



Ordinary (small) cities and LGBTQ lives

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Abstract

In this article, I ask how the theoretical lenses through which we conceptualise LGBTQ lives compel a particular categorisation of queer geographies and experiences; namely, through (implicit) hierarchies between the “gay metropolis” and the many small cities and rural places outside of purportedly “welcoming” metropolitan centres. Drawing inspiration from Robinson’s (2006) ordinary cities thesis, I argue that our scholarly (and popular) points of reference structure the possibilities of understanding LGBTQ lives and place-making outside of metropolitan centres recognised to be “gay friendly”. Consequently, the production of knowledge about queer lives still tends to conform to a dominant model in which a metro-centric and hierarchical spatial narrative functions as an implicit referential illusion. Employing oral history narratives from LGBTQ women in one small Canadian city, I argue that urban/urban-rural hierarchies are at once embedded in the frameworks used to understand queer lives and practices, and constrain our ability to conceptualise the embodied and emplaced geographies of everyday queer lives in geographically-specific terms. Theorising *ordinary* sexual subjectivities requires attending to the mutual constitution of subjectivities, process and place in specific geographical contexts. (181 words)

Introduction

In their article, *The cultural economy of small cities*, Jayne et al (2010, 1414) write, “The broader ontologies of small cities and regions are not fixed or bounded,



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but constantly unfolding in the narratives and practices of policy makers, residents and organizations.” Arguing for a nuanced and more ambitious approach to theorising cultural economy in small cities, the authors remind us of some basic geographic “truths”: that cities and regions of all sizes are context-specific, shaped by myriad forces, and always subject to change. Yet, the geographic ontology of small cities and regions often sits at odds with popular assumptions about such places. Rather than being understood—or understanding themselves—as fluid entities, small cities are constructed in the popular imaginary as static, or even celebrated as tradition-bound (Cloke and Little, 1997; Little, 1999; Little and Panelli, 2002).

The presumed stasis of small cities contributes to the reification of existing hierarchies between cities and city-regions (Jayne et al, 2010, 1409). As Bell and Jayne (2006) argue, the narrow lens used by scholars to theorise urban processes and practices has had the effect of excluding and occluding the diverse forms and functions that exist across the spectrum of global urbanity. This extends Robinson’s (2002; 2006, 92) contention that theorising cities in a hierarchical fashion has the effect of engendering prescriptive directions for all cities based on the practices and experiences of very few cities.

Implicit and explicit urban hierarchies are evident in the scholarly literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBTQ)² lives as well. Research on queer lives and the formation of queer subjectivities has tended to focus on urban enclaves in (presumably) “gay friendly” cities (see Brown, 2008; Chisholm, 2005; Houlbrook, 2005; Kitchin, 2002; Lewis, 2012; Ruting, 2008 for discussions and examples of this phenomenon). Arguably, one implicit assumption informing this research is the importance of a cosmopolitan ethos to the formation of queer lives. This presumption has been disrupted by geographic and other critical scholarship demonstrating the vitality of same-sex sexual and queer lives in rural communities and small cities (Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Browne, 2008; Halberstam, 2005; Phillips et al, 2000; Sullivan, 2009a; 2009b). These contributions have intervened in a persistent popular imaginary that suggests that queer sexual expressions are out of place in rural places and small cities, or that queer subjectivity/experiences *necessarily* take place in large metropolitan centres in the Global North (especially Gray, 2009; Herring, 2010; Knopp and Brown, 2003).

² In this article, I employ the acronym LGBTQ to denote people who participate in a range of practices that sit on/outside the boundaries of normative heterosexuality and/or gender performance. (I use the more common acronym, LGBTQ, sparingly, as the particularities of trans geographies are beyond the scope of this article. See Browne et al, 2010.) I use ‘queer’ synonymously, as an umbrella term to denote people who participate in non-heteronormative practices *or* the non-heteronormative practices themselves. Queer is a contested and fluid term that circulates, is defined, and manifests in place-specific ways. By employing this term, I am drawing out a distinction between dominant heteronormative gender and sexual practices and a full range of same-sex sexual practices and “non-conforming” gender performances that challenge, destabilise, or denaturalise dominant heteronormative structures. I discuss this usage in more detail in the second section of the text and footnote 3.

Further attention must be paid, however, to the ways in which the theoretical lenses employed to read and conceptualise queer lives implicitly reify an existing tendency to create a hierarchy between, on the one hand, places where LGBQ lives are assumed to thrive, and on the other hand, places that are assumed to inhibit queer place-making. When existing, implicit hierarchies go unquestioned, whether between large and small urban centres (urban/urban hierarchies) or between urban centres and rural areas (urban/rural hierarchies), they structure the possibilities of theorising queer lives in small cities that are not recognisably gay friendly (see Kulpa and Mizielińska, 2011). As a consequence, queer practices taking place in “gay meccas” are naturalised as a standard against which queer practices elsewhere are measured. Thus, queer place-making occurring in “gay friendly” urban centres are appreciated as both trend-setting and “normal,” whereas queer practices occurring on “the periphery” are perceived to be exceptional or even mimicry (see Knopp and Brown, 2003). Moreover, existing hierarchies render invisible the geographically specific ways that queer lives are produced in cities of *all* sizes.

In this article, I take up and extend scholarship that seeks to disrupt the characterisation of queer place-making as natural in some major metropolitan centres and out of place everywhere else. Specifically, I examine the ways we read LGBQ lives and queer place-making in small cities, and call attention to the blind spot in sexuality and space theorising that emerges from implicit urban/urban-rural hierarchies. I suggest that these hierarchies hinder our ability to understand and theorise the nuances of queer life in small cities, rural places, and, arguably, metropolitan centres. So long as a metro-centric reference point exists as an unspoken standard of measurement, queer practices in small cities and rural places are too easily assumed to be a reflection or imitation of practices that are more “authentically” locatable in metropolitan centres (Weston, 1995). Moreover, the range of queer practices occurring in non-metropolitan areas are often perceived as examples of a teleological rural queer past that have been “solved” in (or by relocating to) the metropolis (Waite and Gorman-Murray, 2011a; 2011b).

