

**COMING OUT AND COMING UP:
LGBT-IDENTIFIED YOUTH AND THE QUEERING OF
ADOLESCENCE**

by

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Thesis directed by Professor Janet Jacobs

As norms around sexual and gender identity shift, there has been an increase in the number of adolescents coming out as LGBT. A relatively new phenomenon, the study of LGBT-identified youth has largely been centered around risk and harm experienced by these vulnerable young people. Yet much of the research is focused on the experiences of LGBT-identified people whose identities are already understood as a given. Therefore, this dissertation aims to understand how a person *becomes* LGBT-identified and examines how sexual and gender identities are social and historical formations, not biological facts. By exploring how adolescents in particular come to understand themselves as sexual and gendered beings, this work contributes to a larger understanding of the sociology of sexuality. Using a feminist ethnographic approach, I conducted participant observation at an LGBT youth drop-in center and 34 life-history interviews with LGBT-identified youths. By applying a queer theoretical framework to sociological concepts of identity formation, this research contributes to a more complex understanding of how compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity are powerful forms of social control in society. Themes include understanding the role gender atypicality plays in the formation of a gay identity, how processes of gender attribution shore up a binary gender order, how sexual minority youths pursue sexuality education that is representative of their experience via alternative forms of media, and how the queering of the family may result in positive coming out experiences for youth. Ultimately this research acknowledges the formation of boundaries

between normal and queer and how these boundaries contribute to the sexual development of particular young people.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In fall of 2010, Rutgers University students Dharun Ravi and Molly Wei publicly outed Ravi's roommate, Tyler Clementi, by posting to social media a video of Clementi and another man kissing in a dorm room. Just days before I began volunteering at Spectrum¹, a drop-in center for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth, the 18-year-old Clementi took his own life by jumping from the Washington Bridge. Sex advice columnist and gay activist Dan Savage kicked off the now famous "It Gets Better" campaign in response to a rash of LGBT youths' suicides, including Clementi's, that were gaining national attention at the time.

The resulting media frenzy placed a national spotlight on LGBT youth and Spectrum was abuzz with discussion about these events. Sid and Cesar, the program managers of Spectrum, while supporting the youths' excitement about campaigns like "It Gets Better," were skeptical of the attention being paid to this matter. Too often the media paint a dreary picture of the plight of LGBT youth, which both adds to the already depressing climate for these young people and erases the constructive, positive contributions they make to society. Therefore, the program managers aimed to broadcast a different ideology about LGBT youth. Their emphasis was on empowering the youth community to care for itself, rather than depending on outsiders to "save" them. They were also quick to point out that just because LGBT youth suicide was currently getting a lot of attention in the media did not mean it was a new phenomenon. Sid emphasized the following point frequently to the youths of Spectrum, "We don't need anyone to come save us; we need people to follow our lead and support us." She explained that the queer community is fierce and not just comprised of victims who get bullied and kill themselves.

¹ I have changed the names of people and places throughout in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my research participants.

This contrast between the portrayal of LGBT youth as marginalized victims or empowered agents of change marked the mood and context of the time I captured during my three years of field work at Spectrum. It also accurately describes my analysis and interpretation of the data I gathered: data that in some ways reinforces the victimization these youths experience, but more accurately shows their various acts of resistance. As countless other research demonstrates, LGBT youth often occupy a state of crisis. Their sexual and gender minority status in a virulently homophobic society results in endless incidents of bullying and discrimination by others and an insidious internalized homophobia which manifests itself in high rates of self-harm. Yet that is not the story I am going to tell here. While that story is important and should not be minimized, there is also room for a more positive telling of the experiences of LGBT youths. In that vein, I set out not to save the young people of Spectrum, but to follow their lead.

A. Spectrum in Geographical, Community, and Political Context

Spectrum, and The Resource, the larger LGBT organization that houses the youth program, is located in the heart of a bustling urban community in the western U.S. that is home to industry leaders in health care, technology, and investment services and over half a million people. The city's skyline, a growing mass of skyscrapers and cranes, attests to the economic vibrancy of an economy seemingly untouched by the recent recession. The urban center boasts a busy public transportation system with buses and light rail, multiple professional sports stadiums and arenas, art, history, and science museums, a booming dining and nightlife industry, and is home to the State's Capitol. Youth often arrive at Spectrum after having come from downtown, where young people are known to congregate in public spaces, shop at stores like Hot Topic or H & M, or see movies at the multiplex theater.

The Resource is located in a mixed-use residential community east of downtown that has historically been known as this city's gay and lesbian neighborhood. Like many "gayborhoods" across the country, this slightly seedy yet creative and lively place is undergoing urban development and gentrification that is changing its look and feel (Ghaziani 2010). In many ways, this neighborhood is losing its queerness. As a result of the new urbanization and creative economies movements, the hardscrabble businesses and residents who have so long given it a special charm have been pushed out to make room for a whiter, more educated, and straighter population. It is this same influx of development money that helped the Resource to purchase and renovate what used to be a three-story video rental shop on one of the busiest and most eccentric city thoroughfares. When I first started attending Spectrum, the Resource had only just weeks before relocated from a cramped and dingy second floor office above a sporting goods store to this high-profile, environmentally-friendly, modern building.

The largest racial/ethnic minority in the city are Hispanics, who make up 32% of the population, followed by blacks at 11%, Asians at 2.8%, and Native Americans at 1.3%. Whites make up more than 50% of the population and residential racial segregation is the norm. It is one of the most educated cities in the U.S. where 92% of the city's population have completed high school and 35% have bachelor's degrees. While the median family income is just under \$40,000, with the median home price at \$383,000, it has increasingly become the case that the wealthy are pushing the middle- and working-class residents out of the urban center and into its periphery. Regardless, this capitol city remains one of the most racially and economically diverse communities in the state and bears the brunt of providing a disproportionate amount of social services to individuals and families in need.

The Resource and Spectrum are one of the much-needed service providers in the city. Their mission is to serve all members of the LGBT community, yet the various programs and services they provide—including health services, legal aid, addiction services, and outreach—are often used by those who do not have the resources to access these services privately. The same can be said of Spectrum, where the bulk of the youth in regular attendance are from working class and low income backgrounds, many of whom are experiencing or have experienced homelessness, are struggling to complete or have not completed high school, and generally do not have the resources or support that many middle- and upper-class adolescents might have including access to health insurance, quality education, and jobs. While white youth make up the majority of the Spectrum community, youth of color—particularly Latino and black youth—are strongly represented in the space. The combination of sexual and gender minority youth from a wide range of race/ethnic and class identities results in an unusually diverse space for this typically segregated city.

Spectrum serves any young person between the ages of 13 and 22 who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning, and their allies. Although Spectrum is open to everyone, census data from 2009, 2011, and 2012 shows that attendees are primarily white, gay, cisgender² boys and men. Although as previously mentioned, youth of color are over-represented in the space compared to the general population. Data show that a majority of the youths who come to Spectrum occupy a middle- to lower-socioeconomic status, but it is not unusual for upper-class youths to come as well. The fact that Spectrum predominantly serves

² The term “cisgender” refers to a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth. “Cisgender privilege” refers to all of the ways that cisgender people benefit from a social structure that assumes to be cisgender is to be normal.

cisgender men and boys is reflected in my data. This male-dominated space resulted in a male-dominated story.

The U.S. is in the midst of a paradigm shift in terms of LGBT rights. During the time I spent at Spectrum, the U.S. military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and the Clinton-era Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) were both repealed. The first sitting U.S. President publicly expressed support of gay marriage. The "It Gets Better Campaign" exploded in response to LGBT bullying. And record numbers of high-profile individuals came out publicly as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, including MSNBC news anchor Anderson Cooper and Los Angeles Galaxy soccer player Robbie Rogers. History was made during the 2012 election when three states—Maine, Maryland, and Washington State—passed voter-approved gay marriage laws and Wisconsin elected the first openly gay U.S. Senator, Tammy Baldwin. Further, awareness of transgender rights increased steadily. Feature stories on transgender children ran in major national newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and the 113th U.S. Congress passed a version of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) that for the first time included gender identity as a protected status.

So many of these successes center around an idea of normalization of LGBT-identified people (Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen 1999), meaning that while the straight community in the U.S. is becoming more comfortable with sexual and gender minorities, their comfort level is based on the assumption that gay people are "just like us." This has created a powerful rift within the LGBT rights movement between so-called assimilationists who argue that LGBT people are just like everyone else and members of the queer movement who oppose heteronormative social mores. The queer movement accuses the mainstream LGBT community of normalizing its constituency as a political tool to win hearts and minds in its political battles, while the

mainstream LGBT community distances itself from queer members of the community, meaning those people who embody marginalized gendered, sexual, raced, and classed identities (Gamson 1995).

In many ways, the youth of Spectrum, in all of their queerness, embody the very identities that the mainstream LGBT movement has struggled from which to distance itself. In his seminal book on queerness, Michael Warner (1995) states:

Heterosexual ideology, in combination with a potent ideology about gender and identity in maturation, therefore bears down in the heaviest and often deadliest way on those with the least resources to combat it: queer children and teens. In a culture dominated by talk of ‘family values,’ the outlook is grim for any hope that child-rearing institutions of home and state can become less oppressive (p. xvi).

As an alternative to oppressive child-rearing institutions, Spectrum staff encouraged a queer sensibility empowering the youths to embrace this political perspective. It is within the context of a society that is becoming progressive enough to be a proving ground for difference, yet remains conservative enough to be a place where sexual minorities and gender transgressors are most safe if they can pass as “normal”—that the youth of Spectrum are experiencing sexual orientation, developing their sexual and gender identities, and exploring sexual desire. The next section reviews existing literature on LGBT youth.

B. Research on LGBT Youth

Research on sexual minority youth tends to be concentrated in the fields of public health, social work, and psychology, where research questions are often concerned with vulnerability to psycho-social health issues like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Voisin, Bird, Shiu, & Krieger 2013); school climate and bullying (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz 2009; Murdock & Bolch 2005); sexual assault and abuse or commercial sexual

exploitation (Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, & Khan 2008; Roberts, Rosario, Corliss, Koenen, & Austin 2012); and suicidal and non-suicidal self injury (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington 2001; Eliason 2011; Walls, Laser, Nickels, & Wisneski 2010; McDermott, Rowin, & Scourfield 2008). Researchers interested in processes of sexual development have explored various topics related to LGBT youth including sexual minority identity development (Floyd & Stein 2002; Glover, Galliher, & Lamere 2009; Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki 2009; Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez 2009; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun 2006; Savin-Williams 2005; Savin-Williams 2011); the use and meaning of sexual identity labels (Friedman, Silvestre, Gold, Markovic, Savin-Williams, Huggins, & Sell 2004; Ott, Corliss, Wypij, Rosario, & Austin 2011; Russell, Clarke, & Clary 2009); the fluidity of sexual orientation (Diamond 2005 & 2008); gendered differences in sexual identity development (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Levy-Warren 2009; Savin-Williams & Diamond 2000; Striepe & Tolman 2003); racial and ethnic differences in sexual identity development (Dubé & Savin-Williams 1999); and minority stress theory (Wright 2006). Most similar to the work I have done is Herdt and Boxer's *Children of Horizons* (1993), a 20-year-old ethnography of an LGBT youth drop-in center in Chicago's "Boys Town" neighborhood.

Research on transgender youth specifically is scant, since children and adolescents identifying as transgender is a recent phenomenon. Recent works include a mass-market handbook for parents and professionals on transgender children (Brill & Pepper 2008); an ethnographic study of street-involved adolescent transgender girls (Eyre, de Guzman, Donovan, & Boissiere 2004); a study on parental reaction to their gender non-normative children (Kane 2006); ethnographic research on the families of gender-questioning children (Meadow 2011);

identity development among female-to-male transgender youth (Pollock & Eyre 2012); and a reflection on the ethical treatment of gender variant children (Stein E. 2012).

Much of the research on LGBT-youth experience tends to be with adults who retroactively discuss their childhoods and adolescence (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran 2011). As D’Augelli and Savin-Williams have astutely pointed out, most of the research on LGBT-identified youth occurs within service providers—like Spectrum—or on college campuses, which results in data that is skewed towards “out” self-identified LGBT individuals.

A discussion of the important theories employed in my analysis follows.

C. Theoretical Frameworks

1. Theories on Identity Formation

The research that loosened the grip of biology and psychology on sexuality, bringing it into the realm of the sociological, was Gagnon and Simon’s *Sexual Conduct* (1973). Simon and Gagnon delineated a clear social constructionist understanding of sexuality with their introduction of sexual scripting theory. Here Epstein (1994) describes the revolution from an essentialist to a constructionist understanding of sexuality, “Broadly speaking, whereas essentialism took for granted that all societies consist of people who are either heterosexual or homosexual (with perhaps some bisexual people) constructionists claimed that such typologies are sociohistorical products, not universally applicable, and deserve explanation in their own right (193).” This sociohistorical understanding of sexuality led to post-constructionist sociological research on homosexuality as a role.

The first widely recognized sociological essay to discuss homosexuality as role formation, as opposed to pathology, was Mary McIntosh’s *The Homosexual Role* (1968). McIntosh questioned the usefulness of trying to understand the etiology of homosexuality as an acquired or innate trait. She explains, “The failure of research to answer the question has not

been due to lack of scientific rigor or to any inadequacy of the available evidence; it results from the fact that the wrong question has been asked. One might as well try to trace the etiology of ‘committee chairmanship’ or ‘Seventh Day Adventism’ as of ‘homosexuality’” (34). This turn towards understanding homosexuality, and as a result other forms of sexual desire, as a role rather than a condition, led to research on homosexual or sexual minority identity formation.

Cass (1979), Coleman (1982), and Troiden (1989) all aimed to understand the adoption of a “homosexual” role or identity as a process. Although their processes differed slightly, essentially they were the same in that they demonstrated how an individual first becomes aware of their same-sex attraction or orientation and recognizes that it is different from other-sex desire. Next they question and explore these desires. Eventually one begins to accept oneself and come out as gay, finally committing to the identity with pride. The significance of these processes is important because they demonstrate the difference between homosexual behavior and gay identity, as explained by Troiden, “It is therefore quite likely that only a tiny portion of American males who practice homosexual behavior ever take on gay identities” (372). In other words, engaging in same-sex behavior is not what makes a person gay; being gay requires the recognition, acceptance, and adoption of a gay identity.

This research led the way to much of the previously mentioned research on LGBT youth and identity development. While there continues to be debate about the etiology of same-sex desire, sociologists who do research on sexual identity development have largely moved away from being concerned with the so-called cause of same-sex desire and instead, focus their efforts on understanding how one adopts a sexual identity and what the benefits and consequences are of doing so.

2. *Queer Theory*

Warner (1993) explains that “‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (p. xxvi). Rather than being an umbrella term to describe all LGBT people, queer exists as another category along with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. The term is increasingly being used among younger generations to mark youthful, politically progressive, gender variant, and sexually fluid individuals who understand and embrace critiques of heteronormativity and actively separate themselves from the whiter, grayer, more politically moderate term LGBT. In an interview I had with Ernie, a 21-year-old Chicano who identifies as queer both in terms of gender and sexual identity, he tried to explain to me how he differentiates the queer movement from the LGBT movement. He describes the LGBT movement as a gay movement, pointing to the fact that it is represented by gay, white males. He also emphasized that he found the gay rights movement to be exclusive, one that does not concern itself with the rights of women, people of color, and trans-identified people. I asked if he thought Spectrum was more of a gay space or a queer space, which led to this explanation of how Spectrum differs from The Resource:

Oh god, um, The Resource is gay, um, just, it’s very like, “how normal can we be? How like, heteronormative can we be?” But once you go down them stairs and open that Spectrum door, it gets as queer as fuck. Like, like it’s really queer. And like, it’s just something amazing where you, where you just see like, people trying on different shit and just exploring everything and, yeah it’s just really, I think as a, how do you say, organization? It’s really split between everything like, age, and everything. Like the age difference? You can tell the difference. Like, up here, upstairs it’s like very, very gay and downstairs it’s like, really queer and I’m like, I hope I don’t become gay like them [laughs].

And Ernie is right. Spectrum is queer. In addition to identifying themselves as queer in terms of their gender and their sexual identity, the youth of Spectrum are queer in other ways, too, meaning they do not just exist outside the normal because of their gender or sexuality but also because of their race, their class, their ability, their citizenship status, and other kinds of marginalized subjectivities. Further, many of the youth of Spectrum exist on the periphery because of their awkward sociability; they are typically nerds who obsess about Japanese *anime* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. A large number of them disclosed that they have been diagnosed with learning disabilities like ADHD or mental illness like bipolar syndrome. Approximately 15% of the youth who attend Spectrum are experiencing homelessness.

The three floors above Spectrum that house The Resource are filled with professionals who in most cases are LGB-identified, and in some cases trans-identified, but who in all cases resemble the office staff of most professional organizations in dress and appearance. While the staff of The Resource are organizing the annual corporate-beer sponsored Pride Fest and lobbying for LGB rights like gay marriage, the youth of Spectrum are learning to explore intersecting systems of oppression like racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism, connecting them to capitalism, and organizing ways to disrupt this system. They are challenging transphobia by transforming language and behavior to better include transgender-identified people in the movement for change. Their practice of queer politics “opposes society itself” (Warner 1995, p.xxvii).

Although The Resource likes to present the youth of Spectrum like the cast of *Glee!*, a group of pitch-perfect, attractive, happy theater geeks, they are in fact more likely to refer to themselves as “Little Monsters,” a term of endearment coined by the mega-pop star Lady Gaga to refer to her queer fans. It is not the tension between Spectrum and the Resource in particular

that I explore in this research, but it is a condition that must be understood in the larger context of the story I tell here.

D. Purpose of This Dissertation

This dissertation focuses on young people who frequent Spectrum, an LGBT youth drop-in center, most of whom identify as sexual and/or gender minorities. A relatively new phenomenon, LGBT youth and the communities they create and congregate in—like community drop-in centers and gay/straight alliances in schools—are groundbreaking social supports for a previously hidden, isolated, and invisible population. The experiences of the youths of Spectrum and the role Spectrum plays in the identity formation of young, queer people coming of age in a radically new era of LGBT tolerance provides a particularly relevant field site for the exploration of the sociologies of gender and sexuality.

While not as abundant as the research on sexual and gender minority adults, research on LGBT-identified youth is a growing field. Yet little of the research has been focused on how a person *becomes* LGBT-identified and examining how sexual and gender identities are social and historical formations, not biological facts. Much of the research is focused on the experiences of LGBT-identified people whose identities are already understood as a given. While sociologists have provided ample evidence that gender and sexuality are constructed categories, the larger social discourse is one of essentialism. Particularly within the LGBT rights movement, essentialism—or the idea that one is born gay—has been a powerful framework within which a civil rights battle has been fought and is largely being won.

Queer activism and theory have provided a counter to the essentialist discourse both within the LGBT rights movement and academia. Queer theory questions the logic of an essentialist discourse and argues for a dismantling of sex and gender binaries. Although they are still not widely adopted by dominant society, the ideas and challenges formed by the queer

movement have successfully begun to disrupt normative ideas about sexuality and gender. These ideas along with the centering of heteronormativity as a focal point of social inequality are changing how individuals become sexual and gendered beings.

Queer theory as a postmodern ontology rejects the very identities upon which LGBT rights movements are based. Social constructionism and queer theory applied to LGBT identity has resulted in a conundrum of sorts. If sexuality (and equally important, gender) is a social and historical, not biological, fact, sexual orientation and identity become slippery social positions to occupy and organize. My research has stumbled upon this slippery slope where the line between essentialist and constructivist ideas about sexual desire grays and becomes fuzzy. Rather than exorcise this dilemma from my dissertation, I choose to insert my research in the midst of what I see as a productive tension, acknowledging what Edward Stein (1999) recognizes as the epistemological problems of sexual orientation, where knowing for certain what makes someone gay is a metaphysical, not an epistemological question.

Therefore this dissertation attempts to understand young people's subjective understanding of their sexuality and gender as they come of age during an era of formal recognition of LGBT civil rights. At the same time, it offers a glimpse at how the possibilities first envisioned by the queer movement are perhaps starting to become realities. Finally, it recognizes the important role adolescent development plays in our broader understanding of sexuality and gender.

E. Chapter Overview

The four data chapters of this dissertation focus on particular themes related to the development of sexuality, gender, and identity. Chapter One explores how gender atypical boys' gay, bisexual, and queer identity formation is driven by notions of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity. I expand on previous understandings of stage-theories and homosexual

identity adoption to demonstrate the significance gender plays in these youths' understanding of themselves as gay. By identifying four processes: 1) violating compulsory heterosexuality; 2) seeking an explanation; 3) exploring sexuality; and 4) negotiating identity, I show how understanding of sexual desire and adoption of a sexual identity is a social process that intersects with gender expression and identity, race, class, and ability. Most interesting is how little this identity construction has to do with same-sex desire. Chapter Two analyzes the growing trend towards adoption of a gender identity as an alternative to the rigid binary gender system. It includes an examination of how youths embody and express alternatives inside and outside of the gender binary. In particular, I focus on the experiences of youths whose gender lies outside of the discernible gender order. Their ambiguity shows both the weakness and the strength of binary gender. Chapter Three shifts away from identity formation to investigate sexual subjectivity among the young people of Spectrum. I analyze how LGBT youths use media to locate alternatives to the preponderance of heteronormative sexual scripts in society. Their seeking and discovery of alternatives to formal sexuality education is informative when it comes to understanding the widespread problem of sexual illiteracy in the U.S. Ultimately, I suggest that parents and educators embrace the Internet as a viable resource for accurate, comprehensive, and diverse information about sexuality. Finally, Chapter Four looks at the role parents and family play in the lives of out LGBT youth. My findings counter the popular discourse that coming out to family is always a negative experience. Using the mostly-positive coming out experiences of the youths in my study, I explore the characteristics of context and family structures that influence this experience. Gender atypicality of children, along with queer families—non-traditional family structures and presence of LGBT parents and relatives—are signs that youths will come out younger and be supported by their families.

F. A Note on Language

Perhaps one of the more important contributions this dissertation makes to the sociology of sexualities is its careful deconstruction of the language used to describe sex, gender, and sexuality. When writing about socially constructed, fluid identities related to sexuality and gender, the issue of semantics cannot be ignored. Throughout the process of writing I struggled with language and therefore want to emphasize to the reader the intention and care that went into my language choice. As an ethnographer, it is important that I honor the voices of the participants in my study by adopting the identity labels that they used to describe themselves, regardless of whether these are universally recognized terms. Therefore, whenever I identify a participant in my writing, I strive to use the sexual, gender, and racial identities they themselves chose to use when asked. Typically, I have identified participants by a pseudonym, along with their age, race, gender, and sexual identity. For some youths, the term queer was used to describe both their gender and sexual identity. In order to avoid being biologically determinist, I made efforts to refer to sexed/gendered participants as “girl,” “boy,” “woman,” and “man” rather than “male” or “female.” The exception to this rule occurs when the descriptor male or female was used to modify the noun youth, as in “transmale youth,” where “youth” is the then the subject. Given that many of the participants in this study were not adults, I felt uncomfortable referring to all of them as women and men. I arbitrarily chose to refer to youths under the age of 18 as girls and boys and youths over the age of 18 as women and men. I say arbitrarily, because of the socially constructed nature of the categories “child” and “adult.” Nevertheless, I felt the need to create order on this matter for the sake of clarity. When it was contextually necessary for the reader to know that a participant is trans-identified, I state as much, but in many cases I refer to transgender youths simply by their preferred gender.

I use the acronym “LGBT” to describe people who *self-identify* as anything other than straight or heterosexual and/or as a gender other than that which they were assigned at birth, understanding there are straight transgender people and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people who are cisgender. Various institutions and organizations have begun to include other letters, such as “Q” for queer and questioning in this acronym. I chose to leave off the Q in this study for the following reasons. First, neither Spectrum nor The Resource officially include a Q in the acronym used to describe the population they serve. Second, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, the term “queer” is neither a synonym for LGBT nor is it limited to describing one’s sexual or gender identity. One of the primary contributions of this research is a focus on the conflict between the mainstream LGBT rights movement and the queer movement. I felt that it was inaccurate to label all of the LGBT people in this study as also queer, for many of them would not fit that description. Yet it would cause undue confusion for the reader to refer to some people as LGBT and others as LGBTQ. When I use either of the terms “sexual minority” or “gender minority” the reader should interpret them to mean the same thing as LGBT. I use the term “same-sex” to describe desire, behavior, and relationships that are oriented towards a person of the same sex and/or gender. Not all persons who experience same-sex desire also identify as LGBT. I use the term “other-sex” to refer to desire, behavior, and relationships that are oriented towards a person of another sex and/or gender. Arguably, it may be more accurate to use the terms *same-gender* desire, behavior, and relationships, due to the contested nature of biological sex (Stein 1999). Understanding that neither sex nor gender are optimal words to use to describe the biological, psychological, and cultural characteristics that distinguish some human beings from others, in the end I chose to use same-sex, which seems to be the most commonly understood term in social science to describe this phenomenon.

