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I'm From Everywhere:

Articulations of Queer Identity in Online Spaces

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I'm From Everywhere:
Articulations of Queer Identity in Online Spaces

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I'm From Everywhere:
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This thesis is an exploration of the various ways in which queer identity has been subsumed within an urban sensibility by mainstream culture, and how mediated articulations of queerness have subsequently been impacted. Highlighting the influence of late capitalism within the creation of a categorical “queer” identity, this work connects the history of the gentrified gayborhood to televisual and filmic representations of urban and rural queers. Interrogating legacy media representations opens up a conversation about how new media articulations of queerness might operate in the digital age. Examinations of popular queer websites, *Downelink*, *GLEE* and *I'm From Driftwood* illustrate the reification of common LGBTQ identity tropes, as well as highlight the spaces where queer affect theory might perform a critical intervention in how new media scholars might approach future research of online sources.

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Introduction: Queering the Internet

The first time I ever told anyone that I thought I might be queer was when I was 15. I posted my inquiry as a topic titled “*Coming Out Resources?*” in an online forum, one night after my parents had gone to bed. It was well past midnight, and I was perusing the self-proclaimed “queer-positive, trans-positive, sex-positive, girl-positive online community” of *Strap-On.org*. I initially stumbled upon the page after falling down the rabbit hole of hyper-linked clicking while searching for information about support groups for teenagers who identified on the LGBTQ spectrum. I quickly registered as a member of the forum so that I could read other people’s messages throughout the site. The first post that I created about coming out received a number of replies within moments, ranging from tips on how to tell my family and friends that I was queer, to links to local LGBTQ support groups, to instructions on how to engage in safer sex. Amazed at both the immediacy of contact and the openness of my welcome to this group, it is no surprise that I wound up deeply enmeshed in the social entanglements of this particular online forum for over ten years.

Prior to my discovery of *Strap-On.org*, my parents finally gave in to my sister’s and my near daily pleas and purchased a low end Hewlett-Packard desktop computer for the family to share. Before having a computer at home, I would go out of my way to arrive at school early, just so I could check my Hotmail account and read new posts left on various music related message boards. Despite having very concrete questions about my sexual identity during that same year, I was unable to perform any sort of online search including terms such as “gay” or “lesbian” or “queer” at the school library, the

greater district having filtered out any common term that might be deemed sexual, offensive and/or age-inappropriate. I didn't fare much better with my searches at the public library, and besides my inquiries being blocked by municipality-purchased software, I never felt completely safe making such searches in an open atmosphere.

Having a computer at home made these types of sensitive searches easier, though they weren't always entirely comfortable, as the family computer sat on a desk in the dining room. This space was an open commons area with little in the way of privacy, but also the only spot in the house conveniently close enough to a phone jack to use for dial-up Internet access. It was easy enough to wait until my parents went to bed to explore this world of sexual identity, though. Before my family had an in-home Internet connection, I did not have (constant/instant) access, so I relished in my new found freedom to search and explore as much as possible, often into the early hours of the morning.

A new world opened for me through these online searches, bulletin boards, chat channels and listservs. I had never met a self-identified queer person before, and I suddenly had entrée to myriad new vocabulary, identifications, and communities. It was exhilarating. Surely I would have realized I was queer without the Internet, but I doubt I would have acknowledged it—even had the language for who I was—as early as I did without the help of online communications.

The fact that I grew up in a small town with limited access to information and resources for and about LGBTQ people has greatly influenced has greatly influenced my approach to this thesis. My intention within this project is to examine the current state of online social networking within queer communities, paying particular attention to the

various ways in which queer identity is linked and articulated in tandem with geographic location. As I noticed as a queer youth living in middle America, and as some scholars have discussed, representations of queerness in mainstream popular culture—especially in the legacy media of television and film—have a propensity to focus on representations of the urban and are increasingly linked with corporate sponsorship and capital influences (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002; Becker 2006; Campbell, “Outing PlanetOut” 2005; Gray, “Negotiating Identities” 2009; Gray “Out in the Country” 2009; Halberstam 2005; Hennessy 1995). I set out to examine these phenomena—the linkages between queer identity, urban space and capitalism—and perhaps explore online spaces that allow for an expanded notion of what queer identity might encompass. My interests within this work primarily rest on the influence late-capitalism has had on the formation of queer identity, the ways in which capital has influences mainstream media representations of queerness, the various ways in which identity and community are articulated within commercial online social networking sites, and where articulations of a non-urban sensibility in queerness occur within cyberculture.

Queer Identity and Identification

The term “queer” appears liberally throughout this work, often times appearing as though it is interchangeable with “lesbian” or “gay”. The use of queer is not meant to subsume the entire gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered population under one umbrella phrase. Though I am utilizing the term as a way to denote same-sexual or same-gendered attraction and sexual activity, I am also consciously deploying the term in a manner that I hope will call attention to a larger theoretical issue. Rather than solely

focusing on the sexual connotations of the queer, I use this term as a way to illuminate the various slippages and tensions that arise when we speak of sexuality and sexual identity as a fixed categorical situation. Queer, within the scope of this work, is intended to describe

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made or *can't* be made to signify monolithically (Segwick "Tendencies" 8)

Queer, then, can be viewed as a moment that "mark[s] a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of a non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception," viable as a theoretical perspective in that it allows for

a term with some ambiguity, a term that would describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions, including space for describing and expressing bisexual, transsexual, and straight queerness" (Doty 2).

To queer something is to blur, denaturalize and reveal the constructed nature of categorical requirements. Identity creation is an ongoing process, one whose complexity Stuart Hall believes

...exceeds [a] binary structure of representation. At different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are re-sited. They become, not only what they have, at times, certainly been—mutually excluding categories: but also, what they sometimes are—differential points along a sliding scale. ("Cultural Identity" 73)

Online worlds have often been described as arenas where these queer slippages might be encouraged more freely, where new identities can be tried on and explored, reexamined and abandoned. Sherry Turkle's early studies of MUDs and virtual worlds illustrate these potential for identity formation. She believes that within digitally mediated spaces, "the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to 'try out' new ones" ("Life on the Screen" 356). Mark Poster echoes these utopian postmodern theories of exploration: "The shift to a decentralized network of communications makes senders receivers, producers consumers, rulers ruled, upsetting the logic of understanding of the first media age" (88). Much of this early discourse surrounding self-representation in online worlds has hailed the supposed freedoms inherent in cyber-cultural communications. The Internet has been given the task of liberating users from the confines and burdens of offline identity, suggesting that somehow markings of Otherness, such as race, gender, class and sexual identity, do not matter in the digital ether (Roberts and Parks 2001; Turkle, "Life on the Screen" 1995). The implication in these utopian claims is that communications that occur online are somehow distinctly different than those that occur offline, and render some sort of emancipatory effect through which social inequity experienced in the daily lived experience can be easily shed simply by logging on.

Thankfully, the current trend within cyber-culture literature recognizes the innate relationship between identities as represented in both online and offline worlds, and the emerging discourse questions how offline experiences might influence online realities (Byrne 2008; Driver 2007; Fung 2006; Gudelunas 2005; Nakamura 2002; Shaw 1997).

The ideals surrounding liberation contained within earlier literature paired with the current acknowledgement of identity linkages suggest that, in both the online and offline worlds, identity is never fixed. Identity is always queer.

Out on the Internet

The increasingly digital trajectory of queer youth illustrates a commonality in the lives of queer youth growing up in the Internet age (Driver 2007; Gray, “Out in the Country” 2009). This project is an elaboration upon this shift in the relevance of cybercultures to LGBTQ identified individuals, influenced by and built upon some of the more exciting work being done in the field right now. Mary L. Gray’s second and most recent book, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, is surprisingly (or not, depending on from where you hail) the first genuinely in-depth look at the lives and media practices of queer youth specifically situated outside of the boundaries of the gay city. This long overdue volume attempts to address some of the major issues ignored within scholarship focusing on LGBTQ populations, in particular “how young people in the rural United states who lay claim to LGBTQ identities confront the politics of gay visibility, expectations, and constraints that define and shape the recognition of LGBTQ identifying young people in popular culture and public life”, asserting that the negotiations of visibility “engages media and demands a public no matter where you live” (3, 31).

Gray’s stated intention is to complicate the assertion that queer identity must necessarily be centered in urban locales, challenging the myth that all rural queer youth hold a desire to escape their hometowns and find refuge within the metropolis. Utilizing

Judith Halberstam's concept of "metronormativity," a term within which the urban is privileged as an arena for sexual identity formation (not to mention a fabulous riff on "The Fab Five" of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy's* "metrosexuality"), Gray's *Out in the Country* proves to be an engaging ethnographic exploration of LGBTQ youth caught in the liminal space between the city and the rural (Gray 2009; Halberstam 2005). While my approach is not exactly ethnographic in nature, I do utilize the framework of the metronormative to highlight the urban dominance that exists within mainstream queer culture. I analyze the influence of capitalism on the making of a queer identity, examining mainstream texts to give context, and follow up with analysis of queer specific online spaces. By approaching the construction of queer identity and representation in a variety of media through this framework, we are able to better understand how power operates and how we might be able to counter it without our own media creations.

A Case for Case Studies: Taking a Closer Look

Three websites make up the bulk of the digital analysis section of this thesis: *GLEE*, *Downelink* and *I'm From Driftwood*. *GLEE* is a social networking site that has heavy corporate sponsorship from Monster, one of the Internet's largest job search communities. *Downelink* is also a social networking site, targeted to an urban audience, who might describe themselves as being "down," or hip. These two websites are very much driven by the commercial-consumer experience, saturated with advertising and capital influence. *I'm From Driftwood* is a different type of site, one where queer people are able to submit stories about their experiences as someone who exists within a marginalized population. Though it is not explicitly a social networking site in its

architecture, the site serves as a place where identity is expressed, community is explored and formed, and people's experiences are acknowledged. By comparing and contrasting the ways in which these sites operate through the influence of an increasingly capital web presence, we might be able to understand why queerness is articulated in the various way it is within online spaces.

Much of the early literature relating to the study of cyber-cultures, and LGBTQ-centered cyber-cultures in particular, has centered around the analysis of text-based forums, such as gay-specific rooms on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and LGBTQ boards available on the Bulletin Board System (BBS) (Campbell, "Getting it on Online" 2004; Tsang 2000; Woodland 2000). Brenda Danet notes that because of the non-image based nature of these early web experiences, the media was "potentially very liberating" for certain users whose visual appearance may, at times, be limiting (136). Her research, however, heavily favors a digital communication system that is reliant on the written word, paying little attention to the potential of an evolved Internet where text is not the lone communicative form. These copy heavy arenas have a history of being analyzed using the traditionalist methodology of close reading. Though it has its own laundry list of critics, such as Heather Murray in the somewhat scathing critique, "Close Reading, Closed Writing," this method is useful throughout the process of developing critical thought and attention to detail.

This consideration of specifics when examining web-based platforms is necessary, especially given the constant information shifting and increasing importance of visuals within online systems. These illusory platforms are more than just design; the

imagery and interface of these online settings come to “reside in part in users’ culture, incorporating visual metaphors and familiar culturally established ways of handling controls” within the lives of those who utilize them (Krippendorff 315). Part of the power of cyber-cultures rests in this ability to merge the online human experience with the offline human experience. The surge of online social network sites and increasing interest in the visual within online communications serves as an illustration of the thrust toward this cultural incorporation. In her 2008 work *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, Lisa Nakamura argues for the pressing *need* to investigate, interrogate, analyze and comment on the imagery that is increasingly prevalent on the World Wide Web:

Performing close readings of digital images on the Internet and their relation to identity, itself now an effect as well as a cause of digitality, produces a kind of critique that takes account of a visual practice that is quickly displacing television as a media-based activity in the United States. (11)

Her work highlights the ways in which online social network sites hold power within popular culture as, and the ways in which stereotypes regarding race and ethnicity have been reified through dominant power structures in online worlds. Just as in the real world, “cybertyping proliferates as part of a cultural matrix that surrounds the Internet” (Nakamura, “Cybertypes” xiv). In other words, these “new” communities found online do not appear to operate much differently than the “old”.

It is imperative then, to craft a method of analysis that takes the significance of visual cultures and the inherent intertextuality of online social network sites as a medium

into full account. As text and context are brought together in these online communities, the *need* for critical discourse analysis becomes apparent. This methodology builds upon the aforementioned tradition of close reading and textual analysis, and attempts to make sense of the various ways in which individuals are utilizing the discursive language and visual forms found on the Internet in ways that create order within their daily lives. A Foucauldian understanding of discourse is integral for this methodology. Discourse, in his argument, comes not from the study of texts as though they are *about* something, but instead it is created as part of a process that centers on the relationship of networks to power and identity (Foucault 1989). In short, discourse can be defined as “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Lessa 285).

Dominance and Resistance in Online Spaces

Websites with user-generated social network components, such as *Downelink*, *GLEE*, and *I’m From Driftwood*, may be experienced, alternately and concurrently, as spaces within which transmission of cultural codes of dominance, resistance and/or transformation occur. Themes of community are frequently found on these sites, often allowing users to bond via shared webs of connectivity and interrelations. While these websites hold the likelihood for common interest and communal growth, structures of dominance created within social order often intervene. The following framework of identity, community and hegemony/commodity will serve as a foundation from which to approach the case study analysis.

This manufacturing and modification process within websites with social networking functions cannot begin without addressing issues of hegemonic domination of popular culture. Online spaces are not immune from the power dynamics of the ruling class. In assessing these specific communities as spots connecting us to more broad concepts of authority, dominance, submission, rebellion and cooptation, Steven Jones accurately observes that “just because the spaces with which we are now concerned are electronic it is not the case that they are democratic, egalitarian, or accessible, and it is not the case that we forego asking in particular about substance and dominance” (1998: 23). Marilyn Taylor also reminds us of the necessity of “...understand[ing] community in relation to both the public sphere and in context to the power relations that structure the way community is defined” (210). Power, and the imbalance thereof, shapes the world in which we live, including those cyber-worlds we inhabit.

Antonio Gramsci is recognized as the first thinker to fully address questions of the relation of culture to the power and political economy of the dominant class. He notes that in order for the ruling classes to maintain their status, they must secure consent through a structured consensus reliant on the persuasion by the ruling class of subordinate classes to accept its own moral and cultural values. *Coercive control*, or control gained the threat of force, may be used, but it is most effectively gained via *consensual control*, or control through strategic assimilation. Hegemony can best be described via this consensual control, a process by which the dominant class does not simply rule via brute force, but rather directs through the subtleties of “moral and intellectual leadership” (Gramsci 210).

This delicate domination creates a power structure by which the interests of an elite ruling class become naturalized as the interests of society as a whole. Mass media is a critical component in the “moral and intellectual leadership” of hegemony. The success of this leadership can be measured by how well the dominant structures are able to portray alternative or oppositional pursuits as trivial and benign. Cultural channels may acknowledge the existence of the subaltern, but always with the intention of inscribing the dominance of the status quo (Williams 1977). Mass culture is not an entity created *by* the majority; it is created *for* the majority. Dominant imagery does not simply reflect society, but, in this regard, constructs it. In the United States, mainstream media outlets reach an audience of millions, while the production process only includes but a handful of networks. Television, newspapers, magazines, radio and, increasingly, the Internet and popular websites, all lend voice to the construction of the ideals of ruling class by nature of this economic structure.

I'm From Driftwood appears to inhabit some sort of queering of liminal space when considering its position as either dominant or subaltern media. While it might not be considered mass media in the sense that it is not created by a large, conglomerate media company, the project does exist within a medium that affords the project mass dissemination. It has been linked to from major, mainstream LGBTQ media outlets, such as the Advocate, gaining quite a bit of national attention. The fact that so much of the site hinges on *real* people's *real* lives is also of interest—much of mass media is very tenuously connected to actual stories of lived experience, so the interest garnered by *I'm*

From Driftwood might serve to speak to hegemony's need for actual experience in order to sustain an intense level of power and control.

Community, Contention and Social Networks

Community proves to be a highly contested term within scholarship surrounding the Internet and online spaces (Baym 1998; Jones 1998; Postman 1993; Rheingold 1993; Watson 1997). The fundamental point of contention appears to rest upon whether or not a decentralized online collective might be viewed as fulfilling the perceived purpose of the "traditional" physical community: *common obligation*. Media theorist and cultural critic, Neil Postman, stands opposed to defining online collectives as communities, asserting that community is wholly contingent upon this common obligation, articulated as a sense of corporeal and participatory accountability of an individual to a defined population (1993). Doheny-Farina echoes the sentiment of physicality, stating that

...a community is bound by place, which always includes complex social and environmental necessities. It is not something you can easily join. You can't subscribe to a community as you subscribe to a discussion group on the net. It must be lived. It is entwined, contradictory, and involves all of our senses. (37)

This argument contends that online communications, despite all of their potentialities, do not allow the full sensory experience that is assumed to be present with regard to communities of common obligation. Online collectives are, in this view, static and novel attempts at the reproduction of complex social environments.

