

CHAPTER 26

Rolling in the Hay: The Rural as Sexual Space

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Introduction: Where Rurality and Sexuality Meet

Is the rural sexy? In our first imagination of the rural in the word cloud of the mind, sex is likely to be a very small item, if it appears at all. Sex seems somehow more urban, at least in common culture. The rural we tend to imagine is quiet and passive, not a place of passion and action. And, when we do consider the rural and sex, the images are often marginal, bizarre, and even frightening: demeaning jokes about bestiality, slurs about incest and hicks with six fingers, and fears of isolation and sexual violence, as in the “squeal like a pig” scene in the movie *Deliverance*.¹ If we step back just a moment from crude humor and easy images, however, rural sexuality becomes widespread, diverse, “normal,” and often just good, clean fun. The rural is both a place of desire and is a prominent basis for the constitution of desire.

Extending from Hugh Campbell and Michael M. Bell’s (2000) notion of the *masculine rural* and the *rural masculine*, as well as David Bell’s (2003) concepts of the *rural homosexual* and the *homosexual rural*, we argue that there is both the *sexual in the rural* and the *rural in the sexual*—or, in shorter form, the *sexual rural* and the *rural sexual*. In the sexual rural, we focus on the kinds of understandings that M. Bell (2007) terms “first rural”: the sexual practices, attitudes, desires, and sexual identities that can be found in the rural as a material place. In the rural sexual, we center the discussion on the kinds of understandings that M. Bell (2007) terms “second rural”: the use of the rural in social constructions of sex and sexual identities, wherever these find expression. We then introduce the concept of *rural plural sexualities*, based on what M. Bell (2007) terms the “rural plural,” to help us better understand how sexuality and rurality presuppose one another. We conclude with a discussion of

various empirical and theoretical areas that could enrich the study of rural sexualities, such as immigration to new destinations, mobilities theory, and sexual fluidity.²

Background Literature

Fifteen years ago, it would have been quite a challenge to find any work in the area of rural sexualities in the flagship journals of North American rural sociology, or in many other scholarly journals. But early work on gender by rural studies scholars helped to open a space for later studies on sexualities in rural spaces. Thanks to the pioneering work of Bokemeier (e.g., Bokemeier and Tait 1980), Haney (1982; Haney and Knowles 1988), Sachs (1983; 1996), and Rosenfeld (1985), by the late 1990s gender issues had established a strong foothold in North American rural sociology. In fact, starting in 1982, each decennial volume published by the Rural Studies Series (with the exception of the policy volume) has included a full chapter on women in rural America (Dillman and Hobbs 1982; Flora and Christenson 1991; Brown and Swanson 2003). Judging from the pattern of gender and sexuality studies in general sociology, it was perhaps just a matter of time before sexuality would also find a home in rural sociology. Early on, a few scholars in other disciplines helped to set the wheels in motion, focusing on the lives of rural queers. In the late 1980s, community psychologists drew attention to the lack of services and resources for gays and lesbian in rural areas (D'Augelli and Hart 1987; Poullard and D'Augelli 1989). David Bell and Gill Valentine's (1995) "Queer Country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives," although written by geographers in the United Kingdom, introduced several points of engagement for North American rural sociologists, such as the rural idyll, discrimination, and migration. This same year, anthropologist Kath Weston's article on rural-urban gay migration was published in the interdisciplinary *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Weston 1995). These scholars helped to build a foundation for scholarly work in the area of sexuality and rural studies. Today, work on rural and small-town sexualities is no longer at the extreme edges of rural studies, and is emerging from a variety of disciplines: legal studies (e.g., Jerke 2011), tourism studies (e.g., Faiman-Silva 2009; Steinberg and Chapman 2009), media studies (e.g., Gray 2009), cultural and gender studies (Morgensen 2009; Herring 2010), psychology (Preston and D'Augelli 2013), geography (e.g., Johnston and Longhurst 2010), and sociology (Annes and Redlin 2012).