As evidenced here, the language used in any discussion of socially constructed identities is slippery. I ask that the reader recognize the difficulty a researcher/writer faces on this matter, and be open to these interpretations.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS, DATA COLLECTION, & ANALYSIS

A. Methods

1. Ethnography and the Extended Case Method

Ethnography is a micro-examination of a social setting where the researcher pays particular attention to how members of that social setting behave in interaction with themselves, each other, and their environment, and how they then give meaning to their actions and emotions. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) describe the ethnographer's practice as, "Firsthand participation in some initially unfamiliar social world and the production of written accounts of that world that draw upon such participation" (2). The key components to ethnographic research in sociology are interaction and interpretation as influenced by theories of symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology. Social interaction is the process by which, "human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. This mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of human behavior" (Blumer 1969: 79). Ethnomethodology refers to "the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life" (Garfinkel 1967: 11). It is the role of ethnography to uncover these micro processes of interpretation and accomplishment of everyday life through a process of participating, observing, and note-taking that produces analyzable data. Ethnographers understand individuals to be active agents in the creation of meaning about their lives, although how one understands themselves never ceases to be mediated by society. Ethnography's contribution to social science research is to privilege the experience and the voice of the individual within the larger context of a macroscopic study of society.

I employ a generic inductive qualitative method (GIQM) that involves, 1) purposeful sampling; 2) inductive as opposed to deductive research processes; 3) use of memos and memoing in analysis; 4) and an increasingly narrow focus during the research process (Hood 2007). This research is situated within the practice of extended case method (ECM), meaning it “applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro,’ and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory” (Burawoy 1998: 5). ECM aims to “elaborate on existing theory” (Burawoy 1998: 16) rather than discover and develop new theoretical findings. For example, this research explores theoretical concepts like compulsory heterosexuality, hegemony, and gender attribution, looking for cases that either substantiate or expand on these existing theories. Through this process, social scientists develop and grow our understanding of the social world.

2. Critical Feminist Perspective and Feminist Ethic

This research is a feminist ethnography, meaning it is informed by a critical feminist perspective and a feminist ethic. A critical feminist perspective “uses critical inquiry and reflection on social injustice by way of gender analysis, to transform, and not simply explain, the social order” (Ackerly and True 2010: 2). Similar to public sociology, which Risman (2006) describes as “sociology engaged with an audience outside the academy, with an intent to create and to use knowledge for the public good” (281), the goal of research informed by a critical feminist perspective is social justice, not just a contribution to social theory. Maintaining a commitment to a feminist ethic helps the feminist researcher manage the tension between “a political commitment to advance progressive social change through research and a methodological commitment to prioritize our subjects’ voices” (Avishai et al. 2013: 395).

My commitment to social justice is evidenced in my research in two ways. First, during the three years I was actively involved in research development and data collection, I committed to volunteer hours, fundraising, and public speaking on behalf of the organizations I was working with. Second, my data analysis is not strictly a sociological analysis of my setting, but rather engages the setting and the people involved with it in a discussion of future directions, interventions, and possible solutions to existing challenges within the community. Although I do not expect this particular research to be read widely inside or outside of the sociology community, I have shared my findings with the staff of Spectrum and my findings inform my role in the community as an activist and public sociologist. What I have learned through this project informs how I teach related topics in the classroom, how I speak about issues related to LGBT youth in my larger communities, and informs future directions of my research, all of which are done with an eye towards creating positive change for LGBT youth and young people in general.

There are four tenets to a feminist ethic as described by Ackerly and True (2010). Commitment to a feminist ethic requires first that one be attentive to the power of epistemology, “the system of thought that we use to distinguish fact from belief” (25). Attentiveness to epistemology requires acknowledging multiple ways of knowing and taking care not to reproduce ideology in the form of disciplinarian thinking (including that of feminist thought). Second, a feminist ethic is attentive to boundaries: boundaries between disciplines, between the researcher and the researched, among research subject-participants, and among researchers with different epistemologies or who use different theoretical perspective and methods. Noticing and acknowledging boundaries helps the researcher be aware of how boundaries are used to silence and marginalize voices and ways of knowing. Third, a feminist ethic is attentive to relationships

and their power differentials, meaning that few relationships in the research process are power-neutral, including relationships between the researcher and the research participants, advisers, institutional review boards, fellow researchers, and others. Noticing the power differential in relationships throughout the research process helps the feminist researcher reflect on how those relationships affect the research process and findings. Finally, a feminist ethic is attentive to situating the researcher within all three of the preceding dynamics, a process of reflexivity that recognizes that the researcher is an active component of the social context under study. As discussed at length in a 2013 special topic edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* on feminist ethnography, those of us who lay claim to feminist goals and ethics have to take care that our commitment to feminisms does not result in ideological knowledge formation. Therefore, I have tried to adopt Fields's (2013) suggestion that "feminist ethnographers are...ambivalent observers: following feminism but not to the letter; sometimes embracing laws, meanings, and vocabulary and other times rejecting them; constructing a narrative of assent that affirms feminism as central to our work as ethnographers while legitimatizing a partial compliance that skirts any official doctrine" (498).

B. Data Collection & Analysis

1. Project Development

As is often the case with an ethnographic practice, my initial research interests and the final project that resulted from my work were quite different. I did not set out initially to study queer youth identity formation. Rather I was interested in learning about men and boys who trade or sell sex. Fueled by the gendered discourses of the contemporary anti-sex trafficking movement that too often frames girls and women as innocent victims of exploitation, I wanted to understand the experiences of men and boys who sell or trade sex, a population that is seemingly absent from the trafficking conversation. I thought it would be important to hear how they

understand their sexual selves and explore whether the lines between agency and victimization were different for men and boys than for girls and women.

I began exploratory research by first approaching a close friend who had for years been volunteering at Spectrum, the local LGBT youth drop-in center. I shared my research interests with him and was consequently introduced to the then program director. The three of us met—my friend, the program director, and myself—to discuss the prospects of me volunteering at the site as a way to get a feel for the scene. By the end of our first meeting I was filling out volunteer paperwork and planning what days I would attend Spectrum. The program director connected me with several other key members of the community, including a professor from a private university who was the research director for a longitudinal survey and data set collected at Spectrum as well as the director of a day shelter for intravenous drug users (IDUs). In addition, through my previous work with a local anti-human trafficking organization, I was acquainted with an outreach organization that focused on street-involved youth and exploitation. I volunteered with all three organizations in various capacities over the next several months, attempting to see whether or not I could successfully break into a community of young men and boys who might be selling or trading sex and willing to speak with me. After about 16-months, when I only had three interviews with the target population, it became clear that I was on the wrong track and needed to revise my dissertation.

There were several reasons that this initial research idea never took root. First of all, I suspect I mistakenly envisioned men and boys who sell or trade sex as homeless, desperate, and/or openly gay/bisexual. In retrospect, I think I would have been more successful seeking subject participants through the local nightclub scene—both straight and gay—where cruising and hooking up are common. Those who sell or trade sex are likely to formally or informally

work in these settings. Secondly, given either population—the more vulnerable street-involved group or the nightclub group—my position as a white, straight, woman academic in her late thirties who was more at home at an indie rock show than a gay dance club meant that it was exceedingly unlikely that the young people I was interested in speaking to would find me interesting, reliable, or trustworthy, making my job of convincing them to do interviews with me quite difficult. Finally, while all of the informants with which I spoke—most of whom were outreach workers and social workers at the various organizations I worked with—felt certain that there was a population of young boys and men who were trading and selling sex in my community, I suspect that this population is relatively small and—consistent with critiques of the anti-trafficking movement as a moral panic (Augustín 1988; Doezma 2010; Weitzer 2006)—not a widespread occurrence in my locale.

Out of the three field sites where I had been volunteering, the one that most engaged my sociological imagination was Spectrum. I was able to transfer some of the research questions with which I initially entered the field directly into this site, questions that centered around how one understands oneself as a sexual being. It occurred to me that I could conduct ethnographic research at Spectrum, get at some of my curiosities about how people become sexual, and perhaps, through the process, encounter young men or boys who sold or traded sex. By this time, I had earned the respect and trust of the staff and youth of Spectrum and felt supported in my research goals. I adjusted my IRB protocol to reflect a fixed field site, and in January of 2012, officially began doing participant observation in the space and conducting life history interviews with the youths who frequented Spectrum. In addition to the informal observation that began fall of 2010, I was in my field site doing participant observation and interviews two to three nights a week for eight months starting January 2012, and then continued to have a regular presence at

Spectrum through the fall of 2013. This work generated 34 life history interviews with young people (See Table 1 for a demographic breakdown of the participants) ranging in length from 45 minutes to 2 and a half hours, one group interview with two participants, close to 300 hours of participant observation, and 250 pages of field notes. Although my research did not, in the end, reveal data on young men who sold or traded sex, what ensues is an equally important exploration into the sexual, raced, and gendered lives of a small group of young, queer people in the early 21st century.

2. *Setting*

Spectrum, founded in 1998, welcomes youths between the ages of 13 and 22 who identify as LGBT, and their allies. In addition to being a safe drop-in space, Spectrum has developed daily programming which ranges from art and poetry workshops to sex education and community organizing sessions to a monthly drag show. Spectrum provides snacks, music, access to computers and the Internet, health services, counseling and referral, and other resources for youth. Spectrum employs a youth-adult partnership model of service delivery where youth leaders are trained in peer-based support, safe sex education, and HIV prevention. In an effort to combat the power adults have over youths at Spectrum, the youth-adult partnership model helps to ensure that youths hold leadership roles in the space and are actively engaged in some aspects of decision making processes. Spectrum is run by two full-time adult staff, part-time undergraduate and graduate student interns from the fields of social work and human services, adult volunteers, and peer staff/volunteers. Spectrum operates under the supervision of The Resource, an umbrella organization that provides a wide variety of services to adults in the LGBT community.

I was permitted via my university's IRB to interview youths 15 years and older. Participants gave verbal informed consent to be interviewed and parental consent for minors was

waived on the basis that seeking parental permission would create an unreasonable risk for these particular youths, who may not have been out to their parents or guardians. Youths also gave verbal informed consent to participant observation during closed educational sessions. Because of the nature of the setting, I was permitted by the IRB to do participant observation without informed consent during general drop-in hours.

3. Participant Observation

I conducted participant observation during drop-in hours, programming, and special events. As a participant observer (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland 2006), I often engaged in the same activities as the youths such as working on art projects, attending and participating in education workshops and dance class, and planning queer prom. I never considered myself a member of the group, however, due to my age. I identified myself as both an adult volunteer and a graduate student researcher. While not every youth who entered the space was necessarily made aware of my research project, I was not covert about it and most regulars at Spectrum knew that I was a researcher.

It is important to note that I do not identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and therefore I was known among some youths and adults in the space as an ally (I discuss this more at length in the limitations section of this chapter). On a personal level, I do identify myself as queer because of the various choices I have made throughout my life to reject traditional norms around gender and sexuality, but I chose not to place that label on myself in the space because of the myriad ways that I have always and continue to live a life of heterosexual and cisgender privilege. While almost all of the adults at Spectrum became aware of my identity as a straight person simply through conversation, the youths were less likely to know this about me unless they asked outright or were privy to a conversation about it. Publicly claiming one's sexual identity was not a regular practice for anyone at Spectrum, therefore I chose not to identify my

sexual identity to youth unless they asked. Allies are welcomed and regularly in attendance at Spectrum, so my presence as a straight person—particularly as an adult—was not out of the ordinary.

I played several integral roles within Spectrum which gave me a rich understanding of the context within which my research was situated. I was able to position myself as an objective outsider in many aspects, because my role in the space was somewhat undefined compared to other adults there. I was not a staff member, graduate student intern, or strictly speaking, just an adult volunteer. In terms of my relationships with the staff of Spectrum, it was common for both the Director and the Program Director to include me in conversations about the politics, decision making, and operations of Spectrum and the Resource. It was through these conversations that I came to understand the contested status of the youth programs within the larger operations of the agency that housed Spectrum. For example, the staff felt strongly that Spectrum and its staff were marginalized within the Resource, while the youth programs were exploited for fundraising purposes, as discussed in the introduction chapter. My integral role within the space was demonstrated by the fact that the Director of Spectrum often referred to me as, “a member of my team,” and frequently asked for my help and expertise on various issues related to the space.

As a graduate student I was able to bond with the graduate student interns who were completing their social work or human services clinical hours at Spectrum. Through my relationships with the interns, I sometimes learned of the rewards and challenges of working for Spectrum. For example, in the case of a graduate student intern Adrian, a transman, I was able to get a sense of the frustration he experienced trying to access and integrate trans programming into the Spectrum curriculum.

Finally, and most importantly, my somewhat ambiguous role at Spectrum allowed a rapport with the youth that was unique. Because I was at Spectrum more frequently than other adult volunteers and because of the intimate exchanges I had with youths in interview settings, for the three year period that I was engaged in the Spectrum community, I developed a certain closeness with youth regulars. Further, because I was not a staff member and shifted roles between adult volunteer and researcher, I was able to sidestep the authoritative role my other adult colleagues in the space could not. I have recorded in my field notes many instances where young people and I would sit and talk at length about their lives. These informal interviews became integral components of my data. The youth came to know me as a confidant; someone who was a good listener and who cared about them. I believe it was my genuine empathy and my commitment to Spectrum and the young people who spent their time there that led to their investment in and support of my research.

My shifts at Spectrum were typically three to five hours in length and it was my regular practice to write field notes detailing my observations either immediately after leaving or first thing in the morning (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland 2006). It was frequently the case that by the time my day ended at Spectrum, I had already been up and working as either a student or an instructor since first thing in the morning and was exhausted. After trying several different practices, I found that writing field notes first thing in the morning after a shift was when I was the most effective. I often kept a list of “jottings” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) either during my shift or written in my car right after I left to help jog my memory in the morning. Every time I sat down to write field notes, I would begin by writing “a chronological log of what is happening to and in the setting and to and in the observer” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland 2006), describing the scene from the first moment I walked into Spectrum that day, including

what I was feeling, who was present, what was going on, and what occurred throughout the night. I would then write detailed descriptions about specific incidents or occurrences that I found important. As I was in the field longer and became more focused on what was of interest to me, I would pay particular attention to those areas when I wrote field notes. For instance, I became interested in how various youths embodied gender and therefore wrote field notes about youths' clothing, hair styles, use of makeup, and other forms of gender expression. For every day that I attended Spectrum, I created a dated file for field notes, which were then collected in a monthly folder on my computer. Computer files were password protected and stored only on my personal computer.

4. Life History Interviews

I recruited interview participants in two ways: approaching individuals directly with whom I had built a rapport over time and by making open announcements during check-in (a daily practice where everyone present in the space would come together and introduce themselves). Participants had to be between the ages of 15 and 22 and attendees of Spectrum. As per my IRB protocol, I informed interested participants that interviews were voluntary and told them what kinds of questions they might expect to be asked. I then let them decide whether or not they wanted to participate. Of the youths I approached for an interview, only one turned me down directly, stating he was not interested. In a few cases, youths agreed to do an interview, but wanted to do it at another time and subsequently never followed up with me.

Through my preliminary research at various social service organizations in my community, it was made clear to me that providing an incentive for interviews was not only a way to ensure participation, but was also an important way to demonstrate respect for the time and energy of participants, many of whom are frequently asked to participate in surveys, interviews, and complete various census questionnaires. Therefore, I offered participants a \$15

gift card to a grocery store as an incentive. Providing incentives for participation in research and programming was a normal practice at Spectrum. In retrospect, based on comments made by participants, I could have completed this study without the use of incentives and would have likely interviewed close to the same number of youths. However, I was sensitive to the fact that the intimate and personal stories these young people generously shared with me were invaluable to my progress as an academic and was happy to offer them something in exchange.

Interviews began with questions about Spectrum including how the youths found it, how long they had been coming, and what they did and did not like about it. I would then ask them to tell me about their lives growing up: who raised them, what their family structure was like, where they lived, if their parents or guardians worked, stayed home, practiced religion, and more. Finally we discussed their experience with sex, including their most significant intimate and sexual relationships, the things that most influenced their sexuality, their access to sex education, and their safer sex practices. Even though the nature of my interview questions were quite personal and intimate, I found that participants were generally not uncomfortable speaking with me and disclosed incredibly personal details about their private lives. In some cases, the youths expressed surprise at the ease with which they could talk with me about things like their sexual desires and behaviors. I of course have no way of knowing what the participants held back, but common to our conversations were stories of childhood sexual experiences, specific sexual desires, preferred positions and partners, sexual abuse, and anxieties and fears about sex. Although youth were told before the interview began and sometimes reminded during the interview, that they could refuse to answer any questions, in all 34 interviews, I only had one participant choose not to answer one of my questions. This was a young woman who identified as lesbian who declined to answer my inquiry about how she got pregnant. With few exceptions,

interview participants expressed pleasure and enjoyment in response to the interview process, often sharing their experience with other youths in the space, encouraging them to participate in the study.

Researchers (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004; Smith 2013) have noted having difficulty getting men to speak openly and honestly about their sexuality with interviewers, particularly men. I found that the men and boys in my sample were quite forthcoming with me and in fact, more so than the women and girls. Although I am not sure why this was the case, I speculate this may be due to the fact that girls are more often judged negatively for their sexual behavior than boys. Therefore, they may have been more reluctant to disclose intimate details about their sexuality.

Except for one case, where the participant would not consent to having her voice recorded, all of the interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed either by myself or by a professional transcriber. Digital files of the interviews and the transcriptions are password protected and stored on my personal computer. Digital copies of the interviews were shared with the transcriber via a secure website and both the audio and typed copies of the interviews were deleted by the transcriber once I confirmed receipt.

At the end of the summer of 2012, I had completed 30 interviews with youths at Spectrum. Prompted by the ever-ticking graduate school clock, I stepped out of the field for the fall semester in order to begin to write up my analysis. When I returned to the field in the spring and summer of 2013, with the intention of collecting more interviews, Spectrum was undergoing a massive staff upheaval which resulted in low youth turn out. I completed four more interviews by the end of the summer. It became clear to me at this time that the eight month period in 2012 when I had done the bulk of my participant observation and interviewing was a

unique moment in Spectrum’s history, influenced largely by the staff employed during that time. Spectrum was beginning a new chapter in its story and rather than continue with my research into this new era, I chose to cease data collection at this time. Table 1 details the age, race, and self-described gender and sexual identification of the 34 participants.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Age	Race	Gender ID	Sexual ID
16 y.o. (2)	Black (1)	Androgynous (1)	Bisexual (3)
17 y.o. (3)	Latino (5)	Female (8)	Demi-Sexual (1)
18 y.o. (6)	Multiracial (8)	FTM (1)	Energy (1)
19 y.o. (7)	White (20)	Male (19)	Gay (15)
20 y.o. (9)		Queer (1)	Lesbian (3)
21 y.o. (5)		Two-Spirit (1)	Open (1)
22 y.o. (1)		No preference (1)	Other (1)
23 y.o. (1)		Gender Neutral (1)	Pansexual (3)
		Universal (1)	Pansexualtransplus (1)
			Queer (4)
			Straight (1)

5. Group Interview

I conducted one group interview at Spectrum. The topic for the discussion was *anime* and *manga*, a topic I take up in Chapter Three. While I invited four youths to participate, only two showed up. The discussion was conducted during a week when Spectrum was closed for drop-in hours. In exchange for participating, I bought pizza for the participants and supervised the space for two hours while the two played *Yu-Gi-Oh*, a popular role-play card game. I obtained verbal consent for participation in the group discussion, digitally recorded, and transcribed the one hour and fifty-five minute discussion. Although I had hoped to conduct focus groups on other topics during my time at Spectrum, this proved to be over-ambitious in terms of my time and availability.

6. Data Analysis

In my data collection and analysis I employed a generic inductive qualitative model. I used the inductive process of “initial” and “focused” coding (Charmaz 2001; Strauss and Corbin 1990) of my field notes and interview transcription data. Initial coding involves recognizing and making note of general themes or commonalities that arose in my field notes and interviews. Focused coding helped me narrow down my interests based on these surfacing themes, so that I could redirect both my field notes and my interview questions to focus on these themes. Throughout the data collection, coding, and analysis stages of my research, I employed the use of code, theoretical, and operational/procedural memos (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland 2006) in order to keep my thoughts organized and stimulate my sociological imagination. I kept track of the definitions and meanings of various codes that I was using in a code memo. Throughout the process of writing field notes, coding, and analyzing, I wrote theoretical memos whenever I began to have sociological ideas about what was happening in the scene. Operational/procedural memos are where I kept track of the various methodological steps I was taking in my research process. Hand-in-hand with my theoretical memos, the coding process helped me to decide which emergent themes were the most important and interesting. Following the coding process, I would begin to “free write” (Becker 1986) about what I perceived to be occurring in the scene based on a few related codes. Moving back and forth between writing and the data helped me to move my analysis forward. I approached each data chapter with this methodology.

C. Limitations

Spectrum is located in an urban center and predominately serves youths of lower socioeconomic status. Not all, but certainly a large number, of the youths of Spectrum struggle with various issues including poverty, joblessness, learning and physical disabilities, racial,

ethnic, and class discrimination, conforming to institutional settings like public schools, unstable family situations, and violence in their homes and communities, making them a particularly vulnerable group of young people. Thus, my findings at Spectrum may be specific to the population. It may certainly be the case that LGBT youth centers located in different kinds of communities—rural or suburban— or other kinds of youth centers in urban settings—that are not LGBT-specific—may reveal significantly different findings from what I observed.

This research is also limited in its interpretation due to my role as an adult in the space and not as a youth member of the subject population. Young people follow various socialized norms in their interactions with adults. The accounts they shared with me therefore may have been informed by what they thought was appropriate to reveal to an adult. Similarly, my observations of youths were limited to interactions that were occurring under the glare of adult supervision. I obviously was not able to observe how the youths behaved when adults were not present. That said, the fact that the program director was in his mid-twenties and that the graduate interns were typically in their early to mid-twenties meant that most of the adults in the space were young adults and created an air of youthful adult supervision as opposed to one where the adults were much older than the youths in the space. That situation, along with my somewhat youthful appearance and attitude, made for what I feel to be a lively and mostly authentic youth space.

My status as a straight person was probably the most difficult challenge I faced throughout this project. Having never faced the experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and hatred that LGBT people in U.S. culture routinely encounter, I recognize that my interpretation of their experiences might differ from those of an LGBT-identified researcher. I had to remind myself that few social science researchers—regardless of method—share the social status of their research participants. As a feminist ethnographer, I allowed myself opportunities to reflect on my

status within the research setting. My field notes are filled with reflections about this very anxiety. In her book *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Reinharz states that “it seems to be the case that the written text that emerges from the (ethnographic) study is a blend of writing about the self, the group studied, and the methods by which that group was studied” (74). This practice of reflexivity and transparency creates a context from which the reader can better understand the limitations of my interpretations. I made attempts to check my findings with LGBT-identified people including adult staff at Spectrum and my LGBT-identified friends and colleagues, and was attentive to feedback from other LGBT-identified persons who were present when my work was presented at conferences and lectures. All of these measures were taken in an attempt to become aware of the limits of my positionality with regard to my method, analysis, and interpretations.

CHAPTER 3: “HOW DO I KNOW I AM GAY IF I’VE NEVER BEEN WITH A GUY?”: GENDER NON-CONFORMING BOYS AND GAY SEXUAL IDENTITY FORMATION

A. Introduction

Sexuality continues to be a powerful tool for forming social boundaries and therefore the origin and development of sexual orientation, behavior, and identity are matters of interest among scholars. Adolescence is a particularly interesting moment in the life course for exploring sexual development because it sets the groundwork for a lifetime of adult sexual behavior; the experiences of youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer—sexual minority youth—provide a unique glimpse of the early stages of sexuality development. Through the coming out stories of 18 adolescent boys who frequent Spectrum, I attempt to answer the question, “How do I know I am gay?” I will show how individuals make meaning of their sexual selves within the context of a patriarchal, heteronormative structural system, where symbols of homophobia and masculinity inform their identity development, and how that reiterates the normalcy of heterosexuality.

In their review of research on sexuality development in adolescence from the first decade of the 21st century, Tolman and McClelland (2009) celebrate the shift from risk-specific research on adolescent sexuality to research that recognizes adolescent sexuality as a normal part of development. They point to three areas of research that surged in the early part of the new century which include new views on sexual behavior, sexual selfhood, and sexual socialization. Recognizing the overlapping nature of these categories, this chapter is less about sexual behavior and instead contributes primarily to ideas about sexual selfhood as well as shines light on processes of sexual socialization. In many ways my findings resemble previous studies on the processes of sexual minority identity formation among adults (Dank 1971; Troiden 1979;

Weinberg 1978; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor 1994). While my research enriches the relevance of these earlier works, it is unique both because of its focus on youths and its incorporation of queer theory. Further, it fills two important gaps in the literature on adolescent sexualities in that it uses qualitative methodology and focuses on adolescent boys.