Acknowledgement of the inextricable connectivity between the online and offline worlds is escalating in cyber-cultural studies, the tension between dystopian/utopian dichotomies channeled into dialogues exploring the social relevance of emerging online spaces. Rheingold's "virtual communities"—a problematic phrasing that holds the implication that the ethereal online spaces are somehow intrinsically different than the concrete offline spaces—are interpreted as reactions to the disappearance of communities of geographic proximity (1993). Nessim Watson holds a less wistful view of the condition, making note that

Just as the emergence of nation-states has transformed the meaning of 'community' in our collective consciousness to fit a new world situation, so the rise of CMC technologies is operating to alter the meaning of this term again. (123)

This statement implies that a certain degree of responsiveness and transformative qualities must be present in online communications and communities, presenting a challenge to Doheny-Farina's assumptions.

Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community" is also worth considering when thinking about online spaces. While his original intent is to dissect the formation of national identity and reveal nationalism as an imagined construct, this theory applicable to the construction of the World Wide Web. The Web is full of sites, each site holding the potential to be considered a community. "The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 49).

This is particularly applicable to websites holding specific social networking functions. Users may never *know* one another in the most immediate and intimate sense of the word, but they *know* other users exist within these spaces. Communities are not to be viewed as either “false” or “genuine,” but rather as “imagined.” If those who participate think of websites as communities, then they should be accepted as such. *Common obligation* as a physical requirement, then, diminishes in this ever-changing transnational culture. Ours is an era perhaps losing this nostalgia for tangible space, one within which individuals are “seek[ing] community in other places as it dissolves in the spaces we physically inhabit” (Jones 11). Rather, continuation of community demands it.

Queer Community

Historically, much of public LGBTQ culture and community has echoed these space-specific definitions, and been anchored in the specificity of urban physical-world space exemplified in gay bars, bathhouses and community centers (Campbell 2004; D’Emilio 1998; Walters 2001). These “queer havens”, as Campbell describes them, have provided a certain degree of safety and presumptions regarding the sexual identity of the patrons that allow an interior comfort and camaraderie from the often harsh, often violent, outside world. The gay bar has served as a space for LGBTQ identified people to come together and organize, socialize, meet potential lovers and a multitude of other interpersonal engagements. The gay bar has also served as point of access for many queer individuals who have not encountered LGBTQ community prior, and its importance to the creation and sustaining of a cohesive queer community cannot be understated (Campbell 2004; Chauncey 1994).

With the current state of our hyper-connected culture, though, there appears to be a shift in what constitutes an entry point to community for queer identified people. More and more, it is being reported that individuals are accessing queer culture and community for the first time through the Internet and online portals (Campbell, “Getting it on Online” 2004; Driver 2007; Gray 2009). Computer mediated communication and the use of online social networking sites is taking on an increased role in the lives of those who utilize the Internet, and these online communities can be powerful venues for social affirmation and personal exploration, particularly in the case of socially marginalized groups (Campbell, “Getting it on Online” 2004; Driver 2007; Macmillan and Morrison 2006). John Edward Campbell asserts that “...for the core group of participants, these [online] channels represent meaningful communities they can turn to in times of distress, isolation, or loneliness” (“Getting it on Online” 105). There is a degree of safety built into accessing these websites: one need not worry about a friend, coworker, or family member spotting them in a physical location, and the threat physical violence based on sexual identification is decreased when using these online spaces. Beyond the immediacy of physical safety, these online communities offer the opportunity for individuals who are socially, psychologically or geographically isolated to interact and connect with other people who share a sexual identity. This shared sexual identity as well as shared interests holds the potential for these interactions to turn into sustained friendships, “arguably [constituting] the basis of affirming online communities” (Campbell, “Getting it on Online” 105).

Identity in Online Spaces

It is no longer peculiar for scholars to believe that identity formation occurs in online worlds. Early cyberstudies often focused on the “mysterious” nature of personas on the web, failing to acknowledge that one’s life does not somehow become compartmentalized simply because a screen mediates the experience. The current trend in the study of online worlds acknowledges that computer mediated communication is taking on an increased role in the lives of those who utilize the Internet and that online communities can be powerful venues for social affirmation and personal exploration, particularly in the case of young people and marginalized groups (Campbell, “Getting it On”, 2004; Driver, 2007; Macmillan and Morrison, 2006). In his work, *Getting It On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality and Embodied Identity*, John Edward Campbell asserts that “...for the core group of participants, these [online] channels represent meaningful communities they can turn to in times of distress, isolation, or loneliness” (105). Susan Driver echoes the power of these “creative spaces of representation,” claiming that “queer youth cyber-communities challenge simplistic divisions between the virtual and the real, the imaginary and the physical, the textual and the embodied” (192).

While it is possible that multidimensional online spaces hold the capacity to foster individual growth and experimentation, it is also important to recognize that they still function within dominant culture. Mainstream websites do not necessarily offer the same sense of belonging, and at times, can invalidate queer identity. *I’m From Driftwood* appears to challenge this mainstream invalidation by creating a space within which LGBTQ individuals are able to share their own stories in their own words.

“Invisible” Identity

As mentioned above, online spaces held a certain mystique in the early years of Internet scholarship. Much was made of the anonymity and ability to obfuscate social markers such as race, age, sexual identity and gender in online communities, and the potential of this assumedly welcomed “freedom” (Danet 1998; Rheingold 1993; Turkle, “Second Self” 1984; Turkle, “Life on the Screen” 1996). In his famed work, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Howard Rheingold lauds cyberspace as a place where difference is absorbed: “Because we cannot see one another in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person want to make such characteristics public” (26). This statement not only implies that identifiers such as gender and race are somehow problematic in offline settings, but also assumes that users who participate in online worlds *desire* to “leave” such traits behind.

This utopian, and somewhat reductive, approach was common in the 1990s, when theorists were writing in the infancy of the web-as-we-know-it, prior to the current proliferation of corporate money into the development and regulation of the Internet. The majority of online spaces were text based, with MUDs and MOOs reliant on typed commands and threads in order for users to make sense of the worlds. According to interviews of MUD and MOO users conducted by Turkle, a commonly held belief is that these text-based worlds allow for more fluidity of identity than is afforded in offline spaces. As one participant notes:

You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative...you can just be whoever you want, really...You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see are your words. (184)

This sort of "freedom" from embodiment might be argued as being appealing to members of racial or ethnic groups that are discriminated against, gender non-conforming individuals, and even persons for whom accents serve as a detriment. A text-based medium may unbind, but what happens when the imagery of mainstream, legacy media come to dominate the web experience?

Chapter Summary

There are four chapters contained within this work. The first chapter, *Commodity and Control of the Queer Image*, is a brief historical situating of queer identity and community, and how they came to be considered a unified and singular notion. Power is linked with capitalism and control of mass media, image is linked with identity and recirculated within mainstream culture. This chapter argues that power and commodity control the representations of queerness in the media, and the increase in visibility is not because society is necessarily more comfortable with the idea of sexual difference, but

rather niche marketing and consumer culture are increasingly aware of the purchasing power held by queer people.

Chapter two, *Welcome to the Gayborhood*, illustrates the geographic positioning of queer culture, and the urban centric model that has been present in mainstream mass media representations. Through an analysis of popular media texts *Will and Grace* and *Queer Eye*, I problematize the insistence of television to center representation on white, male, upper class and urban models. I also examine the characters Emmett Honeycutt from *Queer as Folk* and Max Sweeney from *The L Word* as examples of how mainstream culture depicts rural queer folk. By situating the discourse of urban queer and rural representations within legacy media, I create a foundation from which to begin to analyze online spaces for identity and community formation.

Sites of Consideration, Sites of Contention is the third chapter of this work, focusing attention on two case studies of queer online social networking sites. *GLEE* and *Downelink* both function as social hubs for queer people, with high volumes of traffic and sophisticated interfaces. I examine these websites regarding their ability to encourage identity formation, community building, and the influence that capitalism and commercial ownership might have on the users.

The final chapter of this thesis, *Where are You From?: Stories From the Fringe*, examines the social sharing site *I'm From Driftwood*. The site differs from *GLEE* and *Downelink* in a number of ways, the two most noticeable being that it is not a commercially operated venture, and that it emphasizes the importance of space and place in the formation of queer identity. Within this chapter, I propose a new framework from

which to analyze *I'm From Driftwood*, one that accentuates “queer realness” and the affective nature of storytelling and witnessing to narratives that are often hidden from the mainstream (Cvetkovich, “An Archive of Feelings” 2003; Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive” 2008; Gray, “Negotiating Identities” 2009; Gray, “Out in the Country” 2009; Halberstam 2005).

This project examines the influence of capitalism on queer identity and community formation, and the subsequent urban centric representational trend in mainstream media. It traces how this commercial influence has carried over into online worlds, structuring queer online social networking sites through the power of commodity. *I'm From Driftwood* is presented as a negotiated position for queerness on the web. Its relevance as an archive of queerness from non-urban areas might serve as a starting point for new ways to theorize representation and collective movements on the web.

Chapter One: Commodity and Control of the Queer Image

The project of examining and critiquing the various ways in which a rural queer identity is articulated within online spaces cannot begin without first acknowledging the means of control through commodity that influence the creation of identity. The impact of commercialized image creation is a continually contested issue within queer communities, and is increasingly acknowledged as a growing concern with regard to how images of non-urban people are presented to a larger culture via mainstream media channels. The political project surrounding the lives of LGBTQ people has struggled with this sort of for-profit mediated visibility for some time, and is argued to ultimately be effected by the pressure placed on mainstream culture by the circuits of late capitalist consumption (Campbell, “Outing PlanetOut” 2005; D’Emilio, “Sexual Communities” 1998; Hennessy 1994). The creation by this consumer structure of a gay identity within the United States that might be viewed as largely white, male, urban, and upper-middle class, is a strategic move by the creators of commodity. This formation of identity acts as a conduit by which an affluent and attractive demographic profile might be generated, one that is ultimately deemed “worthy” through the funneling of niche and target marketing dollars (Campbell 2005; Hennessy 1994; Walters 2001).

This is not to say that cultural visibility as a whole cannot, and has not, had positive consequences for queer people. Quite the contrary; escalating recognition and representation of LGBTQ people in mainstream media outlets has laid the ground for the increase in (if not perfect and all encompassing) civil rights protections, an increase in the

offering of domestic partner benefits by employers, some forms of acknowledgement of non-normative gender identities, acknowledgement of queer studies as a viable academic field, and many more. These shifts in visibility and viability are in great part due to nation organizations such as The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, GLAAD, The Human Rights Campaign, and various other forms of localized, grassroots community-organizing efforts. However, the type of representation and acknowledgment that appears in the current popular discourse of LGBTQ identity tends to focus on maintaining these “potentially lucrative markets” where “money, not liberation, is the bottom line” (Hennessy 32).

Hegemony and Power

In order to understand how and why this queer identity is corporatized, we must first explicate the ways in which capital and hegemony function. A Marxist analysis of social theory begins with the central importance of ideological control as expressed through the now classic base/superstructure model of society. Within this framework, the base stands as a producer of material goods, typically represented by those controlling the economic means, the superstructure represented by the culture’s ideological and social institutions residing outside of the base. A principal concept of classical Marxist theory stems from this base/superstructure model, highlighting the fact that the ruling class specifically formulates the dominant ideas in any society as a means to protect its supremacy. Marx and Engels highlight this notion in one of their most cited passages:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is, at the same time, its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control, at the same time, over the means of mental production...In so far, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. (60-1)

The production of popular ideology is framed as a result of economic determinism. This functionalist view of Marxist theory assumes that economic structuring applies explicit dominance over every other *concrete* aspect of society, but fails to adequately address the ways in which societal participants must consent to this ideological power. Raymond Williams addresses the fact that the base/superstructure model limits the consideration paid to the role of culture in a society, noting that classical Marxist theory lacks “any adequate recognition of the indissoluble connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity” (80). That is to say, the nuances of how various groups of people interact with one another on interpersonal levels is entirely overlooked by classical Marxist theory, and is evacuated of any sort of formal critique of racism, sexism, heterosexism, or any oppression other than that which is class based. Despite this lack of nuance, Marx and Engels give a fairly solid foundation from which to build upon the ways we in which we understand how power and capital operate.

Starting with this strain of Marxist theory and moving forward, Antonio Gramsci is recognized as the first thinker to begin to fully address questions of the relation of culture and the interactions of people to the political economy of the dominant class. He notes that in order for the ruling classes to maintain their status, they must secure consent through a structured consensus reliant on the persuasion by the ruling class of subordinate classes to accept its own moral and cultural values. *Coercive control*, or control gained the threat of force, may be used, but it is most effectively gained via *consensual control*, or control through strategic assimilation. Hegemony can best be described via this consensual control, a process by which the dominant class does not simply rule via brute force, but rather directs through the subtleties of “moral and intellectual leadership” (Gramsci 210). This delicate domination creates a power structure by which the interests of an elite ruling class become naturalized as the interests of society as a whole.

Mass media is a critical component of the “moral and intellectual leadership” of hegemony. The success of this leadership can be measured by how well the dominant structures are able to portray alternative or oppositional pursuits as trivial and benign. Cultural channels may acknowledge the existence of the subaltern, but always with the intention of inscribing the dominance of the status quo (Williams 1977). Mass culture is not an entity created *by* the majority; it is created *for* the majority. Dominant imagery does not simply reflect society, but, in this regard, constructs it. In the United States, mainstream media outlets reach an audience of millions, while the production process only includes but a handful of networks. Television, newspapers, magazines, radio and,

increasingly, the Internet and popular websites, all lend voice to the construction of the ideals of ruling class by nature of this economic structure.

Queers and Capital

For some time, it has been explained that obvious and overt LGBTQ imagery was simply absent from mass culture for decades due to political reasons. While some have claimed (not entirely incorrectly) that this is because the mainstream feared the presentation of queerness to the masses might encourage and increase same-sex relations, it is much more realistic to conclude that the dearth of representation of what is now taken for granted as a visible queer identity was because this categorization was not actually all that prevalent, or even viewed as a legitimate form of personal identification, throughout much of the 20th Century (D’Emilio, “Sexual Communities” 1998; Walters 2001). That is not to say that homosexual acts did not occur—of course they did. This is instead to say that the creation of categories such as “gay” or “lesbian” is based on specific historical moments spurred by capitalism.

The acknowledgment of the vast influence late capitalism has had on the formation of this community in question is a fairly recent occurrence. Until John D’Emilio’s monograph, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970*, originally published in 1983 (with a second edition printed in 1998, including a new introduction and epilogue), there existed scarce literature acknowledging the historical and social construction of what is now assumed as a unified LGBTQ identity. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* sets out to disrupt the myth of assumed universal and concrete characteristics of a queer identity

based on “natural” conditions, such as the current biologically deterministic argument supposing that gay people are “born that way”. The notion of a biological explanation of queerness is actually, according to D’Emilio, ultimately the result of work done by capitalism (“Making Trouble”). To him, capital and commodity culture constantly struggle to obfuscate the ways in which the economic and political structure have functioned as a product-making machine. Queer identity might only be considered an identity because of the ability to capitalize on its significance as a previously untapped market, with supposed millions in disposable income.

Prior to the industrial boom, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the economic system in the United States centered on self-sufficient and patriarchal family-structured homes (D’Emilio, “Making Trouble” 5). Land was owned by the male head of a household, and the rest of the family helped to farm and produce from the plot. Though men, women and children all held different types of roles regarding the work performed, the family was still considered a interdependent production unit, and the survival of each member was determined by collective cooperation of all members (Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio, “Making Trouble” 6). Raw goods from family farms were used to create household goods on the same land where they were harvested, and there was little reliance on outside forces for material items. This system of household production began to wane by the early 19th century, and in the Northeastern urban hubs, wage labor began to increase with merchant capitalism. As more and more people were drawn into the free labor system of capital, the model of household production began to decline (Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio, “Sexual Communities” 1998). The importance of family as an institution of production

decreased, and the unit began to take on new meanings for emotional support and wellbeing. The heterosexuality of the 17th and 18th centuries, which held the sexual imperative of procreation rather than fornication, diminished (D’Emilio, “Making Trouble” 1992; D’Emilio, “Sexual Communities” 1998). Sexuality was increasingly released from the demands of the creation of a family, and increasingly seen as a way to experience pleasure and intimacy with others. As D’Emilio recognizes,

In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, a politics based on sexual identity (“Making Trouble” 7).

This early 19th century queerness-through-capital was truly the beginning of a subcultural identity, one that was not stable or grounded in any sort of formally organized way.

While there were some meeting places for gays and lesbians in big cities such as New York and Chicago, they were mostly bars, and sometimes bathhouses and restaurants, but there was not the sort of political and social strength that is thought of today when considering queerness.