Deserving of much more than just a footnote is the point that developing a full understanding of rural sexuality means also investigating rural heterosexuality,

much as a full understanding of rural gender means investigating the unnoticed normality that is rural masculinity. Bryant and Pini (2011, 81) point out, “rural places are entrenched, defined, and performed as heterosexual spaces.” In fact, several scholars in recent years—mostly from the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand—have gone about documenting this “entrenched” rural heterosexuality. Campbell (2000) shows how pubs in the New Zealand countryside are important venues for not only the construction of masculinity, but heterosexuality as well. And Little (2003) argues persuasively that we cannot fully understand rural sexual minorities without a sure grasp of the hegemonic identities and practices—that is, heterosexualities—located within those rural landscapes. In our conception of rural sexualities, and rural sexual minorities, we include not just rural LGBTQ individuals, but also a focus on rural heterosexuality—or, rather, rural heterosexualities—to illustrate the possibilities for rural sociologists to study diverse sexualities.³

What all of these works share—whether focused on queer or heterosexual rural lives—is the resounding message from scholars that when we study sexuality, place matters. And not just any place, but rural places in particular. When it comes to the study of sexual minorities, urban-based research not just tips the scale, but sends it crashing down when weighed against available research on non-urban queers—though, as we note, the recent efforts to counter this tendency are impressive and becoming more numerous. And as we saw above, these calls of metro-centrism are not limited to the study of LGBTQ individuals, as is evident in the relatively slow growth of studies on heterosexuality in rural places. The criticisms of this imbalance are manifold, and the most common is that the emphasis on cities as the singular and exclusive context for sexual minorities’ identity and expression assigns the urban gay man with master status, representing all non-heterosexual minority identities (e.g., Brekhus 2003). Related to this criticism of the unflinching gaze on urban sexualities are the practical implications for the lives of non-metro queers, whose access to resources and support services is often more limited (e.g., Oswald and Culton 2003). A great part of the justification for studying rural sexualities, then, is about spatial and material concerns—for example, capturing the lives of those neglected others in rural places, or better understanding how heterosexuality structures everyday rural life. But the flip side to these justifications is the importance of representations of the rural with respect to sexualities. Works in this latter area tend to come from European, Australian, and New Zealander scholars, but we lean on work in North America in our exploration of both of these understandings.

The Sexual in the Rural

As a context that is so often viewed as incompatible with not only the material lives of queers, but the mere concept of sexual minorities, the rural seems to carry a lot of baggage when it meets up with queerness. Rural studies scholars are then confronted with a pressing question: given this baggage, how do rural sexual minorities manage their lives in rural places? We explore this area of literature in terms of understanding rural sexuality in its material sense, that is, the *sexual in the rural*. In a 1992 review, which is often cited by scholars of rural sexualities, Chris Philo pushes for the study of “neglected rural others,” which many have read as an explicit call for more work on the *sexual rural*. Here we will briefly discuss a few recent empirical contributions to this area in North America, then turn to emerging work on rural heterosexualities.

A recent work that challenges the view that the rural is somehow incompatible with sexual minorities is Mary Gray’s (2009) book, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. Drawing from ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with thirty-four rural queer youth, Gray, a media scholar, examines the impact of the Internet on the construction of rural queer identities and efforts toward social change. Through vivid accounts, Gray challenges the assumption that rural queers are powerless victims, while also questioning the assumption that visibility necessarily leads to a “post-gay” utopia. Conceptually, Gray’s work complicates the intersections of sexuality and rurality, while also linking rural studies to emerging studies of the Internet, identity formation, and ongoing debates within media studies about LGBTQ visibility. As such, this study effectively brings together discussions of the impacts of globalization in rural places—in the form of increasing electronic communication—with discussions of rural sexual identities. Legal scholar Bud Jerke recently coined the term *queer ruralism* to refer to a distinct type of discrimination coming from living in a rural place and being LGBTQ (Jerke 2011). Drawing on the concept of heteronormativity, which in part refers to views and practices that uphold heterosexuality and opposite-gender attraction as standard, normal and natural, Jerke describes that queer ruralism stems, in part, from “queer metronormativity,” that is, the assumption that all LGBTQ individuals are located exclusively in urban areas. The second component of Jerke’s concept is *ruralism*, defined as discrimination based on living in a rural area. He notes that ruralism “uniquely complicates life for queer rural dwellers” (Jerke 2011, 264). He includes narratives from a small sample of rural queers living in South Dakota, and finds that these narratives both align with and challenge popular conceptions of rural queers. In these narratives there are elements of

isolation in rural areas and the desire for the perceived freedom of urban queer life, but there is also evidence of community acceptance and rural support networks. So, to understand the sexual rural we must take into account the complex reality of rural queer lives to avoid falling into the extremes of either rural queer idealism or its opposite.