This research led me to identify four processes of sexual identity formation. First, by *violating compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich 1980), the youths are marked as different from ostensibly “normal” or heterosexual youth. Second, upon being marked, the youths *seek out an explanation* for their “difference,” looking for words and tools that name their difference. Third, the youths describe *exploring sexuality* where they are introduced to other gay and bisexual individuals and subsequently learn how to fit in with the LGBT community. Finally, the youths *negotiate their identity* by oscillating between various sexual identities, picking an identity that fits them, and exploring how their sexual identity is constructed in tandem with their racial, class, and religious identities. I begin by discussing sociological theories on sexuality. I then present a detailed discussion of my data within the context of the four processes mentioned above. Finally I show how attention to the shifting boundaries of acceptable sexuality inform efforts to improve conditions for sexual minority youth and inform future research.

B. Sexuality as a Socially Constructed Category

Although sex is a biological term, sexuality is understood to be a socialized behavior that is constructed through interaction in the social world (Fausto Sterling 2000; Foucault 1990; Gagnon & Simon 1973; Rubin 1984; Stein 1989; Weeks 1985). Although there are biological and physiological components to human sexuality, there exists little reliable evidence that sexual desire—be it hetero-, homo-, or bisexual—is innate (E. Stein 1999). Therefore, rather than deliberate the origin of eros, I am interested in exploring the processes by which individuals give meaning to their feelings of desire, as well as how the adoption of a sexual identity is often more

pragmatic than romantic. To understand why this is important, it is helpful to refer to Arlene Stein's (1989) theoretical framework of drives, identities, and practices, wherein she advances sexualities theory from the early studies of psychologically innate, impulsive drives, through the functionalist and symbolic interactionist understanding of identities as not naturally, but socially influenced, and finally, to her conceptual understanding of sexual practices as a macro and micro examination of the innate, the structural and the individual in combination. Therefore for the purposes of this study, I look at how these young individuals interpret their feelings of desire through their individual lived experiences and how those individual experiences are constrained by structural forces beyond their control.

Throughout this chapter I borrow from Savin-Williams (2005) and refer distinctly to three different modes of understanding sexuality: orientation, identity, and behavior. I use *orientation* to refer to one's desires, fantasies, and attractions towards members of another sex, same sex, multiples sexes, or having no attraction at all. *Identity* refers to the socially constructed names and labels individuals adopt to describe themselves and/ or their sexuality, such as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or others. *Behavior* is used to describe actual sexual and intimate acts in which individuals engage. While I understand these terms intersect with one another, I also see them as distinct. In other words, one's sexual orientation towards a particular sex or sexes does not necessarily determine whether one's identity or behavior will align with that orientation; identity is not a sure explanation for how one is orientated or what sexual behavior one engages in; and how one behaves sexually may not be a good measure of one's orientation or identity.

C. Four Processes in Forming a Gay Identity

1. Violating Compulsory Heterosexuality

Compulsory heterosexuality relies on biological assumptions about sex and gender, where the sexual pairing of men and women is assumed to be natural and any other kind of same-sex or bi-sex sexual pairing is seen as abnormal. Compulsory heterosexuality results in a social system where all persons are assumed to be heterosexual and gender differences are taken for granted as natural. Compulsory heterosexuality is reinforced by gender norms—what we understand to be appropriately masculine or feminine. For example, rigid boundaries around femininity and masculinity, like the difference between a feminine and masculine sounding voice, are used to shore up compulsory heterosexuality. Persons who violate those rigid gender norms, like men with lilting voices or women construction workers, are often labeled by others as sexually deviant; violation of gender norms becomes a faulty tool used to predict another's sexual orientation or identity.

Another way compulsory heterosexuality is reinforced is through the internalization of heteronormative (Warner 1993) sexual scripts. Symbolic interactionists use scripting theory to show how individuals employ a prescribed set of behaviors (scripts) in their interactions with others. These scripts are learned and socially influenced. Sexual scripts are those prescribed behaviors that relate particularly to our sexual interactions. These sexual scripts are how we differentiate between an intimate sexual encounter with a romantic partner and an intimate medical encounter with a doctor, for example, whereby the former should elicit feelings of arousal and desire and the latter should not (Gagnon & Simon 1973). Heteronormative sexual scripts reinforce dominant ideas about sexuality, where the only acceptable sexual behavior, desires, or feelings occur between members of another sex. The boys and young men whose experiences are detailed in this analysis recount stories of being marked by others or by

themselves for violating compulsory heterosexuality via non-normative gender behavior or straying from heteronormative sexual scripts.

Fausto Sterling (2000) argues that gender is such a central organizing concept that children recognize gender differences long before they recognize sex differences. Yet sexuality, as Foucault (1990) explains, exists “as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (p.103). In order for sexuality to be a point of power, gender—masculinity and femininity—must be particularly salient within the framework of normative sexuality because one’s gender becomes inextricably linked to one’s sexual behavior. Sexuality is so seamlessly attached to gender and buoyed by heteronormativity that for young boys particularly, those who come off as unmasculine in behavior, appearance, or affect are quickly policed by family and peers for being sexually deviant. Similarly, some boys internalize notions of compulsory heterosexuality through various forms of social control and therefore decide for themselves that their same-sex sexual desires or fantasies are proof that they are different from other boys. Thirteen out of the eighteen boys in my study describe this experience as having always known they were different. Troiden (1979) refers to this as sensitization. It was difficult for many of them to put into words why they felt different, yet they often connected being different with non-normative gender behavior. A newcomer to Spectrum, Aaron, a 19-year-old Mexican-American man who identifies as gay gives this account:

Well, I want to say, well, that’s hard, because I...I didn’t call myself gay but I knew something was different. And um...um I don’t...I wasn’t really—‘cause I’m not familiar with when, you know, crushes develop or whatever—but I remember feeling different about...about certain individuals, especially boys. But,

um, it was just different. And the fact that...I...I picked up that I was hanging out with a bunch of girls.

The youths made meaning of these violations of compulsory heterosexuality and the resulting gender policing they experienced, by describing them as the characteristics that make them gay. This is important because ostensibly there are many gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals who do not share this childhood narrative of difference, perhaps due to the fact that nothing about their affect or behavior led others to suspect they were *not* heterosexual. Described by Garfinkel (1967) as the documentary method of interpretation, by the time these young men are telling me their story, they are already claiming a gay, bisexual, or queer identity. Thus, when asked to look back on their childhood and consider when they first realized they were gay, many of them identify this difference as being a logical explanation for their gayness.

Miguel, a Mexican immigrant who is 20 years old and identifies as a gay man has only recently started coming to Spectrum. He came out to his friends and father in high school but he says he always knew there was something different about him. Miguel's coming out process happened in the U.S. in the context of an urban high school, but the following description is from his childhood in Mexico, where he was marked as a young boy for not being appropriately masculine:

Like, my voice...my voice was really, um, high pitched. I did sound like a girl.

But that doesn't mean they had to give me, they used to label me, "Oh you little girl, you little this." Name calling. Being beaten you know, because maybe the sound of my voice didn't go with my boy body, you know? And maybe that's why I got picked on.

Jamil, a multi-racial, 17-year-old boy, identifies his sexuality as open or bisexual and had been coming to Spectrum for about nine months at the time of his interview. He came out as bisexual in middle school. Like Miguel, he also experienced policing of his gendered behavior from his young uncles who pressured him to participate in masculine activities like football, about which he says “wasn’t ever my thing.” He was also teased and bullied in elementary and middle school by peers for not conforming to a typical masculine gender:

I went through a lot as a kid. I was struggling with like, depression; I was facing bullying, and like, being tormented for being the weird kid basically all the time. It was just like, elementary school like, no, middle school was worse. Like, there were some days where people would be nice to me but there'd always be that kid that would always be, "Oh, you're fruity and blah, blah, blah, and your voice is really high and blah, blah, blah..."

The previous examples show a violation of compulsory heterosexuality by embodying physical traits that go against gender norms like having a high pitched voice or “acting fruity.” But for some boys, their first reckoning of being gay or bisexual came when they realized that their sexual desires and fantasies did not fit a heteronormative script and therefore they internalized shame and anxiety about their same-sex attraction. They too were marked as different, except they were marking themselves rather than being marked by others. For example, they recounted stories of looking at heterosexual pornography as young boys and being more interested in the men than the women. Alex, a white, 20-year-old gay man who had recently come out and had been coming to Spectrum for a little more than a month told me that he did not like himself when he was younger. When I asked him why he told me this story:

I always knew there was something different about me. Like—and this is just the way it is like, I’m not a weirdo—but when I was younger like...all of like...even when I was really young, ...say we were watching Power Rangers, they [his brother and cousins] would always be checking out the girls, and I would be like, “Oh, look at the guys.” Like Brittany Spears, I was like, I love her music, she’s pretty, but I love her music more. So I mean I always knew something was different but I was ashamed kind of?

Brian, a white, 21-year-old queer-identified youth came out to his parents and started coming to Spectrum when he was in 7th grade. In the following example, he describes how his behavior with his first girlfriend, whom he was dating when he came out, did not conform to a heteronormative script and therefore became one of the clues to his understanding of himself as queer:

We were like, cuddling on the couch in my basement and I remember her being the one, kind of...you know, little spoon, big spoon? She was the big spoon of the cuddle kind of. And then she kind of said, “You know, actually, you’re supposed to be like, have your arm around me and whatnot.” And I’m like, “Oh, ok, like...That felt more comfortable like, your being the more, you know, dominant one.” So, I think that was another wake up call for me, you know?

Neither Alex nor Brian recounted being bullied or teased for gender non-conforming behavior the way Miguel and Jamil did, but they both described being aware of their desire violating heterosexual scripts and therefore internalizing a sense of being different or of somehow doing it wrong when comparing their behavior or feelings with that of their friends or siblings.

In addition to gender non-normativity and violating heteronormative scripts, some of the youths were ostracized for reasons that were unclear to them but which I argue were likely due to the fact that simply being queer, as in “odd” or “weird,” is enough to trigger exclusion based on the raced, classed, and gendered aspects of compulsory heterosexuality. This is best demonstrated by two brothers, both of whom told stories of being outcasts at their school. Ben and William describe themselves as multi-racial, and are 19 and 16 respectively; both identify as gay and attended Catholic elementary school before moving to a public charter middle school. They have been regulars at Spectrum for about two years. Both of them described being outcasts during their time at Catholic school, yet when I asked them why, neither of them was able to tell me for certain. From their perspective, they were picked on for no good reason. William explains:

Okay so basically you know how there’s always that one kid, that outlier there who basically would, who basically had friends but even then sometimes the friends would talk shit about him just to make themselves feel better about themselves? Basically, I was that kid that got shitted on by everybody. Even the teachers were like, so rude to me.

Neither of them exhibit particularly non-masculine characteristics, those typical markers like a high-pitched voice or disinterest in masculine activities that other youth embody. They both described being picked on by students and teachers alike for no apparent reason and described this harassment escalating to physical violence at one point or another. Further along in my interview with William, I asked him about a period in his life during elementary school when he described a turning point in his understanding of himself. He says he realized:

That I wasn't exactly like everybody else and when I found out that it was, that the reason was because I was gay, that was like, the point where I'm like, really? I, and I had basically just given up on school.

Although at the time it was happening, William did not experience his bullying as being a result of violating compulsory heterosexuality, he retrospectively identified that he was being teased because he was gay. Whether or not they were actually bullied because of their gender performance is less important to my argument than understanding that both Ben and William experienced being singled out for being "different" and then they later identified this difference as proof of their gayness. For William and Ben, the bullying they experienced for being different led to a series of events that resulted in their moving from a Catholic school to a public school where LGBT-identified and racially diverse kids were quite common. This change then led to an experience many of the youths in my study shared—seeking an explanation for their difference.

2. Seeking an Explanation

As demonstrated above, once young persons are marked as "different" either by others or by themselves, they begin to seek out an explanation for why this might be the case and they begin to associate their difference with a queer sexuality. Therefore they look for something to call themselves, a way to name what makes them different from others. It is through this "automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1990: 201) that the youths become naively complicit in their marginalization as they clearly understand themselves to be outside the norm of dominant culture. This process takes place at various times in youths' lives. For the boys in this study, it has happened at a rather early age as they hear others, friends or family, use words that directly or indirectly describe what they are experiencing, words like "gay," "faggot," and "homo." Several of the youths describe how at first they do not have the language to name what they are feeling. Aaron explained it this way:

Like, let's see, I had known something was different in elementary school. Um, but I never...I never called myself gay. It was, you know, because it was too early and I didn't know what it was, or because I just didn't have the experience to say that.

Others, like Alex, experienced a more visceral moment of hearing a homophobic slur, asking what it means, then making the connection that the word describes the desire he has experienced.

I asked him when it was that he knew what being gay meant:

I (was) probably like 13. And um...um, it was just more like, my family would like, once in awhile—they weren't big on it—but they'd say like, "He's so gay," or "He's a faggot." Stuff like that. And like, all the time that I was agreeing—like, I was the agree-er—but I actually asked, I was like, "What's gay?" Finally I asked, I was like, "What do you mean?" He's all, "It's just this nasty person who likes to sleep with uh the same"...uh like, he said it's...the way he said it is, "It's this nasty guy who sleeps with another guy." That's all he said... And I'm like oh my god. Okay. And I was like I wanted to dig more. So I was like, "Well, what's wrong with it?" And he was like, "Well, I don't know, they're just attracted to the same sex." And I was like, oh shit, that's me...like a male that is attracted to a male. And I was like oh god, I look at males more than I do girls. That makes me gay.

In the case of Gabe, an 18-year-old Latino who identifies as bisexual, he describes being attracted to both boys and girls from early puberty but prior to this moment had only dated girls. It was not until he had been introduced to the idea of bisexuality through his peer group that he came out as bisexual:

Um, it kind of start(ed)...like, thoughts going through my mind, um, during the end of elementary school, the beginning of middle school. And so, it's just, like, in the back of my mind I always thought, like, "No, this isn't how it's supposed go. I shouldn't be thinking about guys that way, I should think about girls this way only." And it's just like, um, so, like, during middle school I was kind of, like, fighting myself on it a lot but when I started high school and I got a chance to meet a whole lot of new people who were a part of the GLBT community, considering [my high school] was filled with so many, it just gave me a chance to just like, stop and think and like, be true to myself like, slap myself, "This is reality for you."

Although prior to encountering the term "bisexual" and other members of the LGBT community, Gabe was experiencing same-sex desire, it was not until he was exposed to the idea through peers that he was able to name his experience, claim it as his own, and then begin exploring intimacy with male-identified persons.

This process of seeking an explanation for being different demonstrates the hegemonic power of compulsory heterosexuality. In contrast to domination, where individuals are forced to conform to a norm, the power of hegemonic social control lies in the way that the dominant group "by virtue of its moral and intellectual leadership secures the voluntary consent of the masses" (Kim 2001). In the case of sexuality, heterosexual persons are interpreted to be normal and morally superior to same-sex or bi-sex oriented individuals, not just by heterosexual individuals themselves, but by non-heterosexual people as well who then understand their sexuality as abnormal. Compulsory heterosexual norms are reproduced through various cultural mediums and used to police gendered and/ or sexual behavior. Society is bombarded with

heteronormative images in movies, television shows, novels, songs, fables, children's stories, advertising, and more, all of which suggests to queer youth day in and day out that their sexual desires and behaviors are wrong. Compulsory heterosexuality has erased any and all understanding of same-sex or bi-sex orientation and desire as a normal, healthy occurrence in human sexuality. More importantly, it ensures that those who do not fit the dominant norm will internalize this difference as their own fault and manage their behavior in a way that reproduces the heterosexual as normal. At the same time, as tolerance and awareness of LGBT-identified individuals and issues increases, youth are being exposed to examples of queerness in their day-to-day lives. I saw this happen with the youths who all attended the same public charter school where being queer was clearly safe and supported not only by peers but by the teachers and administrators as well.

What follows is sexual exploration where they boys begin to investigate various aspects of being gay or bisexual through intimate or social encounters.

3. Exploring Sexuality

Feeling somewhat liberated by the recognition of themselves as gay or bisexual, some of the boys in my study pursued relationships with known gay or bisexual persons as a step towards embracing their sexuality. Through these explorations and relationships they learned how to appropriately “be” gay or bisexual.

Anthony, a 17-year-old gay Latino who had been coming to Spectrum since he was 14 years-old, refers to his first boyfriend as a mentor, someone who helped him navigate the “gay world”:

Um, my last relationship that I thought I was in love with somebody, it was with a guy named Thomas. And he uh...this was back when I first—or not first came out—but like a year after I'd first come out. And he was kind of like, my mentor

in the gay world, showing me the ropes, getting me used to it, being my right-hand man as for comfort. So we got in a relationship and we got close. And it wasn't a long relationship, but him practically being my mentor in the GLBT community...

Miguel, like Anthony, also sought an out, gay boy in high school to date. Although he does not refer to his first boyfriend as a mentor the way Anthony does, his explanation for why he pursued him suggests that he admired this boy for being out and proud about his sexuality and was wanting to emulate that himself:

Interviewer: Was he...was he out and gay at school too?

Respondent: Um, yeah.

I: Were you out at school?

R: Actually no. Oh, this is good...this is a good question. I was not out, and he was. And he was like the perfect model of everything that I wanted to embrace...Me dating without having to worry about anybody judging me. And if they were judging me, I didn't care. And I wanted that.

I: Yeah. So he was boldly out.

R: Yeah...

I: But that was attractive to you 'cause you couldn't be that?

R: Yeah. And I was like, I want that so bad. I am here hiding of myself...you know from myself. And oh, suffering. And he's living the life that I wish I had.

Later, after Miguel broke up with this boyfriend and met his current boyfriend, the roles were reversed. He was now the out and proud gay boy and his new boyfriend was the one who was shy and afraid to be "out" in public. Then it was Miguel's turn to be the mentor.

While Anthony, and Miguel found that being in same-sex relationships were a good fit and enjoyed being gay, for some young people sexual exploration comes less easily. Some of the youths, as Ben describes below, may have understood themselves to be gay or bisexual, yet were not as eager to explore being sexual with others. Sometimes the youths have sex because they think they have to, not because they are experiencing strong desire. Ben's first sexual experience is an example of this kind of sex. When I asked him if he was sexually active he said he was not currently, but he had lost his virginity with a friend during his senior year of high school. He explains:

Um, it was with a friend. People kept...people kept saying that we should get together and um, it...it got to the point where we were like, okay. We were like, we're going to do it once.

In the end, Ben was not that impressed with his first sexual experience. He was in fact rather dismissive about it and has not had sex since.

Discourses about adolescent sexuality often assume that young people have sex because they cannot help themselves; they are slaves to unbridled emotions and hormones. Ben's story contradicts this idea. The assumptions that all adolescents want to have sex and that their sexual behavior aligns with their orientation and identity perpetuates essentialist ideas about sexuality and mask the often hidden processes that show sexuality to be a more complicated, learned process. Ben's first sexual encounter, like so many first times, did not quite go right and points to the idea that sex is in many ways an "acquired taste" (Whisman 1996: 32).

Further, these discourses put pressure on young people to attach themselves to a sexual identity. Many of the boys I interviewed identified themselves as virgins. Although it is true that some were not encountering opportunities to have sex, others were dating and had plenty of

opportunities but chose not to. This is important because it demonstrates that being gay or bisexual, much like being heterosexual, is not dependent upon actually having sex, yet discourses about gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons universally depend upon assumptions about individual's intimate, sexual behavior. In other words, debates about homosexuality and bisexuality give disproportionate weight to sexual behavior forcing gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals to account for their sexuality in a way straight individuals never do. Among the boys and men I interviewed, this complicates their process of sexual development because they feel pressure to align their orientation, behavior, and identity, pressure that comes both from outside and inside the LGBT community. As demonstrated in the following section, the youths struggle to find an identity that accurately describes them. There seems to be significant pressure to choose a sexual identity, yet the youths are often ambiguous about what that identity is. Further, it is important to recognize that the negotiating of sexual identity is deeply influenced by the context of young people's social and cultural circles. In the case of my research that social context includes Spectrum, their schools, families, neighborhoods, and more.

4. Negotiating Identity

In his book *The New Gay Teenager*, Savin-Williams (2005) argues that young people today are less invested in sexual orientation and identity as compared to pre-Millennial generations. While it is certainly the case that the youths at Spectrum identify themselves in a multitude of ways and seem less attached explicitly to mono-sexuality³, it was not consistent with my findings that identity did not matter to them. In fact, the very increase in the variety of sexual identity labels evidences that identity matters more than ever among this group of youths.

³ I use the term mono-sexuality in contrast to bisexuality. Terms such as heterosexuality and homosexuality indicate mono-sexuality and contribute to the myth that sexuality is a binary where one can only be attracted to the same or another sex but not multiple sexes.

While youths arrive at Spectrum thinking they might be gay, lesbian or bisexual, once there, they are exposed through peers and workshops to ideas about sexuality and gender that exist on a spectrum and to a multitude of ways to identify oneself, including queer and pansexual. They also learn about the history of the LGBT rights movement and about queer culture like drag and Pride. All of this exposure starts to effect the way they see themselves in the world. Dank (1971), Troiden (1979), and Weinberg (1978), in their work on homosexual identity development, all assert the importance of shifting meanings of homosexuality and inviting contexts—such as a gay community—as necessary components to adopting a homosexual identity. Dank explains, “The cognitive category of homosexual is now being presented in a not unfavorable manner to hundreds of thousands of people who previously could not have been exposed to such information... a higher proportion of those with homosexual desires and behavior will develop a homosexual identity, and the development of that identity will continue to occur at an increasingly younger age” (194). My research shows this expansion of homosexuality as more favorable than it has been previously, along with an earlier acquisition of a sexual minority identity. My observations at Spectrum made it clear to me that youth today have more options than previous generations when it comes to understanding their sexuality. They have expanded the number of labels one can attach to sexuality and they have embraced sexuality as a fluid, not fixed part of their experience. Yet, I do not interpret this expansion of options to mean sexual identity does not matter or is less important than in the past.

Anthony spoke to me about how much he loves being gay; that his sexual identity is the most important part of his identity, the only part of his identity he really cares about (compared to things like race or gender). He associates being gay with a particular type of personality or culture:

Um, I guess being at Spectrum, and being around peers that have...that are in...that are, um, allies to the community and also part of the community, so gays, lesbians, bi's, and all of them...they're fun-loving people. So I've sort of taken myself as part of that community. So I see myself as a fun-loving, happy person. So that being in my sexuality base is kind of like, a...it's grown on me. So I kind of like how it feels. So for me being gay is really fun to me.

Anthony's description of the queer community belies one of the dominant discourses about LGBT youth as depressed and suicidal, raising an important point about the counter-hegemonic role LGBT centers and communities play in U.S. society. Finding a queer-friendly place like Spectrum was described as a pivotal moment for almost all of the participants in this study. They could finally let go of trying to make themselves fit into a heteronormative culture and instead find a place of belonging that was not only fun but something to be proud of.

In addition to exposing youths to pride for gay culture, Spectrum has a regular six-week sex education program that is funded by a federal grant, supervised through a public health organization, and facilitated by peer-educators and adult staff. During the first session, the youths learn about the difference between sexual orientation, identity, and behavior as well as biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression, focusing on how these things (biological sex, sexuality, and gender) exist on a spectrum and do not determine one another. During one session, Cesar, a twenty-something, gay Latino staff member who is deeply admired by all of the youths who attend Spectrum, used his own experience with the sex/gender spectrum to explain that while he had spent most of his life understanding himself as gay and only attracted to men, he had recently had moments where he found himself attracted to butch individuals who were not

necessarily cisgender men. Therefore, his feeling was that he was more attracted to masculinity than to men and therefore perhaps he was not as gay as he once thought he was.

Travon, a 16-year-old boy who is black has spent a lot of time at Spectrum and has been influenced by these ideas about gender fluidity and queerness, ideas that suggest sexuality and gender exist on a continuum rather than being fixed categories and that they can change over time. When I asked Travon how he sexually identifies, he answered that he identifies as queer:

Well, um, I did actually do it for a couple of different reasons. I was like, I was, I was in the time of my life where I like, when I originally came out I was bi, I came out only as bi. And then I realized I like guys better so I said I was gay. And then I started having reoccurring feelings for women so I went back to being bi and I was like, this is too much work, I identify as queer, it covers it all and it also doesn't exclude people like trans people and stuff and like, I felt that it was a lot cooler to include everybody cause I'm not trying to build walls, like, if I like you then I'm going like you.

Identity is rarely fixed among the youths of Spectrum, pointing to the process of negotiating sexual identity, orientation, and behavior. Youths often describe switching back and forth from bisexual to straight to gay and back again. Although the youths are becoming more open to identities like queer and pansexual, many of them are still driven to settle on a monosexual identity. It is harder to be taken seriously or to be seen as an authentic member of the LGBT community with a pansexual or bisexual identity. And certainly within the larger, non-queer society, where tolerance for same-sex relationships and intimacy seems to be growing, little is ever said about where bisexual and pansexual persons fit into the conversation.