The categorical, social and political groupings of “homosexual,” “gay” and “lesbian” as identities, and not simply sex acts, is described by D’Emilio as being a result of the industrialization and increased urbanization that occurred in the post-WWII United States. While George Chauncey’s in-depth 1994 work, *Gay New York: gender, urban*

culture and the makings of the gay male world, 1890-1940, describes the aforementioned inner-city enclaves, those unstable places where men identified themselves in regard to their preferred sexual practices, as coming into creation in the later half of the 1920s and throughout the 1930s, D'Emilio picks up where he leaves off, highlighting the fact that the real boom in gay self-identification happened after the second world war. Young, single men left rural areas to join the military and go overseas, and many were also placed in same-sex housing situations for non-military work. A number of the GIs opted to resettle in urban areas in order to find lucrative industrial positions upon their return to the United States (D'Emilio, "Sexual Communities" 25-27. The war unsettled traditional gender roles put in place by heterosexuality, sending women into the workforce, and creating situations where they could meet and interact with other single women. This increase in prevalent homosociality appears to have led to an increase in opportunities for homosexuality, and an increasingly stable subculture scene in big cities. As this subculture grew, so did the state's concern, and the hazard of "being gay rose even as the possibilities of being gay were enhanced" (D'Emilio, "Making Trouble" 11). The Pride movements of the 70s were a direct response to this dichotomy, a demand for safety, visibility, recognition, and ultimately incorporation into society as a whole.

This history of mainstream queerness has long hidden this insidious work done by capital. From the exploitation of labor, to the illusion of personal autonomy and choice, capitalist structures have functioned consistently to solidify the presentation of gay as a rational, identity-based category that we have been discussing. By tracing this historical

relationship of queerness to capitalism, we can begin to interpret the identity category and the ways in which it is impacted by the process of hegemonic control.

Queer as a Lifestyle

As discussed earlier in this chapter, hegemony works by subsuming the subaltern into the dominant discourse. It is by no means an immediate process, but instead one that occurs over a span of time. The consensual coercion has worked to neutralize the political power that the LGBTQ community was struggling towards in the early days of the gay liberation movement of the 70s. The 80s and 90s saw the crisis of HIV/AIDS sweep through the queer community, and while some groups such as ACTUP were able to effectively implement grassroots organizing strategies to combat homophobia in both federal and local governmental policy, this was a time when queerness was beginning to really be acknowledged and included within mainstream media. Though the first gay television character appeared on a 1971 episode of *All in the Family*, and 1972 brought the first recurring gay character on prime time (Peter Panama, played by Vincent Schiavelli, on *The Corner Bar*), it wasn't until 1989 that two (recurring) gay characters appeared in bed together on an episode of *thirtysomething*. This shocking-for-the-time episode caused a stir within the culture, causing a loss of an estimated \$1 million in advertising funds and was not shown again in the summer rerun season (Walters 2001).

Ron Becker notes that the early 90s was a time when American culture became exceptionally interested in the idea of multiculturalism (2006). Rhetoric of tolerance and diversity were ever-present, and what he describes as “Slumpies,” a newly defined demographic of Socially Liberal, Urban-Minded Professionals, help to explain the boom

of gay-themed programming in prime time. He estimates that around 40% of television shows between 1994 and 1997 had gay characters or storylines, a dramatic increase from any time period prior (Becker 185). Becker argued in an earlier work that the creation of what might be considered a “quality audience”, or a group of viewer-consumers between the ages of eighteen to forty-nine, with upscale taste and a surplus of income to spend on said luxury items. This idea of disposable income is a reflection of the economic security that existed during the Clinton era, a time that some political scientists have referred to as the “post-materialist moment” (Florida 2002). This instance of financial comfort within the United States, brought on by neo-liberal policies, deregulation, high-tech bubbles and free-trade agreements of the time, allowed for the increase in comfort with progressive attitudes toward social issues such as sex, gender equality, the environment and other “lifestyle” matters in general (Becker 2006). This marks a significant shift away from the earlier tendency of people to identify on the basis of class and occupation that was so present throughout the first half of the 20th century, and begin to lean more towards the social identity based categorization that is prevalent in the Post-Fordism era.

This Slumpy category, the articulation of a specifically socially liberal, urban and professional audience, then, appears to be a direct outcome of the impact of the processes of late capitalism. The obsession this group has with multiculturalism, and the myopic focus on “the inequity of cultural representations without drawing the connections to economic and institutional structures of power or unequal distribution of wealth” (Becker 198). The 1990s consistently depicted queer people as “chic arbiters of cutting-edge style” (Walters 16). This is evidenced by the prevalence of LGBTQ themes and people in

magazine articles and ad campaigns—*Esquire Gentleman's* “The Gay Factor in Fashion”, a June 1993 cover story in *Details* about relationships featuring two LGBTQ couples, the ubiquitous and gender ambiguous Calvin Klein CKOne ads, the August 1993 cover of *Vanity Fair*, featuring a hyper-masculine k.d. lang being shaved by a hyper-feminine Cindy Crawford, bringing the butch-femme dynamic into grocery store magazine stands across middle America, only to name but a few—all serving as an illustration of the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) consumption of queerness as a cultural code, all while ignoring the stark reality of inequity in matters of employment, housing, health care and more, experienced by queer people within the United States. As Walters notes, “Gay as chic can be used in ways that deflect attention away from more substantive concerns about lesbian and gay civil rights” (17). Clearly, it has been used with precisely this strategy.

This is the power by which capital encourages the identity category of queerness to exist as one of commodity, rather than of real institutional power. Through this process of turning actual people into commodities, both through the selling of physical goods (magazines, clothing, perfume, etc.) and via the “choice” of being able to buy into an “alternative lifestyle” on account of this multitude of consumer goods, gay people have been embraced by the profit machine and given some degree of legitimacy within dominant culture. Hennessy summarizes the danger of these lifestyle consumer choices and their conflation with true cultural power, saying that

“Lifestyle” consumer culture promotes a way of thinking about identity as malleable because open to more and more consumer choices rather than

shaped by moral codes or rules. In this way, “lifestyle” identities can seem to endorse the breakup of old hierarchies in favor of the rights of individuals to enjoy new pleasures without moral censure. While the coherent individual has not been displaced, increasingly new urban lifestyles promise a decentering of identity by way of consumer practices which announce that styles of life can be purchased in clothes, leisure activities, household items, and bodily dispositions can all dissolve fixed status groups. (Hennessy 58)

In this sense, consumption is experienced as more than a simple act of monetary exchange, but also serves to influence the formation of certain tastes and reception that, in turn, might support more fluid identity categories. Products no longer serve as just products; they represent, and ultimately become, ideology. Purchasing power is not actual political or social power, however. Purchasing power is reductive and diminishes real people into monetary units, rendering them nothing but figures to be tallied in a culture of capital.

Logging on for Lifestyles

How, then, might this commodification of queer identity translate into the explosion of Internet culture in the late 90s and early 2000s? The simple answer to this question is, well, quite easily. Not much has been lost in translation, as the Internet has become an increasingly commercial arena, a space within which capital has been encouraged to flow freely and plentifully, over transnational boundaries. Though there exist a number of non-commercial gay websites online, their influence and public

visibility to the population as a whole does not compare to the number of commercial sites that have appeared in the past fifteen years or so. As queerness remains a profitable niche for marketers, the demand for an LGBTQ-oriented web presence will only continue grow. From the Gay Financial Network (gfn.com) to Out Magazine (out.com), queer commodity has effectively staked its claim and is taking up space in the online world, as much a part of the cyberscape as any other commercial entity.

Both John Campbell and Suzanna Walters have published research within which they analyze the presence of commercial content on popular gay and lesbian websites (Campbell, “Outing PlanetOut” 2005; Walters 2001). Walters looks at Gay.com and the Gay Financial Network, which, given the name of the latter, is perhaps the most obviously capitalist-centric of the sites she examines. She is particularly interested in the tenuous combination of consumerism, casual conversation, identity politics and gossip found on GFN, which appears to be natural for many of the commercial LGBTQ sites on the web. Queer online networks function in this manner, tending to act as more than simple information hubs. Both their creators and their users view them as meaningful modes to connect to all things queer. The domain name “Gay.com” suggests simply that: that it is the place to go for all things gay. With features on LGBTQ individuals, politics and policy, as well as regular columns, there is plenty of “real” content on the site to make one temporarily forget that they are on a commercially run website. That memory is never gone for long, though, as the website is heavily bogged down with advertisements from corporations such as IBM, VH1, AT&T, and American Airlines.

After all, no matter how much information a portal may provide, in commodity culture “all things gay” are always all things you can buy.

Campbell’s work is a bit more nuanced in its analysis, as he is interested in the “Janus-faced” characteristics of the websites Gay.com and PlanetOut, described as such after the Roman god of thresholds (“Outing PlanetOut”). He argues that these queer affinity portals have two faces, like the god, and maintain two clearly distinct identities that depend solely on the position of the individual engaged in a close reading of the text. These two positions are the “community face” and the “corporate face” (“Outing PlanetOut” 665). The community face is that which is presented to those users who are signing up to utilize the websites and their connection capabilities, and the corporate face is the image presented to those entities who pay to have their advertisements appear on the web portals. The tension between the desire for communities on the margins to have true political power and the desire of corporate America to constantly define new, untapped niche markets and increase profit margins is apparent in Campbell’s analysis. He bluntly states that these sites are “predicated on the imperatives on target marketing, reflecting a significant shift in the social landscape of cyberspace as marketers seek to render online communities into profitable commodities” (“Outing PlanetOut” 669). Though he does acknowledge that there is some sort of social value to be found within these affinity portals, he argues that the hybridization of the personal and the profitable is a dangerous cycle for queer people to get caught up in, lest they make the mistake of confusing purchasing power with real power (670). He believes that ultimately, commerce and community cannot coexist harmoniously.

This is a reductive approach, and it is my desire to challenge this belief that corporate websites can't, don't, or won't offer productive modes of community for queer people. The purpose of this project is to examine the ways in which two corporate owned websites, Downelink and GLEE, allow for the articulation of a rural queer identity, and the challenge of a non-commercial entity, I'm From Driftwood, to create a similarly rich and in-depth experience for the visitors to the websites. Though they are all drastically different in architecture and audience, I believe that they all serve the ultimate end: to connect LGBTQ people to one another. Two of the sites I am examining are, indeed, commercial ventures, but that does not mean they are to be excluded from the discourse of community building. Though I have outlined the ways in which commodity help to define the terms upon which queer identity is presented, I again argue that queer existence negotiates myriad oppressive forces in addition to capitalism, such as the institutionalized violence of heterosexism and homophobia. The purpose of an analysis of articulations surrounding identity and community in online spaces is to interrogate the various ways in which these constructions happen, and how they are able to intersect to perhaps create new spaces for articulation.

Just as it has been assumed by the market that "all the gays are men, all the men are white, and all the whites are rich," it is also safe to assume that, given the dearth of acknowledgment in LGBTQ literature relating to media analysis of a rural queer existence, all the rich also live in the city (Walters 285). Even when queer people do not originally hail from the city, often there is the narrative of the salvation that came from the urban hub: the gay kid who knew he was different, was teased all his life in his small

hometown, and as soon as he was old enough, ran away to New York or San Francisco to find solace in bars and bathhouses and drag queen pageants. While this linear trajectory may, indeed, be true for some queer people, certainly it is not the case for all. With the help of social networking sites such as *Downelink*, *GLEE* and *I'm From Driftwood*, Internet users have an increased ability to articulate their existence and identity, regardless of where in the United States they are from.

It is my intention to explore and complicate these articulations, and examine the ways in which the communities for which these portals have been created are making use of the sites as spaces for personal identity formation and community connection. I would like to remain optimistic about not only the potential for conviviality on queer affinity portals, but also about the ability for the users of these sites to be able to, based on their history as an oppressed group, be able to work within dominant power structures to negotiate their use and pleasure of the sites in question. As Walker points out, she, too, is hesitant to write these corporate sites off, noting that “the merger of gay marketing and gay activism is an interesting one, and one that cannot simply be rejected as the sure sign of a corporate takeover of alternative culture” (Walters, 2001: 282). Queer people have always lived in a place of negotiation, and cyberspace is no different. The potential for these websites to be spaces of not only dominance, but also of resistance, is to be examined within this work.

Chapter Two: Welcome to the Gayborhood

Geographical positioning of sexual identification is not necessarily the first topic that comes to mind within the discussion of queer cultural studies. Issues relating to identity, community, politics and commodity have all found their place within the canon of LGBTQ studies, but the implications of physical space still appear somewhat fringe within this discipline (Bailey 1999). Though there are a handful of scholars who have managed to make a career out of the exploration of space and place within sexuality studies—David Bell in the School of Geography at the University of Leeds and Jon Bennie in the Manchester Institute of Social and Spatial Transformations at Manchester Metropolitan University are two notable examples—as a general rule, the assumption appears to be that LGBTQ individuals are relegated to urban locales, and the majority of significant explorations of the queer lived experience, community building and policy focus on those people who occupy urban space (Bailey 1999; Castells 1983; Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio, “Sexual Communities” 1998; Forest 1995; Levine 1979). These historical and ethnographic accounts of the urban supremacy of location within queer cultural studies in the United States have focused quite a bit on the perceived importance of neighborhoods that act as hubs not only to house LGBTQ individuals, but also as centralized nodes for LGBTQ owned and themed businesses (Bailey 1999; Levine 1979). Frequently referred to as “gay ghettos” or “gayborhoods”, these locales, such as West Hollywood in Los Angeles, the Castro in San Francisco, Boystown in Chicago and Greenwich Village in New York City, originated as a physical and spatial reorganization

of queer culture. The result of the naturalized process of commodification and incorporation into “respectable” mainstream capital-centric culture, this shift of queer culture from “the bars to the streets, from nightlife to daytime, from ‘sexual deviance’ to an alternative lifestyle” has allowed these physical queer communities centered on consumerism to crop up throughout cities in the United States (Castells 141). This increase in spatial presence might give rise to a greater public awareness of the fact that queer people exist within society at large, perhaps also allowing greater freedom for queer people to traverse in ways not possible prior due to the hidden and secretive nature of LGBTQ physical place.

The possibilities for freedom are not to be overblown, however. The changing notions of what liberation means within the queer community can be seen in the various ways in which Gay Pride parades and celebrations have shifted since their inception. These parades might be best described as mobile articulations of queer identity, first held after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, marking a commitment to the resistance to oppressive institutional forces. Today, the parades are less political than they once were, increasingly treated as avenues to target brands such as Absolut Vodka, Miller Lite and Subaru to LGBTQ populations. In Rushbrook’s “Cities, Queer Space and the Cosmopolitan Tourist,” she discusses various municipalities and their initial rejection and eventual embrace of Pride festivals (2002). “The city governments completed the shift from repression or occasional tolerance to full-fledged promotion and participation,” realizing that these queer events draw participants from outside of the metropolitans center, an

obvious benefit to any city's economic well-being (Rushbrook 192). Queer issues might not be an issue for local governments, but queer dollars certainly are.

It is important to illustrate the fact that these visibly queer urban articulations exist in part because of their links with capitalism and commodity, as mentioned earlier in this work, and often result in the gentrification of gayborhoods. This process is a method of urban development (frequently referred to by the seemingly positive monikers “urban revitalization” and “urban renewal”) through which wealthier individuals and developers purchase housing and commercial properties in lower-income areas and create new businesses and housing options catering to affluent populations, ultimately attracting an influx of monetarily prosperous people looking to take advantage of the social capital involved in trend setting (Kennedy and Leonard 2001). This more often than not involves an increase in like-minded individuals and attracts investment capital, ultimately increasing property values, rent, and taxes within the neighborhood, resulting in the eventual informal economic eviction of residents with lower incomes (Brydson 2008; Castells 1983). Some view LGBTQ individuals as a way to measure economic and cultural viability of neighborhoods in the process of gentrification, the assumption being that where queer people go, money will follow. In this sense, queer identity and affiliation is interchangeable with commodity. Queerness is not simply a component of a larger, more diverse network and community. Rather, it “serve[s] as the maker of the cosmopolitan nature of the metropolis” (Rushbrook 190). Queer identity, then, becomes innately urban.

Though it should be noted that not every queer person is culpable in the process of gentrification that begets gayborhoods, and that some organizations, such as Queers for Economic Justice in New York City, are actively engaged in the struggle against economic eviction, the identification of the LGBTQ community with these spaces of shifting economic structures and commodity are not to be underplayed. The association between queerness and capital in urban areas highlights the prior mentioned interconnectivity between an assumedly unified queer identity and urban sensibility.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and problematize this tight-knit relationship between urbaness and queerness. The steady rise in the depictions of LGBTQ people within popular culture can be linked with capitalism and culture commodity, and thus, urban locales. The representations of queer people that have been cropping up are often in the form of characters on television shows, both cable and network, and almost always exist within a cityscape. First, I connect Will Truman, from *Will and Grace*, and the televisual depiction of his masculinity to the assimilation process by which queer identity is incorporated into mainstream culture. Then, by examining *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* as a tool to reinforce straight masculinity, I hope to illustrate the ways in which queer labor is used to uphold straight identity. Also acknowledged is the role of product placement within *Queer Eye*, only further illustrating the interconnectivity of queer urban-ness and commodity culture.

