

THINKING OTHERWISE:  
EXPLORING NARRATIVES OF WOMEN WHO SHIFTED FROM A HETEROSEXUAL TO  
A LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, QUEER, AND/OR UNLABELED IDENTITY

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## ABSTRACT

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Stories about adult women shifting from a heterosexual identity to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and/or unlabeled identity emerge in many areas of contemporary U.S. culture, including anthologies of personal narratives, self-help books, women's magazines, talk shows, blogs, major network news outlets, and academic scholarship. This dissertation explores discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women to better understand contemporary U.S. culture. Using a mixed methods approach involving textual analysis and focus groups, I argue that stories about women shifting sexual identities during adulthood illuminate assumptions and contradictions shaping broader thinking about LGBTQ sexualities, women's sexualities, and sexual fluidity in the U.S. Each chapter is organized around a significant concept influencing the construction of contemporary American sexualities. These concepts include the notion that LGBTQ people are "born this way"; the increasingly popular idea that women love "the person, not the gender"; the formative role of whiteness and middle class identity in stories about women coming out in midlife; and the concept of normalcy as it determines LGBTQ people's relationship to the nation. The topic of once-heterosexual-identified women has yet to be extensively studied with a cultural studies methodology. These stories are ideal sites to investigate the construction of American sexualities because they circulate a confusing whirlwind of ideas that challenge, reaffirm, and complicate what is commonly accepted as the truth about sexuality. These stories reveal the strange, contradictory workings of contemporary understandings of sexuality, workings that are easy to overlook while one is living in the present moment.

This dissertation is dedicated to:

My parents, who have always been the biggest supporters of my education,

And

The women in my family, especially my grandmothers.

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## INTRODUCTION

“I am a lesbian and it was a later-in-life recognition. . . . Some people would say, well, you’re living a lie and, you know, the truth is—not at all. This has only been for the past seven years.”

--Actress Meredith Baxter coming out on the *Today* show (Marikar).

“Life threw me a surprise party. . . . I was looking for something fun and chic. I didn’t think it would redefine me as a person.”

--Comedian Carol Leifer on falling in love with a woman at age forty (James Donaldson).

“I had never met a woman I was attracted to [before Christine]. And maybe if I’d met her when I was 20, I would have fallen in love and only dated women. But maybe if I’d met her at 20, I wouldn’t have responded at all. Who knows?”

--Actress Cynthia Nixon on falling in love with her wife at age thirty-eight (Breen).

The above quotations, all published between 2009 and 2010, are part of a recent surge of public discourse in the U.S. about lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and/or unlabeled women who once identified as heterosexual. Stories about women like Baxter, Leifer, and Nixon—stories featuring women coming out in midlife or women leaving male partners for female partners—emerge in many areas of contemporary U.S. culture, including anthologies of personal narratives, self-help books, women’s magazines, talk shows, blogs, major network news outlets, and academic scholarship.<sup>1</sup> This heightened public interest in women who shifted from a heterosexual identity into a non-heterosexual identity as adults compels me to think more about what these stories reveal about how sexuality is understood in contemporary U.S. culture.



In this dissertation I explore discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women with a mixed methods approach that involves textual analysis of first-person essays and news stories, and focus groups with women who identify as having shifted sexual identities during adulthood. While these stories may initially appear as individual women's experiences, I argue that discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women illuminates investments, contradictions, and assumptions shaping thinking about LGBTQ sexualities, women's sexualities, sexual fluidity, and intersections of sexuality with gender, age, race, class, and national identity. It seems significant that such stories are receiving increased attention in this historical moment—the 1990s to the present—and I explore discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women to better understand this moment.

I use discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women to learn things about the moment we live in, to “denaturalize the present” in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms (*Epistemology of the Closet* 48). It is easy to take the conditions of the present for granted as we are living them, to experience them as inevitable. However, discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women is positioned in an in-between space on the U.S. cultural landscape, and because of the strange positioning of this discourse, it illuminates the workings of major concepts constructing contemporary American sexualities. These stories circulate a confusing whirlwind of ideas that challenge, reaffirm, and complicate what is commonly accepted as the truth about sexuality. By investigating discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women, we gain insight into this present moment, into often paradoxical understandings of sexuality that we might otherwise take for granted, and we perhaps imagine new ways of knowing sexuality and identity.

Every research problem starts with a moment of intrigue, and the moment that sparked this dissertation occurred when I noticed a contradiction: stories about once-heterosexual-identified women are prevalent in U.S. culture at the moment, but these stories are not always socially legible and they sometimes elicit hostility, anxiety, or disbelief from audiences. This contradiction became apparent to me in January 2012 when actress Cynthia Nixon incited controversy after she explained her midlife shift in sexual identity in an interview with *The New York Times*. Nixon stated that she received resistance while giving a speech at a gay rights event which included the line, “I’ve been straight, and I’ve been gay, and gay is better” (Witchel). Nixon elaborated on her comment in the interview, stating, “[the event organizers] tried to get me to change it, because they said it implies that homosexuality can be a choice. And for me, it is a choice. I understand that for many people it’s not, but for me it’s a choice, and you don’t get to define my gayness for me” (Witchel). Nixon’s comments incited a flurry of responses in online news websites and blogs, ranging from celebratory to chastising in tone. A Google search of responses to Nixon finds many critics who accuse her of playing into homophobic rhetoric about gayness as a reversible lifestyle choice. For instance, TV news pundit and *AMERICAblog* creator John Aravosis asserts, “Every religious right hater is now going to quote this woman every single time they want to deny us our civil rights. Thanks” (Aravosis). Yet others applauded Nixon for giving voice to the diverse ways same-gender-loving people might experience their sexual identity. Well-known gay playwright and director Harvey Fierstein tweeted in defense of Nixon, “Would people please get a life and leave the lady alone? There is very little black and white when it comes to sexuality. Isn’t that what KINSEY taught us more than 60 years ago? Why are we being as intolerant as

the bigots we despise?” (Fierstein). One could easily fall down an internet rabbit hole sifting through the blog posts, comment threads, and news sites in January 2012 that debated the merits and dangers of Nixon’s description of her gay identity as a choice. This controversy culminated with Nixon releasing a statement clarifying that, “While I don’t often use the word, the technically precise term for my orientation is bisexual” and that she did not believe any sexual orientation, be it bisexual, heterosexual, or gay, was a choice. Rather, Nixon argued, “What I have ‘chosen’ is to be in a gay relationship” (Grindley).

The way these events unfolded filled me with questions. Why should Nixon’s comments about what she stresses as her personal experience rouse such heated debate and even anger? Why should Nixon be compelled to claim an identity label she does not use, “bisexual,” and distance herself from her preferred sexual identity label, “gay”? Additionally, why should Nixon draw such controversy considering her comments exist in constellation with an abundance of recent popular and academic discourse about women shifting sexual identities, including the emergence of scholarship in psychology, sociology, and social work analyzing women coming out in midlife or women’s sexual fluidity more broadly (Larson; Jensen; Diamond; Kitzinger and Wilkinson; Peplau)? The blogosphere controversy that emerged in response to Nixon’s comments signaled to me that something significant is occurring in and around stories about once-heterosexual-identified women, and that it would be productive to investigate the cultural work these stories perform.

Stories like Nixon’s—which I began to find all around me in anthologies of autobiographical essays, in popular news media, and later in my own focus groups—are strange stories in this historical moment. I say they are strange because they simultaneously encompass ideas that trouble dominant understandings of sexuality as

essential and stable, and reaffirm common sense notions that women are inherently sexually fluid. On the one hand, these stories challenge both dominant thinking that sexual identity as stable and prevailing LGBTQ rights rhetoric about being “born this way.” Narratives like Nixon’s rely on a contrasting model of identity in which certain events, people, or texts might change us. Most women who have shifted from a heterosexual to an LGBTQ identity do not describe their experience in terms of “choice” as Nixon does, but even women who believe they were born LGBTQ and did not realize it consider experiences that were catalysts for such intimately felt changes. These narratives suggest the possibility for sexual identity to change in adulthood—even if that change involves awakening to an authentic identity—which complicates most sexual identity formation models that look to adolescence as a critical stage in identity development. As a result, stories of once-heterosexual-identified women are in many instances challenged and disbelieved. Such stories cut against dominant thinking about the stability of sexual identity, as the resistance Nixon received demonstrates.

Yet on the other hand, these stories have obtained a certain level of social legibility, as evidenced by the proliferation of popular texts and scholarly studies generated around the experience of women becoming LGBTQ as adults. While women’s sexual fluidity takes many forms, notably, once-heterosexual-identified women have inspired more popular and academic work than the experiences of women shifting from an LGBTQ identity to a heterosexual identity.<sup>2</sup> The shift away from a heterosexual identity appears to be more newsworthy in public discourse than other “directions” women’s sexual fluidity might take.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women becomes more credible when supported by an assumption in U.S. culture that women are inherently more

sexually fluid than men.<sup>4</sup> For example, Lisa M. Diamond's widely cited study,<sup>5</sup> *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*, argues that theories of sexual identity have been based on men's experiences, and such theories ignore women's greater capacity for sexual fluidity in comparison to men's more stable experiences of desire. Similarly, while stories of women's sexual fluidity have boomed in public discourse during recent years, narratives about once-heterosexual-identified men becoming GBQ as adults are not told with the same frequency.<sup>6</sup> The fact that stories about once-heterosexual-identified women have garnered such public interest—more than stories about men's sexual fluidity, more than stories about once-LGBQ-identified women who are now heterosexual—points to their significance in contemporary U.S. culture. Thus, the contradiction I see is that once-heterosexual-identified women are highly visible in contemporary U.S. culture and of great public interest—perhaps because their stories reaffirm the cultural tendency to characterize women as more sexually fluid than men—yet, simultaneously, such women are often not heard on their own terms, and easily dismissed or simply ignored by others.

Sociologist Ken Plummer argues that sexual stories—stories about sexual identity and sexuality—can only truly be socially legible if historical and cultural conditions allow for it. Plummer theorizes “‘the tale and its time’: how certain stories can only be told when key social worlds await the telling, when an audience is ripened up and ready to hear. Many stories are in silence—dormant, awaiting their historical moment” (35). Thinking about “the tale and its time” in relation to discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women, I ask what these stories can tell us about this moment of U.S. culture. What concepts within these stories are largely accepted as common sense? What about these

stories challenge dominant thinking about sexuality? How do privilege and power function within and through these stories? These are the central questions of my dissertation.

Discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women illuminates the workings of major concepts shaping how we think about sexuality and sexual identity in the present moment. I use the term “discourse” in the Foucauldian sense to mean language and social practices which constitute knowledge—knowledge that creates subjectivities, understandings of how the world works, and reality as people experience it. Foucault defines discourse as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (*The Archeology of Knowledge* 49), and Bower et al. clarify “discourses are fundamentally productive. That is, they produce ‘things’ (e.g., objects, social institutions, individual subjectivities and “subjects”) and they have real effects. ... discourses have a fundamentally material dimension; they productively constitute objects, individuals and social realities in particular ways” (30).<sup>7</sup> I analyze discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women to see what “things”—identities, knowledge about sexuality, cultural conditions, and interpersonal dynamics—they produce.

In these stories we can see the production of the language and ideas we have to make sense of sexuality within the present moment. We can see multiple and sometimes contradictory understandings of LGBTQ sexualities circulating in U.S. culture, despite the dominance of “born this way” discourse. We can see individuals creating new sexual identity labels, complicating and refusing to use existing ones, and expressing their views about labels in ways that point to larger cultural dissatisfaction with the current language available to talk about sexuality. We can see popular media framing sexual fluidity as a particularly gendered experience, assuming that women are innately more sexually fluid

than men. We can ruminate on the political implications of what it means that women are popularly understood to be more sexually fluid than men while authentic LGBTQ identity continues to be defined in terms of life-long stability. We can see the formative role that whiteness and middle-class identity plays in shaping these stories, as the once-heterosexual-identified women who are most culturally visible are white and affluent midlife women. These stories advance culturally specific models of what it means to be a woman who comes out in midlife and what women's empowerment and sexual autonomy looks like. Yet the cultural particularity of these stories go unmarked, implicitly speaking on behalf of all women and ignoring the diverse ways women of varying racial and class backgrounds might make sense of such experiences. We can see once-heterosexual-identified women precariously positioned within the political landscape of dominant LGBTQ politics: on the one hand, they act as ideal representations of the notion that LGBTQ people are normal; on the other hand, their perceived normalcy sometimes delegitimizes their claims to LGBTQ identities and their place in LGBTQ communities. These stories illuminate how we think about sexuality in our time, and I have organized this dissertation to investigate some of the more significant concepts these stories help us understand.

### *Terminology*

I use the term “once-heterosexual-identified” to refer to women who shifted from a heterosexual identity to a non-heterosexual identity at some point in their adult lives, but I do so with some reservations. I want a term that can broadly encompass the diverse experiences represented among the stories I examine, and this term seems like the best possibility. The experiences I examine in this dissertation include women who recognized

their same-sex desires at an early age and actively hid their non-heterosexual identities, women who unconsciously suppressed their same-sex desires until midlife, women whose sexual identity changed during some point of adulthood as they developed new same-sex desires, and radically sexually fluid women who have shifted between multiple identities several times and believe their sexual identity will continue to change. All of these experiences are conflated and tangled together in public discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women, therefore they are conflated to a certain extent in my research. Rather than creating a taxonomy of terms that could speak to these experiences individually—for instance, creating a different term for women who see themselves as radically fluid as opposed to a term for women who see themselves as having a stable identity that they were unaware of for many years—using a single broad term stresses the overlaps between these different sets of experiences. Considering these overlaps allows us to attend to the nuances of these diverse experiences rather than shoehorning them into a series of ever narrowing labels. Furthermore, this broad term suggests that it may be impossible to fully untangle such experiences, as people may have a continually changing understanding of their sexual identities throughout their lives. I acknowledge that this term may not get at the specificity of the many stories that fall within it,<sup>8</sup> but I speak to the specificity of individual stories throughout this dissertation, making sure to give details about how the woman in question conceptualizes her identity and what her story entails.

Additionally, I am mindful of how and when I use sexual identity terms in this dissertation, terms such as “gay and lesbian,” LGBTQ, and so on. The narratives in this dissertation are exclusively told from the perspective of cisgender lesbian-, gay-, bisexual-, queer, and unlabeled-identified women. I refer to these narrators as “LGBQ” to avoid



conflating transgender women's experiences of shifting sexual identities with cisgender women's experiences.<sup>9</sup> I will use the term "LGBTQ" when referring to broader movements that include transgender people and issues. I will use "LGBQ" or "gays and lesbians" when referencing texts or movements that only focus on these respective groups. In any case when I use specific terms such as "queer," "lesbian," or "same-gender-loving" to refer to a woman, it is because this is the term the woman in question uses to describe herself.

*Literature Review: A Critical, Cultural Approach to the Topic of Once-Heterosexual-Identified Women*

Little existing research approaches the topic of once-heterosexual-identified women with a cultural studies methodology. Most of the scholarly work that directly addresses this topic comes from the fields of psychology, sociology, and social work. As I will discuss in the methodology section, my cultural studies approach to this topic allows me to ask different questions than most existing literature on once-heterosexual-identified women. Whereas most existing research aims to better understand the psychological and/or social processes that women experience as they transition from one identity to another, I ask what women's lived experiences and stories about their experiences reveal about culture. Existing studies tend to employ qualitative interview methods to explore issues such as a woman's loss of sense of self, her construction of a new identity, how her transition impacts her family (most of this discussion revolves around children and husbands), her greater awareness of LGBTQ issues and communities, and her experience of losing heterosexual privilege as she takes on a sexual minority identity. The objective of many of these studies is often to create guidelines for health professionals and social workers who

are working with this population of women (Larson; Jensen; Bridges), or to create awareness of these experiences as common, dispelling the notion that individuals who come out in midlife are abnormal (Kitzinger and Wilkinson). Additionally, there has been a boom of recent psychological inquiry with the grander objective of revising sexual identity formation theories to better account for women's greater experiences of sexual fluidity compared to men (Peplau; Chivers et al.; Diamond). This scholarly discussion about once-heterosexual-identified women has been thus far small but rapidly growing, as evidenced by a number of dissertations and theses over approximately the past fifteen years in the social and cognitive sciences about women who come out in midlife (Sasser; Hand; Galvin; O'Leary; Wolfe).

Whereas psychological and sociological studies often address culture as one variable out of many, in my critical, cultural analysis, culture is at the fore as the object of study.<sup>10</sup> This difference requires me to enter the conversation from a different angle than most existing research, employing critical sexuality studies and cultural studies scholarship to investigate how once-heterosexual-identified women are constructed in U.S. culture. I locate this dissertation at the intersection of two areas of inquiry: coming out stories as a genre and the history of women's LGBTQ identities in the U.S. I draw from both bodies of scholarship to explore how discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women produces meanings about sexuality and constitutes sexual identities in relation to specific cultural and historical conditions of the contemporary U.S.

### Coming Out as a Genre

Scholars from disciplines such as English, linguistics, rhetoric, philosophy, and communication analyze coming out stories to better understand how identity is produced

within social interactions, cultural production, and language more generally. Coming out stories recount the process of acknowledging one's LGBTQ/non-heterosexual identity to oneself or the act of sharing it with others. Some scholars analyze the structure and language of coming out stories; for example those doing sociolinguistic research, rhetorical analysis, or discourse analysis (Liang, "Coming Out"; Liang, "The Creation"; Bacon; Chirrey; Wong). Rather than focus on particular social or linguistic processes of coming out, I employ scholarly work that maps out the cultural and political implications of the genre conventions of coming out stories. I stress the cultural meanings of coming out stories and explore the ways narratives construct sexual identities and understandings of sexuality in the contemporary U.S.

Critical scholarly conversations about coming out stories often revolve around a central question: Do coming out stories subversively challenge heteronormative ideologies, or do they reiterate normative master narratives with a superficial twist (the heteronormative protagonist who is lesbian rather than straight)? While some scholars see coming out narratives as a fundamental component of LGBTQ identity construction (Zimmerman; Xhonneux; Saxey), others point to the ways that the coming out narrative is culturally specific and does not adequately represent models of sexuality outside of white-centric or Western contexts (Martin, "Lesbian Identity"; McRuer; Jolly). Many critical scholars argue that typical coming out stories elide difference and employ a restrictive linear narrative that speciously resolves the story with a coherent authentic identity (Martin, "Lesbian Identity"; Roof; Jolly). Yet scholars also argue that the genre has the possibility to speak to the complexities of identity, and some scholars highlight coming out

stories that do not follow heteronormative or ethnocentric scripts (Martin, “Lesbian Identity”; McRuer; Saxey; Xhonneux).

Within these debates, Judith Roof’s *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* is often cited as a particularly suspicious reading of coming out stories. Roof argues that narrative constitutes sexuality, and that Western societies employ narratives that simultaneously affirm the ideologies of “heterosexual reproduction” and “capitalist production” (xvii). This marriage between reproduction and production mandates that each story must resolve in some kind of product. In the case of lesbian coming out stories, ranging from Hollywood films, TV sitcoms, anthologies of coming out stories, and lesbian experimental and utopian fiction, Roof argues that the product is sexuality—the identity of “lesbian.” Roof asserts that in coming out stories the figure of the lesbian must fit within reproductive models by either existing to support the heterosexual familial narrative, or existing as a threat to it. In either case, the lesbian is still confined within the closed circuit of the larger narrative that heterosexuality is *the* primary sexuality. Roof argues that the coming out story limits the lesbian subject because it is “a story of sequestration, comforting and exultant on one level, but robbed of or trading away its really disturbing potential to mess up heterosexual systems” (107). In Roof’s view, coming out stories are too repetitive (she asks the useful question, “Why is the story always the same?” [xxvi]), too focused on explaining the cause of LGBTQ sexualities; too reductive in constructing identity as a knowable, concrete entity; and ultimately limit the ability to tell stories that do not align with a reproductive model of heteronormativity. Roof advocates doing away with coming out stories as we know them in favor of stories about identity that do not

participate in the reproductive, heterosexual matrix, and instead offer competing models of sexuality that expose the “heteronarrative” as one option out of many (143).<sup>11</sup>

Other scholars defend the political efficacy of coming out stories, arguing that these stories are necessary for building LGBTQ identities and communities. These scholars assert that coming out stories are not nearly as repetitive or narrow as critics like Roof suggest. For instance, Lies Xhonneux analyzes three “classic” coming out stories frequently taught in college courses—Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story*, and Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*—and argues that even in these canonical representations of the genre we can see more variations than critics acknowledge. Countering common criticism of the genre, Xhonneux asserts that each novel does not represent experience as wholly linear, that Winterson’s and Lorde’s novels engage with an intersectional understanding of oppression rather than focus solely on sexuality, and that none of these stories end with a neat closure of identity (115). Hence, Xhonneux critiques Roof and other scholars for generalizing the coming story as supporting heteronormative ideas about sexuality. Furthermore, Xhonneux argues that critics “tend to forget that narratives are an indispensable aspect of the process of identity construction for many gays and lesbians” (115). I would argue that a critic like Roof is aware of the importance of coming out stories in identity construction, which is why they trouble her. However, Xhonneux’s argument suggests that coming out stories are too valuable to LGBTQ communities for the genre as it currently exists to be abandoned on account of critiques that it is irrevocably structurally flawed.

In *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity*, Esther Saxey also champions the political uses of coming out stories, but she

acknowledges that this genre can be limiting. Saxey studies over three hundred coming out stories published in the U.K. and the U.S. and argues that the coming out story “is not a monolith as ... critics imply” (12). Saxey agrees with Roof’s argument that standardization in coming out stories marginalizes individuals who cannot or will not adhere to genre conventions. At the same time, Saxey argues that the coming out story is an effective political tool for building LGBTQ identities and communities, a tool that can be adapted to better address the complexities of sexuality. Saxey shows such complexity by offering examples of coming out stories by people of color, queer people in rural spaces, bisexuals, and second or third generation immigrants (138). Saxey highlights how such stories challenge two key components of the genre: the necessity of leaving one’s family or home community for the queer space of the city and rejecting other-sex desires after coming out. Saxey also challenges Roof’s claim that coming out stories lack the potential to respond politically to heteronormativity. Saxey argues that the coming out story is a site of consciousness raising, and that the genre is influenced by the feminist novel of the 1970s (10). Saxey asserts that coming out stories have real political and material effects as readers are transformed by testimonies that living a non-heterosexual life is possible. Countering Roof’s call to radically dismantle the genre, Saxey states, “The young protagonist embodies a single question, answered in each text: ‘How can a person not be heterosexual?’ It is perhaps a question that needs to be answered—and answered loudly—before other assertions can be heard” (142). This optimistic reading of the coming out story stands in opposition to those scholars who view the genre as reductive and politically ineffective.

Other scholars also acknowledge the limiting conventions of the genre but point to how socially marginalized individuals revise the coming out story. For instance, Robert McRuer argues that the coming out story can be “reclaimed,” and he looks to Lorde’s *Zami* as an example of how a coming out story might be inclusive of difference and a catalyst for political action (38). He contrasts Lorde’s novel with White’s *A Boy’s Own*, and reads White’s work as representing an individualistic, apolitical, and white-centric (but racially unmarked) tendency in coming out stories of the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, Biddy Martin’s often-cited essay, “Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference,” looks at the ways that women of color and anti-racist Southern white women writers have challenged the linearity and closure of identity that structures the lesbian feminist autobiography (139). Hence, Saxey, McRuer, and Martin represent efforts by feminist and queer theorists to rethink and refashion the form of the coming out story so it might be more politically responsive, more attuned to intersectional understandings of oppression, and allow for more open and fluid understandings of identity.

Rather than attempting to determine if the coming out stories of once-heterosexual-identified women are subversive or normative, I take these debates into account, but I do not reproduce them in my analysis. I acknowledge the limitations and problematic aspects of coming out stories, yet I undertake what Sedgwick refers to as a “reparative reading” to ask what else I might find in such stories that can give insight into how sexuality is conceptualized in the current moment.<sup>12</sup> Thus, I am not interested in taking an evaluative stance on the coming out genre, and I would rather investigate the meanings and paradoxes once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories encompass, create, and circulate. As will become apparent in chapters one and two, many (though certainly not all) of the coming

out stories I investigate are unconventional and stress surprise, agency, and the fluidity of identity. In fact, in chapter two I explore a discourse that eschews the coming out genre altogether, an increasingly popular discourse about loving “the person, not the gender.” However, unconventional coming out stories and discourse which rejects the very notion of coming out may still reiterate dominant, hierarchal, or essentialist understandings of sexuality and identity, including the centering of white and middle class identities. As will be apparent throughout this dissertation, but especially in chapters three and four, I focus on the complexities of discourse, including the ways that discourse which challenges dominant ways of thinking can circulate such that it benefits privileged identities and produces normative ideologies. Understanding that any cultural text will contain normative and potentially subversive elements, I will examine discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women to better understand the workings of such discourse, rather than making a value judgment about the political efficacy of coming out stories as a whole.

### The History of Women’s LGBTQ Identities in the U.S.

This dissertation approaches sexuality as a socially constructed identity, and I situate contemporary narratives about once-heterosexual-identified women within historical models of U.S. LGBTQ identities. Much of the historical scholarship I draw from comes from the field of “lesbian history,” but this work includes insight into the historical development of sexual identities that are often obscured by lesbianism, such as the identities of bisexual women, queer women, and women who do not identify with any label at all. This dissertation is not a history of LGBTQ identities in the United States. Instead my intention is to better understand the present moment. I draw on literature about



the history of women's LGBTQ identities to contextualize contemporary understandings of such women's identities within a larger historical scope.

Most scholars point to Lillian Faderman's history of modern lesbian identity in the U.S., *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, as a crucial text of in the field of lesbian history.<sup>13</sup> Faderman investigates how social institutions such as the medical industry, female-dominated workforces, and intentional women's communities make lesbian identities possible by creating spaces and discourses that can forge personal and collective sexual identities. Faderman's rendering of major shifts in U.S. lesbian identities from the late-nineteenth century to the late-1980s is largely agreed upon in most existing critical sexuality studies literature. As such, I will not recount all of Faderman's argument here. Instead, I look to the work of Faderman and others to think further about sexual identity as a social construct which changes over time. The historical context that is of greatest importance to this dissertation is the period of the 1970s to the present. This is because the majority of women currently telling stories about shifting from a heterosexual to an LGBTQ identity had this experience within this time period.