In some cases, the youths acknowledge the ways their sexual identity intersects with their other identities. Ernie, a 21-year-old Chicano youth, who identifies both his gender and sexuality as queer, has been coming to Spectrum for several years. As he explains what being queer means, he also talks about his race and class as being important to him:

I like to call myself queer just cause it's like, more like, fluid, like, it's very fluid, like, you're not set to a standard or anything. So, like, I dunno, like, people wanna be like 'oh you're bisexual' but it's not, it's like past that, it's like, another level...It's more fluid still...I would date a girl, or a woman-identified person...and I've dated a man, like it just, that wouldn't matter to me. So that's one part of it and then just like also being a person of color and then also somebody who's like poor, and just stuff like that.

Ernie expresses a queer-of-color (Ferguson 2004) perspective, that being gay is not the only thing that makes him queer. Queerness becomes a marker for all the ways one does not fit into mainstream ideas of what is normal.

Religion can be another identity that intersects with one's sexuality. Matthew, a 21-year-old white gay man who has been coming to Spectrum since he was 16, understands himself to be gay and engages in same-sex behavior with men but struggles with what it means to be Catholic and gay. He talked at length about how it was his understanding that the Catholic Church was not against being gay so much as against engaging in same-sex intimacy. In other words, one could be same-sex oriented and gay-identified but was expected to see sex with men as immoral and therefore avoid that behavior. His recounts his struggle with identity here:

I remember being ...14, 15 and really struggling with the (gay) identity and whatnot. Like, I don't know why I'm this way or whatever, but by the time I

reached um 17, 16 ½, 17, I really, um, feel like I came more into like, acceptance, you know? And like, um, just this is who I am you know? Or part of me or this is my orientation. Um, it's been the last three years that I've, um, had to reface this kind of struggle between not necessarily who I am or what it is, but you know, is it moral or not? Like, I've had to question that now.

In these examples, Ernie's queer identity and Matthew's struggle with being gay, are less about "who you do" and more about "who you are." Sexual identity is a statement. It can be a political stance or a site of resistance, but it can also be a stigma, even within the sexual minority community, particularly if it does not fit a heteronormative (mono-sexual) framework. And sexual identity is part of an assemblage (Puar 2005) of identity, identities that are not necessarily fixed but moving and shifting within a powerful social context. Too often various identities like race, gender, class, and sexuality are assumed to have stable meanings, but in fact meanings and interpretations shift depending on where and when they are being deployed. Puar argues that it is these experiential ways of knowing that may have more to do with one's cultural and temporal location than one's association with various prescribed identities (Robertson & Sgoutas 2012). It is from this point of departure that I will conclude with a discussion of the impact these findings have among the community of youth at Spectrum as well as the larger sexual and gender minority community.

D. Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how sexuality among gender non-normative boys gets constructed through four processes: violating compulsory heterosexuality, seeking an explanation, exploring sexuality, and negotiating identity. Although I am not the first scholar to show gay men's sexual identity formation as a multi-step process, my use of queer theoretical frameworks like compulsory heterosexuality adds an important element to our understanding of

this process. The hegemonic power of heterosexual norms and the resulting policing of gendered behavior is deeply significant to the formation of identity for these participants.

The youth of Spectrum do not have the privilege of writing off their identity as no longer important, like Savin-Williams suggests is the province of the new gay teenager. Almost three decades ago, Rubin (1984) predicted that the “charmed circle” of acceptable sexuality would broaden to include more individuals, but that it would fail to achieve a truly democratic acceptance of sexuality in all its diversity. Rubin likened the growing acceptance of some sexualities along with the continued exclusion of others to racism. This idea that sexuality is a tool for boundary-making operates quite like race in the 21st century U.S. where we live not in an era of post-racism, but rather amidst a shift in the boundaries of whiteness (Gans 1999; Lee & Bean 2004; Steinberg 2004). I am not suggesting that sexual identity and race are equal identity categories, but rather that as focal points of U.S. rights movements, efforts have only succeeded in shifting boundaries, not eliminating them.

The boys and men discussed in this chapter and the youth who attend Spectrum in general, are not embraced as members of the dominant culture, but it may not be just because of their sexual identity. They are excluded because they are queer in multiple ways: they embody non-normative gender traits; they are black, Latino, and bi- or multi-racial; they come from working class and impoverished families who are struggling to make ends meet or are experiencing homelessness; they are failing or dropping out of school; they suffer from learning disabilities and have been labeled with various mental health conditions; they are outsiders, geeks, nerds. It is this assemblage of identity, not simply being gay or lesbian, that have a profound impact on the experiences of these young people. No matter how much access the

mainstream LGBT rights movement accomplishes with its current liberal strategies, the youth of Spectrum will likely continue to exist outside of its boundaries.

These findings point to two important considerations going forward. The first is the importance of youth spaces like Spectrum where young people can access resources. Seidman (1993) argues, “Identity constructions are not disciplining and regulatory only in a self-limiting and oppressive way; they are also personally, socially, and politically enabling” (134). Identity matters a lot to youth who find themselves outside of the charmed circle. It is their very queerness that has secured their access to this family that is Spectrum, a family they rely on for support and survival. The youth of Spectrum access resources that help them to survive and succeed via their queer identities, but it is not just their sexual identities that drive their marginalization. When it comes to the safety and well-being of young people, it will be useful to pay close attention to all of the circumstances that contribute to their problems and take care that resources are not too tightly tethered to identities that are fluid, contested, and political in nature, like sexual identity.

Second, in her book “Dude, You’re a Fag”, Pascoe (2007) shows how the most powerful part of the fag discourse is not that it polices actual gay individuals, but rather that it is used as a tool to reinforce masculinity by policing gender non-normative behavior and individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation. In other words, properly masculine gay men are not the targets of the fag discourse. The youths in my study were policed—either externally or internally—at a very young age, for their gender non-conformity in their behavior or sexual desires. They were teased, bullied, harassed, and badly mistreated because they had high-pitched voices, liked to play with dolls, despised football, or preferred to hang out with girls, not because they were sexually attracted to boys. Pascoe shows that underneath homophobic and transphobic

slurs and epithets lies a deeply misogynist society. Efforts to end bullying, harassment, and teasing of children and youth must, at their core, address sexism and gender inequality. While we are living in an age where racism and homophobia are ever more frequently challenged, the overt forms of sexism that plague girls, women, and queer individuals go largely unchecked.

Within the well-rehearsed narrative of the coming out story lies the key to recognizing the hegemonic power of compulsory heterosexuality; it insists that youth account for all of the ways that they are different from normal, heterosexual individuals. And even in a tolerant climate where perhaps that difference is not cause for threat, the pressure to situate oneself on the homo/hetero spectrum continues to reflect a very heteronormative understanding of sexuality. Hearing youths describe their experiences with becoming sexual brings to light some of the hidden processes of the formation of a sexual self, processes that compulsory heterosexuality often masks among straight-identified persons. Compulsory heterosexuality ensures that straight-identified persons are not faced with the process of questioning their sexual orientation, identity, and behavior, coming out to themselves and others, and struggling to understand why they are “different.” Yet surely, if all young people were forced to account for their sexuality the way sexual minority youth are, their stories of exploration would look similar. Perhaps, we need to ask more straight youth, “How do you know you are *not* gay?” I suspect the answer is that they have always just known. In the next chapter I examine how the formation of a gender identity is as salient to the youth of Spectrum as forming a sexual identity.

CHAPTER 4: “WITH SOME PEOPLE MY GIRL COMES OUT WITH OTHER PEOPLE MY BOY COMES OUT.”: NEGOTIATING GENDER AMBIGUITY

A. Introduction

Across my college campus, a peculiar sign has begun to appear. I see it posted at the health clinic, in the Women’s and Gender Studies department office, the LGBT Resource Center and other various student centers, as well as the offices of my colleagues. The sign is composed of four boxes arranged in a square, each box a different color. Within each box reads the following, “I prefer She, Her, and Hers,” “I prefer He, Him, and His,” “I prefer Ze, Hir, Hirs,” and “I prefer They, Them, Theirs.” Along the bottom it questions, “Do you have a pronoun preference?” We are living in a moment of unprecedented public awareness about issues surrounding transgender⁴ identity and these signs are an example of this shift. College campuses with their propensity towards democracy and civic engagement have been at the forefront of the gender rights movement, along with various LGBT-related centers and movements across the country. Using my research at an LGBT youth center, I explore how the preferred gender pronoun (PGP) and the negotiation of genderqueer and transgender identity among youth demonstrate that young people today are doing gender differently, but still struggling with hostility towards gender ambiguity. I will demonstrate how exposure to ideas about gender fluidity that come from Spectrum, friends and peers, and the Internet have resulted in many of the youths adopting a “genderblind” framework that can be liberating while still reinforcing the dominant gender binary.

⁴ Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term transgender may include but is not limited to: transsexuals, cross-dressers and other gender-variant people. Transgender people may identify as female-to-male (FTM) or male-to-female (MTF). Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically (<http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>).

B. Ontological and Epistemological Understandings of Gender

Kessler and McKenna (1978) define gender attribution as “how we decide whether someone is male or female every time we see a new person” (2). They argue that it is the process of attribution that drives our understanding of all other aspects of gender, including gender roles, gender identity, and gender expression. *Gender roles* are “the culturally specific normative expectations associated with gender,” while *gender identity* “is the private experience of gender, the awareness that one is male or female” (Risman 1982: 313). *Gender expression* is the material display of one’s gender identity both through secondary sex characteristics, which are essential embodied characteristics (body size, location and characteristics of body hair, voice, etc.), non-essential extra-body characteristics (clothing, make-up, hairstyle, etc.), and tertiary sex characteristics which are nonverbal behaviors (facial expression, movement, body posture). Inherent in the concept of gender attribution is the idea that gender is not an essential characteristic of human beings, but rather a socially constructed set of assumptions applied to individuals and then naturalized and used to justify inequalities among differently sexed people (ie., men are masculine and analytical thinking is masculine, therefore men are smarter than women) (Lorber 1994).

Biologically, sex difference accounts for very little variation among human beings, but vast differences among women and men can be explained by the way gender is applied to differently sexed people via attribution and then differently valued. In her 2001 discussion, “Recent Transgender Theory,” where she explores the tensions between queer and feminist theories on transgender experience, Hausman explains gender as an analytical concept: “This view never assumes that gender operates from within the subject as an originating desire or an identity from which a person’s presentation of herself or himself emanates; it is always only a

model of perceiving and experiencing the world that is attributed and narrativized” (476). Yet when it comes to subjectivity, real people do not necessarily experience their gender as something that is attributed, but rather they experience it as something that emanates from within. Hausmann therefore suggests that there are two different understandings of gender; one ontological (how individuals understand themselves) and one epistemological (the exploration of how it is we come to understand ourselves in a particular way).

The ethnographic tradition in sociology is largely interactionist, meaning it prioritizes the meanings and understandings members assign to their experiences, rather than epistemological positions held by researchers. Therefore, ethnographic research on gender tends to describe it from an ontological perspective. I use Kessler and McKenna’s (1978) language of the “displayer” and the “perceiver” and their theories about gender attribution to show how gender ambiguous youths experience their gender through this interactional process. I will complicate their accounts of lived experience with an epistemological understanding of gender. My discussion contributes to the existing body of literature (Lucal 1999; Shotwell & Sangrey 2009; Stone 1991; Vidal-Ortiz 2002) that is critical of treating transgender persons as either guilty of reinforcing gender norms or responsible for disrupting them, while still embracing the feminist argument that efforts to combat gender inequality require a critical understanding of the androcentric gender order.

C. History and Context of Gender within the LGBT Community

Although what we now refer to as transgender people have been part of the gay rights movement since its inception (Rivera 2002), the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) rights movement began including transgender (T) in the late 1990s (Valentine 2007). The conflation of sexuality and gender is indicative of the ease with which society assumes one’s gender expression is indicative of one’s sexual orientation (Gagné, Tewksbury, & McGaughey 1997;

Vidal-Ortiz 2002). Transgender or genderqueer⁵ people are mistakenly labeled as sexual “minorities”—members of society who are not heterosexual, when it would be more accurate to refer to them as gender minorities—members of society who are not cisgender regardless of their sexual identity. Therefore the inclusion of the T in the LGBT movement was not meant to conflate transgender people with sexual minorities, but rather is an example of how queerness—in opposition to the “normal” (Warner 1993)—is often what brings people together under the LGBT banner.

I found Spectrum to be a particularly interesting place to examine gender because within spaces where transgender issues are salient, it has become routine practice to call out how gender is a socially constructed category. Outside of these liberatory projects, pointed discussions of gender identity are still quite uncommon. Thanks to several high profile cases, however, the visibility and awareness of transgender people is on the rise. While I was doing my fieldwork at Spectrum, feature stories about transgender children ran in both the Washington Post (Dvorak 2012) and the New York Times (Padawer 2012), and high profile figures like Lara Jane Grace of the rock band Against Me! and Lana Wachowski, co-director of *The Matrix* film franchise came out publicly as transgender. Similarly, genderqueer is increasingly being adopted—especially by young people—as a term to describe gender non-conformance. Given that trans identity is getting so much attention and that trans-identified people are an integral part of the LGBT community, what has that meant for the youth of Spectrum? How are they “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman 1987)? Within Spectrum, gender is as important as sexuality. This chapter discusses some of Spectrum’s youths’ gendered experiences.

⁵ Genderqueer is a catch-all category for gender identities other than man and woman, thus outside of the gender binary and cisnormativity (Usher 2006). Being genderqueer has no bearing on sexual identity or orientation and a genderqueer person may or may not be transgender.

In the next section I reflect on my experiences as a researcher, highlighting my personal struggles with understanding the youths' gender identities in an effort to demonstrate the complexity of studying gender in a setting such as this one. In the data sections that follow I introduce the preferred gender pronoun (PGP) discussion as a symbol of gender awareness at Spectrum, discuss how cisgender, transgender, and genderqueer youth manage their gender identities within the space, and use case studies of transgender and genderqueer youths to demonstrate how these youths manage their feelings and embodiment of gender ambiguity. I conclude with a brief discussion of the role social settings like Spectrum, peer groups, and the Internet are playing in the way these youths' are queering the binary gender norm.

D. Gender Identity versus Gender Attribution

I often found myself struggling with recognizing a youth's identity as authentic and found this particularly difficult in the case of transgender youth. I found myself convinced that trans youth were just bowing to trends and peer pressure. In the case of youths who had begun various medical or surgical stages of transition, I feared that they could not possibly *legitimately* understand or know themselves well enough to be making these kinds of life-altering decisions. I had to constantly reflect on my assumptions, particularly as they are informed by my cisgender-privileged status. This anxiety was apparent in the following field note:

Red was the first trans person I'd interviewed and therefore I suppose I left the interview with a lot of questions on my mind. One thing that is a really typical criticism of trans persons, particularly trans men, is that they are just lesbians who are either trying to fit hetero norms or that they are transitioning in order to gain male privilege. I found myself wondering these things as I interviewed Red. I also found myself wondering about the safety implications of taking hormones and whether or not it's really safe and really worth it in the end. These are important

things for me to remain cognizant about because it shows my prejudice, perhaps.

It doesn't mean I can't ask these questions, but I need to really be wary about how these things surface in my set of assumptions.

Step 11 in Jacob Hale's "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans____," states, "Focus on: What does looking at transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or trans____ tell you about yourself? Not what does it tell you about trans." Reflecting on what my interpretations may say about myself, I realized that I *believed* some youths more than others when they identified or described themselves. I tended to believe those respondents who fit my idea of what a "gay" or "male" person looks and acts like. Even among transgender youth, there was an element of authenticity that I looked for either in appearance, behaviors, or explanations. Those youth who more readily passed as the gender they identified with were the ones who I took more seriously: in other words, their authenticity was attached to their gender expression. In terms of Hale's rule, what does looking at trans people tell me about myself? These reflections make visible my own process of gender attribution, one that has little to do with accurately knowing a person's biological sex and everything to do with whether or not they fit my expectations of "male" or "female." This process of gender attribution surfaces often in my field notes, as well as in the youths' explanations of themselves.

When I asked Adam, an 18-year old, white, gay, cisgender man what he thought other people usually assumed his gender to be, he responded, "That's a really good question. A lot of people, um, first mistake me for a girl for a second. And then they realize that I'm a guy." Or similarly, Jude, a 22-year old, white, transwoman who identifies as pansexualtransplus explains, "I think most people perceive my gender—if they haven't already asked—um, then they're

gonna assume male most of the time. I've had some people identify it as androgynous...they have difficulty placing it." It is this process that is of particular interest to me in this chapter: how gender attribution, the assignment of gender by a "perceiver," interacts with the lived experience of gender on the part of the "displayer."

Knowing that gender attribution is a difficult process to disrupt, Spectrum engages in various practices that attempt to make it more visible. One of these practices involves the ritualized process of publicly claiming one's gender through a preferred gender pronoun, or PGP, which I discuss in the next section.

E. Negotiating Gender at Spectrum

1. Sharing a Preferred Gender Pronoun or "PGP"

"Let's do check-in, ya'll!" Cesar (Spectrum's program director) hollers over the din of the music pouring out of the speakers. We begin to approach the stuffed armchairs that form a circle on a rug in the center of the space. Under strings of multi-colored holiday lights made nearly invisible by competing day-bright fluorescents, a motley crew of adult staff, volunteers, interns, and youths, slowly come together, quieting down for the daily ritual known as "check-in." On some days, the number of adults in the space awkwardly outnumbered that of youth; on others, the youth dominate and the group spills over to the benches that surround the chairs, more filtering in as check-in proceeds. Cesar commands attention with ease and the various side-conversations die down quickly as he begins to speak:

Welcome to Spectrum, a safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning youth and their allies. We don't care how you identify, just that you are down with queer liberation (to which those of us in the know raise our "claws" and say "RAWR!"). We're going to do a little thing called check-in where you tell us your name—doesn't have to be your real name—your preferred

gender pronoun—examples of pronouns are things like he and she, but you can also use gender neutral pronouns like ze, they, or hir—let us know how your day is going—you can give it a number, a color if you want—give us a letter of the day—like Sesame Street only queer, and answer the question of the day. Who has a question of the day?

It is within this daily practice of checking-in that youth and adults alike are socialized into the queer milieu that is Spectrum, the process serving both as an initiation for first-timers and a time-honored ritual for regulars. Undoubtedly, the question most likely to stump people new to the space is the one referring to the preferred gender pronoun or PGP. I find the PGP question to be one of the defining characteristics of Spectrum; it indicates that Spectrum is a safe place for gender ambiguity and contradiction, and it raises consciousness about cisgender privilege, but at the same time it is a reminder that gender—and the inequality it reinforces—is not easily abandoned.

2. Grappling with Gender

If one has never thought twice about their preferred gender pronoun, being asked to identify it can be rather flummoxing. For many of the youth, check-in is likely the first time they have heard someone talk so explicitly about gender. Newcomer reactions to this topic are generally mixed, ranging from straight out confusion to awkward laughter. The first time I had to share my PGP I misspoke and said I prefer he/she pronouns, much to my embarrassment. I was not alone in my awkward nervousness when it came to answering this question, as this field note demonstrates:

There was a young woman at Spectrum yesterday, one of the Goth kids, who, when she introduced herself, instead of saying what gender pronouns she preferred, stated that she was bi. I've never heard anyone identify their sexual

orientation at check-in, so I think it was a combination of being nervous and confusing sexual identity and gender identity.

Beyond the awkwardness of grappling with one's PGP, being put into a position of having to think about it often starts important conversations about gender, transgender individuals, and cisgender privilege, as demonstrated by this cisgender boy, a newcomer to Spectrum:

During check in when it got to him, in response to gender pronouns he stated that he didn't want to offend anyone, but that he calls everyone "girl" and was that okay? He said he'd been at Burger King earlier in the day and called someone "girl" who got really angry with him.

I have no way of knowing the gender identity of the person whom he referred to as "girl" at Burger King, nor do I know the rest of the story, but as check-in made its way around the circle, a transmale youth, Mark, made his feelings clear about this topic when he said, "I prefer male pronouns and I *will* get upset if you refer to me as a female." This is not an uncommon occurrence. Often, those in the space have to confront their assumptions and prejudices, like having to think about why gay men's practice of calling everyone "girl" might be problematic as some youths are explicitly striving to not be recognized as a girl.

The intentional use of gender pronouns (always asking for a PGP at check-in) is one of the ways that Spectrum youth are taught to recognize how they attribute gender to others. Although the practice of sharing PGPs during check-in is meant to alert everyone in the space to be mindful of people's preferences, there continue to be slip-ups. Understandably, those youth whose gender identity is most difficult for others to attribute are most likely to face the hurtful misappropriation of their gender, even after they have announced their PGP. For example, I

noted this particular exchange between a cisgender female youth and Adrian, a graduate student intern who is a transman, prefers male gender pronouns but embodies some secondary and tertiary feminine gender characteristics:

Later, Saffron referred to Adrian as “she” and Cesar again called her out and said, “Adrian uses male pronouns.” Saffron looked right at Adrian and said she remembered him saying that at check in. “Do you hate me?” I didn’t hear Adrian’s answer.

It is also the case that those few youths who designate that they prefer ambiguous gender pronouns are rarely referred to as “they,” “ze,” “hir,” or other gender neutral pronoun alternatives. The fact that gender attribution is such a powerful social norm means that training individuals to re-think how they use gender pronouns in order to respect people’s gender identities requires a lot of effort and often fails to work without practice.

In addition to the failures to appropriately refer to some of the youths by their PGP, another interesting phenomenon occurs among the youths of Spectrum when it comes to their PGP that I refer to as “genderblindness.” It is quite common for the cisgender⁶ male youths to answer the PGP question with, “whatever’s clever” or “I have no gender preference,” while cisgender female youths are far more likely to express a preference for female pronouns. Among transgender or genderqueer youth, those who are transitioning gender are quite specific about their pronoun preference and those youths who embody gender ambiguity may claim either male or female pronouns, no preference or, on rare occasions, claim an ambiguous gender pronoun preference. When asked why they respond to the PGP question with “no preference,” youths

⁶ I use the term “cisgender” here specifically to describe youth members of my field site who do not identify as transgender and whose gender is not typically attributed to be ambiguous. While it is possible they may personally identify as genderqueer, their gender expression is not discordant with the sex they were assigned at birth, and they never identify as transgender, to my knowledge.

often go into elaborate explanations about how gender does not matter to them; what matters is what is on the inside, not the outside. Although I always found this response lacking in depth, I did not recognize it as significant until I spoke with Jude, who refused to adopt the attitude that gender did not matter and labeled that claim to be a form of genderblindness. When I asked Jude about her sexual identity, she replied:

I'm pansexual. Under the Wikipedia definition, pansexual is someone who is gender blind as a common synonym. It also says all people that are pansexual identify that way. Um, the common misconception, um, is that pansexual "do people," that they're genderblind. I'm not gender blind. In fact, I consider gender to be fairly important in all my relationships and I am not gender blind. But I don't discriminate based on gender. And that's how I take away pansexual.

Borrowing from theories on colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2010) that problematize individuals' claims to "not see race," Jude's use of the term genderblindness suggests that although we like to think that we do not see a person's gender and instead just see them for who they are, this is an idealistic and dishonest claim.

The cisgender youths are not likely to have their gender misread by anyone. Therefore, their claim to "not care" what PGP is used to refer to them is a moot point since it is highly unlikely anyone would refer to them using the "wrong" pronoun. Further, cisgender boys are much more likely to claim no preference compared to cisgender girls, although the most masculine, heteronormative boys in the group also tend to prefer masculine pronouns. Likely, the tendency to claim feminine or masculine pronouns as opposed to "no preference" is due to feeling a need to distance themselves from queerness, especially in a "contaminated" (Connell 1995) space where a large number of queer boys and girls (feminized boys and butch girls) are

present. I suspect that those cisgender male youths who claim to have no gender preference while at Spectrum might care a lot about their gender in a different context: one where they were not out as gay, for example.

At Spectrum, the practice of having everyone identify their PGP during check-in is intended primarily to allow those individuals whose gender is often misread to state safely how they would like to be referred to. As Jude describes, “I feel LGBT people are more inclusive and they’re more realistic about, uh, my situation (as a transwoman) than people who aren’t (LGBT).” The practice is intended to decrease the number of microaggressions gender non-conforming people will have to face, like being addressed as “he” when they prefer “she” or being asked inappropriate questions about their gender. Unlike the cisgender youth described above, genderqueer and transgender youth are constantly being read wrong; their gender expression violates what most of us take for granted as normal. While the PGP question does not interrupt the process of gender attribution, it assigns some agentic power to those individuals whose gender is elusive or whose gender expression and identity conflict in the eyes of others. And perhaps, being asked to engage in practices like identifying a PGP encourages cisgender people to recognize privilege. But even though this process is done with the intention of creating a safe space for people to express their gender identity, is it not actually the case that it is done to settle anxieties about ambiguous gender? The PGP question in effect is a socially acceptable way for people to find out the gender of someone for whom they are struggling with an attribution.

It is not the case that gender does not matter then. In fact, it seems to matter a great deal, so much that people are required—in this particular social setting—to disclose their gender identity. Asking cisgender people to account for their gender creates a small—sometimes transformative—disruption in the gender system, but it is not enough to upset the apple cart

altogether. Even if a cisgender person has the opportunity to abandon gender (by answering “whatever’s clever”), what is really occurring is that the group process at Spectrum is requiring those youths whose gender we do not know or whose gender identity does not conform with their gender expression to explain themselves in a way that can be understood. Furthermore, the different ways that cisgender boys and girls negotiate their PGP demonstrates that not only does gender matter, but in particular, *which* gender you are and how your gender becomes a proxy for your sexuality matters very much. Accordingly, cisgender privilege acts to reinforce the “natural” order of things.