The complexity of rural queer life was recently empirically investigated through focusing on a seldom-studied population: non-metropolitan LGBTQ parents. Many rural sexual minorities choose to stay in their communities and raise children there, or, due to work or family obligations—particularly with the recent global economic downturn—urban LGBTQ parents may find themselves moving with their children to rural places. Either way, this demographic is not typically included in either studies of rural queers or studies of queer parents. When Holman and Oswald (2011) interviewed non-metropolitan LGBTQ parents in Illinois about the salience of their sexuality in community social interactions, they found that in many situations, sexuality was not important. And yet, the authors point out that there is a gap between “ignoring sexuality” and “actively accepting these differences” (Holman and Oswald 2011, 451).

Other recent works on rural LGBTQ individuals include Annes and Redlin’s (2012) analysis of life narratives of American and French gay men in the countryside, and Gorman-Murray and colleagues’ (2012) investigation of a gay and lesbian tourist site in non-metropolitan Australia. We have noticed in reading such studies of rural LGBTQ individuals a certain philosophy that is associated with rural places—a certain “live and let live” attitude. How might this shape the day-to-day realities of rural queers and their families? And, what is the difference between tolerating queer families, for example, and embracing diverse family forms and by extension diverse sexualities? These are sexual rural questions. Yet if we dig deeper, these questions—which seem so material, so grounded in the everyday—are in some ways intimately connected to the rural sexual. In the following section, we turn our attention to this latter understanding. But for now, we turn to emerging work on rural heterosexualities to see how these expand our vision of the sexual rural.

There is a recent shift toward examining the taken-for-granted sexual in the rural—heterosexualities. An early study in this area centered on the experiences of rural English girls, and how they organized and maintained heterosexual relationships in the countryside (Morris and Fuller 1999). There is also the previously mentioned work on constructions of heterosexuality and rural masculinity in a New Zealand pub (Campbell 2000), along with a later study of men and heterosexuality in pubs in Ireland (Leyshon 2005). Bryant and Pini (2011) provided an extensive overview of the scholarship on gender and heterosexuality, as well

as contributed empirical research on the subject in their recent book, *Gender and Rurality*. For example, they find that heteronormativity remains strong in the rural communities in Australia “because growing the business and the family remains one and the same over generations” (Bryant and Pini 2011, 99).

The study of non-hegemonic heterosexualities also adds richness to our understanding of the sexual rural. For example, Little (2003) references Hubbard’s (2000) concept of “scary sexualities.” These sexualities lie outside of the normative definition of heterosexuality and its core notion that the purpose of sex is procreation. Thus while scary sexualities might include individuals engaged in homosexuality and other queer sexualities, they also encompass a variety of heterosexual practices that challenge notions of sexual modesty, decency, and conventionality. For example, the rural is a common setting for outdoor festivals of sexuality, such as “Miss Nude America,” “wet T-shirt,” and similar contests, generally oriented toward objectifying women’s bodies for the heterosexual male gaze, but also promoting non-procreative sexualities. The rural is also a site for much heterosexual tourism, from weekend getaway cottages to nudist camps to the “adult malls” and “gentlemen’s clubs” that can be found along many a rural highway, often offering sites for sexuality that is considered on or even over the borderline of accepted norms. In many instances, these are also sites of homosexual tourism, as the rural provides spatial freedom for a wide range of sexual diversity that is not tolerated in urban and suburban landscapes of normative sexuality. But, too, we need to take note of the “scary heterosexualities” of rural residents, such as rural heterosexuals living single or those viewed as promiscuous (Little 2003, citing Hubbard 2000). As Pini (2003) and Bryant and Pini (2011) point out, there is minimal research on the sexualities of widows or divorced individuals living in rural places. And, we must not forget that there are intentional communities located in rural landscapes that offer spaces for sexualities viewed by many as existing on the fringe. For instance, Aguilar’s (2013) recent study of two intentional communities in rural areas reveals how polyamorous relationships are constructed as socially acceptable in that context. Thus, there is a range of possible heterosexualities in rural places and a focus on this diversity would improve our understanding of rural sexual practices and identities, while setting the stage to better informing ourselves of the interplay between the sexual in the rural and the rural in the sexual.