Despite the ways in which popular culture might try to elide queers who hail from non-urban space from the larger conversation, there are always undoubtedly one or two exceptions to the rule. Within this chapter, I will discuss two of these exceptions: Emmett

Honeycutt (Peter Paige) from Showtime's *Queer as Folk* and Max Sweeny (Daniela Sea) from Showtime's *The L Word*. Both of these characters trace the typical small-town-to-big-city queer migration trajectory, escaping their oppressive originations in favor of the freedom of the metropolis. Though both Emmett and Max are characters that were popular and present through most of both show's runs, I will illustrate the ways in which their country roots serve to isolate them within the narrative of these urban centric narratives. By analyzing these representations, I hope to reach a place from which to begin examining online social networking sites as spaces for both urban and rural queer representation to exist in tandem, as well as propose a new online sociability moving away from the urban/rural binary and instead toward a non-essentialist queer identity.

Vexed in the City: Urban Queers in Popular Culture

Examples of this connection between urbanity and queerness are found throughout popular media representations of LGBTQ people. *Will and Grace* (1998-2006) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) are two examples of incredibly popular primetime, network television shows that have managed to capitalize on the urban sensibility that has come to represent queerness in mainstream American culture. These two examples are relevant to this conversation because of both their urban-centric sensibility, and their uncanny ability to appeal to a mass audience. First airing in 1998 on NBC, *Will and Grace* is a sitcom that is set in New York City and centers on the lives of Will Truman (Eric McCormack), a gay lawyer, and his best female friend, interior designer Grace Adler (Debra Messing). Also prominent within the series are the characters Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes) and Karen Walker (Megan Mullally). The show

stands as the most popular television show with gay characters in the principal cast, having been nominated for 83 Emmy Awards, and winning 16. According to Nielsen television audience data, from 2001-2005, *Will and Grace* was the highest rated sitcom for adults ages 18-49.

Battles and Hilton-Morrow argue that this high degree of success is due, in large part, to the placement of queer content into the familiar format of the sitcom (2002). Putting gay characters into recognizable structures, the show "...makes the topic of homosexuality more palatable to a large, mainstream television audience...[and] by inviting viewers to read the program within televisual frames, *Will and Grace* can be read as reinforcing heterosexism and thus, can be seen as heteronormative" (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 89). The type of queerness represented within the narrative is that of a very specific demographic of gay man, and appeals to the Slumpy described by Becker (2006). This viewer need not be gay in order to connect with and relate to the characters, but rather represent "a particular kind of middle-class white man, ideally with a haircut like Will's" (McCarthy 97). Though some have attacked Will's character for not being "gay enough," it is important to try and avoid essentializing gay identity in this manner (Jacobs 1998). Rather, it might be more productive to acknowledge that the version of masculinity—*not* sexuality--that Will represents does not present a challenge to mainstream notions of what it means to be a man, and is therefore not deemed to be a threat. The positioning of Will's character next to Jack, the more flamboyant and stereotypically gay-queen friend, also allows Will to assimilate into the upper-class, professional and urban landscape through which masculinity is increasingly defined.

This sort of assimilated urban gayness becomes even more popular in mainstream American culture with the introduction of Bravo's hit series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (later shortened to simply *Queer Eye*). The show, again based in the metropolitan center of New York City, features five gay men, referred to in the context of the show and popular culture as "The Fab Five." All five of these characters possess various areas of expertise within which to help spruce up the personal lives of the tattered straight people they've been sent to make fabulous: Ted Allen, "the Food and Wine Connoisseur," Kyan Douglas, "the Grooming Guru," Thom Filicia, "the Design Doctor," Carson Kressley, "the Fashion Savant," and Jai Rodriguez, "the Culture Vulture." Each episode essentially follows the same format: the five men are in their General Motors SUV discussing their straight makeover subject, covering details about their personal life while making note of specific issues that fall within their particular areas of expertise. The five arrive at the subject's home and rummage through the individual's belongings, commenting on the home's décor, as well as wardrobe and food choices. After the initial critical affront, the Fab Five then escort their subject through various stores to purchase new clothing and furniture. They are given lessons in how to prepare gourmet meals and are given haircuts and taught how to shave. The makeover typically culminates in an event, such as a dinner party, and after the event each of the men gives a final tip before the credits roll.

There are a few important matters to discuss regarding the representation and subsequent popularity of *Queer Eye*. First, we have the highly criticized position of the Fab Five as entirely sexless entities who have been sent to do the cultural work of

supporting straight masculinity. Straight men are depicted as hopeless creatures throughout the narrative of each episode, unable to perform a simple domestic task, frequently typified in Kyan teaching the subject how to shave. Women, clearly, are not able to teach this task to their men, so it becomes the job of gay men to extract the most out of their straight counterparts. There is almost always a degree of discomfort at the closeness of so many gay men to the straight subject, and it is almost always the group's gayness that reinforces his own heterosexual subjectivity through the plotline. As Gustavus Stadler so astutely notes, the Fab Five's presence is ultimately "what jolts the guy into realizing his own straight sexuality in its fullest, most socially supported form. Because of the labor performed by ten queer eyes, he gets to come out as a straight man" (109). Being queer is situated within this repetitive narrative structure through not only the ability of gay men to improve the lives of their heterosexual counterparts, but also emphasizing the fact that queer people have the spare time to be able to do so. The straight *fantasy* of queer life is one without the bores of domesticity: there are no children to drop off and pick up from school and soccer practice, no nagging in-laws, no looming divorce, all of this with a fabulous sense of style (Stadler 111). Through the rhetoric of queer life as one unburdened by the responsibilities of home and family, uncritical viewers are led to believe that queer people who have this volume of spare time on their hands naturally spend it teaching themselves about fashion and food and furniture, and can't wait to share this information with straight people. In reality, the lives of most queer people look much different, full of unstable employment, fears of eviction and constant threats (and actualizations) of physical violence. By presenting the Fab Five as fun

loving culture queens with nothing better to do with their time than tend to the flaws of straight masculinity, the political and economic existence of queer people in the real world is obscured and taken out of the larger conversation.

Beyond the importance of the cultural work of maintaining hegemonic masculinity and sexuality represented by the deployment of the Fab Five within *Queer Eye*, it is necessary to also make note of the ways in which this show presents queerness as a wholly depoliticized identity. None of the men are dubbed “the Powerful Politico” or “the Amazing Activist”; rather, their titles are relegated to the dominion of marketable goods. By having each of the Fab Five maintain their hold on territory specific to products that viewers can buy, the show’s creators and sponsors suggest that what queers do best is shop and accessorize. The entire narrative of the show based around the premise of sprucing up someone’s life through the magic of commodity brought by queer people, who have an innate sense of style. *Queer Eye* goes one step beyond, though, and makes sure that viewers know where these items of queerness can be bought. Pepsi, Pier One Imports, Almay Cosmetics, General Motors, Oral-B and Disaronno are but only a few of the brand names mentioned consistently on *Queer Eye*, making the show as much as an advertisement for the program’s sponsors as anything else. In this queer corporate setting, “there is no place for alternative lifestyles, sexualities, or critical products,” and any suggestion of anything otherwise is wiped away from the screen.

Jaap Kooijman makes an interesting observation about this dichotomy, noting that while alternative queer sexuality is not allowed within the show, neither is “conventional” queer sexuality (107). He notes the fact that a commercial for the gay

male dating website, mygaydar.com, was pulled by the Bravo network after having aired multiple times on multiple episodes (it is interesting to note that this is a gay-owned and operated company, not a multinational corporation, like so many of the other advertisers that appear within the program and during its commercial breaks). The ad features a white man who is sunbathing while ignoring the gaze of a white woman; another man comes along, sits with him, and the two share a drink. There is no sexual content, not even a chaste kiss, and yet the innuendo, if it can even be called that, stands as enough reason to get the commercial banned for what was considered by some executive borderline inappropriate content. “Having five gay men restyle your wardrobe and decorate your house is appropriate,” but two queer men engaged in harmless, playful behavior is not (Kooijman 107). Again, queer people are fine when they are selling wares, but become dangerous agents of cultural upheaval when placed in a context where sexual difference is acknowledged and highlighted.

While these two shows might have helped increase the visibility of queer people in mainstream American consciousness, it is important to acknowledge the type of culture that is being portrayed. These shows depict a very specific lifestyle, one of urban sensibilities, hegemonic masculinity, comfortable wealth, and culture centered on capitalism. *Queer Eye* and *Will and Grace* highlight what has been described as “metronormativity,” or the tendency to conflate the urban with a certain degree of visibility of queerness, ultimately culminating with the insertion of these ideas into the narratives of queer subjectivities (Halberstam 36). When mainstream media circulates the same images and ideas, that of the queer subject as the culture maven and as the chic

urban purveyor of all things fabulous, the hope of gaining meaningful political power is taken off of the table. Representations and visibility, though increasingly necessary in our media saturated culture, cannot be substitutes for true economic and political justice. These shows can be enjoyable to watch, but we must also acknowledge that they also run the risk of minimizing and eliding real queer experiences from larger conversations of hegemonic control and oppression. When queer experiences get condensed into “The Queer Experience,” nobody comes out ahead.

Out on the Range: Representations of Country Queers

As has been discussed throughout this work, representations of queer experiences in popular culture have a propensity towards focusing on those individuals who inhabit urban locations. In the section prior, there was brief mention of Halberstam’s notion of metronormativity. This conversation should shift now, with an emphasis on the ways in which the metronormative influences how queer people from non-urban settings are imagined by and depicted in popular media. Perhaps the most common trope when thinking about a metronormative narrative is the queer migration myth. This story has been repeated over and over again in popular culture, the tale of the queer kid from a small town who moves out of the oppressive, violent rural landscape and into the big, gay metropolis, only to be greeted by a warm and accepting community of sexual difference. The country kid then sheds their rural past and assimilates into city life, where they are able to come into and own their true, queer identity. Kath Weston’s ethnographic work made a very convincing argument against this myth quite early on, noting that most tales of what she terms the Great Gay Migration of the 70s and 80s did not end in the promised

discovery of community, but rather an “anti-identification,” a realization that not all queer people are going to get along (269). Differences in age, gender, race and class situate rural-to-urban individuals on very different trajectories, often with very different outcomes. There is no singular queer narrative, no matter what Bravo would like to have you believe.

Just as there is no singular queer narrative, there is no particular way to understand rural queer identity. Although the majority of academic work on queers and spatial relations centers on metropolitan contexts, the past two decades have provided an increasing interest in geographies of queerness that don’t center on urbanity, varying greatly in scope, from the discussion of depictions of rural genders in advertising campaigns, to the various ways in which rural queer people utilize online communities (Bell, “Queer Country” 1995; Brandth 1995; Doan 2007; Gray 2009; Knopp and Brown 2003; Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton, 2000). Despite the differences in range, there are reoccurring themes throughout these works: community, difference, movement and representation (Bell “Revisited” 2006). Many of the pieces discussing themes of community often focus on queer people who have made the aforementioned migration into the city, but an increasing number are focusing on the formal and informal ways in which rural queers are sustaining a queer-country connectivity with one another (Bonfitto 1997; Gray 2009; Kirkey and Forsyth 2001). Of particular note is the extended study of queer community formation in Western Massachusetts by Vincent Bonfitto. His work traces the forces by which community and identity come into being, and influence one another. He discusses the impact of urban identity politics in a neo-liberal era, and how

these political notions have seeped into the Connecticut Valley, creating a climate of increasing tolerance and awareness of LGBTQ issues. Also of note is the work done by Kirkey and Forsyth, which illustrates significant differences in the communities of rural gay men and lesbians (2001). While the lives of gay men in the country tend to center around the domestic, and the lives of lesbians tended towards that of the lesbian separatist political framework, these researchers trace not only the history of these separate communities, but also how they have managed to work together over time for both personal and political reasons. The study is also interesting in that while highlighting the shift of a particular community to one of more collective agreement and cooperation, it also helps illustrate the social and political climate within the United States over a period of time.

The variance of communities in rural queer studies lends itself to a conversation of the topic of difference that is inevitable when speaking about rurality. Binaric comparisons between urban/rural are almost always deployed, frequently as visibility/invisibility, comfort/discomfort, closeness/distance, education/ignorance, and more. Rural difference is the measure by which the country figure is signified, being carefully sculpted into “a foil for middle-class social mores, defining modern norms against perceived abnormality of a liminal subject whose sexuality, gender, class and race are distinctly ‘other’” (Mason 42). Gender identities in rural areas have been the subject of much examination, often focusing on the flexibility of roles for women within non-urban settings (Little 2006). She notes that within rural familial dynamics, younger women are allowed an increasing amount of freedom with regard to domestic tasks and

assumed gender roles within the family. It is not uncommon for daughters to take on tasks such as chopping wood or hunting, jobs that might be considered stereotypically “masculine” (Little 369). Carol Mason also describes a more troubling sort of gender difference, one that is marked on people from non-urban places and that blurs the innate characteristics often thought of as either distinctly “male” or “female” (43). This sort of gender ambiguity represents a threat to the hegemonic structure of the urban queer capitalist model.

Race and class are also inherent differences in the rural/urban dichotomy. Though Mason’s example of the rural hillbilly is a white figure, she notes that the pre-modern and backwards implications of this illustration allow for a particular racial status of not-the-right-kind-of-white to be applied (43). By comparing and contrasting the media created narratives of two hillbilly military women, Jessica Lynch and Lyndie England, she highlights the ways in which this racial positioning might be utilized as hero or heretic, depending on the situation. The flexibility of application of difference in rural subjects perhaps illustrates why they often hold a maligned position within popular culture; it’s an easy story to tell. Often hidden and overlooked, class is another difference that must be discussed when considering the dynamics of rural locales. The United States is a particularly salient example when discussing the impact of hidden poverty and spatial inequity. The focus tends towards a more “dangerous” (read: black and Latino) form of inner-city poverty and policy is typically created for an urban model. The often-ignored version of rural poverty is less dangerous, and so less resources wind up being devoted to ending the structured cycle. “To the extent that it is considered at all, rural poverty

is...associated with hard luck and hard times,” connoting a romanticized image of self-reliance that has little to do with the reality of non-urban living (Tickamyer 413). The rapid industrialization and urbanization of the United States due to late capitalism has left huge pockets of poverty throughout rural parts of the nation, only serving to further dichotomize the ways in which the city and the country are discussed when engaged in tandem (Panelli 73).

Perhaps because of this cycle of poverty, perhaps in spite of it, the third common theme when discussing rurality and queerness is movement. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the most common trope of rural queer migration is that of the country kid who relocates to the gay mecca (Weston 1995). Though this has been the focal point of most of the migration literature, I believe this conversation would be remiss without making note of many of the reverse migrations that have been discussed throughout queer rural literature. Most frequent are the studies done of lesbian separatist groups from the 1960s and beyond (Kirkey and Forsyth 2001). An example of this reverse lesbian migration that is consistent in relevance is the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF) that happens every year in August on a 600+ acre tract of land in Hart, Michigan. Women from all over the world migrate out to “the land” every year for a week long, women-only collective experience. The construction of the rural idyll that occurs at MWMF is not new. There is a similar movement within gay male communities, called the Radical Faerie Movement (Walker 1997). The construction of a rural space that allows people to escape the confines of civilization and find themselves in a place where “same-sex love is no longer seen as a crime against nature, but as a natural expression of

passion,” is a theme that is common in queer rural trajectories (Gorman-Murray, et al 2002: 2; Horton 2008). Bell also discusses the sexual practices of men in the United Kingdom who escape to the country for weekend trysts (Bell, “Revisited” 2006). This romanticized view of the country is a far cry from the violent and oppressive regime of small-town life that is commonly discussed when the country is brought into conversations.

Halberstam has an especially interesting take on the reverse migration narrative, and uses the constructed archive of Brandon Teena, a transgendered man who was murdered in Falls City, Nebraska in 1993, as an example of queer(ing) rural movement. Noting that many urban queer people reacted to Teena’s murder with a “*we-saw-that-coming*” attitude, Halberstam highlights the fact that Teena was originally from a *city*—Lincoln, Nebraska—and that he only had minimal success in his passing as a man full time. It was not until he moved to the small town of Falls City that he was able to pass entirely as a man without hormone treatment or elective surgery:

The small town can accommodate some performances even as it is a dangerous place for others—for example, an exhibition of normative masculinity in a transgender man may go unnoticed while an overt and public demonstration of non-normative gendering may be severely and frequently punished. (Halberstam 43)

His ability to blend was easy in Falls City was primarily because his gender presentation read as male. The urban-to-rural flight of Brandon Teena also illustrates the reliance that many people in small towns have on their community, as his reason for moving in the

first place was to be with friends, causing the dominant urban coming out and finding community narrative into question (Halberstam 2005). By troubling the outsider assumption of queer people in the country, Halberstam is creating space within which an expanded notion of queerness is able to form.

This discussion of the Brandon Teena story is a starting point from which to begin speaking about the issue of representation in the rural queer imaginary. The Academy Award winning film, *Boys Don't Cry*, was based on the life and death of Brandon, a complicated and somewhat problematic issue with regards to how we view country queers in mainstream culture. Both Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard, who was beaten and left for dead outside of Laramie, WY in 1998 and whose life and death the play and film *The Laramie Project* are based upon, are individuals on whom the history of LGBTQ people in the country have hinged, both serving as tragic examples of what happens when queer people don't move to the city and assimilate.