Scholars point to lesbian feminist movements of the late 1960s and 1970s as a force that engendered new models of lesbian identity. Lesbian identity in the 1950s and 1960s is largely characterized as having been forged within working-class bar cultures where butch-femme genders were the norm; where lesbianism was articulated as an innate, stigmatized identity; and where lesbianism was thought of in terms of sexual desire and erotic performance.<sup>14</sup> However, lesbian feminist movements of the 1970s—particularly those movements dominated by white, college-educated, middle-class women—engendered

overtly politicized models of lesbianism, rather than the sexualized models of lesbian identity most often embraced in bar cultures. Lesbian feminist models of lesbian identity sought to challenge stereotypes about lesbianism as a sexual perversion and to forge collective bonds between women based on their shared experiences of gender oppression. These new models of lesbian identity included the “political lesbian”: the woman who chose to be a lesbian to demonstrate her feminist commitment to other women, but who did not necessarily feel sexual desire for other women (Faderman 208). Hence, while dominant understandings of lesbianism in the 1950s and 1960s often relied on older sexologist models of lesbians as congenital invert, lesbian feminists sought to reinscribe lesbianism as a possible political choice for all women. Understanding lesbianism as a radical political choice rather than an innate desire heightened tensions between lesbians of different generations, classes, and life experiences. For instance, women who had known their same-sex desires since childhood often resented the ease with which other women adopted lesbian identity as a celebratory political stance (Stein 100). Faderman notes that tensions over the meanings of lesbian identity intensified during the feminist sex wars of the 1980s as lesbians debated if butch and femme genders, pornography, sex toys, or sadomasochism should have any place within lesbian communities.<sup>15</sup>

Many scholars discuss the ways that lesbian feminist models of lesbian identity became less popular amongst LGBQ women over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Arlene Stein’s sociological study of baby boomer women who came out in the 1970s highlights these changes. Stein found that her respondents largely agreed that the most popular conception of lesbian identity in the 1970s was that lesbianism was a political identity and that all women had the potential to be lesbians. Stein notes that even women

who did not agree with this conception of lesbianism—such as women who felt their lesbian identity to be an innate desire that would exist without their feminist politics—expressed that this politicized notion of lesbian identity was dominant in lesbian communities of the 1970s (43). Yet, Stein asserts that as lesbian feminism became “decentered” from lesbian communities, conceptions of lesbian identity shifted.<sup>16</sup>

Lesbianism over the course of the 1980s to the present became popularly understood as an innate sexual desire and as a personal identity, not a political choice. Scholars generally point to the shift away from lesbian feminist models of lesbianism by noting how in the 1990s and early 2000s young women use the term “lesbian” less often. It is generally acknowledged in feminist and queer communities that younger women who love women tend to describe themselves using the more gender-neutral term “gay,” potentially to align themselves with gay men<sup>17</sup> or to avoid negative connotations of the term “lesbian” in contemporary popular culture, such connotations include separatist politics, being unfashionable, and being viewed as excessively political. Additionally, the emergence of “queer” politics in the 1990s gave a younger cohort of women new language to describe fluid, amorphous identities and to affiliate themselves with intersectional politics, rather than defining their sexuality solely in terms of same-sex attraction. The label “lesbian” has been deconstructed and challenged by activists, scholars, and cultural producers who complicate 1970s lesbian feminist conceptions of lesbianism by suggesting a broad range of desires and experiences operating within communities and cultures of women who love women, including bisexual, queer, and trans\* conceptions of women’s sexualities (Heller, *Cross-Purposes*; Stein; Samarasinha; Aragon; Scott-Dixon; Volcano and Dahl; Serano). Furthermore, scholars point to the ways that lesbian identities from the 1990s onward are

highly sexualized in popular culture—as opposed to a desexualized political model—and identity is largely described as inherent—as opposed to a voluntary choice (Martin, “Sexual Practice”; Stein).

All of these shifts have changed and complicated contemporary thinking about women’s LGBTQ sexualities over the past thirty years, including changing the relationship of feminism to lesbianism. I will not explicitly explore the relationship of feminism to women’s LGBTQ identities in the present, as there is already a substantial body of existing literature investigating this relationship (some of which I cite above), and different issues emerged as more important in my research. However I will occasionally reference this relationship, such as in chapter one when I discuss once-heterosexual-identified women’s coming out stories characterized by feminist agency.

My primary objective in this dissertation is to use discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women to better understand the present moment; hence, I draw heavily upon studies of LGBTQ identities in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century. Much existing literature about U.S. women’s LGBTQ identities in the contemporary moment focuses on representation in television. However, scholars have also examined recent representations of lesbian identities in advertising, film, online cultures, fiction, and lesbian-produced media such as comics and pornography.<sup>18</sup> Scholars characterize this contemporary moment as an “era of mainstreaming” (Beirne, *Lesbians in Television* 7) in which there is an increased cultural visibility of LGBTQ people. On the one hand, cultural visibility is popularly heralded as a sign of progress by many LGBTQ people and their allies, and the tactic of mainstreaming LGBTQ people into mass media is championed as an effective method for assimilating gender and sexual minorities into the

national body.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, many cultural critics argue that visibility comes at the loss of representing the diversity of LGBTQ lives. This argument posits that only normative LGBTQ people are affirmed in such representations, and only the most privileged LG (and to a lesser extent) BTQ people might be perceived as normal (Warner; Phelan; Walters, *All the Rage*; Duggan). Furthermore, such critics note that cultural visibility can distort reality by creating a sense that the everyday discrimination and violence that LGBTQ people face is no longer an issue (Vaid).

Since these debates about the politics of visibility have been well documented elsewhere, I will not go into extensive detail about them here.<sup>20</sup> However, I analyze discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women by asking what this discourse reveals about the workings of the politics of visibility and the workings of normalizing discourses in the contemporary U.S. I undertake this endeavor most explicitly in chapter four, in which I argue that the case of once-heterosexual-identified women illuminates the uneven and inconsistent effects of normalizing discourses, and this inconsistency should compel us to think about normalcy in more context-specific terms than most critical scholars currently do. Yet the politics of visibility are under investigation in a more implicit manner in the other three chapters; here I analyze how once-heterosexual-identified women might feel illegitimate when they tell unconventional coming out stories; how women eschewing identity labels in favor of describing themselves as loving “the person, not the gender” may struggle to be socially legible; and how the experiences of women of color and poor and working-class women are obscured in existing narratives and studies about women coming out in midlife. Discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women provides rich insight into the politics of visibility and normalcy in the contemporary moment, and as such, this

discourse has relevance to emerging studies of LGBTQ women's identities in the twenty-first century.

While scholars can point to broad, representative shifts in thinking about lesbian identity (and identities that are often collapsed within lesbianism) in particular eras of U.S. culture, I argue that it is important to keep in mind that there are often several different and sometimes mutually contradicting models of lesbian identity circulating simultaneously in any one historical moment. Throughout her study Faderman marks differences between working-class, middle-class, and elite women's constructions of lesbian identity. Other scholars highlight the importance of race in the formation of lesbian identities and communities (Thorpe; Walker; Enke). Hence, differences based on race, class, and other aspects of social location interact with larger, popular conceptions of lesbian identity that characterize each historical era. Additionally, historian Martha Vicinus stresses the diversity of lesbian identity by showing how multiple "scripts" of lesbian identity functioned in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, and often how several different scripts of lesbian identities co-existed or overlapped in one era. For example, Vicinus traces the way that sexology popularized the notion that lesbians were congenital invert, and how writer Radclyffe Hall embraced this essentialist model to defend lesbianism as natural in her iconic novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (488). Responding to historians who argue that Hall had no choice but to align herself with congenital invert theories, Vicinus stresses that there were other not-entirely-essentialist models of lesbian identities during this era, such as bohemian cultures in the early-twentieth century in which women made a "self-conscious effort to create a new sexual language for themselves ... [including] gesture, costume, and behavior" (487). Overall, Vicinus troubles the idea that a single

approach to lesbian history is accurate, and instead asks how historians might construct a lesbian history that can account for a wide array of conflicting, incomplete, or confusing “scripts” of lesbian identity. Following Vicinus’ lead, I argue that discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women reveals multiple and sometimes contrary models of women’s LGBTQ identities circulating in the present moment. By exploring this discourse, we gain insight into diverse understandings of sexual identity that co-exist and overlap in contemporary U.S. culture.

*Methodology: Mapping Discourse in Motion*

I use a cultural studies methodology to better understand contemporary conceptualizations of sexuality—especially women’s sexualities and LGBTQ sexualities—in discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women. Borrowing Stuart Hall’s concept of “conjunctural knowledge,” Lawrence Grossberg argues that a cultural studies methodology is defined by a commitment to “radical contextuality” (Grossberg 21). Grossberg argues that cultural studies employs an open methodology that approaches a problem based on which tools are needed to accurately theorize it, rather than relying on a prescribed set of methods and theories. Because cultural studies methodology is open and its borders often indistinct, what unites scholars is not a single methodology but an objective to map out a particular “conjuncture”—a series of contingent and constantly changing contexts. Grossberg argues that the radical contextuality of cultural studies assumes “that the identity, significance, and effects of any practice or event (including cultural practices and events) are defined only by the complex set of relations that surround, interpenetrate, and shape it, and make it what it is” (20).

My cultural studies methodology here entails what I describe as mapping discourse in motion. I investigate the historical, cultural, and political contexts that “surround, interpenetrate, and shape” discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women. As noted in the literature review, these contexts include contemporary LGBTQ rights rhetoric about being “born this way” and the conventional coming out story, common sense notions about women being more sexually fluid than men and larger cultural dissatisfaction with existing identity labels, the dominance of white, middle-class, and Western worldviews shaping what it means to be a once-heterosexual-identified woman, and the politics of normalizing discourses as they shape LGBTQ people’s relationship to the nation. As I map the cultural conjuncture surrounding once-heterosexual-identified women, I follow discourse as it circulates and maneuvers through the landscape of contemporary U.S. culture, paying attention to how the meaning and political implications of discourse changes from site to site. As I discuss in more detail shortly, in order to robustly map this conjuncture I triangulate multiple sets of data including textual analysis of once-heterosexual-identified women’s first-person narratives and interviews, textual analysis of popular news media reportage about such women, and focus groups I conducted with women who have shifted sexual identities as adults. I approach these different sets of data as a single archive of discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women, and I do not privilege one of these sets of data as more true or authentic than another. I approach all of this data as discourse—as cultural knowledge about sexuality. I weave my analysis of different sources together, and pieces of this archive will emerge in multiple chapters. Discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women is so rich, so steeped in critical issues and debates relating



to sexuality, that one text often reveals multiple contexts that are part of the cultural conjuncture I am mapping.

In contrast with most existing literature on once-heterosexual-identified women, my critical, cultural methodology allows me to examine the cultural relevance of these narratives. I explore these narratives to better understand culture, rather than approaching these narratives only as personal experiences. Whereas sociological or psychological studies are more likely to approach identity as an pre-existing entity that can be documented, a cultural analysis is more likely to envision identity as an effect of narrative and power dynamics.<sup>21</sup> A cultural studies methodology assumes that events are relational and that no phenomenon stands in isolation, and that cultural processes are always in flux and that the context is always changing. Hence, a cultural studies analysis tries to better understand particular iterations of cultural meanings in their time and place rather than pin down a definitive, stable, or universal understanding of any phenomenon.

A quick comparison of Diamond's psychological study on women's sexual fluidity and historian Lelia Rupp's work on the same topic reveals the different questions a cultural analysis can address. Diamond argues that while sexual orientation does not change over a lifetime, individuals have differing capacity for sexual fluidity, and women are more likely to have higher capacities for sexual fluidity than men (13-14). Diamond bases her argument on a ten-year-long interview study with about one hundred women and argues that sexual fluidity is due to a number of interrelated biological, cultural, and situational factors. However, the scope of Diamond's project does not allow her to substantially engage with the historical or cultural positioning of her interview respondents, and such historical and cultural contexts seem crucial. Rupp responds to the popularity of

Diamond's work by arguing that discussions of Diamond's work suggest "sexual fluidity would seem to be a twenty-first century phenomenon" (849). In contrast, Rupp historicizes sexual fluidity and explores sexual fluidity before the emergence of a modern lesbian identity. Drawing on her cross-cultural historical research on women's same-sex desire, Rupp argues that women's sexual fluidity has historically been possible when it did not threaten compulsory heterosexuality. Women have been able to engage in same-sex sexual activities as long as these activities did not threaten women's ability to marry men, have children with men, have sex with men, and otherwise stay under men's control (850-851). Rupp clarifies that her view does not suggest that women's desires and agency did not play a role in their sexual activity, instead she argues that in historical context, women who had sex with only women and not men are a rarity (854). Rupp takes a constructivist approach to sexual fluidity and examines the ways that desire and sexual identity are constructed by historical and cultural context. This is a different approach to sexual fluidity than social scientific work such as Diamond's, since Rupp does not attempt to locate psychological or sociological explanations for an individual's capacity for sexual fluidity.<sup>22</sup> In this way, Rupp's work opens a conversation about the cultural and historical conditions that shape the experiences, narratives, and identities of once-heterosexual-identified women. The difference between Rupp's and Diamond's work is the difference a cultural approach can make. While my methods and scope are different from Rupp's, I approach the topic of once-heterosexual-identified women with a similar desire to investigate sexual identities, behavior, and the language we have available to discuss sexuality as indicative of specific cultural configurations, rather than as given or natural entities.

### Positionality as Feminist Methodology: Self-Reflection and Situated Knowledges

Critically engaging with one's position—one's social location and the assumptions one embodies as a researcher—is a central component of feminist methodologies. This methodological practice has informed the construction and analysis of my dissertation. Feminist scholars advance the notion of "positionality," "situated knowledges," or "the politics of location" as a response to the notion that rigorous research is objective (Alcoff; Haraway; Mani). Donna Haraway argues that a hegemonic, patriarchal idea of objectivity disavows the embodied nature of research, as it refuses to see the researcher as a body located in a particular place, with a particular view of the world. Whereas "objective" scholarship passes itself off as "a conquering gaze from nowhere"—a disembodied gaze that sees the truth—in contrast "[f]eminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*" (372 emphasis original). Haraway asserts that feminist objectivity is the acknowledgement that any view of the world is a "partial" (373) and "particular" (377) perspective, and acknowledging this allows scholars to work as members of communities creating a "larger vision" (377) of reality, rather than dogmatically asserting one's partial vision of reality as the only truth. Feminist objectivity involves building a fuller vision of the world by utilizing various positions to gain a nuanced vision—a vision that is more accurate than a narrow and biased "objectivity" which disavows the impact of the researcher's social location on the research. Thus, to practice feminist methodologies is to situate oneself as a researcher; to use self-reflectivity throughout one's process, recognizing the ways that one's social location impacts how one collects, analyzes, and reports data; and to mark one's position in the writing in order to make one's position transparent to audiences.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the idea of positionality has been complicated by

feminist scholars who see position not as a static entity or a simple matter of “correspondence” between social location and knowledge, but as “fraught with history, contingency, and struggle” (Mani 392). In this way, a researcher’s position should be viewed as operating in a matrix of constantly changing power dynamics, historical conditions, and cultural contingencies.<sup>24</sup>

Situating my own position in this research (situating my position for myself and for my reader) has been a consistent method throughout this project, even if sometimes subtly stated. My initial interest in the topic of once-heterosexual-identified women stems from my experiences of having identified as heterosexual until my mid-twenties and then finding myself rather abruptly shifting into a queer identity as a woman who loves women. One reason discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women interests me is because some of it seems related to how women with stories similar to my own are understood in contemporary U.S. culture—how sexually fluid women or women who do not tell conventional coming out stories are made sense of by audiences, and how such women understand themselves. However, I also noted early on in my research that many stories about once-heterosexual-identified women in popular culture do not seem salient to my experience. Stories about women coming out as LGBQ after marrying men, having children, and being part of heterosexist suburban communities are compelling and moving and ripe for analysis, but this was not my story. As a woman who had strong ties to queer and feminist communities, my own experience of living as a heterosexual-identified woman was different than these popular stories; my heterosexuality included ethical non-monogamy, being child-free by choice, eschewing marriage, and being intimately engaged with LGBTQ cultures and politics as an active ally. Furthermore, while coming out at age

twenty-six might be considered “late” in a historical moment in which individuals are expected to come out in adolescence or earlier, my experience is fundamentally different than women who came out midlife or later. While I do not use my own experiences as data in this dissertation, part of my methodology involves critical self-reflection, including recognizing the ways my experience calls my researcher’s eye to particular issues within my data.

Furthermore, my experience was relevant when recruiting for this study, such as when I reached out to groups dedicated to LGBTQ women or groups for “late bloomers”<sup>25</sup> and identified myself as a woman who came out during adulthood, which may have increased the likelihood of such women wanting to participate in my study. Occasionally during focus groups, participants would ask me how I identify and I told them I am a queer-identified woman with a girlfriend and that I identified as heterosexual up until a few years ago. It is possible this affected what they shared in focus groups. Perhaps a researcher who was a heterosexual-identified woman, a life-long lesbian-identified woman, or male-identified would have elicited different findings. Additionally, throughout this dissertation I consistently mark myself as an active participant who is engaging with data. I gesture to my participation in focus group conversations, noting moments when I found myself surprised, confused, or moved by something other participants shared. I make my process transparent for the reader, walking them through how my ideas evolved and using my own insights to explain the stakes of my argument. I do this to stress that this study is a “partial” view of discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women and the surrounding contexts (Haraway 374), and a view that stems from my particular, embodied experiences as a researcher.

Beyond situating myself in terms of how my sexual identity informs this research, I also consider how my position as a white, middle-class woman has shaped this study. I believe my social location facilitated my recruitment of mostly (though not exclusively) white, middle-class, highly educated women for my focus groups because such women dominate in the feminist, LGBTQ, and academic circles I belong to. Women with social locations similar to my own were most immediately available to participate in this research, and at a certain point of my recruitment I realized that if I were to recruit a sample with more racial and class diversity, I would need to invest more time in specifically recruiting populations of women that were underrepresented in my study. Ultimately, the time frame of this dissertation did not allow for more recruitment. I acknowledge that my own social location very likely impacted which participants were immediately available to me and which participants felt most comfortable working with me as a researcher. I expand upon the need for studying discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women particularly from the perspectives of women of color and/or poor or working-class women in the conclusion.

#### Primary Sources for Textual Analysis

My primary sources for the textual analysis portions of the dissertation include collections of personal essays or interviews published by small presses (often women's or feminist presses), self-help books for women married to men questioning their sexual identities, articles in women's magazines, major news network broadcasts or online articles, daytime talk shows, and LGBTQ women's and feminist blogs. My research found a small bibliography of books dedicated to the topic of once-heterosexual-identified

women, ranging in publication date from 1993 to 2010 (Cassingham and O’Neil; Abbott and Farmer; McCoy; Fleisher; Strock; Walsh and André).<sup>26</sup> I also analyzed approximately two hundred news articles and broadcasts, magazine articles, blog posts, and talk show episodes relating to once-heterosexual-identified women. When selecting my sources my first criterion was that sources must be non-fiction—real-life accounts or first-person narratives or interviews—rather than fictionalized representations of once-heterosexual-identified women. While I am aware of fictionalized portrayals of such women, I am particularly interested in non-fiction accounts because of the authority autobiographical and real-life stories receive in U.S. popular culture. My second criterion was that all sources be published between 1990 and the present, because I wish to better understand how discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women shapes contemporary thinking about sexuality. However, I also reviewed sources from the 1970s and 1980s to compare how recent discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women might be different than these slightly older sources.<sup>27</sup>

My primary sources create an archive about once-heterosexual-identified women which illuminates how women coming out in midlife, women partnering with female partners after or during partnering with male partners, and women’s sexual fluidity more broadly is constructed in contemporary U.S. culture. By analyzing these texts we gain insight into how once-heterosexual-identified women understand themselves and tell their stories, how others understand such women, and how such women are framed in popular media.

### Focus Groups Methods

Focus groups are increasingly used in qualitative and critical studies to gain “insights into public discourses” and to understand how members of particular groups collectively make sense of their experiences (Barbour 47). Many scholars use focus groups to better understand what social psychologist Sue Wilkinson refers to as “the person-in-context”—that is the individual in the context of their social world (Wilkinson 112). Focus groups provided me with more insight into public discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women than I would have gained from either conducting textual analysis alone or one-on-one interviews. Unlike one-on-one interviews, focus groups allowed me to understand how meaning about once-heterosexual-identified women is co-constructed in the process of interaction and dialogue with others, both in the sense that participants created meaning in their talk with each other and in the sense that they shared their everyday experiences of explaining their shifts in identity to other people.

By utilizing focus groups in addition to textual analysis, my method enacts what sociologist Laurel Richardson describes as “crystallization”—a term she uses instead of “triangulation” (Barbour 47). Rosaline Barbour describes crystallization as a method that “value[s] ... looking simultaneously at the same concept from a variety of different angles” (47). Qualitative scholars problematize the concept of “triangulation” as it has been employed in quantitative-focused studies. Quantitative scholars tend to use triangulation as a way to double check results by using two or more methods. In quantitative studies, triangulation can become a way to strengthen the validity of researchers’ findings because two different methods have produced the same results. However, rather than assuming that the goal of using different methods is to verify the same results, Barbour asserts that



“qualitative research thrives analytically on differences and discrepancies” (47). Finding contradiction between results produced by different methods can be fruitful for creating a complex understanding of how a particular phenomenon functions. Using the metaphor of the crystal for research suggests looking at various angles of an object of study, and noting the different reflections and refractions of light as one does so. The concept of crystallization connotes turning an object of analysis to view different “sides,” and suggest that using multiple methods can illuminate how complex, perhaps contradictory components of an object of study relate to each other, rather than assuming each angle will hold the same meanings. Using a mixed methods approach of focus groups and textual analysis in this dissertation has proven fruitful in this very way, as different sets of data have sometimes engendered contradictory results, illuminating contradictory ideas about once-heterosexual-identified women in U.S. culture. I explore these contradictions within the chapters, using them as evidence of how discourse functions, how it circulates, maneuvers, and twists across the cultural landscape.

I conducted five focus groups with a total of twenty-seven women who once identified as heterosexual and then shifted into an LGBTQ or unlabeled identity during adulthood. Two focus groups were conducted in-person, three focus groups were conducted online via Google Hangout.<sup>28</sup> The size of each focus group ranged from three to seven participants. Each focus group took approximately two hours to complete. Recruitment of participants occurred primarily by electronically distributing my materials in the feminist, queer, and academic social networks I belong to, sending emails to local- and state-based groups for women who came out in midlife or for LGBTQ women more broadly, displaying flyers in my local area, and snowball sampling—a process in which

participants recommend the study to others. Focus groups were audio recorded, and screen recorded in the case of online groups, and then transcribed. Transcripts were coded to identify major categories emerging in the data and those categories were compared and incorporated with categories emerging from textual analysis (Charmaz).<sup>29</sup> All identifying information was omitted from transcripts and participants chose pseudonyms to be used in all transcripts, research memos, and written analysis.

Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin's model of "responsive interviewing" influenced my interview protocol design. Rubin and Rubin state that responsive interviewing involves focused but flexible interviews in which the researcher may devise impromptu questions in response to issues that the participants raise (37–38). Drawing on Rubin and Rubin's method, the questions I asked participants changed slightly from group to group based on what participants shared. For an outline of the general interview protocol, see the appendix.

Prior to the focus group, participants were asked to complete and return a demographic survey meant to gather information about participants' age, current location, racial identity, occupation, sexual identity, age when they "came out," and if they had ever been married to a man. For a sample of the demographic survey, see the appendix. Based on the results of this survey, participants' ages ranged from twenty-two to seventy; all but four identified as white or Caucasian; about half held occupations that could be considered "white collar" or professional class; seventeen were involved in higher education in some form as (undergraduate or graduate) students, professors, or administrators; fifteen identified as "lesbian," four as "bisexual," one as "gay," four chose another label or multiple labels, and three did not claim any label at all. For more detailed information

about participants' backgrounds and experiences, see the survey results table in the appendix.

### Methodological Assumptions

I take a strongly constructivist view of identity in this dissertation. In the telling and retelling of stories about once-heterosexual-identified women, identities are crafted, refashioned, and the limits of what may count as a socially legible identity are negotiated again and again. Drawing on Judith Butler's influential arguments that gender and sexual identity are comprised of a series of repetitions with no essential origin, I conceptualize sexuality and sexual identity as constructed through the repetition of acts, including the act of telling stories about one's sexuality ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination"; *Gender Trouble*). Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* offers an example of how we might conceive of sexuality as a series of acts. Ahmed argues that becoming a lesbian is an act of learning how to live in a lesbian body—how to move through the world in particular ways. Ahmed states, "So, it takes time and work to inhabit a lesbian body; the act of tending toward other women has to be repeated, often in the face of hostility and discrimination, to gather such tendencies into sustainable form" (102). In this way, when a woman "becomes" a lesbian, her sexuality is constructed via the repetitive acts of "tending toward other women."<sup>30</sup> These tendencies coalesce into a lesbian identity as the woman in question builds experiences, affinities, language, gender expressions, and social worlds that are culturally coded as significant to lesbian identity. As a woman becomes orientated towards lesbian identity and same-sex desire, she begins to feel at home in a lesbian body, a body that has been shaped by her experiences of moving towards lesbian objects and

being directed away from heterosexual objects. Hence, just as we can understand gender to be an ongoing process rather than an essence, so too can we think of sexuality as a construction that must be maintained via repetitive acts.

Another central methodological assumption shaping this dissertation is that discourse plays a fundamental role in constituting identity. I analyze discourse about women shifting from a heterosexual to an LGBTQ identity not as reflective of a pre-existing or essential identity, but as part of the process of identity construction. Saxey suggests the following understanding of how narrative figures into identity construction:

[T]he flow of influence is ... complex, passing in every direction at once between personal experience, recollection, identity, text, genre and society. A genre can influence how a single text is shaped, an identity can determine what experience is recollected by an individual, and ultimately, a coming out story can create an identity. (2)

Rather than envisioning coming out stories as reflecting an identity, Saxey considers how narrative produces identity. Saxey highlights that the “flow” of meaning between experience, narrative, text, identity, and social meanings is not linear, rather each of these entities are constructed in relation to each other. For instance, Saxey states that genre can influence the way a story is told, impact what information an individual remembers as relevant experience, and determine what counts as the defining features of a particular identity such as “lesbian.” Martin gives an example of these complex effects of genre when she argues that one can see the influence of lesbian feminist politics in lesbian autobiographies of the 1970s and 1980s. Martin states that these stories define lesbianism as love and solidarity with other women rather than foregrounding sexual desire, and that

this emphasis on love and political affinity should be understood as a reaction to the “homophobic reduction” of lesbianism to a deviant sexual practice (“Lesbian Identity” 147). In this case, discourses of lesbian feminism makes certain kinds of stories recognizable as “lesbian autobiography” (lesbianism as love for and political identification with other women), and other stories not as legible or easily heard (lesbianism as eroticism and sexual desire). Like Martin and Saxey, I view identity and discourse as co-constructive and as operating in tangent to each other, and I take this approach when analyzing discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women.

