrified. I remember my fear walking down

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2 Andrea Gibson, “Orlando” recorded 2017, track 3 on Hey Galaxy, Tender Loving Empire, Spotify
the street a few days later in my hometown, so far away from Florida, reminded of the violence and hate that queer people experience just because of who we are. This experience, felt by queer people all over, traversed the boundaries of the urban, into the rural and the isolated. This experience forced me to feel and experience this tragedy as a queer person—a piece of me that I still have difficulty engaging with while home in rural Newfoundland.

Andrea Gibson, a queer activist and poet, has articulated their own experience of the Pulse massacre in their poem “Orlando.”

When the first responders entered the Pulse nightclub after the massacre in Orlando they walked through the horrific scene of bodies and called out if you are alive, raise your hand
I was sleeping in a hotel in the Midwest at the time but I imagine that in that exact moment my hand twitched in my sleep some unconscious part of me aware that I had a pulse, that I was alive …. as my temper and rage is a decibel that I can actually get to when I am not just grief sickened and ruined watching history not be history …. and the only place they thought they were safe and the only place they thought they did not have to hide and the only place they thought they were wanted because because of who they loved and how they loved and how they loved.”

Gibson’s poem captures what I believe to be the tangible affective experience of being queer that traverses geographic boundaries. Like me, Gibson was a world away but described how embodied in their being this tragedy was, so deeply that their hand may have twitched in their sleep when first responders asked survivors to raise their hands. My queerness did not care that I had to put it to bed because it exists in tension with other

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4 Gibson, “Orlando.”
facets of my identity; my queerness demanded this tragedy be felt. Queer people are united, regardless of geography, by our shared experiences of being queer. We understand the intense alienation of being queer in Western society. We understand the feeling of homelessness, vulnerability, and fear from our shared experiences. Because of this, even when we are alone we know we have a people out there, somewhere, and we are all trying to find our people.

In a recent account of her own experience attending a memorial service for the victims of the Pulse shooting, Kathryn Hobson offers a depiction of rural queerness. Hobson remarks on how isolating it was for her that the town she lives in did not hold a vigil to commemorate the victims of the massacre. Instead, Hobson had to travel half an hour away to the town where she works to honour the victims.\(^5\) Hobson recalls her frustration with this isolation, but remarks that a need to be with her people motivated her into action.\(^6\)

Much of Hobson’s text reads as an affective reflection of her frustrations, pain, and anger at living in what she calls a “rural” place. Hobson is frustrated by the lack of a vibrant queer community, the absence of a more radical queer politics, the absence of a gay bar. She was also frustrated that the leader of the local pride organization, who formerly worked in law enforcement, took a moment in their speech at the vigil to thank law enforcement for their service and aid in response to the Pulse massacre.\(^7\) Hobson, of course, frames this anger with critiques of the police violence that has affected queer

\(^6\) Ibid., 558.
\(^7\) Ibid., 558.
people, and in particular queer people of colour. But what I read from Hobson’s anger is the anger of an urban queer, facing the reality of rural queer life.

I could not find or be with my people after Orlando. I could only be with the trees, with a campfire, with the frogs, the birds, and the wind. I did not have the luxury of being able to access a queer community to lament the lack of more radical queer politics. I did not have any forum within which to voice my emotions. I did not have any queer group whose leader I could be upset with. The thought of having a queer/gay bar or any queer exclusive space is absurd in an area where I know fewer than ten openly queer people—most of whom only visit seasonally like myself. Like so many other times, being queer in rural Newfoundland meant I had to face the world from outside of it, and that I had to do so alone. I always felt like I belonged to some other community, a queer community that was out there, somewhere, and Orlando wrenched me out of rural Newfoundland to wherever this other part of me was.

I am not sure if the difference between my experience and Hobson’s experience can be attributed to differing understandings and circumstances of rurality, perhaps different types of rurality, or if they can be attributed to the fact that I am a queer person who is of the rural. Hobson never makes reference to where she is from, what kind of place she is of, but she does note that the rural community she is living in while experiencing the Orlando massacre was not her hometown. I grew up in a place and time where being queer meant being isolated. Where being queer meant loneliness, meant having to leave my home to lead a happy life where unlikely. My queerness always meant that I had to struggle to understand how to be in the world.

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8 Ibid., 558-559.
In many ways, my experience of being queer in rural Newfoundland has been an experience of lack, defined by the feelings of impossibility, absence, and loss, though I was never quite sure what it was I had lost. Growing up in Newfoundland was difficult despite the support of a small network of queer and allied friends, teachers, community leaders, and a general pretence of support in Newfoundland’s legal system. No matter how many times municipalities raised rainbow flags to celebrate pride. No matter how many rainbow cross-walks graced roads. No matter how many well-intentioned people gave me vague promises that “it would get better.” No matter how many community leaders or large institutions made statements of support. These tactics of recognition did little to make my experience easy. I did not struggle to have my queerness recognized. In fact, if anything, I struggled for them to recognize me on my own terms rather than within popular understandings of queerness. My primary struggle was one of trying to recognize myself and to recognize what my future might look like as a queer person with strong ties to rural Newfoundland. My struggle was one of loneliness, of trying (and failing) to find my people.

1.2 The Basics: Scope, Questions, and Terminology

Now that you have heard about my own experience of lack, loss, and loneliness, you can understand how for me, this study represents my efforts to come to terms with my experience and to extend a gentle hand to others experiencing the same problems. I included my own experiences because I believe my positionality is inseparable from my work—I will address my motivations for this in my methodology section. I will not
pretend to have the answers to the problems all queer people in rural Newfoundland face. I will, however, articulate what some of these problems are: after all, we have to start somewhere.

To date, scholars have given sparse attention to the experiences and conditions of rural queers in Newfoundland. In fact, there is effectively nothing interrogating the experiences of queer people on the west coast of Newfoundland beyond a few sentences in a few graduate theses. Considering this dearth of literature, my primary goal with this project has been to finally shine a light on our experiences by entering them into discourse, on our own terms, and in our own words. Thus, this study is primarily an investigation of the lives of queer youth in rural Newfoundland through narrative and personal history.

I walked into this study knowing that many queer people have struggled to live happy lives in Newfoundland. I began by asking myself, my loved ones, and my participants what specific experiences have queer people in rural Newfoundland had because of their queer identities? Second, how have our emotional experiences shaped our lives as a whole? Finally, I was curious about what my participants were doing to make their lives bearable, enjoyable, or fulfilling. While these three questions are very broad and exploratory, I think the question I was really trying to answer with this project is one that I have been asking myself for a long time: what does it mean to be queer in rural Newfoundland? And given the tension that exists between queerness and Newfoundland, exemplified by the stress, trauma, and generally negative feelings I have always known were there, can these identities co-exist?
In some sense, this project simply seeks to document the experience of queer youth in rural Newfoundland, though it also has implications for theory and theorizing. This research is intensely personal for me. Like bell hooks, “I came to theory [and this project as a whole] because I was hurting — the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living.”9 I was angry, hurt, and alienated from my society, my culture, my home and by extension, myself. When I came to queer and feminist theory I was “desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away.”10 I have found a lot of answers from the works of early Marxists who grappled with questions of power and culture, such as Gyorgy Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Marx himself, and most importantly for me, Raymond Williams. Further, the works of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault have fundamentally shaped my understanding of queerness.

When I began preparing this project, I believed that I knew what I would find. I had a difficult time reconciling my queerness with other elements of my identity, as did many of the other queer youth I knew from around the province. My undergraduate work was dedicated to exploring how queer youth in rural Newfoundland perform their queerness in ways that help them limit the precarity they face as queer people in an intensely cis-heteronormative climate. My undergraduate work indicated that queer youth in Newfoundland lead precarious lives. They reported feeling the need to perform their identities in more normative ways that live up to the expectations of their families and networks of extended kin, as well as their close-knit rural communities, and reported that this causes them a great deal of stress. Based on this research, I believed my participants

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10 Ibid., 1.
would have found ways to deal with their circumstances that I could categorize as refusal or defiance. I expected to observe a radical application of negative emotion into the emotional, social and cultural politics of the everyday lives of my participants, or at least that their experience would suggest to me that such a framework would be a valuable intervention. I was wrong.

While I was correct to expect that my participants had had similar experiences to me and previous participants, the ways my new participants have dealt with their negative experiences surprised me. The rural queer people I encountered do not engage in forms of defiance or refusal. Instead, many of my participants have already abandoned their rural homes in favour of urban spaces, or they desire to and are planning to do so. Rather than defying cis-heterosexism in Newfoundland society and culture, the vast majority of my participants have come to the understanding that they just have to leave, that their queerness and their identities as rural Newfoundlanders cannot coexist. My participants have also surprised me by describing how intensely they experience metronormativity and homonormativity, and how seriously the cultural narratives of queerness available to us influence our lives and determine what ways of being are legitimate or intelligible to us.

If there is anything consistent across what all my participants have said, it is an echo of my own experience of lacking critically needed things in rural Newfoundland. Our experience of lack is also rooted in something more essential than lacking a gay bar, or queer organization that is suitably radical. Many of us lacked a queer community of any kind or queer social reference point in our everyday lives. Even in cases where other queer people were present in our lives, obstacles prevented us from feeling as if we
existed in any kind of community with these people. Even if we have these things, we still lacked, and some continue to lack, conceivable futures for ourselves as queer Newfoundlanders. I understand this feeling of lack, impossibility, and loss as a consequence of our queerness conflicting with our Newfoundlandness.

The island of Newfoundland is the historic territory of the Beothuk and the Mi’kmaq. I am the descendant of a Mi’kmaq woman named Rose, who married my European-descended-Newfoundlander great-grandfather on the same beach that I played on as a child.\(^1\)\(^1\) They lived their entire lives in the same community that my family still calls home. I feel as intimate a connection to Newfoundland as I imagine is possible for anyone to feel for any place. While I am home, and thinking of home, I speak in a whole other dialect of English—my words, my voice, my style of speech becomes completely alien from what so many people assume is my default way of speaking. Every inch and every syllable of the province is endowed with deep meaning and value for me. My European-settler ancestors have been calling the island home for nearly five centuries now,\(^1\)\(^2\) and the Indigenous people who I am also descended from have called the island Ktaqmkuk,\(^3\) their home since time immemorial. I do not just know Newfoundland: I feel Newfoundland.

To be a bit more specific than saying Newfoundland is a feeling, it is also a large island off of the east coast of Canada. The island proper is home to roughly half a million

\(^{1}\) While I do claim Indigenous ancestry, I have not had access to Indigenous culture, and do not wish to speak for Indigenous people. This is still an aspect of my identity that I am slowly coming to understand.

\(^{2}\) Though many of the first European settlers did so illegally.

\(^{3}\) This is the Mi’kmaq word for Newfoundland, translating roughly to “across the water.” Despite my best efforts and asking some local experts and Indigenous leaders I could not find Beothuk word for Newfoundland. The word for their domiciles is mammateek and their word for islands is mammaseek, it may just be a coincidence that these words are very similar. Sadly, we know very little about the Beothuk as their culture was lost due to displacement and disease caused by European settlers, as well a campaign of outright genocide.
people, half of which live in the capital city of St. John’s, or towns directly surrounding it. Newfoundland was the last province to join confederation— we joined in 1949 following a second,¹⁴ and highly contested referendum where 48 percent of voters rejected joining Canada.¹⁵ The memory and spirit of independence persists in the province to this day. Newfoundland’s population is comprised mainly of settlers from Great Britain and France,¹⁶ though over 100,000 people claim Indigenous ancestry.¹⁷ I cannot speak to the degree this ancestry is felt beyond my own personal experience. With an economy once based on fisheries, Newfoundland has a long history of economic hardship, though it has been experiencing a period of great wealth this decade from offshore oil extraction, with the exception of recent financial issues following a slump in oil prices.¹⁸ Newfoundland society is noted for its unique culture, its friendly and welcoming populace, its famous English dialect, unique cultural practices, and even its own time zone that is half an hour different than our maritime neighbours in the rest of Atlantic Canada. It is a queer place, in the old-fashioned sense of the word.

For the purposes of this discussion, “queer” will normally denote any person whose romantic, sexual, sex, or gender identity does not fit the rigid caste of clearly cis-sexed, cis-gendered, heterosexual, and heteroromantic. I prefer to default to such a definition of queer because a finite acronym such as LGBTQ is incapable of covering the

¹⁴ The first referendum happened nearly 100 years earlier, and Newfoundlanders voted against becoming part of Canada.
¹⁶ Susan Manning “Contrasting Colonisations: (Re)storying Newfoundland/Ktaqmkuk as place,” Settler Colonial Studies 8, no. 3 (2018): 325.
range of, sex, sexual, romantic and gender minorities that queer represents. My participants identify themselves in highly varied ways, including as they do non-binary people, cis-gendered people with a range of sexualities, gender-queer people, and individuals who have always identified as queer in some way but are still questioning and discovering their sexual, sex and/or gender identity; I find myself in this last category.

Throughout this text I will also liberally use the terms homonormativity and metronormativity. Homonormativity is a term first coined by Lisa Duggan, Duggan uses it to describe the way our neo-liberal economy has taken over the expression of queerness through right-wing and centrist queer groups that seek to establish a “gay mainstream” critical of leftist activism and even the politics of the word “queer.” This new mainstream developed when the anti-gay right redefined public and private, where private became a “cordon sanitaire protecting “public” sensibilities.” At this time, queerness became tolerated when it occurred in private spaces, so long as it did not leak out into the private.

Five years after Duggan offered her definition of homonormativity, Jasbir Puar took up the concept in their 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Puar refers to homonormativity as a simulation of heteronormativity accessed through white, middle-class privileges. Scholars like E. De Dauw argue that Paur’s definition reveals how homonormativity reinforces “conservative gender roles and identities, including the construction of the American nuclear family, because the

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20 Ibid., 185.
21 Ibid., 181.
citizenship rights the gay community is given access to are rights connected to the
production of the family, such as adoption and marriage, which functions as the
reproduction of citizens to the benefit of the state. This legitimised the white, middle-
class gay community by heterosexualising queer culture.” Paur, and by extension De
Dauw, speak more to homonormativity as I understand it than does Duggan. When I
invoke homonormativity, I am referring to a normative idea of how queer people are
expected to perform; this normative idea is for the most part, white, upper-middle-class,
and indeed a simulation of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. It involves being
“respectably” queer in ways that do not step on anyone’s toes, emulating a heterosexual
family structure and life style, participating in one’s queerness through consumption, and
corresponding with stereotypes of gender, sex, and sexuality. It is about as unqueer as a
queer person could possibly be.

Metronormativity is a very similar term to homonormative, I would actually argue
that metronormativity is an element of homonormativity. Judith Halberstam coined the
term metronormative in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* within a discussion of “the metronormative narrative.” Halberstam argues that “the
metronormative narrative” inspires queer migration away from the rural into the urban by
mapping the coming out narrative onto a spatial narrative of migration from the rural to
the urban, turning the rural into a closet of sorts. Halberstam develops the term
metronormative based on what David Bell calls “metrosexuality,” a term he uses to
discuss the way the rural is constructed as backward and unsophisticated as opposed to

24 Judith Halberstam. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, New
the metropolis, or as a place that is untainted by the depravity of the city.\textsuperscript{25} Metronormativity is now used in Queer Rural Studies to describe the way that the gay imaginary has been constructed with an urban bias—that queerness is assumed to belong in the city, and be an urban phenomena.\textsuperscript{26} This urban bias delegitimizes rural queer experiences.

One of the last terms I would like to define is the gay imaginary. My usage of this term is informed by Kath Weston, who uses it in her 1995 essay “Get Thee to a Big City.” Weston says that the gay imaginary arose with the “availability of print and other forms of media that alluded to the “existence” of people called homosexuals.”\textsuperscript{27} Weston conceptualized the gay imaginary as a way to explain the motivations her queer rural-originating participants had to leave their homes for the city.\textsuperscript{28} Weston consistently uses the “gay imaginary” to describe the way rural queers longed for an idealized place where they were not alone, could be accepted, free, and among one another; in many ways Weston is describing an imagined community.

“Imagined communities,” as conceptualized by Benedict Anderson, are a phenomenon in which nationalism and nationalist sentiment lead people to invest and insert themselves into the diverse and amorphous institution of the nation.\textsuperscript{29} Anderson notes that the formation of an imagined community relies on shared media through printed language, which, he says, “laid the bases for national consciousnesses … first and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 283.
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foremost they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars." Like Weston in her description of the gay imaginary, I argue that many forms of media now offer an avenue for queer people to interact with an idealized community, of which we presume a consciousness exists. Contemporary queer scholars have also adopted Anderson's term. Rebecca Kern suggests that queer people can form an imagined community by doing something as simple as watching a queer television show. Kern uses the example of *The L Word*. “Viewers interacted with the show, found personal, socio-political, and cultural validation within and beyond the show, forming membership in a mediated, imagined, community.” Kern goes on to articulate that queer people become part of imagined communities that are “culturally constructed and formed through shared representations, negotiations of identity and experiences, and connections to a larger, inclusive society.” In many ways I think that the isolation we face because of our queerness, our yearning to find our people, and our shared experiences of cis-heterosexism allow us to very easily build an imagined community to which we all belong – at the very least, an imagined community to which all of us that are at least somewhat normatively queer can belong.

But the gay imaginary is not just an imagined community. When I refer to the gay imaginary I am not just invoking some idealized gay community but also knowledge and discourses about queerness—the terms upon which queerness is understood, interpreted,

30 Ibid., 261.
32 Ibid., 436.
33 An oxymoron if there ever was one! What I am referring to here are queer identities and experiences that are more intelligible and recognizable within discourses and expectations of homonormativity. For example, a cis-gendered gay man is more “normatively queer” than a man who has sex with men but identities as straight, or a two-spirit individual!
and performed. The gay imaginary is composed of structures of feeling, discourses, and the cultural narratives that make it observable, and powerful, in our everyday lives. One way to put this is that "the imaginary" is not "imaginary": it is real.
Chapter 2

Contexts

2.1 Political Theory Foundations

There is a considerable body of Marxist thought interrogating the relationship between culture and power. Two of the most prominent early philosophers who engaged this topic are Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. Importantly, these two Marxists offered theories about the relationship between culture and power that are critical of economic determinist readings of Marx in which the economic base determines culture in a mechanical sense. They also laid the foundation for more nuanced accounts of culture and power, like the one offered by Raymond Williams.

Gramsci’s concept, “hegemony,” attempts to explain the “manufacture of consent” where people are manipulated by the ruling class into consenting to their own domination.\(^\text{34}\) Hegemony can account for the way that individuals become co-opted into participating in knowledges or practices that do not best represent their interests. Gramsci outlines two ways that hegemony works upon society:

1. The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.

2. The apparatus of state coercive power which “legally” enforces discipline on those groups who do not “consent” either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed.\(^\text{35}\)

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 145.
A crucial quality of hegemony is that it operates behind the façade of another system, “behind which it can disguise its own real domination.” Thus, like ideology or cultural artifices of power more generally, hegemony is beyond the awareness of people within society – which perhaps explains why Marx’s great revolution has not yet happened.

In his 1971 text *Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus*, Althusser describes ideology as that which “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence;” this is, of course, a reference to Marx’s introduction of the dialectic between a society’s material condition and its superstructure. Althusser’s concept of ideology is compelling because it is not entirely abstract with no tangible existence, but rather “perceived-accepted-suffered.” In Althusser’s words "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices.” Most compelling for me is the schematic Althusser offers to describe the way that these allegedly intangible ideas exert power over a society:

…ideology has very little to do with ‘consciousness’…. It is profoundly unconscious … Ideology is indeed a system of representation, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with ‘consciousness’: they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that impose on the vast majority of men [sic], not via their ‘consciousness’. They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men [sic] via a process that escapes them.

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36 Ibid. 145-146.
40 Althusser, *For Marx,* 233.
In essence, Althusser identifies ideology as the intersection of ideas and the social world, observable in human behaviour, that might otherwise be assumed to be natural. From here we can see how such concepts might be useful to analyze queer experience, and indeed Althusser’s work has inspired notable queer theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

I am hesitant to use the general term “ideology” to interrogate queerness in rural Newfoundland. Cis-heterosexism, homonormativity, and metronormativity are all phenomena that are far more complicated and specific than the term can accommodate. Also problematic is the sheer amount of power that Althusser attributes to ideology; while he does acknowledge that ideology is lived and that it is observable in its interactions with human beings and our behaviour, I believe that he places far too little agency in the hands of people. We can be conscious of ideology; in fact, queer people often are because we have to be. We can escape or resist ideology, and we are capable of creating ideologies running counter to, or completely unaffected by, those that exist and dominate society.

Thus, I find Raymond Williams's work ultimately more useful than that of Gramsci and Althusser. Williams creates his own concept to describe the relationship between culture and power and its effect on society. In his chapter-long definition of "structures of feeling," within his ground-breaking monograph “Marxism and Literature,” Williams begins by saying:

The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products. What is defensible as a procedure in conscious history, where on certain assumptions many actions can be definitively taken as having ended, is habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions, and formations
in which we are still actively involved and converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes.\textsuperscript{41}

Williams’ opening critique articulates many of the issues I have with Gramsci and Althusser; that their “reduction of the social into fixed forms” is a “basic error.”\textsuperscript{42}

William’s notes that “Marx often said, and some Marxists quote him, \textit{before returning to fixed forms...} Thus we speak of a world-view or \textit{of a prevailing ideology} or of a class outlook… but the living will not be reduced.”\textsuperscript{43} Gramsci is particularly guilty of this, but even Althusser, who highlights how crucial it is to acknowledge that ideology is lived, that it is “perceived-accepted-suffered,” falls back into the trap of allowing ideology to become something of the past tense: a passive cultural artifact rather than an active and mutable artifice of power.