Despite the fact that there is no one way to be queer, popular culture products continue to portray the lives of queer people in non-urban locations as ultimately ending violently, most recently, perhaps, in 2005's box office success *Brokeback Mountain*. Directed by Ang Lee, this is the story of two cowboys in the Wyoming mountains, Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), who are white, rugged, handsome, straight-acting and in a tenuous relationship with one another. The two initially meet when they are both hired for the summer to herd sheep, and after spending weeks alone in the mountains together, they emotionally and physically bond. The summer ends, but their relationship does not, Ennis and Jack meeting up for occasional

trysts disguised as fishing trips over the next eighteen years. At the end of what proves to be their final trip to Brokeback Mountain together, Ennis informs Jack that he won't be able to make their next scheduled encounter because of a work obligation. The two argue because of Jack's frustration of not seeing his lover on a regular basis, and then leave, never seeing one another again. Ennis learns of Jack's death when a postcard he sent his lover is returned with a stamp on it, reading "Deceased". Ennis learns that Jack was killed by an exploding tire, but a scene of three men beating him to death with a tire iron, assumedly because of his sexual orientation, appears on screen. Regardless of what the truth is, the moral remains the same: queers in the country are going to get what is coming to them. Though these stories of Brandon, Matthew and Jack lend themselves to drama, they are not exemplary of what is often presented as a unified rural queer experience. As John Howard said in a 2006 dossier on queer responses to *Brokeback Mountain*,

Just as we shouldn't allow smug urban condescension to displace homophobic violence onto the hinterlands, just as we shouldn't permit Lee to equate what he calls the 'toughness' and 'conservativeness' of the countryside with a uniform, timeless hostility to queers. (102)

Plenty of queer people are out and comfortable in the rural landscape, and to have urban storytellers create sad stories saying otherwise is an unfair and inaccurate representation.

That being said, not all images of rural queerness are actually as tragic as the ones mentioned about. Unfortunately, however, most are as problematic. Within this section, I will discuss two characters from two incredibly popular queer themed cable television

shows, Emmett Honeycutt (Peter Paige) from *Queer as Folk* and Max Sweeney (Daniela Sea) from *The L Word*. Both shows aired on the premium cable network Showtime, with *QAF* airing from 2000-2005 and *The L Word* airing from 2004-2009. *QAF* was based off of a British television show of the same name created in 1999 by Russell T. Davies, and was adapted for North American viewers one year later. Both shows were extremely successful, at one point or another both being Showtime's number one show, prompting many queer bars throughout the United States to host "viewing parties" for both series.

Queer As Folk Centers around the lives and experiences of a group of six gay men who live in the urban hub of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Four of the six men are from the Pittsburgh area, except for one who is from New York City, and another, Emmett Honeycutt, who hails from Hazelhurst, Mississippi. Emmett is the object of analysis within this conversation, as he is the only member of the group of friends who is not from a city and is often placed in the rural-outsider position within the show's narrative. He left his hometown of Hazelhurst as soon as he was old enough, and relocated to Pittsburgh. Emmett is an interesting choice to have represent the rural other within this narrative, as he is the most flamboyant of the characters on *QAF*. His swish often sets him apart from his urban cohort, who all fit into the straight-acting category. Emmett's queenish tendencies are often referenced when he tells stories about being back home in Mississippi, and it is assumed that his non-conforming masculinity is one of the reasons why he chose to move to the city. It is assumed that rural locales don't deal well with fluidity in gender identity, and Emmett's perceived femininity (he often refers to himself as a "Mary" throughout the show) would not have been welcomed in his hometown

(Brandth 1995). The fact that his form of masculinity does not fit in with the other men he is friends with is a process by which the narrative is able to keep Emmett in the constant liminal space that popular culture has set aside for rural queerness. In the fourth episode of the second season, Emmett recounts how when he first moved to Pittsburgh, he didn't know anyone, but somehow found his way to a gay bar.

This story follows the country-to-city migration narrative that Weston documented in the early 90s, where wayward queer youth move to the city hoping to find community (1995). Though Weston notes that this narrative is not consistent, and that many rural queer folks who relocate to the city do not find themselves in comfortable territory, Emmett clearly takes to Pittsburgh like a gay fish to water. He tells Justin Taylor (Randy Harrison) about being taken in by Godiva, the city's most famous drag queen, and finding his place in the unfamiliar urban territory. Emmett is marked with a thick Southern drawl, and often tells stories beginning with, "back home in Hazelhurst," always maintaining a connection to his Southern roots. He consistently reminds his friends and the viewers that he is not from 'round these parts.

Though there are multiple instances where Emmett references being from Hazelhurst and the country in general, some of the most striking moments where class difference occurs is in the second season's seventeenth episode. In one scene, Emmett is sitting in a diner booth with Ted Schmidt (Scott Lowell), Michael Novatny (Hal Sparks) and Brian Kinney (Gale Harold), while balancing his checkbook:

Emmett: You know, the good thing about not balancing your checkbook is that when you finally do, you get to relive all your purchases. Ooh, the Pleasure Vault!

(Ted glares disapprovingly)

Ted: Alright, let me see...No. No. Alright, you know, in the future, balance before you buy.

(Emmett smiles sheepishly.)

Ted: How much is it going to cost me this time?

Emmett: Um...fifty? But...closer to eighty if I want to turn my phone back on.

Michael: Try a hundred if you'd like to pay half the electric. (Episode 2.17)

The comments and body language given by the group in this scene imply that this is a recurring theme with regard to Emmett. He is a simple country boy who just isn't good with money. Ted's willingness to cover his expenses, for what appears to be not the first time, imply that Emmett can't take care of himself, that he is a victim of his rural circumstance, and this is to be expected when the country boy finds himself in the big city. Try as he might to succeed in the urban world, Emmett faces the constant shaming reminded that his struggle for respectability is in vain (Hartigan 98).

Later in this episode, while Emmett is checking his balance at the ATM, he realizes that his account says he has an extra ten million dollars in it. Rather than contacting his bank to inquire about the potential of an accounting error on their end, Emmett checks the balance by withdrawing three hundred dollars from his account. When all of the men meet up at the gayborhood bar, Emmett shares his wealth by

offering to buy a round of drinks for his friends. Incredulous at the waste of his money, Ted implies that it's not a surprise that Emmett is broke if that is how he spends. This backhanded shaming calls attention again to the fact that the rural character cannot control himself or his funds. Emmett hands Ted a one hundred dollar bill and states that he won't need his financial assistance any more. When Michael tells the group that someone put ten million dollars into Emmett's account, Ted reacts intensely:

Ted: What?! I hope you didn't touch any of it!

Emmett: Just a measly three hundred.

Ted: What?! Do you realize what you've done? You've committed bank fraud. That's a federal offense.

Emmett: Oh my god.

Michael: I warned you.

Emmett: Oh my god. What am I going to do?

Ted: Tomorrow you're going to go to the bank and you're going to return every cent.

(Emmett looks shocked, then concerned)

Emmett: Do you mind if I borrow back that hundred? There was this fabulous Gucci belt... (Episode 2.17)

This scene again highlights a class difference between Emmett, country other, and the rest of his friends, the urban insiders. Michael's singular comment-- "*I warned you*"-- implies that Emmett was the only one who didn't know he was doing something wrong,

something potentially dangerous, perhaps because of a country naivety to which he still clings. Ted's paternalistic reaction signals a need for the country boy to be taken care of, since he obviously just doesn't know any better. Emmett turns right around, though, and makes a comment about needing the hundred dollars back because he saw a "fabulous Gucci belt." This is an interesting moment, because it shows the ways in which he has been able to assimilate into the city culture—through commodity. Emmett may not be a full-fledged metrosexual, but his proclivity for brand names and spending money signal to the viewer that he is trying.

In the thirteenth episode of the third season, and final example from *QAF*, the branding of the rural other becomes even more blatant. Ted and Emmett have been dating, but Ted has been steadily falling into an addiction to crystal methamphetamine. Their relationship is strained because of his drug use, and though Emmett is still trying to make it work, his patience is obviously wearing thin. This scene takes place in Ted's apartment. The night before, Emmett threw an elaborate party for Ted and his drug dealing and using friends, not knowing the extent of Ted's drug problem. When Ted's friends arrive and immediately pull out pipes and drug paraphernalia, Emmett is shocked, and leaves for the evening, not returning until the next day. When he comes back, Ted confronts Emmett about his perceived lack of decorum. The two begin to argue, and Ted turns on Emmett:

Ted: No matter how many fancy parties you give, or how much money they give you to give them, you'll always be a piece of trash from Hazelhurst, Mississippi.

Emmett: I don't need you to tell me that, because I tell myself that every day, but at least I am not a tweaked-out, fucked-out crystal queen! (Episode 3.3)

Two things are happening in this exchange. The first, and most obvious, is that Ted is positioning Emmett as “white trash.” Even though he doesn't say those words exactly, the implication is there. Hartigan notes that the term white trash is deployed in order to “maintain the unmarked status of whiteness” (110). Whiteness is perceived as the positive standard that one must uphold, and to be marked as trash is to call attention to the levels of status that exist within that category and the ways in which the identification might be tarnished. Ted is distancing himself from the “piece of trash from Hazelhurst, Mississippi,” asserting his class and racial dominance over Emmett. This illustrates that there is no unifying power in whiteness alone; the privilege exists within a complex interplay of race, class, gender and sexuality. The second moment worth examining is the way that Emmett has internalized his white trash branding. His acknowledgement of the fact that he is reminded daily of his lower status amongst his cohort in the city illustrates the “severe social isolation” that can occur when country folks move to the city (Hartigan 102). The fact that Emmett performs a non-normative masculinity suggests that he may have been called “white trash” a number of times when he was still living in the country. Ostracized by his peers because of his apparent gender and sexual difference, the white trash label becomes a mode through which respectability is extracted, and hierarchies are created. Though we don't know for sure what Emmett's reasons for saying he tells himself everyday that he is trash, we can discern that because of the intersection of his

rurality and his queerness, he has been on the continuum of otherness for a good portion of his life.

The final example of rural queerness in popular culture to be discussed is the character Max Sweeny, from Showtime's hit drama, *The L Word*. This show centers on a group of affluent lesbians in Los Angeles, all of whom have conventional presentations of femininity. Not an original principal cast member, Max was introduced in the beginning of the third season and continued to be a central figure until the final season. Max is a transgendered man, transitioning from female to male within the narrative of the show. The scenes that are analyzed here are from when he was referred to as "she" and went by the name Moira. Though I will be referring to him as Max and using male pronouns, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that Max entered the show as a female character, one with a butch and masculine gender identity. It is in this context that we are analyzing his experience.

In the second episode of the third season, Max and his new love interest Jenny Schecter (Mia Kishner) are driving to Los Angeles from Illinois. Jenny, who lived in LA prior, returned home to Skokie, Illinois to undergo inpatient therapy. The two met while she was back in Illinois, and Max decided at the last minute to flee the country life and try out the big city. The two are driving down the highway in Max's truck, a signifier of not just his country roots, but also his rugged masculinity. Jenny opens the glove box and finds a taser. She is surprised, but Max explains that it's nothing to worry about.

Max: I've never had to use it. It's just that...I get a lot of shit from people, and I want to take care of myself. ("Lost Weekend")

This shit that Max is referring to is assumed to be his gender difference. This is moment of acknowledgement of outsider positioning, perhaps negating Halberstam's suggestion that perhaps gender fluidity is more acceptable in smaller locales. While I don't think that this necessarily discounts this theory, I do think that it points to the urban power position of the writers and producers of *The L Word*, and signals the lens through which we are able to analyze Max's character and his relationship to his gender and spatial roots.

Later in this episode, Max and Jenny get a flat tire and are stuck on the side of the road. A large recreational vehicle pulls over, and an older man and woman get out. The man greets Max with, "Hey there, fella. Looks like you need some help." Jenny tries to insert the fact that Max is not really a *he* but is, rather, a *she*, but Max gives her a side look and plays along with the man's (mis)interpretation. Marked as rural by his flannel shirt and work coat, he and Max have an obvious rural masculine bond. He comes over and introduces himself as Hal, and his wife Martha offers fried chicken to Jenny "and her husband." Max introduces himself as Max for the first time within the narrative of the show, his gender identity never questioned by Hal and Martha. This moment of recognition and acceptance illustrates the aforementioned passing of Halberstam's example. Like Brandon Teena, Max Sweeney is read as male by people who encounter hegemonic masculinity on a daily basis. The rural recognition of Max as male is illustrated as somewhat of a joke to Jenny, as she giggles when Max is called her husband

and when he introduces himself as Max, signifying a difference in relationship to and understanding of gender through the urban/rural dichotomy.

The two continue on their journey, eventually stopping to use the restroom in a small town. Max is seen walking out of a toilet stall and into the lobby of a restroom, where there is a teenaged girl putting on eyeliner. She sees Max, and is clearly confused. Max approaches the sinks where she stands to wash his hands:

Girl: What the hell are you doing in here, boy? Can't you read? It's the lady's room. Get the fuck out.

Max: I'm a girl. ("Lost Weekend")

He leaves the restroom, visibly shaken. Jenny is waiting for him in the driver's seat of the truck, and the girl follows him out the restroom. She sits with two of her male friends in the bed of a pickup truck, and starts whispering to them. Max asks Jenny to leave, but before they are able, the group of teenagers begins to harass Jenny and Max:

Girl: See that freak there? It was just in the girl's bathroom.

Boy 1: Must be a faggot.

Girl: FAGGOT!

Jenny: What did you say?

Boy 1: I called you a faggot. (Approaches truck)

Max: Look, man, we don't want any trouble. Okay?

Boy 1: Oh, I don't want any trouble, either. I just want to talk. Get out here and talk.

Max: Look, we're out of here, alright?

Jenny: Dude? Leave us alone.

Boy 1: Fuck you faggot. Get out here! ("Lost Weekend")

The boy proceeds to open the truck door and pull Max out of the truck by his neck, telling him he'll show him what a real man can do. Jenny approaches the scene calmly.

Jenny: Let her go. ("Lost Weekend")

Calling Max *her* in this situation is a dangerous move, particularly when it is the revelation of Max's femaleness—not the presentation of masculinity--that elicits such a violent response in the first place. Jenny pulls out the taser from the prior scene, points it at the man who is assaulting Max, and he lets go. Max moves toward Jenny, and she pulls the trigger, leaving his assailant paralyzed on the ground. The two make their escape in Max's truck, with banjo music playing in the background. They have narrowly avoided serious harm—again—and are all too ready to get out of the country. They drive over a bridge, a symbolic goodbye to the dangerous and violent rural life that lies anywhere outside of Los Angeles.

One more stop before making it safe into the anonymity of the city, Jenny and Max find themselves in what Max describes as "your typical small town gay bar." When they are walking up to the dimly lit, unmarked, wood paneled building, the two get a

disapproving glare from a man walking by. This moment is then cut away from to go to a scene of the other characters at a casino night back in Los Angeles. The women are all wearing formal attire, drinking martinis and playing high stakes roulette. The juxtaposition of class as it is based on location—small town gay bar versus big city gay bar—is stark, and only further situates the opinion of the writers and producers as believing that small towns are places where queer people are invisible, live in constant danger, and from which they must escape.

In the third episode of season three, Max and Jenny finally make it to Los Angeles. They pull up to Jenny's home, and Carmen and Shane are thrilled to see their wayward friend, but seem skeptical of Max's presence. When Carmen offers to help the two with their bags, Max replies that the butches will take care of it. Carmen mocks these statements, implying that in Los Angeles, lesbians have moved "beyond" the old-school butch/femme dynamic of the country, situating it as backward in some manner. Jenny's friends further marginalize Max when a large group gathers to go out to a welcome home dinner. Everyone at the table is hyper-feminine, and as in the casino scene, wearing formal attire. Obviously out of his element, Max is wearing a cut off flannel shirt and jeans. Jenny's friends ignore him; he is literally pushed aside. When Jenny finally introduces him to her friends, there is a long awkward moment of silence, as her friends are clearly sizing him up and judging him based on his non-urban appearance. They sit down at the table and Max opens a menu. He notices the prices of two entrées, one is \$48 and the other is \$52. He is visibly uncomfortable and shifts in his seat. Everyone around him is talking and laughing, unaware of his discomfort. He orders quietly when the waiter

comes by, asking for a salad and a side of fries. When the waiter tells him what tonight's special salad is, he asks the price. The waiter moves on to Bette, the quintessential urban woman, who orders whatever the chef recommends, regardless of price. This contrast between class and cultures is painful to watch, as it places Max in the role of the country bumpkin who doesn't know how to order in a fancy restaurant and is worried about money. Continuing through this scene, as everyone's food is brought out, Max is shown eyeing each entrée with envy. He appears jealous of what Jenny's friends have ordered, and when his salad is placed in front of him, he is dismayed at the portion size and the fact that it is merely some sliced radishes and grass-like greens. Alice, noticing Max's discomfort, asks if he would like some of her lobster. He declines, and Bette also offers some of her entrée. He again declines.