To develop this argument, I analyse oral history narratives from LGBQ women located in one small Canadian city and use the narratives to tease apart the ways that urban/urban-rural hierarchies are embedded in the frameworks that are employed to understand queer lives and practices. The argument is based on findings from research currently being conducted on queer lives and urban change in Lethbridge, Alberta. This research is partly a project of “recovery”: one of its aims is to create a counter-archive by collecting the stories of people whose voices have been entirely absent from the historical record and, until recently, the public imagination of a rapidly growing regional centre in the Canadian prairies. Following Weston (1995) and others (e.g., Murphy et al, 2010), however, the research seeks to move beyond rendering lives visible: it aims to use oral history narratives to elicit the material practices of queer life and geographical processes of urban change in order to understand and theorise the role of social difference in a

place that many consider to be a socially conservative hinterland of an otherwise (purportedly) queer-friendly nation.

The article is divided into three sections. First, I review recent trends in sexuality and space literature on LGBTQ lives outside of the metropolis to illustrate how categorising frameworks inform scholarly and popular conceptualisations of queer lives. Second, I turn to methodology, where I frame my use of oral history narratives as tools to enrich a theoretical intervention. In the remainder of the paper, I weave together the site-specific context and the voices of the narrators to consider the logics at work in hierarchical readings of queer lives in small cities. I discuss how these logics leave in place certain assumptions about queer lives in “gay friendly” metropolitan areas, and thus interfere with our ability to theorise queer practices in small cities.

This analysis is set in Lethbridge, a regional centre of nearly 88 000 in southern Alberta. Having grown by more than 27 000 people in the past twenty-five years (City of Lethbridge census, 2011), and having surpassed the population figures projected in 2001 for the year 2011 by well over 7 000 (Urban Futures, 2001), the city has arguably seen shifts in its culture as well as in its demographic profile. Yet, Lethbridge remains a fairly socially and politically conservative city, within a socially and politically conservative region, and is widely perceived as such. Read through the lens of the “gay friendly” metropolis (Toronto, in particular) and Canadian nation, Lethbridge is one of many small, isolated regional centres that appears to be situated on the periphery of “meaningful” queer existence (Hogan, 2010; Riordon, 1998). It is this perception that I interrogate throughout the latter half of the paper, arguing that urban/urban-rural hierarchies constrain our ability to conceptualise the embodied and emplaced geographies of everyday queer lives in geographically-specific terms. Using oral histories to illustrate how narrators identify, struggle for, and create meaningful queer spaces and networks, I show that paying heed to queer practices in small cities on their own terms offers one perspective for what it means to understand the mutual constitution between subjectivities, process, and place in specific geographical contexts (Brown, 2008; Robinson, 2006).

Theorising geographies of queer sexuality in small cities and rural places

Within the discipline of geography, the study of sexuality has taken a number of important turns (see Browne et al, 2007; Brown, 2008; Oswin, 2008; and Wright, 2010 for reviews of such work). On the one hand, mapping and situating the lives and forms of place-making of LGBTQ people has been and continues to be a significant contribution to a richer depiction of cities, suburbs, and rural areas. On the other hand, engagements with queer theory have made possible a rethinking and “unsettling” (Lim et al, 2007, 222) of taken-for-granted institutions (“the state” or hetero-patriarchal kinship structures, to name two examples) and daily practices. To rethink the ontological basis for theorising the lives and place-making practices of people who live on or outside the boundaries of normative heterosexuality

and/or gender performance in small cities, it is necessary to call upon both of these empirical and theoretical engagements. In this article, then, the term *queer* is used both as a shorthand term to refer to LGBTQ people and as a reference to the non-normative practices in which LGBTQ people engage, which challenge the disciplinary authority of heteronormative frameworks and institutions (see Browne, 2006).³

This use of queer to re-think urban hierarchies builds directly from articles published in the last decade calling on geographers (and others) to develop a more nuanced framework for theorising LGBTQ lives. Knopp and Brown's (2003) critique, for example, made the case that queer theory and geographic scholarship on queer sexuality was marked by an implied centre-to-periphery model: innovation in queer lives and political cultures is assumed to emerge in large urban centres and spread by way of hierarchical networks to peripheral or marginal locations. In the peripheries, then, these innovations "serve (presumably) as models and are adopted by local populations, often in spite of conservative local suspicions" (Knopp and Brown, 2003, 412). The authors trouble this implicit hierarchical model of diffusion about queer lives and practices, and encourage us to rethink the kinds of power relations embedded in theorisations of subjectivities (Brown, 2008).

Yet, the production of knowledge about queer lives still tends to conform to a dominant model in which a metro-centric and hierarchical spatial narrative functions as an implicit referential illusion (following Miller, 2005). Thus, queer practices occurring in the "welcoming" metropolis no longer appear to be geographically specific but instead stand as a universal reference point for small cities and rural communities. With this referential illusion intact, queer practices in the "gay mecca" appear to be the model to which LGBTQ communities who live beyond the "welcoming" metropolis should aspire (Gray, 2009; Herring, 2010; Waite and Gorman-Murray, 2011a).

To a certain extent, geographic scholarship on sexuality and space suggests that geographers have become sensitive to this critique: there is now a substantive

³ This usage of *queer* sits in productive tension with uses of the term that focus exclusively on unsettling the normative. The exclusive focus emerges from a set of politics that rejects both essentialist identities and mainstream gay political organising that foregrounds a politics of recognition at the expense of a radical critique of hetero-patriarchal systems of oppression. An extension of this set of politics is a critique of homonormativity, which queer theorists see as mimicking heteronormative aspirations. While this formulation of *queer* and its political grounding are vitally important, I seek to diverge from this usage so as to leave greater room for geographically specific and materially grounded understandings of LGBTQ place-making practices. For instance, from the perspective of "traditional" queer theory, many of the place-making practices I characterise as queer in this research (e.g., navigating daycare as same-sex parents; negotiating the boundaries of gender performance on a day-to-day basis; trying to cultivate public visibility for LGBTQ bodies) would be perceived not as queer but as aspiring to fit into a normative hetero-patriarchal framework. There is a certain accuracy to this assessment, but it fails to account for the "queering" function that is served when LGBTQ bodies perform these types of activities, and also reflects a disconnect between queer theory and the material and spatially-manifest practices of queer place-making.