Williams’ structures of feeling are considerably more receptive to conceptualizations of culture and power that run counter to the dominant, or exist completely independent of it:

Indeed just because all consciousness is social, its processes occur not only between but \textit{within} the relationship and the related. And this practical consciousness is always more than a handling of fixed forms and units. There is frequent tension between the received interpretation and the \textit{practical experience}…\textsuperscript{44}

and even where form and response can be found to agree, without apparent difficulty, there can be qualification, reservations, indication elsewhere… \textit{Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness}, and this is not only a matter of relative freedom or control. For practical consciousness is what is \textit{actually being lived}, and not only what it is thought is being lived. Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: \textit{not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois
culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex.

By definition, a structure of feeling allows for a deviation between the practical consciousness and official consciousness, making possible the development and substantiation of new culture, new thought, and new structures of feeling that run counter-to or might otherwise be discouraged by the prevailing structure of feeling. This emergent quality of the concept of "structure of feeling" places so much more social power in the hands of people.

Most importantly, structures of feeling are methodologically significant, as Williams points out:

Methodologically, then, a ‘structure of feeling’ is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connection in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence. It is initially less simple than more formally structured hypotheses of the social, but it is almost more adequate to the actual range of cultural evidence: historically certainly, but even more (where it matters more) in our present cultural processes.

Structures of feeling seems to be a tailor-made concept to describe the experiences that I collected from my participants. My participants relayed their emotional experiences to me in ways that were fleeting, often resorting to metaphors or appealing to me to understand what they are incapable of articulating by ending statements with questions like “you know?” and “right?” In other words, my participants were clearly “feeling and thinking” in a way “which is indeed social and material, but… in an embryonic phase

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45 I believe this to be a direct dig at Althusser and his ilk.
46 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 130-131. Emphases mine.
before it can become fully articulate and defined.”® Structures of feeling will be featured heavily throughout later sections, where I will discuss them in much greater depth.

I would argue that there is another way that power is exercised upon people through culture: through cultural narrative. Cultural narratives are not entirely divorced from structures of feeling, the two influence and inform one another, but they differ in that cultural narratives are much more tangible, immediate, and, pardon the pun, structured. I conceptualize cultural narratives in conversation with insights derived from the renowned anthropologist and ethnographer Clifford Geertz. Geertz has famously attempted to define culture itself as “a story [people] tell themselves about themselves.”® I think Geertz’ attempted definition of culture offers us a powerful tool to understand another way culture and power interact. While Geertz made this insight in a discussion of “metasocial commentary”© of the Balinese cockfight that he says is a “Balinese reading of Balinese experience,”® we might also apply this insight to cultural narratives. Cultural narratives are not necessarily narratives belonging to particular cultures. They are not necessarily particular oral histories or sacred beliefs (though they certainly can be), though they are of particular cultural and subcultural groups. When I say cultural narrative, I am referring to narratives with immense cultural significance—to particular motifs, narrative structures, and narrative formulae.

Cultural narratives are what structure how we live our lives. Cultural narratives appear over and over again in movies, television shows, and other forms of media, but

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® Ibid., 131.
© Ibid., 447-448.
® Ibid., 448.
they also appear in the conversations we have with other people and in our own internal dialogue. Further, cultural narratives act on many individuals at once, shaping all of our experiences, making it so that cultural narratives are not only exemplified in these aforementioned ways but also through their propagation and enactment in real life with people we know and care about. Cultural narratives are a valuable social text that can offer great insight into queer culture and queer experience.

We may read cultural narratives like any other text to gain a greater insight and appreciation of the culture these narratives come from. Cultural narratives take the form of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, our understandings of our respective and collective pasts, or about the potential futures available to us. Discussing cultural narratives rather than ideology, especially in tandem with structures of feeling, can offer a more tangible way to grapple with complex experiences like those my participants described. We will return to discussions of various cultural narratives that affect queer people as we move through our discussion.

2.2 Queer Studies Foundation

Queer studies can trace much of its academic lineage back to a burst of scholarship within gay, lesbian and trans history that occurred in the 1970s, with works of: Dennis Altman, Arno Karlen, Vern Bullough, Estelle Freedman, Allan Berube, Martin Duberman, Elizabeth Kennedy, Madeline Davis and Jonathan Katz. It is important to realize how young much of this scholarship really is, as some of the aforementioned scholars are still alive, others have died only recently, and most have continued
publishing throughout the field’s development. Before these academics took a stake in developing gay, lesbian and trans history into a recognized field, it had roots during the 1960s and before in work by activists and the “homophile press,” such as the Mattachine Review.51

John D’Emilio followed the work of these early scholars, and is now one of the most renowned authors of gay, lesbian and trans history; some even credit him with establishing the field.52 D’Emilio’s work is as fascinating as it is ground-breaking; writing in the 1980s and 90s, D’Emilio traces the development of what he calls “the gay identity,” which he claims is intimately entangled with social change brought about by capitalism and capital’s influence upon all aspects of our lives, and the world.53 Despite the term "gay identity," D’Emilio’s work, much like Katz’, argues that there is, in fact, no one true form of homosexual identity, but rather that there have only been particular historical forms.54

D’Emilio argues specifically that the gay identity arose when it did, out of urban spaces, because of the changes that capitalism, and an increasingly capitalist mode of production and subsistence, brought about in the West, particularly in its cities:

The expansion of capital and the spread of wage labor have effected a profound transformation in the structure and functions of the nuclear family, the ideology of family life, and the meaning of heterosexual relations. It is these changes in the family that are most directly linked to the appearance of a collective gay life.55

55 Ibid., 469.
Under these changes in Western society and culture, the family shifted from a unit of economic production and subsistence\(^{56}\) to something entirely new:

By the 1920s among the white middle class, the ideology surrounding the family described it as the means through which men and women formed satisfying, mutually enhancing relationships and created an environment that nurtured children. The family became the setting for a "personal life," sharply distinguished and disconnected from the public world of work and production.\(^{57}\)

Being able to pursue “mutually enhancing relationships” may have originally been an ideological incentive for the development of the heterosexual nuclear family, but it may have also have offered to some the freedom to form family units outside of the heterosexual family formation, making way for more sexual freedom like queer relationships. D’Emilio’s work is particularly interesting to me because it displays how capitalism’s hold on society shifted the structure of feeling that surrounds romance, the family, and partnership, producing a distinct effect on the social reality of people’s lives.

Similarly, D’Emilio’s claims that the gay identity also developed out of urban spaces is also very interesting to me. I do not dispute that today’s gay identity is a product of urban queer culture. I am, however, worried what effects the prevalence of this narrative has on what we believe possible for queerness. Just because mainstream contemporary gay identity has emerged from urban spaces does not mean that there are no alternative modes of queerness that could have developed out of rural spaces. Still today, in places where a gay pride parade could or would never happen (and indeed, even in places where they do), there exist forms of queerness such as men who are

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 469.
\(^{57}\) D’Emilio, “Capitalism and the Gay Identity,” 469.
“heteroflexible” or straight men who have sex with men.\textsuperscript{58} If we go beyond settler rural spaces to other modes of living on the land, we encounter a whole host of queer modes of being originating from Indigenous cultures,\textsuperscript{59} and non-western contexts.\textsuperscript{60}

Judith Halberstam is perhaps the most prominent theorist within Queer Rural Studies. In Halberstam’s 2005 monograph \textit{In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives}, Halberstam commits a significant amount of time to interrogating rural queerness and trying to make room for it in discourses like queer theory.

Halberstam starts by lamenting that “most theories of homosexuality within the twentieth century assume that gay culture is rooted in urban life, that it has a special relationship to urban life.”\textsuperscript{61} While this was readily apparent in the work of D’Emilio and his predecessors in “gay, lesbian and trans” history, Halberstam connects the prevalence of this belief to Gayle Rubin’s comments in her essay “Thinking Sex.” Halberstam asserts that Rubin wrote “Thinking Sex” to provide a “theoretical foundation for sexual ethnographesis, or the ethnographic study of community.”\textsuperscript{62} While Halberstam acknowledges this as well-intentioned and even well-suited to the historical moment, they are highly critical of Rubin’s foundation. “It made sense” says Halberstam, “to contrast the sexual conformity of small towns to the sexual diversity of big cities” because “such a


\textsuperscript{61} Halberstam, “In a Queer Time and Place,” 35.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 35-36.
contrast made crystal clear the motivations of young white gay men who seemed to flock in droves in the 1970s from small towns in the Midwest, in particular, to urban gay centres like San Francisco and New York.”63 Considering the prevalence of gay migration at this time the “distinction between rural repression and urban indulgence makes a lot of sense, but in actuality, as recent research has shown, we might find that rural and small-town environments nurture elaborate sexual cultures even while sustaining surface social and political conformity.”64

Halberstam tries to disrupt Rubin’s narrative, and much of queer studies and theory, by introducing atypical articulations of queerness that occur in rural spaces. Primarily, Halberstam cites the work of John Howard from his (1999) monograph *Men Like That* that investigates the sex practices of rural gay men. Howard’s project is focused on trying to dispel the narrative that all queer men leave the country and travel to the city. Halberstam seizes on this to try and disrupt what they call the metronormative narrative, the metronormativity of queer theory, and the supposed heteronormativity of the rural.65 Tony Silva’s more recent work exploring rural men who have sex with men, and in particular “straight men who have sex with men,” is another study of such a queer queerness, that is, strange or atypical queerness. Silva asks us whether sex between straight men (hereafter simply referred to as MSM) can be considered a queer act,66 but then articulates how the existence of straight MSMs queers heterosexuality, and thus queers the rural, because “heterosexuality [and the heteronormativity that is associated

63 Ibid., 35-36.
64 Ibid., 35.
65 Ibid., 36-8.
66 Tony J. Silva, “‘Helpin’ a buddy out’: Perceptions of identity and behaviour among rural straight men that have sex with each other,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 1 (2018): 85.
with the rural] is performed, rather than naturally enacted; and heterosexuality is a matrix of not only attractions and sexual behaviours, but also interpretations of attractions and behaviors, as well as of identity labels.”67 Similar to Silva, Halberstam quotes Howard as saying, “[w]hat is apparent is that gay identity in Mississippi (surely as elsewhere) existed alongside multiple queer desires that were not identity based or identity forging.”68

Like Howard’s work, Silva’s insights into the performativity of heterosexuality asks us to consider how “[n]ormativity can be challenged not just from the fringes of sexuality and gender… but also unintentionally from within the institution of heterosexuality itself.”69 But I am skeptical about the idea that the existence of “straight MSMs” can queer heterosexuality and the rural “[b]y having sex mostly with other privileged men—conventionally masculine, white, and not gay—and by enjoying secretive and romance-free same-sex sex”70 while simultaneously framing “their encounters as straight and normatively masculine.”71 I value Silva’s work for demonstrations like these, where the fragility of compulsory cis-heterosexuality becomes apparent. But I question if queerness made manifest in the phenomena of MSM is sufficient enough to disrupt metronormativity as Silva, Howard, and Halberstam wish that it would.

67 Ibid., 85.
68 John Howard, Men Like That: A Southern Queer History (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999): 29, as cited in Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 40.
69 Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 40.
70 Silva, “‘Helpin’ a buddy out,’” 68.
71 Ibid., 68.
Queer rural studies can include studies like these that investigate particular rural areas,\textsuperscript{72} as well as investigations of current issues within rural queer communities,\textsuperscript{73} the study of how rural places are depicted in literature and fiction,\textsuperscript{74} and more theoretical discussions of rurality as it applies to queerness.\textsuperscript{75} The “rural” element of queer rural studies is a topic that has received considerably more attention in recent years. For a very long time, queer rural studies, for the most part, operated with the assumption that there is a rural, and that the word rural can be used to describe, in any amount of detail, the vast spread and variety of communities that exist outside urban centres. However, what rural means exactly is incredibly complex. Just the tip of this iceberg is the question of what qualifies as rural? Lucas Crawford asks, “does ‘rural’ describe small municipalities of 200 and under, 20 000 and under, or cities with a population of almost 1 million people but a low population density?”\textsuperscript{76} Rural is used in all of these ways, despite the social reality of these differently sized spaces being radically different.

Others have suggested that rural is a more complicated concept than is typically acknowledged. In the introduction to their anthology \textit{Queering the Countryside} Johnson, Gilley, and Gray suggest that the word rural “is first and foremost a name we give to an

\textsuperscript{73} Colin R. Johnson, “‘We Are Here For You:’ The It Gets Better Project, Queering Rural Space, and Cultivating Queer Media Literacy” in \textit{Queering The Countryside}, eds. Mary Gray, Colin Johnson, and Brian Gilley (New York, New York University Press, 2016): 169-189.
\textsuperscript{74} Andy Oler, “Sherwood Anderson’s “Shadowy Figure”: Rural Masculinity in the Modernizing Midwest” in \textit{Queering The Countryside}, eds. Mary Gray Colin Johnson, and Brian Gilley (New York, New York University Press, 2016): 78-96.
astoundingly complex assemblage of people, places and positionalities”\(^\text{77}\) beyond just being complex because of the ambiguity of the size of the community being referred to, as Crawford discusses. Johnson, Gilley, and Gray highlight just how complex these assemblages are. They tell us that when people use the word rural, they “are not just referring to farming; they are often also referring to things like religiosity, which is typically thought to inform the world views of rural and small-town Americans to a much greater extent than it does the lives of city-dwellers.”\(^\text{78}\) They further articulate the popular understanding of rurality as being intimately entangled with “ignorance, racism, or membership in [a rightwing-conservative] political party.”\(^\text{79}\) The editors of *Queering the Countryside* are, however, quick to deconstruct this phantasmal construction of the rural by highlighting the complexity and nuance of the concept. They point out how because of “the rise of new communication, information, and transportation technologies…. it has in some respects become difficult to differentiate between rural American life and American life in general,”\(^\text{80}\) and they highlight how similar these areas can be to urban ones. I am critical of this argument. In rural Newfoundland, just like rural America, new communication, information, and transportation technologies are changing the economic base and the material conditions of life in rural places. They do nothing, however — so far, at least — to shift the structures of feeling that occupy these places.

I would also like to highlight again that the rural is so amorphous, diverse, and transient that different rural spaces may seem entirely distinct from each other. For example, as discussed earlier, I struggle to see similarities between the rural depicted in

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\(^{77}\) Johnson, Gilley, and Gray, “Introduction,” 17.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 12.
Hobson’s article and my own experience, just as I struggle to recognize my experience of the rural in many other depictions offered from various authors.

The collection of rural into one supposedly cohesive category does a disservice to queer rural studies, or any form of rural studies. We must keep in mind that rural is about as concretely and easily defined as the word queer; perhaps in the loosest sense of the word rurality is itself a bit queer. This proposition is exciting for me considering the way that rurality is commonly understood to be so fundamentally opposed to queerness:

for all that the term ‘rural’ does connote in the context of twenty-first-century American culture, one thing that it is almost never used to signify is gender or sexual diversity. On the contrary, when most people talk about ‘rural and smalltown values,’ they are referring at least in part to a culture of sexual conservatism that is generally assumed to be intolerant of gender and sexual diversity at best, if not overtly sexist and homophobic.\(^81\)

To suggest that there might be something a little bit queer about rurality is invigorating for those of us who would like to queer the rural more than it already is, and to make room in rural spaces for modes of being that are queer.

Despite or because of the ambiguity and debate surrounding the word rural, queer rural studies has a rich body of discourse that might be applied to help understand queer youth in rural Newfoundland. One of the most prominent cultural narratives affecting queer people is the “Out of the Closet, Into the City,” hereafter referred to as the OCIC narrative. There is a significant body of literature within queer rural studies concerned with the OCIC narrative, an archetypal cultural narrative said to depict the experience of the majority of contemporary queer experience in the Western world.

Kath Weston’s 1995 essay “Get Thee to a Big City” is considered by many to be the critical piece that first began to problematize and deconstruct the OCIC narrative in

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 14. Emphasis in original.
popular culture and academic literature. Weston begins her essay with the realization that her earlier academic work had never even given thought to rural subjects, despite the fact that she was collecting the coming out stories of queer people who had migrated to San Francisco during the 1970 and 1980s in what she calls “the great gay migration.” Weston’s essay focuses on how, while sharing their coming out narratives, most of her participants recalled experiencing a time in their lives when they believed themselves to be “the only [queer person] in the world.” I think this experience is much less common now than it once was, thanks to advances in telecommunication technology, mass media, and the considerable social progress queer activist and advocacy groups have made since the 1970s. Many of my participants stated that they knew they were queer very early on in their lives, and those who did not realize or accept their queerness until later certainly knew that queer people existed before they reconciled and accepted their own queerness. But in any case, as my own narrative indicates, isolation remains a serious concern for many rural queer youths.

Johnson, Gilley, and Gray critique the prominence of the OCIC narrative that dominates queer studies, theory and experience, as well as complicating what is meant by rural. They explain that this narrative is a consequence of greater trends of metronormativity that characterize queer media and much of the scholarship surrounding queer people. In their introduction, the editors identify metronormativity as the natural ideological enemy that queer rural studies has been developed to disrupt, saying that it needs to be “disappeared” from queer studies because it “creates an impasse that

82 Weston, “Get Thee…,” 256-257.
83 Ibid., 256.
effectively tells rural LGBTQ-identifying people that they cannot be happily queer right where they are and should expect hostility — and in fact deserve it — if they do stay in their communities."85 Their introduction to the collection does an excellent job of establishing what they consider to be queer rural studies’ main priority: dismantling metronormativity so that queerness might be acknowledged, intelligible, and possible in rural communities. Johnson, Gilley, and Gray say that “the tendency to generate imaginary spaces on the two distant poles of freedom and intolerance… between the small town and the urban” has been a fundamental problem with queer scholarship.86 These scholars have also been highly critical of the “imaginary binaural geographies” of rural versus urban because this frame of thought, this narrative of out-urban versus closet-rural, “masks the ways in which the imaginary of urban gay emancipation and the imaginary of a heteropatriarchal rural life co-construct one another.”87

Mary Gray’s 2009 monograph Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America undertakes a project that is in part, very similar to mine, where she sets out to understand the lives of queer kids in Kentucky and Tennessee—what she considers rural America. Gray takes care to note that this area is characterized by its relationship to the nearby Appalachian mountain chain, and I think it is poetic that Gray’s study should focus on youth living around the southern end of this mountain chain while my participants live around the northern end; indeed, my hometown is situated in the foothills. The experiences of youth at the southern end of these mountains are both strikingly similar and alien to the experiences of queer youth on the northern end in

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86 Ibid., 21.
87 Ibid., 21.
Newfoundland. This dissimilarity is in no small part thanks to the difference in what rural functionally means in both of these areas, as well as the physical, cultural, and economic circumstances that characterize each region. Of course, rural Newfoundland is strikingly different from rural America, and I would argue that rural “KenTennessee” is also strikingly different from rural California where Gray grew up, and again for rural Texas, Ireland, India, and so forth.

Gray’s study was motivated by one shocking homophobic event: the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998. Shepard’s death has, in many ways, had a similar impact or resonance to the Orlando massacre: it was a tragedy affecting queer people that spanned across the divides of the urban, the rural, and the isolated—but, significantly, it happened in a rural area. Following Shepard's murder, “city-based queer-youth social movements seemed able to do little more than pity and demonize those living outside of urban centres.” Gray, who migrated from what she calls a “rural” town of 15,000 people to San Francisco, began to realize that the context of her queerness offered her the privilege of being able to claim queerness, that she had access to the language of queerness because of her education and proximity to queer culture. Gray was worried that without the city, without “living three blocks from the Castro” all of the activist infrastructure supplied by urban-based activist organizations would not be useful or sufficient to actually help rural queers. Gray asks us, “were these youth able to do much more than read what we post? They have access to representations that are affirming, but, at the same time, none of these images reflect their local surroundings.”

89 Ibid., 13.
90 Ibid., 15.
with how “reliant queer-youth organizing was on the infrastructure of urban-based non-profit organizations” 91 and how effective queer-affirmative media can be. 92 She notes that the non-profits she worked with and observed “presumed media make a difference in kids’ lives no matter where one lived” but Gray argues that instead of just presuming media was an effective tool “we need to start with the question… of their utility and consider when, how, where and why media technologies stood in for other political work that seemed too hard to do otherwise.” 93 Underlying these questions, Gray is also concerned with more foundational questions of rural-queer experience: “what are the queer sexual and gender possibilities in places where the operative assumption is that no one has ever met a stranger? If access to a visible community of sexual and gender difference is central to the story of urban queer cultural formation, how do the exactions and experiences of prosaic familiarity, central to the organization of rural communities, produce and articulate queerness differently?” 94

Gray’s concerns are very similar to those I held when I began my study. I have been very concerned with how queer youth in rural Newfoundland can act, ideally in unison, to improve their circumstances. By and large many of Newfoundland’s rural communities lack even the urban-based queer/LGBT non-profits that reach out to try and help; none had any significant presence in my own community, and none of my participants reported similar organizations being present in their experiences in rural

91 Ibid., 15-16.
92 Ibid., 16.
93 Ibid., 16
94 Ibid., 22
Newfoundland. The only queer group that I have known to exist in my own home, a Queer-Straight Alliance, was established by my friends and me while we were in high school after we travelled to St. John’s and learned about such groups. In my interviews, two participants reported a Gender and Sexual Alliance (GSA) in Corner Brook. Greta, one of my participants, actually helped to establish it, and my participant Charli described attending its meetings. Some urban-based groups did produce media intended to reach rural queer youth (including EGALE’s website and the materials they produced, and videos from the “It Gets Better” campaign) and it did, in fact, reach some of us—though none of my participants described these forms of media having much significance for them, if they were familiar with them at all. The organizations with the most presence were those that temporarily brought rural queer youth away from the rural and into urban spaces, like St. John’s, to teach them about queer issues and about how they might mobilize to help themselves. Maybe because these organizations were never present in my experience, or in the experiences my participants shared with me, beyond Gray’s descriptions of their (albeit limited) usefulness I have not even considered what role they could potentially play in rural Newfoundland. They represent an opportunity for further scholarship, especially considering the recent establishment of a week-long summer camp for queer youth on the west coast of Newfoundland that is scheduled to open for the first time in 2019.