The Rural in the Sexual

Having described the sexual rural, we turn now to explaining in more detail what we mean by the rural in the sexual, or more simply, the rural sexual.

We began this chapter with a brief contemplation of what the imagination conjures up with the pairing of sex and rural. But there are quite a few more images we have not yet mentioned. There is, for example, John Steuart Curry's painting, *Our Good Earth*, with its image of the strong American farmer, muscles bulging, standing in a field of wheat, eyebrows furrowed, concentrating on something he sees off in the distance. And then there is the image of the lumberjack, who controls the forest and its creatures, fighting against the natural elements to get the job done (see Brandth and Haugen 2000). Both of these are portraits of hegemonic masculinity to be sure, but just as masculinity is not easily teased apart from heterosexuality, Curry's farmer and the logger can also be viewed as rural sex symbols of sorts. In both we see the rugged, individualistic, aggressive hard man, tested in the wild, and it is undeniable that these qualities are common in our sexual imaginations, whether we live in rural or urban places. We might also consider the sexiness of the tough and rough image of motorcycle gangs in the United States, who frequently roar their way through rural places—clad head to toe in leather—where they have the freedom to ride in wide open spaces. Flipping through a motorcycle magazine at the news stand, for example, it is easy to see that many find sex appeal in motorcycles and rural spaces—in a half-naked woman stretched across a powerful looking “hog,” with fields and an open road in the distance.⁴ But there is also a softness and cleanliness to the rural—set against the hardness and dirtiness of the rural above—that finds expression in the sexual imagination. This soft and clean image is typically associated with femininity and the tamed, cultivated sense of the rural. For example, there is the farmer's daughter, deployed as a literary stock character in a range of cultural media, from Daisy Mae in *Lil' Abner* comics (see Roddy 2008) to the 1990s television sitcom *Seinfeld*.⁵ This young, country girl is often constructed as a naïve and available sex object, always ready and willing to satisfy any male desire. Or there is the mythological sexy green goddess. Or the nymph, a young female spirit creature who is sexually precocious and dwells near brooks, meadows, or woody areas, singing and playing with other nymphs. Just consider the many videogames, adult comic books (e.g. Japanese adult manga), and examples of adult animation that include characters such as these.

Whether masculine and dirty or feminine and clean, these are images that—as suggested in our brief review of media sources above—both urban and rural imaginations alike conjure up when considering sex. We come to see then that sex—that business that happens between the sheets, in the most private and local sphere of our lives—is infused with far-flung geographical meanings, and that these meanings are not purely contingent on sex in situ. As such, we have

seen that there are a great many ways in which the rural may be invoked alongside sexuality outside of the physical and material space of the rural.

But these associations are not confined to normative heterosexual imaginaries. There is also rural imagery in non-heteronormative, queer sexual imagination. These constructions are often referred to as the *queer rural idyll*. In an essay on homosexuality in literature, Fone (1983) writes:

Those who would dwell in Arcadia seek out that secret Eden because of its isolation from the troubled world and its safety from the arrogant demands of those who would deny freedom, curtail human action, and destroy innocence and love. Arcadia can be a happy valley, a blessed isle, a pastoral retreat, or a green forest fastness.

This early work in the area of minority sexualities and rural studies shows us the appeal of the countryside and natural spaces for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals. And it implies movement. The search for a paradise where one can truly express those sexual desires deemed corrupt by society implies a sense of mobility—in this case, migration from an undesirable place to another place that is full of freedom and natural wonder. But in order to migrate to a more desirable place, one must already construct the countryside as an escape destination, as a zone of safety, free from the fetters of urban life. In fact, previous authors have suggested that this construction of the queer rural idyll is an urban construct (e.g., Gorman-Murray, Waitt, and Gibson 2012). This is rural sexual—the imagined, ideal rural, its images and notions, which operate on the symbolic level.