I read narratives less as evidence of real experience (though, I certainly believe that the events in these narratives occurred) and more as evidence of the cultural conjuncture that shapes thinking about women’s sexualities and LGBTQ sexualities in the contemporary moment. I choose to study autobiographical, news, and non-fiction accounts by and about once-heterosexual-identified women because such stories carry more authority of authentic experience than fictional representations. I am interested in how these authoritative texts construct what it means to be a woman who shifts identities as an adult. Plummer cautions against viewing autobiographical sexual stories as the truth about any single identity or experience. Plummer envisions the life of a storyteller as always “unknown and unknowable” (23), because the content of sexual stories can only ever be a partial representation of the teller’s life. Since the full truth of experience is unknowable (to the listener and, I would argue, to the teller as well), researchers must consider the ways that life narratives are selective, and selective in tandem with cultural expectations. Referring to the tellers of sexual stories, Plummer asks, “Are their stories really to be seen as the simple unfolding of some inner truth? *Or are their very stories something they are brought to say*

*in a particular way through a particular time and place?”* (34, emphasis original).

Plummer stresses that a sexual story is always shaped in contingency to cultural, social, and historical expectations. Such expectations are very much linked to conditions of power. Plummer notes that the context of the “time and place” of a story determines which stories will be “a credible voice” and which stories will be “an incredible one” (26-27). To think back to the example of Cynthia Nixon, the context of contemporary LGBTQ rights rhetoric which stresses being “born this way” makes Nixon’s story about choosing to be gay seem to many listeners “incredible,” unbelievable and politically irresponsible. Yet, Nixon’s position as a highly privileged woman—she is a celebrity, rich, conventionally attractive, and white—likely empowers her to tell such an “incredible” story. I consider such power dynamics in my analysis, and I approach stories told by once-heterosexual-identified women not to learn the truth about their experiences, but to think further about how power makes certain ideas possible, or even makes certain ideas seem like common sense, and other ideas impossible and illegible on a cultural level.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, I keep in mind Plummer’s point that “stories [are] something [narrators] are brought to say in a particular way through a particular time and place” to emphasize that what I study here is discourse, not people per se. The purpose of my analysis is never to determine how a story told by an individual woman reflects her political character or her logical reasoning. For instance, my aim is never to chastise individuals employing exclusionary or dominant discourses, nor to champion individuals employing radical or marginalized discourses. Instead, I explore and follow discourse as individuals employ it and are shaped by it. My method assumes that an individual espousing a particular discourse in one moment is not defined by it; that moment is not

evidence that they are indelibly affiliated with such a discourse. People—those in my focus groups, those cited in news stories, and authors of personal essays—do not use a single discourse to understand the world at all times. People make meaning in the moment using what discursive resources they have available to them.<sup>32</sup> This is evidenced throughout my analysis when I note that individuals articulate contradictory understandings about identity and sexuality from one moment to another. This contradiction is not necessarily a sign of poor logic or bad faith; rather such contradiction reveals how the function of discourse changes with context. I assume that individuals make sense using what discursive resources are accessible and desirable to them in the moment, and that complex and always shifting power dynamics determine accessibility and desirability in these momentary encounters.

### Limitations

This dissertation examines a relatively small archive of primary sources and is not meant to be representative of all once-heterosexual-identified women's narratives or women's sexual fluidity. If one were to focus on how such narratives are told in fictional texts, in film or television, or within specific online communities, this might raise different issues than the texts I explore. I will consider some of these additional directions for research in the conclusion chapter. I cannot make definitive claims about how once-heterosexual-identified women are constructed in contemporary U.S. culture or about such women's lived experiences. Instead I draw out significant concepts emerging from this discourse and investigate the cultural work these stories perform in specific sites.

It is also important to note that the narratives I analyze in this dissertation are told most often from the perspective of white, professional class women. As I have noted, the

public face of a woman shifting from a heterosexual to an LGBTQ identity is often an educated white woman in midlife with a husband, children, and a professional career, and thus most of the texts I work with feature such women. Furthermore, I was unable to recruit a particularly diverse focus group sample in terms of race and class. Through my research I have been able to foreground the pervasiveness of whiteness and middle class identity in discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women, and to investigate how these privileged identities shape this discourse as whole. I explore the workings of privileged identities that typically go unmarked, and in this way my research challenges the practice of treating whiteness and middle-class identities as invisible. Yet because my sources emphasize the experiences of individuals with race and class privilege, my research offers little insight into women of color's or poor and working-class women's experiences of shifting sexual identities. The particularities of how women of specific racial, ethnic, national, and class backgrounds experience and articulate shifting identities should be analyzed in context and in-depth. In the conclusion of this dissertation I expand upon the need for more scholarly study and popular representations that take into account the experiences of once-heterosexual-identified women and sexually fluid women from diverse social locations.

### *Chapter Summaries*

I am drawn to discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women because it is a rich site for better understanding contemporary conceptions of sexuality, specifically models of LGBTQ sexual identities, the construction of women's sexualities, and the meanings of sexual fluidity. The topic of once-heterosexual-identified women has yet to be



extensively studied with a cultural studies methodology. A cultural studies approach allows me to theorize how stories circulating about such women reveal and shape understandings of sexuality in U.S. culture, going beyond existing literature that largely approaches these stories to make sense of individual experiences. The chapters of this dissertation are constructed around the most significant concepts that emerge from my research. Each chapter focuses on issues that seem most centrally and urgently relevant to how sexuality is understood in the present-day U.S.

In chapter one, I explore two alternative discourses that once-heterosexual-identified women create which trouble the conventional coming out story, discourses of surprise and agency. These unconventional coming out stories help us better understand how multiple and sometimes mutually contradictory “scripts” of identity circulate within any given historical era (Vicinus), as well as the power dynamics that make some understandings of identity more socially legible than others. The notion that LGBTQ people are “born this way”—what I refer to as “born gay” discourse—has become pervasive in LGBTQ advocacy because it has proven to be effective for rights-based agendas in the current political climate. Even as they would appear to challenge essentialist understandings of identity, alternative discourses of surprise and agency never wholly depart from “born gay” discourse, as they often paradoxically draw upon dominant discourse or at least have to acknowledge it. In this way, stories of surprise and agency reveal how discourse works, how dominant and alternative discourses are not discrete from each other but actually overlap and sometimes interact in contradictory ways. I argue that confusion and contradiction in once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories of surprise and agency makes it very easy in U.S. popular culture to render such women incredible—

to present them as ridiculous, delusional, or as playing into homophobic rhetoric. When once-heterosexual-identified women are made incredible for telling unconventional coming out stories, larger cultural confusion about sexual identity is displaced onto them. Stories of surprise and agency remind us that if we want to study sexuality accurately and with nuance, we have to work against this tendency to characterize a historical era by a single discourse.

Chapter two examines an increasingly popular discourse about sexual identity that eschews the coming out story altogether, the idea that “I love the person, not the gender,” what I refer to as PNG discourse. I unpack multiple political directions that PNG discourse cuts in contemporary U.S. culture, moving from the most radical to the most conservative possibilities. Following the multiple political implications of PNG discourse allows us to see discourse in motion, to better understand how discourse maneuvers across the landscape of U.S. culture, producing complex effects. PNG discourse functions as a way for unlabeled individuals to radically resist existing sexual identity categories based on gender of object choice. Furthermore, PNG discourse acts as a way for people of various identities to embrace a progressive, non-discriminatory notion that gender is irrelevant when people fall in love. However, these radical and progressive intentions become re-routed when PNG discourse dovetails with neoliberal ideologies that support the idea of a universal identity, rendering difference of sexuality, gender, race, and other categories as something to “get over.” Additionally, the potential of PNG discourse to challenge existing thinking about sexuality is contained in popular media when this discourse shores up essentialist ideas about women being driven by emotion and men being driven by sexual attraction. It might be easy to focus on one of these political possibilities as the true

meaning of PNG discourse, but I ask that we hold all of these possibilities in mind simultaneously to fully understand the cultural function of the notion of “I love the person, not the gender.” Again, exploring stories about once-heterosexual-identified women reveals how discourse works, how discourse shifts from moment to moment, changing in meaning from one iteration to the next, even when the same person invokes PNG discourse.

Chapter three explores stories about women coming out as LGBTQ-identified in midlife—approximately between the ages of forty and sixty. Such stories reveal what it means to be a midlife woman in the contemporary U.S. and how race and class shape conceptions of midlife. I argue these stories center a white, middle class, and Western worldview, but such a worldview is treated as a general experience of midlife rather than a particular one. These stories circulate a counter narrative that resists the idea that midlife is a time of decline for women. This counter narrative constructs midlife as a second adolescence for women; midlife as a time of increased confidence and empowerment for women; and the midlife woman’s self as a product of significant internalized labor characterized by self-reflection. I stress that while this counter narrative emerges as a way to triumph over a narrative of decline, it does not take into account the race and class privilege that facilitates experiencing midlife as a time of personal metamorphosis, empowerment, and a time for working on the self. Thus stories about women coming out midlife reflect larger gaps in our scholarly and popular understandings of how women of diverse backgrounds experience and make sense of midlife.

Chapter four investigates the workings of perhaps the most significant concept structuring LGBTQ people’s relationship to the nation in the present moment, the concept

of normalcy. I argue that we should not view normalcy as a coherent concept that will have effects we can easily predict in advance. Normalcy is an ambiguous touchstone that takes on different meanings from context to context. I demonstrate this by using once-heterosexual-identified women as a case study that reveals how normalcy can produce inconsistent effects and create contradictory meanings even about the same group of people. Using my method of mapping discourse in motion, I move through three different contexts in which the idea that once-heterosexual-identified women are normal produces different meanings, making such women illegitimate LGBTQ people in one context, members of a normal majority of LGBTQ people in another, and, lastly, fascinating and anxiety-producing LGBTQ women who are rendered strange for the very reason that they excel at normalcy. I show how the meaning of normalcy is inconsistent in these three contexts, and how normalcy functions less as a coherent concept and more as a shell that can house disparate ideas. Stories about once-heterosexual-identified women reveal the inconsistency of normalcy, causing us to wonder about the context-specific workings of normalcy and to see this significant concept shaping American sexualities in a new light.

Discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women is not merely reflective of individual women's experiences, and these stories are not just trends in popular journalism. Instead they have much to teach us about our time and how significant concepts shaping our ideas about sexuality function in this moment. I analyze this archive to bring present-day understandings of sexuality to the fore, as it is often while living in the present moment that we have the most difficulty understanding and gaining perspective about the cultural conjuncture we navigate and operate within.

## CHAPTER 1.

NOT BORN THIS WAY:  
 ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES OF SURPRISE AND AGENCY IN ONCE-  
 HETEROSEXUAL-IDENTIFIED WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

This chapter explores models of identity in once-heterosexual-identified lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, and/or unlabeled women's coming out stories that complicate dominant discourse about sexual identity as a stable, innate trait. The idea that sexual identity is stable over life course (or at the very least from adolescence onward) informs the ubiquitous political strategy in LGBTQ movements of describing sexual minorities as "born this way." This powerful assumption, what I refer to as "born gay" discourse, shapes the contemporary coming out genre, thus, unconventional stories which give voice to the possibility for identity to shift might seem specious in comparison. I examine how once-heterosexual-identified women articulate alternative discourses of surprise and agency that trouble "born gay" discourse, but do not depart from dominant discourse entirely. I analyze stories of surprise and agency found in anthologies of interviews and personal narratives published since 1990 and argue that these alternative discourses tangle together supposedly antithetical notions of identity: in these stories identity can be both essential and unpredictable, innate and shaped by environment.

Whereas "born gay" discourse functions to smooth out contradiction and confusion in an individual's life story, discourses of surprise and agency draw readers' attention to contradiction. This results in a tendency to represent once-heterosexual-identified women as what Ken Plummer refers to as "incredible," as unbelievable or unlikable narrators. I argue that this tendency displaces cultural confusion about sexual identity onto once-heterosexual-identified women—by implying that such women are simply baffling—rather

than to recognize that contradictory notions about sexual identity function more broadly in U.S. culture.

Whereas a conventional coming out story will provide clues of a continuous, stable LGBTQ identity in the past,<sup>33</sup> stories of surprise and agency allow for a certain amount of disjuncture and complexity in narrators' lives that never fully resolve. This is significant because the way a coming out story is told is never simply a matter of personal choice; instead, narrative constructs identity and has real-life impacts. John D'Emillio argues that under the condition in which one is thought only to be authentically "gay" if one was "born that way," gay people may "filter out our heterosexual impulses and experiences or we render them inauthentic" when telling their coming out stories (161). Thus, "born gay" discourse may obscure or explain away inconstancies between an individual's heterosexual past and LGBTQ-identified present, influencing what one chooses to tell and what one remembers as relevant to identity development. Such (perhaps unconscious) labor is done in service to "shap[ing] [our stories] to achieve our main purpose—building ties of community among a group whose links are, frankly, tenuous" (D'Emilio 161). In this way, the coming out genre constructs community for sexual minorities by assimilating differences in lived experiences into a familiar story that can resonate with others.<sup>34</sup> The risk of telling an unconventional coming out story is to break these "tenuous ties," losing recognition as part of a community of LGBTQ people unified by the shared experience "born gay" discourse provides. As I discuss later in the chapter, once-heterosexual-identified women who tell stories of surprise call these risks into relief when they express feeling like illegitimate LGBTQ people because their stories complicate "born gay" discourse. Yet, even narrators who do not express feelings of illegitimacy, such as those

telling stories of agency, are vulnerable to being rendered as inauthentic or improper LBGQ people within U.S. popular culture.

Whereas “born gay” discourse provides access the authority of the authentic, unchanging self, alternative discourses of surprise and agency engage two ideas that are made problematic by “born gay” discourse: sexual fluidity and the role of environment in shaping identity. Paradoxically, these alternative discourses do not forgo the notion of the authentic, innate self, they still recount a familiar coming out narrative of becoming “who you really are.” Yet, they do not tell this familiar narrative in an uncomplicated, linear fashion as “born gay” discourse requires. Stories of surprise call readers’ attention to sudden ruptures in a narrator’s identity and do not neatly suture breaks in the narrator’s life by the end of the story. Instead narrators linger on confusion and, in some cases, explore bad feelings that result from these confusions. Stories of agency call readers’ attention to the contingency of environment and identity, articulating a queered form of agency in which the narrator actively forges a new identity under the influence of new LGBTQ-affirming contacts. Thus, these alternative discourses provide understandings of sexual identity that seem nonsensical and paradoxical under the hierarchal dominance of “born gay” discourse.

It might be tempting to think of this contemporary moment as defined by “born gay” discourse, but it is crucial to recognize that multiple discourses about sexuality circulate simultaneously in any single historical moment.<sup>35</sup> Yet, not all narratives about sexuality are received equally, and at the end of this chapter I explore a larger cultural context in which women who tell stories of surprise or agency are framed as “incredible”—heard by audiences as confusing, ridiculous, or even irresponsibly playing

into homophobic rhetoric. Plummer argues that sexual stories can only be heard as “credible” when “key social worlds await the telling, when an audience is ripened up and ready to hear,” and without the right social and cultural conditions some sexual stories are “incredible,” “awaiting their historical moment,” unable to be heard without hostility or disbelief (26-27; 35). Stories of surprise and agency are largely received as incredible in contemporary U.S. culture because they allow for more contradictory or confusing explanations of identity than the clear linearity of dominant “born gay” discourse. Once-heterosexual-identified women are marked as perplexing subjects in popular media, but this does not necessarily reflect narrators’ personal logical failings. Once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories illuminate contradictory notions of identity, but this contradiction is not unique to such women. Rather, they draw attention to confused, paradoxical thinking about sexuality which circulates all around us, but which there is a cultural mandate to ignore or to simplify.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the historical and political conditions within which “born gay” discourse has emerged as the sole LGBTQ-affirming way to discuss sexual identity. I then unpack the workings of alternative discourses of surprise and agency in relation to “born gay” discourse, highlighting how they precariously negotiate concepts of the stability and unpredictability of identity, merging notions that are supposedly opposite of each other. I compare surprise and agency by examining how and why narrators telling stories of surprise express feelings of illegitimacy, but those telling stories of agency do not. Lastly, I outline how once-heterosexual-identified women who tell unconventional stories are rendered incredible in contemporary U.S. culture, and the



way this act forces such women to carry the burden of the contradictory thinking about sexuality even as larger culture circulates these very same contradictory ideas.

*The History of “Born Gay” Discourse in the U.S.*

“Born gay” discourse has become the primary method of advocating for LGBTQ civil rights; correspondingly, discourses about identity that suggest fluidity, choice, the influence of environment, and other non-biological explanations for sexual identity are viewed by many LGBTQ people and their allies as playing into homophobic rhetoric (Whisman; D’Emilio; Weber). The possibility that one could make a choice to eliminate same-sex desires is the central logic behind reparative therapy programs and ex-gay movements, and studies show that those who believe that sexual orientation is a biological drive are more likely to support LGBTQ civil rights (Whisman 4-5; Dunn). Before exploring how once-heterosexual-identified women interact with “born gay” discourse, it is necessary to briefly outline the historical context for why this discourse has become ubiquitous among LGBTQ people and their allies in the U.S. over the past thirty-five years.

The popular notion that LGBTQ sexuality is an inborn trait has roots in sexology literature of the late-nineteenth century. Shifting away from viewing same-sex desire as merely a taboo behavior, sexologists popularized the concept of the “congenital invert”: the idea of the homosexual as a specific type of person with an inborn deficiency or difference.<sup>36</sup> Early proponents of homosexual inclusion in Western societies championed this new scientific identity category and argued that homosexuality should be tolerated because it was a natural trait.<sup>37</sup> Yet, scholars also note that nineteenth and early-twentieth century attempts to locate the origins of homosexuality in the body or in biology always

overlapped with seemingly contradictory discourses about same-sex desire as a product of environment (Terry, “Anxious Slippages”; Allen). Notably in the 1930s and 1940s, the medical opinion that homosexuality was the product of environment and improper childhood development prevailed, and as a result this era saw a widespread institutionalization and “treatment” of those with same-sex desires and/or non-conforming genders (Terry, *An American Obsession*; Faderman 130-138).

Gay liberation activists in the 1960s challenged these understandings of homosexuality as pathological by arguing that all people have the potential to experience “polymorphous” desire (D’Emilio 155). This political rhetoric dovetailed with the popularity of Alfred Kinsey’s theories that homosexuality functions as a varying range of behaviors and feelings, rather than the homosexual being a discrete category of person (Terry, “Anxious Slippages” 130). Gay liberation activists argued that identities such as “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are simply the product of oppression, and that people have a greater capacity for love and attraction than these terms suggest (D’Emilio 155). Similarly, 1970s lesbian feminists theorized the idea of the “political lesbian,” arguing that any woman could choose to be a lesbian as a political commitment to other women (Echols 232; Faderman 206-209; Stein 40-43). Lesbian feminist discourse also argued that compulsory heterosexuality prevents women from actualizing their true connection to other women, suggesting that women’s same-sex love is innate (Rich). However, this idea of lesbianism as natural did not invalidate the notion of lesbianism as a political choice, even if these two ideas sometimes existed in an uneasy tension together (Stein 100). These radical rhetorics fell out of favor over the course of the 1980s as LGBTQ movements responded to an increasingly conservative political culture.<sup>38</sup> Significantly the late-1970s

and 1980s saw the rise of the religious right in U.S. politics. Their tactics included waging anti-gay and -lesbian legislation at the local and state level, and public campaigns characterizing homosexuals as sexual predators looking to “recruit” children (Fetner). It is within this political climate that “born gay” discourse has taken hold as *the* LGBTQ-affirming discourse to use to discuss identity.

“Born gay” discourse prevails in the contemporary moment because it has proven effective for dominant gay and lesbian movements in responding to homophobic rhetoric, anti-LGBTQ rights legislation, and the increasing influence of the religious right in U.S. politics. Tina Fetner argues that since the 1970s the religious right has successfully highlighted issues that incite public anxieties about sexual minorities, including same-sex marriage, military service, and making sexual orientation a protected legal category (xv). Thus, gay and lesbian movements especially from the 1980s to the present have been placed in a defensive position, working to meet “short-term electoral goals” (Fetner 97). Such goals often appear best addressed by normalizing tactics making gays and lesbians seem the same as heterosexuals, rather than highlighting the diversity of LGBTQ communities, especially issues that are pertinent to trans people, bisexuals, people of color, and gender non-conforming people (Fetner 96–97). In this context, “born gay” discourse appears preferable or more effective because it does not incite anxiety that heterosexual people can “turn gay” or be “recruited” by LGBTQ people.

Thus, we come to this moment in which the rhetoric of choice is a mainstay of the religious right’s attacks on LGBTQ rights, and in which any explanations of sexual identity that do not rely on biological determinist thinking—any explanations that could suggest fluidity, agency, or the influence of environment, even if one does not articulate one’s

identity as a “choice”—are tainted as supporting homophobic agendas (Whisman; Weber). “Born gay” discourse may be commonly supported among LGBTQ people and their allies, but this discourse contains significant limitations. These limitations include the reinforcement of the heterosexist notion that no one would be LGBTQ unless it was something they could not change (D’Emilio 164), and the exclusion of “those who don’t experience their sexual identity as stable throughout their life” (D’Emilio 160–161). Shannon Weber argues that the dominance of “born gay” discourse is harmful to many LGBTQ people because it “disenfranch[izes] certain queer people from fully participating in an accurate articulation of their experiences in political and popular discourse” (685). Individuals who view their same-sex desires as an outcome of choice, sexual fluidity, and/or environment have more difficulty expressing such experiences in this moment when “biological determinism [is rendered] as *the* acceptable pro-gay discourse versus *the* unquestioned treatment of ideas about sexual choice and fluidity as anathema” (Weber 685, emphasis original). Beyond addressing limitations of “born gay” discourse, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick cautions against uncritically embracing biological explanations of gay identity as less homophobic than arguments which purport homosexuality to be the product of environment. Sedgwick argues that any desire to conclusively *know* the origins of gay identity—be those origins “nature” or “nurture”—must be suspect, as these theories do not challenge the “aegis of a culture’s desire that gay people *not be*,” and she asserts under such conditions “there is no unthreatened, unthreatening conceptual home for a concept of gay origins” (*Epistemology of the Closet* 43, emphasis original). Writing this essay at the end of the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, Sedgwick argues that any definitive explanation of gay identity can be used to

enact systemic violence against gay people. Sedgwick argues that that the better strategy is to validate a diversity of origins for gay identity (44). Despite such critiques, “born gay” discourse currently dominates as the LBGQ-affirming, anti-homophobic way to think about and to articulate sexual identity.

Yet, even as any discourse that does not render LBGQ identity as stable is popularly viewed as necessarily homophobic, once-heterosexual-identified women are telling stories that suggest the possibility that sexual identity can change. In the midst of the “born gay” vs. “choice” binary, once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories implicitly ask why notions of stable and fluid identity must be antithetical to each other. Discourses of surprise and agency merge supposedly contradictory ideas, often invoking an innate sexual identity, but then paradoxically highlighting the unpredictability of identity. Stories of surprise and agency refuse to resolve or ignore contradictions in an individual’s sexual identity development, and offer a messier, less seamless version of the coming out story than we are generally accustomed.

### *Exploring Alternative Discourses of Surprise and Agency*

I turn now to personal narratives that characterize sexual identity in terms of surprise and agency. I draw from three texts: Barbee J. Cassingham and Sally M. O’Neil’s collection of interviews, *And Then I Met This Woman: Previously Married Women’s Journeys into Lesbian Relationships*, first published in 1993; Deborah Abbott and Ellen Farmer’s anthology of personal essays, poetry, and interviews, *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life: Stories of Transformation*, published in 1995; and *Dear John, I Love Jane: Women Write About Leaving Men for Women*, a 2010 collection of personal essays edited by Candace Walsh and Laura André. These three texts stand out in anthologies of women’s

coming out stories because they are specifically organized around the idea of shifting sexual identities during adulthood. I focus on particular narratives in these three anthologies because the form of personal narrative offers a close look at the choices narrators make when telling their stories, which is helpful when investigating the workings of discourses of surprise and agency. I also see examples of surprise and agency in other stories, such as stories in popular news media and stories women shared in this study's focus groups, and I will analyze popular culture texts briefly at the end of this chapter to discuss a larger cultural context in which women telling stories of surprise and agency are rendered incredible. I will also explore media texts and focus groups in the following chapters. However, the stories I examine in this chapter provide particularly rich, detailed examples of these alternative discourses, which is why I chose to focus closely on them. Additionally, it should be clear that not all once-heterosexual-identified women tell stories of surprise and agency, and many tell conventional coming out stories reiterating "born gay" discourse. Therefore the stories I examine in this chapter cannot be representative of once-heterosexual-identified women's coming out narratives, nor can they be an exhaustive account of the alternative discourses such women may employ. Instead these stories serve as especially apt examples, which is crucial for better understanding how alternative discourses work.

### *Surprise Troubling Backwards Birthing in the Coming Out Story*

Once-heterosexual-identified women employing a discourse of surprise complicate a key genre convention of coming out stories: continuity and the need to tell one's story as if one was always coming toward exactly where one is in the present. Katherine Bond

Stockton argues that continuity in coming out stories is maintained via what she refers to as the “backwards birthing mechanism”(7). Stockton notes a typical coming out narrative will uncover signs of the queer self in childhood and engage in a “hunt for the roots of queerness” (7). Hence, the queer child is not merely remembered, but constituted through these attempts to find clues of the queer self in childhood, the time period that is culturally marked as the most significant to sexual identity formation. Stories of surprise do not easily reproduce this “hunt” for the “roots” of the narrator’s LGBTQ identity. For example, Gale (Sky) Edeawo’s coming out story hinges on a radical surprise when she suddenly feels attracted to women, with no discernable reason for this change. Edeawo states, “I remember the first time I caught myself looking at a woman’s legs and ass in the ‘wrong way.’ ... I was looking at Donna daily, constantly, with pure lust. I did not know what the hell was wrong with me” (50). Like the other narrators I cite here, Edeawo does not describe feeling “different” as a child as in a typical coming out story, instead she notes being “boy crazy”<sup>39</sup> as a teenager (47). Edeawo’s story offers an example of how a discourse of surprise might forgo backwards birthing and in such stories the emergence of same-sex desire is a complete surprise. However, other stories of surprise function differently by acknowledging “clues” in adolescence that might be understood as evidence of the life-long-stability of a narrator’s LGBTQ identity, but narrators refuse to frame their story in terms of “born gay” discourse. These stories of surprise suggest that desire might be static over life course, but the meaning of desire and how desire informs one’s identity can change. Thus, stories of surprise forgo, complicate, or outright reject the backwards birthing mechanism, even in cases when narrators embrace the notion of an essential, innate LGBTQ identity.