95 Of note, one participant did describe engaging with such organizations, however this engagement occurred while they were living in Nova Scotia, roughly an hour from a larger centre where the organization was operating out of.
96 A variety of student club designed to bring Queer studies and teachers together with student and teacher allies. These exist in many forms and under many names, including Queer-Straight Alliance, Gay-Straight Alliance, Pride Alliance, and Gender and Sexuality Alliance.
97 Indeed, the organizations that allowed me to escape my rural home were not queer organizations at all, but organizations meant to encourage leadership.
Finally, I have gained a lot of insight into my own work through Kelly Baker’s chapter in *Queering the Countryside*: “LGBT identities’ in rural Nova Scotia, Canada.” While Nova Scotia and Newfoundland share many characteristics and are neighbours separated only by the Cabot straight, I want to highlight that the two provinces do have distinct cultures and histories—it is a very large strait that separates us. For example, Nova Scotia is part of the culturally and historically defined maritime provinces, while Newfoundland shares no such designation. Unlike Nova Scotia, Newfoundland was once independent from Canada and existed this way for a considerable period of time. The island of Newfoundland is also twice as large as Nova Scotia, with only half of Nova Scotia’s population. In fact, none of Nova Scotia’s counties have a smaller population density than that of rural Newfoundland, though Victoria County comes close at 2.5 people for every square kilometre of land.\(^9\) The Long-Range Mountains federal electoral district, which encompasses my entire field site, has a population density of 2.3 people for every square kilometre.\(^9\) These figures are even more extreme when considering Sydenham’s\(^10\) population density of 19.2 people for every square kilometre, or the Greater Toronto Area’s population density of just over 1003 people per square

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\(^10\) A rural area near Kingston, Ontario.
kilometre.\textsuperscript{101} All this statistical conjecture is not meant to be scientific or to prove some objective point; after all “as students of culture, we are always a little wary of statistics” and are “suspicious of the classificatory terms that seem to arrive whenever they are put into use.”\textsuperscript{102} It is just meant to highlight the isolation that characterizes rural Newfoundland relative to places like Nova Scotia.

Just as significant a distinction between Baker's work and mine, however, is that Baker’s essay quite carefully avoids the use of the word queer and instead defaults to words like “gay/lesbian” and the acronym LGBTQ. Also, Baker's analysis is quite celebratory compared to what I found my situation merited. Her analysis of queerness in rural Nova Scotia begins with a discussion surrounding the 2008 controversy when the mayor of Truro refused to raise the pride flag in recognition of pride month.\textsuperscript{103} Baker notes that in a defiant response to Truro’s mayor, many towns in rural Nova Scotia raised their own pride flags, emphasizing that the response to this incident “illuminated the fact that Nova Scotia contains a number of rural LGBT communities that are actively promoting acceptance and equality.”\textsuperscript{104} Through her discussion of their experiences, local news, and other cultural elements of life in rural Nova Scotia, Baker quite passionately decides to try and depict rural Nova Scotia as a place where queerness is possible, and perhaps even embraced and welcomed. Unfortunately, and maybe because of this queer-positive portrayal, Baker fails to interrogate the bad experiences queer people may have


\textsuperscript{102} Johnson, Gilley, and Gray, “Introduction,” 13.


\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 35-36.
had in rural Nova Scotia. We will place Baker’s analysis in conversation with my own later.

2.3 Queer Newfoundland

Finally in this survey of foundations for my work, let me briefly discuss the context of Newfoundland and Newfoundland queerness specifically. As previously noted, there is no published research speaking solely to the experiences of Newfoundland’s rural queer youth. This dearth of literature has left a vulnerable population even more vulnerable, creating a situation where rural queer youth are not seen or understood and have little opportunity to speak for ourselves or to lead societal change on our own terms and for our own sake. Newfoundland’s urban queer population have had some success in lobbying for the recognition of queer rights and legal protections for queer people. Sexual identity was added to the province's human rights code in 1996, and protections for individuals from discrimination based on their gender identity and expression were added nationally in 2013. Despite this legal recognition and protection, rural queer youth in Newfoundland still lead precarious lives and experience violence because of their queer identities.

In Out in the Country, Mary Gray frequently refers to what she calls a “popular Southern euphemism” that she feels describes the feeling of rural towns: that in one of these towns one might easily think one “could never meet a stranger.” Gray says that

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this feeling “makes it easy to presume you have known the person ahead of you in the grocery store checkout lane all your life”\textsuperscript{109} and leads people to “assume the … posture of pre-emptive friendliness.”\textsuperscript{110} Gray says she had this feeling both in her field site and her hometown, a town that had a “population of 15,000 in the early 1970’s that exploded to more than 60,000 by the time I left.”\textsuperscript{111}

This feeling is even more significant in rural Newfoundland’s even smaller communities. As I stated earlier, I grew up in a community with a population hovering around 300 people. My town is one of many similarly sized communities dispersed within an hour’s drive around a second, larger town with a population of about 3500, which left me with very long bus rides for my 12 years of schooling. The high school I attended from Grade 7 to 12 had a student population of just above 300. I could not just presume I knew everybody: I did. In my home town I still know everybody: their children, siblings, parents, pets, and what colour their kitchen walls are. And just as I know them, they know me. I have often joked that there are no closets to hide in.

In rural Newfoundland, sociality is based deeply in one’s relation to kinship groups or other individuals. When people from surrounding towns are unable to "place" me, which is somewhat uncommon, they ask me questions such as “who owns ya’?" “who’s yer mudder and fadder?” — and my personal, though lamentably rare, favourite: “who knit ya’?” Invariably, the people asking these questions would then know me in relation to my parents, my parents’ siblings, or my grandparent, who in turn they often know by their nicknames. In other cases, individuals are known by their close friendships

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 21. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 13.
or romantic relationships. I cannot count how many times I have heard somebody ask “is that the one who goes around with Jane Doe?” or “is that Grace and Don’s youngest?”

All of this is to say, rurality and what it means to be a rural queer subject in Newfoundland is strikingly different from how it is often described in many queer rural studies. In rural Newfoundland we do not just feel as if we could have known the person ahead of us in line in the grocery store all our lives, as Gray depicts, but because we probably do know the person ahead of us in line—not to mention their children, and the cashier as well.

There are also questions of what rural even means and if it is comparable across these two contexts. Gray seems to depict a rural that is agrarian, sprawling, and pastoral. Her Nova Scotia study describes areas that comprise large swaths of land that are consistently populated. Rural Newfoundland is strikingly different. There is almost no farming in Newfoundland. Communities are dotted along the coastline and were historically dependent on the cod fishery until a moratorium was imposed in 1992. The moratorium had a cataclysmic effect on the province’s economy and culture. Most rural communities in Newfoundland are relatively tightly packed compared to what you might expect from a rural-agrarian setting because homes do not need to be separated by farmland. In some cases, houses are grouped together, nearly on top of each other, though in a much more haphazard (and arguably charming) way than occurs in the city.

Formal research focusing on queer people in Newfoundland is virtually non-existent. There is a small body of literature analyzing the lives of queer Newfoundlanders more generally, taking the form of three graduate theses, all of which focus solely on St. John’s, the only major urban centre. The most recent of these theses was published in
2016 and uses a post-colonial queer framework to explore access to healthcare by queer Indigenous people in St. John’s. This queer-Indigenous study also notes a dire lack of literature addressing queer people in Newfoundland in general, never mind rural Newfoundland.¹¹² The other two are *Gay Men at Work: A Qualitative Study of Workplace Anti-Gay Violence in St. John’s, Newfoundland* by Courtney (2003) and *The Social Construction of Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Newfoundland Education System* (1998) by Shortall.¹¹³ The consensus across these three texts is that Newfoundland has a strong heteronormative climate;¹¹⁴ and that the queer people who call Newfoundland home often live precarious lives because of this.¹¹⁵ Accompanying these three theses is a recent study by Childs and Herk (2013) published in *Sociolinguistics* exploring the way the linguistic stylings of drag queens interact with Newfoundland’s special dialect of English; this also focuses on St. John’s. Beyond this academic literature, there exists a liberal-homonormative text of “queer monologues” meant for performance, styled as an “it gets better”¹¹⁶ text,¹¹⁷ and sparse mentions and references in pop culture, including an independent film *Closet Monster* set in St. John’s that depicts a young man’s struggle with violent homophobia from both his family, and community.¹¹⁸ It is also worth noting that there are several well-known queer Canadian personalities from Newfoundland, such as Rick Mercer, though I am skeptical if people like this serve as role models of any kind.

¹¹² Sylvia Grills, *A Postcolonial Queer Analysis of Aboriginal Queer Client’s Experiences of Health Care Services in St. John’s, Newfoundland* (St. John’s, Memorial University, 2015): 15.
¹¹³ Ibid., 21.
¹¹⁶ I want to note that “it gets better” is a politics this project is intentionally divorced from and critical of.
for queer youth in rural Newfoundland. I did not know Rick Mercer was queer until I began writing up this research, and I did not realize he was from Newfoundland until I was in my early twenties. None of my participants mentioned Rick Mercer, or anybody like him, when I asked if they had any queer role models.

Courtney’s (2003) thesis, *Gay Men at Work*, is focused on the working experience of gay-identified men, drawing from narratives from openly gay men in St. John’s. The word or idea "rural" never appears in Courtney’s thesis, and he appears maddeningly negligent of any effect or influence that queer rural-urban migration may have on his participants' experiences. In fact, his study seems jarringly negligent towards the unique cultural contexts of Newfoundland and what influence they may have on the experience of queer people on the island. The majority of the study is spent discussing forms of homophobic violence as they appear and have been discussed by academics elsewhere, speaking broadly about Western culture as a whole, rather than showing awareness of what is unique about the province with its long and distinct history, culture, language, and people.

Shortall’s significant contribution to my work is an insight into “the power of the institution of the church over the lives of gays and lesbians in Newfoundland.”119 She is very adamant that this influence “cannot be overstated.”120 Shortall demonstrates this through a historical vignette depicting the situation in 1996 when the provincial government announced it would follow the lead of the federal government by introducing legislation to add protections to the province’s human rights code for individuals based

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on their sexual orientation.\textsuperscript{121} Shortall notes the reaction of one local parish near St. John’s that issued a bulletin calling on Christians to push against same-sex marriage and other legal protections so that they may engage in “rightful discrimination” and “protect the morals and health of [their] fam[ilies].”\textsuperscript{122} While I am hesitant to say that this continues to be the case for all Newfoundlanders, the church and religious belief still has a very significant influence in rural Newfoundland, particularly older generations. I want to caution us away from the easy assumption that it is the older generation in Newfoundland who are the most homophobic.

Even since Shortall and Courtney produced their theses, homophobia has continued to be an issue in Newfoundland. One of my research participants shared a narrative with me about a queer minister who began working for a parish on the southwest coast. The minister in question served an area that encompassed several communities, and the churches of many communities accepted, and even adored him. Despite this, “a few old biddies’ down at [St. David’s] didn’t rest until he was gone.” I experienced something that closely parallels this story while I was in high school. One September we were greeted with a new French teacher, who to my great surprise was a young queer man. I was not taking French that year, and so I never had a class with him, but he did come to several meetings of our school’s new, and tiny, Queer-Straight Alliance and sat with us, though normally in silence. While several members of the teaching staff were vocally "allies," it was very significant to have an openly queer teacher among us, in a position of leadership and authority. Unfortunately, I was more disgusted than surprised when I discovered that our new teacher had left his teaching

\textsuperscript{121} Courtney, \textit{Gay Men at Work}, 22.
\textsuperscript{122} Shortall, \textit{The Social Construction of Homophobia...}, 67.
position before winter break had even arrived, because of the homophobia he experienced from the student body.

This form of evidence, comprised mostly of anecdotes and stories, is almost the only literature that is available at present to speak to the experience of queer people in rural Newfoundland. But at least it can be said that in Newfoundland’s rich storytelling culture, anecdotes like this form the social fabric of space and place and give the social world its meaning.

While there is only sparse material speaking to the experiences of queer people in urban Newfoundland society, and virtually nothing addressing Newfoundland’s rural queer people, other more traditional academic materials are still useful. Narratives about queer Newfoundlanders can sometimes be found in broader texts addressing Canadian queer people, such as N. M. Lewis’ (2012) study of geography and its relation to “coming out” of, or going back into, “the closet.” In this study, Lewis tells the story of Mark, a queer Newfoundlander who came out only after leaving Newfoundland in 1980 at the age of 20. Mark later returned to Newfoundland to work as a teacher and went “back in the closet” as a survival tactic to cope with Newfoundland’s heterosexist sociocultural climate. Narratives of emigration from rural areas, or from Newfoundland as a whole, to find one’s queer identity are common. We will return to themes of migration later, as they featured heavily in the experiences of my participants.

What existing materials do indicate is that queer people in Newfoundland often live precarious lives marked by violence and hardship because of their queer identities.

124 Ibid., 218-219.
This precarity often includes exacerbated rates of mental illness and precarious housing,\textsuperscript{125} direct physical violence and threats thereof,\textsuperscript{126} as well as other forms of violence such as verbal abuse and harassment, discrimination, and job insecurity, especially before laws were passed to try and eliminate this form of discrimination.\textsuperscript{127} Further, we also know that social scripts of masculinity and femininity are particularly rigid in Newfoundland. Some link this to the power and influence of religious institutions, particularly the Roman Catholic church\textsuperscript{128} while others attribute this to Newfoundland’s economic history that harshly reinforced a gendered division of labour.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{125} Ellen Taylor, Andrew Jantzen, and Barbara Clow, \textit{Rethinking LGBTQ Health} (Halifax, Atlantic Centre for Excellence for Women’s Health, 2013): 33.

\textsuperscript{126} Shortall, \textit{The Social Construction of Homophobia}..., 85.

\textsuperscript{127} Courtney, \textit{Gay Men at Work}, 1-5.

\textsuperscript{128} Grills, \textit{A Postcolonial}..., 23; Shortall, \textit{The Social Construction of Homophobia}..., 89.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

In her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” Judith Butler stakes a clear claim for the importance and value of personal experience and narrative as a tool of inquiry. Butler argues specifically that feminist theorists, and I would argue queer theorists, who study the experiences of women and queers should ground their theories in personal “lived experience” because “[t]he personal is… implicitly political inasmuch as it is conditioned by shared social structures.”\(^\text{130}\) Of course, Butler is not the only person to have made this claim, but this insight has proven critical, as it often underpins many of the methodologies used in queer studies and those who engage with queer and feminist theory.

Inspired by this, I have opted to discuss my own experiences and narratives alongside those of my participants, thus erasing any claims or façade of distance from my research. While it is typical for scholars in the social sciences and humanities to try and keep at least some modicum of distance from their work, I think projects like these benefit from deep personal involvement and entanglement. Further, I would claim that it is simply not possible to remove my positionality, experiences, and beliefs from this work, and I will not try to. Instead, I have chosen to make my position blatantly clear by displaying my own experiences, where I come from, and the place from which I am engaging in this work—even though it makes me uncomfortable to be so forthcoming about my own experiences.

The nature of my work demands that I involve myself personally; indeed, I do not think it would be possible for me to explore these questions without exploring my own experience, and that is why I began this thesis with several very important stories from my own life. This research is as much an exploration of my own experiences as it is that of my participants – and in many ways, I think I have been trying to understand my experiences through theirs. I have learned as much about myself during this process as I have about my participant’s lives.

My seven participants (all of whom I identify by pseudonym) ranged between the ages of 20 and 30 years old, though most of them were in their early twenties. All of my participants have lived in rural Newfoundland for a minimum of four years, and in fact all but one (Sam) have lived in rural Newfoundland for the vast majority of their lives. I selected my participants with the intention of getting a balance between “big rural” and “small rural” experiences. Six of my participants grew up in Western Newfoundland, while my seventh participant grew up in rural Nova Scotia and moved to Newfoundland as a young adult. Three of my participants were from Corner Brook or towns immediately surrounding it, and the other three were from much smaller towns on the west coast, similar to my own. About half of my participants have left Newfoundland since becoming adults and return intermittently, or often. The rest have left rural Newfoundland in favour of St. John’s, or are living in Corner Brook for the moment with intentions of moving to a bigger center. These off-island, or at least out-of-rural, experiences have allowed my participants to develop strong tools for self-reflection that they have used to analyze their own experiences.
My participants were also intentionally chosen to offer a variety of subject positions within Western Newfoundland’s young queer population. Three of my participants identify as cis-sexed, two gay cis-sexed men who I have dubbed Devon and Kyle, and a bisexual cis-sexed woman who I have named Ashley. The four others identified along a spectrum of gender-nonconforming to gender-queer. These individuals have been assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms (Kris, Sam, and Charli) and one other, Greta, specifically requested their pseudonym. I tried very hard to solicit a variety of perspectives on queer issues and interviewed individuals who I know to be involved in artistic, activist, and advocacy work, as well as people who prefer to keep a low profile, so to speak.

Protecting the identities of my participants is particularly challenging for a project like this. I feel obliged to communicate the experiences of my participants in such a way that the person behind the participant has a clear voice;¹³¹ I believe that this is a critical aspect of my work. However, this makes it nearly impossible to maintain the anonymity of my participants. Because of this, beyond simply assigning pseudonyms I have also masked or distorted basic non-essential information like exact ages, the names of their communities, their family structures, occupations, and so on. Despite all this, I still believe there is a risk my participants could be recognized by people who know them well enough to know their specific stories. I have discussed this risk with my participants and they understand that it is possible they may be identified (See Appendix B & C).

¹³¹ As opposed to projects like those by Kelly Baker. Baker’s important study of queer youth in rural Newfoundland analyzes the experiences of their research participants by theme, rather than participant. I do not feel like I know any of Baker’s participants well enough to understand them after reading their study.
One limitation of my participant selection is that the vast majority of my participants have or will soon have, a university degree. While this is unfortunate, there are several reasons why this selection of participants was necessary and is not as constrictive as it may seem. Post-secondary education in Newfoundland is affordable, with tuition at Memorial University costing only $2,550 CAD a year.\(^\text{132}\) A tuition freeze has been in place in Newfoundland and Labrador for 15 years,\(^\text{133}\) thanks in large part to the hard work of a very robust and active system of passionate, well connected, and cooperative student’s unions and a general pretence of (now faltering) support from successive provincial governments. Finally, a robust grants system is in place for post-secondary students in Newfoundland to complement those of the federal government; before some budgetary crises, Newfoundland replaced all of its student loans with grants for all qualifying post-secondary students (though following said budget crises these grants have been rescinded back to earlier levels). Because post-secondary education is so affordable in Newfoundland many queer youths in rural communities see post-secondary education as an easy, obvious, and quick opportunity to escape their small communities for larger centers. Further, a university education is not as much of a class marker as it may be in other places where tuition is several times more expensive.

All of my participants were known to me in various capacities before this study began. Some are close friends of mine, others are those I have worked closely with in my past endeavours as an activist, advocate, and researcher in rural Newfoundland. I would call everybody that I held conversations with a friend of mine, though I am significantly

\(^{133}\) Ibid.
closer to some of them than others. This friendship was of preeminent importance for this study and I do not believe that my research questions could have been answered were I not friends with my participants. This closeness facilitated difficult conversations, making it possible to talk about things that would have been impossible were I a stranger to them.

It might be claimed that my close relationship to my participants could have “contaminated my data.” I believe the exact opposite is the case. During our conversations, my participants were very forthcoming with their experiences because they knew and trusted me. All of my participants have a very good idea of who I am, and they understand that my academic and artistic work interrogates queerness in ways meant to help queer people. Because I was known to them, my participants felt comfortable speaking with me and shared things that I am not sure they would have if we did not already have an existing relationship. My participants even felt comfortable enough to share perspectives with me that they knew I would not agree with. I think ultimately this friendship assured my participants that I would treat them with respect during the conversation, and then treat their voices with respect after the fact.

My interview process was guided by four core values: camaraderie, autonomy, non-judgement, and the importance of narrative in diverse forms. Much like other queer researchers who do oral history work I used a non-structured style that emphasized the necessity of strong rapport, and ideally friendship, between myself and my participants. Instead of a script for the conversations, I walked into each conversation with a broad set of seven questions that I felt would be a good fit for my participants. I

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did my best to make sure that my interviews did not feel like data collection meetings—I’m reluctant to even call them interviews—and for the most part they happened more like organic conversations with a close friend or trusted peer, not unlike the therapeutic ‘teller-focused’ interview style pioneered by social worker M. Hydén (2014) and queer oral history projects completed by Boyd (2009), Kennedy (1995), and Howard (1999). This organic flow of conversation was essential for my research, the participants I had the best conversations with were those with whom I had the most time to talk, and with whom I had built the strongest rapport during past work and interaction. Our shared experiences of queerness were also an invaluable asset for this work. Some of the conversations I had with my participants were fraught with difficulty and confusion as we spoke about memories of complicated and confusing experiences and feelings. Without our shared queer identities this project would not have been possible.

There is a long history of using oral history to explore queer life. John D’Emilio (1983) was one of the first to use such a methodology in queer studies in his famous text “Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities.” Under D’Emilio’s guidance, the field was largely focused on documenting the experiences of gay, lesbian and trans people before they could be forgotten. Since D’Emilio’s work, most of the notable texts in gay, lesbian and trans history have used oral history methodologies, including most notably Kennedy and Davis’s (1993) Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, Howard’s (1999) Men Like That, and Boyd’s (2003) Wide Open Town. More recently the Oral History Review has released a special issue dedicated to queer oral history, including analyses of queer labourers.

135 Boyd, “Who is the Subject?” 177.
the queer movement as it has intersected with the student moment, and speculation as to how activists and scholars might go about using “web 2.0 tools” to reclaim the “lesbian archive” (and the collective archive of other queer identities).

Thirty years after its inception, queer oral history as a subfield began exploring the subjective opportunities presented by queer oral histories. Many have called this change the “the affective turn,” saying that it represented a renewed focus and interest on emotion and individual experience. One such queer oral historian is Elizabeth Kennedy, whose work explores the affective dimensions made available by oral history methods. Kennedy’s work with lesbians of varying class positions in Buffalo, New York demonstrates the subjective quality of oral histories, and how they allows us to access an individual’s understanding of a specific event, giving us access to their process of identity construction and their intimate understanding of themselves. Because the memories we share are impregnated with emotion, we as scholars are afforded a whole new dimension of analysis beyond the strict details of a participant’s, or patient’s, experience. My interest in emotion and my participant-narrator’s intimate internal experience of their queerness introduces some exciting opportunities for the use of methodological tactics derived from oral history.