body of work that focuses on queer lives outside of large urban centres (e.g., Bell and Valentine, 1995; Browne, 2008; Detamore, 2010; Gorman-Murray et al, 2007; Gorman-Murray et al, 2008; Gorman-Murray, 2009; Kirkey and Forsyth, 2001; Kramer, 1995; Phillips, et al, 2000; Sullivan, 2009a; Sullivan, 2009b), and a growing body of scholarship focusing on queer practices outside of the Global North (e.g., Kulpa and Mizieleńska, 2011; Silva, 2009; <http://www.lespt.org/lesonline/>). Moreover, there is greater attention given to the need to disrupt the diffusion model, or what Bell (2006, 348) calls “the metronormative story of coming-out and migration to the city” (Brown and Knopp, 2003; Cooke and Rapino, 2007; Gorman-Murray, 2007; Knopp, 2004; Smith and Holt, 2005). While this scholarship has intervened into a master narrative about the kinds of places where LGBQ populations thrive, it has not significantly displaced the ontological premise that “only urban life enables LGBTQ individuals to live their lives fully” (Doderer, 2011, 431). It is this gap that I seek to address in this article.

It is worth noting that for some, queer desire *does* feel out-of-place in small cities and rural places. There is a well-worn storyline about LGBTQ people who left small towns and rural places out of a desire to see other forms of queer expression, and this is captured in both popular media and scholarship (Bell and Valentine, 1995). Yet, popular representations of the rural queer fleeing to the welcoming city are over-determined (Spurlin, 2000; Halberstam, 2005), and the over-simplified urban fear of queer life in rural places is produced to excess (Gray and Van Deven, 2010). Indeed, there remains an (unconscious?) attachment to the expectation that queer place-making requires certain conditions: for instance, a critical mass of LGBTQ people; a liberal socio-cultural urban environment; or a history of LGBTQ activism. These “certain conditions” are the geographically specific elements of cities that have become legibly “gay friendly.”

Place-making on/outside the boundaries of the normative centre is difficult, but it is not the size of a given city that makes queer place-making *necessarily* more difficult. Instead, it is the ways in which the myriad geographic contingencies converge to produce (and reproduce and challenge and modify) place-based social norms, such as the average age of marriage and childbirth, or the ways that white, heterosexual masculinity are “supposed to be” embodied and performed. Rather than reproducing existing hierarchies when theorising LGBQ lives and queer place-making in small or large cities, then, it is necessary to examine queer lives with an eye to the geographic specificities of place and attention to the ways that urban/urban-rural hierarchies influence readings of LGBQ lives.

This attention also includes recognition that calling upon a referent to make sense of queer practices in new or different places may be inevitable and even useful. Indeed, research participants may themselves employ such referents to make sense of—and help researchers, as outside observers, understand—their experiences of place-making and negotiating queer lifeworlds. To be sure, the definitions and meanings of “LGBTQ” and “queer” are informed in part by the

circulation of knowledge and ideas, and place is implicated in these flows of knowledge. Understanding the context of “queer life” in a given location may in fact require an examination of the networks and relations between places. In all of these instances, however, comparisons need not inevitably produce hierarchies between cities. Robinson (2006) suggests as much, noting that useful comparisons can be made between cities—even from within individual cities—by considering cities, and the geographical forces that bring the particularities of cities into being, on their own terms.

Robinson’s (2006) focus on the ordinary and the particularities that bring cities into being is thus foundational for researchers who seek to elucidate, for example, the relationships between sexuality and space and the production of queer geographies (Brown, 2008). This framework encourages a focus on the mutual constitution of subjectivities, process and place in specific geographical contexts. It enables a consideration of LGBTQ lives and queer place-making in small cities on their own terms. In sum, this framework promotes theorisations of *ordinary* sexual subjectivities and a way to conceive of queer place-making without a hierarchical lens.

Methodology

Showcasing the significance of everyday geographies for those who are perceived to be, or see themselves as, “different” is a central goal of this research, where social difference is understood largely in terms of sexuality. To elucidate the ways in which LGBTQ people negotiate their everyday geographies in a context of rapid urban change, this research combines oral history methodology with other qualitative approaches designed to understand how social difference is lived and perceived in a growing city. In this text, I analyse oral histories in relation to the backdrop of the assumed and widely agreed-upon conservatism in Lethbridge, Alberta.

The few texts within geographic scholarship on sexuality and space that employ oral histories and life narratives (especially Brown, 2001; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011a; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011b) demonstrate their relevance to theorisations of sexuality and space. Oral histories, as Gavin Brown (2001, 48) contends, enable us to write geographies that embody the lived experiences of our subjects rather than geographies that “simply measure and locate our presence.” Moreover, oral history methodology can help us to grapple with vexing theoretical issues, such as fluid subjectivity (Boyd, 2008; Weston, 2009) and the spatial and temporal factors that produce both identities and the lenses through which identities become knowable (Maynes, et al, 2008).

The findings presented here emerged from research begun in November 2010, which focuses on developing an archive of oral histories from LGBTQ-identified people who live in and around Lethbridge, and using oral histories to understand changes taking place in the city. Although the scope of the project now includes narrators from all of the subject positions under an ‘LGBTQ’ umbrella,

the initial call for participants was narrow and it was out of this set of respondents that this paper emerged. The initial call asked for adult women (over age 18) who identified as non-heterosexual (gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer) and had lived in Lethbridge or its surrounding region for at least five years. From this initial call, I collected oral histories from eight respondents who ranged in age from twenty-one to sixty-seven. Four of these narrators were from Lethbridge and the surrounding region; four were migrants to the region. All but one narrator were in some way attached to the University (one undergraduate student, three former graduate students, and three current or former staff). Per each narrator's wishes, the audio interview and/or narrator-approved transcript of the oral history interview may ultimately be housed in the Sir Alexander Galt Museum and Archives in Lethbridge.