Sometimes surprise twists coming out story conventions rather than departing from employing the backwards birthing mechanism entirely. The ability of surprise to bend, rather than break, convention is illustrated in Veronica Masen's story when she explains her gay identity as a sudden development that she cannot fully account for, but she also asserts that her gayness had been "dormant" for most of her life (63). Masen states that her same-sex desires have occurred since childhood, however, she argues that her orientation changed in midlife because such desires took on new significance in her life, becoming defining features of her identity rather than peripheral desires. Masen wrestles with this contradiction, backwards birthing her gay identity in hindsight and yet, paradoxically, insisting that her sexual orientation changed midlife. Masen explains that her experience coming out as a middle-aged woman with a husband and children countered her assumption that those who come out in midlife had always known their authentic sexuality:

I truly believed that coming out later in life was more of a choice to reveal something known, not the unexpected appearance of something new. Most of my gay friends had always known they were gay. ... Somehow I had made it to adulthood without understanding that one could *not know*. ... (57, emphasis original)

Masen's emphasis on "not knowing" suggests that gayness could be "the unexpected appearance of something new," that is, new capacities for desires and attractions that the individual did not know she could feel. This kind of sudden surprise does not replicate a familiar coming out story with a protagonist who knows their LGBTQ identity because it had "always" been part of their sense of self.



Even though Masen backwards births her gay identity, what sets Masen's story apart from a more conventional coming out story is that she describes her shift in identity as a surprise and a change of orientation. Masen backwards births her gay self early in her narrative, stating she wanted to kiss girls as a child, and joking about other signs of a "dormant" gay woman she sees in hindsight. She remembers her teenage crush on Kelly McGillis in *Top Gun* and states, "I know. That plus the fact that I later drove a Subaru and listened to the Indigo Girls should have tipped me off" (56). Masen calls upon these desires and interests as evidence of an authentic gay identity lurking within her. A discourse of surprise may call upon ideas of an innate authentic identity and the stability of desire, but it refuses to play entirely by the rules "born gay" discourse. Masen's story differs from the conventional logic of "born gay" discourse in the way she argues that her orientation, not only her self-identification, changed from heterosexual to gay: "I thought sexual orientation was hardwired. Honestly. I didn't get that it could change" (57). Thus, despite her life-long desires for women, Masen insists on employing a discourse of surprise, even if it might be possible, and would perhaps be easier, for her to adhere to "born gay" discourse.

Masen's story calls on a complicated, potentially confusing for readers, notion of surprise in which desire can be stable throughout life course, but identity can unexpectedly change. Masen's story allows for the possibility that feelings which did not seem significant to one's identity before—such as her early desires to kiss girls and her attractions to women—can suddenly become central to one's self. She suggests we might be surprised by our desires as they take on new meanings in our lives, if not new forms. Importantly, such surprise does not have to signify that we misunderstood the true meaning

of those desires; rather, the meaning of desire can change over life course. In this way, a discourse of surprise allows for seemingly contradictory notions in the same story: identity is stable and innate but certain desires might suddenly, inexplicitly play new roles in our lives. Such contradiction would need to be edited out of a conventional coming out story with an uncomplicated, linear use of the backwards birthing mechanism. Yet Masen's story not only includes this contradiction, but she calls her audience's attention to it by grappling with her own surprise and confusion about her midlife shift in sexual identity. Masen uses a discourse of surprise to give an explanation of her identity that feels accurate to how she lived it, rather than minimizing contradiction in her story to fit "born gay" discourse.

"Born gay" discourse is commonly understood as antithetical to the possibility that identity can change, yet stories of surprise might paradoxically call on both ideas, suggesting identity to be unpredictable yet essential to the self. This startling overlapping is visible in Katherine A. Briccetti's story which does not backwards birth her present-day lesbian identity but then ends by embracing the notion that identity is based in biology. Briccetti's narrative highlights how she was ambushed by new desires for a woman, and she is confused by how her surprise contrasts with dominant sexual development identity theories. Briccetti asserts that after she kissed a woman for the first time, "I didn't feel 'gay,' and I didn't think being gay happened like this, so immediately. Everything I'd read suggested that people suspected they were gay at least by adolescence, and that was not my experience" (171). Because Briccetti's feelings emerged "so immediately," she questions if her departure from the theories she read disqualifies her from "being gay." Briccetti attempts to backwards birth a gay identity, shifting through her past, but comes up lacking

any clues about her capacity to love a woman. Briccetti notes her childhood attractions for boys and male celebrities (173), her “boy crazy” teenage years and her history of dating men (171), and she notes that even after establishing a same-sex relationship, she still had sexual fantasies about men and rarely found herself attracted to women other than her partner (173). Considering all of these factors, Briccetti’s description of her sexuality might initially suggest that she thinks her identity is shaped by situational factors; she believes meeting the right person can influence identity. In this sense, Briccetti’s surprise that she could fall in love with a woman undermines the inherent stability of identity purported by “born gay” discourse.

However a discourse of surprise might encompass notions about the stability of identity even as it simultaneously undermines the certainty of such stability. This contradiction is apparent when Briccetti concludes her essay by stating that she believes that she changed sexual orientation due to a hormonal flux, and that she might change sexual orientation again because of hormonal shifts. She states that she thinks “sexual orientation is probably biologically determined” and that scientists will soon discover that “fluctuat[ions]” in hormones that might cause “some of us to take detours off our genetic map” (174). Thus, Briccetti engages “born gay” discourse, but she refutes the idea that her experience is wholly reflected in it; instead she articulates a discourse of surprise that conflates concepts of biological determinism and chance occurrence. Briccetti states that her experience “didn’t feel like a choice for me, nor did it feel like I was following biological inclinations. It did seem like a predetermined path, though, a spiritual blueprint” (175). The messy slippage between surprise, biology, and spiritual destiny in Briccetti’s

story creates a confusing coming out narrative that troubles any easy binary between the stability and the fluidity of identity.

The notion that identity might be (spiritually, biologically) predetermined surfaces in other stories of surprise. Beth describes her surprise of falling in love with a female friend, stressing that while a complete surprise, her new desires for a woman simultaneously felt “natural” and meant-to-be:

Suddenly I felt this depth of connection to Judy that also became sexual and very much a surprise. It was as natural as anything. I had no idea that this depth of connection could be possible. It was like discovering that water was good to drink. It was so easy and natural. I thought, “This is a life partner that I have been looking for—for thousands of years.” (Cassingham and O'Neil 51)

Beth does not make any effort to backwards birth her desires, but she stresses the naturalness of her new capacity to love a woman, the way that her new relationship seemed to fulfill some heretofore-unknown essential need within her. Erin Mantz describes a similar forceful and wholly surprising desire for a woman that changed her formerly untroubled identity as a heterosexual wife and mother. Mantz stresses a sudden rupture in sexual identity, stating: “Then I fell in love with a woman. I was shocked and I was immediately absolute. I wanted to be with her for the rest of my life” (22). Like Beth and Briccetti, Mantz argues that this radical surprise occurred without any clues in her past, but that once her desires for a woman surfaced, she was clear and certain that she had “found my soul mate” (23). Such stories draw on powerful ideas about finding the one person who you are destined to love, and suggest the inevitability of becoming “who you really are”—a stable identity lurking within one’s self. In this way, such stories are consistent with the

coming out genre as it is shaped by “born gay” discourse, telling a story of realizing the authentic self. Yet, these stories of surprise do not perform an uncomplicated rendition of “born gay” discourse, and instead narrators leave lingering confusions in their stories.

Whereas “born gay” discourse would allow a narrator to argue that they had merely misrecognized their past heterosexual identity as their true self, narrators employing a discourse of surprise draw their audience’s attention to ambiguities in their present-day identities. Mantz finds herself reflecting on old boyfriends and asking “Was I the same person then?” (23), without ever coming to an answer about how to reconcile her heterosexual past with her present as a woman partnered to another woman. Beth’s story also ends without piecing together a stable, coherent LGBTQ identity, and she argues that after the dissolution of her first relationship with a woman she is focusing less on if she should date men or women and more on finding the kind of intense emotional connection she had with her female partner (Cassingham and O’Neil 52). As I will discuss in more detail later, Briccetti also expresses many doubts about the legitimacy of her lesbian identity, speculating, “maybe I’m a straight woman who has simply lived for over twenty years with the person [a woman] she loved the most” (174). An alternative discourse inflects familiar stories about fulfilling your destiny to love the person you are supposed to love and becoming the person you are meant to be with surprise, and this inflection results in a coming out narrative which leaves intact confusion about identity that “born gay” discourse would explain away.

While many stories of surprise implicitly challenge “born gay” discourse, occasionally narrators overtly reject the assumption that their identity is essential or inevitable in any way. This is evident in Amelia Sauter’s story in which she pointedly

refutes that her gay identity was dormant: “You won’t find me rewriting history to say that I was gay all along. I was straight. Now I am gay. I won’t insult my past by saying I was in denial or confused” (242). Sauter speaks back to the assumption in “born gay” discourse that she must have been “gay all along,” arguing that sexual orientation can shift unexpectedly for some people, and that to suggest that such people were “in denial” or “confused” before that shift does a violence to their history. Sauter frames her childhood and young adulthood as a time when she was truly heterosexual—noting that she was “boy crazy” in comparison to most of her friends who were “all lesbian-identified or bisexual” (237). However, as Sauter explains her sudden shift in orientation, she notes that she had sexual experiences with women before she came out. Sauter dismisses her early sexual experiences with women as merely the “awkward” sexual experimentation of “a curious straight girl” (237). She views these experiences in contrast to her experiences with her current female partner that led to a significant shift in her identity to being gay. Like Masen, Sauter acknowledges same-sex desires in her past, but argues that these desires shifted from the margin to the center of her identity. In order to use a discourse of surprise, Sauter must actively fight against the assumption that her past same-sex sexual experiences are significant to her present-day identity, and in doing so she raises a direct challenge to “born gay” discourse.

A discourse of surprise allows narrators to tell parts of their life stories that seem incommensurable within “born gay” discourse. Sauter refuses to embrace a notion of continuity in her story, even as others narrators might, and instead she explains her coming out in terms of the unpredictability of identity: “I am a textbook example of the fluidity of sexuality. I always thought I couldn’t change. I was wrong, and that freaks out a lot of

people who are scared to imagine that one day everything they think is true and permanent could change” (242-243). Sauter refuses the notion of stability of identity—a notion which carries with it the connotation of authentic identity in an era of “born gay” discourse’s dominance—and embraces the underrepresented notion that “everything [most people] think is true and permanent could change.” It would be easier for her to explain her past same-sex desires via the logic of “born gay” discourse, as Sauter tells a story using understandings of identity which “born gay” discourse renders impossible. Within the context of “born gay” discourse, it might be possible for Sauter to be a curious straight girl, or to have been a gay woman all along, but not to be a curious straight girl and a gay woman within the same lifetime. Yet, a discourse of surprise allows these supposedly contradictory life experiences to exist, unresolved, within the same story. As such, Sauter’s story, like the others I have cited here, inflects the coming out story with far more contradiction, confusion, and inconsistency than is conventional.

However, the pressure to produce a narrative of a single, stable identity is powerful, so much so that even those like Sauter who refuse “born gay” discourse cannot escape that pressure entirely. Instead, narrators find themselves compelled to acknowledge and grapple with dominant discourse as they give voice to alternative understandings of identity. A discourse of surprise produces coming out stories that seem strange or paradoxical when compared to “born gay” discourse, and this incites bad feelings such as illegitimacy and defensiveness for some once-heterosexual-identified women.

*Feeling Like an Imposter: Surprise and Illegitimacy*

The telling of coming out stories is an “everyday and grounded matter” (Plummer 28), and how one tells a story (or if one tells a story at all) produces real-life effects. D’Emillio stresses that the potential risk of not adhering to “born gay” discourse is the loss of a secure place in a LGBTQ community (161). This loss is reflected in once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories of surprise when they express feeling illegitimate. For example, both Briccetti and Masen describe feeling like “imposters” as gay or lesbian women because their experiences deviate from a coming out narrative in which the protagonist knows their sexuality by adolescence. Masen continuously compares herself to her other gay friends and asserts that she never felt she had the same amount of clarity about her same-sex desire that they had: “[S]ince I lacked the sort of brazen knowledge about my sexuality that they possessed, since I wasn’t *sure*, that I must, by default, be straight. That if I *knew*, I would *know*. And since I didn’t *know*, I must not be” (57, emphasis original). Because her experience did not take the form of a conventional coming out story in which the protagonist *knows* in some definitive way that they are gay, Masen felt for many years that she was “straight by default.” Masen argues that her lack of “brazen knowledge” stopped her from sexually “experimenting” with women because she “didn’t want to be an imposter. I didn’t want to take something so real and so personal and trivialize it by trying it on like a costume” (57). By this logic, if Masen did not know her sexual identity from childhood onward, she must be “an imposter,” merely playing around with an identity others felt to be “so real and so personal.” Briccetti similarly describes feeling as if she’s not a real lesbian, even though she identifies as such and has been partnered with a woman for more than twenty years. Briccetti never finds clues of a “heretofore-denied [lesbian]



sexual orientation”(173) in her past heterosexual life, and this abrupt rupture between her past and present selves causes her to question the authenticity of her lesbian identity: “I still feel different from some of my lesbian friends, I feel as if I’ve never been a legitimate member of the Lesbian Club; that I’ve been pretending to be someone I’m not, my internal voice chanting, *imposter, imposter*” (174, emphasis original). Because Briccetti does not call upon “born gay” discourse to authenticate her identity, she feels set apart from other lesbians. These feelings of being an imposter and an outlier in LGBTQ communities call into relief the risks of telling a story that deviates from “born gay” discourse.

Even narrators like Sauter who do not express feeling illegitimate still gesture to a cultural context in which if one espouses a discourse of surprise others will question the authenticity of one’s LGBTQ identity. While Sauter does not express feeling illegitimate in the ways Briccetti and Masen do, she finds herself in a defensive position, compelled to react to “born gay” discourse. Thus, Sauter cannot simply ignore or transcend “born gay” discourse, but she must respond to the assumptions of this dominant discourse and pointedly work against them. Sauter anticipates how her audience might not believe her or might judge her, and preempts her critics by stating that she finds the notion that she was previously “in denial or confused” about her identity “insulting” (242). Similarly, she anticipates that by conceptualizing her identity in terms of sexual fluidity she “freaks people out” because she makes them reflect on their own potential to shift identity (242-243). In such moments, Sauter seems aware that as she tells a story of surprise, she will be an unbelievable or even an unlikable narrator to audiences who expect a coming out story to align with “born gay” discourse. Yet, by having to react to “born gay” discourse and to

anticipate naysayers, Sauter demonstrates the power of this dominant discourse, how even those who would claim to be breaking free of “born gay” discourse cannot entirely do so.

Bad feelings expressed by women employing a discourse of surprise result from telling a story that highlights confusion and contradiction, confusion and contradiction which “born gay” discourse functions to disregard or to suppress. In the context within which “born gay” discourse is the dominant, anti-homophobic way for thinking about sexual identity, women telling stories of surprise can easily be rendered unreliable or disagreeable narrators because their stories are contradictory. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that contradictions in stories of surprise are not reflective of once-heterosexual-identified narrators’ illogical thinking, as is implied in much cultural visibility of such women, but instead these stories illuminate widespread contradictions within understandings of identity that are usually ignored. However, using an alternative discourse that challenges “born gay” discourse does not necessarily result in feeling alienated within LGBTQ communities. In the following section, I explore a discourse of agency and the ways this alternative discourse also produces contradictory thinking, but does so while maintaining connections to a political community that supports narrators telling these unconventional stories.

#### *Agency as Refusing Compulsory Heterosexuality and Celebrating Contingency*

A discourse of agency courts ideas that the dominance of “born gay” discourse renders as implausible and as dangerous to LGBTQ people; namely, the notions that identity is contingent to environment and that individuals make choices in the act of constructing their identities. When once-heterosexual-identified women use an alternative discourse of

agency, they argue that environment can shape identity. Narrators describe being acted upon by an environment of compulsory heterosexuality<sup>40</sup> and then being influenced by an LGBTQ-affirming environment that provides them with resources to cultivate an authentic sexual identity. Whereas agency is typically thought of as the opposite of being shaped by outside forces, these stories reconceptualize agency to mean one's active openness to being shaped by environment and by others. Thus, an alternative discourse of agency involves a queered form of agency that values being receptive to the influence of others, allowing oneself to be deeply changed through contact with people and new ideas.<sup>41</sup> This discourse simultaneously reiterates the notion of an innate, authentic identity, and yet refuses to discredit environment-contingent LGBTQ identities as necessarily inauthentic.

Whereas a discourse of agency in once-heterosexual-women's stories stresses the contingency of sexuality, under the conditions of the "born gay" vs. "choice" binary the idea that one's sexual identity could be informed by the influence of others is stigmatized. Because homophobic rhetoric relies so heavily on the notion of gays and lesbians "recruiting" heterosexuals and the dangers of LGBTQ-affirming environments turning impressionable people gay, "born gay" discourse disavows the possibility that contact with single-sex spaces, LGBTQ people, or queer and feminist ideas might influence our identities. Weber gives an example of this sort of disavowal in her analysis of the 1999 cult comedy film *But I'm a Cheerleader!* In this film, the teenage protagonist is sent to an ex-gay camp to "recover" from her lesbian sexuality. Each teenage camper is required to confess "the root" of their homosexuality, and Weber notes how various ludicrous-sounding roots (such as "I was born in France," or "my mother got married in pants") are lumped together with one camper's root of "all-girls boarding school" (693). Weber

questions why the filmmakers would see environment-contingent sexualities in “the same comical light” as these other farcical roots (693). Weber notes that this is one example of how “born gay” discourse in popular culture elides the role environment plays in sexual identity development,<sup>42</sup> making environment-contingent sexualities laughable and even dangerously homophobic. Queer theorist Sara Ahmed notes that the idea of “contact sexuality”—that heterosexual people might become homosexual because of contact with certain people or objects—has historically been “used to deauthenticate such orientations as ‘less real’” (*Queer Phenomenology* 94). This stigma of environment-based sexualities surfaces in sexologist and Freudian notions of contact sexuality that suggest the danger that a lesbian could seduce a “normal” woman. In this scenario, a heterosexual woman is taken advantage of by a predatory lesbian, and we can see this type of thinking emerge in contemporary homophobic rhetoric about the dangers of being exposed to LGBTQ people and texts. “Born gay” discourse asserts that identity is impervious to influence, already fully formed within an individual, and environment-contingent sexualities are marked as inauthentic in contrast.

A discourse of agency in once-heterosexual-identified women’s coming out stories reconstructs what agency means, showing the possibility of contact sexuality to incite an active uncovering of the true self in resistance to compulsory heterosexuality. While the notion of agency typically involves being a person who acts, not one who is acted upon, in a queered notion of agency, identity can be actively crafted via response to influential encounters, accidental contacts, and unpredictable political awakenings. Thus, an alternative discourse of agency embraces the notion of an authentic identity as found in

“born gay” discourse but rejects the stigmatization of contact sexuality that “born gay” discourse articulates.

A discourse of agency unveils the otherwise hidden work done by compulsory heterosexuality, making the interaction between identity and environment—an interaction “born gay” discourse disavows—explicit. Narrators critique compulsory heterosexuality as a condition that limits the possibilities of *all* women’s sexualities, implicitly highlighting how desire is shaped by outside influences. Margaret Randall offers this kind of critique by describing feeling heterosexual and partnering with men for forty-nine years, but highlighting the structural conditions that shaped her sexual experiences and choices. Randall complicates the backward birthing mechanism by stating she cannot remember any attractions to women or girls in her formative years, but that this may be due more to such desire being an impossibility under the condition of compulsory heterosexuality rather than that she simply did not feel such desires. She states, “Oh, I can bring up a few female-to-female erotic moments if I search the years. But I grew up pretty well socialized into white, middle-class, and fully gendered expectations” (169). Randall argues that such expectations lead her to fulfill a number of roles, including the “crushes on the captain of the football team and later the ‘egghead’ who wanted to be a writer just like me; and finally the very heterosexual camp-follower woman’s role in the New York beat scene of the late 1950’s” (169). Randall asserts that the possibilities she saw available for her life were shaped by compulsory heterosexuality and that this had a direct impact on the desires she felt and the people she envisioned as ideal partners.

The fact that Randall stresses the role of compulsory heterosexuality in shaping her, and inevitably others’, identity is crucial because the contacts that shape heterosexual

orientations—cultural institutions like the family and social privileges associated with heterosexuality—are typically made invisible, whereas contacts that shape LGBTQ orientations—such as influential relationships with LGBTQ people, or books and films about LGBTQ people—are typically rendered as inauthentic and manipulative. Ahmed addresses this inequality by arguing that contact sexuality is not a less authentic kind of sexuality; instead she shows how *all* sexual orientations are shaped by cultural, social, and historical contingencies.<sup>43</sup> An alternative discourse of agency performs a similar task in that it questions whether identity operates independent of environment. For instance, like Randall, Vanessa Fernando states she cannot find a definitive origin of her queer lesbian sexuality, but the reason she cannot is likely tied to the ways that compulsory heterosexuality defined her early life. Fernando describes an adolescence and young adulthood of identifying as heterosexual, although she can recall both same-sex and other-sex attractions in her youth (47–48). Fernando’s story details how her involvement with radical queer communities allowed her think beyond compulsory heterosexuality, however, she cannot find an exact event or contact which made her shift into a queer lesbian identity. Reflecting on her shift, Fernando states:

In all honesty, I don’t know what shifted. I wouldn’t define myself as one of those lesbians who knew since childhood the ‘truth’ about her sexual orientation. But I do feel that I defined myself as a heterosexual because the society in which I grew up never affirmed the other parts of me. (52)

Fernando’s comment makes compulsory heterosexuality visible as a contact sexuality, and in doing so troubles the easy continuity of identity in a typical coming out story. Fernando implies that compulsory heterosexuality clouded her understanding of herself to the point

that it is now difficult to say what the “truth about her sexual orientation” was from childhood onward. Yet, throughout her story, Fernando conceptualizes her lesbian identity as her authentic sexuality; she refers to unacknowledged “parts” of herself, an internalized core of “[her] own sexual desire (52), and ultimately ends her narrative by arguing that she is now “[l]iving as a whole person”(53) as a queer lesbian. However Fernando’s engagement with authenticity and innateness differs from “born gay” discourse in the way she takes into consideration how environment might forge people’s most intimately felt desires. She does this both by calling out the way that growing up under the condition of compulsory homosexuality shaped her false and restrictive heterosexual identity, and by later showing how radical queer communities gave her resources to rethink and restructure her sexual orientation into a more holistic, satisfying queer lesbian identity. As such, a discourse of agency flips the script regarding LGBTQ contact sexualities, and in this alternative discourse compulsory heterosexuality is manipulative and inauthentic, while LGBTQ contacts become resources for uncovering a true identity.

Whereas “born gay” discourse downplays the unpredictability of identity and stigmatizes the idea that identity could suddenly shift in relation to an accidental contact, a discourse of agency re-values LGBTQ contact sexualities by suggesting that one’s true, authentic identity just might be uncovered by accident. Thus, stories of agency value being open to unpredictable contact and engaging with the world around oneself, rather than viewing contact sexuality as a reflection of one’s weak will. JoAnn Loulan’s interview in *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life* demonstrates this kind of re-valuing when she discusses the possibility of accidental contacts to awaken a person to an authentic identity, and takes pride in being a person who is receptive to such contacts. Loulan does not

describe any awareness of her lesbian sexuality as child, stating, “Yeah, I dated boys. I am one of those lesbians who didn’t know I was a lesbian, didn’t think I was different. I was one of the girls” (259). Loulan’s story offers a critique of compulsory heterosexuality by showing how women’s sexualities and life possibilities are hampered by structural conditions, and Loulan suggests that her “not knowing [she] was a lesbian” could be contributed to a restrictive environment. Loulan states that she grew up Catholic and had no real understanding of sex as a teenager or young adult, including lacking awareness about masturbation or that women could have sex with each other (260). Furthermore, Loulan notes that her small town in Ohio in the early 1960s did not offer many possibilities to imagine life as a lesbian, and that she never even heard the word until after she had graduated from college (264). When asked if she thinks she would have come out if she had stayed in her hometown, Loulan speculates,

I think probably not, unless something had happened where I was suddenly in some situation with a very aggressive lesbian. ... If some lesbian had come on to me—I’m very impressionable, which I see as a positive trait—come on to me very strongly and made a sexual pass at me, I think I may have figured it out.  
(264)

Loulan’s statement that meeting “a very aggressive lesbian” in her hometown could have caused her to “figure out” her lesbian identity stresses the possibility of our sexualities being shaped by contact with others. Her statement may bring to mind homophobic arguments about gays and lesbians “recruiting” heterosexual people. Yet it does not carry the stigma of contact sexuality found in homophobic fantasies of impressionable straight



women being taken advantage of by predatory lesbians. Instead, Loulan twists this fantasy back on itself by appreciating her capacity to be affected by others.

Loulan uses an alternative discourse of agency to re-read the possibilities of contact sexuality. Instead of imagining a nefarious scene of being manipulated by an “aggressive lesbian,” an encounter with an “aggressive lesbian” is imagined as a path towards greater freedom, joy, and authenticity. Rather than imagining herself as passively bending to the will of others and taking on an artificial identity, it is through this imagined contact that she could have awakened to her true identity earlier in her life. Loulan’s sexuality seems no less authentic in her imagining being brought out by “an aggressive lesbian.” She later explains in her story that her “impressionable” nature actually helped her become her authentic self as she changed in relation to resources that affirmed lesbianism. This alternative discourse of agency offers new meanings for contact sexuality, one in which being open to the influence of others is a good thing. In stories of agency, the narrator is not a dupe for changing in relation to LGBTQ contacts, but a powerful agent bravely opening herself up to being changed by contact and facing her true identity.

A discourse of agency necessarily allows that individuals make some conscious choices in the construction of their sexual identities in relation to their environments, and in this way, agency may carry the taint of choice as a homophobic understanding of identity. Yet, an alternative discourse of agency envisions “choice” differently than within the terms of the “born gay” vs. “choice” binary. In a discourse of agency, individuals may “choose” to be LGBTQ-identified, but in doing so they are choosing an innate and authentic identity. Hence, in stories of agency narrators make choices in service to uncovering their true selves; this is a different construction of choice than found in homophobic rhetoric, in

which an individual makes a choice to become LGBTQ-identified with no innate identity supporting that decision.