Introducing the recent special issue of *Oral History Review* on "Listening to and Learning from LGBTQ Lives," Murphy, Pierce, and Ruiz are adamant that that oral history methodologies have a lot of political significance and appropriateness for queer

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projects because oral history requires taking a side. Murphy, Pierce and Ruiz make this claim based on the work of Allesandro Portelli, an early practitioner and theoretician of oral history who argues for the appropriateness of oral history methodologies while working with marginalized groups because oral history always requires that the researcher takes a side.\textsuperscript{141} Portelli tells us that

\begin{quote}
orphal history can never be told \textit{without} taking sides, since the ‘sides’ exist inside the telling. And, no matter what their personal histories and beliefs may be, historians and ’sources’ are hardly ever on the same ‘side.’ The confrontation of their different partialities—confrontation as ‘conflict,’ and confrontation as ‘search for unity’—is one of the things which makes oral history interesting.\textsuperscript{142}
\end{quote}

Murphy, Pierce and Ruiz are quick to note that this side-taking, and the confrontations that these methodologies come with, are things that the post-stonewall queer community desperately needed, and so oral history seemed like a natural fit for early gay, lesbian and trans history.\textsuperscript{143} Oral history was an especially good fit considering that the project of gay, lesbian and trans history has been “aimed not only at critiquing heteronormativity and sexual oppression in the larger culture but also at influencing the direction of [LGBT/queer] activism.”\textsuperscript{144} While my study is not a history project, it does use elements of oral history methodologies, and these political elements of the methodology are a critical part of my work.

I spoke with seven queer Newfoundlanders over the course of early spring, though many of my participants were still suffering under the heavy and persistent winter weather typical of Newfoundland. The conversations took place using video conference

\begin{footnotes}
\item[142] Portelli, \textit{The Death of Luigi Trastulli}, 5. Emphasis mine.
\item[143] Ibid., 5.
\item[144] Ibid., 6.
\end{footnotes}
software. The conversations were very open, free-flowing, narrative-based, and averaged about 90 minutes in length each, though some ran well past the two-hour mark. I have also conducted quick follow-up conversations with some of my participants to clarify some of the things they shared with me, to get greater contextual details and updates. Our conversations were largely characterized by laughter and camaraderie; while we often spoke about our difficult and sometimes painful topics and histories, the discussion always returned to a cheerful tone with frequent jokes and commiseration about our shared queerness.

While I did use a prepared set of seven questions as a loose guide for the conversation (see Appendix A), much of the discussion was free-flowing and led by my participants, with the questions acting more like prompts to inform them of what I was interested in knowing. This allowed me to capture what elements of being queer are significant in the lives and histories of my participants, and what experiences they believe to be most important. Much like Kennedy and Davis (1993), I took a passive role in the conversations whenever possible.\(^{145}\) Beyond encouragement, expressions of sympathy and camaraderie, and occasional questions to contextualize narratives, I remained relatively silent, speaking only when my participants had naturally found the end of their stream of thought, with one exception. Whenever my participants seemed to drift in focus, began to answer my questions with succinct or one-word answers, or if they appeared anxious about talking a lot (some even directly apologized for talking so much) I would step in and tell a narrative of my own that related to the topic we were perusing, or the next topic I wanted to discuss with them. I designed the interview process like this

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in hopes of isolating my own expectations, and my worldview from those of my participants, or in the case of those who knew me pretty well from my past community involvement, at least isolating my views from the conversation — but making them available as needed as a resource or mode of connection.

My methodology did have some drawbacks, and while I was still getting a grasp on the process, the first conversation I had for this project left much to be desired. The conversation with my first participant resulted in mostly just cultural information about Newfoundland rather than anything I would call a ‘queer narrative.’ After this first conversation, I was able to more easily insert myself to have enough of a presence to effectively guide the conversations. I believe I was successful in my conversations with the following six participants, as my participants stayed on topic, often expressed views that I did not expect or anticipate and expressed political beliefs that they knew I disagree with. I am glad and grateful that they felt comfortable to speak so freely with me, their open and honest perspectives were refreshing and incredibly enlightening. I cannot thank them enough.

Opting to occasionally share my narratives with my participants had the added bonus of assuring them that things as seemingly mundane as their everyday lives were still relevant to my analysis. Howard (1999) encountered this issue in his own work, and it is an issue that I struggled with in my earliest conversations. Howard (1999) and Boyd (2003, 2008) also noticed that their participants seemed to try and shape their narratives into frames and structures they expected were appropriate, or frames they knew to be intelligibly queer even if they did not personally experience the event in question from
such a frame of reference. My focus on my participant’s internal emotional understandings of themselves, the events that shaped their understanding of queerness in general, and their own queerness in particular, also helped me to avoid this. For example, rather than asking my participants “when did you come out,” I asked them to share with me their “life story.” This often prompted my participants to tell me of their many comings out, and how these moments intersected with other important parts of their lives and identities.

Unfortunately, I was not able to travel to Newfoundland to have these conversations in person. While this did threaten to negatively impact the quality of my work, I believe that I was able to mitigate this, at least in part, by relying on participants with whom I had already established a strong rapport. Having to facilitate our conversations through video conferencing software added an unwanted layer of removal from our dialogue, making them feel less like organic conversations. There is a growing conversation about the use of video-calling software in qualitative interview work. Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst note that while Skype does provide access to some non-verbal communication, it also conceals a great deal—and makes it more difficult to establish a rhythm for the interview. However, others argue that video-calling can actually be advantageous for building rapport with some participants; Deakin and Wakefield suggest that in their research “rapport was built quicker [using videocall software] than in a number of face to face interviews.” I was aware of potential issues I

147 Gail Adams-Hutcheson and Robyn Longhurst, “‘At Least there Would Have Been a Cup of Tea’: Interviewing Via Skype” Area 49, no. 2 (2017): 151.
might face when selecting my interview participants, and so I tried to account for issues that might affect rapport or rhythm by interviewing people I had some pre-existing relationship or rapport with. I also took the first part of every call with each participant to joke and connect with them, and then emphasized to them how important it was that they just be themselves and treat our conversation like they might any other conversation with me. Some participants required more reassurance than others, but I am happy with my results.

I have shared parts of these following sections with my participants, especially when I was unsure of my analyses of their experiences were accurate to their experiences. In an ideal world, I would have liked to be able to replicate anthropologist Michael Jackson’s\textsuperscript{149} strategy and sit down with my participants to review a complete draft of this work to ensure I am depicting their experiences as accurately as possible. Unfortunately, my isolation from Newfoundland makes this impossible—as do time constraints. I will be sending all of my participants a copy of my thesis along with a personal thank you for their participation.

I tried to engage with the conversations I had with my participants as much as possible, using active listening as my primary mode of analysis. Throughout the process of these conversations I would take notes of topics and timestamps where my participants said things of note, or things that seemed especially important to them. Once our conversations about queerness and their experience were over, we would spend a few minutes just chatting aimlessly and joking. Sometimes participants would seek reassurance on their performance, reveal that they were really anxious talking about

\textsuperscript{149} Michael Jackson, \textit{At Home in the World} (Durham, Duke University Press, 1995).
certain topics, or emphasize certain topics—this was very helpful for me. After completing the interviews I would normally sit in a coffee shop and reflect on what was said, scribbling notes, questions, and topics that I wanted to pursue further. After, I would listen to the interview recording again, pausing intermittently to reflect further, sometimes rewinding and listening to segments many times. Finally, I would set about transcribing the interviews in full, highlighting passages as I progressed. After all the interviews had been digested in this way, I would occasionally return to the recordings again as needed. I still find myself returning to them and reflecting on things we discussed; I suspect I will keep doing this for quite some time.
Chapter 4

Findings

I chose to organize my findings primarily according to participant, rather than theme, for two reasons. First, I am often frustrated when reading qualitative work where the different participants in the research process get lost. When I read about people’s lives I feel a strong need to get to know that person to the best of my ability; maybe that is because for all of my early life, I rarely ever met any strangers. It is not enough for me to read a quote or two within a discussion of one theme that emerged: I need to be able to engage with the person speaking behind the quote. I strongly believe that this added context, granted by substantiating the person that waits behind the participant grants a wealth of information not otherwise available.

Second, the politics of my project is dedicated to allowing my participants to speak to their own experiences, on their own terms. This requires that I step back from my role as researcher, at least in part. I feel that choosing this somewhat more atypical method of presenting my findings has made it harder for my own biases to be written over, and onto, the voices of my participants. This is also why you will see me splicing in commentary about my own experience throughout the course of the following discussions, and it is one of the reasons why I have included my own experience. Later, after I have given life to all of the people behind the participants you see, I will also speak to them with a broader-brush, but I am comfortable they’ll be able to speak for themselves at this point.
4.1 Devon

“I always wanted there to be like, some big break, like something would happen that was so significant that I felt that was the time and place to declare who I was, that type of thing.”

Devon grew up in a small community on the southwest coast of Newfoundland with a population of fewer than 1000 people. Devon identifies as a cis-sexed gay man, and like many of my other participants, his queerness has an enormous influence on his identity. Devon lives in Corner Brook for half the year where he is completing his undergraduate degree at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University. He spends the other half of the year living with his parents in his hometown. Devon is unique amongst my participants as he does not identify as an activist or an artist.

Devon grew up in a multi-sibling home with several siblings a few years his senior. Two of them have children now, and Devon is very happy to be a part of their lives. In the upcoming academic year, he will be entering the final year of his undergraduate degree at Grenfell Campus and intends for his undergraduate thesis to focus on issues that affect queer people. Devon is unsure what he will do and where he will go after he finished his degree, but he has decided that he will not be able to live in the rural town that he calls home for any significant amount of time.

I asked Devon to describe his experience to me growing up as a queer person in rural Newfoundland:

Part of me wants to say it was depressing, but I [pause] feel like that might be too dramatic? [we both chuckle because we have had many conversations before about how difficult it is being queer in communities like our own]. It is definitely difficult at times. I feel like, a lot of people here are relatively accepting, or they are just maybe, putting up a front that they are accepting. But they, I don’t know. I still kind of feel that there is this underlying [pause] judgement… like to your face they’ll say “well I don’t have a problem with
gay people.” But then in person, you’ll hear [pause] hear them say things in public, and you’re like, Devon “hmmm, not really sure if I would agree with you there”… Like I have had people say to me like “oh I don’t have a problem with you or gay people.” And then I have heard them say like, pretty homophobic and transphobic things in public. And for me it’s like, really disrespectful obviously, but it’s also like, it gives me this impression that they feel they [tone becomes very careful] need to put up this facade that they are these genuine people when they are really not.

Devon’s experiences are not atypical of what one might expect in a liberal society still defined by its cis-sexism and compulsory heterosexuality. While members of his community are willing to say that they support queer individuals, in practice this support is tenuous, and conditional on the behaviour of these queer subjects fitting a distinct set of expectations and boundaries.

Devon and I have had a lot of discussions in the past about the idea of ‘coming out,’ and how the way that coming out, as traditionally understood, is not reflective of the experiences of most queer people. Both of us strongly believe that the vast majority of queer people have no one ‘coming out’ moment that we can point to, but instead many stories of coming out to different people or groups and at different times. Most importantly, Devon and I have reflected on how queer people continue having to come out all the time. Whenever we enter a space or meet someone new; we are forced to constantly negotiate our identity, performance, and safety. Despite awareness of this alternative understanding of coming out, Devon still attempted to frame a coming out story, saying that his own was strange and not a “formal coming out.”

It’s strange actually, because I never had really a formal coming out… My mother, [pause], asked me about it, and I, at that point, this was during my second year of university actually, um, and I just told her straight up that I was kind of waiting for that opportunity to tell her. Not that I feared what was going to happen once I did come out. Well I mean, I sort of did. But it was more, I never felt there was an appropriate time to come out. Like I didn’t just want to wake up, come down stairs and be like, “hey mom and dad, this is
how I am, now deal with it,” type of thing? I always wanted there to be like, some big break, like something would happen that was so significant that I felt that was the time and place to declare who I was, that type of thing. Um, but eventually, yeah, my mother asked me, and I told her, and then it was kind of like a free fall from there. Like, other people started hearing it from my mother, and she kind of opened up those doors for me, and yeah. A lot of the reception was good, positive, so I’m glad.

Devon’s attempts to account for his lack of a ‘formal’ or typical coming out story are consistent with observations made by Nan Boyd (2008). Boyd, during the course of her fieldwork, observed that even though she told all of her participants that with her project she “hoped to decenter gay identity from the heart of [her] project,” her participants “worked hard to recentre their gay identities” by “a prideful claim to gay or lesbian identity.” Boyd believes that by trying to shape their narratives and make them intelligible as “gay and lesbian product” they tried to “map their memories onto an intelligibly gay/lesbian narrative structure.” While my research was not trying to decenter queerness from the heart of my study, and in fact does quite the opposite, I did observe that my participants also tried very hard to fit their narratives into neatly packaged and “established” gay and lesbian narrative structures.

My concerns with the ‘coming out’ model center around insights offered by Pearlman, and their reading of Foucault. Pearlman (2015) argues that queer people can often play into the trap of the cis-heterosexist oppressor without even realizing it. Pearlman is a trans performing artist who is supremely concerned with the “requirements of autobiographical ‘truth-telling’ in identity-based theatre” and how this truth telling interacts with “problematic essentializing gestures, ‘the erasure of difference’ and the

150 Boyd, “Who is the Subject?” 188.
151 Ibid., 188.
‘reiteration of normative narratives’ that can accompany autobiographical performance.”\(^{153}\) While Pearlman is primarily concerned with autobiographical theatre I believe that the insights he offers also apply to queer people when we share our narratives; after all, our identities and social realities are built through performance, repetition, and practice.

Pearlman’s concerns are born out of Foucault’s insights around coming out, and the “manufactured desire to ‘confess’ one’s self.”\(^{154}\) Inspired by this insight, Pearlman argues that because queer people are forced, by “the Western moral and ethical need to confess our truth,” in what is “an internalized and largely unquestion[ed] regime of disciplinary power that creates, controls and regulates the limits of identities.”\(^{155}\) Pearlman finds a great deal of resilience in creating “truth trap” as performance, that is, convincing their audience of various ‘truths’ about their identity as a trans person only to destabilize and disprove them moments later.\(^{156}\) Pearlman acknowledges that the “subversive” effect of these performances is limited, but that

the springing of each singular trap refuses both solidification and expectation; the repeated and explosive reveal of multiple traps rejects the desire for answers and the possibility of a stable narrative in which an identity ‘problem’ is solved. Ideally, the effect at the close of the performance is that a space without solidity emerges, without the need for ‘understanding’ or confession, potentially a space not submitting to Foucauldian ‘regimes of power.’\(^{157}\)

The emancipatory value in what Pearlman is trying to do is that it provides an opportunity for queer people to break free of cultural scripts that decide how we can tell our stories, and what the

\(^{153}\) Ibid., 88.
\(^{154}\) Ibid., 89.
\(^{155}\) Ibid., 89.
\(^{156}\) Ibid., 89-90.
\(^{157}\) Ibid., 90.
contents of our stories may be. By offering expected narratives and then upsetting them, Pearlman demonstrates how society tries to force queer people into new boxes, or closets so to speak, as soon as we escape the closet of compulsory cis-heteronormativity. While not nearly as dramatic as Pearlman’s artistic practice, one of my goals in the way I conducted these conversations with my participants was to allow my participants to break out of established expectations that might try and structure or subvert our narrative. I invited my participants, and myself, to challenge what is popularly known about queer people and the queer experience. I believe I was at least somewhat successful in allowing many of my participants to speak their own truth authentically as they experienced it. Devon and Kyle represented the greatest obstacles to this.

The power that cultural narratives can have on our lives, and in particular the coming out narrative among queer people, can be seen not just in the form Devon’s narrative took when he shared it with me but also in the way it clearly had a powerful impact on his life. In the above passage, Devon mentions several times that he did not have a formal coming out and that his coming out was “weird” because it did not happen in some dramatic, life-changing moment. Further, Devon explicitly states that he did not come out to his mother until his second year of university, despite accepting his own sexuality and coming out to many of his friends while he was still in high school. Devon explained that he was waiting for “one big break, like something would happen that was so significant that I felt that was the time and place to declare who I was, that type of thing.” Devon’s desire for that perfect moment, that quintessential cinematic world-shifting moment to come out and declare himself to all who would listen, never came. Instead, his mother simply asked him if he was gay and he said yes, leaving Devon with what he believes to be a “weird” or “strange” coming out story. All this is not to say that Devon believes the only legitimate way to come out is in such a dramatic moment, just
that he believes it may be the more common or more desirable way to do so, at least that it was the only way that he believed he could come out. I’m willing to speculate that Devon believed this because all of the cultural narratives of coming out available to him, depicting coming out as a dramatic, world shifting moment. If Devon’s mother had never asked him I have every confidence that Devon would have eventually come out to her.

I think, however, that Devon’s desire to wait to come out is more complicated than just waiting for that one moment. I believe that cultural narratives surrounding kinship and familial ties in Newfoundland also influenced Devon’s decision to not come out until he was asked. As you may have noticed, like many people in rural Newfoundland, Devon has very strong ties to his family. I have been fixated on the coming out story Devon offered, and so we have had several follow up conversations about it. In one of these conversations Devon said: “I guess I just didn’t want to bring it up until it became relevant or necessary… just waiting until questions were being raised and I had to answer them.” When I asked Devon why he was waiting, he replied saying “I guess one part of it was fear… It is hard to explain.” Devon asked for some more time to think about it. He got back to me a few days later, saying:

I really just didn’t want to come out at random because I felt people would be even more judgemental of that. Asking like “where did this even come from?” So, I needed a time when it felt right and suitable for me to come out. Also, I needed a time when I didn’t feel there would be any repercussions for doing so… I just felt as if my family life was going to fall apart at times if I came out. I wasn’t worried about friends at all because I knew they’d accept me unconditionally… But also, during that time I was very much still devoted to living and being in my hometown, so family was important to me, and having that sense of inclusion.
Devon’s anxiety about coming out to his family, fearing that it might somehow change his relationships with them is clear. These familial ties are incredibly important to Devon, and they were an important part of Devon’s connection to his rural home.

It is difficult for me to articulate exactly how familial affiliation might differ in Newfoundland than in other rural spaces; of even if it does. What I can articulate is how they affect rural Newfoundlanders. As I mentioned earlier, people in rural Newfoundland are normally known through their kinship ties. For example, most of my community know me as the child of my parents, or grandchild of my grandparents, rather than knowing me on my own terms. My identity as a rural Newfoundlander is intricately entangled with my familial identity, as part of a clan of sorts. Additionally, it is not at all unusual to have a large portion of your family living in the same town as you, or in a town nearby. Out of ten houses on my street, seven belong to close family members, and ‘across town’ (still visible from my bedroom window) my grandmother’s house is directly surrounded by three of my aunts and uncles. Other relatives are peppered throughout the community, as well as adjacent communities.

Near the end of this writing process I had a follow-up conversation with Devon about his plans for the future: he had suggested that I speak with him again as late as possible to see if he had decided on what he is going to do after he finishes his degree this year. Devon’s response was pretty to the point: “A bigger center, somewhere where there is everything available, and I don’t have to live in a small depressing town.” While this alone is fairly enlightening, I pressed Devon and asked him to define what he meant by everything: “food, amenities, and opportunities for relationships.” Devon’s frustration with rural life is made clear here; he craves “foreign” or more worldly culture than is
available in his rural home, and because of his location in an isolated and rural community, is often forced to contemplate that unless he does leave he will be alone. Ultimately, he believes it is likely that he will move to St. John’s, but he took care to note that above anywhere else he would like to be able to leave Newfoundland and live in a larger city, preferably Montreal.

4.2 Sam

“And you know, sometimes you just have to shove it in their face before they will understand that it is necessary.”

Sam is my only participant not born in Newfoundland, but who rather chose to live there, at least for a time. Sam is an artist and an activist from a rural area in Nova Scotia, who spent four years living in Newfoundland while they worked on an undergraduate degree in visual arts at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University. Sam identifies as gender neutral, uses they/them pronouns, and spoke in great detail about how their queerness is a very significant part of their identity and has had a dramatic impact on their experience both in their rural home in Nova Scotia, and their time in rural Newfoundland.

While Sam no longer lives in Newfoundland, having left the island a year ago, their perspective is especially valuable as that of a cultural outsider, allowing for a juxtaposition of rural Newfoundland with another rural area in a comparable jurisdiction. Sam grew up in a town with a population of fewer than 700 people, and while they were able to attend elementary school in their hometown, they had to travel more than an hour
by bus to attend high school in a small city nearby. That city has a metropolitan population of roughly 30,000, which is nearly the same as Corner Brook’s metropolitan population. These metro populations are, however, based on two wildly different areas. The metro-population of the small city near Sam’s community is spread over about 40 square kilometres, while Corner Brook’s metropolitan area is significantly larger at 255 square kilometres, with the city proper having less than 20,000 residents.\footnote{Statistics Canada. 2017. Corner Brook [Population centre], Newfoundland and Labrador and Newfoundland and Labrador [Province] (table). Census Profile. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E (accessed August 3, 2018).}

While there is a lot of similarity between Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, Sam was quick to highlight how their experience as a queer person living on these two islands differed drastically.

Yeah, but it’s a give and take. I feel like Nova Scotia has more of the celebrating queerness, whereas Corner Brook, I find is pretty small and not as celebratory. It’s slowly growing I suppose. They painted a rainbow sidewalk, which was kind of cool!