While some scholars have speculated on the possibilities of a non-binary gender framework (Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2000; Kessler 1998), dominant U.S. culture is not one where a third gender or gender ambiguity is currently acceptable. As Lucal (1999) explains, “We cannot escape doing gender or, more specifically, doing one of two genders” (785). Perhaps within spaces like Spectrum, where a concerted effort is being made to disrupt the gender binary, ambiguity can more safely occur, but most youth are not interested in locating themselves somewhere in-between the gender binary. This is evidenced by how very few of them ask to be referred to with gender neutral pronouns. Further, given the difficulty people have assigning a preferred male or female gender to someone whose gender expression and identity confounds the process of attribution, the regular use of androgynous pronouns—while clever in theory—fails to really take hold in practice. In the next two sections, I share the experiences of three gender non-conforming youths in order to demonstrate how being ambiguously gendered is a complicated—and not altogether troublesome—experience.

3. Questioning One’s Gender

Transgender and/or gender non-conforming youth are exceptionally marginalized because of how their very presence disrupts the seemingly natural gendered order of things.

Those youths who do not fit into the gender binary struggle with being understood at school, at home, and on the street. They are labeled disruptive, learning disabled, mentally ill, delinquent, or, in hate language, “freak.” Yet the youth of Spectrum are living in an age where assumptions about gender identity are being challenged in a new way. They have access to new technologies in the form of clothing, make-up, wigs, hair removal, hormones, and surgeries that make it easier than ever to physically transform the embodied aspects of one’s sex and gender. Being gender non-conforming is nothing new but the expanded possibilities and options for transitioning from one gender to another (either temporarily or permanently) have grown immensely. Further, gender is increasingly being understood as a fluid identity rather than an immutable fact.

At Spectrum, where there is an institutionalized effort to recognize cisgender privilege, gender is a particularly salient component of youth identity. Using Spencer’s experience as a case-study, I will show that: 1) the experience of negotiating one’s gender is heavily influenced by external pressure, often in the form of gender attribution; 2) some gender non-conforming people do not simply “know” they are one gender or another, but rather they experience a process of decision making about their gender; and 3) having to choose one gender is actually quite complicated and perhaps not ideal, yet necessary in a world where binary gender is the norm.

Spencer is a 19-year old Latino who typically identifies as a man at check-in. He and I had several lengthy conversations over the course of my participant observation at Spectrum. Spencer spoke mostly to me about his struggles as a transman, both at school and at home, and of his love life. He explained that he has an information processing (IP) disorder and has attended several high schools. He said, “Schools don’t get me,” referring to his gender status. He also expressed deep frustration with his mother and sister, whom by all accounts are very protective

of him, but are not always compliant with his wish to identify as a man. His mother is particularly reluctant to support his male identity around her family. One day Spencer shared with me that there had been a death in his family. He explained how he was coming home at about three in the morning from a popular youth gathering space and as he approached his house the police asked who he was. He explained he was the “daughter,” which he said upset him because he dislikes being in situations such as these where he has to identify as a “daughter.” This family tragedy meant that he would have to attend a funeral and deal with family, something he is dreading as he knew it would mean negotiating his gender. He returned from the funeral to say that his mother did in fact call him by his “girl” name at the funeral. He added that he’s out as transgender to his mom, but she still talks about him as being a “tomboy” around family rather than referring to him as a man. He stated angrily that he hasn’t been a tomboy since he was 11 (he’s 19 now) and that it was insulting to him to have people see him as a girl. He kept insisting that he wanted to be recognized as a guy and not a tomboy around family and that he wanted to be taken seriously, although his mom will not refer to him as a guy.

This account shows how at school, on the street, or among family, Spencer is negotiating his gender. At school he is, as Judith Butler (1990) describes, “unintelligible.” In the situation with the police, in order to explain who he was, he had to consider how he was being perceived—what gender the officer was attributing to him—in order to be believed by a person in a position of authority over him. Among family he has to struggle against a fixed female attribution of his gender, with little or no help from his mother to re-imagine him as a boy. In her reflection on her own gender ambiguity, Lucal (1999) describes, “How I see myself, even how I might wish others would see me, is socially irrelevant. It is the gender that I appear to be (my perceived gender) that is most relevant to my social identity and interactions with others. The

consequence of this fact is that I must be continually aware of which gender I ‘give off’ as well as which gender I ‘give’” (791). It would appear that one’s gender identity is far from a “private” experience because no matter how one personally identifies, without affirmation from others, the opportunity to be recognized as that gender becomes less attainable.

Like all of the transmale youths I interviewed at Spectrum, Spencer came out as a lesbian (he told me this while enclosing the word lesbian in finger quotes) before he came out as trans. He once explained that he met a girl in middle school who asked him, “Do you really want to be a girl?” He replied that he did not and she said, “Let’s be trans.” I tried to get him to talk more about how he realized he would rather be a boy but he did not elaborate. Similarly, other youths’ explanations of their acquisition of gender identity reflect how the influence of peers and others who share similar experiences were crucial to their identity formation. Jude, for example, shared how she learned about transgender through an online gaming community she belonged to where over time members of the group began to disclose their transgender identities to each other. In a different case, Adam shared with me that looking back on his late childhood, he believes had he known being trans was an option, he likely would have grown up to be a girl.

As more and more young children are starting to identify as transgender, explanations rooted in biological or psychological (not sociological) origins tend to describe trans persons as being somehow broken, trapped in the “wrong” body. In the case of Spencer, I wanted to know if he had always known he was a boy or had someone suggested that this was the explanation for his confusion? I realize, however, that this line of questioning takes for granted that there is such thing as an authentic trans person and is rooted in the assumption that one is either born a boy or a girl and that this does not change, except in very particular situations. By assuming gender is fixed, my search for how Spencer understands himself to be the “wrong” gender can only result

in an answer that reinforces that assumption. Conversely, anyone who cannot prove the origin of their sense of wrongness is not seen as legitimately trans. Therefore, the assumption that there is a right or a wrong way to “be” gendered inadvertently dismisses the experiences of ambiguity that complicate gendered experiences.

Yet Spencer continued to convince me of his legitimacy as a man through his accounts of gender roles. Spencer talks about being a “regular guy,” or about “guys like me,” or “I’m not that kind of guy,” when he is referring to girls and dating. He says he doesn’t like having feelings and he likes keeping them bottled up, claiming that, “this is what men do,” therefore I was quite surprised one day when he arrived at Spectrum wearing eye make-up, fingernail polish, and a feminine blouse and shoes, hand-in-hand with a girl. Here is what unfolded for Spencer, as detailed in my field notes:

I said hi to Spencer and asked how he was doing. He started to explain that with some people his boy comes out and with some people his girl comes out and that his girl had been coming out for the first time in forever because he’d been spending time with this female friend of his. He kept repeating that some people draw out his girl and being a girl was making him really happy right now. That afternoon during check in, when Spencer introduced himself, he said, “I don’t have a gender preference, I guess, it doesn’t really matter,” spoken not very convincingly.

As Spencer’s experience demonstrates, some of the youths at Spectrum vacillate between two cultural, gendered scripts—male or female—neither of which necessarily fit their experience. In addition, youths relationships with others have a certain influence on their choices.

It has been documented elsewhere (Irvine 1990; Mason-Shrock 1996) that the medical pathologizing of transsexual and transgender persons has necessitated that individuals seeking medical or surgical transition comply with an origin story that explains how they know they are the wrong gender in order to access medical and surgical care to aid in various stages of transition. Of the several transgender youth I came to know at Spectrum, very few of them describe their experience as being trapped in the wrong body. Most of them describe a process of recognition that paralleled the onset of puberty, sexual awakening, and the development of other identities. This act of burdening trans-identified people to force their lived experiences into a pathological model in order to be formally recognized—while a successful practical strategy for those seeking medical or surgical procedures—results in making stories of ambiguity seem illegitimate. This pathologizing of transgender reinforces ideas that gender is an innate rather than attributed characteristic and eases social anxiety about ambiguousness. But not all gender non-conforming people are interested in transitioning; many of them will live their lives occupying the ambiguous space in-between. I take up this experience in the next section.

4. Gender Ambiguity

One can easily perform gender in a myriad of ways by simple alterations of dress, make-up, facial and body hair, and body movements, but there are certain embodied characteristics that cannot easily be transformed without hormonal or surgical treatments, if at all. These include the sound of a person's voice, the size and shape of their body (including things like having breasts or the size and shape of hands), and location and thickness of facial and body hair. Some people's gender expression is extreme in that it is either highly masculine or feminine, while most of us fall somewhere along a spectrum of gender characteristics: some closer, others further away from those polarities. Jude expressed that although she is doing hormone replacement therapy, she would rather embody an androgynous than a female gender. She sums up nicely

how she recognizes her own gender on a spectrum, “In fact, I would say pretty commonly the direct ratio of male to female, uh, stereotypically based on social, uh, constructs of the gender binary would be about, uh, 23(male):77(female).”

But there are those people who either land in the middle, leaving others always questioning whether they are a boy or a girl, or perhaps cross over onto the other side of the gender expression spectrum from their preferred gender identity. Not only are these individuals subject to policing of their sexuality, as social norms result in a conflation of sexuality and gender, but they are further sanctioned for not fitting into appropriate gender norms (Lucal 1999).

There are a handful of youth at Spectrum that I identify as ambiguously gendered for whom the PGP question is helpful, because it allows them the opportunity to identify as they want to be identified, not as others decide for them. As I mentioned previously, it also eases the discomfort of those around them who are unsure of their gender, and unlike the cisgender youth, they are more likely to get mis-identified both inside and outside the space. For the purpose of my research, I understand these particular youths to be people who: 1) are more or less comfortable identifying with the sex they were assigned at birth even though they embody a gender that often contradicts that identity or; 2) prefer to identify as gender “neutral” or “ambiguous,” also because their embodiment of gender is confusing to others. In neither case are they seeking to transition from one gender to another. I was often struck by the irony that some youths at Spectrum so easily passed—and therefore were mistaken—for another gender than the one with which they identify, while others who wanted to transition from one gender to another found it hard to pass as they desired. The difference has to do with how one embodies⁷ gender

⁷ I use “embodiment” in an attempt to distinguish this from “gender expression,” which is the multifaceted ways that each and every one of us can choose to display our gender to others, including clothing, make-up, hairstyles,

and therefore how others attribute gender to them. Corey, an 18 year-old Latino who identifies his gender using the term “universal” and his sexuality using the term “energy” explains how he is understood as femme within the LGBT community and often confuses people in the broader community when it comes to his gender:

Um, well, I know in the LGBT community...they think I'm really feminine and really flamboyant, and very, uh, “twinkie,” you know? So, it's...depending on where I'm at. 'Cause even...even...even like going on the bus, people will probably think that—from the way that I dress and um, just how I...how I bring myself out I guess you'd say—um, I don't know what they would think. I think that's exactly what they think...is they don't know, you know? It's like, well, I don't know.

Gabe is an 18- year old bisexual Latino, who is about five and a half feet tall and slight of frame. He typically dresses in masculine clothing like blue jeans, heavy hiking boots, and t-shirts. He wears his dark brown, wavy hair long, usually highlighted some shade of red. He has a soft, feminine face but almost always has a beard of dark hair that grows just up to his throat and over his chin and jaw bone, but not up the side of his face. It's not unusual to see him wearing a fedora hat. More notable even than his feminine facial features and small stature is his voice, which sounds very much like that of a young woman. He is overall gentle, soft-spoken, and kind. Gabe claims no gender preference during check-ins and introduces himself both as Gabe and as his alter-ego, Kaylee. I have never heard anyone refer to him as anything other than Gabe and using male pronouns, indicating that among his friends he is attributed a male gender. Outside of

mannerisms, etc. I see embodiment as a more fixed characteristic than gender expressions, although embodiment could be a form of gender expression.

Spectrum, though, he is often mistaken for a woman. After telling me this in an interview, I asked him how he feels about being mistakenly identified as a woman and he explained:

Um, it actually makes me feel happy; knowing that even when I'm not trying, like, people will think that I'm a woman. And it's just, like sometimes, it kind of grinds my gears, 'cause sometimes I'll be dressed completely like a boy. Like, I'm wearing a nice button up shirt, some good jeans, it's just like, I'm obviously wearing—I mean, I own more boy shoes than I do girl shoes—it's just like, I go out completely dressed and looking like a guy and I even have facial hair and everything and yet I still have somebody mistake me for a woman. And sometimes I'm just like, “Grrr, like hello? Do you not see the facial hair? Does it look like I have breasts?” [laughs] So like, it's kind of bittersweet sometimes but most of the time I just feel happy knowing that I can get people to think that I'm a woman without even trying.

Using secondary (non-reproductive, physical characteristics) and tertiary (nonverbal behaviors such as facial expression, movement, body posture) gender characteristics, people find it difficult to categorize Gabe's gender because of the ways that his ambiguity defies a clearly male or female gender. As described above, Gabe does not seem bothered by his gender ambiguity. In addition to his experiences with strangers who think he is a woman, he also likes to perform in Spectrum's drag shows and his embodiment of gender makes it easier for him to pass as a woman, which results in various symbolic and material rewards in a space where being a man who can successfully pass as a woman in a performance setting is highly valued.

Another example of a genderqueer youth is Ditto, a 20 year-old bisexual Latina who is six feet tall, and in her own words, “fat”. At check-in, Ditto is likely to say that she does not care

what gender pronouns are used to refer to her. In our interview she explained that she has a disorder that causes her to have ambiguous gender traits, and that, along with her size, makes people question her gender. When I asked about her gender identity she offered this account:

Respondent: Um, I am predominantly female, sometimes I'm genderqueer.

Interviewer: And people out in the world, people who don't know you personally, how do you think they perceive your gender?

R: Uh, a lot of people just don't know. I have a chemical imbalance, so sometimes I'll grow facial hair and so people question then, too. They're like, "I don't know if that's a fat guy or a hairy girl." So, I just throw people off with my gender all the time.

I: So people are confused by it a lot.

R: Yes, a lot of times I just hear "freak" and that's fine.

It does not simply follow that a person embodies gender characteristics that contradict the sex they were assigned at birth, and therefore want to transition (Devor 1989, Halberstam 1998, Lucal 1999). Similarly, people like Gabe and Ditto, who embody an ambiguous gender, are also not interested in a gender transition. Even in the case of Jude, who is undergoing hormone therapy and desires to be recognized as a woman, she says, "I just want to be like a female that dresses like a guy." For these respondents, ambiguity is the norm, not a moment of transition. Keeping in mind that transgender rights are often focused on rights to access medical and surgical care and formal recognition within institutions that control driver's licenses, passports and other forms of formal identification, the emphasis is often on the rights of transitioning individuals. Being gender non-conforming, however, is not just about those people who want to change their gender: it includes people who live entire lives of gender ambiguity. Within the

transgender community itself, there is a complex understanding of this concept, although there are sometimes divisions among those who are transitioning and those who are not (Davidson 2007). Yet, as the larger society begins to better understand transgender issues, much of the attention is pointed towards those individuals who want to transition gender rather than a growing acceptance of gender ambiguity.

Still there continue to be human bodies for whom society struggles to attribute “girl” or “boy.” This is a matter of serious concern because so much of the discrimination and violence that occurs among sexual and gender minority people is driven by a perceived violation of gender—not sexual—norms. Can we as a society learn to be comfortable with ambiguity? I conclude with a brief discussion of why spaces like Spectrum are important for genderqueer and transgender youth.

F. Conclusion

Through the experiences of the youth of Spectrum, I have shown the complicated process of gender attribution and formation of a gender identity. First, I demonstrated how, regardless of one’s gender identity, when faced with having to account for gender—your own or others’—processes of gender attribution become visible. Next, I showed how the experience of gender is often characterized by ambiguity, particularly with the pressure to identify as either a woman or a man with no other choice. Finally, I explored how some of the youths embody gender ambiguity that resists a binary definition. These accounts call into question the binary sex/gender system and illuminate the fluid nature of gender.

Spectrum has played a crucial role in the lives of gender atypical youths who face certain bullying and harassment, as well as other forms of social sanction, for not conforming to society’s expectations of looking and acting like appropriate boys and girls. It has allowed Gabe, Ditto, and Spencer to find a place for themselves as queers in a straight world and they all

acknowledge the role Spectrum has played in bolstering their self-confidence. As Ditto says about her first visit to the space,

Then I got to go and see there was all these people and I wasn't a freak; I wasn't that one person who's that gender they don't know. I was Ditto and everyone was okay with that. So "I'm like, oh yeah, I'm bi!" "That's cool, I'm a lesbian! What, you want a cookie for that?" It didn't feel like it was a judge thing, it was like, that's cool, it was like saying, "Oh by the way, I live here." It was not a big thing.

So within the walls of Spectrum, youths like Ditto are no longer the "freaks."

Of course what happens at Spectrum is not what is happening in the so-called "real" world. The Spectrum community does help youth build their confidence, meet people, and build friendships that become strong support systems. Spectrum thus provides effective tools for facing down the judgments, hate, and prejudice that the youths face outside. It does not, however, change the fact that people whose gender display confounds a male or female attribution nevertheless shoulder the burden of society's discomfort with gender ambiguity.

The youth of Spectrum are unique in that they occupy a space where the gender binary is ever-present, but where one's self-identification is honored and exploration of gender ambiguity is allowed. The members' experiences I shared are in many ways evidence of a lasting and stable gender dichotomy, but they show how this binary is an accomplishment, not a given. These young people, and others like them, are coming of age in a world where being genderqueer or transgender is a viable option in ways that it was not for previous generations. This shift has expanded what *being gendered* looks like, while at the same time puts more pressure on them *to identify* as a boy or a girl (as opposed to just *being* a boy or a girl). While we are slowly learning to accept and honor the choices of those people in U.S. society who wish to "change" their sex

and/or gender, there still exist the Gabes and the Dittos, those individuals who do not fit into our socially constructed categories of “male” or “female.”

What I have tried to show here is the strength of the binary gender order, which compels people—whether they are transgender or cisgender—to either be a boy or a girl, not something in between, and that the gender order is upheld through the process of external gender attribution, not internal gender identity. Although the youth in many ways embrace gender ambiguity, like Gabe for example, who says it makes him happy to be mistaken for a woman, Ditto is still seen as a freak, unidentifiable as neither a man nor a woman. Jude, who identifies as a woman but is really most comfortable as an androgynous person says, “I feel like it’s a lot of pressure behind me to dress and act feminine, because I identify that way.”

Although my research does not explain why there is an increase in visibility of genderqueer and transgender people, the study began during a precise moment in history where the first generation of transgender children are being reared (Meadow 2011). Further, more and more transgender people are coming out in public, and terms like transgender, cisgender, and pronoun preference are beginning to be familiar. Being gender non-conforming is not a new social condition, but the identities “transgender” and “gender queer” are part of a new gender vocabulary. Young people are doing gender differently than the generations that came before them, largely as a result of the proliferation of conversations about transgender and gender fluidity via new media. Thus, when I asked Jude about the effects of the Internet on the transgender community, she gave this account:

Is transgenderism the minority or the majority? Is there the gender binary, or isn’t there? Is it true that not everyone feels 100 percent man or 100 percent woman? I mean, what person doesn’t have like, this element of difference in their

personality? In some people it's more than others. It's not a yes or a no, it's that there's these spectrums and there's a spectrum of how male or female do you feel? How intense do you feel this? When do you feel this, etc.? It's this entire thing based on situational awareness, and it's all based on the social constructs that we've built upon within North America, and the UK, and etc. And these societal constructs that have evolved over time but now have liberation in a world where we're becoming more aware of differences and these changes. And changes are the only constant. And so we become less afraid of the unknown and we're willing to question more. Um, so then it just becomes a question of do you believe this is just a natural evolution of things?

Although Jude describes what she sees in the gender landscape as a “natural evolution,” her explanation is actually quite sociologically astute. How the youths of Spectrum experience their gender is mediated by their social world and that social world notably includes Spectrum, friends and peers, and media. The “liberation” of “societal constructs” of gender comes from exposure to new ideas and new ways of being that come largely from social communities, both in-person and virtual. Access to radical forms of knowledge about gender presentation for the youths of Spectrum comes from the Internet, as well as from older peers and adults encountered in the space. Places like Spectrum and the Internet have not revolutionized the gender order per se, as the gender binary and male/female, masculine/feminine hierarchies persist, but they have opened a door to people who do not fit into the gender binary—those who are transgender, gender queer, androgynous or ambiguously gendered, providing spaces where they can connect and make meaning of their gendered lives. I now turn to a more complex discussion of the role that the Internet and new media play in the lives of the youth of Spectrum.

CHAPTER 5: “I AM FROM THE INTERNET.”: LEARNING ABOUT SEX THROUGH THE INTERNET AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

A. Sexual Illiteracy in the U.S.

It was consistently reported among the youth of Spectrum that there was never enough access to honest, accurate information about sexuality that in any way represented their experiences with sexual desire, behavior, and emotion. Many of the youths shared their thoughts and experiences about sexuality education in school, relating similar experiences of fifth grade and middle school sexuality education classes that either focused on abstinence-only or on sexual risk like pregnancy and STI infection. Rarely did they experience educational settings where same-sex desires or behaviors were addressed, and when it was, too often it was limited to that of same-sex behaviors among men and the spread of HIV/AIDS. It was less often the case that same-sex desires and behaviors were disparaged than simply absent from any discussion.

Herdt (2007) explains that U.S. Americans suffer from sexual illiteracy, “an inability to comfortably and competently discuss the many dimensions of sexuality” (17). This supports existing comparative research on Western sexualities (Schalet 2011) that argues that the U.S. is far behind other Western countries when it comes to sexual literacy. While few young persons in the U.S. are immune to this sexual illiteracy crisis, young people who experience same-sex desires are left particularly unequipped when it comes to understanding their experiences as sexual beings. Compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) ensures that heterosexual desire and behavior is replicated over and over again in all forms of media. Therefore, from a very early age in U.S. culture, heterosexual scripts (problematic as they may be) are readily available to those who experience other-sex desires and behaviors. Similarly, sexuality education, whether abstinence-only or comprehensive, provides information that is most useful to and framed for those with heterosexual desires and who engage in heterosexual behaviors (Elliott 2012; Fields

2008). Yet persons of all ages and walks of life experience same-sex desires and engage in same-sex behaviors (Gagnon 2004; Kinsey 1948). What resources inform the sexual scripts of these individuals? In this chapter I explore the resources that the youths of Spectrum turn to, or stumble upon, for sexuality education and what their experiences with these alternative sources can tell us about sexuality education, both formal and informal, in U.S. culture.

B. Formal and Informal Sexuality Education

Contrary to today's dominant discourse on adolescent sexuality, adolescents either abstain from or delay sexual activity at a higher rate than previous generations. At the same time, the concept of remaining a virgin until marriage has virtually disappeared in U.S. culture (Risman & Schwartz 2002). Although important variations by gender, class, and race persist, young people today are more cautious about sexual behavior (having sex less frequently and with fewer partners, using condoms and other contraceptives) than they were in previous generations (National Center for HIV/AIDS 2011). There is no scientific consensus as to why this is the case, but research suggests it is likely a combination of the rise in awareness of life-threatening sexually transmitted illnesses like HIV/AIDS, increased levels in education across all genders, classes, and races, access to birth control and abortion, and an increase in discourses about sexual abstinence in schools (Risman & Schwartz 2002). Largely, both abstinence-only and comprehensive sexuality education curriculums continue to institutionalize heterosexist ideology, resulting in a sexuality education curriculum that not only privileges heterosexual desires and behaviors, but renders same-sex desires and behaviors at the least, invisible, and at the worst, abhorrent (Fields 2008; Fine & McLelland 2006).

Much like research on young people in general, research on sexual desire and behavior of LGB youth is largely limited to sexuality and risk, focusing on things like STI infection (Voisin, Bird, Shiu, & Krieger 2013) and sexual abuse (Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, & Khan 2008;

Roberts, Rosario, Corliss, Koenen, & Austin 2012). Furthermore, because formal sexuality education settings rarely treat same-sex desires and behaviors as a normal aspect of sexuality, studies that look at sexuality education and young people are by default focused on heterosexual sexuality education (Elliott 2012; Fields 2008). Therefore, there is limited sociological research that explores same-sex desire among youth as a healthy behavior and we know little about how young people with same-sex desires access information about sexuality that is appropriate for their lived experiences.

Research on alternatives to formal sexuality education explores the various ways the media serve as de facto sex educator for youths of all sexual orientations (Bay-Cheng 2005; Brown & Keller 2000; Charmaraman & McKamey 2011; Döring 2009; Pascoe 2011; Smith 2013; Weber, Quiring, & Daschmann 2012). Similar to the heterosexism present in formal sexuality education settings, mainstream media in the form of television, film, music, books, and advertising, perpetuates compulsory heterosexuality. Same-sex desire, behavior, and relationships are rarely depicted in mainstream media as normal, healthy, developmentally appropriate human behavior. If they are represented at all, they are portrayed as hypersexualized, the target of a joke, or criminal.