An alternative discourse of agency offers a complicated understanding of choice in which individuals make explicit choices in order to construct their true, authentic selves. For instance, Loulan's story describes her shift into a lesbian identity as involving some active, conscious choices about changing her life after being exposed to ideas that affirmed lesbian sexuality. Loulan describes taking women's studies classes and learning about lesbian sexuality, and that this led to her conscious decision to stop dating men. She explains: "One part was an all-day class taught by Tee Corinne and Pat Califia. It was incredible to hear about lesbians in a graphic, sexual way. That was it with me and men. I never dated men again" (263). The kind of agency implied here does not suggest that one has choice in one's orientation per se. Loulan's phrasing consistently conveys that she believes her authentic sexual identity has always been lesbian, but she "didn't know" or had yet to "figure [that] out" for a large portion of her life. However, her story does connote the agency to pursue new knowledges, in this particular case "graphic" understandings of lesbian sexualities, and to make choices about how to live one's life, such as her decision to stop dating men once she becomes excited by the possibility of sex with women. In this way, a discourse of agency complicates the idea of "choice" as it has typically been understood in the "born gay" vs. "choice" binary by highlighting the contingency of sexuality and the choices about their sexuality that individuals necessarily make while they interact with the world around them. Fernando's story also illustrates this understanding of choice when she stresses the role that her involvement with queer, polyamorous community had in the construction of her queer lesbian identity, an identity

she suggests is innate to herself. Her story describes a political journey in which contact with new ideas leads to a greater capacity for her to know and feel her desires: “I never let myself experience the vast expanse of my own sexual desire until I found myself in incredibly new territory, where love, relationships, sex, self-definition, gender, and identity became much more multi-dimensional than I would have expected” (52). Fernando articulates an alternative discourse of agency in which she actively, consciously reconstructed her identity outside of the confines of compulsory heterosexuality. It is being open to the influence of a “new [political] territory” which incites Fernando’s choice to allow herself to experience her full range of desire and attraction. Yet even as this new environment influences Fernando, she does not will a queer lesbian identity out of thin air, instead she uncovers the inherent “vast expanse of my own sexual desire.” Stories of agency assert the existence of an essential, inherent sexual identity, and offer the pleasures of the convention of finding “who you really are,” yet through an unconventional route that includes influence of environment and the active use of choice in the process of identity development.

Stories of agency complicate ideas of authentic identity as they are shaped by “born gay” discourse because such stories tell the active reconstruction of “who you really are,” but this authentic “you” might have never come into existence without (sometimes accidental) contact. Whereas contact sexuality is maligned as inauthentic and preposterous within “born gay” discourse, a discourse of agency revalues the possibility of contact and honors the bravery it takes to be truly open to the world around oneself. Stories of agency have the potential to incite anxiety because they do not eschew concepts such as contact sexuality and choice that have been the mainstay of homophobic rhetoric in contemporary

U.S. culture. Instead, a discourse of agency reimagines these concepts which “born gay” discourse renders contentious. However, narrators telling stories of agency do not express the kinds of illegitimate feelings and marginalization that narrators telling stories of surprise do. I argue that this is because stories of agency position narrators as already a part of a political community, and because the very notion of agency—even a queered form of agency—connotes more personal power than the notion of surprise.

### *Agency and Political Community*

Despite the fact that a discourse of agency engages with supposedly contradictory thinking—drawing upon the stigmatized concepts of contact sexuality and choice in explaining how a narrator discovered her true self—feelings of illegitimacy do not emerge in these stories as they do in stories of surprise. As I discussed, narrators using a discourse of surprise may express feeling like outliers or pariahs in LGBTQ communities, that they are not legitimate LGBTQ women or that others will not view them as such. Yet, telling a story that troubles dominant discourse will not necessarily result in bad feelings.<sup>44</sup> Instead of feeling like illegitimate LGBTQ people, narrators telling stories of agency express feeling empowered and enlivened by the politicized pleasures agency offers. Thus, while both discourses of surprise and agency suggest contradictory thinking and trouble “born gay” discourse, this does not seem to negatively impact the sense of self for narrators telling stories of agency. I argue the difference lies in what agency means culturally and how stories of agency stress an individual’s place within a politicized community. Instead of bad feelings, a discourse of agency offers politicized pleasures: being part of a movement

that is larger than oneself, being an active participant in taking control of one's life, and opening oneself up to an authentic identity.

Narrators telling stories of agency speak as part of a community, rather than as someone ostracized from community. For instance, Randall describes her process of coming out as being imbricated with her involvement with feminist movements. Randall argues that 1970s feminist theory and activism incited a change within her, a new way to envision the world and the ways women could relate to each other. Even as Randall's own coming out occurred quite a bit after this point in her narrative, she describes her lesbian identity as a "natural" expansion of her involvement in feminist communities:

Recognizing the lesbian in me was and wasn't complicated. Finding my place in a community of women had provided my greatest comfort: joyful, like breathing effortlessly after wracking cough or gasp for air. From there to the understanding that I loved women—in that deeper more erotic sense—seemed a natural progression. (167)

Rather than feeling her difference from other lesbians, Randall's "place in a community of women" facilitates her coming out, and only strengthens her bonds to lesbian feminist community. Randall's political commitments to women open up into a "natural progression" of feeling sexual attraction to women. In this example and others, the narrator's sense of agency is shaped in the context of becoming more fully tied to an LGBTQ-affirming community, not about feeling their difference from others within said community. Similarly, Fernando can only discover "the vast expanse of my own desire" (52) once she is a part of a radical queer community. Fernando's coming out story is a political awakening as much as a sexual one, and that draws her in closer to the queer

community that offered her LGBTQ-affirming contacts in the first place. Hence, narrators using a discourse of agency tend to describe coming into their LGBTQ identities in contingency to community, and thus they do not express feelings of illegitimacy and defensiveness so often present in stories of surprise.

A key difference that may influence why narrators telling stories of agency do not express feelings of illegitimacy is that agency connotes personal power and action, whereas being taken by surprise connotes passivity and being controlled by an outside influence. Thus, even as a queered form of agency embraces being malleable to outside influence, agency still connotes being active, not passive. An alternative discourse of agency positions narrators as empowered individuals resisting compulsory heterosexuality, and this differs from stories of surprise in which narrators are swept up in the radical unpredictability of identity. Even as both alternative discourses imply the unpredictability of identity, a discourse of agency stresses the actions of the narrator as she responds to accidental contacts, as well as her personal bravery. She is not passively overtaken by a shift in identity, she plays an active role in restructuring her identity. In this sense, the idea of agency is always already imbued with being a powerful, active subject, so that even a queered discourse of agency might avoid the stigma of being a passive object who is acted upon by a surprising force.

Even as narrators employing a discourse of agency may express fewer bad feelings than those employing a discourse of surprise, both stories of surprise and agency can be easily rendered incredible—implausible, ridiculous, supporting homophobic ideology—in mass media. For audiences socialized to expect the conventions of “born gay” discourse in a coming out story, the kinds of contradictions and confusions highlighted by alternative

discourses may seem reflective of the delusional or flawed thinking of individual narrators. Yet, I argue that when once-heterosexual-identified women are rendered incredible in U.S. popular culture for telling supposedly contradictory coming out stories, contradictions at work in larger cultural understandings of sexuality are displaced onto such women. Once-heterosexual-identified women carry the burden of telling incredible, confusing, contradictory coming out stories, but such confusion and paradox is actually widespread throughout conceptions of sexual identity in the U.S.

*Incredible Stories: Displacing Contradiction about Sexuality onto Once-Heterosexual-Identified Women*

Discourses of surprise and agency encompass disjuncture and paradox in an individual's life that "born gay" discourse would resolve, thereby producing stories that deviate from what is commonly believed to be possible about sexual identity in the present moment. Plummer argues that sexual stories "*live in [a] flow of power*" and that constantly shifting sets of social, political, and personal conditions determine when a story can be told, when it can be heard as "credible voice," and when it will be an "incredible one" (26, emphasis original; 27). In this section, I briefly examine the tendency in U.S. culture to treat once-heterosexual-identified women's stories of surprise and agency as incredible—as laughable, impossible, or homophobic because they do not neatly replicate "born gay" discourse.

There are numerous instances in the cultural visibility of once-heterosexual-identified women over the past twenty years in which such women are rendered baffling because they suggest that sexual identity might change over life course. One especially

publicized example is when actress Anne Heche made statements that she “was not gay before” she met Ellen DeGeneres. News media generally represented Heche’s understanding of her identity as delusional, and many gay and lesbian cultural workers and activists publicly criticized Heche for being complicit with homophobic rhetoric.<sup>45</sup> For example, Heche’s sexual identity was represented as incredible during her 1997 appearance with DeGeneres on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Heche’s comment, “I was not gay before I met [Ellen]. I never thought about it,” is met by Winfrey and audience members with bewilderment (lolluzza91). Heche’s comment comes after DeGeneres argues with a fundamentalist Christian in the audience that DeGeneres’ gayness is not a “choice” or a “lifestyle” but “this is who I am.” DeGeneres implicitly uses “born gay” discourse to explain that her sexual identity is innate and stable, and DeGeneres receives rousing applause from the audience in support of her understanding of her identity. Yet, when Heche explains her different understanding of her identity—that her desire for DeGeneres was a new surprise, not a suppressed part of herself that had always been there—she is met with confusion from the studio audience. In a follow-up question with Heche, an audience member asks Heche to explain herself further, stating, “I was just getting the impression that people who are gay tend to know from birth and you kind of disputed that” and “It’s just like I had heard like Ellen say she thinks she knew from childhood...” In the midst of the audience member’s question, Winfrey expresses her own struggle to understand Heche, stating, “That’s what [Heche] told me and I’m just as confused as you are.” In contrast to the relatively easy acceptance with which the LGBTQ-supporting members of the audience understand DeGeneres’ story that she has always been gay, Heche’s story of surprise elicits less support. Compared to the linearity and certainty



of DeGeneres' use of "born gay" discourse, Heche finds herself made incredible on *Oprah*, confounding the audience and even Winfrey herself. Upon Heche's breakup with DeGeneres and subsequent marriage to a man, Heche's same-sex desire was largely represented in the popular press as disingenuous. Heche became an easy joke as a fake lesbian, such as in a 2009 *Advocate* article which quipped: "While Vanessa Redgrave and Anne Heche both starred in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, only Redgrave went on to win an Emmy. Some people are just better than others at acting like lesbians" (Kilmer-Purcell). In the dissolution of Heche and DeGeneres' relationship, Heche is typically understood as having been "acting," pretending to be in love with DeGeneres in order to gain fame, perhaps to make herself seem more interesting. In chapter four I will return to the idea that women who shift sexual identities are constructed as liars who cannot be trusted, their sexual fluidity suspicious compared to the credibility of having a stable sexual identity. What I wish to stress here is that popular representations of Heche's story of surprise demonstrate how it is generally acceptable to make once-heterosexual-identified women incredible when they do not adhere to "born gay" discourse.

In a more recent example, actress Cynthia Nixon faced a blogosphere backlash in 2012 when she argued that after falling in love with a woman in midlife she does not identify as bisexual but rather as gay by choice. Nixon's story suggests a kind of agency that has been rendered controversial by the dominance of "born gay" discourse, and Nixon was accused of irresponsibly bolstering homophobic rhetoric by using the concept of choice to explain her gay identity. In a January 2012 interview with *The New York Times*, Nixon stated that she received resistance while giving a speech at a gay rights event which included the line, "I've been straight, and I've been gay, and gay is better" (Witchel).

Nixon elaborated on her comment in the interview, stating, “[the event organizers] tried to get me to change it, because they said it implies that homosexuality can be a choice. And for me, it is a choice. I understand that for many people it’s not, but for me it’s a choice, and you don’t get to define my gayness for me” (Witchel). Nixon’s comments incited a flurry of responses, including critics who accused her of supplying ammunition for those who wish to deny gay people civil rights on the basis that gayness is not an innate identity but a reversible lifestyle choice (Aravosis). Even as Nixon’s story of agency and sexual fluidity comes approximately fifteen years after Heche’s story of surprise, alternative discourses that challenge being “born this way” are still framed as incredible and threatening to LGBTQ people in U.S. popular culture.

Both Heche and Nixon were met with hostility from gay and lesbian pundits because their understandings of their sexual identities centered surprise, fluidity, and choice, and thus they were accused of playing into homophobic rhetoric. More generally, mainstream media coverage treated Heche’s and Nixon’s explanations of their sexual identities as impossible, and their stories of surprise and agency were contained by imposing a socially legible identity label on them: Heche was ultimately represented as heterosexual, a fake lesbian, and Nixon was compelled to release a statement clarifying that she is “technically” bisexual and that people cannot choose their sexual orientation (Grindley). These stories are illustrative of how easy and common it is for once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories of surprise and agency to be marked incredible in public discourse.

However, the tendency to render once-heterosexual-identified women incredible merely displaces larger cultural confusion about sexual identity on to women who shift

sexual identities as adults. Once-heterosexual-identified women tell stories that knot together supposedly antithetical ideas of identity as unpredictable and of identity as innate, and this leaves them vulnerable to being rendered incredible. While this contradictory mix of ideas about the stability and unpredictability of identity becomes especially visible in stories of surprise and agency, it is at work in discourse about sexual identity in U.S. culture more generally. For instance, D’Emilio points out that having experiences that are incommensurable with “born gay” discourse is not uncommon, and that many LGBTQ-identified individuals may have “heterosexual impulses and experiences” that are more significant to their sense of self than they would readily admit (161). Thus, once-heterosexual-identified women who are made incredible in much popular culture because they have supposedly inconsistent sexual histories—histories of having feelings of love and attraction to men at one time and then women at another—are not unique, and many might be in a position to empathize with such women’s supposedly confusing stories. Yet “born gay” discourse elides the commonness of such inconsistency in people’s lives, explaining away past heterosexual feelings as false or misguided. As a result, narrators who frame their stories in terms of surprise and who do not explain away confusions in their life stories may find themselves heard as incredible by others, even by others who might have similar experiences. Similarly, Sedgwick points out that larger cultural understandings about to what extent environment shapes identity are highly paradoxical, even though that paradox is typically ignored. Sedgwick notes that “minoritizing” and “universalizing” views of homosexuality—the idea that homosexuality is a stable, discrete identity that impacts a small group of people and the idea that homosexuality is a diffuse, unstable set of desires that could affect anyone—operate simultaneously in Western

cultures. She argues that these contradictory views of homosexuality are crucial in shaping ideas about sexuality—for instance both operate simultaneously in the “homosexual panic” defense<sup>46</sup>—and yet this contradiction is not addressed as such (*Epistemology of the Closet* 9). Thus, narrators telling stories of agency may find themselves viewed as incredible for expressing the contradictory notion that identity is innate yet identity is also a product of environment and choice, but this kind of contradiction informs larger cultural understandings about homosexuality. Ideas about sexuality as a product of “nurture” or “nature” circulate adjacent to each other and overlap, even if “born gay” discourse functions to conceal and simplify this contradiction by deauthenticating contact sexuality. In this way, narrators telling stories of surprise and agency are merely drawing attention to paradoxes shaping ideas about sexual identity, paradoxes which “born gay” discourse conceals or disavows.

What is unique about once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories of surprise is not that they contain contradictory ideas about sexual identity, or that they include inconsistencies in an individual’s sexual history, but that they actively highlight such contradiction and inconsistency. Whereas there is a cultural mandate to ignore or explain away contradiction and confusion within conceptions of sexual identity, stories of surprise call audiences’ attention to it. Narrators tangle together paradoxical ideas, and they speak directly to their own confusions about their lives, or acknowledge that others might find their stories troubling. Because narrators explicitly engage with contradiction, it is all too easy within U.S. culture to think of individual once-heterosexual-identified women as confused or illogical. But this merely forces such women to carry the burden of being contradictory and incredible, when in reality these stories of surprise and agency reflect

larger cultural confusion about sexual identity. Rather than seeing discourses of surprise and agency as evidence that thinking about sexuality is paradoxical, the tendency is to simply think of these stories and their tellers as absurd or implicitly supporting homophobic rhetoric. Thus, making once-heterosexual-identified women incredible in U.S. culture is an act of displacing anxiety about sexual identity. These women are giving voice to ideas that inform complicated understandings of sexual identity in U.S. culture, even if the dominance of “born gay” discourse functions to downplay that complexity.

### *Conclusion*

Once-heterosexual-identified women’s alternative discourse of surprise and agency draws attention to the cacophony of “scripts” of sexual identity in this era (Vicinus). Being reminded that a diversity of discourses about sexuality circulate in any single era compels us to hear, in Plummer’s terms, more varied understandings of ways of being LGBTQ. For scholars, stories of surprise raise the challenge of investigating and documenting contemporary U.S. culture while accounting for contradictory, overlapping conceptions of sexual identity that constitute this moment. Whereas conventional coming out stories easily recount a “tautological ... process of coming to know something that has always been true, a truth to which the author has returned” (Martin, “Lesbian Identity” 148), these unconventional coming out stories struggle to tell this kind of tautological narrative. Readers become aware of this struggle as these stories fail—or sometimes refuse—to produce seamless, linear narratives. Narrators further call attention to their (undesired or willful) failure by self-consciously engaging with the confusion and contradiction in their stories. We see narrators who question the stability of their identity by choosing not to re-

read their past as significant to their present-day identity. Or narrators who complicate the notion of authenticity by showing how environment-contingent LGBTQ identities can engender the authentic “you” which may have never existed without LGBTQ contacts. Hence, such stories do not satisfy the requirements of “born gay” discourse to conceal and smooth over inconsistency and paradox, and they may lose the authentication of identity that “born gay” discourse provides. Once-heterosexual-identified women take on the burden of being incredible even as the paradoxes they call attention to are not unique to them but reflective of confusions about sexual identity in U.S. culture.

Although “born gay” discourse has become ubiquitous as *the* LGBTQ-affirming discourse from the 1990s to the present, at the same time, both popular culture texts and scientific studies increasingly mark women as inherently fluid (Peplau; Chivers et al.; Diamond). Stories of surprise and agency are rendered incredible in most mainstream American media—heard as puzzling or even offensive to audiences socialized to hear coming out stories shaped by “born gay” discourse—yet they are simultaneously gaining visibility, perhaps becoming more credible as possible stories to tell. More cultural criticism is needed to investigate the implications of the fact that women are commonly believed to be more sexually fluid than men, but notions of authentic LGBTQ identity remain invested in the idea of identity as stable throughout life course. Additionally, more research on individuals who tell unconventional coming out stories would further illuminate paradoxes that shape LGBTQ identities in the contemporary moment, and perhaps how unconventional stories impact thinking about sexuality more broadly.

The strangeness of these stories—their contradictions, their seemingly impossible interweaving of antithetical ideas about sexual identity—reveal crucial paradoxes and

investments shaping the construction of LGBTQ women's sexualities in the present. In the following chapters, I explore how once-heterosexual-identified women's stories illuminate contemporary thinking about sexuality in U.S. culture as it intersects with gender, class, race, age, and national identity. In the next chapter, I move away from the coming out genre and investigate a discourse that attempts to transcend the notion of "coming out" entirely. I examine the increasing popularity of the discourse of loving "the person, not the gender" and the multiple political directions this discourse cuts in contemporary U.S. culture, functioning to deconstruct, question, and reassert what is largely accepted as truth about sexuality.

## CHAPTER 2.

LOVING “THE PERSON, NOT THE GENDER”:  
TRANSCENDING GENDER OF OBJECT CHOICE, AND, THE PERSISTENCE OF  
GENDER

Whereas chapter one explored alternative discourses that trouble the conventional coming out story, this chapter investigates a discourse that eschews the idea of coming out altogether. In this chapter I examine the multiple meanings of an increasingly prevalent discourse about women’s sexuality in U.S. culture: the notion that people can fall in love with someone based on who they are as a person, regardless of that person’s gender, and that such experiences are particularly likely for women. This view, which I will refer to as “the person, not the gender” (PNG) discourse, calls into question the cultural aegis of defining sexual orientation based on gender of object choice. Some individuals use PNG discourse to explain why they do not claim any sexual identity label at all, asserting that sexual identity labels which forefront gender—even non-binary labels such as “bisexual” or “pansexual”—do not apply to them. PNG discourse has also emerged in U.S. popular culture as a way to understand women as inherently more sexually fluid than men, more likely to be driven by emotional connections with others than by gender-specific attractions. However, PNG discourse should not be understood as a concept from which a clear politics or set of meanings follows, but rather as a concept that functions in myriad ways. I map PNG discourse as it cuts in four different political directions, exploring how this discourse offers radical and progressive potential to dismantle and question sexual identity categories as we currently know them, and how such potential is contained when PNG discourse supports a depoliticized, universal identity or when it shores up essentialist understandings about men’s and women’s desire.



While PNG discourse is centrally relevant to the cultural visibility of once-heterosexual-identified women, it is also gaining traction in U.S. culture as a “new” way to think about women’s sexuality in general as person-based.<sup>47</sup> Many recent psychological studies advance the idea that women have greater capacity than men to feel love and sexual attraction for particular people who are not their preferred gender (Peplau; Diamond; Chivers). Additionally, whereas in the past any woman who reported same-sex attractions would generally be lumped into a category of “lesbian” or “bisexual,” more studies have begun to take note of women who do not label their sexual identities (Brooks and Quina; Callis; Better). Dovetailing with recent scholarly interest in women’s sexual fluidity, PNG discourse is often framed in popular culture as a new trend among women. For example, in an *Advocate* article discussing “LUGs”—women in college who are “lesbian until graduation” and then partner with men—psychologist Lisa Diamond argues that the idea of a LUG will become obsolete as younger people turn away from sexual identity labels altogether. Diamond argues that not labeling oneself is a “revolution” of a new generation, implying that younger generations, of women especially, are less invested in labels and driven more by exploring their attractions on a person-to-person basis (Kennedy). Similarly, both daytime talk shows *The Tyra Banks Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* had episodes in March 2009 which featured celebrity trainer Jackie Warner, asking why Warner, an out lesbian, has a devoted fan following of straight women with “crushes” on her (Warner; “Women Leaving Men for Other Women & Sexual Fluidity”). Banks frames this as part of a larger phenomenon of a “growing number of straight women who have no problem admitting that they have crushes on *certain* sexy, gay women” (Warner, emphasis mine). Banks explains Warner’s heterosexual fan base as a larger phenomenon in which

heterosexual women feel more comfortable than in the past admitting to and acting upon their attractions to specific women, perhaps only to one particular woman, as one of Warner's smitten heterosexual fans explains on the show. Thus, PNG discourse can make the idea that women are more sexually fluid than men common sense in contemporary American culture, rendering *all* women's sexuality as open to change based on attraction to a particular person.

It is important to note that PNG discourse as I discuss it here functions separately from understandings of bisexuality, even though other scholars have referenced PNG discourse when studying the meanings of bisexuality (Rust 51–52). While it may initially seem that PNG discourse would support the adoption of a bisexual identity, my research found that this was not the case. There is a near absence of the mention of the bisexuality in media texts espousing PNG discourse, and I found that in my focus groups and in literature about once-heterosexual-identified women do not generally view identifying as bisexual as a viable option. Most once-heterosexual-identified women I have encountered, in person or in print, claim a monosexual identity such as “lesbian” or “gay,” but in cases when they did not, I found that it was more common for such women not to label themselves than to claim a bisexual identity. Some of the reasons unlabeled<sup>48</sup> women give for not wanting to adopt a bisexual identity include avoiding bisexual stigma, not wanting to overemphasize their attractions to men, and feeling as if the word “bisexual” is too defined and they want to convey that their identity is ambiguous. PNG discourse may suggest the potential to love across genders as bisexuality does, but PNG discourse does not necessarily affirm bisexuality or work against bisexual stigma. Thus, PNG discourse should be understood as a discourse distinct from bisexuality, perhaps even a discourse

that can further marginalize bisexuality. The relationship of PNG discourse to bisexuality is outside of the scope of the argument of this dissertation. However I plan to explore this relationship in future work.

Of all the chapters in this dissertation, this chapter takes up my method of mapping discourse in motion—which I outlined in the introduction—in a particularly explicit and visible manner. PNG discourse should be understood as a braided set of multiple political implications, rather than a single entity from which a particular politic or set of desires flows. I unweave this braid over the course of this chapter to look at each political implication separately with the intent of better understanding what each disparate direction of PNG discourse entails. In the conclusion of this chapter, I re-braid these directions to give a sense of how PNG discourse functions, of the overlaps between multiple sets of political implications, and of the ways individuals (sometimes the same person) can call upon PNG discourse to convey different political investments and longings for different kinds of worlds. It is necessary to follow PNG discourse through multiple directions in order to speak to the full complexity of how this discourse functions in contemporary U.S. culture.

I trace PNG discourse as it cuts four different political directions, moving from the most radical to the most conservative possibilities. I illuminate the implications of these multiple directions, including the ways PNG discourse deconstructs, questions, and reaffirms dominant thinking about sexuality. I begin with the most radical use of PNG discourse by exploring the experiences of unlabeled participants who refuse existing sexual identity labels which privilege gender of object choice and stability, and instead adopt PNG discourse to describe their sexualities and to essentially deconstruct and restructure

dominant labels. I then track PNG discourse through a progressive, less radical, direction in which it functions as a liberal ethos that love transcends gender. Participants of various identifications invoke PNG discourse as a gender-free model of love in which “the person” becomes elevated above gender as what is important when people fall in love. This progressive use of PNG discourse might question the centrality of gender of object choice in defining sexual orientation, but it does not dismantle existing identity categories in the way that a radical direction does. Furthermore, it implicitly creates a hierarchy in which gender-free love is nobler than gender-specific attraction. From this ethos that love is universal and gender is a minor concern, PNG discourse needs only to take a quick turn to easily support a neoliberal worldview in which (sexual, gender, racial, class, ability and so on) difference does not matter. I explore a third direction in which participants call upon PNG discourse with the intent of communicating a progressive view, but they inadvertently bolster neoliberal gender-blind ideology in which the most desirable identity is one that is universal, unmarked by difference. In this direction PNG discourse elides the role that identity plays in shaping individual’s lives and structural inequalities. Lastly, I move from focus groups to the space of U.S. popular culture to explore the most conservative uses of PNG discourse. Media texts such as magazine articles and talk shows employ PNG discourse to promote the belief that women are especially and naturally invested in emotional connections that transcend gender of object choice whereas men are viscerally drawn towards gender and inherently less fluid because of it. I investigate the tension between the radical potential of PNG to dismantle sexual identity categories as we currently understand them, and the way this potential is contained when PNG naturalizes essentialist understandings about the differences between men and women. In the

conclusion of this chapter, I will complicate these four directions by noting the ways they are not discrete from each other, and how we can see radical and conservative implications throughout this entire constellation of PNG discourse.

It might be tempting to reduce PNG discourse to just one of these directions, for example, to focus on the conservative implications of PNG discourse in popular culture texts; or perhaps to see only liberatory implications of PNG discourse when unlabeled participants employ it to reject existing categorization of sexual identity. However to do so ignores the complex multiplicity of desires and politics PNG discourse encompasses. As will become apparent, we will see the same individuals using PNG discourse to imply different worldviews, longings, and political possibilities. Whereas we typically think an individual “has” a certain politics or a discourse signals a particular politics, this analysis shows how discourse works on multiple levels and how people can invoke a single discourse to signal multiple, perhaps conflicting desires and political investments. To focus on one manifestation of PNG discourse would overlook the ways this discourse operates in the everyday as a complicated set of ideas which overlap with each other and can be called upon to create resistant, progressive, neoliberal, and essentialist meanings about sexuality.