But yeah, I’m not afraid to be who I am, but I certainly feel different from who I was in Corner Brook, and in the Grenfell Community specifically. I didn’t spend too-too much time in the queer community of Corner Brook, because as far as I know there isn't one!… But inside Grenfell I felt more comfortable than I have anywhere, more-so because I was there for four years, it’s where I basically grew and blossomed into myself, and it was nice because the professors were aware of how things are changing, and they were just, they were very accepting of using proper pronouns…

Sam’s experiences indicate that Corner Brook, the most urban-like place that rural Newfoundland has to offer, is strikingly different than the city they are familiar with. The lack of a queer community off-campus in Corner Brook is something that several of my participants mentioned. It was particularly jarring for Sam because in the past they had
attended events and conferences organized and hosted by the queer community in a nearby city, where they felt liberated and happy. Events like this were incredibly important for Sam growing up, as they offer some of the only moments when “you know, when you have that feeling that you're not alone in a room. It is pretty fantastic.”

For Sam, being queer in the rural space that is their hometown is complicated by having to live in close proximity to their parents.

In Corner Brook my living situation was with friends. They knew me, they were allies, or they were queers themselves. They understood, they got it. Now my home living situation is a bit different, I'm home, I'm with my parents, they gave birth to me you know? [We laugh]. I was their baby, I was their little girl, and my parents will still call me that. But I’m not that anymore, um. But, I’m [they pause] I'm hoping, I really, really, hope to be able to make my way to Halifax soon because there is quite the [queer] community there as far as I know.

As far as queer people are concerned, the rural is often intimately entangled with family and the sometimes-impossible expectations that our families have of queer people. Sam explained to me how in the eyes of their parents they are still a she, they are still their parent’s daughter, instead of their child. In their rural home, Sam is forced to occupy a subject position that they do not identify with, forced to consider the performance of their identity in negotiations within a much more rigid ideological framework. Unlike urban areas, Sam is not able to escape their identity as part of a family, they are known in relation to their parents, and presumably other relatives. Because they are always known as Sam, child of Daniel and Sophia while in the rural, the rural becomes inextricably tied to family.

Sam spent quite a bit of time during our conversation discussing the odd relationship they have with the rural, and their own rural hometown in particular:
So small rural areas have their benefits and their downfalls. Like, in a small town if your neighbour has something going on you help them, you bake them cookies or be there for them, whereas like in the city near home or in Corner Brook it is a little bit different, like you have your friend group but the community is a little bit [pause] a little bit different, you don’t know who is living next to you. So in a way it is comforting to know that my neighbours are people I went to school with, or people I grew up with, and you know like, they’re not going to invade my space like, even though they’re not as understanding of [tone becomes cautious and speech slows] my queer status as [pause] you know, it’s still, it’s comforting to know that I know who they are and it’s easier to think of having a conversation with people I know next door, rather than a [pause] a stranger.

Sam’s anxiety about being away from the intense social connection of small towns and what that might mean for their safety, and even seemingly paradoxically their safety regarding issues of their queerness, is not something that was expressed by my other participants. This also stands in quite stark contrast to Sam’s earlier comments about feeling trapped in rural spaces and being unable to escape the associations of kinship and having a known, and gendered, history.

Despite Sam finding comfort in their small town in Nova Scotia, they are no great advocate for living a queer life in rural spaces and have no intention of living in their hometown for very long. Sam details their frustrations with their hometown just moments after praising its relative safety.

Um, but, it almost makes me kind of want to suppress you know, who I am, because all these people think they know who I am, and what - who they are thinking of is someone different than who I am, so it is a little bit weird… It is aggravating because they all have this idea of what you’re going to be right? Because they remember me as a kid when I went to school with their kid, and after going to university in Newfoundland and coming back I feel, not like a completely different person but of course I feel like I’ve changed significantly. A change of mindset, change of goals. But I came back and everyone expects me to have and be these, you know, these ideas that they have for me. It’s like why? Why are you deciding my life and future? Like why are you deciding my goals? I don’t know how to explain it. You know?”
The above passage from my conversation with Sam depicts just some of the difficulty that queer people can experience when they come back to their rural/isolated hometowns when they return. Sam had since decided that they would live to move to Halifax, to pursue the arts, but also to find community “I think there’s a big queer community there, right? I hope so.”

4.3 Kyle

“I’m, um, a little more, like, quote unquote discreet.”

Kyle’s conversation stands out from the rest of my participants in that his experience of queerness seemed to have a relatively small impact on his identity. Kyle is the youngest of my participants and grew up in one of Newfoundland’s mid-sized towns on the west coast of Newfoundland. Kyle moved around a lot as a small child, but by the time he started attending school his parents stopped moving around and settled into the community he now calls home.

Kyle is currently in the process of completing a Bachelor of Nursing degree at one of Memorial University’s nursing schools located in St. John’s. While Kyle is not yet a nurse, he says that he has always felt a strong passion for healthcare and has an “interest in caring for injured people, disaster management, and incident response.” Kyle’s path to nursing, however, was fraught. Kyle recalled that originally, like all of the other boys he attended high school with, he was going to apply to an engineering program. “I was going to be an engineer, because it’s a professional program, and it’s kind of the stereotypical male thing to do when you were going to university, were good at math and
science, and wanted to do a professional program. You went into engineering.” Kyle is very happy he did not enrol in the engineering program after all, and instead chose to break from “a very defined path, a very normal path for [pause] men to take.” Kyle suggested to me that he may not have made the same decision were his understanding of his own masculinity different.

Kyle spends a long time in the interview comparing his coming out to the coming out processes of queer people he was close to, particularly his brother and a past long-term boyfriend. Kyle first came out as bisexual to his then-girlfriend, who took the news pretty well… She was really supportive. And I, [Kyle fumbles on his words for a moment] I don’t feel that it really like, that it changed — well it changed our relationship a little bit, more or less because we were a little more open with each other regardless. However, like one positive interaction then spurred me to tell more people and that kind of just spread.

The coming out story that Kyle offered stands in stark contrast to the descriptions he offered of those of his brother, and his now ex-boyfriend. Kyle describes his brother’s coming out as very sudden, and dramatic.

He was a lot more open, and a lot faster than I was. He was very [he pauses briefly] Thomas doesn’t do anything half-way. So, when he came out, he did it all probably within the span of a couple months. Just like, ‘bang we’re just going to tell everyone like right now, and if they’re not okay with it, then that’s a them problem and I really don’t care’.

Kyle’s coming out process, on the other hand, has been dramatically slower and he does not make any efforts to out himself in his everyday life.

Kyle describes his ex-boyfriend’s coming out process similarly to his brother’s.

And so, I met [past boyfriend] through some mutual friends, and he wasn’t out publicly either. But he pretty well came out instantly. [Pause] like, he told me like, real early on… He came out like exceptionally early, like, it probably came up in a couple weeks of us being introduced… But, he told me, we met
and like two weeks later he like, two weeks later he had like came out.

Kyle seems to be particularly taken with how quickly his past boyfriend came out to him after their meeting, and his repetition suggests that this was indeed, very significant for him. Similarly, the tone that Kyle used when describing the coming out processes of both of these people in his life conveyed just how surprising or dramatic he believed their coming out to be.

Throughout our conversations I frequently found Kyle comparing himself to his brother and his ex-boyfriend as if his identity as a queer person was at times constructed in reference to theirs. I believe this is common, especially for queer people living in areas with small populations. We also see this phenomenon in Devon’s experience with a gay man a few years his senior living in a nearby town and it was also Greta’s experience with her sister. Queer youth who live in isolated rural areas appear to often find powerful social reference points in the queer people that are known to them, likely because there is a severe dearth of other queer people to serve as social reference points for queer identity work. I am not suggesting that queer people in urban areas do not have or need queer social reference points. I am simply trying to highlight that because so few queer social reference points are available to us in rural areas, and sometimes none in the case of people such as Kris, those queer social reference points that are available become very important.

Unlike Kyle’s brother and ex-boyfriend, Kyle’s performance of his queerness is “Um, a little more, like, quote unquote discreet.” Kyle and I discussed his performance of his queer identity in some depth, and the entire time Kyle’s tone was unsure and questioning, as if he had not thought much about the topic himself.
And that’s not, that’s not necessarily, that not necess- [pause] it’s not my
goal like “oh I want to appear straight” or whatever. It just, kind of, happens?
What I want to do with my appearance I still do with my appearance but that
doesn’t necessar- [pause]. I don’t really, like, I, I don’t want to say that there
is a stereotypical way to dress [emphasis in his tone] to dress queer, however
some people do express themselves in that way… I don’t feel that I really
dress like [pause] like overtly gay. I kind of, I am kind of just, pretty
moderate with everything. Like I didn’t. Like, at no point did I really
dramatically change my wardrobe. Like I try to dress nicely. Um, I don’t, I
[pause] am not a fan of like, getting a whole bunch of piercings [pause]. But
like. But like. Like, even pants for example. I’m really not a fan of like real
real tight pants, so like I’ll still go to like the more, straight looking jeans, like
if that’s even a thing?

Kyle’s tone through this part of the conversation was rather fraught with indecision and
many of the statements he made sounded more like questions, as you will notice in the
above text. It is also fairly fragmented and repetitive. Kyle seems to be insecure about his
performance in these topics and seems to experience a fair bit of anxiety when
considering them. Kyle’s experience is interesting in relation to Devon’s. Both Devon
and Kyle expressed an anxiety to come out in the right way, Devon in that he was waiting
for the right moment and Kyle in that his coming out did not resemble that of his sibling
and boyfriend. These anxieties are informed by their interactions with the gay imaginary;
they have observed homonormative cultural narratives of queerness and believe that these
narratives are what they should emulate in order to be legitimately or intelligibly queer.
In the case of Devon he tried to replicate the narrative that was informing his behaviour
about coming out—until his mother asked him if he was queer. Kyle’s queerness,
however, serves as a form of truth-trap, constantly disrupting what the gay imaginary
says the lives of queer people must look like.
4.4 Greta

“Everyone’s home town is a place to run from.”

Greta grew up in Corner Brook with one sibling and two parents who are very well educated. Greta’s home has always been very open to queer people and discussions of issues that affect queer and other marginalized people. Despite this, Greta recalls their teenage years as being difficult and lonely, characterized by her frustration with Corner Brook’s tiny queer community, small minds, and the isolation she and her sister faced as a result of their queer activism and their non-heteronormative identities.

What was particularly striking about my conversations with Greta’s were her experiences of deep emotional pain and alienation that she felt because of her queer identity, even despite her family’s unconditional acceptance of queerness. Greta describes being particularly affected by the cis-heteronormative cultural climate of the community, noting how even today, after she has moved away from Newfoundland, it is still something that she finds herself having to deal with:

I felt just, perpetually self-doubting. I had to monitor my body language, and my clothes, and sort of how I sounded so that I was read more normatively. Yeah… I think that like, the sense of loneliness is something that I still deal with a lot… But, I just, it’s just the idea, [Greta sighs], that, that, um, I will never be able to, that a queer partner will not suffice to fill that void, that is my sort of, really, dark self-talk that has carried over from growing up in a sort of [Greta sighs again] constrained, politically constrained, and sort of ideologically constrained community. And I feel that it is very complicated because I feel guilty for thinking that, because it is so antithetical to my family's beliefs and my own core beliefs. But it is a spectre. It is a spectre from that community that I carry, that sort of picks away at that void that I have never been able to fill. And I don't, just, I don't know if that void will dissipate or not.
Greta’s description of her internalized cis-heterosexism despite the queer positivity she exudes and has always been exposed to was particularly striking for me. The way that Greta describes being haunted by a spectre of the community she grew up in, almost like a bird pecking at some sort of wound or void that the community left in her, really resonates with me. I often find myself critiquing my own performance through the lens of how I might be viewed were I home. I consider how my partners might be considered in the social, political, and cultural spaces of my childhood, if they would be safe, if we would be safe together, despite the fact that I am now a decade and a thousand kilometres away.

Although Greta moved away from Corner Brook nearly half a decade ago, these issues continue to affect her.

Okay, so… my first serious relationship was, um, with an androgynous woman… At first when we started the relationship, just sort of dating I guess, I felt, uh, really ashamed and guilty weirdly? And I didn't tell my family, including my sister, for a while. Which is again, like, very bizarre. My family and I sort of, like, um, emotionally barf onto one another all the time [we laugh]. To not talk about this fundamental detail was significant… Uh, which is, I just feel that this was the lowest points of my life honestly. [...] and anyway, I ended up calling my parents, and they were, this is so clearly stuck in my mind. It was a sunny day, I was outside of the recreation centre at my university and I was sitting, I didn't know at the time, in a pile of those, not lady bugs but the other scary ones… I was in a pile of beetle carcases, and I told my family, and they were angry with me, not because of the relationship but because of the fact that I concealed things for so long from them and they felt hurt. Um. Yeah, they felt hurt and why didn't I, know you, when I had been involved with boys growing up, like why didn't I sort of emphasize anything to them? Like, it’s just hard, it sounds wild in comparison to my family values. But that's just it. I didn’t say it. And um, and I still feel nervous talking about it, because I still feel guilt and shame.

Greta’s shame that she did not come out to her family sooner is something we will interrogate later. For now, I would like to focus on how the culture that Greta grew up in has been so deeply ingrained in her and interacts so insidiously with her embodied
experiences of homophobia and cis-heterosexism, that it has had a profound effect on her relationships. Not only did it prevent her from sharing with her family and twin sister that she is queer, but it continues to affect her when interacting with partners in public:

I felt apprehensive about being in a relationship with a woman. Dealing with people yelling in the streets at me, with my partner. Sort of fetishizing at parties and stuff. Talking to us in really sort of derogatory hypersexualized ways. And, all of the, sort of the mixture of fetishization and platonicization of my relationship made me feel sort of like I was making up something, like a sort of romance that wasn't real. And I felt somewhat invalidated.

The invalidation of her queer identity that Greta experiences is especially concerning, and I believe it may be representative of the severe effects patriarchy still has on the queer community, and the effect our cis-heteropatriarchal society at large has had on Greta. Greta’s anxieties about the legitimacy, the very plausibility, of her relationships is not a result of her being aware of the way romance and partnership has been socially and culturally constructed (though I know she is aware of discourses on this subject). Instead, I believe that Greta struggled to escape the structures of feeling that occupy the feminine-queer subject positions in her rural home; she alludes to this in the next passage.

Greta’s teenage years were different, though strikingly similar to her current experience. Greta was not “out” while she was a high school student, though she also did not actively try to maintain a cis-heterosexual identity. “My sister and I were for most of our high school experience, um, alone. I mean, alone I say we had one another, but, relative. Relative loneliness. Aloneness.” This loneliness was compounded by their involvement with their school’s queer organization, which led to not only isolation but also outright bullying.
Greta and her sister were able to evade their high school loneliness by spending time at the local university campus as well as coffee shops near the campus frequented by university students, and queer students in particular. Interacting with queer young adults, who were several years older than her but still relatively close to her age, was incredibly important for Greta.

I want to finish Greta’s section by leaving you with this passage from our discussion.

But I'd say, Ky, I would say that in spite of the very open family that I had, supported any sort of way that I decided to go, uh, I think that I felt, uh, I think I still felt apprehensive about queerness, not other people’s queerness, but my own queerness. [Greta’s tone is careful]. Yeah, and, I, I think that's sort of something I still deal with in certain ways. I think it's difficult, not only am I within a sort of patriarchal structure. But also a heteronormative and homonormative one where female queer relationships are like non-existent, or they’re fetishized, objectified, or platonicized. So, and I had very little sort of representation, you know, growing up, of sort of long term female queer relationships and family structures. So, I feel like it was practically a mystical thing. Like a made up, like a make believe… I know there are sort of long term queer relationships that function. I mean, I know people in long term, life-long serious partnerships. But it is this idea that I just have, that I feel like it is going to be impossible to fill, that I will never find someone, sort of a queer partner, who is able to fill it. And then, sort of, in the really the uh, abyss of my mind where all of my sort of oppressive, politically oppressive and sly thoughts are, you know, I just think, oh, is it because you're secretly giving up on men. But for what reasons, like, do I really need to unpack that?

Greta shared this near the end of our recorded conversation, and I felt very fortunate that she was willing to share this with me. Her tone was rather tense she spoke this passage, this is significant given her usual upbeat and whimsical, though still compassionate, considerate, and intelligent disposition. Greta’s feeling that her relationships are “made up – like a make believe,” are disturbing to me. I believe that Greta’s feelings here demonstrate the depth, and the power that structures of feeling can have on queer people.

Greta appears to have internalized all of these knowledges that she fundamentally knows to
be untrue, beliefs that her family would never espouse, and would likely be deeply saddened to hear. I believe that this, more than anything, shows how important it is for the wellbeing of queer people to have access to not just supporting allies, but a community of queer people they can rely on.

It is possible that like Devon and Kyle, Greta struggles to reconcile her performance of her queerness and queer identity with homonormative cultural narratives. Greta has a strong, loving and supportive family that would have accepted her queerness in a moment; yet she did not come out to them until she was almost twenty and feels guilty for not doing so. Unlike Kyle, she is not conflicted about failing to perform queerly enough to satisfy cultural narratives of homonormativity, nor does her family expect a more radically queer performance from her – in truth, her performance already is fairly radically queer. Instead, Greta struggles constantly with the simultaneous fetishizing and platonicizing of female-queer intimacy, and how female same-sex relationships are depicted and structured in cultural narratives. Greta’s struggle is with how homonormativity and cis-heterosexism have delegitimized of her intimate relationships and identity.

4.5 Charli

“I never imagined a queer life here, anything for myself, I imagined going away to meet somebody and maybe someday coming back, because I do love the place, I do love Newfoundland. But yeah, I always imagined leaving.”

Charli was assigned female at birth, and identifies as queer, gay, and gender fluid, though they have had considerable difficulty engaging with labels like these. Charli just finished their undergraduate degree at Grenfell Campus, in Corner Brook, where they
have lived all of their life. While Charli has only lived in Corner Brook, they are quick to note that they have travelled extensively and paid particular attention to their trips to “gay centres like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Berlin.”

Charli discovered that they were queer some time in their late teens and did not come out to their parents until they were in university. At the same time, Charli was out to many of their friends from a much younger age and was openly queer in the university community before telling their parents. Charli’s parents are very devout Christians, and religion holds a very important place in their life. Charli themself was raised in, in fact, two churches; first and foremost, their parent’s church but also that of their babysitter. Charli also attended church camps every summer and even volunteered with them when they became too old to attend as a camper. While Charli’s parents are very devout in their faith, Charli describes them as “progressive” Christians, who view anti-queer religious sentiment as “cherry-picking,” saying that they believe “people should just live their lives, and love who they love.”

Charli was still very anxious about coming out as queer to their parents and recalls “testing the water” with their parents by disclosing that some of their friends had come out as queer. While they reacted well to Charli’s friends being queer, it was a bit different when Charli tried to bring up the issue of their cousin being queer. Charli recounted the memory of when they raised the issue with their parents:

I remember once I tested the water with my cousin who had recently started dating a girl and it was as it, it was the first time I’d ever had any sort of reaction like this, but it was as if [pause] like my dad kind of shut it down really quickly, like he kind of shut the conversation. not as if he didn’t approve but just he didn’t want to talk about it. And it’s not even his blood relation, it’s my cousin on my mom’s side. But uh, it was just kind of a weird reaction that I hadn’t experienced before. But uh, it almost seemed like he
was fine with it until it was in the family.

Charli shared this memory with me when I asked them about moments that stood out for them as significant moments that shaped their understanding of what it means to be queer, and queer in Newfoundland. As Charli became more involved with the queer community and queer advocacy and activism, they made the decision to come out to their parents.

When Charli did come out to their parents, they came out as bisexual—not gay.¹⁵⁹

“I was completely gay, I told them I was bi. And at that time, I was pretty sure that I was gay.” Charli made several references to an anxiety around the ambiguity of their own sexuality and commented throughout the conversation that while they are still unsure of their identity, they have since become more comfortable with ambiguity.

Yeah, so when I came out to them I was like, I think I’m gay but don’t be surprised if sometime in my life I end up dating a guy or marrying a guy, like I don’t know what my future holds, but I do know this now. And uh, as I said before they were kind of, uh, a little bit uh, I like warmed up the waters with my friends being gay right? Before I told them that evening I said I was going to tell them something and my mom cut in and was like “You’re dating John!” my friend John, who is gay. [we laugh]. And my dad clued in faster, and was like uh, Susan, I don’t think that’s what is happening here.

Charli’s parent’s reaction to their child’s potential bisexuality is particularly interesting; after the initial surprise at the news, their response was simply to say “‘well, I don’t care one way or another, but don’t sit on the fence.’ As in, their problem was more with the bisexuality than being queer… like pick a side, pick a side. Which actually later translated to a little bit of a transphobic attitude as well. They were very adamant about it.” Charli’s parents also refused to believe that their child was queer, instead insisting

¹⁵⁹ This is actually the exact strategy I chose; believing that a bisexual identity left, for my parents, the plausibility of having a normal child, that my supposed bisexuality would be more tolerable, relatable, and comprehensible than other labels.
that they were “just fitting in with [their] friends.” I believe that this reaction is quite indicative of how queerness is treated in much of Newfoundland; that is, it is delegitimized and often dismissed.

While Charli described their parents as being “liberal, progressive Christians” who are accepting of “gay people,” they appear to be just that: accepting of gay people, not necessarily queer people, or queerness, or even bisexual people. Their acceptance, or perhaps just understanding, of queer issues seems to be limited to acceptance at the surface level only; an acceptance of gay and lesbian people, but discomfort and doubt about identities that challenge and disrupt binaries or threaten their understanding of sex, sexuality, and gender. Charli describes this more in-depth when they move on to discuss their parent’s interaction with a trans friend of theirs.

“You know Terry, well actually, their family goes to my family’s church, and [Charli pauses] they had a little bit of, I remember when they first were introduced to they-them pronouns, my parents were super confused about them and didn’t know why they would ever use them. They were like, you’re either a dude or a woman, no in between, like no way. But they’ve gotten to the point now that they are uh, trying their best to use gender neutral pronouns for people. So, they uh, they have come a long way. Like for uh, you know, people who are non-binary. They are trying their best.”

While Charli’s parents are “doing their best,” and making progress, Charli has not yet opted to share with them that they identify as gender fluid and prefer they-them pronouns themself.