There is a significant amount of research that looks at how the Internet and Internet communities have served as a positive source of sexuality education for sexual and gender minorities worldwide who seek an alternative to the derogatory and missing representations of themselves in mainstream media and formal sexuality education settings (Bryson 2004; Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan, & Lin 2006; Halberstam 2012; Muise 2011; Saraswati 2013; Weinrich 1997). The Internet and other forms of alternative media can be problematic sources of sexuality education, namely due to misrepresentation of and misinformation on sexualities in these

sources. Nevertheless, I argue these alternative sources—along with increased media literacy among young people—are truly integral to the healthy sexualities development of sexual minority (and sexual majority) adolescents in the U.S. These alternative forms of media, and the way sexual and gender minority youth learn about sexuality from the media, are the focus of this chapter. I will conclude by arguing that parents, educators, and health care providers should see the Internet and other alternative sources of sexuality education as powerful resources that when used effectively, could change the tide of sexual literacy in the U.S.

C. Young People and Sexually Explicit Content (SEC)

1. SEC and the Internet

I asked all of the youths I interviewed to name three things that have most influenced their sexuality. The five most common replies in descending order were: 1) some form of sexually explicit content⁸ (SEC) via media; 2) intimate relationships; 3) family influence or family members; 4) friends and peers; and 5) sexuality education (namely at Spectrum). It is not surprising that some form of media was most frequently named as influential to the youths' sexuality (Charmaraman & McKamey 2011). Digital natives, those individuals who were born during or after the widespread use of digital technologies, are growing up in the midst of unprecedented access to information via media (Prensky 2001). The Internet allows confidential, quick, and easy access to diverse, explicit sexual images (Döring 2009; Weber, Quiring, & Dauschmann 2012). According to Weber, Quiring, & Dauschmann, "For most adolescents, pornography is the only accessible source of depictions of sexual behavior; Pornography might thus be used by adolescents not only for sexual arousal but also to discover sexual behavior and explore their own sexual preferences" (410). Pornography viewing was quite common among the

⁸ I define sexually explicit content as any image or representation that describes or depicts sexual behavior in a realistic way. Pornography is a form of sexually explicit content.

young people I spoke with and often informs much of what they know about sexuality, but it was not the only way the youths used the Internet to explore sex.

Youths also spoke about electronic bulletin board systems such as Planned Parenthood's sexuality education website for teens, online chat rooms, peer-to-peer networks, dating and hook-up sites, and online gaming and role play settings. The Internet and the alternative sources it provides are particularly useful for marginalized communities like LGBT youth. In his research on the LGBT rights movement and the Internet, Weinrich (1997) found, "One of the most common benefits of the Internet to the gay community...is that it permits geographically dispersed minority individuals to interact with one another as if they were a local majority" (62).

Although the other influences on sexuality mentioned by the youths are important, because of the relatively recent influence of the Internet and its significance in the lives of young people, I have chosen to focus this chapter on the Internet and alternative media.

2. *Easy Access to SEC: "Google knows everything"*

Researchers continue to be concerned with inequity when it comes to Internet access (Banerjee & Hodge 2007; Pascoe 2011). Access to the Internet has historically fallen along classed and raced lines where those individuals with the most privilege have the most access to the Internet. Yet, the Pew Research Internet Project shows that 95% of teens use the Internet and 95% of teens have a computer or access to one at home. While youth from lower income or lower education households are less likely to use the Internet, they are as likely, if not more so, to access the Internet using a mobile device (Purcell 2013). Seventy-seven percent of young people aged 18-29 access the Internet using a mobile device and blacks and Hispanics are more likely to access the Internet using a mobile device than whites (Lenhart 2013).

Among the youth of Spectrum, access to the Internet appeared ubiquitous. Within Spectrum itself there was access to a multitude of computers, all of which had Internet access. It

was also common that the youths had smart phones, making the need for a computer with Internet access an unnecessary tool. Further, many of the youths shared stories of accessing the Internet and sexually explicit content in their homes with little trouble. Digital natives tend to be quite savvy when it comes to covering their tracks and in many cases are far more nimble on the Internet than their parents or guardians (Pascoe 2011), making it easy for them to discreetly access content that adults in their family might find questionable. Although some of the youths shared stories about being caught looking at SEC online, none of them said that their parents were using any sort of blockers or restrictions through their Internet service.

The youth of Spectrum, and likely a large number of their peers, know exactly where to go on the Internet to look up SEC. They spoke very matter-of-factly about the Internet and especially Google, as an obvious resource. They were not typically shy or embarrassed to tell me about their online explorations and approached the topic from the assumption that everyone does it. The following quotes from a variety of participants—including youths of various genders, sexual identities, and racial/ethnic groups—make evident the ease with which youth access SEC online through Internet connections via computers and phones and easy-to-use search engines like Google:

Especially our generation with the...the smart phones, and the Internet, the wifi...all of that. Um, it was simple.

(Anthony, 17-year-old Latino, identifies as gay)

I don't know. I wasn't originally like looking up porn, like, that's not how it started out...I was on the computer, probably on some social website and something, and then I, like, I don't know, it just popped in my head and I got curious, so I searched. Like, if you want to know something what's the best way

to find out? Go look. [laughs] So I did and I found like, pictures and videos and I was like, “Oh!” [laughs]

(Travon, 16-year-old black male, identifies as queer)

Interviewer: So you looked at porn? Where did you find that? On the Internet or in magazines? Or how did you find it?

Respondent: Internet. Late at night when my parents weren't awake.

I: Okay. And how did you discover that?

R: Just in Google, like, “naked people,” or I don't even know, like “boobs.”

(Fiona, 19-year-old white woman, identifies as bisexual)

I: If you were trying to figure out well, you heard somebody say, “Me and this guy did this,” and you're like “What the hell?” Then where would you go to find out information?

R: Google. 'Cause unfortunate as it is, Google knows everything.

(Nik, 18-year-old white man, identifies as gay)

As these quotes demonstrate, accessing SEC on the Internet is not a challenge for young people. Once they discover it, how they use that content varies. I found that youth used viewing SEC as a sexual activity, a way to seek out same-sex sexual scripts, and as a way to educate themselves about sex.

3. SEC Viewing as a Sexual Activity

Exploring SEC online is one of the ways young people engage in sexual behavior. Through this exploration, the youth discover that SEC is stimulating and is one way to make themselves feel good through sexual arousal. Matthew, a 21-year-old white man who identifies as gay, remembers discovering heterosexual pornography when he was seven or eight and finding it sexually arousing:

It was stimulating...it was women, you know, it was women. It was stimulating, you know. I remember I used to like boobies, you know...

Looking at SEC online is also an anonymous and relatively risk-free way for youth to satisfy their curiosities about bodies and sexuality. I say “relatively risk-free” as there is evidence that young people often encounter SEC online unintentionally and express concern about seeing disturbing or violent images or “shock” images (Döring 2009; Smith 2013). Among my participants, however, no one shared a negative experience about encountering SEC online. Viewing SEC online, both same-sex and other-sex behaviors, was often named by the youths as one of the primary ways they came to recognize themselves as having same-sex desire. Therefore, viewing SEC online was an entry point to understanding themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Grace, a 21-year-old white woman who identifies as bisexual, describes how she explored her sexual desires via SEC:

I was just always, just, I was interested and, uh, I started noticing I was interested in women. When I did look up porn, it would always be women and stuff...And it was about 6th grade, 7th grade era, that I started, really started to look into it.

William, a 16-year-old black youth who identifies as gay shares a similar experience with viewing SEC:

So basically, I slowly started to experiment with different kinds of porn when I was younger and figure this out about myself through doing so. So I’m like, okay [hesitant], oh, okay yes, definitely [with confidence]! And since then I’ve been able to understand my homo...my sexuality, and respect it more, more so for the fact that I’ve also, not just looking at porn, but also looking at documentaries about people that are basically my age who have been able to understand and

respect themselves for it as well. Okay, so I can be myself and it shouldn't really matter who I am. Yeah, figuring out that I was gay came from porn except when it came from the documentaries from people my age...

While not all of the youths I interviewed described experiences with SEC online, of those that did, the likelihood of viewing SEC did not differ across race or class. I also found that young people of all genders described experiences with viewing SEC on the Internet. I suspect race, class, and gender do affect the ways youths use SEC, but I do not have the data to elaborate. Future research could better inform this understanding.

It became clear to me that early explorations of SEC were typically representations of heterosexual sexuality. At this life stage, any kind of SEC discovered on the Internet can be informative. Yet, as young people reach puberty and start to recognize their same-sex desires, they describe heterosexual representations of sex as lacking in relevant information. As the youths become more adventurous and savvy in their pursuit of SEC, they may start to explore images that more closely represent their desires; and for better or worse, SEC on the Internet is one of the few sources of media representation of same-sex desire, behavior, and relationships available to young people.

4. Lack of Relevant Sexual Scripts

The youths sometimes described the lack of stories or representations of individuals with same-sex desires. This lack of access to sexual scripts that could help them negotiate same-sex relationships, intimacy, and romance led them to look in alternative places like online forums and chat rooms, alternative films, and more. Although there were not many youths who were able to articulate this lack of access, it was often implied by the fact that the youths rarely, if ever, referred to any sort of mainstream media as a source of information about sexuality, romance, and intimacy.

Jack, an 18 year-old, white FTM man, who identifies as pansexual but “leaning towards gay,” describes seeking out lesbian erotica and pornography made by and for lesbians rather than mainstream pornography:

First of all like, lesbian erotic stories written by people who have female anatomy and have used it with a partner—which most stories seem to be written by virgins—um, as well as the fact that I didn't know where to find videos, porn-type videos that would, that I didn't think would give my computer a virus then. So that meant that it was—regardless of whether it was easy or hard to find—lesbian porn directed at lesbians.

Because it was harder to find this kind of erotic material, Jack explains that in fact, his lack of access to scripts that accurately represented his experience meant that he had the opportunity to develop his own authentic sexuality. He wanted information about how to be in a same-sex and/or gender queer relationship but could not find those representations easily:

Um, it was kind of the lack of those things that I think I got to come up with a more authentic, what's “good for me” thing. Um, and then well, the lack of specifics being part of it, but then also in terms of this idea of how various relationships develop and such that was something that, you know [pause] first of all, your major media has one kind of fairytale view to it which I never really bought into that much because none of the major media fairy tale stories every really worked out for me.

It is taken for granted that young people with burgeoning desires have no shortage of representations to turn to in order to explore their feelings. Yet, representations in mainstream media largely teach heterosexual scripts. While there are other missing representations in

mainstream media, including positive representations of people of color and women, it was the lack of depictions of same-sex behavior that the youth mentioned in the context of their exploration of sexuality. Therefore, they turned to SEC as a way to learn the logistics of having sex.

5. SEC as Educator

Young people, regardless of their sexual orientation, are incredibly eager to know how sex works. Formal sexuality education typically focuses on the biological functions of the reproductive system and various risks that come with sexual activity like pregnancy, the spread of STIs, and abuse. This education, however, rarely covers the embodied logistics of having sex, either alone or with others (Fields 2008). In other words, formal sex educators are very careful to limit their discussion of sex and sexuality to medicalized, disembodied explanations, yet youth want to know the nuts and bolts of how one has sex, namely with other people. Travon, who is black, 16 years-old, and a boy who identifies as queer, offers this account:

Like, they told us about like, the sexual, they told us to use abstinence and if not, use a condom and they told us about the consequence if we don't use a condom, like STDs and stuff. But like, I kind of wish they would have like, told us like, how to use a condom or like, you know, like just go in depth and like, when's the right time to have sex like, you know, it's like, the things you need to know.

Yeah, we should know how to do it. Like, I know that sounds weird but like we should know how to do it so we know what we're doing when it comes down to it. Like, and it's high school now. Like, grow up a little bit, you can get a little dirty like, we need to know this. It's how, it's life like, I know it's hush-hush cause like, it's like, a touchy subject but like, we need to know cause if we don't

know now then we're going to fuck up later. [laughs] I don't know. It didn't, it didn't make sense to me.

Travon expresses his frustration with not getting real answers about how to have sex from sex educators in school settings. Unless using a strict abstinence-only curriculum, sex educators in schools will teach young people how to put a condom on a banana (but not a real penis) and explain how to avoid getting an STI or getting pregnant, as well as how one gets pregnant. As my findings show, teenagers want to know more about sex and sexual behaviors and thus they turn to alternative forms of media, namely pornography, for their education.

Pornography (which I define as one form of sexually explicit content) frequently came up specifically as one of the three things that most influenced the youths' sexuality. When gently pressed to explain why, it often was the case that pornographic videos or images were the youths' only source for figuring out, quite literally, *how* to have sex. Often, this SEC was heterosexual in nature, leaving youths with same-sex desires and interests confused and unsure about how they were supposed to "do it." Ernie, a 21-year-old Chicano who identifies as queer, said the media was one of the three most important things that influenced his sexuality. I asked him what it is about the media that has influenced him:

Respondent: Um like, was um, like, the part of like, gay relationships where like, where like, I dunno like, sexual positions and stuff like that? Or like, yeah. Or who was the like, the woman and man? Like that, like that was something I was like, "What the fuck?"

Interviewer: When you talk about media and you can go learn, you can learn about positions, sex, was it specifically porn or more like movies?

R: Um, like when I had those questions...I dunno like, when I was like, me and my friends would watch different like, porn videos or and be like, maybe like maybe we can try that out, or like, just like look up random sex positions. But then like, something about what they're showin', they're all like, heterosexual positions. And then when you're like, "Oh fuck, I don't got a pussy, how am I gonna do that?" And just things like that.

One of the reasons young people give for viewing SEC is that it teaches them the logistics of how to have sex. Ernie turned to media—specifically pornography—as a way to understand how people have sex, but expresses how heterosexual representations of sex just left him more confused.

Another participant, Aaron, explains how talking about sex with his stepdad is not helpful because his stepdad is not familiar with same-sex intimacy and how he has had to piece together on his own everything he knows about how to have sex with men. Although he does give credit to high school health class, his source is primarily the Internet:

R: Yeah, and with my stepdad as well, it's not like.... I haven't had like, any discussion about like.... maybe because they're not familiar with it and they don't want to impose? I don't know. But most of...most of the knowledge that I have of...of gay sexual relationships is from like, my own...looking into that by myself, and building upon what I've already learned and like, health (class) in high school, so.

I: Where do you find information?

R: Uh, the Internet.

Aaron goes on to explain how SEC on the Internet functions as “kind of opening a door.”

While he is not really interested in pornography, he says:

R: In a way it did help me again with my sexuality, so I mean, but at the same time, you don't want to objectify like, your partner, or like, compare your partner to what you see on the screen or whatever. But I mean, I guess it was a little helpful, just to get an idea of what it was.

I: When you say helpful, to help you understand how it works?

R: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, so I guess like, that's like, where I kind of picked up.

Like oh, so that's how it works. I mean I was curious, so that's where I went.

Jude, a 22 year-old white woman who identifies as pansexualtransplus, explains how she learned how to have sex from watching pornography:

So, um, so I saw porn before I really reached the uh, the age of maturity where I understood like, what things were going on. Um, I guess I tried to replicate things that were like, going on in the porn, but I couldn't do it, um, until like, a couple years later. And I was like, oh like, this is pretty fun. So I kept doing it. But, uh, that went on...still goes on. Whatever.

Jude found viewing pornography a useful way to learn about sexual positions she wanted to try out herself. Similarly, when I asked Fiona how pornography has influenced her sexuality, she responds:

It's just porn. It doesn't, it doesn't influence it, it just, it says a lot about a person or a lot about what they like, what kind of porn they watch. I've noticed that. Um, like me, I'll watch the lesbian porn 'cause I like girls. They're hot. I love watching it. With guys it's all the same. It's always the same. So boring. But um,

they just...you know it's how I learned what I like to do when I was younger.

Um, it's how you learn new things most of the time. You can look up these positions or whatever. Find out how to do it, so. Yeah.

As demonstrated here, youths found SEC a useful tool for learning how one actually has sex with themselves or another person or persons. While useful in many ways, sex educators should be concerned when young people's primary source of this kind of detailed information is adult entertainment content like pornography or various other forms of media such as films. These representations not only generally fail to explore same-sex desires, but they often present unrealistic portrayals of sexual performance, what Cesar, Spectrum's Program Director and trained sex educator calls, "Made for TV sex." Next, I discuss other alternative forms of media beyond pornography that youths described as sources for learning about sex.

D. Alternative Media: *Anime*, *Manga*, and Independent Film

As a testament to the lack of representation of same-sex desires and gender non-conformity in mainstream media in the U.S., a large number of participants mentioned their interest in *anime*—Japanese animation—and *manga*—Japanese graphic novels. Although *anime* is animated, the topics and storylines it portrays are hardly comparable to mainstream U.S. cartoons. According to Susan J. Napier (2005), "*Anime* works include everything that Western audiences are accustomed to seeing in live-action films—romance, comedy, tragedy, adventure, even psychological probing of a kind seldom attempted in recent mass-culture Western film or television" (7). The U.S. consumption of *anime* and *manga* is unique in that, for the most part, the images, narrative styles, humor, and psychology are rarely altered to suit a U.S. audience (Napier 2005). *Anime* plays an interesting role in the identity formation of LGBT youth, and while a deep discussion of *anime* goes beyond the scope of this particular chapter, I could not

ignore the important influence *anime* seems to have had on the sexual development of the youths with whom I spoke.

Many of the youths mentioned first being exposed to *anime* through *Sailor Moon*, a Japanese cartoon that began airing on U.S. television in the 1990s. Young people who watched *anime* like *Sailor Moon* were exposed to gender and sexuality norms through the lens of a completely different (Japanese) culture, a culture where, for example, men dressed as women and where same-sex intimacy is portrayed: notably deviant behaviors in U.S. culture. Napier explains, “In its fascination with gender roles and gender transgression—as seen in lighthearted terms in romantic comedies or *shōjo* (young girl) narratives and more bleakly in occult pornography—*anime* encapsulates both the increasing fluidity of gender identity in contemporary popular culture and the tensions between the sexes that characterize a world in which women’s roles are drastically transforming” (11). This gender fluidity and negotiation of shifting norms around sexuality speak particularly strongly to queer youth. Gabe, an 18-year-old androgynous Latino who identifies as bisexual, explains here how his childhood impression of a gender-bending character in one of his favorite *animes*, *InuYasha*, changed as he got older and became more aware of queer sexuality and gender:

Um, the main, um, homosexual character that’s blatantly obvious, but I was not aware of when I was 13, was um, *Jakotsu* who, he is a mercenary who works with this...with this band of seven brothers. And um, he’s very flamboyant. Looks like a woman. Has lipstick on. Wears a female kimono and I had no idea...like, the whole time—when I was 13 through 15—I thought it was just a girl pretending to be a guy. And then it wasn’t until I hit 16 and I was watching the series over again, it got near the end and *Jakotsu* came on and I’m like, “Wait a minute.”

When I asked Regina, who is 19 years old, black, and identifies as queer, to name three things that most influenced her sexuality, she explained:

Hmmmm. Let's see. [pause] Um, *Sailor Moon*? [laughs] Yes, cause there's this one character, she's just like, she's just so beautiful and so magical and so hot. And like, when I saw her I was just young, I was young when I was watching *Sailor Moon*. Um, she's, uh, she's, um, she was the outcast but she was very mysterious. Which made me just really attracted to her...But she just had a very defining look and like, a very mysterious and like, alluring personality, which just like made me super attracted to her. Plus her two like, fighting partners were lesbians, so I was just like, when Sailor Uranus came on I was like, is that a guy or a girl? It's like, it don't matter, they're all hot.

Ditto, a 20-year-old bisexual Latina, described a similar connection with the queer, gender-bending characters in *Sailor Moon*:

The wonderful thing about that, they were like, "This person is gay and this person is cross-dressing and this person is doing this and this person is now transgender." Even in *Sailor Moon*, the Japanese version had sequences where like, full guy characters, looked like a guy, act like a guy, would transform into a chick and it was like, it was not a big thing. Yeah, that thing, and it just does that, it just happens. They walked down the street and walked around the corner, that's how casual it was. So connecting that with me coming out was like, yeah, walk down the street round the corner, it was the casual flow through, which was really nice.

While *Sailor Moon* and other cartoons like it may have been the youths' first exposure to *anime*, once introduced to the genre, the Internet opened up an entire world where access to *anime* appears limitless. The youths quickly discovered that the seemingly deviant gender and sexuality norms portrayed in *Sailor Moon* were even more common in *anime* from Japan. Napier describes a characteristic of *anime* as the "mode of the festival...for a brief moment norms are transgressed or actually inverted. The weak hold power, sexual and gender rules are broken or reversed, and a state of manic intensity replaces conventional restraint" (13). In the U.S. cartoons have typically been considered children's entertainment, although that has shifted somewhat with the introduction of adult-themed cartoons like those commonly viewed on Cartoon Network's late-night programming, *Adult Swim*. In Japan, *anime* is not just for children, but for people of all ages, and in fact, various forms of erotic-themed *anime* (cartoons and comics) exist and are accessible to just about anyone with Internet access.

There are several different genres of erotic *anime*. Each genre represents a different sexual preference, orientation, or fetish. For example, the most commonly discussed among the youth of Spectrum were *Yaoi* and *Yuri*, boys' love and girls' love, respectively. Both genres, that tell stories of same-sex attraction, romance, and intimacy, appeal to fans of all genders (Napier 2005). Adam, an 18-year-old white man who identifies as gay, told me of his early fascination with *Sailor Moon* and how later, he discovered *anime* erotica and the profound impact it had on him:

Gay *anime* was such a like, breakthrough, I guess, because, um, I don't even know how I even started watching it, or how it came about... Um, it was during 7th grade going to 8th grade. And I started watching—I don't even know how I got to it—I think I was watching regular porn, and then um, I saw like, a link or

something and it was like, “Oh, what’s this?” And it was two guys and I was like, “Oh, what the fuck?” And then I was like, “Oh, let’s explore this.” I think that’s how...I think that’s what happened. ...So to just see like, two super hot *anime* guys like, liking each other, and going at it with each other was like, “Oh, this is hot.” That’s just...oh, that’s so appealing to me. And I couldn’t understand why at the time and I didn’t know what it meant at the time, but I just knew that secretly I would have...I would like, find it when everyone was asleep or everyone was out of the house, I’d watch it. And I was like, “Oh this is...this is my shit.” And I’d just watch that same *anime* over and over and over.

Ben, a 19-year-old black man who identifies as gay, described the varying degrees of erotica one can find in *manga* and *anime*:

Yeah. Yaoi and Yuri, um, they range ‘cause some of them are more intense. And some of them are very light. Like the ones I found like, I actually found at a *Barnes & Noble*. So they have really toned down the ones, um, in public, but if you’re looking for ones that are a little more deep into the sex and the sexual intercourse, you would most likely be able to find that online or just read it on online websites that people post that whole thing on.

I found that *anime* appealed to youth across racial groups, gender, and sexual identity, although I suspect that *anime* is especially appealing to youth of color because the characters are Asian rather than white. For young people raised in U.S. culture where institutional racism is reinforced in the media through the lack of representations of people of color, *anime* is refreshing in its depiction of non-white characters.

Alternative films about LGBT people were also mentioned by the youth as having influenced their sexuality. *Brokeback Mountain*, the 2006 Ang Lee film-adaptation of the Annie Proulx novella, tells a universal love story through the experience of two men in a secret relationship with each other. This R-rated movie includes scenes of sexual intimacy, much like any love story drama about a straight couple. Remarkably, the mainstream popularity of the film resulted in it being nominated for and winning several Oscars. This film had a profound impact on Aaron who described watching the film in secret in his home, hidden from his family:

Yeah, uh, it's interesting because you know I was...I was into movies and then there was *Brokeback Mountain*. Everybody hears about that. Although at the time it was one of the first one that I...the first gay movie that I had ever seen. And not only like...I don't know. I guess that not only did it help me be a little more comfortable with myself—with my sense of self—but um, I guess that kind of opened the world to other...other films. But I think that one in particular because there actually was, you know, a sex scene in that movie. And it was different for me. It's not like, um, I don't know...I didn't watch it because I wanted to have—how would I say—be pleased by that. But it was just different for me. You know like, I'd never seen something like that before.

The previous discussion of youths' interest in *anime*, along with Aaron's experience and his longing for a representation of a same-sex love story that was authentic and real, demonstrates the important role media play in the sexual and romantic lives of young people. Yet, without a doubt, sexual minority youth have to look hard for media that represent their experiences and therefore, in some cases, they create it themselves.

E. Fan Fiction

According to Rebecca W. Black (2008), “Fan fiction...is fiction written by fans about preexisting plots, characters, and/or settings from their favorite media” (10). Fan fiction allows individuals who are fans of particular stories to contribute their own storylines to existing books, television shows, movies, and more, generally out of love for the medium rather than for any commercial gain. For the purpose of my discussion, I am particularly interested in “shipper” (short for relationship) fan fiction that focuses on romantic, intimate, and/or sexual relationships among characters from existing media. For example, it is not unusual for fan fiction writers to create same-sex relationships among characters from their favorite media who are either typically portrayed as straight or perhaps not portrayed as sexual at all. Among fan fiction’s earliest adherents were women writing erotic or shipper fan fiction for other women, often with the goal of countering masculinist, sexist plots, and storylines in mainstream media.