Here, I employ a selection of excerpts from three of the eight original oral history interviews. Some of the first to contribute to the research, these narrators emphasise the place-based specificity of struggles to create meaningful queer spaces and networks; stories which may be elided when analysed through a hierarchical lens. The number of narrators presented here is obviously small and should not be read as representative or generalisable. Indeed, the oral histories presented here are not intended to serve as a definitive documentary of LGBTQ experiences in Lethbridge. Rather, in the context of this article, the excerpts are used as tools to reconsider the strategies for theorising queer place-making in cities that are perceived within scholarly and popular imaginaries as too socially conservative for LGBTQ populations to thrive. The length of the excerpts helps to paint a picture of LGBTQ lives; these excerpts are then discussed in relation to theorising queer life in small cities.

Narrators are presented here with real or false names; the assigned names conform to the wishes of the narrator as described on research consent forms and additional details are listed in such a way that they will not compromise the anonymity of those participants who wish to remain anonymous. These oral histories should not be read as a transparent set of data but rather as interpretive materials that are meant to be deconstructed with an eye to the significance of space and place in shaping queer lives (Kennedy, 1995).

Resisting a hierarchal reading: Queer place-making in a socially conservative small city

The production of geographic knowledge about queer place-making practices and the processes that shape the everyday lives of LGBTQ people requires attention to queer lives and the practices taking place in small cities on their own terms, and theorisations of the mutual constitution of subjectivities, process and place in specific geographical contexts. In this section, I adopt this method to analyse the ways in which social conservatism and size matter (or do not matter) for queer place-making in a small city like Lethbridge. I employ the narratives of Dana and Natalie, introduced in turn, to discuss the effects of reading queer lives within a

hierarchical framework and the discoveries that become possible when that reading is resisted.

To begin, a bit of context: In July 2011, for its series on Canada's greatest communities, Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe & Mail*, published an article entitled "The keeper of faith: Lethbridge, Alberta." Intended as part of *The Globe & Mail's* celebration of the national holiday, articles in the series were written following suggestions submitted by *Globe & Mail* readers. "The keeper of faith" thus presumably adopts the tone of its nominator; as such, religiosity is presented both as a prominent feature of the city and of the article. The author writes,

Peter Portlock nominated Lethbridge as one of Canada's great communities for its kind, trusting people, its beautiful landscapes and its welcoming attitude toward religion. 'This is a city where people actually go to church on Sundays,' writes Mr. Portlock, the chief executive officer of Lethbridge Family Services – and a part-time organist. Rather than proselytizing, he adds, there is a 'grounding in faith' that's clear from the way people interact with and respect each other (Mackrael, 2011).

Indeed, the author describes the geography and culture of Lethbridge in ways that conform to widely-held notions of the place. Located 222 kilometres south of Calgary and 106 kilometres from the U.S. border, the regional centre⁴ is widely perceived to be geographically and culturally isolated, in part because of its location in one of the areas known to be part of a Canadian "Bible belt." Because the city's church-going populations include "mainstream" conservative Christian groups, fundamentalist Christian groups, a substantial LDS/Mormon community, and close proximity to several separatist religious (primarily Hutterite) colonies, Lethbridge is sometimes referred to as being situated in the midst of the "Bible buckle" to highlight its location in the widest part of the "Bible belt."⁵

The perception of Lethbridge as a socially conservative city is also an outcome of its location within a province that has been widely understood as a politically conservative outlier within Canada. Rhetoric of "traditional" social values –most famously former premier Ralph Klein's 2004 argument that Albertans are "severely normal"– is used to both celebrate and disparage Alberta. The politics of the province, and, by extension, the ethos of the place, are understood to conform to this rhetoric. Consequently, Alberta is perceived to be

⁴ By definition (Statistics Canada, revised as of 2011), Lethbridge is a medium-sized population centre, which describes urban areas with populations between 30,000 and 99,999 (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/subjects-sujets/standard-norme/sgc-cgt/urban-urbain-eng.htm>).

⁵ It is worth noting that the *Globe & Mail* write-up, and the dominant portrayal of Lethbridge, was met almost exclusively with opposition in the newspaper's online comment forum. The dominant depiction of Lethbridge as religious and socially conservative is significant; so too are the debates and contestations over this characterisation.

homogenous in its political and social conservatism; likewise, compliance with compulsory heterosexuality is assumed, especially outside of the two metropolitan centres⁶. Wesley (2011) argues that the conservative political culture and political codes of the province may explain its persistent conservative ethos, which makes it a political outlier even in the prairies provinces⁷.

To a certain extent, the widely held associations of homophobia and social conservatism in Alberta are not incorrect. Provincial policies provide germane examples. Writing in 2006, Gloria Filax noted, “Alberta is still the only Canadian province distinguished by state-sanctioned homophobia...The province of Alberta remains unique in the Canadian mosaic of ten provinces and three territories for its continued refusal to realign its human rights code or to extend human rights protections by reading homosexuality as a protected category into the provincial human rights code” (Filax, 2006, xii-xiii). The provincial human rights code was ultimately modified in 2009 (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2009), an amendment which materialised only after the province was forced to adopt federal legislation to legalize same-sex marriage in 2005.⁸

Narrators in this research drew out examples of the perception that the city and province are unremittingly conservative while simultaneously illustrating the ways that their own experiences sit in tension with the dominant understanding of the city. Dana, a transplant to the region, provides a case in point. In her late 30s at the time of the interview, Dana is a filmmaker who moved from Montreal to Lethbridge with her partner in 2005. Dana’s family has roots in southern Alberta, which provided her with both personal experience of Lethbridge and a certain degree of willingness to let the place speak for itself rather than be defined by others’ expectations. This sentiment is captured in the following excerpt, where she responds to a prompt about her life as a queer parent in Lethbridge. This story

⁶ Discourse matters in the construction of place, and in the construction of those who are read to be welcome, legitimate citizens of place. As Rasmussen (2006, 808) contends in her study of right-wing political mobilization in Nebraska, USA, the discourse with which anti-gay campaigners constructed the state forcefully stabilized an internally coherent heterosexual identity and a “cosmopolitan gay” identity that could be excluded from the space. Gorman-Murray et al (2008) describe similar phenomena in debates over belonging for gays and lesbians in Daylesford, Australia: they show that gay and lesbian belonging was contested both in relation to the town and to the nation and that belonging is felt and produced at multiple scales. These arguments are relevant to the context of Alberta, and particularly to the small towns and rural areas of the province, which are widely construed to be intolerant of queer life.