But the rural sexual, in terms of sexuality but in other ways too, is not always that image of the dreamy escape destination. Images of the rural can also be frightening, as we noted in the opening to this chapter. It is this aspect of rural sexuality—which is sometimes manifested in its material sexual rural sense—that brings many to see as an impossibility the existence of a rural sexual minority. As far as cultural representations of rural sexual minorities, many are quick to point out *Brokeback Mountain* and the violent murder of the character Jack Twist. And for many, considering the idea of rural sexual minorities brings to mind the actual murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 outside Laramie, Wyoming—or the rape and murder of Brandon Teena, a transgender man, in 1993 in small town Nebraska. Here we are struck by how closely the sexual rural is weaved into the rural sexual when we are scared and frightened of the rural. We are almost unable to decipher which understanding we are invoking. The real? The imagined? From here we turn our attention to both, at once.

Plural Rural Sexualities

Up to this point we have distinguished between the sexual rural and rural sexual, that is, the material understanding of the rural, on the one hand, and the ideal and imaginative, on the other. Taking a *plural rural sexual* approach means seeing the significance of both understandings, and initiating conversations and intersections between the two.⁶ We encourage more of a focus on this aspect in sexualities research, and we discuss how interactions between and across sexual rural and rural sexual can lead to new possibilities.

The work of UK geographer David Bell (2003) gives us a vivid understanding of both the rural sexual and the sexual rural as it relates to men in the United States, describing, for example, the rituals of Radical Faeries gatherings in Arizona in the late 1970s. Other scholars focusing on the American context have implicitly employed these two understandings in other ways. Sandilands (2002) investigates lesbian separatist communities in Oregon, showing how women construct queer safe spaces, carve out rural lesbian identities, and experience natural spaces as erotic sites. In a study of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a yearly celebration held on rural land in the upper Midwest, Browne (2011, 21) finds that lesbian utopias challenge "hegemonic heterosexual ruralities." Important aspects of the creation of lesbian utopias include outdoor nudity, rural sex spaces, and spirituality in connection to the land (Browne 2011). The bridge between the imagined and the real is apparent in these instances. In these examples we see the material manifestation of the imaginary rural sexual—in this case, the experience of urban gay migrants arriving to a rural destination and what unfolds thereafter. Considering the plural rural sexual means seeing the communications between the sexual rural and rural sexual, when changes in the actual sex practices and sexual identities of rural places occur in interaction with imagined associations.

Another example that highlights the possibilities of this plural rural sexualities take is a blog on queer farmers that we recently stumbled upon. Titled the *Queer Farmer Film Project*, the blog includes interviews with queer farmers across the country and explores "the dynamic relationships between gender, sexuality, and agriculture, with particular focus on the hearts and hard work of America's queer farmers."⁷ One such interview is with a gay farmer, Brandon, who grows organic vegetables and flowers in northeast Arkansas. Of his experience living as a gay man rurally, "Brandon said that he is out to his family and greater community and has experienced very little discrimination based on being gay." Brandon also described dancing to Madonna songs while working in the fields and "his idea for making t-shirts for [his] farm that instead of the

John Deere deer, have a unicorn instead and said that his farm is for sure a ‘safe space for unicorns.’” Given the cultural symbolic connection between unicorn imagery—as well as rainbows—and LGBTQ individuals, Brandon’s Arkansas farm is constructed as a queer sanctuary, a safe space for queer farmers. In this sense, Brandon challenges that typical rural sexual image of the heterosexual farmer by being a queer farmer and, at the same time, he changes the actual sex and sexual identities of rural spaces. He invokes both understandings at once, as well as the interactions between them, showing the possibilities of rural plural sexualities.

Pini (2008) observes that for LGBTQ individuals, rural places are frequently painted as either liberating sanctuaries or their polar opposite. An additional push for more plural rural understandings stems from this critique. So often, rural places are neither utopias nor unequivocally intolerant communities for LGBTQ individuals. They are someplace in between. Some scholars have indicated this rural diversity by highlighting various factors that might shape rural sexual minority experiences: the presence of universities, a history of gays and lesbians in the region (Kirkey and Forsyth 2001), or identification as urban in-migrant versus rural native (Smith and Holt 2005). We should also consider the importance of gender in shaping the experiences of sexual minorities in non-metropolitan places. Kazyak’s (2012) recent article on rural Midwestern gays and lesbians centers on the intersections of place, gender, and sexuality. She concludes that constructions of rurality align with those of female masculinity and lesbian sexuality, while constructions of male femininity and gay sexuality do not align with these same constructions of rurality. Of course, we ought to remember that there are multiple definitions of rural (e.g., Halfacree 1993) and myriad ways rural sexual minorities live life in the countryside (Spurlin 2000). We argue that acknowledging that rural contexts for acceptance of LGBTQ individuals are varied and complex is also part of embracing plural rural sexualities.