*Living Without a Label: Using PNG Discourse to Dismantle Existing Sexual Identity Categories*

PNG discourse has the potential to radically reject the veracity and necessity of defining sexual orientation via object of gender choice. This was most clearly evident in the case of focus group participants who refused to claim a sexual identity label, despite cultural pressure to do so. I refer to these refusers as “unlabeled” participants;<sup>49</sup> they used

PNG discourse to articulate sexual identities that are person-based, determined by how one feels in the moment, and more uncertain than dominant sexual identity labels. These participants suggested that even terms like “bisexual” or “queer” which convey a sense of loving multiple genders are too defined, suggest too much certainty about identity.<sup>50</sup> Bower et al. argue that while “resistance to self-labeling” might be understood as “an apolitical move,” it can also be a way to critically articulate “dissatisfaction” with existing labels (32; 35). Unlabeled participants deployed PNG discourse to explain their sexuality without a label, and in this way PNG discourse provides an alternative language dissenting from the cultural compulsion to define sexual orientation in terms of gender of object choice and stability. In this radical direction of PNG discourse, I see potential to undo dominant conceptions of sexuality—to undo perhaps in fleeting moments if not in a larger cultural sense—and to open up new understandings of sexual orientation as fluid, ephemeral, and not centrally defined by gender of object choice. Unlabeled participants’ radical deployments of PNG discourse threaten dominant thinking about sexuality, and this threat is evidenced by the challenges unlabeled participants face, including feeling pressure to label, being alienated in LGBTQ communities, and being mislabeled by others.

Rather than identifying with a sexual identity category, unlabeled participants employed PNG discourse to identify as being in love with a particular person, in effect rejecting gender of object choice as a defining characteristic of sexual orientation. In Gloria’s view, her relationship with her female partner should not have to generate a label signaling gender of object choice. Gloria argued “the idea that gender is the primary concern, to me, it seems sort of irrelevant.” Gloria spoke about how it was sometimes challenging to be an unlabeled woman with a female partner because people often assume

that she is LGBTQ-identified. However Gloria rejected the assumption that her partner's gender defines Gloria's sexual orientation, asserting, "I don't need a label just because I'm with her." Gloria challenged the dominant cultural logic for organizing sexual orientation by refusing to define her sexuality via gender of object choice. Penny performed a similar move by suggesting there was too much importance placed on gender when determining sexual orientation. Penny argued that people might want to label her as "gay, bisexual, whatever" because Penny has a female partner, yet Penny stated simply, "I just love my girlfriend." For Penny, being able to say "I just love my girlfriend" should be enough to explain who she is without having to use a label. Penny questioned the impulse to categorize individuals based on the gender of their partners: "I just don't understand why there has to be a label on anybody. ... You're in love with a person, not necessarily because of the sex of the person, but because that's who that person is." In Penny's estimation, "who that person is" is separate from "the sex of the person," making gender irrelevant in the act of loving someone. Clair also questioned why the simple act of announcing her love for her partner was not sufficient, and why she had to choose a label based on gender of object choice. Clair noted that she identifies as "I'm in love with this woman," but stated that identifying as being in love with someone "seems like that's not enough for society." Being in love with a particular person is supposedly not enough to base a sexual identity around; the notion of "I'm in love with this woman" in and of itself is not typically accepted as a coherent identity. However, unlabeled participants critically question why that cannot be enough, why identifying as being in love is paltry compared to identifying as "lesbian" or "bisexual," for instance. Unlabeled participants deployed PNG discourse to signal their dissatisfaction with existing systems of sexual identity

categorization, and to replace such systems with a less familiar logic that defines identity by person-to-person-based attractions.

In addition to questioning why sexual identity labels privilege gender of object choice, unlabeled participants engaged PNG discourse to challenge the dominant notion that sexual identity is stable. Unlabeled participants argued that labels circumvent potential futures that participants might have or could have had, and used PNG discourse to stress ephemeral, uncertain qualities to their sexualities. Penny explained her sexual identity as ephemeral as she pointed to the impossibility—at least for her—of pinning down her identity because who she loves could change. Penny argued that in the moment she does not think she will ever partner with a man again, but she stated she was unable to absolutely close off that possibility: “But you never know. I don’t know, Mr. Right or Mrs. Right could walk right through that door and I’d not know it. For me I don’t think I can label myself as anything, just being in love with the person I’m in love with right now.” Penny focused on “just being in love with the person I’m in love with right now,” implying that all the clarity she needs about her sexual orientation is that at the moment she loves her girlfriend. Penny seemed comfortable allowing herself to live in the moment without closing off the possibility that her feelings might change in the future, and she signaled this by choosing not to label her identity.

Gloria also argued that her problem with sexual identity categories and most of the language we have to talk about sexuality is that they foreclose possibilities for the future, eliding any uncertainty a person may have about their sexuality. Gloria gave an example of her dissatisfaction with the narrowness of dominant language when she discussed being part of LGBTQ diversity training at her work and feeling “left out of the conversation”



because she does not label herself or use the language of “coming out” to talk about her life. She stated:

[This training] talks about coming out. I always wanted to be like, “What happens when people go back in? What does it mean if they choose something different?” The language around it just feels really not about my experience. ... I’ve been partnered [to a woman] for five years and I don’t know. I don’t know what my future holds.

Dominant language for same-gender-loving sexualities rely on this notion of “coming out” into an identity, but Gloria rejected that the idea of “coming out” is an accurate way to represent her sexuality. Labels signified to Gloria a fidelity to a certain way of loving and living, forever. She wanted to leave open the possibility of “choosing something different” rather than compulsively embracing what she later referred to as a “unidirectional” view of her sexuality—reducing her life to having been heterosexual and now being LGBTQ-identified. Gloria wanted to leave room in her understanding of her identity for perhaps continuous fluidity and change. Hence, like Penny, by focusing on her current partnership with a woman, Gloria thought of her sexuality in terms of her love for a specific person in the moment, rather than attempting to claim a label for her identity that could encompass all of her past and future desires. Similarly, Clair suggested that choosing a sexual identity label would cut off a greater sense of possibility for her sexuality, negating other lives she could have had if she had not met her current partner. In response to another participant who said she loved the label “lesbian,” Clair stated, “I would love that label too. But it just feels like there might have been more. Because I was happily married at one point in time to a wonderful man. ... And I didn’t ever really look at anybody else until [her current

female partner] came along.” Clair clarifies that she does not have negative feelings about being lesbian-identified, but that the label does not feel accurate to her. She states that “it just feels like there might have been more” possibilities in her life than the label “lesbian” can account for.<sup>51</sup> Thus, PNG discourse can function to signal dissatisfaction with the stability of identity that labels connote—that one will be a person who fits this one label forever—and can facilitate embracing a radical kind of uncertainty about identity.

When unlabeled participants radically challenge existing thinking about sexuality by calling upon PNG discourse, they might become illegible to other people. The effects of such illegibility may be alienation in LGBTQ communities, others mislabeling unlabeled women as “lesbian” or “bisexual,” or unlabeled women consciously using a label they do not identify with to avoid confusing or irritating other people. In their study on the differences in sexual identity development between lesbian-, bisexual-, and unlabeled-identified women, Kelly D. Brooks and Kathryn Quina found that unlabeled women do not place as much importance on collective identity or being part of a sexual minority community as lesbian- and bisexual-identified women (1039; 1040). While it seems logical that unlabeled women might not have a deep investment in a collective identity, my research suggests that unlabeled women have strong ties to LGBTQ communities and politics, yet they often feel on the fringe of these communities because they do not use typical language invested in gender of object choice to describe their identities. Perhaps “holding this more person-centered view of sexual orientation may interfere with or inhibit the development of a strong collective identity for unlabeled women” (Brooks and Quina 1040), but perhaps unlabeled women struggle to communicate their allegiance to a

community without being compelled to describe themselves in ways that feel disingenuous.

In contrast to Brooks and Quina's findings that unlabeled women are less invested in community than lesbian-or bisexual-identified women, in the focus groups I conducted, unlabeled women claim belonging to LGBTQ women's communities, but suggest that those communities might be a hard fit when one eschews a label. For instance, Penny described an uphill battle to be accepted by people in her adopted lesbian community on her own terms. Penny found herself in uncomfortable situations when lesbian-identified women assumed she was gay- or bisexual-identified, and when she explained that she was not, her explanation was not understood or accepted. Penny stated:

The LGBT community, don't get me wrong, I love them to death, but I think it's sometimes hard for them to embrace someone that's been married but they can't define their sexuality. ... [At events with many lesbian-identified women] people will ask, "So, how long have you been gay? How long have you been bi?" But I'm not anything. I just love my girlfriend. And I think that's what's the hardest, the community doesn't embrace people, trying to—and I don't know if they're scared or what it is—but that's a hard community to get them to accept.

Penny lives among a lesbian community and "loves them to death," but she also sees herself as separate from people who label their sexualities. Penny finds herself in uncomfortable moments when her explanations of her identity—that she's "not anything," that she simply "loves her girlfriend"—seem inadequate in the context of a community centered around particular identities. Clair also struggled with not claiming a readily accepted sexual identity when participating in LGBTQ activism. Clair stressed throughout

the interview how important being a part of LGBTQ community is for her, and the different types of LGBTQ rights activism she has done. Yet not having a label left Clair feeling vulnerable to potential accusations that she was not truly committed to the community: “By not having a definition it feels so weird. By not identifying you feel like you’re floating out in the middle of the sea, and no one is going to believe that you are pounding on the pavement, fighting for our rights ... because you don’t even know who you are.” Even as Clair felt strongly affiliated with an LGBTQ community, not having a label created a feeling of isolation for her, of “floating out in the middle of the sea” by herself. Furthermore, she anticipates that others might see not having a label as a lack of political commitment. Unlabeled participants may invoke PNG discourse to signal their dissatisfaction with labels, but they do so at the cost of having to negotiate illegibility in their chosen communities.

Participants who did not label their sexualities found they had to pick their battles, sometimes using PNG discourse that felt most accurate to them, and sometimes reiterating the language of dominant sexual identity categories. For instance in a follow-up, Clair clarified that she often uses the label “lesbian” to describe herself when meeting new people, but that she is frustrated that she is compelled to take on a label “merely for other people’s benefit.” Clair employed PNG discourse to conceptualize her identity, but she felt she had to conform to dominant language when talking to new people, at least until she got to know them better. Other unlabeled participants shared stories of labeling as “lesbian” or “gay” in certain contexts, such as with family or when meeting new people, just for the sake of not confusing others. I argue that this kind of struggle and critical negotiation highlights the threat that PNG discourse can pose to existing thinking about sexuality.

PNG discourse cuts a radical direction in U.S. culture when it threatens existing ways to make sense of and define sexual orientation. I see potential for PNG discourse to radically disrupt dominant thinking about sexuality when unlabeled participants critique the emphasis placed on gender of object choice in determining sexual identity and challenge the assumed stability of identity. By using PNG discourse, they rendered much of the language we commonly have to discuss sexuality irrelevant, including identity categories and powerful cultural concepts such as “coming out.” Without the dominant criteria of gender of object choice to make sense of their gender orientations, unlabeled participants found themselves struggling to be heard on their own terms when they explained themselves with PNG discourse; or, conversely, they would strategically not use PNG discourse, momentarily identifying with a label to avoid confusing or eliciting hostility from others. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will address the conservative implications embedded even in this radical use of PNG discourse, including how emphasizing love and person-based attractions might desexualize women’s desire. However, the growing popularity of PNG discourse may present opportunities for dismantling familiar notions about sexuality and resisting the language we commonly have to discuss sexuality.

*PNG Discourse as a Progressive, Gender Non-Discriminatory Approach to Love*

PNG discourse proves salient to more people than just unlabeled women, and people of various sexual identities employ it as a progressive, non-discriminatory approach to love. Many participants asserted that gender is irrelevant when two people fall in love, and they stressed that individuals become attracted to others based on who they are as a

“person.” Bisexual-identified people produce similar meaning for bisexuality, defining their sexuality as “a form of gender nondiscrimination” (Rust 53) and as “a refusal to exclude” potential partners merely based on gender. (Berenson 13). Interestingly, even participants who claimed a monosexual identity label such as “lesbian” or “gay” called upon PNG discourse to communicate this “form of gender nondiscrimination.” In these moments participants mobilized PNG discourse to signal their open-mindedness in picking potential partners or that they did not think people should be penalized for falling in love. I argue this progressive use of PNG discourse communicates a non-discriminatory politics of love, but it also may be more of a form of lip service to such a politics than a substantial challenge to existing thinking about sexuality.

Unlike when unlabeled participants invoke PNG discourse to resist existing sexual identity categories, progressive deployments of PNG discourse leave such categories largely intact, with some participants paradoxically eliding the importance of gender in the general experience of falling in love, but holding fast to the idea that gender of object choice is important to their own personal identity. Thus, a progressive use of PNG discourse may promote tolerance of a diversity of sexualities, but such possibilities are less radical than restructuring dominant identity categories. Additionally, participants called upon PNG discourse to argue that gender is a biological or embodied trait that becomes irrelevant when compared to an individual’s “personality” or who someone is “as a person.” In doing so, they communicate PNG discourse in the spirit of tolerance of all love, but this progressive ethos takes a limited, reductive view of gender and disavows how gender shapes our perception of supposedly gender-neutral traits. Creating a distinction between the “person” and gender creates a hierarchy of how to love, in which

loving people for supposedly gender-free traits is more noble than loving the gendered body. Like a radical direction of PNG discourse, this progressive direction critically questions the centrality of gender of object choice in defining sexual orientation; however, its ability to do so is more contained, more fraught with more problematic and implicitly hierarchal thinking than the first direction of PNG discourse I explored.

It is important to keep in mind that PNG discourse might be used in myriad ways by the same person. For example, participants who employed such discourse to reject existing identity categories, but then call upon this same discourse to communicate a progressive, gender-free view of love that could leave such categories in place. It is not that I cited “radical” participants in the previous section and “progressive” participants in this section, but rather that PNG discourse can be employed to signal these slightly different sets of politics and desires, sometimes by the same person. The flexibility of PNG discourse reveals how individuals make use of discursive resources around them, how they seek a way of speaking about sexuality that feels the most true and accurate, and how they may need to deploy discourse in a slightly different fashion from moment to moment in order to do so.

Progressive deployments of PNG discourse signal desires to understand sexuality outside of dominant terms by emphasizing love as a person-based activity, not an activity that will always follow lines of gender. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick “denaturalizes” the assumption that sexual orientation is defined by gender of object choice by unpacking the many other ways people could or do define their orientations, including how much or how little sex one likes to have, or the importance certain sex acts might have to one’s sense of self (*Epistemology of the Closet* 48; 25). Participants use PNG discourse to wage a similar

challenge, arguing that they are orientated towards seemingly gender-neutral traits rather than to specific genders. Gloria, who does not use a label, argued that gender is “irrelevant” in how she chooses partners, and she asserted that the intelligence of the other person played a much larger role than gender in determining her attractions. Penny, who also does not label her sexual identity, rejected the idea that she must label herself as “lesbian” or “bisexual” because she asserts that gender of object choice did not play a role in how she chose her current partner. Penny argues that she did not fall in love with her partner because “she was a girl,” but because she “loved her personality, who she was, how empowered she was.” Penny’s statement assumes that “personality” can be cleaved from gender, that gender does not play a significant role in shaping one’s personality or “who a person is.” Thus, Penny invoked PNG discourse to render “personality” as a gender-neutral trait, and to make gender an incidental detail. Nicole, who identifies as bisexual, also stressed that gender of object choice does not define her sexual orientation, and that there were qualities she looked for in a partner that she viewed as separate from gender. Nicole stated that she is so “picky” about choosing partners that she did away with gender as a determining criteria for potential partners: “I’m so picky when it comes to partners that I had to sort of cut something out in order to create more options. And for me that was the biological identity of the other person. There were more important things like how clean they are. Do they like pop culture? Are they a nerd? Like comic books?” Nicole argued that that gender, “the biological identity,” of a potential partner seems like an insignificant factor compared to other qualities she values in a partner, qualities related to personality, habits, and interests. Nicole, Penny, and Gloria foreground the traits they want in partners—intelligence, being clean, being empowered, and so on—and frame gender as the



coincidental form a partner with those qualities might take. Similar to Sedgwick's playful speculations on what characteristics we might use to define sexual orientation other than gender of object choice, these participants suggest that perhaps one's orientation could be defined by being attracted to intelligence in others, or attracted to others' interest in "nerdy" things. This progressive use of PNG discourse reveals desires to step outside of existing thinking about sexuality and is non-discriminatory in the sense that it functions for participants as a "refusal to exclude" (Berenson 13) partners merely on the grounds of gender.

Yet progressive uses of PNG discourse valorize gender-non-discriminatory love by negating the relevance of gender in shaping individuals' personalities, and reducing gender to a backdrop to one's true self—a biological canvas on which other more meaningful traits are painted. Just as Nicole rendered gender "the biological identity" of a person that is secondary to more important, supposedly gender-neutral traits, gender was repeatedly framed in focus groups as a surface appearance, as the body, and/or as genitals. In these moments, to be invested in the gender of one's partner was an almost crude fixation on the body. Instead, participants privileged "the person" over the gendered body, using PNG discourse to articulate what I believe they intended as a vision of love that refuses to discriminate based on the gendered body. For instance, Karen, who provisionally identifies as lesbian, asserted she becomes irritated when she is asked to label her sexual identity because gender seems of minimal importance when one falls in love. To make her point Karen offered a hypothetical situation that if one fell in love with another person and that other person was in an accident that altered their body, this would not change one's sexual orientation:

If you fall in love with some person and then from a physiological standpoint something happens, some sort of terrible accident or whatever, does that change the person that you are? Does that change your sexual identity? No it doesn't. It's who you've fallen in love with, not a determination of what their body parts are, so to speak.

Karen argued that gender is the body, and the body is of secondary importance to whatever else attracts one to a person. Karen asserted if one's partner's body were to change in a way that altered their gender, one's sexual orientation would stay the same because love is grounded in qualities that are separate from the gendered body. Such a notion might be contradicted, for example, in the experiences of transgender people who have altered their bodies to affirm their gender identity, and how the effect of these bodily changes may (or may not) impact their intimate relationships. Yet Karen's articulation of PNG discourse defines gender as merely the body—the body as insignificant compared to grander qualities—and love as transcending bodies. Miriam similarly rendered gender as the body, particularly as genitals, and she downplayed the importance of the body in love. In a discussion about how people label themselves, Miriam stated that her first female partner said, “You fall in love with a person and then you use whatever equipment is available.” Again, the “person” becomes distinguished from and elevated above the body as that which really matters when people fall in love. Progressive uses of PNG discourse make gender unrelated to the interior character of an individual, of who they are as “a person.” Instead gender becomes the body—“equipment,” “parts” and a “biological identity”—that makes up a backdrop to the qualities that really matter when you love someone.

By separating the person from gender, participants deployed PNG discourse to question the dominant logic of defining sexual orientation, however, this non-discriminatory use of PNG discourse implicitly denigrates the experience of being attracted to the gendered body. When participants collapse gender into the body, they disavow the importance gender plays in individuals' attractions and feelings of love. This progressive direction of PNG discourse suggests that to be invested in gender is to focus on superficial aspects of a person, that it is narrow-minded to fall in love with someone because of one's attraction to their gendered traits. Progressive iterations of PNG discourse reveal good intentions and desires to step outside of existing thinking about sexuality, but they also reveal significant blind spots to the relevance of gender as a social category that extends beyond the body. PNG discourse as a progressive ethos can function to create a hierarchy in which gender-specific love is petty, but gender-free love is noble and more invested in what really matters. Thus, this progressive direction of PNG discourse shows potential to bolster hierarchal thinking even as participants intend to signal their non-discriminatory perspectives through this discourse.

PNG discourse as a progressive ethos may be more of a gesture of a non-discriminatory, gender-free approach to love than an ethos which radically challenges or changes dominant investment in gender of object choice. For instance, participants sometimes invoked PNG discourse in a contradictory manner in which they espoused a non-discriminatory view that gender should not matter in love, and yet in other moments clearly stated that gender very much mattered in their attractions and experiences of love. Participants could invoke PNG discourse to signal their non-discriminatory politics—that they believe that love does not discriminate by gender, that love should be accepted in any

form it takes—even if their own experience contradicted PNG discourse because gender was a crucial factor in how they loved people. As such, progressive manifestations of PNG discourse can leave existing sexual identity categories intact, unlike radical uses that attempt to disrupt or dismantle such categories. For instance, Miriam argued that she never knew what it was to fall in love with someone until she did so with a woman, but also described the general act of loving someone as transcending gender. She described coming into the realization that she is capable of greater romantic feelings for women than for men: “I could never understand the stories, the movies, walking past your boyfriend’s house even though you know he’s not home. It just didn’t make sense to me. But now if you change that and say Suzie’s there, not Sam, ooooh, it totally changed my whole outlook.” Miriam argued that gender is very important in defining her sexual orientation, and yet she also agreed with her first female partner’s statement “You fall in love with a person and then you use whatever equipment is available.” This example shows how individuals might argue that gender does not matter in a progressive spirit of non-discrimination, but that they might also reveal their personal investment in gender as a defining element of their sexual orientation. Jo B. similarly demonstrated this contradictory use of PNG discourse when she argued that “For me, I know I’m gay and always have been” but that she has a friend who was “a die hard lesbian” and then she “found the right guy” and she “fell in love with him. ... So, love is love, wherever it comes from.” Jo B., much like Miriam, points to the gender specificity of her own sexual orientation, but then renders the general act of loving as being beyond concerns of gender. Her statement “love is love” has increasingly become part of marriage equality rhetoric about love being universal.<sup>52</sup> In these moments, the idea that love is universal becomes a mantra that can

elide participants' experiences of gender-specific love. Such a mantra might function as a platitude that does not trouble existing thinking about sexuality, as an individual could espouse PNG discourse to signal their liberal progressive intentions, but hold fast to defining sexual orientation in terms of gender of object choice when it comes to their own identity. Thus there is a tension between embracing PNG discourse as a way to make sense of love in general or of other people's experiences, but distancing one's own identity from person-based thinking: *gender does not matter, and yet gender matters very much to me*. As such, PNG discourse might create an ethos about love transcending gender in the spirit of progressive tolerance, but in practice, PNG discourse as a progressive mantra does not substantially challenge models of sexual orientation that prioritize gender of object choice.

Whereas radical uses of PNG discourse directly challenge existing systems of identity categorization, progressive uses produce more contained possibilities. Again, I am interested in how these momentary *uses* of discourse can produce different political implications, rather than viewing individuals as defined by how they utilized PNG discourse in these moments. The progressive use of PNG discourse even amongst individuals who choose to label themselves may signal greater cultural weariness with existing sexual categorization based on gender of object choice, or increasing cultural ambiguity about how accurate dominant sexual identity labels really are. In the instances I explore in this section, dominant sexual identity labels may remain intact even if PNG discourse subtly questions their relevance. Furthermore, in order to advance an ethos of gender non-discrimination, this progressive slant on PNG discourse takes a reductive view of gender as the body, and the body as something of inferior importance to the person. As I will discuss in the following section, reducing gender to the body and annexing gender

from the person teeters towards a gender-blind ideology that disavows the role gender plays in our lives. Thus, progressive uses of PNG discourse signal gender non-discriminatory desires, but they may advance a hollow challenge to existing thinking about sexuality, as they can easily dovetail with troubling neoliberal ideology about the depoliticized, universal self.

*Love as Universal: PNG Discourse and Neoliberal Anti-Identity Ideology*

Participants argued that love is universal in a spirit of non-discrimination but this progressive direction of PNG discourse can easily veer towards affirming neoliberal ideologies about living in a post-identity world.<sup>53</sup> The progressive potentials of PNG discourse can be co-opted by neoliberal ideology, taking off in a different direction than participants anticipate. In this section I explore how PNG discourse can bolster neoliberal attacks on politicized, collective identities. In a neoliberal worldview, those who attempt to hold on to the particularity of minoritized identity—the difference of same-sex love or of ethnic identity, for instance—are viewed as perversely invested in an injured identity (Ahmed, "Happy Objects" 47–48). Within a neoliberal regime of choice individuals are socialized to believe that they can construct their self via the choices they make, and the quality of an individual's life is understood as directly related to their private choices, not to any structural power that may have impeded or benefited them (McRobbie; Budgeon). In this way, neoliberal ideology supports a view of identity as privatized and non-politicized, and renders the idea of (sexual, gender, racial and so on) difference as something to get "beyond" or "over" (Cefai 9). Neoliberalism purports a meritocracy and free market ethos in which individuals may succeed without being "held back" by their

identities, and yet those dominant identities that are already accepted as universal, invisible, and depoliticized (for instance, heterosexuality, whiteness, male identity) still benefit the most from this sort of ethos.<sup>54</sup> The idea that love is universal and that gender is secondary to “the person” might signify a worldview in which the particularity of LGBTQ identities no longer matters. PNG discourse may have the potential to “productively question” (Shane Phelan qtd. in Bower et al. 35) existing sexual identity categories, but it does so in close proximity to neoliberal ideologies that thrive on the negation of difference and the dominance of an unmarked, universal identity. Thus, whatever progressive, non-discriminatory potential PNG discourse may represent—either to individuals employing it or in a larger cultural sense—must be understood as operating adjacent to neoliberal ideology about identity as insignificant.

As I discussed in the previous section, participants suggested that the essence of a person, the essence that one falls in love with, is found in aspects of identity unrelated to gender—personality, interests and hobbies, habits, and elements of character like intelligence and self-assurance. These statements imply that it is possible to think of the person as separate from gender, and often the gendered body becomes mere “equipment” or the shell that contains the person. By making gender an insignificant factor in love and desire, participants may implicitly, or even inadvertently, communicate a kind of gender-blind<sup>55</sup> thinking. Gender-blind thinking suggests that gender-specific love signals a petty obsession with the gendered body, being too invested in identity labels, and not focusing on the right things in love (the de-gendered person). Certainly, participants’ statements do not explicitly support gender-blind thinking, and I speculate that most participants believe in the political necessity of LGBTQ identities and speak openly about the difference gender

makes in everyday life, including in forms of discrimination. I am not arguing that participants explicitly or intentionally affirmed a neoliberal worldview in their statements, and, as I noted, sometimes participants in one moment used PNG discourse to frame love as universal while in another moment they asserted that the difference of same-sex love and desire really did matter to them. The same participants could draw upon PNG discourse to signal diverse political potentials, and participants should never be understood as invested in a particular politics because of a momentary use of such discourse. Instead, my point is that progressive invocations of PNG discourse overlap with a neoliberal anti-identity worldview and that PNG discourse can facilitate gender-blind thinking and anti-identity ideology, even outside of the intention of the speaker.