Even before Charli knew they were queer, they faced bullying from others in their school. Charli shared one narrative of a particularly traumatic incident:

I like, have this memory. I was probably in junior high, I didn’t know what it was at that point, I didn’t know who I was or what I was. And I just remember my friend asking me like, Charli, are you gay? And I didn’t think so at the time, but it was loud enough in the hallway that uh, I think this is where that fear stemmed from, it was loud enough that in the hallway a bunch
of girls heard and they suddenly became super afraid of me, and no one would talk to me, so I had a bit of a rough time when I was young and at that point I didn’t even know if I was gay.

The bullying Charli faced at the presumption of their queerness, before they had even discovered it themself, marks a significant moment of what queerness meant for Charli. Queerness became a stigma, something to be avoided under risk of being ostracized from not only their family, but also their friends, and their church.160

Charli brought this aforementioned incident to my attention several times, noting later that when they had come to an understanding that they were in fact, queer in some sense, they were still incredibly anxious when coming out to women. Quite significantly, once Charli did accept their own queerness, this fear and anxiety greatly exacerbated the sense of loneliness and isolation that they were already suffering.

But definitely loneliness was huge. I didn’t feel like I had like stable friends at that point. And, I didn’t, I guess, like really know what I was. And it was also very hard for me to make friends at this point, because I developed this strangle phobia with being friendly to girls, even just to make friends, because I just had such a fear that they were going to assume the worse, so I literally just shied away and became very anxious to even meet people because of it.

Charli now connects this loneliness to a lot of the mental health issues they had in their adolescence.

“I had a lot of mental health issues at that point, during high school, and a lot of them probably stemmed from my internalized homophobia, literally, and my fear of being gay… Yeah. I'm pretty sure most of those, most of that stemmed from being gay, probably all of my, uh, issues with depression and a lot of my anxiety probably stemmed from that.”

Something significant that Charli brought to light over the course of our conversation was their belief that they would eventually have to leave the province.

160 It is worth noting that Charli is no longer religious.
because of their queerness. This conflict between being a Newfoundlander and being able to live a happy queer life is a tension that I observed in many of my participants, and in fact, it is one that I have been struggling with myself without realizing it before my participants brought their own struggles to light. When I asked Charli what it is like to be queer in Newfoundland, this was their response:

Um, I think that it is as, as its culture, a very heteronormative place… if you dig into the community enough you will find very heavy remnants of patriarchal ideals and uh, like, I kind of blind myself at times that Corner Brook is better than it really is because I spend so much time at Grenfell where people are much more open minded and much more progressive thinkers, but its once you get into the community you find people who are not, they have very different ways of thinking and very different mindsets. And my gosh, as a young queer person in Newfoundland, I think I mentioned before, the thought of meeting someone, it often does mean leaving. We don’t really have a queer scene, like St. John’s has a pretty stable queer council/pride council but we don’t really have that here, and I don’t think there’s really one anywhere else… It is something that will come up once a year and only once a year and people will either get involved or stay out of it, and for kids, it is definitely changing now but you wouldn’t have wanted to be queer growing up here, for sure, because nobody teaches their kids about it, and there is that fear about how do you teach your kids what it is to be gay? How do you teach your kids about gender? It’s like all of their fairytales and everything are all straight, without, I guess, more of a diversity influence that you can get elsewhere. It’s [pause] it’s harder, I never imagined a queer life here, anything for myself, I imagined going away to meet somebody and maybe someday going back, because I do love the place, I do love Newfoundland… But yeah, the queer community here is small, and being gay here is not [pause] you don’t have to do it. Like I think it would be hard to even build a strong queer community like they have elsewhere here, because everyone just had the mindset that they have to leave.

I believe that what Charli is struggling with are two very different realities of living a queer life in a rural area. First, as Charli points out, there is the very real and very difficult circumstance that in small areas like this, queer communities are very small, and it is very difficult to find to partner. Making this worse is the heteronormativity and patriarchy that, as Charli notes, dominates the culture of the province. But another issue
that I believe compounds this problem is that queer people in Newfoundland’s rural communities have to battle the narrative of “out of the closet, into the city.”

4.6 Kris

“You're not a dyke! You're not a dyke! Don't let them ever say that to you again!”

Kris identifies as a non-binary queer person, uses they/them pronouns, and is significantly older than the rest of my participants. Kris grew up in Corner Brook, though they have also lived in St. John’s and Fort McMurray. With the exception of time spent in Alberta and St. John’s, Kris has also lived in rural Newfoundland longer than any of my other participants and described a stronger connection to rural Newfoundland than any of my other participants; but despite this Kris has also decided to leave the province and move to a major Canadian city.

Kris describes their life before coming out as a very tense and stressful time for them. Kris’ family were poor while they were young, and as a result, they were left in the care of their grandmother who was struggling with particularly bad mental health issues that often left her incapable of caring for Kris. Kris offered me a short narrative detailing their family’s poverty:

We were like, so poor when I was younger that like, part of the reason I was in the care of my grandparents was because we couldn't afford to heat our house, or food to feed me. I have this memory of a beta-fish I had when I was like five years old; we ran out of heating oil for a few days, and when we got back to the house the water in the fish's tank had frozen. But before that the water had gotten so cold I guess at some point, that the fish had actually jumped out of the tank and died on the floor instead.
The poverty Kris experienced in their early life had a significant effect on them, and they are now very concerned with class and socioeconomic status in their practice as a teacher, artist, and activist. Similarly, they are very critical of liberal, middle-class politics and advocate for more radically leftist and working-class led social change. This aversion toward liberal middle-class politics and culture has also made Kris distinctly more comfortable living in rural spaces.

Kris grew up in Corner Brook and attended school there. Like Charli, Kris experienced a great deal of bullying at the presumption of their queerness while attending high school in Corner Brook.

When I was younger, before I came out, people assumed I was gay. Like, the girls in my grade would like tease me and mock me and try to shame me, especially like in the change room for gym. They would call me like, dyke and all this sort of stuff. One of them, a group of them specifically, were really, really, mean and would like chant in chorus and be like "dyke! dyke! dyke! dyke!" in the locker-room. And so, one day, after this happened, I left to go home for lunch and when I got home my mom was home too. I was like crying and stuff, so she asked me what happened. I told her, and she was like, so mortified, she was just like, “You're not a dyke! You're not a dyke! Don't let them ever say that to you again!”

Personally, I am not sure what is more chilling, or what would have had more of an effect on me: my peers derisively chanting a slur at me, saying I was queer before I had come to terms with that myself, or one of my parents insisting that I am not queer and that such things could not be uttered. It appears to be a trend that our families disallow our queerness on a discursive level, a level of feeling and imagination before we even come out to them, or sometimes even ourselves.

As Kris matured and became more aware of their identity they experienced a lot of anxiety around potentially being discovered as definitively queer, rather than simply being accused without evidence of any kind.
I was always just afraid, like, I was living terror, like who is going to find out? What are they going to say? What is this person's reaction going to be? What's going to happen in school tomorrow, what's going to happen in the gym change room? I was always anticipating something bad happening because of my identity, for the most part, and a lot of my late teens, early twenties, all I did was look for ways to get high. That was [pause] and that was, a big, maybe, I don't know, that might have been like a coping mechanism that I was using to deal with these overwhelming feelings of fear and anxiety, and during that period I never really thought of those things, and so when I moved, I felt like, a little more anonymous and I felt like I could just do whatever I needed to do when I first moved there in the early 2000s. And the drug use helped me escape some of that fear, and a community, an network of support that I didn't have prior to that, even though it was toxic and anxiety, and during that period I never really thought of those things, and so when I moved, I felt like, a little more anonymous and I felt like I could just do whatever I needed to do when I first moved there in the early 2000s.

And the drug use helped me escape some of that fear, and a community, and network of support that I didn't have prior to that, even though it was toxic and fucked up... I came to realize that, and that's why I left that situation, but at the time I was really comforted by the feeling of having people around me experiencing the same thing, everyone was just emotionally just, we were [pause] on some level we were all the same and there was support, friendship, and community there, and that's like, really what i needed to deal with those feelings I was having.

Kris also shared the most traumatic story of all my participants. Kris is a particularly good story-teller, and so I will present their narrative at length rather than piecing things together as I have done with other participants:

My [pause] my parents actually found out I was queer when I was in Grade ten. I had this, when I was, when I started in high school I had this… [pause] Do you remember in high school, before cell phones even existed, people would write notes and pass them to each other? [We laugh, I say yes.] I was doing that, I had a note from a closeted girl who had a crush on me, and so, she passed me this note saying so, and I had put it in my pocket. Like a normal teenager who didn't do any chores my mom washed all my clothes, and so when she was doing my laundry this note fell out of my pocket, and it exposed me. [Deep sigh]. She picked me up from my friend's house later that day, I got in the car. She looked at me and she said, “Are you gay?” and I said “No, what are you talking about?” and she was like “Tell me right now, are you gay?” and I was like “No, I don't know what you're talking about.” So she was like [Kris’ tone here is a whispered scream, indicating yelling] “Don't lie to me! If you lie to me now it's going to make it worse later!” And so, I said yes. Then we drove home in silence, and I don't remember a ton more detail about that moment, but afterwards, or uh, [pause] when we were in the car actually, when we pulled into the driveway, she was basically like “I'm not going to tell your father, or tell anybody, I don't want to hear anything else about this.” But we went into the house, and shortly after she tells my father, and then there's this big uproar in the house and like, I'm crying and
she's screaming at me. She told me I was grounded for, I don't even know, I was grounded for so long, and I wasn't allowed to do anything, and I was constantly like, under their surveillance. They were like, hyper [short pause] watching everything that I did to see if I was doing anything gay [dark laughter] like all the time, and really monitoring me, and making sure I wasn't hanging out with anyone that could make me turn gay. [Dark laughter again]. They had all these ideas right, such misguided ideas about everything. But my mom wouldn't talk to me, at all, like not a word for three or four days, but it was like three years before she came around [careful tone], like, to the idea. [Pause]. And like, those three years, so I was like 15 at the time and I started running away from home a lot, it was a really tumultuous time. There was one time my father got drunk and like, he called me a bitch dyke and other stuff. I punched him, and so I left home for, I think close to a month that time [drifts off]. I was just couch surfing. I stopped going to high school, for the most part, after this whole thing went down. I started skipping more and more and more, and I became like more [pause]. I guess, it sort of like became something that like built up over time. Even though I was getting further away from the actual event of the outing, more tension was building up all the time. So I stopped going to school, and in the end I didn't graduate. So I left, I didn't end up going back. And that's okay.

So, I left and moved to St. John's, to try and like [pause]. For me it was about like, finding community. I felt very isolated in Corner Brook, and also like, I was trying to escape that tension and the really negative history. And so, when I went to St. John’s I met like, [queer] people, and had my first long term girlfriend. And that was a really, like [Pause]. She had a lot of her own shit going on, to say the least [dark laughter]. I think I gravitated toward her because there was some commonality there, she had issues with her parents, and was trying to get by on her own, but she was a very violent person and wrapped up in a lot of different stuff. She ended up introducing me to hard drugs, and I became really [pause] I was really, [pause] I had a really, really, really [tone stresses each repetition] bad drug problem for, this was [drift off and pause]. When I met her I was 18, and I tried cocaine for the first time, and so that escalated over the course of like five years it really escalated. And she was like, violent, and an abuser, and physically harmed me on multiple occasions. I ended up in the hospital from the harm she did to me by like hitting me and beating me. One time she cut me with a knife, and I’ve still got scars and everything from that ordeal. I continued to date her for two years, it was like a long-term relationship and it was really tumultuous. I think my mother knew a little bit about what was going on and came around to support me a little bit and was like really scared for my safety. After I got out of that situation my mother was a lot more supportive of my partners that came after that situation. That was like an ordeal, I struggled with addiction until I was, I mean, it’s never something that you don't, for me, it’s always present. But I haven't been using drugs for years and years now.
Kris’ narrative is a particularly powerful one, and it stands clearly as the clearest example of the kind of precarity queer people in rural Newfoundland can face. Unlike any of my other participants, Kris was effectively rendered homeless by their family’s discovery of their queerness. Left without a family to speak of, or any form of queer community in Corner Brook, one can only imagine how intensely alone Kris felt. It is no surprise that Kris moved to St. John’s as soon as they were able.

Kris’ narrative more than any other highlights how intensely queer people in rural Newfoundland need to feel connected to a community of other queer people. Kris’ desperation to find community, so intense that they found it within a community of drug users who understood what they were going through emotionally (though not what that emotional baggage was exactly), is particularly striking for me and renders me near speechless. Often times our queerness is a huge facet of our identity, not even necessarily by choice; I would argue this is definitely the case for Kris. Kris was only finally able to find sobriety, purpose, and even happiness, after the intervention of a queer family that they found, built, and chose to be kin with. The significance of this, of how Kris was forced to rebuild their identity along the axes of their queerness is a powerful example of how our personhoods can be queered by cis-heteropatriarchal society, how we become dominated by our queerness.

Before I leave Kris’ narrative here and pick it up in the following sections, I would like to leave you with some closure to their narrative. After Kris turned 23, they left St. John’s to live in a town near Fort McMurray with some queer friends who they had met in St. John’s, who recognized that St. John’s was not a good place for Kris. These friends bought them a plane ticket and welcomed Kris to live with them so that
Kris could start over again. Kris lived in Alberta for a few months, until they got their acceptance letter to Grenfell Campus, Memorial University, located in their hometown of Corner Brook. Kris soon moved back to the island, though they were still struggling with substance abuse problems. While at Grenfell Campus Kris became actively involved in student politics, activism, art, and the community. Kris credits their ability to control, and then finally stop their substance use to their involvement with that community. Kris had found a community and the support they needed, they had found a home in the world.

Once Kris finished their undergraduate degree they moved to St. John’s and began studying to become a teacher at Memorial University’s Faculty of Education. Kris completed this program in 2017. Since talking with Kris, they have decided to move to a major Canadian city and will be leaving Newfoundland in January 2019. However, they have explained to me that they fully intend to return to the province in the future.
Chapter 5
Analysis

5.1 Feeling Rural, Feeling Newfoundland

My participants described engagement with rich and complex structures of feeling that informed the emotional experiences of their queerness in ways that often intersect and are difficult to understand. They describe conflicting feelings while occupying rural and urban spaces, the way their attachment to their rural homes conflicts with their queerness, narratives about migration away from the rural and into the urban—and sometimes back to the rural.

One major structure of feeling that my participants communicated to me was a feeling of belonging that they experience in relation to Newfoundland and their rural homes. To begin interrogating the feeling of Newfoundland, the structure of feeling of being welcome, of home and safety that Newfoundland seems to produce, let us begin with Sam. In the retelling of their experience, Sam does not refer to ideologies of surveillance, the country, or the rural—they default to how they feel at home, how everyone in their town is known to them, creating a feeling of safety (though also claustrophobia). Sam does not articulate a frustration with the way that ideologies of cissexism, homophobia and various other forms of normativity affect their lives; rather, Sam articulates that they are aggravated with the way they feel their life has been decided for them despite the fact they are comforted by the feeling of safety of being known and knowing their entire community.

I’m not afraid to be who I am, but I certainly feel different [at home]. From who I am in Corner Brook, and in the Grenfell Community… Now my home living situation is a bit different…
Sam then goes on to articulate exactly how it is they feel while they are home, in the rural.

Here in my town in Nova Scotia, it’s [pause] it’s a little bit harder to just be me, to be free, everybody knows who I am, they have known me since I have been in diapers basically, right? And even some people I don't know who they are, but they know who I am. It’s a little weird.

It is aggravating because they all have this idea of what you're going to be right, because they remember me as a kid when I went to school with their kid, and after going to university and coming back I feel, not like a completely different person but of course I feel like I've changed. A change of mindset, change of goals. But I come back and everyone expects me to have these, you know, these ideas that they have for me. It’s like why, why are you decided my life and future? like why are you deciding my goals? I don't know how to explain it. You know?

Sam does do not articulate their experiences as suffering under homophobia of cis-sexist ideologies but as a shift in the structure of feeling of their surroundings. Mary Gray uses the term structure of feeling in a very similar way when describing the experience of being small town in the south:

“never met a stranger” friendliness—a popular Southern euphemism I heard often during my time out in the country. It is a pervasive ethos, what cultural theorist Raymond Williams might have called a “structure of feeling,” that makes it easy to presume you have known the person ahead of you in the grocery store checkout lane all your life. This imagined, affable familiarity animates both the repulsion and fascination many urbanites—particularly queer-identifying ones—feel toward the rural.161

While I and my participants have also described such a feeling permeating Newfoundland, that there are no strangers and no closets to hide in (easily, at least), my participants have also complicated this feeling. Like Gray, we also experience an “imagined, affable familiarity,” but for many this structure of feeling does not feel authentic for us, in our queer subjectivities. Devon describes this best: “I still kind of feel that there is this underlying [pause] judgement… Like, to your face they’ll say well I

don’t have a problem with queer people. But then in person, you’ll like hear [pause] them say [queerphobic] things in public.” Devon describes being very uncomfortable and alienated by this, what I would call a structure of feeling. While the official discourse of his hometown is one of queer acceptance and tolerance, in reality this is not the case for the practical consciousness at all.

Sam alludes to a feeling that is exuded by Newfoundland, simply saying that it has a real charm. This was echoed by Charli who also tried to articulate this same feeling that Same describes the island as exuding:

I do love Newfoundland. I don't think you can be from here and not love Newfoundland. I was actually, um, my friend, on Facebook, the one I travelled with, the other day he posted "A newfie is a newfie no matter where he is at." He is also queer. I don't know, it's just you know, there's something about growing up in Newfoundland… there's something that ties you to the province, and if you live here you just do. And it’s a hard place to live, but people find so much hope in it, and its inspiring… It just seems to happen to everyone who comes here, and I don't know why, if I think about it and put it into words it’s a shitty place to live. The economy is terrible. And like, as I was just saying, the extreme gender roles and, its, its, its, its [pause] so conservative, it’s so behind in so many ways, but I don't know, and like, you can go elsewhere and be with nature, it’s the same natural experiences, I don't know what it is about this place, but you just kind of love it. You just can't not. Its um, gives you pretty strong roots, somehow [pause] somehow. And people often leave, but we always come back.

Charli’s description of Newfoundland has stuck with me since they shared it with me.

Like so many of the queer people that I know I fled rural Newfoundland for St. John’s as soon as I was capable of doing so. A year after that I moved to Corner Brook to enroll in a different program, but I still considered Corner Brook urban in comparison to my hometown. Since then I have relocated to Kingston, Ontario, and miss Newfoundland every day. When I go home to Newfoundland I get goosebumps at the thought of being amongst one group of my people. Despite the intense cis-heterosexism that I experience while there, it is home and one part of me feels like I belong. When the airplane lands I feel a visceral reaction of my body releasing a tension I did not realize was there, but simultaneously my posture changes to reflect a more masculine predisposition, the inflection of my voice because harder and more clipped, my suitcase is filled with clothing I feel safe wearing in a climate where
deviation from expected gender norms is frowned upon. It is a peculiar and haunting experience to feel both so intensely at home while also feeling incredibly isolated, alone, and unintelligible.

Differing from these still is Kris’s description of the way rural Newfoundland feels to them. In a short follow-up conversation, Kris also described a structure of feeling that exists in the rural. After they announced their plans to leave the island in January, I asked them if they thought they would come back to Newfoundland.

I have never been to [city they are moving to] or really lived anywhere that wasn’t considered rural or in close proximity to the rural. St. John’s is by far the most urban place I have ever lived and even still, I was never far away from the bay [we laugh]. I figure there will be a huge adjustment for me in terms of navigating urban life. I fully intend to come back to Newfoundland, because of my cultural ties, I feel inseparable from the land and the community here… But when I first left I definitely thought that was it, that I won’t ever want to come back.

Kris describes rural Newfoundland a way that has been difficult for many of my participants to do — and not because they have not experienced other places: most have. Instead, most of my participants have not been able to reconcile their queerness with their Newfoundlandness. We share this deep connection to our rural home, but we do not know how to assimilate ourselves into it. While Kris feels inseparable from the island I feel anguish at the feeling of separation I feel from it, even while I am there.

5.2 When there are no Closets to Hide in: Feeling at Home in the Rural?

Kelly Baker undertook similar work to mine in rural Nova Scotia. Baker’s essay is especially interesting to me because of the anti-urban statements made by most of her interview participants. Many of Baker’s participants highlighted tensions surrounding socioeconomic and class-cultural differences between rural and urban areas. Charlotte, a
self-identified lesbian, recounts her experience of her two years living in Halifax, Nova Scotia’s capital and largest city. Charlotte details how she felt she did not belong in urban lesbian circles, because “[she] didn’t really meet up to their standards. [She] wasn’t as informed and [she] didn’t know the lingo, the correct way to be, or talk, or whatever.”162 Charlotte notes that it was her unfamiliarity with, or perhaps dislike of, urban culture that alienated her, saying that “I fit in, but I was very quiet… their food and their lifestyle was so different than what I was used to… It just overwhelmed me… that kind of lifestyle, and culture, and cuisine, I felt like a little country bumpkin, you know… I felt intimidated.”163 Baker identifies these separate cultural elements associated with urban life, rather than some distinct element of urban queerness, as what intimidated Charlotte as a rural subject and made her want to leave the urban-queer community.

Also interesting to me is Baker’s depiction of Manny’s and Chris’ experiences and perspectives of queer urban life. Baker describes how Manny takes issue with “gay male” spaces and culture in Halifax because from his experience they were “extremely sexualized” and had high incidents of drug use.164 Manny notes that “here [in his small town] I’d say is… a little more safer… by a long shot.”165 Manny then goes on to assert that “[i]n the city, like, I know the younger you are the more pedophiles cling to you… You’ve got your pedophiles, your gay bashers… It’s just ridiculous166” as another reason young queer men might want to live in rural spaces rather than urban ones. Chris articulates his anxieties about queer urban life more directly; he says that urban queer life

162 Gray, Out in the Country, 45-46.
164 Ibid., 46.
165 Ibid., 46.
166 Ibid., 48.
is characterized by “parties, sex, and drugs,” “non-monogamy,” “promiscuity,” and “sex parties,” and he finishes by saying that urban queer life is “self destructive.”¹⁶⁷ Chris then contrasts this to rural life, which he prefers because “you have a partner, you’re settled, you live a basic life.”¹⁶⁸ One might easily presume Chris would also easily extrapolate that rural queer life is safer, better, and not self-destructive.