⁷ While Calgary’s recent election of a Liberal (and Muslim) mayor may signal an emergent political trend in Alberta’s largest urban centre, the province as a whole is still commonly read in terms of the socially-conservative brand of party Conservatism that has governed since the late 1960s. The Conservative party continues to dominate Alberta politics in the federal government and the provincial legislative assembly. At this writing, however, the new far right party, the Wild Rose Alliance, is poised to win a majority of seats in the upcoming provincial election.

⁸ The modified human rights code continues to be controversial. Wells and Chamberlain (2009) describe the modification as a Faustian bargain: “In addition to including sexual orientation [in the Human Rights, Citizenship, and Multicultural Amendment Act], Section 9 of the bill also sought to enshrine ‘parental rights,’ which would allow parents the right to opt their children out of any explicitly planned discussions of religion, human sexuality, or sexual orientation.” In practical terms, Bill 44 has been decried as a infringing upon teachers and reproducing the notion that certain topics –like evolution and sexuality– are taboo.

opens with Dana recounting the support she and her partner have received as same-sex parents and the forms of queer place-making that she believes have engendered that support. By the end of the segment, Dana's desire to be in a city with a more diverse population comes to the fore.

Dana: One of the things I have to say about coming to this region and being same sex parents in this area, we've received nothing but support in terms of our ability and our right and our everything. It's been amazing.

When we came from Montreal, these were some of the stereotypes that I wanted to flip the bird at, because our friends said "I thought you wanted to be parents, you can't go there! It'll never happen." Because at that time Alberta was the holdout province in terms of same sex marriage, so why would they say same sex parenting was a fine thing? But sure enough, no road blocks, none. And I would say more supportive than the experience we had in Quebec, in Montreal.

So as a family, and I think that has something to do with choosing to be very out. We've just functioned on the assumption that no one would have any issue with our parenting, and everybody has met us half way or more than. And that has been great. And we still expect nothing less. We found that the day care, we had to lay it out there just to check what's what. And we had to do, at all the schools, be out and be our friendly selves and kind selves and open selves.

And so far that's been a great formula in terms of having that reciprocated in terms of our role as parents. Might change, you know, we'll see. I've heard some stories about how the faithful and the secular [negotiate] childhood friends. It's [religion is] sometimes an issue for parents, and I would imagine if that was an issue, then our sexuality might also be an issue for some parents. Can't predict until it happens.

And we might be elsewhere. Because I do want a greater diversity for [my son], I want him to see families that are like his own, versus being the well loved exception. I want him to live in a community where there's not just one other family like his. There are places where there are lots of families like his, and I want him to know that and have that confidence.

There are a number of points in this excerpt that can be used to diverge from hierarchy-based theorising and give voice to an alternative reading for examining queer lives in small cities. To draw out these points, it is necessary to first consider what a hierarchical reading might entail. A framework that presumes that small cities are necessarily homophobic and drive people away in search of more gay friendly locations may regard Dana's story as evidence that queer lives cannot be maintained outside of a gay friendly metropolis (e.g., Doderer, 2011; Weston,

1995). For example, a hierarchical reading might focus on Dana's comment that she and her partner have been met "half way or more than" in their role as parents by the range of people with whom they engage as a family. While Dana's comments suggest that she interprets being met "half way or more than" as evidence of positive reception, a hierarchical lens risks developing an over-determined reading of this characterisation: being met "half way or more than" suggests that Dana and her partner are still not met *the whole way*, which implies that she and her partner are not received on the same terms as opposite-sex parents. "Half way or more than," articulated as a positive description, could therefore be read as a demonstration of the conservatism of Lethbridge.

The logic of the hierarchical reading, relying as it does upon assumptions about the conservatism of small cities (and a presumed socially liberal climate in large metropolitan centres), functions as a red herring that detracts from a nuanced and intersectional analysis of Dana's story. It suggests, for instance, that social conservatism is *the* defining feature of Dana's experience as a parent in a same-sex couple in Lethbridge and, by extension, that she would not have the same type of experience in a larger city that is known to be gay friendly. Further, it sets up an expectation that Dana's ability to successfully navigate the socially conservative city makes her the exceptional case. In fact, such a reading ignores the narrator's own interpretation of her experience: for Dana, social conservatism has not been a significant factor in her experience of same-sex parenting in Lethbridge thus far. Likewise, reading Dana's narrative as exceptional feeds into the stereotypes about southern Alberta that Dana's peers held so strongly, stereotypes that she was quite invested in challenging.

Moreover, to assume that Dana's experience is particular to small cities is to render invisible the possibility that queer place-making poses challenges in cities of all sizes. For instance, according to Dana, the encouraging reception with which she and her partner were greeted as same-sex parents was actively shaped by their performances of openness and friendliness. This type of performance—and its perceived reception among the people Dana and her partner encounter in their daily lives—is not unique to queer place-making in Lethbridge. Instead, such performances (and navigating the reception to these performances) are strategies by which LGBTQ people create a sense of place and construct lifeworlds in cities of all sizes.

Queer lifeworlds also extend well beyond sexual diversity, and this too is a point that does not receive sufficient attention in a framework that orders cities based on their presumed embrace of LGBTQ people. As such, a hierarchical reading of Dana's narrative encourages attention to certain questions and ignores others. From this perspective, Dana's desires for living in a diverse city become narrowly focused on sexual diversity: for example, ensuring that her son is exposed to other families headed by same-sex couples. Yet, this reading is too limited in its neglect for the intersectional ways that subjectivities are produced. The diversity she referred to at the end of this segment *does* refer to sexual diversity, as she wants her

son to be in a community of queer families, but it also refers to racial and linguistic diversity; as she describes in other segments of the interview, Dana identifies strongly with the African diaspora and wants to retain a bilingual identity.