Disliking identity labels became common sense amongst the majority of participants, revealing overlaps with neoliberal anti-identity ideology. Regardless of if they labeled their sexual identity or not, the expression “I don’t like labels” became an almost a knee-jerk mantra throughout groups, a shorthand for participants to communicate a progressive ethos. In these moments, participants conveyed that labels focus on trivial things—one’s sexual orientation—at the expense of overlooking who someone is as a person. For instance, Judy, who provisionally identified as lesbian, expressed frustration over how to pick a label that represented her sexual identity and stated that she desired “to just be a person without a label.” Similarly, when I asked what she thought about labels created specifically for women who shift sexual identities, Rachel, who appeared to identify as a lesbian without a sense of conflict, stated, “I don’t really care for labels, why does everyone and everything have to have a label?” The kind of exhaustion Judy and Rachel expressed about sexual identity labels was common in focus groups, and there was



a larger consensus that labels are restricting, and resentment towards an amorphous “society” that requires labels. Participants suggested a range of nuanced motivations for why they did not like labels, including the threat of violence waged against LGBTQ-identified people; feeling “over-labeled” as a person with multiple minoritized identities; and fear of getting “stuck” in a label and not being able to explore attractions as they occur. However one especially popular rationale for why labels were problematic or bothersome was that participants had experienced being a virtually unlabeled person when they were heterosexual-identified, and they resented that they were now expected to take on the extra work of labeling themselves as same-gender-loving women. For once-heterosexual-identified women who used to move through the world with an invisible, dominant identity taking on the extra work of a minoritized identity may be a shock, and may seem unfair. In every focus group, participants remarked upon how heterosexuals have the privilege of living as essentially unlabeled, and many participants expressed wanting to be understood as a person outside of a label.<sup>56</sup> This widespread rationale for not liking labels points to a critique of heterosexual privilege, but it also aligns with a neoliberal ideology which suggests that it is better to have a universal, unmarked identity, and that if everyone had such an identity this would be progress.

When participants longed to be taken as a person free of labels, PNG discourse supported a vision of the world in which engaging with sexual difference is exhausting and embodying a universal identity is liberating, implicitly maintaining the dominance of subject positions already accepted as invisible. In these instances, PNG discourse reveals a desire not to have to labor at identity, but such a desire is steeped in the privilege of being a person with a dominant, largely invisible sexual identity. Participants implicitly called

upon PNG discourse to question why they were now expected to forefront gender of object choice in their identity labels, when in the past when they were heterosexual-identified and/or partnering with men, they were allowed to simply exist. In this way, participants suggested that it is easier to be seen as loving “the person” as a heterosexual, because heterosexuality is taken for granted as an invisible identity category and heterosexuals are not expected to hang the whole of their identity on their gender of object choice. For instance, both Julia and Penny questioned why when they were heterosexual-identified they did not have to think about or announce their sexual identities, but when they became women who partnered with other women they were suddenly faced with a bevy of labels they could claim. These labels pertain to sexual orientation—lesbian, queer, bisexual, and so on—as well as labels pertaining to their gender expression or the gender expressions of their partners—femme, butch, genderqueer, soft butch and so on. Julia asserted, “you’re under-labeled as a straight person,” and that straight people are allowed to move through the world unlabeled, but if you express same-sex desires, you will be expected to take on extra work of labeling your identity, and labeling it in a detailed way. Julia stated, “[When you are straight] nobody ever asks you to identify yourself. Like, ‘Are you straight straight? Are you kind of straight? Are you kinky straight? What do you do in the bedroom?’ Nobody ever asks you that. Until you identify yourself as something outside of the norm.” Julia described her experience of shifting from a heterosexual identity into a lesbian identity, and finding herself suddenly expected to explain and announce her new identity with a frequency and detail she was never expected to have as a straight person. Julia resented that when she fit the “norm” of being heterosexual-identified she was allowed to live as an “under-labeled” person, and her statement reveals desires—not

necessarily desires she internalizes as a lesbian-identified woman—to move away from the forced labor of identifying as sexual minority. PNG discourse encompasses such desires and offers the chance to live as a heterosexual person, as someone who will not be interrogated and who will not have to continually articulate one's sexual identity.

Penny expressed a similar frustration that she was expected to identify with a label not only to announce her gender of object choice, but also to announce a preference for the kind of gender expression she preferred in a partner. Penny stated that people assumed that because Penny's partner is a masculine woman Penny must only like masculine or butch women. Penny argued that when she was heterosexual-identified she dated men with varying gender expressions and that was never viewed as reflective of her sexual identity:

I didn't have this problem dating men. [No one ever said] 'Oh, so you like preppy guys. Or the rugged guys.' There was no label when it came to dating men. It's like how come I have so many choices when it comes to women, but I didn't have so many choices with men? It becomes very frustrating that there has to be a label.

Penny was annoyed that the whole of her identity is supposed to be encompassed in her gender of object choice, including the gender expression of her partner. Penny criticized the way that for same-gender-loving people sexual orientation and their gender of object choice gender is assumed to play a formative role in their identities. In stating that she never had "this problem" when she dated men, Penny points out how heterosexual privilege allows heterosexuals to live life without a label, and to not have to make "choices" about which of the plethora of labels they will choose to describe their sexual identities. Both Penny and Julia implicitly use PNG discourse to critique heterosexual

privilege, yet their statements may also reveal nostalgia for a time when they benefited from such privilege. In this way, PNG can support the dominance of subject positions that are treated as invisible, and treat marginalized subject positions as something to get free from on the account that they involve excessive labor.

In arguing they wanted to be viewed as people, not as sexual identity labels, participants demonstrate how PNG discourse can facilitate anti-identity thinking in which the cultural invisibility of dominant identities such as heterosexuality becomes something for LGBTQ people to strive for, articulating a utopian longing to step outside of systems of labeling and the labor of identifying as a sexual minority. This anti-identity thinking implicitly centers dominant, invisible identities and frames particularized identities as focusing on the wrong thing—sexual orientation—over the fundamental essence of the person. Participants asserted that if sexual identity labels were not given so much cultural clout, individuals could be seen for who they really are. For instance, Karen argues that her sexual orientation is of minimal significance to her overall identity and that her sense of herself as a person should not be defined by orientation. Karen stated, “In heterosexual society, those people don’t have to think about what they identify with. I guess it kind of bothers me that I get asked sometimes, ‘What do you identify as?’ And I say, ‘As *me*.’” Karen’s desire to be viewed as “me” rather than as a sexual identity label was expressed with a sense of unfairness that she was expected to explain her identity to others when heterosexuals are not continuously asked how they identify. Karen points to the heterosexual privilege of not “having to think” about one’s sexual orientation at all, to effectively live life identifying as “me” rather than having to define oneself through a label. Other participants throughout the focus groups echoed such a desire.<sup>57</sup> Similar to

Karen's desire to identify as "me," Dani stated that when she teaches heterosexual college students she calls their attention to the tendency to think of LGBTQ-identified people solely in terms of their sexuality, whereas heterosexuals are able to exist in person-based terms that foreground other pieces of their identities, like their occupation or family status. Dani stated, "[I ask them] do you walk up to someone and say, 'Hi, I'm heterosexual'? You don't do that. You have your occupation, you're a daughter, you're a sister, you're a teacher, whatever. You don't identify yourself by one thing like that." Dani objects to being identified by "one thing"—her sexual orientation. Thus, Dani, like many other participants, critiqued the unevenness of labeling, that heterosexuals are not expected to label themselves and can ultimately think of themselves as just being a person without having to think about their sexual orientation. While such a critique highlights heterosexual privilege, the desire to gain that privilege—to be allowed to simply exist as a person without attending to orientation—implicitly bolsters an anti-identity thinking that PNG discourse can facilitate.

In this neoliberal direction, PNG discourse implicitly asserts that it is better to have a universal, unmarked identity. Such anti-identity thinking is problematic in the way that it supports a neoliberal view of the world in which particularized, politicized identity is irrelevant. Angela McRobbie notes that in such a neoliberal worldview, a universal identity promises greater participation in social institutions for (sexual, racial, gender) marginalized populations, but also disavows the continued structural oppression of such populations (2). Thus, individuals are understood as making choices that impact their lives, and the role of structural power influencing their lives is elided. Sarah Cefai argues that within the "consumer logic" of neoliberalism, one's choice to be invested in an LGBTQ identity—to

say that one's identity label does matter, to say that gender of object choice matters, and to emphasize the difference of same-sex desire compared to heterosexuality—means making the wrong choice (10). Thus, when participants suggest that to be deeply invested in a sexual identity label or the gender of one's partner wrongly privileges gender of object choice over the person, PNG discourse dovetails with a neoliberal worldview in which to strongly define oneself through sexual orientation is “a self-elected limitation of one's field of choice” (Cefai 10). If labels are assumed to be reductive and gender of object choice is assumed to be coincidental, then a woman who has a political investment in a lesbian label or a woman who is clear that the gender expression of her partner is fundamental in shaping her desire can be viewed as having an almost a fetishistic investment with difference, as getting hung up on gender and sexuality at the expense of seeing the person. A neoliberal worldview champions a universal, identity-free subject position, and in this context, it becomes common sense that labels are bad, and that same-sex love is not different than other-sex love.

When participants invoke PNG discourse to argue that the person is fundamental but gender is coincidental, or that labels are burdensome, or that love is a universal experience that transgresses gender of object choice, this discourse plays into a neoliberal worldview in which difference gets in the way. For instance, in her analysis of the advertizing campaign for *The L Word*, Cefai argues that the show's producers attempted to downplay the notion that the show was about lesbians by drawing upon a “Universal Love Discourse,” which was in turn used by heterosexual viewers to explain how they could identify with and desire lesbian characters. Cefai argues that while the notion that “love is love” is invoked as a progressive way to argue that sexuality does not matter and that

lesbian love should be tolerated, the effect of “representing love as being *beyond* sexuality resolves heterosexual anxiety, folding lesbian difference back into heterosexual culture” (6 emphasis original). Hence, lesbian love is stripped of its erotic and political specificity in *The L Word* campaign in order to make the show more marketable to heterosexual viewers. Instead of showcasing how LGBTQ women create subcultural understandings of intimacy between women that differ from dominant heterosexual understandings of women’s sexuality, this campaign makes it so heterosexual viewers can consume a show about women who love women without ever having to engage with difference, and can feel included within the audience of the show under the auspices that love is universal. Thus, all differences between people of different sexualities are flattened out in order to facilitate heterosexual audiences’ comfort and access, rather than forcing such audiences to face difference head-on. I suspect the participants I spoke with would not support the decision to downplay difference in order to court heterosexual viewers; however, their use of PNG discourse can sometimes align with a neoliberal worldview in which identity no longer matters. Such a view makes identity an obstacle in understanding love, undermining the need for particular, politicized LGBTQ identities in favor of conceptualizing sexual identity in universal terms. As the example of *The L Word* campaign shows, such universal terms ultimately support the dominance of privileged identities (heterosexuality, whiteness, and so on). In this direction, PNG discourse intersects with neoliberal ideology that negates the need for LGBTQ identities and the need for social movements to respond to injustice.

The point here is not to determine if PNG discourse is truly progressive because it critically deconstructs existing identity categories, or merely appears to be progressive while playing into neoliberal ideology that disavows the need for politicized and particular

identity while maintaining structural inequality. PNG discourse exists in constellation with both of these sets of ideas, among others. My point in this chapter is to map out the lines and directions PNG discourse takes within contemporary U.S. culture, illustrating that no single direction can tell us the full impact of PNG discourse. The radical and progressive effects of this discourse must be understood as being contained—consistently, perhaps only momentarily—by covertly hierarchal neoliberal ideologies about identity.

In the next section, I continue mapping PNG discourse by following it into the realm of U.S. popular culture. I explore how PNG discourse in popular media becomes a way to mark all women as more sexually fluid than men. Whereas neoliberal ideology functions in an insidious manner, co-opting progressive rhetoric in service to perpetuating hierarchal social systems,<sup>58</sup> the final direction of PNG discourse I explore is more traditionally, plainly conservative. This conservative direction of PNG discourse affirms familiar, essentialist ideas about the differences between men's lusty natures and women's emotional natures. Thus, in the space of popular culture PNG discourse undermines the significance of gender in defining sexual orientation, yet in reasserting gender essentialist ideas it shores up the significance of gender.

### *PNG Discourse in Popular Culture and The Persistence of Gender*

PNG discourse's radical potential to create new understandings of sexuality is most contained within the space of popular culture where it reiterates familiar essentialist notions about women as emotional creatures who love and desire in fundamentally opposite ways from men. I explore this conservative direction of PNG discourse as it functions in popular culture texts, including women's magazines, daytime talk shows,



blogs, and mainstream news media. These texts advance PNG discourse as an explanation for why women shift sexual identities as adults, and in doing so construct women in general as innately more sexually fluid than men. Women's sexual desire is framed as driven by emotional connection and men's sexual desire is framed as driven by carnal lust. Women's sexual fluidity is explained as stemming from an intense emotional connection with a certain person, and men's sexual stability is understood as a result of men's inability to make emotional bonds that would change them. Whereas unlabeled participants found using PNG discourse as something of an uphill battle because they were challenging existing thinking about sexuality, PNG discourse in popular media reiterates a palatable, essentialist notion that men and women are opposites. Conservative uses of PNG discourse do not trouble or stretch dominant thinking about sexuality, and instead affirm what is largely accepted as truth about women's sexuality, that women are ruled by their emotions and are less interested in sex than men. While popular media frames PNG discourse as a new way to imagine sexual orientation without taking gender into account, gender persists to be meaningful when media uses of PNG discourse bolster essentialist ideologies about differences between men and women.

This contradiction—that PNG discourse ostensibly challenges the relevance of gender in defining sexual orientation but can simultaneously reiterate the importance of gender by affirming a traditional gender binary—calls to mind Lauren Berlant's work on the "female complaint." The workings of the female complaint as outlined by Berlant is similar to the workings of PNG discourse in popular culture in the sense that both wage a critique and yet remain invested in the worldview which produces the conditions that gave rise to the critique. Berlant argues that the female complaint<sup>59</sup> functions in women's

culture as a way to articulate how women are exploited by men within a heterosexual economy of romance. Yet the anger and threat of this critique is contained because the female complaint remains invested in this same system of romance. Berlant states: “The complaint genres of ‘women’s culture,’ therefore, tend to foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women’s intimate suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place” (*The Female Complaint* 2). The complaint may critique the exploitation of women in a heteronormative economy of love, but the critique understands such an economy as inevitable. Unlike the female complaint, PNG discourse allows for possibilities outside of compulsory heterosexuality. However this conservative direction of PNG discourse views gender and the gender binary as inevitable, even as it offers a critique of the relevance of gender.

PNG discourse in U.S. popular culture naturalizes the idea that women are sexually fluid and men are sexually stable by reiterating the notion that women are fundamentally emotional while men are fundamentally motivated by base, lusty desires. In this conservative iteration, PNG discourse shores up the stability of men’s desires while rendering women as innately more fluid by assuming that women are more capable than men of making emotional connections and being changed by those connections. This is apparent in American psychologist Richard Lippa’s comments in a 2010 *Guardian* article about women coming out midlife. Lippa argues that while men generally have “a preferred sex,” women exhibit “more shades of grey” in their attractions (Cochrane). Lippa explains this difference between men and women by calling upon PNG discourse and arguing it represents a quintessentially “female experience”:

I have definitely heard some women say, “It was the person I fell in love with, it wasn't the person's gender,” and I think that that is much more of a female experience than a male experience. I've never had a straight man say to me, at age 45, “I just met this really neat guy and I fell in love with him and I don't like men in general, but God, this guy's so great that I'm going to be in a relationship with him for the next 15 years.” (Cochrane)

The assumption in Lippa's statement is that women have a greater capacity to be impacted by emotional connections than men. Hence, Lippa argues that a woman might reevaluate her sexual identity in midlife based on an intense emotional bond with one particular woman, but men in midlife are generally not deeply touched and changed by their relationships with others in this way. Thinking about men's fundamental stability as a result of their emotional paucity is also seen in a March 2006 *Cosmopolitan* article, “The Rise of Girl-on-Girl Hookups,” which renders women's sexual fluidity as natural and men's as impossible. In this article, the tendency of apparently straight women to initiate sexual relationships with their female friends is compared to the supposed unlikelihood of this happening among straight-identified men. The author, Freya Williams, asks the reader, “Think about it: Can you imagine that a group of guys would identify themselves as GUGs (Gays Until Graduation)? Or better, picture your boyfriend getting it on with his best bud. Not going to happen” (Williams). Williams encourages the reader to mull over the ridiculousness of male sexual fluidity, arguing that the idea of straight-identified male friends having sex with each other as an impossibility. Williams goes on to explain, using Diamond's work as evidence, that male sexual fluidity is unimaginable because of men's lack of practice being intimate with each other, in comparison to women's tendency,

regardless of orientation, to be intimate with other women.<sup>60</sup> PNG discourse is at implicitly at work here because Williams relies on the idea that women have a “natural” facility for creating emotional bonds to support her claim that women’s intimacy is more likely to transcend preferred gender of object choice than men’s. Thus, PNG discourse can reaffirm a gender binary in which men and women are opposites in how they experience attraction—with women being primarily motivated by emotion and men being primarily motivated by lust for particular gendered bodies.

The assumption that women need to “fall in love first” before they develop sexual attractions for a person becomes the primary rationale for understanding women’s sexual fluidity, even when other less gender stereotyping rationales are readily available (James Donaldson). PNG discourse becomes a way for media texts to define *all* women’s sexualities as fluid *because* women have an essential capacity to forge and to be impacted emotional bonds that men do not. For instance, a March 2008 *Marie Claire* article entitled “How Gay Are You?” represents Diamond’s research as if she uses PNG discourse to explain all of women’s sexual fluidity, when in reality Diamond’s research offers several interlocking reasons for women’s sexual fluidity, including biological factors and effects of gender socialization. Popular news media generally emphasizes Diamond’s discussion of “person-based attractions” (172) rather than attend to the nuances of her argument, and I argue that this media interest in selective parts of Diamond’s work shows how PNG discourse becomes a convenient or comforting way to understand women’s sexual fluidity via familiar, essentialist notions. Diamond is quoted in *Marie Claire* pointing to the role of socialization in shaping how women tend to value emotional relationships as an important part of their sexual desire, but the author of the article, Lori Fradkin, frames Diamond’s

statement to mean that women are naturally orientated to create intimate emotional relationships. Even as Diamond presents a rationale for women's sexual fluidity that does not support PNG discourse, Fradkin translates Diamond's words for the reader as if Diamond were simply arguing that women naturally exhibit PNG thinking more than men:

“When we talk to girls about sexuality, we talk about it only being appropriate in relationships,” says Diamond. “It’s not that women don’t ever want casual sex, but most of the research suggests that relationships play a more organizing role for women’s eroticism than men’s.” IT’S NATURAL. In the past, women who had one or two same-sex attractions were dismissed as crazy, in denial, unable to find a man, or repressed. But Diamond found that occasional attraction to other females is common. (Fradkin)

Fradkin jumps to the conclusion that women's sexual fluidity is “natural”—an essential trait particular to women—even as Diamond highlights that individual's desires are socially constructed to some extent. Fradkin's stress on the concept of women's sexual fluidity as natural, using all capital letters, elides Diamond's acknowledgment that women are socialized to organize their “eroticism” around “relationships” rather than “casual sex.” Instead, Fradkin argues that Diamond's point supports the idea that sexual fluidity is “common” among women and implicitly less so among men, because of women's “natural” tendency to forge emotional connections. In this moment, Fradkin employs PNG discourse to gloss over Diamond's point about socialization, and reasserts a gender binary in which women's erotic desire stems from an innate desire to be in a loving relationship, but men's erotic desire innately functions independently from the context of a loving relationship. It is strangely as if Diamond has not said anything about social construction at

all, and all roads lead to this conservative iteration of PNG discourse when discussing women's sexual fluidity in popular culture.

Conservative uses of PNG discourse desexualize women's desire in popular culture, as they render women's attractions to other women in terms of emotional connection to "the person" rather than visceral sexual attraction. This is significant because stories about once-heterosexual-identified women in general are not desexualized. In fact, explicit discussions of sex and desire play a crucial role in many narratives written by once-heterosexual-identified women.<sup>61</sup> Conservative uses of PNG discourse elide women's lust and downplay the importance of attraction to a gendered body in favor of reiterating a view of women's sexuality that aligns with hegemonic gender norms. A March 2009 episode of the daytime talk show *The View* illustrates this kind of desexualization, as the hosts discuss what is framed as a growing trend of "more and more women over forty are taking female partners" ("*View* Sounds Off"). The hosts, Joy Behar, Barbara Walters, Sherri Shepherd, and Elisabeth Hasselbeck, attempt to make sense of why women who had been heterosexual-identified for most of their lives would suddenly come out in midlife. During this discussion, the idea that women inherently form emotional bonds with each other is in tension with the notion that women might be driven by a sexual attraction to another woman. As the hosts advance different speculations about why women might come out midlife, Hasselbeck asks, "Is it a question about intimacy? Because I think women have an intimacy with women that maybe through their friendships it's not maybe the sex as time goes on, [Shepherd: 'Companionship?'] but maybe that true intimacy and companionship." Hasselbeck frames women's, especially midlife and older women's, decisions to partner as being driven by "true intimacy and companionship" and less so by

“sex.” Hasselbeck implicitly draws on PNG discourse to suggest that midlife women are invested in emotional connection, not sexual attraction or pleasure, hence, female friends might create an intimate bond that would lead to a romantic relationship that would not necessarily prioritize sex. Behar counters Hasselbeck’s desexualization of women coming out in midlife by stating dryly, “No, I think it’s about the sex.” In the debate that follows, the other three hosts seem more invested in the notion that women are motivated to partner with other women because of an emotional connection, whereas Behar stresses that these relationships should be thought of in sexual terms. For instance, Walters agrees with Hasselbeck’s statement, arguing that she read articles about women coming out midlife in which such women describe an “an intimacy, a closeness, there was [an emotional] bonding [with a particular person]” as a catalyst in their shift of identities. Behar responds, “But you can have that with a man. This is a sexual attraction to a woman.” Sex and emotional intimacy are framed as opposites of each other, and the majority of the hosts express a belief that women are fundamentally motivated by emotional intimacy rather than sexual desire in their choice of partners.

Just as Diamond’s acknowledgement that socialization shapes women’s sexual fluidity gets glossed over, popular media deployments of PNG discourse downplay female sexual desire and emphasizes male desire, even in cases when individuals question this essentialist logic. Even as Behar resists minimizing women’s sexual attractions to each other, she participates in the logic that women are primarily emotionally driven. At the end of the conversation, Behar argues that men are driven by lust whereas women’s desire is more subdued: “You notice that men don’t take that long to come out. With a man you know where you’re going with that heated missile [gestures to crotch] [audience laughter]

[Walters: 'Right.'].” Thus, even if Behar’s dissenting voice in this discussion calls into question the tendency to desexualize women’s desire, the discussion resolves by reasserting men’s hypersexual natures in comparison to women’s muted sexuality. Everyone in the last moment of the show—Behar, Walter, the audience via their laughter—can easily agree that men are motivated to pursue relationships out of unbridled desire, suggesting that women are not. Much like Behar’s comment about “heated missiles” on *The View*, Eli Coleman, the director of the human sexuality program at the University of Minnesota Medical School, suggests that men’s supposedly blunt, visceral attraction creates far less ambiguity in men’s sexuality than in women’s. In a 2009 *More* magazine article about women coming out in midlife, Coleman discusses his research with men and women who experience same-sex desires after marrying a different-sex partner. Coleman argues that men tend to be aware of same-sex desires before they marry, whereas women discover these desires after getting married. He states the reasons for this difference could be that women tend to marry younger than men, that women “may be more scripted by societal roles,” and “[f]emale desire, Coleman adds, is determined more ‘by emotional and relationship factors.’ Men, he says bluntly, are ‘much more visually motivated’”(Jones). While Coleman offers several reasons for why women might be less aware of same-sex desire until adulthood, including reasons related to socialization and stigma, there is a persistence of the essentialist idea that women are naturally orientated to relationships in which “emotion” might sway their desire and men are naturally orientated to a baser, “visually motivated” sexuality. Thus, while there are many reasons why women might be sexually fluid or might come out midlife, popular media continually emphasizes the idea that all women are simply essentially driven by emotion and can create unexpected



romantic bonds with other women, while men are less fluid because they care about gender or the gendered body more than women do.

PNG discourse in U.S. popular culture fosters a common sense idea that women are more sexually fluid than men, and in these instances essentialist notions of gender are employed to make sense of women's sexual fluidity. In this conservative direction of PNG discourse the potential to imagine sexuality differently than existing dominant notions is redirected to reinforce what is already largely accepted as truth in U.S. culture, that women are highly emotional and unpredictable because of it, and men are static, unmoved by emotion, and clear and forthright in their desire. In the space of popular culture, PNG discourse functions to shore up familiar ways of thinking about sexuality rather than to generate views that might alter the sexual landscape.

*Conclusion: (Re)Braiding Multiple Directions of PNG Discourse*

I have explored a complex constellation of PNG discourse, looking at multiple directions of PNG discourse and how it might produce diverse political effects, ranging from radical to conservative. In its most radical form, PNG discourse disrupts dominant thinking about sexual identity by challenging the significance of gender of object choice and the stability of identity, yet in its most conservative form, this discourse solidifies essentialist thinking about gender and reiterates hegemonic ideas about men's and women's sexualities. Paying attention to the full range of effects of PNG discourse is important because this discourse is emerging in U.S. culture as a popular and credible way to understand women's sexuality. While I approached four directions of PNG discourse separately, I will conclude by exploring the intersection of these directions to note that

these directions are not discrete, but also to briefly speculate on some possibilities of PNG discourse I have not touched upon.

While I argued that PNG discourse in its most conservative form can desexualize women's desire by rendering women as fundamentally emotional and men as fundamentally sexual, it is important to note that this kind of desexualization can also occur in more radical and progressive uses of PNG discourse. When participants refuse a sexual identity label and use person-based terms to define their orientation, the notion of being in love is foreground, but the notion of sexual attraction and lust is largely absent from unlabeled participants' descriptions of their sexual identity. For instance, Penny reiterated several times that she defined her sexuality in terms of "I just love my girlfriend," but only alluded to her sexual attraction to her girlfriend once in the focus group. This could be related to general silence about sexual desire and intimacy in a group of strangers. However I find it illustrative that Penny's description of her unlabeled identity privileged love but did not speak overtly to erotic desire, suggesting that such desire is less important in defining identity. A similar silence around erotic desire and lust occurred when participants deployed PNG discourse to create a progressive ethos about love transgressing gender. In these instances, falling in love was a matter of being drawn to the person, but erotic desire became associated with the idea of desiring the gendered body. Participants rendered the gendered body as a coincidental backdrop—merely the "parts" and "equipment" people "have to work with" when they fall in love with someone—and downplayed the experience of desiring the particularly gendered bodies of women. Thus, radical and progressive uses of PNG discourse also engage in the problematic practice of desexualizing women's desire in favor of emphasizing women's emotional investments.