None of my participants described a similar anxiety about moving away from their rural homes—in fact, they all looked forward to it quite excitedly. Devon mentioned, several times, that he was frustrated with the lack of opportunities for intimate relationships of any kind, whereas Manny and Chris bemoan the kinds of sexual relationships that they believe all urban queers engage in. Rather than expressing remarks about being able to be queer in their own way, my participants largely felt they could not be queer at all. Kris is the only exception to this, and we will address their case shortly.

Conspicuously, Baker fails to interrogate the narratives of anti-urban anxiety provided by their rural participants; despite what appears to be a moral-panic-inspired caricature presented by Chris and Manny. On the other hand, Newfoundland folklorists have captured and articulated these anxieties very well in their analysis of contemporary legends around HIV and AIDS in Newfoundland. Dianne Goldstein, in particular, is well known for her study “Welcome to the Mainland, Welcome to the World of AIDS,” where she collects and analyzes numerous versions of narratives where someone contracts HIV from a malicious sexual partner while in mainland North America. The narratives Goldstein collected were from her students attending Memorial University in St. John’s, and thus the sample includes a mixture of people from both rural and urban

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 47.
¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 47.
Newfoundland. Goldstein includes the following as a prototypical “Welcome to the World of AIDS” narrative:

This girl needed a break and decided to go to Florida for a month or two holiday, I think. While she was there she met a man, who seemed to be... the man of her dreams. He had money, he treated her like gold and he gave her everything she wanted. She fell in love with him and... during her last night there they slept together. The next day he brought her to the airport for her return to St. John's. He gave her a small giftwrapped box and told her not to open it until she got home. They... said goodbye and she left, hoping that someday they would be married and the gift would be an [engagement] ring. The suspense was killing her and... she decided to open the gift on the plane. It was a small coffin with a piece of paper saying "Welcome To The World of AIDS."

There are many narratives similar to this one, with a subject from various rural communities, sometimes even going so far as to give the girl a common Newfoundland surname. Such practices render the subject of these contemporary legends more socially immediate and accessible because the subject is conceivably knowable, and easily imagined as a friend, family member, or loved one.

The importance of this contemporary legend is that it highlights ‘mainland anxiety,’ what I would argue to be a structure of feeling that occupies Newfoundland. The mainland is associated with the urban, and with crime, drugs, violence and other dangers both physical and moral (Chris and Manny’s fears of gay-bashers, pedophiles, infidelity, and self-destruction should be echoing in your head here); the mainland is “a place without the natural island protection of home, a place where anything could happen and a place where the social controls of the island do not apply.”

Understanding this structure of feeling is critical, as Newfoundland is largely an insular society that has been

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170 Ibid., 27.
historically isolated from the rest of Canada,\textsuperscript{171} and to this day still remains relatively isolated due to geographic barriers. This isolation has resulted in a structure of feeling of safety and security occupying rural Newfoundland. We might also easily generalize the spirit of mainland anxiety to apply to areas like rural Nova Scotia.

To a lesser degree, even St. John’s is seen, from the rural perspective, in a similar light to mainland North America. St. John’s is widely considered to be very distinct culturally from the rest of Newfoundland. St. John’s is colloquially known as “town,” and the people of St. John’s known as townies, while everyone else are known as “baymen,” or more colourfully by some as “baywops.” This anxiety of the urban is demonstrated clearly in Goldstein’s discussions of the contemporary legends that involve men as the victim. In the vast majority of the narratives focused on men, the men in question normally do not leave Newfoundland at all.\textsuperscript{172} Instead, the men engage in transgressions of Newfoundland’s moral norms of sexuality and monogamy while they are in St. John’s, typically by purchasing sex or engaging in a one night stand, especially if they are in a relationship with a woman back home in “the bay.”\textsuperscript{173} Importantly, these narratives rely on appealing to the danger of the unknown elements in urban settings, that which is without the “natural protections of home… where anything could happen… where the social controls of the island do not apply.”\textsuperscript{174}

This anxiety about the mainland, and by extension the urban, is relevant to the experiences of my participants. Baker’s participants depict urban queer life as being demarcated by promiscuity, drug use, violence and other dangers, revealing the same

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 26-27.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 31-32.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 27.
tensions about the mainland found in Newfoundland. This may indicate that queer subjects in these regions are predisposed to prefer the rural communities that are known to them, offering some pre-existing distrust or dislike for metronormative depictions of queerness and urban queer life. This is, of course, not a bad thing. The pro-rural/anti-urban positions that these Nova Scotians take have an exciting political value in the way they run counter to themes of metronormativity that saturate contemporary queer media and pop-discourse. This anti-urban bias or fear represents a very significant point of inquiry for future studies of queer rurality, particularly in Atlantic Canada. It also introduces some questions about my own participants' interactions with rurality in reference to their own queerness, and about why their experiences are so strikingly different from those shared by Baker’s participants.

My participants shared a much more complicated perspective of the rural and their rural communities than those depicted in Baker’s work. None of my participants painted the urban as a space like Manny or Chris; no one expressed a fear of the supposed sexual promiscuity of the city, none of them expressed a fear that the city is a lawless place or a space lacking safety the way Chris and Manny did. Surprisingly, I did not observe mainland anxiety in my participants. None of my participants, not even Kris who wishes to remain in rural Newfoundland and feels uneasy about living in a major Canadian city, fear the city. Kris does not describe any of the same fears of immorality or danger that Baker’s participants do; Kris simply said that they feel more at home in rural Newfoundland where their class identity is respected.

Baker’s participant, Charlotte, described her feelings of Halifax in a way that is vaguely reminiscent of Kris’s concerns about the urban. Charlotte felt like “a little
country bumpkin” while living in Halifax. She felt isolated because she was unfamiliar with the politics, the language, and just the culture of the urban in general. Kris did not echo any of these concerns and actually seems excited to escape some of the politics of small-town Newfoundland where everybody knows one another. In fact, the only concern they expressed about being in an urban space is feeling disconnected from their working-class roots and using the transit system. I would like to contrast Charlotte’s feeling of disembeddedness with Charli’s experience of urban centres like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Berlin:

I don’t know, just something about standing there, there is just this huge sexual freedom. Like you’re walking down the road and there are queer sex shops all over the place, and like bars where you can go where there are men dancing, and you walk down the road and there’s something just so freeing about it. I, I guess well, I became like, I guess I always have been, well no not at all I hated being gay when I was younger, but there was something about that kind of freedom, just like, pure liberty, that was kind of, kind of incredible to experience I guess. I don’t know. Just. That. That sense of freedom? Or the sense of that overall feeling of like, being welcome?

I think what Charli, Sam, Kris (and even Baker’s participant Charlotte) are really identifying here in their experiences is an affinity with feeling free to be who they are. Kris and Charlotte describe an affinity for the rural because it corresponds to their class identities, and they feel welcome in these capacities, while Sam, Charli, Greta, Devon and I experience the rural with varying levels of anxiety, claustrophobia, and discomfort—even if these feelings are in conflict with the way we also feel at home in these places.

5.3 Experimenting Outside the Rural
Gray noticed an interesting phenomenon during her time in KenTennessee where youth would travel to a local Wal-Mart together, where they felt safe performing their queer identity. The Wal-Mart in question was the gathering place of “all the queer youth in the county.” ¹⁷⁵ That they opted to make Wal-Mart their local hangout spot is at first baffling, but it makes a lot of sense. First, “the logic of capital cannot bar them from this queer twist on the public square” ¹⁷⁶ because they are still first and foremost, customers. Second “Wal-Mart’s (then recent) instatement of domestic-partner benefits for employees signalled that Wal-Mart was, as Clay put it, ‘a tolerant place where they could expect to be accepted.’ Unlike [other places they had access to].” ¹⁷⁷ Third, for most of the youth involved, Wal-Mart was an acceptable distance to be separated from their home geographically, one might say they were able to move out of the rural into a quasi-urban space.

Moving in and out of rurality and rural spaces was a major theme I noticed among my participants, and hearing their experiences made me realize how important my own trips away from my rural home were for me. All of my participants described how important leaving the rural was for them. Devon was the first to share his experience with such behaviour:

To me, Corner Brook was an urban centre, somewhere I visited maybe once or twice a month. Yeah, it was definitely like, I’d go there and I’d see all kind of different people and I, yeah. Having those experiences, especially in St. John’s too, it really like kind of, broadened my horizons that there were more people like me, or, potentially like me. It was really important to me.

Like Devon, I also made regular trips to Corner Brook as a child:

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 113-114.
¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 114.
At the time, I thought Corner Brook, a town with less than 20,000 residents, was mind-bogglingly enormous; it felt urban to me in a way that it does not at all now. It had all of these things that I associated with cities, like Wal-Mart, McDonald’s, and things like that but also, there were people everywhere, people that I didn’t know, and not just people that looked like who I had grown up with, but people of different races, though still predominantly white, people who wore strange clothes, and people who were visibly violating gender norms. I would fixate on these people. I remember that I used to love going to this one store with my mom when I was like… I’m not sure but it was after I realized I was queer, because a gay man worked there, and I’d get to see him sometimes. I probably had a crush on him, but I don’t even know his name.

Our trips away from the rural into the quasi-urban may not have given my Newfoundland-born participants and me access to a queer community, but they did offer us chances to locate queer people living in a familiar culture.

Sam’s trips to the urban have been even more meaningful—and frequent. Sam attended high school in a town that was slightly larger than Corner Brook. In their school, they had access to queer groups, and they were able to get in touch with the queer community of the town itself. Being involved in the queer community of a small city gave Sam access to things like queer youth conferences:

Then, from, through [pause] through my high school they had [pause] set up a, like, it was like a conference? Like an alliance, and um, queer conference for students? I can't remember what ages and the other details about it, but anyway, they had hosted it at a community hall, they had speakers come in, and people from the community and the ally center, and they did different workshops like slam poem workshops. And it was so liberating, it was the first time I had ever heard of or got to attend anything like that. And like I got to meet new queer people which was incredible! This was probably in like, Grade 10 or 11 or so. Yeah, it was great, and, just to meet people from the community and you know, it was small numbers sure, but, you know, when you have that feeling that you're not alone in a room it is pretty fantastic [we laugh]. Yeah, that was great. While we were at the conference we forgot why we were there we were just in a room with a bunch of cool people who had common interests and passions, and it was just really, really, neat.
Sam’s experience is particularly delightful for me to consider. Knowing that it is possible for queer youth in rural areas who are struggling with their identities and trying to find their place in the world to find community and feel like they belong, to be able to forget, if even for a moment, that you are not alone, that you can just be among people that are similar to you in fundamental ways, is a dream. The only times I have ever been able to forget my queerness, to stop guarding myself and stop being hyper-aware of my performance, was when I left the island.

Charli’s descriptions of travelling away from home, to large urban centres, for the sake of exploring their queerness, are also especially interesting. During my conversations with Charli I asked them to share with me any moments that had shaped their queerness, any moments that had influenced what queerness means for them. Charli recalled one of their own travel experiences of exploring the “gay communities” in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Berlin. Charli seemed to place a lot of significance on these trips to large queer centres, especially San Francisco, and described their time spent in these places as having a profound significance for them.

You know, I think [pause] I had one of those moments recently, in a sense. But, it was significant because like, here [in Corner Brook] I mean yeah there’s a queer community, it’s a small queer community, and uh you meet some pretty cool people. But like. It’s not the first, it’s not the first time I’ve had this moment because I’ve been to bigger centres before. But for instance, I went to San Francisco and LA, and you kind of just stand in the middle of the queer centre of these cities and it just has such a feeling to it, it makes you feel like you’re part of something bigger. There is a whole [Charli pauses] there are so many people like you. I don’t know, just something about standing there, there is just this huge sexual freedom. Like you’re walking down the road and there are queer sex shops all over the place, and like bars where you can go where there are men dancing, and you walk down the road and there’s something just so freeing about it. I, I guess well, I became like, [pause] I guess I always have been, well no not at all I hated being gay when I was younger, but there was something about that kind of freedom, just like, pure liberty, that was kind of, kind of incredible to experience I guess. I don’t
know. Just. That. That sense of freedom? Or the sense of that overall feeling of like, being welcome?

Devon and Charli’s experiences are strikingly similar to my own. Our experiences here prompt questions about queerness and its feasibility to occur in rural settings, not because we are not in urban space, but because we are without the connectedness to other queer people that is most easily found in urban spaces. I struggle to think that I would have had the same experience if I had grown up in a hypothetical town where a sizeable number of the populace were openly queer.

5.4 The Presence of a Visible Queer Community

Mary Gray theorizes that the presence of a visible queer community is one of the three necessities of “discovering a sense of one’s queer self;” the other two being “the privacy to explore one’s queer differences… and the safe space to express queer difference.”178 I dispute Gray’s three necessities. Devon had no access to a queer community as he discovered his queerness, neither did Kris, Kyle, or myself, though many of us found queer friends after reconciling our queerness with ourselves. Charli and Greta both had access to a queer community, albeit small ones, but they were the participants who acknowledged their queerness latest in life and expressed having the most difficulty reconciling it with themselves. Greta still struggles with trying to find legitimacy in their queerness, whereas Charli is still very anxious about performing in ways that are true to them but would be read as queer.

178 Gray, Out in the Country, 5.
Differing again from these experiences is that of Kris. Kris grew up in Corner Brook, at a time when no other people in their school were out as queer. Kris was identified as queer by their peers for their performance at an early age, though they did not come out, officially at least, until later (this demonstrates a tension between being read as queer and acknowledging one’s queerness and queer identity. Charli’s experience demonstrates the same phenomena). Kris did not have any queer social reference points in their community. No queer relatives visited as I experienced. Some individuals outed themselves to Kris in private, but they did so after Kris had accepted their queerness and were not friends of theirs in any significant way. Is there something about Newfoundland that allows queer people to come out without access to a visible queer community? The more likely situation is that Gray was wrong when she said that we require a visible queer community in order to develop a queer sense of self. I believe that the knowledge of a queer community existing, elsewhere, somewhere, just that queerness is available as a category of being, is enough to facilitate the development of a queer sense of self. This is certainly my experience at least.

If you’ll remember from the introduction to this text, I shared my memory of the exact moment when I realized I am queer. At the time, I did not have access to a visible queer community at all. I did not have any friends who had confided that they thought they might be queer, no teachers that were openly queer, nobody in my everyday life was queer, but I was still able to come to terms with my queerness. If you’ll remember from the childhood Christmas memory I shared, what I did have, eventually, was access to the concept of queerness, though that was still a stretch.
If we reflect on the experiences of my other participants, we can see a trend where these kinds of relationships are also very significant for them. Kyle was very attached to his brother and his boyfriend, both of whom had come out publicly as queer before he did and were the only significant queer people in his life. Charli constantly compared their behaviour and their coming out process to that of their queer friends. Devon became fixated on the only other queer person he knew in his area, who he communicated with over social media but had never met in person. Kris, at the lack of any queer social reference points in their immediate vicinity then sought them out in music, and over the internet.

Social media and the internet introduce some interesting questions. Can seeing queer people on social media serve as a replacement for a visible queer community? And if yes, how effective is it? Does a person have to engage with queer people on social media for it to help them come to terms with their queerness, or is simply seeing it enough? The only contact Kris had with queer people (with the exception of a closeted girl confessing their attraction to them) was through people they had met online.

I also had lots of, [pause] I had lots of like, do you remember Neopets? I was like really into that when I was a kid, because it was this roleplaying pet simulation game, and it was also like, a community for like, talking to people all over the world, and for someone who grew up in Corner Brook and had basically no access to queer youth, that gave me access to queer kids all over the world. I made friends that I could add on like MSN Messenger and stuff, and we talked about so much more than just Neopets.

Notably, Kris does not say that these people helped them come out or realize their queerness. Kris’s queerness was a ready-made and accepted fact when they began interacting with these people. Second, finding these people did not erase Kris’ need to find their people or find a queer community they could belong to; Kris moved to St.
John’s when they were 18, seeking these things. Despite all this, Kris’ commentary about finding other queer people on the internet was fascinating to me because they were the only one of my participants who shared such an experience with me. It was something I had expected many people to share, as it was also my experience—I made a lot of queer friends over social media while living in rural Newfoundland.

Perhaps Gray has theorized the value of a visible queer community in the formation and acceptable of queerness incorrectly. We seek out other queer people because so many of us feel alone in the world. Our sexual and gender identities are made into such a big part of our identities that we can sometimes be made queer before we even accept that we are. There is no doubt that a visible queer community is important, and an asset for the process of queer self-discovery and acceptance, but it certainly is not a requirement or condition.

5.5 Moving Away: Newfoundlandness and Queerness in Conflict

I have never been able to imagine a queer future for myself in rural Newfoundland. After I accepted my queerness and began to experience my culture from the subject position of queerness I began to feel more and more as if these two very important parts of my identity were in conflict. I have wondered if this is just because of metronormativity extinguishing any hope I had of queerness in the rural, of if it is a rational and realistic understanding of rural queer circumstances. I believe the latter is correct. While metronormativity has definitely shaped our collective experience and understanding of rural queer life, queer life in rural spaces remains to be a challenge.
I know I am not alone in feeling this way. Charli spoke the most in depth about this issue:

It’s [pause] it’s harder, I never imagined a queer life here, anything for myself, I imagined going away to meet somebody and maybe someday going back, because I do love the place, I do love Newfoundland… But yeah, the queer community here is small, and being gay here is not [pause] you don’t have to do it. Like I think it would be hard to even build a strong queer community like they have elsewhere here, because everyone just had the mindset that they have to leave.

Charli’s belief that they cannot live in rural Newfoundland as a queer person came in the grander context of a discussion about Newfoundland in general. When Charli says “you don’t have to do it” I think they are really getting at the spirit of queer experience in rural Newfoundland. Even for those of us who do not experience extreme trauma in our rural homes, it is still difficult, and it is not something we have to live with (once we are of age to leave, that is). We can move away, culture tells us that it is the normal thing for queer people to do, and so we do it. We leave.

This project has forced me to ask myself how much I am sacrificing by choosing to live outside of rural Newfoundland so that I can try and live a fulfilling life as a queer person. These identities are in such constant conflict for me, but I have clearly chosen that my queerness is what I need to pursue. This project has forced me to reflect a lot on my queerness; and it has made me question how similar of a sacrifice it would be to instead sacrifice the opportunity to pursue my queerness as I have imagined; to remain in rural Newfoundland.

What is it about my queerness that made me, and so many others, choose to privilege my queerness over my identity as a rural Newfoundlander? And why must they be exclusive? Obviously finding other queers, finding my people, is an important part of this, but rural Newfoundlanders are still my people, who I am left missing, and feeling isolated from here in urban Ontario. I am still not sure if I am able to answer this question fully, or if I ever will be.
Chapter 6

Properly Queer versus Queerly Queer: A Conclusion?

This project has represented a long learning process for me that has allowed me a significant amount of deep introspection. I have learnt many things, which I will summarize in three points. First, a tension exists between our identities as queer people and as rural Newfoundlanders, and this tension has a lot to do with our capacity to imagine futures in our rural homes. Second, the extent to which rural youth are affected not only by metronormativity but also homonormativity is greatly understated and deserves further attention; for my own case, my experience of these structures of feeling and the cultural narratives that constructed them was more harmful than forms of queerphobia made manifest. Third and finally, the cultural narratives of queerness available to us have enormous power over our lives and determine what ways of being are legitimate or intelligible to us; queering these narratives might represent an opportunity to improve the lives of queer Newfoundlanders.

While my participants have a lot of things in common I have decided to primarily focus on our/their differences. I’m not sure that we can say there is any one experience of queer youth in rural Newfoundland; our experiences are enormously diverse. So I have resisted what might be the obvious impulse to construct the image of such an experience. Instead, I have emphasized that the queer people who call rural Newfoundland home are queer in very queer ways. We struggle under structures of feeling and cultural narratives that try to shape and force our lives into recognizable gay and lesbian products corresponding to a gay imaginary but largely, we resist them, opting instead to create our
own narratives. While I walked into this study expecting that my participants would engage in specific behaviors that I could classify as refusal or defiance, I never imagined that they would be engaging in refusal and defiance by just existing the way they do.

6.1 The Right Way of Being Queer

I did not expect to find an anxiety among my participants to correctly perform normative queer identities. I knew that many of my participants were queer in curious and odd ways—that they are queerly queer—but the idea that they might feel pressure to perform their queerness in any other way than they do still surprises me.

Greta’s queerness is particularly queer, for one striking reason: she was ashamed to come out to her accepting family. By any standard, Greta’s life and background might be the one that any queer person, at least one feeling rejected and alone in their rural community, might desire. Greta’s parents, as well as her sister, are well-educated, compassionate, and kind people who are actively and vocally accepting of queer people. Yet, still, Greta struggled intensely with her queerness to the point that she hid it from them. Then, her family got mad at her, not for being queer as is the case with many of us, but for not making them aware of her queerness. Greta feels ashamed that she did not come out to them sooner, throwing another foundational though completely atypical, or rather, queer, element to her queerness.

A second queer element of Greta’s queerness reveals something important, and disappointing, about the queer community: that is, Greta feels queerly queer because she is a queer female who is sexually attracted to other females (in addition to other types of bodies and identities). Greta highlights this when she speaks to the anxiety she has
experienced when with her partner: they faced constant platonicization, and Greta was frequently made to feel as if her identity and desire were illegitimate. Greta describes continuing to struggle with these issues to this day, and says that in the part of her mind, “where oppressive and sly thoughts are, you know, I just think, oh, is it because you're secretly giving up on men.” It is sad to consider that Greta considers her identity in this way, phrasing her thought process almost as if she is forced to question her identity because of the deep way the cis-heteropatriarchal culture she grew up in has embedded itself within her.