Ultimately, a hierarchical reading provides an already-expected set of interpretations while foreclosing the possible lessons that do not conform to a master narrative about LGBTQ lives in small cities. Teasing apart the absences that make queer place-making in Lethbridge difficult for Dana requires more than attention to social conservatism, for she has found ample support as a queer parent. Further, this examination requires more than consideration of city size. As Dana demonstrates, using a comparative lens to suggest that her experience of being a queer parent in Lethbridge improved upon similar experience in Montreal, a larger city is not a solution in and of itself. As she noted elsewhere in the interview, many cities are larger than Lethbridge but similarly lack the myriad types of diversity that she wants for herself and her son.

Starting from the premise that small cities provide a livable context for queer place-making, it is possible to examine the ordinary ways in which cities of all sizes encompass many different people and modes of living. For most narrators, Lethbridge has much more work to do to be a more socially inclusive city. Several participants pointed to the ways this call has been taken up: they referenced the City's support of new refugee and immigrant populations; the increasing presence of NGOs and faith-based organisations committed to supporting diverse groups, including LGBTQ people; and the City Council's near-unanimous vote to join the Coalition of Municipalities against Racism and Discrimination, a UNESCO-initiated global effort to build inclusive communities by combating racism and discrimination. As the second narrator, Natalie, points out, however, the city struggles with issues that are common among many North American cities, including particular patterns of urban growth (suburbanisation, development of gated communities) despite the City government's commitment to invest in the downtown core, and particular forms of housing and employment discrimination toward First Nations people.⁹ Yet, conceptualising these processes of urban change and the tensions they may give rise to around queer place-making must occur not in comparative-hierarchical terms but in terms of the ways these changes are informed by the historical, political-economic, and social contexts of Lethbridge and Alberta more broadly.

Natalie's interview provides another perspective into the logics that are put into motion and the kinds of information that remains concealed when a hierarchical framework is used to theorise LGBTQ lives in small cities. Natalie, like Dana, is a transplant to Lethbridge. For her, the imagined geography of conservatism that coloured her expectations of the place was validated immediately

⁹The First Nations peoples, or Aboriginal Canadians, whose nations are situated in close proximity to Lethbridge include the Siksika Nation, the Kinai Nation, and the Piikani Nation.

upon her arrival. From the start, however, this expectation of conservatism was shot through with inconsistency. Twenty-eight years old at the time of her interview, Natalie moved to Lethbridge with her partner when they were in their early twenties. They married in British Columbia immediately prior to their move. In the following excerpt, she responds to what it was like to move to Lethbridge at a time when same-sex marriage was a hotly debated political issue in Alberta. Natalie's closing comments, on how the city has changed in the intervening years, emerged later in the interview.

TM: What was that like? Moving as newlyweds to Lethbridge?

Natalie: Well, our families were convinced we were going to get killed. Neither of our families have a particularly high esteem of Alberta, especially southern Alberta. But I think we actually had more problems by being vegetarian than by being gay, for the most part (laughs).

I think I still had purple hair at that point and we were covered in piercings and we were just like, you know, any other twenty years olds going to university for the first time. We did make it into the newspaper our first week here though. We had moved right downtown basically and we were just sort of wandering around town, exploring the city, and we saw what looked like a protest at Rick Casson's office, the MP [Member of Parliament]. We wondered what all these old white people were protesting. We thought it might be a health care thing or something. And so we walked over to it and we saw all the "Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve" signs, and we realized that it was about gay marriage. And we were newly married and so we held hands and we walked right into the middle of it.

We found a couple of other pro-gay marriage people. All of them were straight, they were social workers and teachers I remember mostly. So we found some allies right away, which was pretty neat feeling not alone although we were surrounded by this big ring of people who were clearly hostile.

So, we made it into the newspaper my first week of school then. There was a student sitting beside me in history class and he had the newspaper open and he asked me the clearly leading question about what did I feel about this gay marriage stuff. And I said, "Well, you see that gay couple that they interviewed, that's me and my wife." He turned out to be a really strongly LDS Mormon guy who was gay and was looking for someone to come out to, so that turned out to be a pretty good connection for both of us...

[Later in the interview] Lethbridge seems to me to be growing. It seems to be to growing really quickly but mostly with closed or semi-closed, gated communities out in the rich areas of town. So it's seems

to be growing but also really suburbanizing... [with development and] people who aren't interested in the downtown core vital life. I know that the City is putting in a lot of effort in revitalizing downtown Lethbridge but they have been doing that for the seven years that I have been here. I think it's tough going because everyone wants to live in a gated community out in the suburbs. But like I said, the first week I was in Lethbridge, we were in a anti-gay marriage protest, you know, in the middle of it, and that's something you would never, never see anymore. So I think Lethbridge has gotten more tolerant in the meanwhile as well.

Read through a theoretical lens that separates large, presumably gay friendly cities from small, purportedly intolerant cities, Natalie's story offers ample evidence for the city's failure to be open to LGBTQ difference. From her family's misgivings, to her "welcome" with an anti-gay marriage protest, to her impression that the population has become "more tolerant" even as people disappear into gated communities; all of these characteristics reinforce the notion that small, conservative Lethbridge is the antithesis to a large urban centre that embraces a socially diverse and inclusive population. In effect, this interpretive lens reads hierarchy *into* the interview rather than drawing this theme out from its content.

The consequence of this reading is to privilege one kind of city over another, setting up an oppositional relationship between between LGBTQ lives in urban centres that are considered "gay friendly" and LGBTQ lives everywhere else. In particular, it serves to focus attention on conservatism and acts of discrimination occurring in small cities, as if these are the only sites where homophobia in its myriad forms is found. This type of reading places emphasis on a certain small-mindedness that is expected to accompany a city's small size and reduces the demand to pay attention to forms of discrimination and violence wherever they occur.

Reading Natalie's narrative with an analytical lens that resists the totalising portrait of LGBTQ life in small urban centres offers an alternative analysis that emphasises the geographic specificity of queer place-making. Beginning by depicting Lethbridge through common understandings of social conservatism and dominant homophobia, Natalie showed how that depiction conforms to and sits in tension with her experience in a variety of ways. She and her partner found allies in the midst of an anti-gay marriage rally; she made fortuitous connections with other LGBTQ people; and she has had a tougher time in her day-to-day life negotiating a meatless diet than she has had establishing a life outside of heteronormative boundaries. Each of these "moments" was enabled in the context of specific geographical forces: for instance, political climate; social norms informed by religious conservatism; and Alberta provincial pride for its ranching and cattle industry, respectively. The intersections of these forces demonstrate that queer place-making is contingent on a network of factors, including but not limited to city size and social conservatism. Such intersections enable richer analyses of the

production of LGBQ lives than what is available in hierarchical readings of queer living in small cities.