Tina: Moira, don't you like lobster?

Max: Yeah. Actually, I like it a lot. ("Lobsters")

He is at the end of the table, and all of Jenny's friends are staring down at him. Obviously missing the point and oblivious to their lack of class-consciousness, the group, after a brief pause, continues their conversation. The camera zooms in on Max, and as he sits in silence for a few moments, turns to Jenny and tells her that he is going to leave. He gets up from the table, and Jenny follows. In their absence, the group ponders why Jenny would date someone so masculine, so butch, and so obviously wrong for her. Bette tries to describe Max's experience, saying

Bette: She comes from a place where you have to define yourself as either/or. It's probably just the only language that she has to describe herself.

Alice: Well, she has the language of those shit kickin' boots and that lumberjack walk. ("Lobsters")

The language used in this follows the trope of the rural as pre-modern, that somehow country queer people are stuck in an unfortunate time, and that all they need is to simply learn how things are done in the big city. Alice's comments about Max's appearance serve to push him further to the margin, turning his expression into a joke and minimizing his experience.

This outsider positioning that takes place with Max's character in relationship to his rural roots continues through the next few episodes, but eventually it trails off in favor of other storylines. Soon after this episode, Max meets some people in Los Angeles who "introduce" him to the concept of transitioning from female to male, and he quickly assimilates into this community. Perhaps, as Bette noted in the passage before, he did not have the language for who he really was. While this may hold some semblance of truth, it is not necessarily Max's ruralness that prevented him from being able to identify as transgendered. Any number of factors could influence that reality, and to turn it into a matter of urban liberation is reductive. As the show follows Max through his transition, it is interesting to witness how he shifts regarding class and gender markings. When he starts going exclusively by Max and taking testosterone, he happens to land a high paying

computer tech job and almost immediately blends in with the urban sensibility of his new group of friends. He wears button downs in favor of torn flannel shirts, drinks expensive coffee drinks instead of eating French fries, and has no problem navigating social situations in his new urban home. The way that urbanity excludes any sort of difference, and ultimately drains it, from Max, is a classic example of the ways in which rural queerness has been handled in popular culture to date.

No Future?: New Articulations of Old Narratives

Just because representations of small town queers have typically been based on dichotomous assumptions when compared to their urban counterparts, this does not mean that the depictions must continue to follow this course. With new technologies increasing in popularity, and their scope of influence growing exponentially, we might be able to view the Internet as a space where a rural queer sensibility holds the potential of exploration beyond the tropes examined in this section. The subsequent chapters interrogate the ways in which community and identity are expressed in online social networking forums, and how issues of commodity might influence the ways in which people interact with these technologies. What I am interested in asking is how might the Internet allow for new articulation of not just the notion of a singular queer identity, but open up spaces for a queer identity that is not white, middle class, male and urban? How do online settings remediate the coming out story? Does this narrative of proclamation hold the same status in a world in which we have constant connectivity? How might we be able to view websites as archives of a shared queer experience, while at the same time acknowledging and appreciating the variance that exists within the greater queer

community? Though this is a massive undertaking, and not all issues can be addressed within the scope of this project, I hope to lay a solid foundation upon which future work might be built.

Chapter Three: Sites of Consideration as Sites of Contention

Downelink and *GLEE* (Gay, Lesbian and Everyone Else) represent two LGBTQ centered online social network sites that highlight the current trend towards websites acting as a consumer and social portal, providing instant and constant access to some sort of centralized, if not broadly defined and determined, queer culture. These websites function as components of a broader network of online communication that links individuals from what has been, traditionally, a socially marginalized group together through digital means. I have chosen these specific sites for analysis because they serve two functions. Firstly, they operate under the rubric of social network sites as outlined by boyd and Ellison (2007). They consist of the dominant structures present in much of the popular social networking that takes place on the Internet today, making them comparable to other prevalent websites such as Facebook and MySpace.

Secondly, I am examining *Downelink* and *GLEE* because of their unabashed catering (in both a social and economic sense) to the perceived wants and needs of the Internet using LGBTQ community. Both sites specifically target queer audiences on their homepages, describing themselves as “a fresh online community for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other supportive individuals” (*GLEE*), and “an online LGBTQ community that provides ways for people to interact with others through network of friends” (*Downelink*). By selecting websites that are presenting themselves as specifically queer-identified in community and content, but that still operate within the dominant network structure, I am acknowledging one of the many ways in which non-normative

identities are able to seep into the mainstream, both effecting the cyberscape and being affected by it.



Figure 1: Downelink and GLEE Logos

The two websites in question, *Downelink* and *GLEE*, encompass what I just referred to as the “dominant network structure.” By this I mean not simply how the websites work within the larger framework of social networking sites (though this is not to be discounted), but also the particular and typical traits that encompass interface architecture of popular online social network sites. There are three major components that constitute social network sites, described by boyd and Ellison as

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (np)

Downelink and *GLEE* both operate within this organization of dominant network structure, with the functionality of both sites centering around the articulation of lists created by members, of other members (often referred to as “friends lists”), which act as

a communicative flashpoints embedded within user profiles. These groupings are a nexus for enabling and actively encouraging interactivity and multi-channeled communication within the interface of the websites. The ability to create blogs, bulletin board posts, private messages and leave public comments on other users' profiles, all serve as examples of the various ways in which communication and interaction are promoted.

Further examined, these social network sites also often require a certain amount of identifying information be provided in order to become a site member and create a user-profile, such as a username, an uploaded profile picture, birthday, disclosure of physical/geographic location, and sex/gender. While it is possible, and even quite simple, for users to fabricate information and create profiles that are not accurate, as is often referenced by the now-famous *New Yorker* cartoon captioned "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog," this does not seem to be typical for the average user. It appears as though many users of online social network sites are creating profiles that serve as online extensions consistent with their offline personas (Kendall 1999; Kennedy 2006). Through her study of the online forum, BlueSky, Kendall asserts that participants in online worlds have a tendency to "continually work to reincorporate their experiences of themselves and of others' selves into integrated, consistent wholes" (62). That is to say, as these Internet and digital communicative forums have continued to grow in popularity over the past decade, there is research to suggest that users of online social network sites might be leaning towards the creation of unified and (semi) stable representations of themselves. It is not entirely unfair to assume, then, that a number of the users with profiles on *Downelink* and *GLEE* are individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ spectrum in

their daily offline experience, and are, to some degree (if not entirely, at least partially, to some people), “out of the closet” about their sexuality. Users are drawn to these sites as a means to articulate an online identity that is consistent with their offline experience.

Quantitative data also shows that these websites are not necessarily diminutive phenomena. According to analytical data collected by web information aggregate Alexa, both *Downelink* and *GLEE* rank within the top 100,000 visited domain names out of millions of registered websites in the United States. These sites are the ones that are most frequently searched and visited, directing the cyber-traffic of information and communication on the web today. Numbers such as those found on Alexa give empirical evidence, backing up what many queer people already know: these social network sites are, indeed, an increasingly important communicative experience for the Internet-using LGBTQ community. Queer people are connecting with one another through these online forums. In turn, it is not unreasonable to suggest that these forums play some significant part in the creation of culture and community within the queer cyberscape.

Reading Between (On)Line

A close reading and critical discourse analysis of these two websites is an attempt to interrogate three major components of the queer online social network experience: identity, community and commodity. Identity and community are both terms that have proven difficult to define within cyber-cultural studies, as they are notions that are as tenuous and shifting as the online worlds within which they are articulated. Through complicating these ideas of personal and collective representation in online settings and the rhetoric that surrounds them, I hope to provide insight on the various ways in which

these queer online social network sites allow for certain articulations of identity and community, even in the midst of commodification and hegemony.

Questions I am interested in are as follows: Does the interface of these social network sites encourage an articulation of queer identity? How might visuals and text on user profiles enhance or detract from this articulation? What importance is placed on bodies within this expression of identity, or does the medium force an embrace of the “disembodied” ideal? How is the rhetoric surrounding community and shared experience deployed within *Downelink* and *GLEE*? What cues suggest this notion of community within the websites? How is geographic space tied into the online community? What role does commodity culture play in the articulations of community and queer identity within these sites?

Because this chapter centers on the discourse of online social network practice, the primary concern of the following pages is an exploration of the relationship between the websites’ text and the social conditions that they reflect. The online social networks of *Downelink* and *GLEE* contain within them specific dialogues of language and identity, and require a methodology as self-reflexive as critical discourse analysis. The goal of this process is to gain insight of the ways in which queerness is deployed in online social spaces, and how the rhetoric of individuality, community and the market might serve to influence these articulations.

Queer Identity and Identification

Downelink and *GLEE* are two websites that highlight the fluid category of sexual identity as a critical component in personal identification and representation of the self.

Both websites are presented to the public as safe, open and affirming online spaces for LGBTQ identified people to come together and express themselves. This self-expression comes by way of the creation of user profiles, rich with text, audio and visual cues that give other users a glimpse into the personalities of others within the social network. It is fair to assume that before users generate their own content, they must first become members and then explore the websites a bit to gain an understanding of how other individuals are utilizing the forums and representing themselves. *Downelink*'s interface differs from *GLEE*'s in that users are allowed to utilize HTML code within their profile pages. Some individuals appreciate the ability to modify almost every aspect of the generic interface, allowing for full, user-directed customization. Similar to the dedicated websites for popular social networking site MySpace, backgrounds that include animated graphics, celebrities, sports team logos, and more, are available from entire websites dedicated to *Downelink* profile modification. Music players can be embedded, links to send text messages to users' mobile phones can be added...There is virtually no part of *Downelink*'s interface that cannot be altered in some way or another to reflect the member's personality. As danah boyd notes,

...Technological information gives...the wherewithal to craft a profile, [but] the interpretation and evaluation of this performance is dictated by social protocols...profiles become yet another mechanism by which [users] can signal information about their identities and taste. (11)

Style and taste are subjective, and the ability to perform an identity through these profile modifications might increase the number of users on a given site, but it might not (boyd,

2010). Based on my observations and the fact that most user profiles on *Downelink* contained some sort of personalization through HTML code, however, it is can be said that the ability to modify personal pages is a feature that people within this particular social network site enjoy and take advantage of.

Both sites encourage a degree of openness about sexuality and, and many users appear to want to show their “pride” by uploading photos of themselves with same-sex significant others, or by utilizing avatars with LGBTQ-centric themes, such as the gay pride rainbow or images of gay or lesbian kisses. The majority of individuals on both sites who uploaded avatars and used those as their main profile images also had photo albums that included what are presumably photographs of themselves. These images tend toward the mundane: pictures taken of themselves in mirrors, pictures at a bar getting drinks with friends, pictures of users with their pets, pictures of pride celebrations. These photo albums are significant in that they illustrate a degree of authenticity of lived experience that is articulated within the interfaces of *Downelink* and *GLEE*. *GLEE*’s home page encourages users to “post photos and videos to share your experience!” Through these shared images, it is assumed that the users of these websites are real people, who live real lives, and are who are making an active decision to ground their lived experience within these online social network sites.

In his book, *Queer Kids: The Challenges and Promise of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth*, Roberts Owens notes that fear and isolation often accompanies queer-identified individuals, but can, at times, be alleviated through online modalities. In this work, his focus is specifically on youth, but these observations regarding the varying

means and ends of cyber-communications can be easily transferred to LGBTQ people of all ages, those who aren't yet ready to be 'out', those for whom being 'out' is not an option, or even those individuals who are out, but desire access to a larger queer consciousness. Owens writes:

Gone are the fears of discovery by the librarian, the operator, or the accidental meeting with your sister at the entrance of a meeting. With anonymity, lesbian, gay and bisexual youths can gain information about sexuality and recourses, swap coming out stories, discuss feelings, and seek advice. (153)

Participation in the greater conversation about LGBTQ identity is filtered through varying levels of self-disclosure, contributing to an experience of community that has implications for the individual beyond the online realm. Gray notes that these implications, as mediated through online technologies and website architectures, are "...model[ing] not only the dialectic of...broader public spheres but also the dismantling of private/public spatial dualities" ("Out in the Country" 106). Online social network sites, such as *Downelink* and *GLEE*, increasingly request and require "real" information from the user, such as name, birth date, and email address, and, as I have noted in this section, rely heavily on personal visual imagery provided from the profile creator. Though the levels of self-disclosure do, indeed, allow for a modicum of control, anonymity can no longer be considered the hallmark of the Internet experience, and the public and private dichotomy becomes even more blurred (Gray, "Out in the Country" 2009; Kennedy 2006).

Explicit image references posted in photo albums and on profiles serve as a sort of hyperlink of the users' body, bringing the physical back into the digital experience. Sandy Stone succinctly illustrates the importance of the body in digital communications, stating that "even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies" (Stone, 525). These physical bodies, and self-selected representation of these bodies, that appear in photo albums viewable on *Downelink* and *GLEE* illustrate but one step in an ongoing process serving a crucial function in the performance of identity. Bodies and their referents are utilized to project an image of who we are—and how we want to be perceived--through external cues, from facial expression to clothing. These corporeal projections are a significant tool in what is referred to as impression management, a skill that comes into being through the process of socialization and interaction (Goffman 1956). Because of the inherent public nature of these online social network sites, a certain degree of self-monitoring and impression management does, indeed, occur. People want to present their best selves, and are likely to self-select images that they think best represent who they truly are. What is also fair to assume is that the users of these sites are well aware that they are presenting themselves to a broad online audience as an LGBTQ identified individual. Queer bodies, like the bodies of people of color, have historically been sites of contention, regulation, violence, silence and spectacle, and this process of personal, self-dictated ownership and control over mediated image creation can be a powerful moment, suggested to lead to a sense of empowerment and self-confidence that might also spill over into the user's offline experience. Some studies have shown that online social network use has, indeed, fostered "online-offline crossovers that

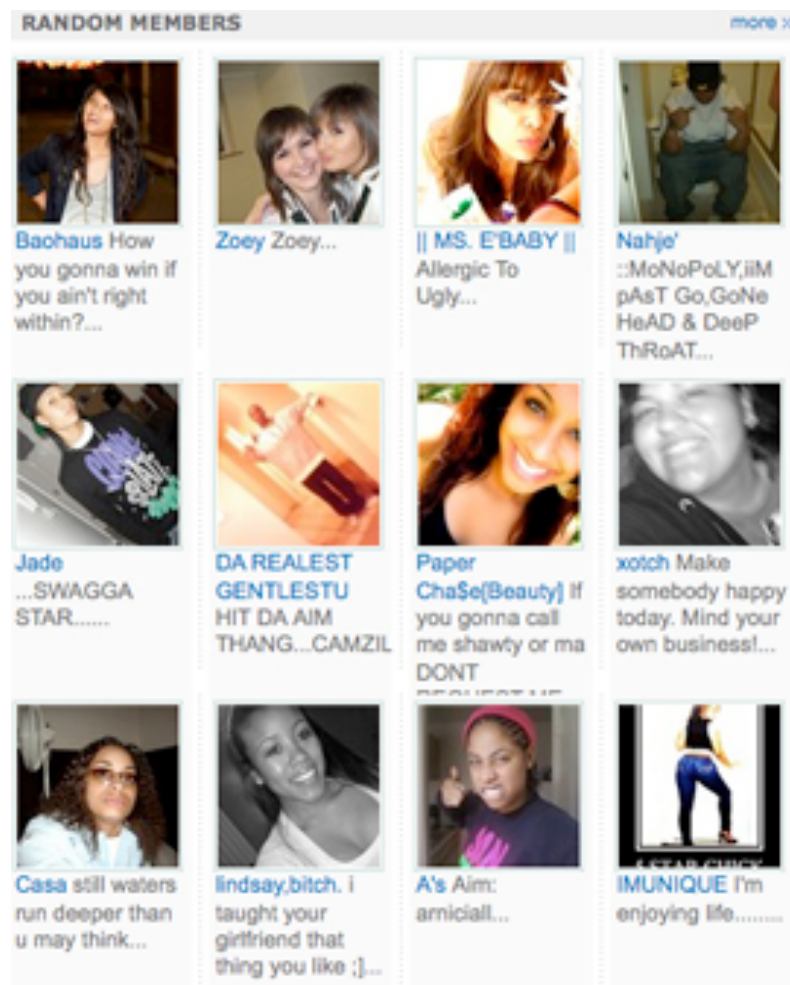


Figure 2: Random Members from Downelink's Homepage

LGBT members perceived to promote their empowerment in the political, social, educational and cultural domains" (Mehra 790).

How wholly true this empowerment argument is remains to be fully seen, as it cannot be entirely known if the empowerment and self-esteem occurred before or after the individual user first came into contact with the online social networking site. It should be stated, though, that through these websites and their ability to allow individuals to represent themselves through self-chosen imagery, an assertion of individuality and

articulation of queer identity, the potential exists to lead to an increased visibility and “normalization” of LGBTQ individuals, which has the potential to lead to empathy and understanding, which has the potential to lead to incorporation and, eventually, to less violence—both physical and psychic—in the daily lives of LGBTQ individuals, which is something that no one should be able to argue against.