Kyle offers another insight into a queer form of queerness. Kyle describes the way he performs his queer identity as “discreet.” I asked Kyle about any bullying he has been subject to because of his queerness, and he responded that he has never actually experienced any: “[i]t might be because, I'm more, like quote unquote discreet.” As you may recall, he acknowledged wearing "straight looking jeans.” But when he talked about this, it was one the most tense moments of my conversations with Kyle. I speculate that Kyle has a lot of anxieties around the performance of his queerness and may feel that he does not perform queerly enough even though he is an openly gay man. I think this may be especially significant for him considering the more “stereotypically” queer way that his brother and high school boyfriend express their queer identity, and now that I think about it, likely how I have expressed my own identity while in his company as well.

Kris is the last of the queerly queer identities that I want to address. Kris is the most peculiar of all my participants, in that they seem to have rejected notions of metronormativity entirely, and instead have found a way to feel at home in the
rural. This begins with some very strong feelings about Newfoundland, and their class identity:

People imagine Newfoundland as like this, backwater, and that [pause] fucking like, because it is outside of St. John’s everything is very rural, and there is this association with the rural being inherently homophobic and transphobic, and those opinions, in my opinion, are very much class based, because the rural is seen as working class and there's this idea that the working class is inherently homophobic and transphobic, and i don't think that's true at all. Of course, some rural people are that way. I know there are people in these communities who feel this way, there are people open about their homophobia and transphobia, but the media frames it as being people who are clearly working class, they never show the people who are articulate or in business suits, who also occupy those positions of power, who actually have [emphasis] power that they can, and do, wield against queer and trans people! And in that sense, it’s framed as being this class thing, these poor rural people are homophobic and transphobic, but really it’s not the poor rural people who are the problem!

Kris is very passionate about criticizing the construal of rural Newfoundland as a space that is viciously queerphobic and insists that we are led to believe it is anti-queer from popular depictions of the rural. Kris defends how they feel at home in the rural, and how they feel is more accommodating of their identity and their performance. This very clearly demonstrates how practical knowledge of the rural, of being queer in the rural, contrasts with the official consciousness of what rurality and rural Newfoundland mean.

6.2 To be Queerly Queer?: Anti-(homo/metro)normativity

I have observed earlier that queerness seems to be inaccessible or unintelligible in rural Newfoundland, and that as I have experienced life, my identity as a queer person, and as a rural Newfoundlander seem to contradict one another. However, what if we were
able to reinterpret “unintelligible” in terms of its near-synonym, “queer”? Those of us who have found resilience and comfort in our queerness within the contexts of rural Newfoundland have had to undergo a long, lonely, and fraught process of identity construction; and even after this hard identity work our relationship to rural Newfoundland is tenuous. Even though many of us love the province dearly and would love to find a way to live there as adults, the unintelligibility of queerness in rural Newfoundland often makes this seem like an impossible future. But what about the queer person from rural Newfoundland that cannot make a home in a city like St. John’s, Halifax, Toronto, or San Francisco? What of the queer people who lack the means to leave their communities? Or who simply don’t want to leave? An important step in the process of building a queerer world, or at least a world where queer people are freer from erasure, violence, and unintelligibility, is to fight against homonormativity and metronormativity.

I have used the word identity liberally throughout this project but have opted not to describe it until now because I think coming to a definition of identity can be as difficult as discerning one’s own identity. In a sense I wanted to convey the struggle to put a pin in things, to really understand them, the same way queer people do with their identities. It is this discerning of one’s identity that I would argue represents what I refer to as identity work. I consider identity to be a combination of two broader things: first, it is influenced by a person’s internal, emic, understanding of their place in the world based on categories, labels, and groups that they have claimed or accepted. Second, identity is influenced and more importantly experienced by the recognition of belonging to
categories, groups and labels—and this is, of course, in part influenced by our performance.

The implications of defining identity this way are numerous. First, this drastically broadens the scope for who can be considered as queer. Before a person comes out they are still queer; they experience their queerness as an emic phenomenon that is typically invisible to those around them, but they still experience it. Being able to accept one’s self as queer is something distinct from performing in ways that are recognizably queer, but an important step filling between the spaces between experiencing, accepting, and performing is recognizing queerness, both your own, and other possible queerness.

When I refer to identity construction and identity work, I am alluding to the process by which we become familiar with cultural narratives that are available to us and make our experiences and desires recognizable, legitimate, and intelligible. In Newfoundland there are very few cultural narratives surrounding queerness. We imagine ourselves and understand ourselves based on the cultural narratives available to us. We can imagine, and thus we can expect, having to move away to live a happy queer life. However, as we are also viewed and understood by others based on these narratives, our futures become imagined in reference to the cultural narratives of queerness available to those imagining them. My own father, for example, upon discovering my queerness rejected not me but his child as he imagined me, having placed me within the queer cultural narratives available to him. Kyle’s anxiety about being “quote unquote discreet” likely stems from his perceived failure to correspond with homonormative cultural narratives of queerness that he believes I would deem desirable or acceptable. The same could be said for Charli’s parents rejecting Charli’s announced bisexuality, demanding
Charli “pick a side” because they do not possess a cultural narrative of bisexuality, only homosexuality.

The cultural narratives that are available to us determine our intelligibility; both our intelligibility to ourselves but also our intelligibility to others—and so they are fundamental to our identities and experiences. Most depressing for me is the lack of queer cultural narratives that render a happy queer life in rural Newfoundland intelligible or imaginable. I have never been able to imagine myself in Newfoundland as a queer adult living any sort of life that I would deem happy, fulfilling, or good. Charli has alluded to the same, saying “I never imagined a queer life here, anything... I always imagined leaving.” Similar again, Sam, Devon, and Greta all speak about the inevitability of them having to leave their rural towns and their unhappiness in them.

For lasting and significant social change, in order to help rural queer people and queer people in general all over the world, the gay imaginary needs to be deconstructed and, frankly, queered. The gay imaginary still conjures the image of a white, upper-middle class, athletic and able-bodied, urban, gay man. The gay imaginary is composed of cultural narratives of queerness and suggests what is normal for “gay” people, such as migrating from rural to urban spaces, coming out of the closet during high school to all and sundry, and fitting our experiences and identities into clearly delineated boxes. The gay imaginary is staggeringly homonormative, and often transphobic and misogynistic, but influences all aspects of queer experiences, legitimizing or delegitimizing particular behaviours, identities, and people. The gay imaginary forces people, like my participant Kyle, to insist that they are gay “because I don’t know what else to call it.” The gay imaginary renders identities outside of LGB and sometimes T inaccessible, and as we see
in the case of Charli’s parents, even bisexuality was not legitimate or accessible, with no
reference to this way of being existing in their gay imaginary. The gay imaginary makes
people feel that their queerness is weird, atypical, or illegitimate because it does not look
like forms of queerness that are privileged by the current shape of the gay imaginary. Is it
not enough that cis-heterosexist society makes us feel weird, atypical and illegitimate?

It should also not be the case that the gay imaginary is so tightly entwined with
urbanism that the lives and experiences of rural queer people are made illegitimate,
unimaginable, and unintelligible. I’ve realized over the course of my research that the
biggest obstacle to my rural queerness in Newfoundland is not homophobia, through this
is still a significant problem. It is the ever-present and pressing cultural narratives
enforcing cis-heterosexism and homonormativity that are made manifest as structures of
feeling. These narratives create a structure of feeling that occupies the rural queer subject
position with feelings of loneliness, lack, and loss that are exercised upon rural queers so
persistently that they colour our lives and give them meaning. I cannot even visit home
without feeling that I am alone in my queerness, and that I have had to abandon part of
myself to feel accepted there, like I have to lock part of myself in the closet.

Metronormative currents within homonormativity tell us that queer people belong
in the city, and that as long as we live outside of it we should expect to be alone. Like
Johnson, Gilley, and Gray I am “not denying there is a core of realities to the imaginary,
yet the conflation of everyday life with the phantasmal, produces and imposes particular
subjectivities that gloss over individual and collective constructions of queer
selfhoods.”179 The ideological construction of rural queerness that is admittedly based in

the realities of rural queerness acts upon rural queers adding another layer of complexity to our subject positions.

It might be the case that rural queerness might be made possible by queer(er) forms of queerness. I think the spirit of Halberstam’s argument is correct, that the rural is already pretty queer, but the issue occurs when conflicting cultural narratives of queerness and rurality intersect; how can I feel both queer and of rural Newfoundland? Is there anything less legitimate about Kris’ queerness, that has rejected metronormative currents within homonormativity, to find themself thoroughly at home and blossoming in the rural? Naisargi Dave, a queer studies scholar who has undertaken ethnographic work with queer women and activists in India,¹⁸⁰ highlights that queer studies has a habit, perhaps unintentionally though perhaps also intentionally, of studying the global south so that forms of queer alterity could be documented and cited as arguments for the legitimacy of Western queerness, the locus for much of queer studies. Dave argues instead that what practitioners of queer studies in the global south should be doing is interrogating the way that the local and foreign (read: Western) forms of queerness are interacting, in recognition that just as globalization has affected all other elements of the world, it has also affected queer people, politics, and experience. I am suggesting that the seat of hegemony for queerness is not necessarily the entire West, but urban centers of the West. As it has been pushed out into the world via globalization, cultural narratives and other discourses that inform structures of feeling surrounding queerness have been

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changed not just in societies of the global south, but also non-urban areas in the global north, rural-settler space and place, and Indigenous space and place.\footnote{181}

I think a lot of opportunities to queer queerness can be found in non-Western queerness. This is made clear in Asegi Stories by Cherokee Two-Spirit scholar Qwo-Li Driskill. Driskill challenges “queer studies to include an understanding of Native queer/Two-Spirit resistance movements and critiques in its imagining of the future of queer studies itself.”\footnote{182} Asegi Stories displays Driskill’s “critique of colonial heteropatriarchy” as well as the beginning of a reimagining of the histories of Cherokee gender and sexuality. Driskill’s book re-reads Cherokee history and re-writes queerness into narratives where colonial heteropatriarchal forces have erased it.

Driskill took on the monumental task of having to rediscover their queerness within the context of their Indigeneity. “In order to begin to listen for the narrative wisps of Cherokee Two-Spirit people and Cherokees who had relationships with members of the same gender, we must understand that within dominant European world views all Cherokees were characterized as gender-nonconforming and sexually deviant.”\footnote{183} Driskill then brings us to a more significant problem that I believe Queer studies should be very concerned about.

One of the problems with some contemporary scholarship on “gender” and “sexuality” among Native people is often an assumption-unconscious or not—of the existence of these things we now call “gender” and “sexuality” in the first place. Within our contemporary colonized frameworks, we project contemporary constructions of these ideas onto the past.\footnote{184}

\footnotetext{181}{1} I make no claims that queer people in rural communities are affected just as dramatically and/or violently by globalization as those in the global south. I am not interested here in who is affected more/more violently, just who is being affected, and by whom/what.
\footnotetext{182}{2} Driskill, “Asegi Stories,” 23.
\footnotetext{183}{3} Ibid., 41.
\footnotetext{184}{4} Ibid., 41-42.
This insight makes me intensely curious about how scholars trying to disrupt cis-heteronormativity, and the homonormativity and metronormativity of queer studies cannot acknowledge Indigenous and pre-colonial forms of queerness.\footnote{The same might be said numerous for Indigenous groups the world over.} I also find it very validating to think that a common understanding of gender on Turtle Island before it was “discovered” by Europeans was exceedingly queer by our contemporary Western standards. If anything, cis-heterosexuality might have been considered asegi, considered queer. What implications do non-Western queernesses have for deconstructing homonormativity and metronormativity? More work needs to be dedicated to this line of inquiry—but I am confident there is more potential here than using non-Western queer experience to justify and substantiate Western queer claims of legitimacy.

### 6.3 Living with these Narratives

As a researcher, friend, and fellow queer rural Newfoundlander, it is not easy being aware of so much trauma and pain in the pasts of my participants. The narratives my participants shared often had very strong, visceral effects on me. Whether it was Devon’s retelling of the alienation he feels in his home town and the frustration he has with people in who community who are “allies,” the deep and intense loneliness felt by Greta growing up that still lingers and affects her, the stress, fear, and isolation that Charli experienced while coming to terms with their queerness, or the deep trauma and precarity the marked the early years of Kris’ life, I felt their pain with them, knowing that...
any of their stories could have so easily been mine and that my own story has a lot in common with some of theirs.

What is important with the narratives articulated here is what we do with them now. In my final paragraphs, I would like to turn to practical and policy implications of my research. As it stands, conversion therapy is still legal in Newfoundland and Labrador, many other parts of Canada, and the world, despite long-standing and well-established\(^{186}\) proof that it does not work, and it harmful to individuals forced to undergo it.\(^ {187}\) While none of my participants were made to go through conversion therapy, one participant who does not wish to be identified did express that they were extremely worried their parents would force them to. Additionally, Kris’ experiences have made it abundantly clear to me that Newfoundland’s Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development, which includes the province’s child protection detail, needs to do more to ensure that supports exist, and are exercised, to protect and help queer youth who are cast out or made to feel unsafe by their families or caregivers.

What is also clear is that there is a severe lack of non-profits operating in rural Newfoundland trying to improve the lives of rural queer people. While Gray is critical of how effective the aid of urban-based non-profits can be in rural areas, I am not even sure where to begin articulating such a critique as the presence of non-profits in rural Newfoundland is extremely limited.


After coming out, the one queer friend I had in my rural home became aware of Camp Eclipse, a weeklong summer camp for queer identified youth outside St. John’s. My queer friend and two allied friends attended this summer camp twice, and it had an enormous impact on their lives. I did not feel secure enough to attend this camp, worried that my involvement would threaten the precarious place my queerness had found within my family structure, community, and school. Further, while the camp did offer financial assistance to some campers who could not afford to attend, they could not cover all the expenses—presenting another obstacle for any queer youth who were prevented from attending by the expense, or children whose parents were not willing to give them money to attend a camp for queer identified youth.

I am overjoyed and very excited to say that another such camp, Camp Ohana, has been established near Corner Brook on the west coast of Newfoundland, making it much more accessible to rural youth further from the St. John’s area. This camp opened its doors for the first time this summer, in 2018. I look forward to potentially working with them in the future.

These queer summer camps have a lot of positive impacts on the lives of campers who attend, and the communities they call home. Beyond allowing queer youth to escape their homes for a week and be with other queer youth, regardless of whether it is in an urban or rural space, this time is no small relief, and very significant! This type of organization also provides the youth who attend language and resources needed to establish grass-roots community groups in their own communities and schools, this is how the Queer-Straight Alliance was founded in my high school, and several others that I

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188 My parents likely would have allowed me to go, but my dad would have “grumbled” about it for quite some time.
am aware of. While these summer camps are a great place to start, much more needs to be done. These camps have limited spots, require not insignificant commitments of money and time from youth and their families, and they only provide queer space for attendees for the week that they are in session. After that it is up to the youth who attend to build their own queer spaces, if the powers-that-be in their communities allow them, or if there are no other constraints preventing them. More needs to be done on a government level to ensure that issues affecting queer people are considered in decision-making processes, and more research still needs to be done to find out what these needs are; my study has barely managed to scratch even the surface.
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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? Where you are from, who you are, what do you do for work, what are your hobbies?
2. I’d really like to know a bit about your life, is that okay? What is “your story?” How did you get here?
3. Were there any significant moments in your life connected to your Queer identity? Do you have any memories that stand out relating to your Queer identity?
4. Did you have any Queer role models growing up? Did you know any other Queer people? Who were they?
5. Do you have any artistic practice? Including writing, dancing, music, visual arts, other?
6. Are you involved in any community, political, or activist groups?
7. What would you say is your general experience of being Queer now, as opposed to when you were younger? (Please specify how young).
Appendix B
Letter of Information for Participants

My name is Ky Pearce, a second-year master’s student in the Cultural Studies program at Queen’s University. I am currently undertaking a research project as part of my master’s thesis that examines the emotional lives of queer youth who live, or have lived, in rural Newfoundland. My goal with this research is to amplify the voices and narratives of my fellow queer Newfoundlander in such a way that will magnify our voices, and their potential reformatory power. I do this hoping we might influence knowledge produced about us; and to begin creating a grounded theoretical framework of queer politics that queer folk can use.

I am inviting openly (“out”) queer identified individuals who have lived in Newfoundland for at least five years, and are between the ages of 18 and 30, to participate in my research examining the experiences of queer youth in Newfoundland. I expect the interview to last at least an hour. If you agree to take part, I will be audio-recording and later selectively transcribing parts of the interview. I intend to use these interviews to create detailed case studies, which will be accompanied by discourse and narrative analysis, and paired with discussions of queer and feminist theory.

Some of the topics we cover may cause you anxiety or stress. If you experience distress after the interview, please find the list of free mental health resources included with this letter. There is also the possibility that the stories you share with me could expose you to social stigma should they become public knowledge. For this reason, I will give you a fake name, obscure identifying information like your age, and I will not say what town you are from aside from giving a vague area (i.e. “the Corner Brook area, or south west coast). I will do my best to obscure or hide all identifying information. However, I cannot assure that your identity will remain confidential as you may be recognized by the stories or information that you share. The recording of your interview will only be handled on password protected, encrypted devices, and it will not be stored in “the cloud.” Only my research supervisor and I will have access to these materials.
This study addresses the lack of scholarly publications regarding queer life and experience in rural Newfoundland. While there may be no direct benefits to you as a participant, the publication of this study aims to contribute to provincial-government policy change and allow for a greater understanding of the experiences and needs of young queer people in Newfoundland. I hope to achieve this by availing of policy-making contacts I have made as a member of the non-partisan premier’s youth advisory council. In conversations with policymakers, I will discuss my academic work and may provide them with copies of my thesis or other publications. You are entitled to a copy of these publications also.

I want you to understand that your participation is completely voluntary, and that you may withdraw at any time during the interview, or just choose not to answer particular questions. You can ask me to exclude any part, or the entirety, of your interview for up to 31 days, no questions asked, by contacting me at 16kgjp@queensu.ca or [personal phone number removed]. I can provide you with a transcription of the interview contents to help you make this decision if you would like. Otherwise, the recording of your interview, and a digital copy of the transcription, will be securely stored for 5 years after which it will be destroyed in a secure manner.

I hope to publish the results of this study in my master’s thesis, academic journals, and present them at conferences. Some of these publications may be open to the public, while others may be limited to academic journals/databases. I will include quotes and general inferences from some of the interviews when presenting and writing about my findings. I may develop a case study from your interview that will be embedded in my thesis or other academic work. I will not publish or distribute any case studies by themselves as “standalone” documents.

My studies are funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), which is a non-partisan research funding agency overseen by Canada’s federal government.
This letter of information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study.

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies. Should you have further questions about the research study please contact Ky at [personal phone number removed] or 16kgjp@queensu.ca. If you have any ethics concerns, please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. I have included in this letter a list of mental health resources that you may avail freely avail of.

**Researcher’s contact information:**
Ky Pearce,
Candidate for Master of Arts
Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.
Phone: [personal phone number removed]
Email: 16kgjp@queensu.ca

**Free Mental Health Resources:**

**Mental Health Helpline (Newfoundland):**
Toll Free: 1-888-737-4668

**Mental Health Services (Corner Brook):**
1-709-634-4506

**Counselling Services (Grenfell Students)**
1-709-637-7919

**Others:**
Victims Crisis Line: 1-800-267-5183
Sexual Assault Crisis Line: 1-800-726-2743

More information about mental health services in Newfoundland, and where/how you can avail of them can be found at:
http://www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/mentalhealth/
Appendix C
Consent Form

Name (please print clearly): ________________________________________

I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I will be participating in the study called Newfoundland’s Queer Narratives; Queer Speech and Queer Defiance. I understand that this means that I will be asked to participate in a recorded interview that will last at least one hour, with the potential for future follow up interviews over skype or facetime if I am willing, and able.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may freely opt not to answer any question, or withdraw my participation at any time during the study. I understand that if, after participating, I wish to withdraw from the study, or if I would like specific parts of the interview excluded, I may contact the principal investigator (Ky Pearce) to do so for up to 31 days after the interview. I understand that I may request a copy of the interview transcription to help me make this decision.

I understand that every reasonable effort will be made to protect my privacy and maintain the confidentiality of my personal information now and in the future, but that my confidentiality cannot be assured. I understand that I may be recognized by the stories or by the information I chose to share. In an effort to protect my privacy and confidentiality I understand that only Ky Pearce (the researcher) and Laura Murray (researcher’s supervisor) will have access to the raw interview data. I also understand that I will be assigned a pseudonym, and that some biographical details of my identity may be obscured. I understand that this information will be stored in a locked, safe location and that all digital data will be password protected and encrypted. I understand that this raw data will be stored five years, and after that it will be erased, and that physical materials will be destroyed after the research project is completed.

I understand that there is no compensation for participation in this research study, and that there is no immediate benefit to participating, but that a copy of the findings will be made available to me if I so choose.
I understand that my interview(s) will be developed into case studies to be used within the researcher’s thesis and other academic works. I understand that these academic works may be discussed with policymakers, other academics, and may potentially be available to the public.

I am aware that should I have further questions about the research study that I can contact Ky at [personal phone number removed], or 16kgjip@queensu.ca and that if I have any ethics concerns I can contact the Queen’s General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:

Signature: _____________________________ Date: ___________________________
Appendix D
GREB Approval

March 22, 2018

Mx. Ky Pearce
Master’s Student
Cultural Studies Program
Queen’s University
Cultural Studies Program Office
B176 Mackintosh-Corry Hall
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GCUL-076-18; TRAQ # 6023135
Title: "GCUL-076-18 Newfoundland’s Queer Narratives: Queer Speech and Queer Defiance"

Dear Mx. Pearce:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GCUL-076-18 Newfoundland’s Queer Narratives: Queer Speech and Queer Defiance" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies"). Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Interim Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Laura Murray, Supervisor
    Dr. Dorit Naaman, Chair, Unit REB
    Ms. Danielle Gugler, Dept. Admin.