Natalie's discussion of the changes afoot in Lethbridge is also significant in its demonstration that urban change cannot be characterised in teleological terms. A hierarchical reading of LGBQ lives in small (and large) cities tends to frame "progress" in unidirectional terms of rights and recognition: for instance, more people self-identify, more activism, more visibility, and more rights result in a reduction in homophobic acts of violence. A reading that resists this type of framing does a better job of detailing the slippages and discrepancies that often work alongside "progress." Thus, Natalie notes that on the one hand, the city has become more tolerant, a place where an anti-gay protest would be out of place. On the other hand, she points out that urban growth in this city tends to take the form of exclusive residential developments that grow up on the edges of an existing, if new, suburban-style landscape. This juxtaposition suggests that increased "tolerance" has emerged alongside an apparent increase in a suburban lifestyle that is grounded in middle class homogeneity.

In sum, dispensing with a hierarchical reading of LGBQ lives and queer place-making enables us to conceptualise everyday queer lives in geographically specific terms. Rather than focusing on the problems of queer place-making in Lethbridge, which are anticipated in a hierarchical reading, we must start from the assumption that small cities provide a context to construct queer lifeworlds. In so doing, it becomes possible to identify both problems and successes of queer place-making. Indeed, the problems and successes experienced by Dana and Natalie illustrate the ways in which queer place-making in small conservative cities may both conform to and confound dominant expectations. These are the geographically specific tensions that emerge from a more generative, non-hierarchical reading.

Analysing queer place-making in Lethbridge on its own terms

One key dividing line that has emerged among oral history narrators is the significance of visibility: whether LGBQ bodies/events/everyday practices are visible in Lethbridge and whether attention should be paid to making queer place-making more visible. In this city as elsewhere, the politics of visibility are contentious: the visibility of queer bodies and practices arguably expands the repertoire of what is deemed possible, even as it constitutes another form of boundary-making. Seen through a lens that emphasises hierarchy, though, the dynamics of queer visibility are reduced to a simplistic reading whereby relative *invisibility* is strictly a function of social conservatism rather than a contested practice that is produced in geographically specific ways. Queer place-making in a small city can be analysed on its own terms, however. For the following narrator, Bente, visibility must be examined in the context of a small city where dominant overtones of insularity are persistently disrupted by different modes of being. In her late forties, Bente grew up and has spent much of her adult life in southern Alberta. Bente's narrative offers insights that underscore the need for a nuanced theoretical

framework to understand the embodied geographies of everyday LGBQ lives outside the fictive “gay metropolis.”

TM: You mentioned Lethbridge not having a gay bar. Do you think that's important?

Bente: I don't know. It would be nice to have some kind of establishment where it wasn't so youth oriented. Because [PRIDE, the University campus group] and stuff like that, it's youth oriented. So for somebody like me, I'm 47 years old, I'm a lesbian and I'm single. Meeting somebody in Lethbridge, I might as well be in the Sahara Desert. But on the other hand, I like being alone so it's not such a bad thing for me. But there are people for whom it's like relationship death: you come here and unless you're already in a relationship, it's awfully hard to find something. And everything that is available is really being geared towards a late teen to 20-age group. Where does that leave you?

Now this coffee [private social] group, that is older ladies. But again, there's a lot of couples, which more power to you, I think it's great. But even with that, we find somebody's house to go to every week. So it's never a place we can go out. It's never an establishment where you can go shoot a game of pool, do some darts, a game of cards, that would be great. Would it ever happen in Lethbridge? Who knows.

But it's not so important that the existence of a gay community can't happen without it. I mean, there very obviously is, I think there's a very healthy gay community in this city. But maybe there wouldn't be the issues if there was a place where we could all come together and that there was more communication back and forth between groups. Maybe the issues between GALA [the local gay organisation] and [PRIDE] wouldn't be so huge if there was that aspect. But then again, who knows, it might not mean anything.

At first glance, this excerpt appears to do little but confirm the expectations that a hierarchical reading imposes: except for Bente’s comment that “a very healthy gay community” exists in Lethbridge, the assumptions about queer life in small cities that accompany a hierarchical lens are confirmed. The excerpt suggests that invisibility of LGBQ bodies and queer place-making is the standard, which is what we are led to expect of a small conservative city. And it is necessary to recognise that this description fits how some people experience queer life in Lethbridge.

Yet, positing that small cities like Lethbridge serve the sole function of being “the city from which one escapes” obfuscates the queer lives that are being forged there. It ignores the place-specific ways in which queer practices are produced and conducted, and it assumes that the challenges faced by LGBQ residents are unique

to those living in Lethbridge and other small cities, whether or not these cities are socially conservative. In fact, the challenges that Bente draws out relate to the same kinds of debates and community tensions that occur in many urban contexts.

Visibility of LGBQ bodies and queer life is one example. For sexuality and space scholars, the question of separate social spaces and gay public venues is a source of contention. Some have noted that existing divisions within queer communities may become perceptible and exclusions more pronounced within queer social spaces (Taylor, 2007). Others have demonstrated that the presence of gay public venues does not ensure the visibility of lesbians (Podmore, 2001; 2006), even as these spaces may provide access to affirmative recognition and, possibly, space for political activism (Fincher and Iveson, 2008).

Bente's discussion illustrates that the question of the value or utility of queer public spaces remains relevant. For Bente, a notable feature of LGBQ life in Lethbridge is that it occurs largely in private spaces (see Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Valentine, 1993; but see also Smith and Holt, 2005, for a different reading of public displays of affection among lesbians in rural settings). While monthly or occasional gay dances in public, if obscure, venues have been a long-term feature of the local gay and lesbian association, many narrators argued that queer social life in Lethbridge primarily takes the form of small dinner parties, house parties, and events that require people to have existing social networks in order to be included. For some narrators, this form of sociality parallels, or is an extension of, a dominant culture of privacy that is at work in the city.