Going Forward

To be sure, work on rural sexualities has been on the rise in recent years. Yet there are quite a few avenues that could lead to an improved understanding of this area, and we suggest some of these here.

There tends to be more of a concentration on men in the rural sexualities literature, which mirrors the male-bias in interdisciplinary LGBTQ studies. In this review we have tried to avoid falling into this bias by giving equal emphasis to work on rural women, which helps us better understand how gender hierarchies and sexualities shape one another in rural places. And yet, there is another

group that is almost entirely absent from talk of rural gender and sexualities—transgender individuals. Researching this group may present a bit of an empirical challenge, yet we have observed a noticeable increase in both public and academic attention to the “T” in LGBTQ. In fact, the *Atlantic* published a recent article titled “Growing up Gay and Transgendered in Appalachia” (Hannaford 2011). We are confident that rural sociologists will begin to think about how to include this group—as well as other marginalized groups, such as black, Latino, Asian American, and American Indian populations—in studies of gender and sexuality in rural places.

A different possibility to strengthen the study of rural sexualities is the theoretical perspective of *mobilities* that has emerged in recent years (e.g., Urry 2000). In response to this approach, Bell, Lloyd, and Vatovec (2010) note that mobilities research tends to be quite urban-focused. Often the rural is portrayed as fixed, an unchanging idyll of tradition, a nationwide “nostalgia for our rural past” (Pruitt 2006, 159). But rural areas are dynamic and in flux, just like their urban counterparts. Globalization does not just affect the metropole, but also shapes the countryside as well. The increasing ease with which money, ideas, and people move can be just as easily observed in small town America as it can in the big city. This mobility also has implications for rural sexualities, which is evident in recent work on LGBTQ individuals, migration, and rurality. For example, Waitt and Gorman-Murray (2011) center on the concept of “home,” finding important significance in the return stories of LGBTQ individuals who had previously left one regional city for a large urban center, drawing connections between the movement of bodies, meanings of “home,” and challenges to homophobia. And in recent work Annes and Redlin (2012) similarly engage with the mobility of LGBTQ individuals in an examination of French and American narratives of bidirectional rural-urban movement.

But there are additional ways that scholars can use mobility perspectives and make global connections to study rural sexualities. One area for exploration here is the impact of neoliberal policies and globalization on the changing demographics of rural areas, specifically, the often hidden demographic of immigrant agricultural workers. For example, in the last ten years Mexican immigrants have increasingly been heading for new destinations in the United States, regions in the South and rural parts of the Midwest where previously little immigration from Mexico occurred (Massey 2008). Following recent calls by rural sociologists to engage with intersectionality perspectives, the study of diverse rural sexualities ought to include groups such as these, who are marginalized by race as well as citizenship. It is clear that mobilities are shaping immigrant experiences in the rural communities where they reside, and sexuality is no doubt part of

that experience.

In this review, we have discussed a few examples of studies of rural heterosexualities, but there is much more room in the literature to explore diverse contexts and practices in this area. As rural sociologists, we may assume that there is sex between women and men happening in the rural, but often we are not tuned in to the variety of ways and places it plays out. As we mentioned previously, nudist colonies and other sexual tourism sites, truck stops, and elder care facilities are potential, yet seldom discussed, sites for analyzing rural heterosexuality (as well as rural same-sex encounters). In addition, the ways in which heterosexuality—and for that matter, sexualities generally—is discussed tends not to leave much room for slippage. You are either gay or straight, with no in between. And yet, we have known since the times of Alfred Kinsey that for many Americans, sexual identity, practices, and fantasy do not always line up in a strict either/or. Furthermore, we cannot assume stability of these phenomena over the life course. The term *sexual fluidity* is increasingly used in sex research to describe this slippage (Diamond 2008), and this is one area to which scholars of rural sexualities could contribute.