Construction of Community

Downelink and *GLEE* can be thought of as operating as symbolic constructs of community through the amalgamation of social codes and values, as described by Anthony Cohen (1985). This symbolic production of community helps provide a sense of collective identity to the users of the social network sites, and includes the array of textual and visual cues located within the interface. The word “community” is used frequently throughout the boundaries of both *Downelink* and *GLEE*, highlighting the fact that these are places that view themselves as a unified whole for a collective LGBTQ identity. *Downelink*’s homepage describes itself as “an online LGBTQ community that provides ways for people to interact with others through network of friends.” This self-description aligns this online social network with what could be considered more traditional community networks, giving the site a sense of legitimacy through the association of a collection of individuals that users already know. Community, in *Downelink*’s description, is viewed as an interactive process and is articulated through the various ways members communicate with one another. They are offered a variety of communicative channels, including blogs, direct messaging, bulletins, forums, video and audio chat, instant messaging and video profile capabilities. These tools allow real time

commenting by other users, representing a re-articulation of face-to-face, in-person conversation, which stands as a cornerstone of community building.

Both websites encourage each user to collect friends based off of email contact lists, but *GLEE* employs the rhetoric of pre-made community as a way for users to “network.” Their homepage exclaims:

Want to connect to the GLBT community and tap into what’s going on?
It’s a big, wide world out there and we know it’s hard to find like-minded people you identify with, so we’ve done our part to make it a little easier.
Link up with others who have common goals, interests, issues and ideas in our Groups section and discuss what’s important to you in our Forums.
There are infinite possibilities for shared experiences through communication and understanding! (*GLEE.com*)

The claim by this website that it has aggregated a number of people who share similar interests, aspirations and ideals insinuates that it has produced itself as a repository of specific queer cultural knowledge—that they are *in the know*. The online social network presents itself as not just a *thing*. Rather, it is positioned as a dynamic and always evolving process, through which individuals are able to come together and bond over shared interests, identity and an assumed degree of familiarity.

Beyond the notion of interactivity, the discourse of place is found throughout the ways in which we articulate our understanding of the Internet:

The reminder from my Chair to turn in my annual report is *in my electronic mailbox*; I’ll move it to the *trash* when I’m done. *Where* did you

find that list of gay and lesbian studies programs? *What's the address of the NewtWatch Web page?*—all of these constitute metaphors for locations in cyberspace. (Woodland 417)

This is an interesting observation, as the discourse of a specific place—the closet—has been a central signifier to LGBTQ identified people. The closet metaphor has all but been discarded within the interfaced spaces created on *Downelink* and *GLEE*. There is no connection to this metaphorical closet space within which all queer people have to negotiate at some point in their lives, be it through family, school, or work. This commonality of inhabited space appears to have been left behind in these social networks, assuming that all queer people are, indeed living out-of-the-closet.

Mutable and ever changing, the closet is a spatial metaphor as dynamic as the communities within which queer people live. While *Downelink* and *GLEE* are able to assume some degree of “outness” by their users by nature of the Internet as a public forum, the reality is that queerness is still a constantly negotiated identity, and closets are a constantly negotiated space (Driver 2007). The inattention to this fact by the websites marks a certain level of privilege by those people in charge of the website creation. In the case of *GLEE*, this is Community Connect, a multi-million dollar online niche-marketing firm, also responsible for other popular niche community sites such as BlackPlanet, MiGente and AsianAvenue. *Downelink* is operated by the Logo Network, which is the Gay and Lesbian arm of the MTV Networks, owned by media conglomerate Viacom.

Commodity's Influence

Within the parameters of this project, *Downelink* and *GLEE* prove to be prime examples of queer-centric Internet social networks through which to highlight the ways social and economic powers interact in online settings. The integration of commercial structures into these queer social spaces is a common theme within late capitalism, suggesting also high stakes for LGBTQ populations, as citizenship is increasingly restructured to include access and use of information and communication technologies as desirable qualities (Wakeford 409). *Downelink* and *GLEE* represent an embracement of this cyber-citizen model, a sort of hybrid space of community and commodity. Users are invited and encouraged to come to these spaces and interact with other queer people, and while they are exchanging messages, chatting, watching video or uploading photos, they are also viewing constant advertisements for Progressive Auto Insurance, Subaru, various LOGO shows and American Express. Users who desire the communicative and community building features of *Downelink* and *GLEE* have no other option than to be inundated with advertising messages from various outlets. John Campbell likens this sort of target marketing to a panoptic surveillance, a meshing of the “community face” with the “corporate face” as a way to enable certain degrees of constraint and control (Campbell, “Outing PlanetOut 2005).

While much of the Internet has by now been commercialized (afterall, simple access to an unfiltered connection the Internet is something one must *purchase*), even simply signing up for a membership to online social network sites is an act of commodity. These websites operate through the funding of advertisers, who pay for the privilege of selling their wares to the users of these websites. One of the more desirable

features of advertising on these sites is the amount of user information that is gathered by each member as they register on the website. When registering for a user account, one must almost always include demographic information, consumer stats that are very valuable for companies looking to refine markets. Campbell points out that commodity based LGBTQ sites such as *Downelink* and *GLEE*

...effectively conceal the economic imperatives driving target marketing, solicitations for personal information are disassociated from their corporate aims and rearticulated with inviting images of community and romance” (Campbell, “Outing PlanetOut” 666).

Downelink emphasizes the community experience within their “About Us” section by explaining that

The foundation of DowneLink is to provide a space for Down people and their friends to exchange ideas, build friendships, and utilize local and nationwide services. As with any community, we hope to grow and introduce new and innovative services that will suit their wants and needs.
(Downelink.com)

On the surface, this message seems like a warm welcome from a group of people who genuinely care about the community it claims to be serving. The invocation of friendship and local community building are rhetorical triggers of acceptance that members of a systematically oppressed group might be wont to hear. However, the phrase “innovative services” serves to uncover the “economic imperatives” present within the architecture of the website. Though it can be said that data mining has the potential to be used as a

means to better understand and serve the needs of communities, especially communities who have been historically underserved, it is near impossible to ignore the profit driven interests of the corporations who are collecting this data under the guise of “community.”

GLEE is a particularly egregious example of the link of commodity and community within queer online social networking. Words such as “network” and “empower” and “professional” appear in text throughout the site, with the link to a “Jobs” section prominently displayed next to the website’s logo on the top, left hand corner of every screen. The website, owned and operated by affinity portal specialists, Community Connect, has marketing deal with Monster.com, one of the largest employment websites in the world. When members log onto *GLEE*, before being taken to their homepage, they are offered a full-page advertisement from *Monster.com*. The advertisement typically has some witty phrase along with an image, and below the image there are hyperlinks to different job postings from *Monster.com*. The links, when clicked, redirect the user to a version of the *Monster* website that is embedded within *GLEE*, a subsection titled “Professionals.” In order to get to the actual social network site, users must view this screen, and then click a small link on the top, right hand corner of the page.

This association of community with capital, the notion of professional networking as a means of community building, is a way through which capital is able to normalize its function. The targeting of LGBTQ individuals is a system of incorporation used in order to maintain order and dominance. For what they may be able to offer in terms of connection and community engagement for some socially isolated individuals, corporate owned and operated websites also serve to uphold systems of oppression. The increased

[Go to GLEE.com](#)

monster®

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Job Title	Company	Location	Apply
Instructor - RHVAC	Everest Institute	TX - Austin	Apply Now
C# Web and Winforms	TEKsystems	NC - Charlotte	Apply Now
Senior Information Systems Analyst	Lockheed Martin	MD - Montgomery County	Apply Now
Game Programmer	Adayana	IL - Springfield/Champaign	Apply Now

[View more jobs like these](#)

Figure 3: Monster.com Ad embedded in GLEE

commercialization of the cyberscape holds potential for queer identity to be driven by the availability of what users are able to choose from within a network's interface. It is not enough to simply not participate in cyberculture. Instead, cyber citizens "...must continue to notice and question what's missing from the various menus offered to us, and work to rewrite these menus in ways that include all of us" (Nakamura, "Cybertypes" 116).

*Chapter Four: Where Are You From?
Stories on the Fringe*

As discussed throughout this project, articulations of queer identity often fall into the trap of being dictated by the financial backings of media producers. From the success of big budget feature films to the advertising that appears within online spaces, it is fair to assess that queerness is of escalating interest to creators and consumers of popular culture. The websites analyzed in the prior chapter, *Downelink* and *GLEE*, are indicative of the types of representation that exist within mainstream online social networking outlets. Though these sites do provide important space for individual identity to be expressed and for communities to be formed on the basis of similarities, the corporate interests of the website owners frame the approaches through which these interactions and articulations occur.

I'm From Driftwood is an example of the ways in which community and identity might be articulated in online spaces when power is divested from large-scale capital influence. The website is a story-based venture, dedicated to sharing the experiences of LGBTQ people from all over the world in their own words, and is run entirely off of donations and a few small scale advertisements that appear on the website's homepage. *I'm From Driftwood* represents, perhaps, an alternative online sociality through which the experience of queerness is not easily distilled into a monolithic set of consumer lifestyle choices, but is rather presented as rich, vast, and varies greatly from person to person. As Walters argues in *All the Rage*, queer people may be more visible in today's media landscape, but that does not mean that they are necessarily more incorporated into daily

life, better known, or understood (17). *I'm From Driftwood* is a case that directly challenges mainstream media portrayals of queer people. Its purpose appears to be focused on creating a space where LGBTQ people are invited to speak for themselves, telling their stories in their own words, and add to the mosaic of experiences that inform a queer collective cultural consciousness.

Drifting towards Driftwood: A Creation Story

Nathan Manske, a copywriter living in Brooklyn, launched *I'm From Driftwood* in March of 2009, after having been inspired by the Academy Award winning film *Milk*, a biopic about the life and career of the first openly gay elected official, Harvey Milk. As noted on the “About IFD” section of the website, Manske’s inspiration draws much more from Milk the person than Milk the movie (“About IFD”, *I'm From Driftwood*). In an interview with Amber Marlow-Blatt of the weekly podcast, *Hey Brooklyn*, Manske describes an image of Harvey Milk in a pride parade that served as the catalyst for creating the website:

I was kind of half-asleep and in that weird state of, you know, between awake and asleep and where you’re just relaxed and ideas are kind of coming to you. And I was thinking about this image of Harvey Milk, and it wasn’t in the movie, but he was holding a sign and sitting on the hood of a car in the San Francisco Pride Parade and the sign said “I’m from Woodmere, New York”. And I thought that was interesting that the first openly gay elected official isn’t from San Francisco, he’s not from Chelsea or a gayborhood. He’s from this town out on Long Island, an

obscure town, if you're not from New York, you probably have never heard of it. Myself, I'm from Driftwood...and I thought that was interesting. What that said to me was that gay people are everywhere. Not just in the big cities, but from the small towns. (Marlow-Blatt, *Hey Brooklyn*)

This assertion of what most queer people already know, and what was a popular rallying cry in the 1990s ACTUP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) movement—that we are everywhere—is the model of community creation that Manske's *I'm From Driftwood* clearly draws upon. His website is a forum for “true stories by gay people from all over,” as is stated on the header at the top of the homepage (*I'm From Driftwood*). By calling attention to the fact that not all LGBTQ identified people are from these gayborhoods, including those queer people who are among the most celebrated and notable, *I'm From Driftwood* is debunking the mainstream myth of queer identity as being interchangeable with urban identity.

Even though Harvey Milk was no longer living in Woodmere, NY, he still felt strongly enough about where he was from to carry a sign proclaiming his personal history to those around him. In an interview on the popular gay media site, After Elton, Manske echoes this notion of connectivity to place and its importance to the creation of *I'm From Driftwood*, saying:

I'm not from Chelsea. I'm not from the Castro District. I'm not even from Austin. I'm from Driftwood...most of us aren't from gay meccas. We're from suburbs or these smaller, Middle America communities or rural

towns, just like everyone else. It burns me up sometimes to hear people associate the LGBT community with the two coasts and the "liberal Northeast." As much as some people might not want me to be, I am and will always be a Texan. (*Clanks After Elton*)

The declaration of an identity based on a place, such as Manske's assertion that he will "always be a Texan," suggests the crucial nature of physicality to the self that many



Figure 4: Milk and his I'm From Woodmere, NY sign (Source: IFD "About" page)

individuals feel, even when they are traversing within the realm of online communications. Despite the fact that much of early critical cybercultural work celebrated the assumed ability of the Internet to free people from the binds of the physical world, many current scholars argue against this reductive and utopian ideal (Baym 2006; Fung 2006; Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1984). The recognition of the interconnectivity of physical space with that of cyberspace illustrates the significance of *I'm From Driftwood*, acknowledging that the Internet does not create worlds; instead, it illustrates the fact that:

online spaces are constructed and the activities that people do online are intimately interwoven with the construction of the offline world and the activities and structures in which we participate...offline contexts always permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into the offline experience. (Baym 86)

The media texts that exist on *I'm From Driftwood* are the product of a community that inhabits and engages within a larger culture, both online and off, and though they might be viewed as separate, standalone works, it is not productive to remove them from the context within which they were created. The fact that *I'm From Driftwood* so clearly binds the greater queer community to space and place supports Doheny-Farina's claim that community "must be lived" and that it is intrinsically an experience that is "entwined, contradictory and involves all of our senses" (37).

Topography

As far as websites go, *I'm From Driftwood* is quite uncomplicated in its architecture, retaining a certain degree of small town charm through this design simplicity. The homepage has a header at the top that reads "I'm From Driftwood: true stories by gay people from all over", to the right there is a search bar. The search capabilities on the site allow individuals to find stories by country or state, gender and sexual identity. The ability to search by certain identity terms, such as sexual or gender identification, but not others, such as race, is an elision that becomes important when considering the social construction of sexual identity. Below the search bar lie links that connect visitors to stories by lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered people as well

as non-queer allies. Underneath the header is a bar of more links, directing individuals to the other components of the site: Home, About IFD, Contact, Featured Artists, Video Stories, Submit Story, Donate and Press. There is a banner ad that takes up the space below these links, above the main content of the home page.

Though this website is a non-profit venture, the fact that advertising is present is worth commenting on. The ads that appear in the banner are occasionally for some fashion of gay dating website, or, as I have encountered in my frequent visits, for the Trevor Project. The Trevor Project is a non-profit organization that runs the only national suicide prevention and crisis intervention hotline for LGBTQ youth. The organization's website also has a permanent link embedded in the "About" section of I'm From Driftwood. Within this section of the site, Manske describes the core mission of I'm From Driftwood as being focused on not only storytelling and community building, but also lowering the LGBTQ youth suicide rate:

There are gay stories from every corner of the Earth and I think they should be told. But why? *What does it mean??* To the gay teens struggling to come out and deal with their sexuality, who to this day still attempt suicide 4 times more than straight kids, it says "you are not alone." Other people have dealt with similar situations, families, communities and churches, and have overcome and are now living happy lives. It can happen for you, too. It gets sooooo much better, I promise. Hang in there, kiddo. ("About," *I'm From Driftwood*)

The last four words link back to the Trevor Project's website, creating a sense of urgency and purpose for these stories to be told. Should someone who is in a desperate state come across this website, read those words and click that link, they might actually reconsider what might be a tragic act and outcome. When compared to the advertisements found on commercial queer websites, such as *GLEE* or *Downelink*, one can't help but make note of the difference in core content. While the for-profit sites are running advertisements for credit cards, car insurance and other commodity-based goods and services, *I'm From Driftwood*, at least in part, appears to be making a very conscious attempt at the cultivation of a sense of social responsibility to the site's constituents not only through the content provided, but also through the necessity of advertising revenue.

Beyond the stated purpose of suicide prevention, the site also appears to have the intention of creating a forum within which queer people from all over the United States--and the world--are able to come together through the process of sharing stories. These stories are about not only where they are from, but also where they have been and where they are going, both geographically and metaphorically speaking, and hold a direct connection with the individual's sexual identity. The content of the project consists primarily of user-written and submitted text based tales, each title beginning with "I'm From..." and finishing with the insertion of the name of the town from where the subject of the story hails. Each of the stories deals with LGBTQ sexuality in one form or another. As Manske so succinctly states in an *After Elton* interview, "Being gay doesn't always define who we are but it is always a part of who we are" (Clanks *After Elton*). His point asserts that queerness informs the various ways in which LGBTQ individuals move

through the world, from survival strategies and emotional responses, to the much more mundane daily tasks in life, such as doing the laundry, as described in one story by J.R. Mortimer on the website (“I’m From Glasgow, KY”).