In Bente's narrative, there is an open question about the absence and relevance of queer-focused public venues in the city. This type of public space would eliminate the need to claim gay space in establishments where, in her experience, straight owners are welcoming only insofar as the business from gay event nights or queer clientele did not turn off other potential customers, or make the establishment appear to have "turned" appreciably gay-friendly. Further, she intimated that such spaces may facilitate meeting available single women who are in her age range in a way that private social gatherings do not. According to Bente, one effect of queer social life occurring in homes or spaces similarly inaccessible to a wider group is the cost to finding and building intimate relationships. With no visible social spaces for LGBQ people in Lethbridge, Bente remarked that meeting other women poses a particular challenge (Kramer, 1995).

Another consequence of maintaining queer life in private, exclusive locations that came to the fore for Bente is less significant infrastructure for "easy" community engagement. As she noted, tensions that emerge between community organizations (the University campus queer organization, called ULSU Pride Centre, and GALA, the city/regional GLBTQ organization) have the potential to fester for longer than they otherwise might if there were a public space in which LGBQ residents were invested.

Viewed in hierarchical terms, the lack of a public gay venue in Lethbridge –a social space, a cafe, a community centre– might signal a closeted or even non-existent LGBTQ community. From this perspective, the significance of private functions and the absence of a place to publicly congregate reinforce a common perception of queer life in the small city: that it is behind doors and “behind the times.” It is precisely this kind of analysis that feeds the expectation of LGBTQ lives “on the periphery,” and it forecloses the possibility of observing the broader cartography of queer space that already exists.

As Bente noted, however, there is a sizable and vibrant gay community in Lethbridge, despite the absence of a dedicated space and the (partial) visibility that comes with a public venue. And, to some extent, the visibility of queer life matters. Undoubtedly, then, there are struggles involved with queer place-making in Lethbridge. For Bente, it is a particular challenge to be single in a town full of couples, and where so many social events are aimed at a younger audience. In this excerpt, the desire for change was not voiced in prescriptive or teleological terms. Pointing to the historical and socio-political context of the city in her question about whether a gay bar would ever happen in Lethbridge, Bente did not suggest a particular kind of visibility. Instead, her description of the city intimates that disrupting the dominant norms of city life must occur in geographically-specific ways.

Thus, this narrative emphasises the relevance of understanding LGBTQ lives in a city on its own terms. This type of attention, on the geographical specificities that produce particular forms of queer place-making, produces a nuanced picture of the strengths and struggles and already existing queer practices and activism in LGBTQ communities in cities of all sizes.

Conclusion

Geographers who study sexuality and space have taken a critical view of certain popular narratives about urban queer life. For example, scholars dispute the argument that some “model” Canadian cities that “have arrived” by embracing queer bodies (Catungal and Leslie, 2009; Miller, 2005; Nash, 2010). Likewise, scholars have cautioned against prescriptions about “progress” in urban queer life: neither the gaybourhood (Doan and Higgins, 2011; Giesecking, forthcoming; Nash, 2006), the visibility of lesbian bodies (Podmore, 2006) nor the inclusion of queer identity within gay marriage legislation (Browne, 2011) signals uncontested or unproblematic queer urban politics or community life. In other words, queer life in every city faces geographically specific challenges. Yet, the ways in which the (often specific, if unnamed, gay friendly) metropolitan centre is implicitly deployed as the referential illusion in theorisations about queer urban life requires more of our attention.

Critical and feminist geographers, taking a cue from post-colonial theorists, have emphasised that the production of geographical knowledge, even when written from a critical or marginal position within ‘the centre’, often has the

tendency to reproduce normative spatialities of centre/periphery, insider/outsider. In sexuality and space/queer geographies literature, this tendency manifests as a consequence of where research is conducted and how urban hierarchies structure our theoretical gaze. Writing on the utility of the closet metaphor, Michael Brown (2011, 125) identifies this trend as an outcome of “the structural [and spatial] advantages of our own cosmopolitan academic lives in progressive enclaves.” The result is insufficient critical attention to the *geographies* that inform the theories employed, and those subsequently written, in sexuality and space scholarship (see Berg, 2004). As sexuality and space (critical/feminist/ post-colonial) scholars, we need to be more attuned to the circulation of the theories in which we engage.

Thus, like other authors who are concerned with theorising the lived realities of LGBTQ people (e.g., Lewis, 2012; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011b), I draw attention here to the implicit urban hierarchies that influence and inform dominant readings of queer life in small cities, rural places, and arguably even metropolitan centres. With a referential illusion of the gay friendly metropolis intact, queer practices in small cities and rural places are too easily assumed to be a reflection or imitation of practices that are more “authentically” locatable in metropolitan centres (e.g., Doderer, 2011). Likewise, they are often taken for granted as examples of a teleological rural queer past that have been “solved” in (or by relocating to) the large, presumably gay friendly urban centre.

Queer place-making practices in small cities must be theorised without this master narrative. Instead, they must be recognised for their ability to expand our understanding of how queer lives are produced, negotiated, and experienced. Moreover, the theoretical terms we employ to understand the mutual constitution of sexualities and space and place gain greater nuance when we attend to queer practices and desires in “ordinary” terms, with an eye to the ways that queer subjectivities shape, and are shaped by, the geographic specificity of place. In this article, I have employed LGBTQ oral history narratives to emphasise the relevance of understanding LGBTQ lives in small cities outside the rigid boundaries of a hierarchical reading and on their own terms. These narratives speak to the myriad geographically specific ways that narrators construct queer lifeworlds; they recognise both successes and challenges that arise from queer place-making, and demonstrate the value of reading and theorising LGBTQ lives in geographically specific terms (Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011a). Moreover, they illustrate the possibility for producing a much richer and more nuanced picture of the strengths and struggles of LGBTQ practices and communities in cities of all sizes.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the narrators who are showcased in this article for sharing their time, stories, and insights. Thanks also to two reviewers and the editors of this special issue, and Catherine Nash and Kath Browne in particular, for constructive and insightful feedback throughout the writing process. I also wish to acknowledge the Centre for Feminist Research at York University, where parts of this paper were

developed. This research is being conducted with funding support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Lethbridge.

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