There are ways in which the sexual rural is also political, and these have consequences for those who wish to study it. In the last decade or so, and most recently in the 2012 battle for the Republican presidential nomination, right-leaning and even moderate politicians attempted to make crystal clear their opposition to same-sex marriage through supporting state bills and constitutional amendments that would limit the definition of marriage to a union between a man and a woman. In 2012, President Obama told Americans that his personal viewpoint on this issue had changed and that he supported same-sex marriage. In a landmark decision in favor of marriage equality, the US Supreme Court in 2013 struck down a key section of the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act. But this is all just politics. How do these changes affect the field of rural sociology and the work of rural sociologists? This very question was addressed during the keynote speaker session at the 2008 Rural Sociological Society meeting in Manchester, New Hampshire, when an audience member asked the director of the US Census Bureau why the 2010 census would not be counting same-sex married couples. The director explained that DOMA constrained the bureau's actions, resulting in the re-categorization of these marriages into single status. Later, the Census Bureau under the Obama administration reported that DOMA did not pose a constraint, and that gay and lesbian marriages in fact would be counted in the 2010 census after all, thus reversing the decision made under the Bush administration in the summer of 2008 (Associated Press 2009). By way of this example, it is clear that federal policies have affected the ability of rural studies scholars

to collect reliable data, in this case, putting a limitation on our understanding of rural queer lives, and thus hemming in research on the sexual rural.

In this chapter we have supplied ample evidence to counter the image of a passive and sexless rural by highlighting the diversity of sexualities in rural spaces. We established a brief history of work on rural sexualities, then turned to sketching out what we mean by the sexual rural and the rural sexual. Seeing the rural combined with the sexual, in both material and imagined ways, and examining how these two understandings interact with each other to create new possibilities, are the defining features of what we have termed plural rural sexualities. This approach means acknowledging the power of the rural in shaping what many, including those living in the metropole, consider sexy, and seeing how this plays out in reality. And yet for all the fun and playfulness that can come with a romp in the hay, embracing plural rural sexualities means seeing that for those who are marginalized, combining sex with the rural is not always that liberating utopia that it is imagined to be. Nor should we assume that same-sex desire and LGBTQ individuals are incompatible with rurality. Balancing these multiple understandings, while also recognizing the political aspects of rural sexuality, is becoming more important. With the increasing use of technology and the easy mobility that come with a globalizing world—the coming together of different groups, and the drawing of boundaries and the tensions that can result—moving past one-sided understandings of how sexuality and rurality relate is crucial to pinning down shifting meanings of identity, community, and place, all of which are prime concerns for rural sociologists in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 Or so we discovered through a bit of casual ethnography, when we tried out the phrase “rural sexuality” with friends and colleagues and asked them to free associate in response.

2 In this chapter, we use sexuality and sexualities to refer loosely to the realm of the erotic, which in sex research terms may include sexual behavior and practices, desires, fantasies, attractions, or attitudes about sex. As much as possible, we try to use sexual identity—or we use those specific identity terms—to refer to the labeling of an individual’s own attractions, practices, and fantasies (e.g., lesbian, gay, heterosexual, bisexual, queer, etc.). We use *sex* as an abbreviation for sexual practices, except in the case of *same-sex*, which in popular lexicon refers to same-gender attraction.

3 We find that the term *LGBTQ* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning), rather than the more common variant *LGBT*, is more inclusive of sexualities that are not heterosexual or normative heterosexual.

4 For example, the August 2012 issue of *Easyriders* magazine features national biker parties, one of which is the Great Southwest Chopper Fest, located in Bizbee, Arizona. The article includes a full-page photo of a woman in a wet T-shirt contest, and other photos depict men riding motorcycles in the desert landscape.

5 *Seinfeld*, “The Bottle Deposit, Part 2,” season 7, aired 2 May 1996.

6 Note that we drop here the materialist/idealist distinction implied by the word order *sexual rural* versus *rural sexual*. We take *plural rural sexual* and *plural sexual rural* as equivalent, but plural rural sexual as more linguistically mellifluous.

7 See Lyon (2009) for information on the project's mission. Also see the *Queer Farmer Film Project* website (<http://queerfarmer.blogspot.com>), and the newly released film *Out Here* (<http://outheremovie.com>).

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