I’m From Driftwood actively solicits stories from LGBTQ people from all walks of life. The site also actively encourages stories that illustrate the fact that queerness is not simply a binary that consists of “in the closet” and “out of the closet”. When a site user clicks on the prominent “Submit Your Story” link on the homepage, they are directed to another page with a handful of guidelines, including “Make it a story,” “Keep it clean,” “Have fun with it” and “Think outside the closet,” (“Submit Your Story,” *I’m From Driftwood*). The most striking of these guidelines is this directive for users to “think outside the closet.” The coming out story is a narrative that is prominent in queer culture within the United States, asserting that there is a degree of ignorance associated with being in the closet and that enlightenment happens after coming out, that somehow life gets better and easier once one has proclaimed their sexual identification to the world, and that all of the problems that LGBTQ people face will be solved by coming out and being visible (Brown 2000; D’Emilio 1983; Gray 2009; Walters 2001).

These are complex assertions, however, and the closet is a complex psychic space. It is not a fixed position, and most queer people operate under a constant negotiation of degrees of openness about their sexual identity dependant upon the social conditions within which they live (Sedgwick, “Epistemology of the Closet” 1990). When *I’m From Driftwood* creates a request for stories that intentionally do not address the closet and its binary position, it signals a significant shift in how queerness is thought

about and presented to the world at large (or at least the Internet using population). As the website stresses, “Almost every LGBT person has a coming out story and every one is unique. But unless yours truly stands out, try to write a story about something other than your coming out experience” (“Submit Your Story”, *I’m From Driftwood*). This decisive move away from the centrality of the coming out narrative is a noteworthy variance in the way in which *I’m From Driftwood* presents queerness as compared to mainstream media texts.

Also included in the site’s structural design are visual representations of some of the stories by featured visual artists. On occasion, the illustration that appears within the text is an abstract work, meant to highlight certain emotions brought out by the story, such as loneliness, but the majority of the visuals are literal in their approach. They will often factually signify the closeness of a partner or friend, or highlight the distance between the protagonist and the rest of the world. Despite their frequent exacting presentation, these illustrations still serve to add another layer of depth to the narrative. Producing a visual corroboration, these images elicit affect and ask the reader to engage in a cultural dialogue of what the individual story, as well as the entire website, might mean as both a personal and political act (Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive” 116). The type of mixed-genre media text found on *I’m From Driftwood* suggest “that providing witness to intimate life puts pressure on standard genres and modes of public discourse” (Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive” 112). The varieties of presentations that appear on *I’m From Driftwood*, and the variations of queer representation that exist wherein, pose a

direct challenge to hegemony through making the private very public, and creating space for the subsequent affective response and acknowledgement.

Interactive maps are also present throughout the website, an attempt at illustrating the geographic breadth of the LGBTQ experience. *I'm From Driftwood* presents an interesting challenge to the concept of “community” in an online world, as the purpose of the site is not to diminish the spaces we physically inhabit, but instead to actually connect the online world with the offline world through the use of geographic place and visual representation. Different maps of each different town discussed appear throughout the website, appearing under the title of each story on the webpage. The representations are

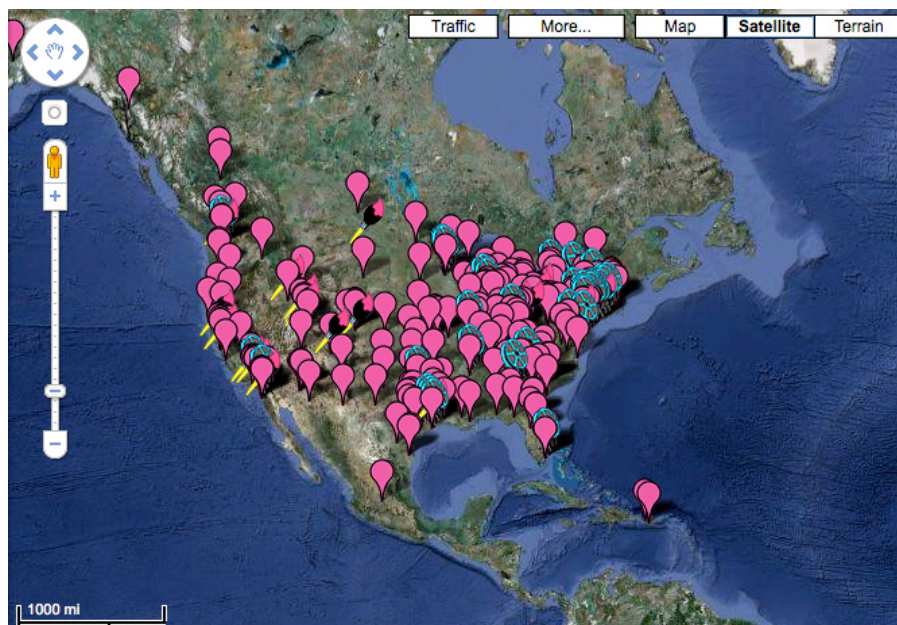


Figure 5: Map of I'm From Driftwood story contributions

used to illustrate the importance of physical place within the context of the LGBTQ

experience. Another map, this one of the United States, appears on the homepage to the right of the screen. Small flags mark each city and town from which a story hails, creating a visual trajectory of queer identity in the United States. This type of physical representation serves to connect the perceived ephemeral of the cyber-world back to the more tangible of the physical world, grounding the lived experiences of the LGBTQ population into a perhaps more concretely shared narrative. Though this inevitably raises questions about who is and who is not participating within this project, and whose stories are and are not being heard, the map remains an intriguing illustration of the geographic breadth of the queer experience within the United States. Spatiality becomes part of the process through this visual incorporation, as well as through the inclusion within the narratives, and is viewed as integral to the dynamics of queer community.

Feeling Queer Realness

The technical and aesthetic architecture of the website are but only a fraction of how *I'm From Driftwood* operates. It is necessary to also consider the various ways in which this media text functions within the larger discursive cultural terrain. It is my intention to examine some of the ways *I'm From Driftwood* might stand apart from other media outlets, particularly with regard to the knowledge and expression of queer experience, or “queer realness,” as is utilized by both Gray and Halberstam (Gray 2009; Halberstam 2005). Queer realness is “...not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its effects” (Halberstam 51). The idea of queer realness, then, is not to be confused with that which is presented to queer audiences as real. Queer realness

might best be viewed as an incorporated response to the hegemonic representations that appear in mass mainstream media culture, such as *Will and Grace* and *Queer Eye*. While these dominant images are presented to audiences as exemplars of the real queer, they are also consumed by queer people who are not necessarily relatable to these characters for a number of reasons—they're not white, they're not rich, they're not men, their gender is not binary—but who are still real none the less. For these audiences, the process of taking these media representations and appropriating them to into queer realness helps to carve out a space that "...offsets any implications of inauthenticity" (Halberstam 2005: 51).

Gray points out that the creation of a queer realness can be especially useful for LGBTQ people living in non-urban areas, who have come to view their existence through the recurrence of media depictions of not only what it means to be queer, but also what it means to be from the country ("Negotiating Identities" 1163-1165). More often than not, because real queerness is depicted within cityscapes, and the creation of queer realness in these locales often depends on this constant rearticulation of tropes that have been used and reused throughout mainstream media, queer people in the country appropriate these narrative, regardless of any direct relevance they might have in relation to their daily lives (Gray, "Negotiating Identities" 1163). Borrowing from media studies scholar Jason Mittell's system of approaching media as "sets of themes and patterns that surface across media texts," Gray proposes a method for viewing online communities that integrates not only how users experience the text in question, but also takes into account the "industry practices that consistently produce and recycle these themes and patterns" ("Negotiating Identities" 1163).

I'm From Driftwood is an interesting case to approach with this negotiation of queer realness in mind. Even though the website explicitly requests stories other than those that rehash the coming out trajectory, the majority of accounts in one way or another reference the moment of sexual identity revelation, be it to one's self, a friend or a family member. The frequency of occurrence clearly indicates the appropriation of the coming out narrative into queer cultural consciousness. That being said, there is no singular way that the coming out story is told on the site, and while many have a very linear and singular outcome, there are a handful of examples that illustrate the notion of queer realness.

One such example is the video story submitted by Elisa Mason, titled "I'm From Seabrook, TX." The video is three minutes and twenty-three seconds long, and is told in an interview style, with Nathan Manske sitting next to Elisa on a couch in what is assumed to be her living room. Her story is not about coming out as a lesbian, but rather about the shift her father made over time, from being a staunchly dictatorial presence, chiding her sister for having a gay friend while they were in high school, to ultimately speaking up and defending gay marriage at his 50th West Point reunion. This is, in a sense, a coming out narrative, one within which the "coming out" is not that of proclaiming queerness, but rather defending it from the cultural attacks that so often occur. The fact that Elisa herself never reveals whether or not she is queer is also of note when discussing *I'm From Driftwood* as a site for an alternative presentation of queerness. Ultimately, her sexual identification is not what matters; it is the larger picture of mutual respect and dignity for all human beings that is highlighted with this narrative.

Another example is the story “I’m From Payson, UT,” submitted by a user named Elliot Ryan. Elliot’s story is about how she came to realize that she was a transgendered woman. She discusses the importance of online communities and gaming in her teenage self-realization, saying:

I found myself playing female roles so much that people began assuming that I was a female in real life. My heart had skipped a beat. I knew it was unfair to lie to them, but I couldn’t tell myself to break it to them because for some reason I loved every moment of it. (Ryan, “I’m From Payson, UT”)

She goes on to describe the subsequent years of her life, her assumed identity as a woman named “Kate” in IRC channels, and how she would steal and hide her older sister’s underwear so that she would have something feminine to wear, something to ease the pain of having to live an inauthentic life. Elliot did not have the accrued queer knowledge to refer to the feelings she was experiencing as even necessarily female, let alone transgendered, but she still managed acknowledge them, and fashion some sort of survival strategy, perhaps in part because of the sum of her media experiences in online communities. Halberstam explains that this sort of queer realness, the creation of new or temporary gender categories, is a frequent strategy among transgendered people within non-urban communities, and *I’m From Driftwood* presents an avenue to address these alternate approaches (52).

Elliot continues through her story, revealing her struggle against what she describes as “gender identity disorder” and subsequent enlistment in the Marines. She

tells the readers that she served a ten-month tour of duty in Iraq, ultimately being discharged from the military for mental health reasons related to her gender identity. She ends her story by telling the readers that she is currently undergoing treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and is getting hormone treatment through Veteran's Affairs. "It is only now that I can look back on my life and see how many years that were wasted because I had no idea that transgendered persons even existed," she says. "Such is the trappings of a heterocentric society such as Utah" (Ryan "I'm From Payson, UT").

Though the coming out story appears to be present throughout the text, with her self-discover and ultimate personal acceptance, Elliot's story of gender awakening and transitioning is certainly not the sanitized version of the coming out story that so often appears in mainstream media. By featuring stories such as Elliot Ryan's, *I'm From Driftwood* makes a strong assertion of its place in the larger cultural discourse, where a variety of expressions of queerness might be interpreted as authentic, not only those forms commonly depicted in television and films, and increasingly, in commercially run websites.

Real Queer Feelings

It is also particularly useful to *examine I'm From Driftwood* as a queer archival project. The digitality and perceived lack of materiality of *I'm From Driftwood* should not exclude the website from consideration when determining what is and is not legitimate for archival purposes. The collection of written and video stories, visual art created by featured artists on the site, maps of from where the storytellers hail, press coverage of the website, interviews with Nathan Manske, as well as the comments left on each of the

tales all serve as a well-organized collection. Scholar Ann Cvetkovich asserts the difficulty of locating, but the necessity of investigating, ephemera when discussing spaces specific to queer communities and the ways in which queer publics are ultimately organized around these cultural artifacts:

These publics are hard to achieve because they are lived experiences, and the cultural traces that they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation. Even finding names for this other meaning of culture as a ‘way of life’—subcultures, publics, counterpublics—is difficult. Their lack of a conventional archive so often makes them seem to not exist, and [this project] tries to redress that problem by ranging across a wide variety of genres and materials in order to make not just texts, but whole cultures visible. (“Archive of Feelings” 9)

The function of *I’m From Driftwood* is two-fold in this sense, serving both as an archive of queerness in and of itself through its presentation and preservation of stories by LGBTQ individuals, but also in the sense that the site serves as a repository for the reassertion of a queer realness, referenced and relived within the stories posted on the website.

The expansion of the archive into the realm of the affective—an “archive of feelings”—we are able to imagine a sort of queer realness that embraces not only the fabulous and frivolous as it is presented and reworked in mainstream media, but also the trauma and melancholy that shade the experience of every queer person within the historical lineage in the United States (Cvetkovich, “Archive of Feelings” 2003; Love

2007). The website is home to some of the most intimate moments of queer expression as experiences and shared by its users, ranging from the aforementioned coming out stories, to stories of heartbreak, to stories of physical and emotional abuse, to stories of familial loss, and more. *I'm From Driftwood* serves as an exploration of these intense "feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (Cvetkovich, "Archive of Feelings" 7). Queer realness is, in a sense, in a constant loop of reflection and regurgitation, and the website serves as a crucial interstitial point for this reflexivity.

There is perhaps no more poignant story on the site that illustrates personal reflection as well as Sarah A.'s story posted on October 29th, 2009, titled "I'm From Dubuque, IA." The story chronicles the various ways that Sarah must lie in order to survive life in a mid-sized city in America's Heartland. The story begins with an assertion of the fact that the author is a liar:

There's something you should know about me: I'm a liar. Don't judge me.

Because if the first thing you should know about me is that I'm a liar, the second is that I'm a teacher, and the third that I'm a lesbian. (Sarah A.

"I'm From Dubuque, IA")

She chronicles her personal identification in the order she deems most important, interestingly enough, being a lesbian comes in last. This perhaps hails back to Manske's early statement that being queer does not necessarily define everything within our lives, but because it still makes Sarah's list, it certainly does still appear to influence everything she does.

Sarah continues through her narrative, recounting all of the lies that she must tell in order to make it through a typical day: lies about a girlfriend being merely a friend, lies about not getting married because she is too involved in her work, lies about men being attractive, lies about sex, lies about life getting better for her students. This list of false statements, by being written and published on *I'm From Driftwood*, might serve as what Cvetkovich calls an “act of witness”:

using the intensive labor...to become an archivist whose documents are important not merely for the information they contain but because they are memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past...the act [of storytelling] thus becomes an act of witness, while also giving rise to a collection of emotionally charged documents and objects. (“Drawing the Archive” 120)

By representing her own identity in this contrary way, with the reversal of identity being the assertion, Sarah is representing her own sexual identity on her terms. Adding her story to this collection, in this instance, the entire site contained within the domain *I'm From Driftwood*, allows the scope of queer experience to be broadened within the greater discourse surrounding queerness. All of the images, maps, illustrations, stories, links, videos and more, become this collection, and thus become part of the larger archival project surrounding queer culture and the ways in which “history makes itself manifest in ordinary life” (“Drawing the Archive” 125).

Trouble in Paradise

For all of the praises sung of *I'm From Driftwood* within this chapter, it is not a site without its problems. One of the largest and most glaring issues is the fact that it appears to be dominated by stories from white, gay men. This is an issue surrounding representation of the queer community that we have touched on within other areas of this project, and it is worth making note of. While stories submitted by and highlighting women do appear throughout the site, and I have made the conscious decision to examine three stories provided by women, this is more the exception than the rule. The stories of transgendered people, though present, are not as frequent or prominent. Transmen dictate the bulk of stories about transgendered people, only serving to further marginalize transwomen. Bisexuals are also a group that appears to be underrepresented on *I'm From Driftwood*, perhaps suggesting that some more targeted outreach by Nathan Manske might help with the diversity of the stories that are submitted.

It must also be acknowledged that *I'm From Driftwood* is an overwhelmingly white website. Though many of the stories do not explicitly call attention to race, the illustrations by the featured artists are almost always of white bodies, and most of the video stories are of white men. While there are a few notable exceptions to this rule—Cory Quach's "I'm From Houston, TX" video stands out as a sharp criticism of the racism that exists within the gay male dating scene—there need to be more challenges to the hegemonic assumptions of queerness as a white identity, particularly within online spaces. "Women and racial and ethnic minorities create visual cultures on the popular Internet that speak to and against existing graphical environments and interfaces online," and if this is the case, *I'm From Driftwood* holds some degree of responsibility, as a site

whose purpose holds tenants of social justice, to work towards exposing and embracing these visual cultures within the site's own architecture (Nakamura, "Digitizing Race" 172).

The purpose of this project has been to argue for an expansion of inclusion within representations of queerness in mainstream culture. The overwhelmingly white, male, affluent and urban-centered voices do not depict the wide range of LGBTQ people that are living and thriving in the United States today. The increase in access and ease to online communications perhaps offer the opportunity for a wider range of voices to be heard within the discourse. As we have witnessed, the influence of capital and commodity on media outlets, from television to film to commercially run websites, have a tendency to limit the scope of representation and subsume any sort of racial, gender, class or spatial difference. The early cries of the Internet as being the great democratizer are increasingly being replaced by dystopian fears of a cyberscape that does not look much more different from a suburban shopping mall. Websites such as *I'm From Driftwood* hold the potential of resistance. As long as it remains a not-for-profit site, and works to expand its outreach to a broader variety of people within the LGBTQ community, there is no reason why *I'm From Driftwood* can't be a site for queer resistance and revolution.

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