The role fan fiction plays as a tool of counter hegemonic discourse, particularly related to sexuality and gender, cannot be understated (Black 2008; Busse 2005; Jenkins 1992; Kustritz 2003; Scodari & Felder 2000; Somogyi 2002). Black recognizes in fan fiction “the many ways in which fans are taking up elements of pop culture and then redistributing them in new forms that are imbued with meanings that are grounded in the lived realities and social worlds of fans” (13). I encountered several youths at Spectrum who either read or wrote fan fiction and named it as a significant influence on their sexuality, namely because within fan fiction, they were able to recognize themselves and their own desires.

Both Red, a 20 year-old white transman who identifies his sexuality as “other,” and Rick, a 19 year-old white transman who identifies as demi-sexual, claim that everything they know about sex is from fan fiction. Interestingly, Red felt that what he learned might be questionable, as there was no guarantee that the author of a sex scene in a particular piece of fan fiction

actually knows what they are talking about. Rick, on the other hand, felt that the fan fiction he read was accurate:

Everything like, everything, before Spectrum, everything I knew from sex I learned about from lesbian fan fiction. Which is, it's good, it's well done and I mean it's very accurate....it's very well done and so it was just sort of interesting that, that was most of my experience from sex was from lesbian fan fiction.

Ben, who not only reads fan fiction but authors it, explains the important role fan fiction plays in the lives of youths who are often misunderstood and misrepresented in mainstream media:

So, um, I just believe like, considering when you're a teenager, finding the things that relate to you is really hard to do. So I just figure if I take characters that possibly a lot of people are familiar with, and actually associate with, and relate to, just like, reading about them going through like, possibly a similar association that you're going through is something that they can really do and be something really enjoyable for them to read.

For young people who experience same-sex desires, fan fiction is an outlet for creating stories and scripts that are too often missing from mainstream discourses about sexuality. By reading and writing fan fiction, LGBT youth can re-imagine characters in their favorite movies and television shows as being more like them by writing in same-sex desires and relationships or non-normative embodiments of gender among characters. In other words, LGBT young people today have many outlets for making their own media, media that represent their experiences, emotions, and desires, and more importantly, they are able to readily share that media with others. They make up for the dearth of representations of same-sex desire and behavior in

mainstream media and in sexuality education curriculum through their ability to share media via the Internet.

The Internet greatly facilitates the distribution of fan fiction, although sharing fan fiction online is not a necessary component of the process. Red, for example, reported that he and two friends passed around a notebook in which they authored an ongoing fan fiction story. It is through these friends and this experience that Red experienced sexuality vicariously. This is a key point in understanding the sexual development of youth because it suggests that young people do not just learn by doing, they learn through others, both real and imagined. Fan fiction as a form of sexual activity allows young people the opportunity to experiment with sex and relationships in a completely risk-free way. By sharing their stories and reading the fan fiction of others online, as well as co-writing stories with their peers, the youth are creating a network of information about what sex and relationships can look like.

Although alternative media have provided a way for the LGBT-identified youth of Spectrum to explore and understand sexuality, formal sexuality education is still badly needed in order to combat sexual illiteracy in the U.S.

F. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have discussed the various ways that the youth of Spectrum access information about sexuality when traditional venues such as school-based sexuality education and mainstream media fail them. Through their exploration of SEC, accessed with ease via the Internet and search engines like Google, the youths experiment with sexual arousal, seek out representations of same-sex desire, and learn the logistics of how to have sex. In addition to viewing SEC on the Internet, the youths learn about sex from alternative forms of media like *anime* and fan fiction. All of these sources provide alternatives to the abundance of heterosexual scripts that do not speak to the experiences of same-sex oriented young people.

This account sheds light on the fact that young people are actively seeking alternatives to school-based sexuality education to learn about their bodies and their sexuality, whether or not the adults in their lives approve. Rather than depicting the Internet—and media in general—as a dangerous place for naïve and innocent young people, this research shows how it is a much-needed resource for those with burgeoning sexualities who are seeking information about their experiences of desire, fantasy, relationships, and pleasure. While these resources can be positive and useful, they are also problematic for all of the reasons discussed here and more. All of these forms of media—SEC on the Internet, erotic anime, feature-length films, fan fiction—are not necessarily intended to formally educate people about sexuality. They are primarily intended for entertainment purposes and are therefore subject to a multitude of flaws. While I do not anticipate there being any way to stop young people from searching media to learn about sex, parents, educators, and the community at large should be concerned when this is young people’s primary source of sexuality education. And to be certain, as this and other research shows, regardless of their sexual orientation, these informal sources are where many if not the majority of youths go to learn about sex.

Thankfully, in addition to the Internet, the youths in this study had access to *Let’s Talk About Sex* (LTAS), Spectrum’s sexuality education program that is offered quarterly. LTAS exemplifies the positive direction sexuality education in the U.S. could be headed. LTAS was one of the most largely attended educational programs held at Spectrum and highly regarded by most youth who had been through the five-week program. One youth said it best when he described a “relationships” class he had in high school where they taught the students “the opposite of everything we’re learning here.” LTAS is typically facilitated by the adult program director and a peer youth educator. While LTAS is not truly “peer education,” as the curriculum

is pre-determined by the staff and a public health organization, it models a kind of youth empowerment that helps young people learn how to educate others on issues of sexuality. The themes of the 6 modules include: Sexuality 101, Feelings & Frustrations, Sexual and Gender Identity, Love & Relationships, and Safer Sex and Risky Business. The LTAS curriculum moves beyond traditional “comprehensive” sexuality education in that it educates young people about the biological and physiological processes of sexuality and risks surrounding sexuality like STIs and pregnancy, while encouraging open, frank discussions about sex, including desire, consent, fantasy, fetish, behavior, and more. Furthermore, LTAS speaks frankly about both men’s and women’s bodies, as well as intersex or transgender bodies, effectively naming and recognizing girls’ and women’s and transgender people’s desires, something formal sexuality education in schools has failed to do (Fields 2008; Fine & McClelland 2006).

Although Spectrum’s sexuality education programming attempts to address the problem of sexual illiteracy, its reach is clearly not enough. While the school setting remains an important and logical place for children and youth to learn about sex, school-based sexuality education settings in the U.S. offer limited information about sexuality (Fields 2008; Fine & McClelland 2006). Youth of all walks of life could benefit from access to accurate, honest information about sexuality that portrays diverse forms of desire and behavior, includes diverse types of bodies and people, and reflects the social and embodied experience of sexuality. Yet the politics of school-based sexuality education in the U.S. has prevented this from becoming a reality. Although many parents argue that they would rather be their child’s source of information about sexuality, research shows that young people and parents have difficulty talking to each other honestly about sex (Elliott 2012). Furthermore, straight parents of children experiencing same-sex desire are ill-equipped to help their children understand their sexuality.

Although SEC available on the Internet can be problematic, it is important that parents, educators, and health care providers who are concerned about the well being of young people recognize that the Internet is also a powerful resource. In her research on youth's use of sexuality education electronic bulletin boards, Bey-Cheng (2005) found that, "The free rein afforded web-based sexuality education with regard to its content and pedagogical methods makes it a dramatic and democratizing foil to its school-based counterpart, which is both restricted and restricting (39)." Examples of successful online resources of this kind include Columbia Health's online health resource, *Go Ask Alice!* (<http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/>), Planned Parenthood's, *Info for Teens* (<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/info-for-teens/>), and the Coalition for Positive Sexuality's, *Just Say Yes* (<http://www.positive.org/JustSayYes/index.html>). Countering less reliable sources of information about sexuality with the proliferation of websites like these, the use of social media like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and the creative use of online demographic analytics and marketing could have an enormous impact on sexual literacy in the U.S.

In the next chapter I explore the youth of Spectrum's relationships with their families and in particular, how they describe their parents' reactions to having an LGBT-identified child.

CHAPTER 6: “HE HELD ME BY THE HAND AND HE TOLD ME THAT IT’S GOING TO BE OKAY.”: NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILY STRUCTURES AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCES “COMING OUT” TO PARENTS

A. Introduction

The significance of coming out to one’s loved ones, parents⁹ in particular, cannot be underestimated in the narrative of the lives of LGBT-identified people. While coming out to family and friends is recognized as a developmental stage in the healthy lives of LGBT people (Beaty 1999; Coleman 1982; McDonald 1982; Troiden 1989), it is also painted as a treacherous step to take, particularly for those who are still dependent upon their parents. Academic research (Gattis 2009; Kruks 1991; Van Leeuwen 2005) and mainstream media (Goodyear 2014; Nichols 2013) alike tell stories of LGBT youths who have been forbidden from being gay or transgender at home and are therefore living on the streets. Tragic stories about youths suiciding after being publicly outed are common as well (Foderaro 2010; Shore 2013). Coming out to one’s family is perceived to be so difficult that many young people who come out to themselves in their early adolescence wait until they are adults to come out to their parents, in many cases waiting until they have gained financial and emotional independence from their families to do so (Savin-Williams 1998). Yet the data also show that generally speaking LGBT people are coming out at younger ages today (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks 2008; Gibson 1989; Herdt 1989; Savin-Williams 1998; Troiden 1989).

According to Martin, Hutson, Kazyak, and Scherrer (2009) and Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998), popular advice for parents of LGBT children—whether touting acceptance, accommodation, or disapproval—frames the coming out of children as a traumatic experience, one that may require professional help for the parents. Parents are told to expect to experience

⁹ I use the term “parent” to refer to primary caregivers, whether they be biological, step, foster, or adopted parents of youths and/or their guardians, or other family members like grandparents or aunts and uncles.

grief similar to what they would feel if their child had died. In other words, having a gay or transgender child is still publicly painted as a tragedy, not something to celebrate. These popular discourses perpetuate a negative narrative of coming out for both children and parents. Given the existing research, is coming out as an LGBT-identified person always a negative experience?

For the young people of Spectrum¹⁰, being out to one's parents is the rule not the exception. A distinct lack of traumatic coming out stories for sexual minority-identified youths marked this group as unique in light of the taken-for-granted discourses described above. Compared to others, what is different about these youths that made their coming out experiences generally positive ones? What is different about their parents? Are they truly the exception, or is the cloud of risk and tragedy that surrounds the coming out story a myth? Based on my review of the literature on this topic and the information I learned from interviewing and observing these youths, I have found that the experiences of Spectrum youth support existing sociological findings: that gender atypical children are more likely to come out as LGBT at a younger age and that their coming out is less of a shock to their already suspecting parents (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks 2005)¹¹. In addition, I found two other important commonalities: that they typically come from non-traditional families and that the youth of Spectrum typically have an LGBT-identified parent and/or relative. In other words, these participants come from queer families. My findings, however, are limited by my methodology and more importantly, by my research setting, as experiences of LGBT youth in more conservative communities are likely quite different.

¹⁰ The reader should understand that I am primarily referring here to the coming out experiences of sexual minority youths and this discussion does not necessarily reflect the experiences of young people coming out to their parents as transgender.

¹¹ The gender atypical children in question do not include trans-identified youths, but rather cisgender youths whose gender expression and presentation marks them as atypical males or atypical females.

B. How Parents React

Many of the young people I interviewed told me how terrified they were to come out to their parents. The particular fears that their parents would disown them and force them to leave the house were particularly vivid for them. After his mother discovered some gay pornography websites he had been looking at on the computer, Travon, who is black, 16 years old, and a boy who identifies as queer, was terrified that he would be forced to leave the house:

I was so embarrassed, and like, I was scared. Like, I was expecting her to freak out about it cause like, I've seen on movies and actually, I had seen an actual news report like, a couple days before, of like, they were interviewing this entire tunnel of LGBTQ youth that were kicked out of their homes cause of who they were. It terrified me, so when she talked to me I was like, "Oh my god." So not only was I embarrassed that I was like, looking up stuff, but I was like, scared that I was going to be kicked out of the house at 11.

Aaron, a 19-year-old Mexican-American man who identifies as gay, had a similar experience when his stepfather sat him down for a talk after discovering a somewhat suggestive photo of Aaron and his boyfriend.

With my stepfather...I mean he asked me. I didn't come out to him, he asked me. And, um, I was expecting some outrage and to be kicked out of the house, right? You know he...what I admire the most was he held me by the hand, and he told me that it's going to be okay. And it's an emotional thing but uh....

Aaron trails off as he was brought to tears in recounting this story to me, demonstrating the emotional significance of his stepfather's acceptance of him over the rejection he had expected.

As demonstrated by both Travon's and Aaron's stories, for those youths who particularly feared their parents' reactions, it was often the case that they were involuntarily outed to their

parents. But none of the cases where young people described being terribly afraid to come out to their parents resulted in them being forced to leave the house, disowned, or physically abused. In most cases, their parents were surprisingly warm and supportive.

For some youths, coming out to their parents was a non-issue. They were not afraid and more or less knew they would be supported. For example, when Brian, a 21-year-old white youth who identifies as queer, came out to both his mom and dad in seventh grade, his dad then accompanied him the first night he came to Spectrum. He describes his experience as very non-traumatic, “You know I wasn’t afraid to come out, I didn’t know. I didn’t know, so I just came out to people and I was just one of those lucky people that had a positive experience.” Ditto, a 20-year-old bi-racial, gender queer bisexual described how it felt when her dad asked her one evening on the porch if she was gay. She says, “It was the most casual...it was kind of like asking me, is your favorite color blue? That’s what it felt like. There was no judging.” Ben, a 19-year-old multi-racial man who identifies as gay, explains how before he came out to her himself, his mother had already “introduced” him to the LGBT community, making it clear that in her opinion, same-sex desire was an acceptable option for Ben, “Um, another thing that influenced it (his sexuality) was my mom’s openness with it, so I never really had what a lot of kids have...this foreboding.”

It is the case that some parents reacted negatively to the news that one of their children identified as a sexual minority. When I asked Miguel, a 20-year-old Mexican man who identifies as gay how his father reacted to him coming out as gay, he told me his Dad returned to Mexico because of it, leaving him in the U.S. to fend for himself. While Adam, an 18-year-old white man who identifies as gay, has a very supportive mother who has always been open about the option of same-sex desire, he has had a particularly hard time getting along with his father throughout

his life. The conflict with his father seems largely to do with his father's disappointment in Adam in not being the son he had expected. Adam has been gender atypical his whole life, enjoying singing and music, dressing up in costumes and girls' clothes, and wearing nail polish. Because of his father's intolerance, Adam continues to identify as bisexual rather than gay with his father, as he feels that this identification alleviates the tension between them to some degree.

In another case, Lucy, a 17-year-old white girl who identifies as lesbian, has a mother who has been very punitive in her reactions to Lucy's sexual identity. Lucy's mother outed Lucy after reading her diary and in reaction to Lucy's expression of her sexual orientation frequently takes away her posters and music and forbids her from going out of the house. Although her mother claims to not have a problem with gay people, she insists that Lucy is not a lesbian and told her once that Lucy "didn't turn out the way she thought she would."

The experiences of transgender-identified youths were somewhat different from those young people coming out to their parents as LGB. In four out of six cases, transgender youths came out to their parents as sexual minorities first. These four individuals were sexed female at birth and first came out as lesbians. Not long after coming out as lesbians, though, they came to realize that what made them different from their heteronormative peers was their gender identity not their sexual identity and reasserted themselves as transgender not lesbian. The other two participants were sexed male at birth but never identified as gay before coming out as transgender. Yet they were similar to the previous group in that they initially personally associated their experiences with those of sexual minorities, but quickly began to realize that it was their gender identity they were grappling with, not their sexual identity. Both of them identified their sexuality as pansexual. In the case of the previous four individuals, coming out as transgender was more complicated than coming out as lesbian primarily because it was less

understood by their parents. These individuals experienced various microaggressions from their parents such as failure to identify them with the pronouns they preferred or the parent being selective about when and where they would or would not recognize their child's preferred gender. In the case of the latter two, both of them experienced extremely negative reactions from their parents to their transgender identity. They were both forbidden from dressing as girls at home and severely punished for violations. At the time I met with each of them, they were estranged from their parents and experiencing homelessness.

Coming out to parents as transgender is an under-theorized area of study. Unlike my discussion of coming out as LGB, I do not have data with which to compare my small sample of six. As evidenced by this brief discussion, future research could look specifically at how the transgender coming out experiences of those sexed female at birth compare to those sexed male at birth. In addition, exploring the different ways that parents react to and deal with disclosure of a trans-identified child compared to an LGB-identified child would be of interest. Finally, a better understanding of how gender atypical children are forcibly outed as sexual minorities is relevant to the experience of transgender youth who are being pressured into identifying as a sexual minority when in fact what they are more likely experiencing is a negotiation of their gender identity.

It is important to note that in all the cases where parents reacted in a severely negative way, there was evidence of life-long dysfunction and/or abuse of the children by their parents. Consistent with Savin-Williams's argument (2005), the youth with particularly hostile parents were coming from very unsafe family situations in which their disclosure of LGBT identities was just one part.

1. Conflating Gender and Sexuality

Researchers suggest that gender atypical young people come out to their parents at younger ages (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks 2005; Savin-Williams 1998). Those children who are particularly non-gender conforming are more likely to be outed by friends and family at a younger age because of the way society conflates homosexuality with deviant gender expression. Friends and family of flamboyant boys and butch girls assume them to be gay or lesbian. Coinciding with this assumption, parents of gender atypical children have had some time to prepare themselves for the fact that their child might come out as LGB and therefore are less likely to react negatively and may be better equipped to deal with the disclosure when it comes. Interestingly, as mentioned above, parents and peers often push gender atypical children out of the closet, only to learn later on that their child or friend is transgender, not LGB. The experiences I share here are those of sexual minority-identified youths, not transgender youths.

In Chapter One, I explain how certain boys described always having known they were gay and how this was often related to their gender atypicality in childhood. Particularly among the boys, many mothers claimed to have always known their son was gay when their son came out to them. The youths sometimes described this experience as some version of “mother’s instinct.” It became clear, though, that in fact, it was not the case that their parents always knew their child was gay. Parents associated moments in their son’s childhood where they behaved in gender atypical ways as signs of them being gay. For example, when Nik, an 18-year-old white, gay man, came out to his mother he said she always knew he was gay because he watched the Broadway musical *Cats* so many times she had to replace the videocassette. Parents’ conflation of sexuality with gender led the parents to *assume* their gender atypical child was gay and therefore they were not surprised when this turned out to be the case.

Adam, who described himself as an effeminate boy, told me that his mother always suspected he would grow up to be gay. One of the most poignant stories he shared was of a time in middle school when he described himself as homophobic and not out as gay. During this time he got in a dramatic fight with his mom because she suggested to him that it was okay for him to explore his feelings for boys. He reacted with anger and frustration at this suggestion:

I was like, why would you say that to me? I'm not gay! That's gross blah-blah-blah. And I had a giant episode about it. And she was in the room and she locked me out of her room and I would sit there and scream and kick at her door. And I was like, "I can't believe you're calling me gay!" And I would sit there and cry at her door because she called me gay. But she didn't even call me...it was, "Adam, it's okay if you're having feelings for guys," or "Adam, it's okay to explore." And I was just so appalled. I was like, "How could you even think that of me?"

Later when Adam did come out to his mom, she responded with, "I told you. I knew it." When Gabe, an 18-year-old Latino bisexual who describes himself as androgynous came out to his mother, she replied, "I've known since the day you were born." When he probed her, asking how a person could know something like that, she ascribed it to mother's intuition.

During my time at Spectrum, the agency was experiencing an unprecedented number of contacts from parents who were seeking resources for children under the age of 13 (the minimum age for youths to attend drop-in at Spectrum). This resulted in the development of a program aimed specifically at these children and their parents that was held outside regular drop-in hours. Due to my human-subjects research restrictions, I was not able to conduct participant observation or interviews with these individuals. But in my brief interactions with these concerned parents and their children, I would argue that they were likely grappling with gender identity issues, not

sexual identity issues. In a society where institutionalized homophobia and transphobia have resulted in a powerful social movement—the LGBT movement—the conflation and confusion of gender with sexuality results in pressure to form an identity around these categories (see Chapter Two). Informed, liberal minded parents concerned for the well-being of their gender atypical children naturally reach out to the local LGBT center for help. In fact, they might be referred there by concerned teachers, counselors, or other community members. How this will manifest itself in the future identity development of young people remains to be seen.

Therefore, one explanation for why the participants in my study were so frequently out to their parents at a young age is their gender queerness. Many of these young people were gender atypical youths whose parents already suspected they might come out as gay during adolescence. Similarly, the lack of negative experiences might also be due to the fact that the parents of these children had more time than other parents to prepare themselves for that moment when their child might come out to them, and therefore were able to react in a mild manner. But not all of the youths of Spectrum could be described as gender atypical. The next two sections explore two more explanations for why the youths of Spectrum came out to their parents at an earlier stage in their lives: their non-traditional family structures and LGBT family members.

C. Non-Traditional Families

It has too often been assumed that white parents of LGBT children are more tolerant than parents of color, and a particularly pernicious trope about intolerance for LGBT people among African American communities has been used to divide communities (Cillizza & Sullivan 2013; Richen 2013). In their 1993 study of family conflict around the issue of LGBT children, Newman and Muzzonigro asked whether race or traditional family values were a stronger predictor of family conflict. The authors found that LGBT people, regardless of race, who experienced the most conflict as a result of coming out to their parents were those whose parents

had strong traditional family values, such as, “When religious beliefs were devout, family members had high expectations for the youth to marry and have children, and gender roles were polarized and stereotypical” (216). The large number of working class youth I interviewed, many of whom were youth of color, came from non-traditional family structures, which I argue eased the conflict between them and their parents upon coming out.

Only nine youths did not identify their families as being religious at all, meaning that the majority of those interviewed did associate their upbringing with a religion. Yet, of all of the youths I interviewed, I would only identify a small handful as having been raised by a devoutly religious person or persons. I would only identify four youths as being devout themselves. Of those four youth, two were from a family of devout Wiccans, a belief system that inherently contradicts traditional family values. Another youth became a born again Christian in late adolescence, but was raised by non-religious parents. The fourth youth in question was raised by a devoutly Catholic mother and identifies himself as a devout Catholic. All four of those individuals are white. Among the other youth who identified themselves with a religion, they typically described their families as being casually religious, attending church irregularly if at all. Or, as was often the case, they had devoutly religious grandparents through whom the youths may have been exposed to religion, although their parents had not maintained a strict religious practice in the home. More importantly, while many of the youths had stories about attending worship, being involved with a church at one point or another, and perhaps experiencing discrimination in these spaces, I would not describe their home lives as devoutly religious. I have no record of an instance—with the exception of the Catholic mother and son mentioned above—where religion was mentioned by the youths as a point of contention when coming out to their

parents. This lack of devout religious practice suggests an absence of so-called traditional family values among these young people and their families.

I did not specifically ask any of the participants whether or not their parents had high expectations of them to marry and have children. Yet, when youths recounted coming out to their parents, rarely did they mention any discussion of their parents being disappointed that having an LGBT-identified child meant they would miss out on weddings and grandchildren. This does not mean that parents did not hold hopes for their children to marry and have children. Rather it demonstrates that it was not vocalized as a point of contention for most of them. I speculate one reason for this may be that the youths' parents were often teenage parents, single parents, parents of several children, or guardians of children whose parents were not able to properly care for them. The parents' personal experiences might inform their goals and hopes for their children to take a different path as adults and focus on themselves rather than marriage and children right away. It is also likely that as the U.S. increasingly shifts towards tolerance of same-sex marriage and parenting, parents of LGBT children no longer have to assume that their children will give up marriage and children in exchange for being LGBT-identified.

Finally, and perhaps most important to this argument, among the family characteristics of the youth participants, it was striking how few of them came from households with "polarized and traditional" gender roles. I saw this manifested in several different ways including father-headed single-parent households (5), mother-headed single-parent households (11), and LGBT-identified parents (2 lesbian mothers, 3 bisexual mothers, 3 gay fathers, and 1 pansexual father). Even among the youths who grew up in a household with a heterosexual parent couple, there were often things that suggested that the parents were not modeling traditional gender roles. These include both parents typically working outside of the home and family structures where

the mother was more often the biological parent of the child and therefore the dominant parent in the family (Moore 2011). The parents of the youths in my sample were often described as rebellious, teen parents, and/or having had children from multiple partners. One mother was even developing her career as a professional dominatrix.

The youths of Spectrum had fathers who were primary nurturers and mothers who were wage-earners and I would characterize few of their parents as being committed to traditional gender roles. The absence of traditional gender roles in the family—the queering of family—likely contributes to parents’ positive reception to the disclosure of their LGBT-identified children. In his discussion of Shulamith Firestone’s controversial theories about eliminating men from the reproductive process, Halberstam says, “Change the status of that [reproductive] role and the family that gives it meaning and you can change all of society” (36). While it is likely that this particular characteristic of the youth of Spectrum—living within non-traditional family structures—is due to Spectrum’s urban location in a liberal community, that does not mean it should be dismissed. This trend, even if it is urban and liberal, points to the changing face of the gender order in the U.S., and parental tolerance of LGBT-identified children could very well be one of the results.

D. LGBT Parents, Relatives, and Family Friends

Exposure to LGBT-identified parents, relatives, and family friends was another common characteristic among the young people of Spectrum. Eight of the mothers or fathers of youths claimed a gay, bisexual, lesbian, or pansexual identity, meaning that more than twenty percent of the people I interviewed had an LGBT parent. Similarly, of the youths I interviewed, nine had gay, lesbian, or bisexual brothers and sisters. In fact, there are two pairs of siblings among my participants. Youths in my interview pool identified 14 LGBT cousins, aunts, uncles, godparents,

and grandmothers in their families (not to mention several other friends of the family). These youths comprised more than two-thirds of the youths I interviewed.

This demonstrates that a significant number of the youths who are out as LGBT and attending Spectrum on a regular basis have been exposed to LGBT people in their family circles. In liberal, urban communities like the one within which Spectrum is located, the normalization and routinization of same-sex desire, behavior and relationships carries far less stigma today than in decades past (Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen 1999). Therefore it is not surprising that so many of the young people of Spectrum have adult LGBT family members, particularly aunts, uncles, and cousins. But it is also likely that being out as LGBT at a younger age is aided by the reality of having an LGBT-identified parent or sibling, simply because early exposure to same-sex desire, same-sex relationships, and gender atypicality presents this identity as a viable option for these youths. In other words, LGBT-identified family members, particularly parents, are counter-hegemonic to compulsory heterosexuality. Trevor, a 20-year-old white man came out as bisexual first, then as gay not long after he got out of high school. He told me it was through his introduction to his lesbian sister from whom he had been estranged that he learned about being LGBT:

That's how it kind of all started and then I started getting involved with my sister and her partner... And then, um, so then, that was like, the really big start of me getting to know more about the LGBT people and stuff like that. And then, um, I remember that I first came out as bisexual.

This is not to suggest that having an LGBT-identified parent results in an LGBT-identified child, as research shows there is no correlation between sexual identity of parents and sexual identity of children (Stacey & Biblarz 2001). At the same time, young people who are

presented with alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality may be more open to exploring their feelings of same-sex desire as well as more open to assigning an identity label to those feelings such as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Similarly, youths who spend time with transgender or gender atypical family and friends may be more open to questioning and exploring their gender identity. Ernie, a 21-year-old, queer Chicano learned from and felt supported by his mother's roommate, who at the time we spoke was a transwoman, but who was living as a man when they first met. He came out to his mother's roommate as gay before he came out to his mom:

So yeah, and me and her would talk all the time. Well before, she was a drag queen. So she would do drag. And sometimes she would take me to do...she would sneak me in the club with her when she do her drag shows. So that was cool, but me and her would just talk about like, just some stuff and like, at first I was like, "What are you talking about?" But like, yeah...

Both Trevor and Ernie describe how LGBT family members and family friends had a profound impact on their understanding of themselves as LGBT-identified. Consistent with stories told by other participants, these LGBT family members often encouraged the youths to come out and provided the support they needed to do so. This queering of the family—non-traditional family structures and having LGBT-identified family members—either in combination with being gender atypical or on their own, help us to understand why some youths come out to their parents at an earlier age and why those parents demonstrate tolerance and support for their LGBT-identified children.

E. Conclusion

Contrary to the myths that surround the coming out experience, most of the participants in this study had a relatively positive experience coming out to their parents and did so at a young age. In this chapter I explained that these positive experiences might be due to the gender

non-normative behavior of the child, which prepares parents in advance for the possibility of having a child who identifies as a sexual minority. Further, I suggest that the non-traditional nature of the child's family structure along with the influence of having LGBT-identified family members may be significant factors in this experience. While geographical location and community type are also important to the coming out experience, this data show evidence of a shifting landscape towards tolerance for LGBT-identified young people.

D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2005) found no difference in rates of disclosure across either race or ethnicity or SES among their sample of 293 youth who frequent community based drop-in centers. Yet, in a review of the existing studies on disclosure Savin-Williams (1998) discovered that rates of disclosure to parents were much higher for those youths who were sampled from community centers compared to those who were sampled from college campuses. Savin-Williams speculates—and I concur—that the college students at research universities differ from youths who frequent urban community centers in terms of race, SES, and gender expression. College students at research universities, where this kind of research is likely to occur, are more likely to be white, of a high socioeconomic status, and gender typical in their expression. As I have demonstrated, Spectrum youth are a group of racially diverse young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom are gender atypical in their behavior and appearance. These findings could be indicative of a regional sampling bias or the particular needs of these two different populations (Savin-Williams 1998). Alternatively, my discussion suggests that the queerness of a young person's family leads to coming out earlier and to a more positive reception.

Studies show that parents' anxieties about having sexual minority or gender atypical children are linked to the parents' heteronormative expectations of their children: that they will

grow up to marry and have children and that they will not be queer in a society that rewards normality (Fields 2001). My research supports existing findings that suggest gender atypical children come out to their parents at a younger age and that often their parents already suspected their child was same-sex oriented and are therefore less shocked by the revelation. My findings expand on these explanations by showing that young people who come from non-traditional households and are exposed to LGBT family members are also more likely to come out to their parents at a younger age with little to no conflict. While it may be true that parents of gender atypical children expect their child to be LGBT, this may not be enough to promote early disclosure. Acceptance and encouragement of an LGBT-identified child are linked to parents having less traditional and restrictive ideas about gender and sexuality.

A non-traditional family structure opens the options available to a young person, particularly at an experimental stage of their lives. Homosexuality is a modern social construction, the definition of which is dependent upon biological and psychological presumptions about sexuality. At the same time, we have entered a post-modern era where we understand sexuality itself to be socially and historically constructed, not biological. We have shifted from homosexuality as pathology to the adoption of identities that more accurately reflect individual sexual and gendered desires, behaviors, and communities. Exposure—through family and peers, media, and other cultural resources—to same-sex desire, sexual fluidity, and the expansion of categories and options for identification results in a larger group of young people who are more willing to explore their same-sex desires in an “out” rather than a closeted manner (Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen 1999). In other words, post-modern sexualities are the result of destabilization of fixed categories. Youth sexualities reflect this instability as adolescents begin the journey of discovering and exploring their sexual selves.

Although young people are not discovering same-sex desire at a younger age than previous generations, they are coming out at a younger age than previous generations. In fact, the data are quite consistent in terms of young people becoming aware of their same-sex desires during the onset of puberty, regardless of what age they come out (D'Augelli & Hershberger 1993; Garnets & Kimmel 1991; Herdt 1989). Yet, they might retroactively assign “gay” to a gender atypical behavior that occurred before they became aware of their same-sex desires. Similarly, they may assign “gay” to a same-sex sexual activity they participated in before they reached puberty (see Chapter One). Whether one comes out at 12 or at 30, they are reacting to social pressure to publicly name their same-sex desire and adopt an identity category and community. As Connell describes, “In a story like this, ‘coming out’ actually means coming *in* to an existing gay milieu” (Connell 1992).

The young people of Spectrum often described how they were certain they were the only person on the planet who experienced same-sex desire until they began to come out and discover others like themselves. For many young people, this discovery is happening outside of the family and intimate home life. As I have suggested, being exposed to queer family structures, those structures that disrupt heteronormativity, may provide a way out of the closet for young people with same-sex desire. More importantly, though, is how heteronormative family structures inadvertently limit young people’s sexual options. Parents need not model same-sex desire in the home, but allowing this desire to be an acceptable expression of one’s sexuality early on in a child’s life could ease unnecessary tensions between parents and their LGBT-identified children.

As mentioned in the introduction, researchers bemoan the lack of a celebratory message in advice books for parents of LGBT-identified children. The stories shared here by the youths of Spectrum support the idea that the discourse of tragedy, danger, and risk that surrounds the

phenomenon of LGBT children coming out to their parents does not represent all experiences. Of course for some parents, learning that their child is LGBT-identified is upsetting or perhaps even tragic, and for some young people coming out to parents is a dangerous and risky move. Because traditional expectations of gender are linked to politically and religiously conservative communities (Stein 2001), the likelihood of a negative coming out experience may be far more common in conservative regions of the country or more rural communities as opposed to urban areas. By examining and attempting to understand the context and conditions for young people who come out to loving and supportive parents, sociologists can develop a better understanding of the shifting landscape of sexualities and gender studies. With changing cultural acceptance of sexual diversity and gender atypicality, perhaps more parents will learn to celebrate the coming out of their LGBT children as a moment of self-discovery, maturity, and independence.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION: THE NEW NORMAL ISN'T QUEER

A. Summary

In the previous chapters I examined some of the processes of becoming sexual as seen through the experiences of young people who identify as LGBT and frequent an LGBT youth drop-in center. In particular, I explored: 1) how for some young boys, the fact of their atypical masculinity and/or feelings of desire that violate heterosexual scripts led in part to the formation of a gay identity; 2) how the process of gender attribution and the resilience of the gender binary makes it a challenge for gender-questioning or gender ambiguous young people to form a gender identity that accurately represents their experience; 3) the various ways young people with same-sex desires seek out relevant sexual scripts and information about sexuality in a society that renders same-sex desire as abnormal, abhorrent, or invisible; and 4) the context within which youths come out to their families and experience positive reactions and support as opposed to reactions that are negative. In this final chapter, I discuss the tension between being “normal” and being queer and its relationship with maintaining a dominant heteronormative social structure. Finally, I will discuss how my research informs broader sociological areas of interest and point to future directions for youth sexualities research.

B. Normal versus Queer

In his memoir about having a gay son, *Oddly Normal: One Family's Struggle to Help Their Teenage Son Come to Terms with His Sexuality*, New York Times correspondent John Schwartz (2012) talks at length about how he and his wife, Jeanne, suspected their son was gay from a very early age. He explains that among his peers in a highly educated, well-to-do, liberal enclave in the northeastern U.S., one was not disappointed about having a gay child. He understands sexuality—whether straight or gay—to be natural and biological, and “as baked into who you are as eye color and height” (13). While the Schwartz’s story about their son Joseph is

compelling and heartfelt, in many ways it is less a story about having a gay child and more about a parent's desperate search for an explanation as to why their child is so odd. From early childhood, Joseph struggled with succeeding at school, was diagnosed with a variety of learning disabilities, attended therapy, and acted up in various ways. Joseph begins to disclose his feelings of same-sex desire first to his parents but later at school, which results in a humiliating experience and a failed suicide attempt. Throughout the book Schwartz associates Joseph's queerness with his latent homosexuality. The story becomes one of hopefulness and survival as Joseph starts to regularly attend a community-based drop-in center for LGBT youth and begins to form a gay identity. In the end, it was not the case that the Schwartz's were unhappy about having a gay child. Rather their struggle was with having a child with a learning disability, who was bullied and disciplined frequently at school, and who was not popular among his peers.

Coincidentally, the same year that *Oddly Normal* was published, Jack Halberstam (2012) published *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Halberstam, an English professor and director of the Center for Feminist Research at the University of Southern California, is a self-described butch whose best known work is *Female Masculinity*, an exploration of masculinity without men. While Schwartz's memoir is about his family's struggle with having a queer child, Halbertsam's book is a manifesto that makes a call to arms for a new kind of feminism that rejects the category of normal entirely. Gaga feminism is described as, "A gender politics that recognizes the ways in which our ideas of the normal or the acceptable depend completely upon racial and class-based assumptions about the right and the true" (26). Halberstam is decidedly not interested in creating a place where being gay or lesbian is normal, but instead has aspirations that a new generation of young people will grow up with radical ideas

about sex, gender, and sexuality, resisting the heteronormative impulse to adopt gay, straight, or lesbian and male or female identities.

These two artifacts of early twenty-first century culture exemplify the tensions that were reverberating throughout *Spectrum*, *The Resource*, the larger LGBT community, and U.S. culture itself while I conducted this research. On one hand, being gay or lesbian is more normal than perhaps ever before, best demonstrated by the recent hard-fought success of the right to marriage movement. On the other hand, LGBT-identified people are leading a revolution in terms of shifting society's understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality in the direction of the queer. The more we learn about sexual and gender orientation, identity, and behavior, the less salient categories like gay, lesbian, and straight or man and woman become. At the heart of this tension lies the hegemonic power of heteronormativity.

C. Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is not the opposite of homosexuality, it is a “distinct concept” that regulates sex, gender, and sexuality in society (Berlant & Warner 1998). Heteronormativity is deeply tied to constructing the normal, where queerness aims to reject the normal. LGBT politics—and by default, all LGBT-identified people—occupies the hot seat in the middle of this battle. On the one hand, the LGBT movement strives towards social equality for LGBT-identified people, while on the other, the queer critique argues that the very identities that the movement has based its political goals upon are unstable. Resolution to this tension, as Gamson (1995) explains, is not a matter of which side is right (normal versus queer) but in the acceptance that individuals find themselves situated within “the simultaneity of cultural sources of oppression (which make loosening categories a smart strategy) and institutional sources of oppression (which make tightening categories a smart strategy)” (403).

The young people of Spectrum are living these tensions between loose and tight categories. I have tried to show how adolescent negotiation of sexuality and gender is rife with ambiguity, confusion, and uncertainty. LGBT youth in particular make visible the processes of *becoming* while simultaneously demystifying the process of naturalization. Adolescents struggle with understanding who they are not because their essence has yet to materialize, but rather because they have yet to learn the field (Bourdieu 1993). Travon shares his struggle with finding the right box in which to fit:

Like, it's not, like, sketched out for me who I am. I don't got a guidebook like, who I am is just who I am and I'm always trying to question that and put it into words. I'm trying to define the indefinable: me. And like, it just, it doesn't work. And like, I have, there's a lot of inner, internal conflict with this, cause like, I always want to put myself in a box. Society puts you in enough boxes and then I'm sitting here trying to put myself in another one like, I'm trying to figure out every aspect of who I am as if I'm thinking about myself as if I'm a different person; as if I'm trying to judge or characterize a different person.

Where the negotiation of gender and sexuality is the most visible is in the gray areas in between binary categories. Youths' explorations of bisexuality and transgenderism indicate not only a conscious resistance to adopting a binary category but empirical evidence that the recognized categories (straight, gay, lesbian, man, woman) fail to encompass the lived experiences of individuals. Sexual desires may be innate to human experience, but our understanding of them as same-sex or other-sex in their orientation is a sociohistorical artifact. The fact that our taken-for-granted assumptions about biological sex—that one is either a boy or

girl—are inaccurate (Fausto-Sterling 1993; E. Stein 1999), renders any natural correlation between biological sex, gender, and sexuality false.

In the *Mismeasure of Desire*, Edward Stein (1993) questions why it is that what he refers to as the sex/gender of one's object of desire has become the most important facet of sexual orientation. Why is it that one's sexual orientation is determined by sex/gender rather than the type of sexual behavior one enjoys or the nature of one's fantasies? The answer lies in the sex/gender order and the maintenance of heteronormativity. The primacy of gender to our understanding of sexual orientation and identity is instrumental in maintaining a complex system of control that shores up systems of inequality. The sex/gender order rests on the idea that one is sexually attracted to members of a sex other than your own. This assumption goes on to form any number of institutionalized hierarchies related to sex/gender within and outside of heterosexuality. Further, heteronormativity functions to regulate not just sex/gender, but race, class, nationality, ability, and more based on assumptions of what is normal. Regina, a 19-year-old who is black and identifies as queer illuminates how her queerness—being “weird”, black, gay, and poor—has deeply impacted her access to support systems:

Being weird and queer is probably [pause] fucking probably [pause] I mean being weird was just hard as fuck. But being black is just hard as fuck. And then you just add gay on top of that, and some other shit, it's just fucked. To this day, like, where like, even just to make friends, especially with white lesbians, I just wanna make friends and it's like, since you're an inner city kid that, you know, not in college yet, really don't give a fuck about college right now, into metaphysics, you know what I'm saying? A whole different type of like, intelligence, and I'm not just like, book smart, you know, or give a fuck about pop culture and Adele

and shit all the time. They won't like, communicate [with] you nor acknowledge that you're an actual person cause you're not into the type of bullshit they are... "You're not going to be my friend cause I'm black??!" And then it really comes to pressure like, I can't be ghetto and stuff. And I like being ghetto cause I think it's funny. But it's like, you know, when you're around like very like, I guess, sophisticated fondue like, "Look at me I shop at café lesbian!" It's like you have to be so like, I guess proper, like you can't say like "fuck" or "shit" or you know none of that.

Regina's experience shows how boundaries that establish "normal" play out among an ostensibly queer community of white lesbians.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that individuals adopt lesbian, gay, or straight identities through a complex process that involves sex, gender, desire, behavior, sexual scripting, identification, and interaction. Similarly, it calls into question the binary sex/gender system by illuminating the fluid nature of gender. Third, it shows how learning how to be sexual requires effort: effort that is made invisible among straight people because of the preponderance of heterosexual scripts. Finally, it shows how the shifting sex/gender order, reflected in family structures, is changing the way we do sexuality and gender in society.

For Halberstam, the significance of a Gaga feminism is in its potential to remake society. His vision rings true with the experiences of the young people of Spectrum. The way their experiences as queer adolescents differ from generations that came before them is evidence of a shift in society. Halberstam states, "We do not think about how changes in one sphere create changes in other spheres: and so the momentous shifts in the meaning of gender and sex and sexuality that have allowed for the emergence of transgenders and transsexuals globally have

also created massive, if unnoticed, shifts in the meaning of heterosexuality, male and female” (81). These shifts will also have significant effects on the heteronormative laws that govern social behavior as well. Halberstam’s Gaga feminism and my findings demonstrate the advantage of queering the movement for human rights. In other words, they show hope for the dismantling of *cultural* sources of oppression.

Yet where does that leave Joseph Schwartz and the oddly normal youth of Spectrum who daily are facing *institutional* sources of oppression whose distinct purpose is to normalize? The pressure is unrelenting upon these young people to figure out who they are as they merge into adulthood. Although Travon resists putting himself into a box, this moment of time as an adolescent may be the only time in his life that he will have the luxury to claim to not know who he is. The institutions that govern society do not allow for ambiguity with respect to identity. Many of the young people of Spectrum want the same things that their straight counterparts want from life. Like Alex, a 19-year-old white gay man, they want companionship and love, and to have a family:

And I...I...like, this sounds so weird, but like, say two weeks from now I met this guy. We started dating. And we spent the rest of our life together. That’s fine with me. And if that happens, then that happens. I mean I would much rather have that than having to search...but I almost like, just want to start my life and be happy and get on with it and stuff. Because now that I’m out and can actually like, be happy, I want to just share that with someone else.

Yet even if same-sex marriage becomes a widely acceptable norm, it is a far cry from a world where one’s sex, gender, and sexuality simply does not matter. Every liberal democratic accomplishment seems to reveal another layer of inequality.

D. Beyond Spectrum

How does my research matter beyond Spectrum? Beyond the theories and findings I have discussed at length throughout this dissertation, I find that it informs at least three other areas of sociological study: social movements, the process of othering, and the study of youth and adolescence.

Even though this is not a dissertation on social movements, the work informs social movement theory and organizing. About the shifting identity categories within the LGBT movement, Gamson (1995) writes, “Genuine inclusion of transgender and bisexual people can require not simply an expansion of an identity, but a subversion of it. This is the deepest difficulty queerness raises, and the heat behind the letters [LGBT]: If gay (and man) and lesbian (and woman) are unstable categories...what happens to sexuality-based politics?” (399). The same question can be raised about other unstable categories around which social movements are organized: race, sex/gender, ability, nationality, religion, and more. Much research has explored the power of identity politics, but we are only just beginning to understand the potential of loosening identity categories for coalition organizing. The queer movement has been powerful in that it has not been solely concerned with the rights of gender and sexual minorities, but rather it has engaged in the critique of capitalist, neoliberal politics that results in the marginalization of all queer people. A broad queering of the social justice movement is leading us towards organizing in a way that is less about the liberal political goals of accessing rights for various identity groups and more about combating the root causes that drive inequalities in the first place.

This research may also be useful in that it helps us to think more broadly about the process of othering that leads to marginalization. Too often the marginalized group is singled out as the problem, even if this is done in a compassionate way. Among discourses about gayness,

for example, compassion is stirred for LGBT-identified people by arguing that they cannot help how they are born. While perhaps well-intentioned, this line of reasoning still singles same-sex desire out as abnormal. To point to how this research might be useful outside of the LGBT community, the research informs the burgeoning field of disability studies, which is in many ways about the embodiment of queerness. Success in accessing rights for people with disabilities depends on dismantling strong-held beliefs about what is normal and healthy.

Finally, while my research was limited to a community of LGBT-identified people, my hope is that rather than just seeing this project as a study of LGBT youth, it is seen as a study of adolescence. Adolescence itself is a social construction. Gary Alan Fine's (2004) ethnographic research of adolescent debate teams helps to demonstrate how adolescence functions in society. He explains, "Teenage subcultures represent transformations and negotiations of other social worlds that are drawn from a melding of adult and childhood skills and are judged by adults whose attitudes toward this melding is ambivalent. This transformation and negotiation provide this period with its distinctive sociological character" (17). Research that approaches adolescent experience from the perspective that young people are unique in that they have yet to be fully formed by the external forces of society will help us to understand people of all ages in a more nuanced way.

E. Future Directions for Youth Sexualities Research

Throughout this research process I found myself with more and more questions: a sign of an important research topic. I had moments of wishing I had explored this topic differently and regrets that there was not more time to spend in the field. Therefore, I point to some important directions where this research might lead in the future.

First and foremost, I am guilty, like so many others, of approaching the study of adolescent sexualities through the lens of the marginalized other, in this case LGBT-identified

youth. In order to more fully understand the process of heteronormativity, research must explore the formation of identity among straight youths. The problem, of course, is that the hegemonic power of heteronormativity makes the process of becoming straight less visible than the process of becoming gay and therefore requires more creative, experienced, and nuanced research design. As I pursue this topic in the future, I would like to find a field site where I have access to a diverse population of young people with a variety of sexual and gender identities and develop a research design that specifically targets the invisible processes of sexuality development.

Second, although the study of children and youth and the Internet is growing, the speed at which digital forms of media have become ubiquitous for young people makes this a crucial area of study. Adults, particularly those born before 1990, approach digital topics with a very different perspective than those digital natives born later. The lack of understanding of how young people use and get used by digital media stems in part from this generational divide. Regardless of whether or not researchers themselves have an interest in digital media, we cannot dismiss the Internet, social media, digital gaming, and the like, when it comes to understanding the social worlds of young people. More research that provides empirical evidence of the effects of digital media on children and adolescent sexual development should be a priority.

Third, I would like to more fully develop explorations of how marginalized youth—and adolescents as marginalized people—resist the hegemonic powers that order their lives. While it is well-intentioned and necessary, it is often too easy to focus on what is wrong with those on the periphery rather than what is right with them, no doubt a result of the power of the center. Among adolescents and young adults there exists a powerful source for change. The more research can shine a light on the possibilities that young people envision, the more likely those possibilities can be achieved.

Finally, I regret that this project does not make a stronger contribution to our understanding of the experiences of lesbian and bisexual girls. The most prominent explanation for this is simply logistical. Spectrum is a male-dominated space, therefore my use of emergent methods led me down the path of male-dominated themes. Similarly, when I did have important themes to pursue regarding the experiences of girls, I was often reluctant to use them because I felt that my sample of girls was too small to be conclusive. Yet, there is a story to be told about girls and one I would hope to pursue in the future.

F. Conclusion

In closing, the study of youth sexualities offers an exciting glimpse into the process of how humans develop their sexual personhood. Through the experiences of the youths of Spectrum, I learned how boundaries between normal and queer are maintained, as well as how those boundaries shore up social inequalities related to various social identities, not just one's sexuality. It has opened the door to a wealth of research opportunities that I hope will serve as inspiration for future investigation of these topics. Although this research was at times disheartening because I saw the ways that youth perpetuate the status quo, the work also left me equally optimistic about the future due to the youths' willingness to resist the dominant paradigm.

It is primarily the young people in U.S. society who are most willing to consider same-sex desires and behaviors acceptable as well as to explore the fluid nature of sex, gender, and sexuality. They of course stand on the shoulders of the activists, academics, and organizers who paved the way for a brighter future for LGBT-identified people. Yet as my research shows, mainstream society is not necessarily moving in the direction of becoming more accepting of queerness. The need for Spectrum illustrates this point. Thus, Regina describes what Spectrum means to her:

Um, I feel like this is like, my family here. Like, literally like, my family. I haven't felt this close with people ever in my life. So it's kind of like, I come here and it's like, complete family like, you feel the love, you feel the energy, everyone knows everyone. Everyone spends time with everyone. You come here, we have a good time and it's like, like, kind of the only time and space in my life where I actually get to truly relax and enjoy myself and the people around me, and just laugh.

Although Spectrum is not a utopia for queer youth, it is the next best thing. It is a joyful place where young people who have struggled to find a place of belonging feel as if they have arrived home.

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