However, a crucial difference in how PNG discourse might desexualize women's desire in its more radical or progressive directions versus how it may do so in its most conservative direction is that participants in focus groups largely speak for themselves whereas popular media attempt to speak for all women. Participants who described their identities without labels or who described the act of falling in love by de-centering gender of object choice often clarified that they were speaking of their own experiences. These participants did not generalize their experiences to suggest that all women who shifted identities—or even all women—experienced love and attraction in the way that they did. Popular news media, however, frames women's sexual fluidity in general as an effect of women's natural tendency to think in terms of PNG discourse. Thus, PNG discourse as it functions in popular media creates a more conservative effect than when participants used it because it becomes a way to shore up the gender binary and to create a common sense notion that women must be more sexually fluid than men. Participants did not make such grandiose claims, and generally only used PNG discourse as a way to give voice to their personal experiences. In this way, the radical and progressive potentials of PNG discourse work more thoroughly to deconstruct existing thinking of sexuality—to challenge easy assumptions about how we should define sexual orientation—whereas conservative iterations of this discourse contain those potentials by making PNG discourse a non-threatening way to understand women's sexual fluidity by restating familiar essential notions.

I also argued that PNG discourse facilitates neoliberal anti-identity ideology in which an unmarked, depoliticized, and universal sexual identity is preferable to a particular, politicized one. Yet I acknowledge that wanting to live as a person unmarked by

sexual identity may encompass complex sets of desires. When participants argue that they want to live as “me”—as a person who is just allowed to exist—they note that they were allowed to live in this fashion when they were heterosexual-identified. In an uncharitable reading, we might understand these statements as individuals wanting to have their heterosexual privilege back. A more nuanced reading acknowledges that such statements reveal desires to live in a different kind of world, a world in which people do not have to take on the work of a minoritized identity, and a world in which sexual minorities do not have to explain themselves.

When participants want to be seen as “me,” they are asking to be heard on their own terms, to not have to conform to a system of sexual identity categorization that was forced upon them (just as it was forced upon all of us). There is a kind of utopian desire to step outside such a system, and to simply be able to exist without having to labor at one’s identity, to continually announce one’s identity, to suffer the repercussions of being recognized as a sexual minority, and to be sanctioned when one does not adequately maintain that identity. As I noted in chapter one and will return to in chapter four, once-heterosexual-identified women sometimes express feeling like illegitimate LGBTQ women because changing sexual identity makes one an object of suspicion in U.S. culture. Thus, it becomes very easy for others to challenge once-heterosexual-identified women’s LGBTQ identities, and for such women to internalize feelings of illegitimacy. The allure to just “be a person without a label,” as Judy stated, may be particularly poignant for once-heterosexual-identified women who may feel that others view their present-day identities as conundrums to be solved or frauds to be denounced. Being a person who is unmarked by sexual identity means being allowed to exist as a fact, as someone who can be heard on

one's own terms. As will become apparent in chapter four, this might be particularly appealing for women who find that even when they take on the work of explaining their sexual identities to others, they may not be heard, and others may insist that they are not who they say they are. Hence, even as I critique those instances when PNG discourse might play into neoliberal ideology that frames minoritized identity as something to “get over,” desires to be free of the work of a minoritized identity also critique the unevenness and unfairness embedded in systems of labeling. Participants' comments gesture to a world in which all people are free to be heard on their own terms, and can forgo the labor of articulating and maintaining an identity.

However, these desires for a new world in which people are not punished or belabored because of their difference from a heterosexual norm must be understood as positioned adjacent to anti-identity neoliberal ideologies. Whereas the former desires envision a world free of sexual hierarchy where people can love without restriction, a neoliberal ideology maintains hierarchy by continuing to privilege dominant subject positions. Thus, even as PNG discourse can encompass desires which critique existing systems of hierarchy—in this case the notion that heterosexuals do not have to identify their sexuality but everyone else is compelled to do so—the proximity of PNG discourse to neoliberal ideologies must be recognized and the potential of PNG discourse to facilitate neoliberal social hierarchies in which a universal identity is the most desirable must be considered.

Lastly, while I argued that PNG discourse is most contained and most conservative in U.S. popular culture, it is worth noting that there is always some potential for oppositional readings of popular culture texts (Hall 487). Thus, even as PNG discourse in

popular culture reiterates the gender binary, there are opportunities even in this conservative direction for the visibility of PNG discourse to create possibilities for imagining life otherwise. Perhaps the popular interest in stories about women shifting sexualities creates more resources for other women to imagine and act upon such possibilities in their lives. Perhaps media use of PNG discourse signals a cultural weariness with the centrality of gender of object choice in thinking about sexuality and the homosexual/heterosexual binary this thinking supports. If this is the case, the popularity of PNG discourse may be part of a larger sea change in how sexual orientation is conceived and articulated in U.S. culture. Even if I argue that the greater work of PNG discourse in popular culture is to affirm what is already accepted as truth about sexuality, that men and women love in very different ways, there is always possibility for radical interpretations of these stories which deconstruct existing thinking about sexuality.

The four directions of PNG discourse I have laid out in this chapter should not be thought of as existing on a simple radical-to-conservative spectrum, as we can see layered political implications within each direction. Paying attention to nuances in how a particular discourse shifts and changes meaning in multiple contexts is crucial to understanding the full cultural impact of a respective discourse. This notion will be foreground again in chapter four when I map out the inconsistent effects of the concept of normalcy as it impacts meanings about once-heterosexual-identified women in multiple contexts. As I argued in the introduction, stories about once-heterosexual-identified women are not only illustrative of how such women experience their own sexualities, but also of major concepts shaping contemporary thinking about sexuality. In this chapter, by looking at stories about once-heterosexual-identified women, we have been able to better understand

the multiple political implications of the increasingly popular practices of not labeling and of defining sexual identity without prioritizing gender of object choice, as well as gaining more insight into how women are constructed as more sexually fluid than men in contemporary U.S. culture. In the next chapter, I will continue to explore how these stories illuminate thinking about sexuality by investigating how age, race, and class operate in stories about women coming out midlife. As I shall show, stories about once-heterosexual-identified women become rich sources to better understand how women's midlife is constructed, and how race and class shape those constructions.

## CHAPTER 3.

THE FORMATIVE ROLE OF MIDDLE CLASS IDENTITY AND WHITENESS IN  
STORIES ABOUT WOMEN COMING OUT MIDLIFE

While this dissertation as a whole approaches the topic of once-heterosexual-identified women broadly, incorporating the experiences of women who have shifted identities at various points of adulthood, women who come out in midlife make up the majority of the cultural visibility of this topic in the U.S. Stories about women coming out as LGBTQ-identified at midlife—midlife being broadly figured here as approximately age forty to sixty—have been a hot commodity in the past ten years or so, especially in popular media marketed to women.<sup>62</sup> I speculate that the prominence of these stories is in part because they reiterate notions of midlife and the self that are already familiar in popular culture.<sup>63</sup> Namely, stories about women coming out in midlife rely on constructs of midlife that stem from a white, middle-class, Western worldview, including a concept of the self that comes from American self-help cultures.

In these stories, we can see a counter narrative about midlife that has been marketed to American women as an alternative to the notion that midlife is a time of decline for women.<sup>64</sup> Midlife in stories about women coming out is framed as a second adolescence for women, and as a time of increased self-confidence and empowerment. Furthermore, as in self-help cultures, the midlife woman's self is conceptualized as a product of great labor, and the true self must and can be uncovered through intensive labor of self-reflection.<sup>65</sup> This counter narrative is told as if it is universal and available to all midlife women, however, I unpack how these empowering or resistant constructs of midlife are invested in particular ways of knowing, and how race and class privilege



facilitate these experiences of midlife. Stories about women coming out midlife advance a counter narrative which allows women to reject the notion of midlife as a time of decline, but this counter narrative is not equally available or salient to all women. I argue this counter narrative reveals investments in a particular racialized and classed subject position, even as that subject position goes unmarked and unspoken in stories about women coming out midlife.

Scholars studying how women experience and make meaning of midlife rely largely on white, college-educated women to inform their findings.<sup>66</sup> While there have been efforts by scholars to remedy this gap in the literature by studying the experiences of women of color, non-college-educated women, low income women, and non-Western women, these studies have been more recent and fewer (Wray; Tangri et al.; Flores; Miner-Rubino et al.; Wong et al.; Noonil et al.). Additionally, studies of women coming out midlife have relied almost exclusively on the experiences of white women. In my research I have only found one source that approaches the topic of once-heterosexual-identified women entirely from the standpoint of women of color, D. Dionne Bates' study of once-married African-American lesbians and bisexual women (Bates). Thus, our scholarly understandings of how women experience midlife and how women experience coming out midlife are limited to white and middle-class perspectives. Popular texts show slightly more diversity in giving voice to midlife women of a range of racial identities,<sup>67</sup> and the anthologies I have analyzed sometimes include authors who are women of color and working-class women, though race and class are rarely explicitly or critically discussed in these narratives.<sup>68</sup> Hence, stories about women coming out midlife and ideas about women's midlife more generally center a white, middle-class worldview not only by rarely

including a diversity of experiences but also by not acknowledging this particular view as a subject position.

Considering the small set of women represented in stories about women coming out midlife and the dominance of such women in studies about midlife, it is no surprise that stories about women coming out midlife reiterate what scholars have found to be white, middle-class American women's experiences of midlife. Women in these studies report experiencing midlife as a positive time: they express gaining a stronger sense of self; caring less what others—especially men—think about them; having more free time as parenting responsibilities decrease; and using this extra time and energy to work on their selves through reflection, additional schooling and professional development, and attending to dreams and desires that they would have put aside before (Trethewey; Miner-Rubino, Winter, and Stewart; McQuaide; Ogle and Damhorst; Stewart and Ostrove; Zucker et al.). However this experience of midlife may not be universal for women. I will draw on a smaller body of work that looks at women's midlife from the perspectives of women of color, poor and working-class women, and non-Western women to discuss the ways that racial, cultural, and class differences might impact a woman's experience of midlife, making it less likely that she will experience midlife as a time of greater confidence, freedom, and a period of "me time" to invest labor in the self. However it is important to note that women of diverse social locations might use this counter narrative to resist a dominant narrative of decline, and also to build counter narratives that speak to their particular racialized and classed experiences of midlife.<sup>69</sup> I explore this counter narrative that centers a particular subject position and assumes certain privileges when constructing women's midlife but this does not mean that only white, middle-class,

Western women have investments in this counter narrative. Rather, I stress that contemporary U.S. conceptions of women's midlife are over-determined by particular experiences, which makes it difficult to imagine how women of color, low-income women, and women from the Global South might conceptualize midlife and coming out in midlife differently. As in line with the larger project of which this chapter is a part, I acknowledge that we cannot predict in advance how individuals will make use of discourse, and that a discourse about midlife as a time of renewal for women could have multiple and contradictory effects. I briefly speculate on the potential of this counter narrative to transform conceptions of women's midlife in the conclusion of this chapter. Thus, while I critique how this counter narrative primarily serves women who are most directly hailed by it and who have easiest access to its benefits, I also note that this counter narrative might have broader impacts than I consider in this chapter.

In many ways this chapter was the most difficult for me to write because while I felt it was absolutely necessary to address the ways whiteness and middle class identity shape stories of women coming out midlife, I do not want to be perceived as criticizing individual women speaking about their experiences. I am deeply indebted to the women whose stories have informed this dissertation, especially participants in my focus groups. I have immense respect for women who have come out in midlife, and I honor the painful actions they have taken in order to be their most authentic, most fulfilled, and vibrant selves. These stories move me and inspire me. I want to be clear that what I am exploring in this chapter—as in all the other chapters—is discourse, not individual stories or life histories. Making value judgments about the (personal, political) character of individual women telling stories about coming out midlife is not part of this project. Furthermore, as a

white, middle-class woman who is closer to midlife than to youth, it is worth noting that my own subject position is under investigation in this chapter. Perhaps my difficulty approaching writing this chapter is in part because of my own investments in these constructs of midlife that are imbricated with whiteness and middle class identity. Thus, as I note throughout this dissertation, I am not arguing that narrators in these stories are acting in bad faith. It seems perfectly logical that individuals would embrace a counter narrative of life getting better in midlife rather than accept a dominant narrative that women become tragic and uninteresting in midlife. Instead I explore the current limitations of discourse available in U.S. culture to talk about women's midlife, including the limitations in resistant counter narratives.

Stories about women coming out in midlife illuminate a trap operating in discourse about women's midlife. This counter narrative about midlife as a time of empowerment and as a time to work on the self is invoked by women out of "self defense" (Apter qtd. in Ogle and Damhorst 9) in a culture that would have them believe they become uninteresting and unproductive as they age. Yet only particular women are culturally positioned to triumph over a narrative of decline in this way. Particular women have the privilege and resources necessary to best facilitate this counter narrative about midlife, and particular women are culturally affirmed to believe that living an empowered and fulfilling life is something that is reasonable for them to want and possible for them to obtain. I highlight the narrowness of existing discourse about women's midlife, showing how resistant discourse subtly centers a particular subject position but then masquerades as a general counter narrative supposedly available to all midlife women.

*Midlife as a Second Adolescence for Women*

Stories about women coming out midlife often espouse a popular notion found in media marketed to women that midlife is a kind of second adolescence for women, a time when they are finally free of parenting and caretaking responsibilities and can devote their energies to their selves.<sup>70</sup> In this construct of women's midlife, women are framed as having spent their entire lives taking care of children and their spouses, and midlife becomes a time to finally take care of themselves. This extra time and energy devoted to the self is a period of renewal and metamorphosis, and as women reevaluate their lives they may find new social outlets and friends, new careers, and new romantic relationships and sexual desires.<sup>71</sup> In this section, I investigate the tendency to construct midlife as a second adolescence in discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women, and I argue that this conception of midlife assumes a certain amount of privilege—free time, decreased caretaking responsibilities, resources for leisure and creative pursuits, an entitlement to sexual freedom—that may be easiest accessed by white middle-class women.

Thinking of midlife as a second adolescence for women assumes midlife is a time of great freedom when women find themselves unburdened of their responsibilities for others, especially for children. This idea of being liberated from caretaking responsibilities can often explain why women might experience new desires and same-sex attractions, suggesting that women did not have the (emotional, material) resources to explore their sexualities earlier in life. For instance, focus group participant Tami stated that it was not until her children were grown and had left home that she had “the space and the room to be able to process [my sexual identity].” Thus, Tami experienced the onset of midlife as having more time and privacy for self-reflection without her children in the home, and this

extra time facilitated her shift into a lesbian identity. An experience like Tami's is reiterated again and again in stories of women coming out in midlife, or in stories of women experimenting with sexual fluidity for the first time in midlife. In these stories, midlife is assumed to be a time of expanded freedom for women. In an *O Magazine* article, lesbian celebrity trainer Jackie Warner's remarks about her heterosexual-identified, midlife fans convey this idea. Warner is asked why she thinks she has become "an unusual pin-up girl" for married "straight women" who confess they have never been attracted to any other woman but Warner. She states that her heterosexual midlife fans are likely experiencing a moment in their lives when they have more time for themselves and feel entitled to some sexual excitement and fun in a way they had previously not felt entitled. Warner states, "Many of them are in the second part of their lives, their kids are grown, they're still in their sexual prime, and now they're looking to expand and have excitement" (Fischer). Whereas the notion of "excitement" and "expand[ing]" opportunities for the future is generally associated with youth, this construct frames women's midlife as a time for personal growth and sexual fun. Warner's statement is an example of how this idea of midlife as a second adolescence for women manifests, how midlife becomes commonly accepted as time where women are able to attend to their pleasure after devoting years of their life to caretaking.

While experiencing midlife as a time of increased freedom may well resonate with many women, this thinking suggests a culturally specific view in which one can expect responsibilities to lessen as one ages, rather than caretaking responsibilities staying the same or increasing. Sharon Wray argues that thinking about midlife in terms of increased freedom may be a feature of white, Western women's experiences of midlife. Wray found

that white English/Anglo women in her study commonly discussed midlife as a time of expanding freedom when they could devote more of their energies to themselves, a time to attend to their personal growth and happiness. However, the Muslim/Pakistani and Caribbean women she interviewed expressed a different outlook on midlife, seeing it instead as a time when caretaking responsibilities continued, and sometimes a time when caretaking and household responsibilities increased as family members became ill or husbands passed away (37). Wray notes that studies of aging suggest that an individual's social location will impact them throughout their lives (32). For instance, if a woman lived in economic precarity before midlife, it is likely that the pressures of financial insecurity will create new responsibilities and worries in midlife, rather than responsibility dissipating as she ages. Similarly, if a woman is part of an ethnic group in which living in a multi-generational home and family caretaking for older and sick relatives is the norm, her unpaid labor in the home might increase during midlife, even if her parenting responsibilities decrease, and she may not experience midlife as time for herself.

For instance, in her study of Latinas' sexuality in midlife, Yvette G. Flores discusses how gendered norms create pressures for many Latinas, especially those with lower family incomes, to be primary caretakers for older family members. Flores states, "For middle-class women, [midlife] could be a time of shifting the focus away from nurturing and care giving of their partner and children to prioritizing their own needs. However, due to cultural mandates and economic realities, many women in midlife must continue to be caregivers for aging parents or in-laws, continuing to sacrifice their own desires (91). Here Flores notes the ways that particular "cultural mandates" for Latinas, in addition to economic factors, make it more likely for Latinas to take on extra labor in the

home during midlife. Flores argues that Latinas may take on such labor and keep silent about the toll this physically and emotionally taxing work might have on them in order to fulfill “grand narratives of *aguantar* (put up with or carry burdens)” (91). Flores ultimately argues that when midlife Latinas reconstruct such scripts—attending to their own desires and needs rather than “sacrific[ing] [their] own aspirations” for the good of everyone else in their lives (92)—they find greater well-being, sexual satisfaction, and happiness.

However, Flores also implies that there are more barriers in place—both cultural and economic—for many Latinas to begin a process of reconstructing grand narratives which limit their personal and sexual autonomy than for white women (97). Taking Wray’s and Flores’ findings together, we can see that conceptualizing midlife as a time of fewer responsibilities and more “me time” is not a general experience, but a specific experience that is treated as general in discourse about women coming out midlife. When women of color, non-Western women, or women with low household income have been interviewed about midlife, studies show they articulate a more complicated relationship to caretaking responsibilities and less investment in viewing midlife as a time of personal freedom.

Midlife is further constructed as a second adolescence for women coming out when it becomes a time of great sexual discovery, extending the idea that midlife is a time of expanding freedom for women. Such stories often frame midlife as a time of sexual renewal and experimentation with heightened erotic possibilities for women. This should be understood as a counter narrative to the sexist narrative that midlife women’s sexuality is uninteresting, abject, or comical (Weitz). Yet assuming midlife is a time of great sexual freedom for women may ignore the differences and complexities in how white women and women of color are unevenly impacted by racist and sexist messages restricting women’s



sexuality. A 2009 article in the women's lifestyle magazine *More* demonstrates this assumption that midlife is a time of sexual freedom for women when it discusses how women coming out midlife might experience a reawakening of the body and a youthful excitement associated with "discovering sex for the first time" (Jones). Social worker Joanne Fleisher assures readers that erotic feelings of unprecedented intensity are a normal part of the midlife coming out process: "Yet with the confusion can also come the exhilaration of newness, a feeling akin to discovering sex for the first time. Fleisher assures the women she counsels that 'a normal part of coming out as an adult is the feeling of being an adolescent on fire, caught in the body of a 40- to 50-year-old'" (Jones). This idea of being an "adolescent on fire" in the mismatched body of a woman in her forties or fifties reimagines midlife as a possible time to experience "newness," even as a dominant narrative would suggest that by midlife women have already had their most exciting sexual experiences. Thus, midlife coming out is constructed as reconnecting with the kind of unbridled sexual excitement associated with adolescence, perhaps an excitement a woman coming out in midlife had not felt before. Interestingly, when stories about women's midlife describe this sort of sexual reawakening, the language used sometimes refers to adolescent boyhood, suggesting that in midlife women discover the freedom of a boy to experience uncontrollable lust, rather than the sexual restriction of adolescent girlhood. This point is highlighted in the same *More* magazine article when a woman who came out midlife likens herself to a teenage boy. Melanie Shore explains that since coming out her attractions to women are ubiquitous: "'I don't have a type yet,' Shore, now 51, admits. 'I'm like a teenage boy. I think every woman is absolutely freakin' gorgeous'" (Jones). In describing herself as "a teenage boy" because she feels an uncontrolled attraction to every

woman she sees, Shore's statement implies that coming out midlife afforded her a liberating exploration of intense sexual feelings that are taboo for girls. Thus, Shore feels not just like an adolescent, but like a heterosexual male adolescent who is entitled to feelings of exaggerated lust. In this way, describing midlife women's coming out as a second adolescence constructs this experience—and perhaps the time period of midlife for women more generally—as a time of great sexual empowerment and liberation. So much so that perhaps midlife women may experience their sexuality without the confines and policing that was likely placed on them as teenage girls, and may finally allow themselves a kind of unbridled sexual desire associated with men and teenage boys.

However, constructing women's midlife coming out as akin to adolescent, heterosexual boys' feelings of unrestricted sexual desire assumes a kind of sexual freedom that may be easier for white women to access than women of color. Again, these stories represent these experiences of midlife sexual liberation as general experiences, not taking into account the ways racist ideologies misrepresent and restrict the sexuality of women of color. Rather than feeling entitled to visceral expressions of desire without restriction, midlife women of color may find themselves negotiating their desires in proximity to powerful racist and sexist ideologies. For example, Flores points to the particular ways that Latinas are impacted by the virgin/whore dichotomy, and how historically this notion has been used to preserve the respectability of white women by denigrating Latinas (88). Flores argues that as a result, many Latinas have to contend with racist and sexist messages that their respectability and worth as a person is connected to their sexual propriety. Flores states "cultural messages about modesty and embarrassment about sexuality and sexual desire along with Latina objectification can result in reduced sexual satisfaction throughout

their life cycle” (89). Flores gives an example of how Latina midlife women may be burdened by the virgin/whore dichotomy in ways that white women are not when she notes how one of her therapy clients responded negatively to the suggestion that midlife should be a time of sexual fun for women. The client stated she felt troubled by “that puta thing”<sup>72</sup> and experienced a painful, offended reaction when her previous therapist encouraged her to feel empowered to have lots of sex in her forties (92). The assumption that midlife is a time of sexual freedom for women does not take into account how women of color are impacted by racist messages about their sexualities. Nor does this assumption take into account how racist messages might create additional barriers for women of color to experience the kind of entitled, unapologetic—perhaps even masculinist—sexual desire that is emphasized in stories about women coming out in midlife.

When stories about women coming out midlife call upon this culturally specific notion of midlife as a second adolescence—as a time of lessening responsibility, greater personal freedom, and sexual exploration—they privilege the experiences of particular women, but articulate these experiences as universal rather than specific. Rather than experiencing midlife as a second adolescence full of fun and personal growth, women of color and low-income women may contend with financial and cultural pressures and risks that make midlife stressful, a time of increased responsibility, and a time when one’s own desires are expected to be put aside. This is not to suggest that midlife must necessarily be a trying time for women of color and low-income women. A few studies suggest that women of color and working-class women may experience midlife as an opportunity for personal growth and internalize similar counter narratives that resist the idea of midlife as a time of decline for women (Tangri et al.; Flores; Miner-Rubino et al.). However,

experiencing midlife as a second adolescence is likely easiest when one has some material resources and a culturally affirmed sense of entitlement to personal satisfaction and sexual autonomy. Hence, this counter narrative about midlife as a second adolescence becomes a way for midlife women—all midlife women—to resist the idea that their lives are winding down and they are sexually uninteresting, and yet it does so in terms that best suit privileged subject positions.

*“Life after forty is so much better”: Midlife as an Empowering Time for Women*

Stories about women coming out midlife embrace a counter narrative of midlife as an empowering time for women, perhaps even as the best time of a woman’s life. This counter narrative has gained credence in U.S. culture over the course of the past thirty years. A significant body of research suggests that women, white college-educated women in particular, experience midlife as a time when they gain confidence, come into a stronger sense of self, and care less what other people think of them (Trethewey; Miner-Rubino et al.; McQuaide; Ogle and Damhorst; Stewart and Ostrove; Zucker et al.). While this notion that midlife is an empowering time for women is a useful and desirable counter narrative to the idea of midlife as a time of decline, this counter narrative is not equally available to all, as some subjectivities are discursively positioned to experience midlife as empowering, while others are absented from this conception of midlife. White, American college-educated women’s experiences of empowerment become the model of what empowerment looks like for midlife women in these stories, ignoring other ways of making sense of midlife, including less individualized notions of empowerment that women of diverse social locations might create and internalize. This does not mean that college-educated

women of color or women without a college education do not experience midlife as a time of increased confidence. A smaller body of research suggests that such women might have similar experiences to their white college-educated counterparts (Tangri et al.; Miner-Rubino et al.). However, I explore how the concept of empowerment embedded in these narratives is a culturally specific one that stresses the importance of individualized empowerment and women's autonomy from other people.

As I will discuss, the celebratory notion that “life gets better after forty” bespeaks a certain kind of individualism. Stories about women coming out midlife frame women as gaining personal forms of power in midlife, becoming detached from their connections to family or social pressures and turning into autonomous individuals no longer held back by fear of what others think of them. Personal empowerment is a hallmark of Western liberal feminism, and has been critiqued by feminists from the Global South for ignoring the ways non-Western women might be less likely to envision themselves as autonomous individuals and more likely to see themselves as part of networks of family, ethnic, and religious communities.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, framing midlife as time of increased confidence for women reveals assumptions of race and class privilege. I question what types of privilege one might need in order to find oneself able to be empowered and confident in this way.

In stories about women coming out midlife, forty signifies a turning point when a woman focuses her efforts inward and no longer feels restricted by social pressures, and in this way she becomes empowered to explore new or continuing attractions to other women. These stories circulate a relatively new conception of midlife popularized in consumer culture in which this period is a wonderful, self-fulfilling time, and these stories show investments in the popular “maxim that life begins at forty” (Featherstone and

Hepworth 201). Focus group participant Wilma Agnes demonstrated how this maxim functions through stories about women coming out midlife when she explained that she liked the term “late bloomer”<sup>74</sup> because it connotes that midlife is a positive time full of new opportunities for self-discovery and growth. She noted, “I love being a late bloomer because life is so much better after forty.” Wilma Agnes did not come out in midlife—she came out in her late twenties—but the term “late bloomer” still resonates with her and she feels empowered by the idea that her life is “so much better” now that she is in her forties. Her phrasing expresses that this is not true just for her, but that life in general is better after forty. She gestures to a larger cultural assumption that life for women is better after forty, in which “better” means that women become more confident and self-assured at that age. In this way, stories about women coming out in midlife reveal a common sense assumption operating in U.S. culture that women become their best selves during midlife.

However, the notion that life is better for women after forty implies a conception of midlife facilitated by class privilege, one which does not address how limited material resources might make midlife an anxious time rather than a triumphant, celebratory one. In her study of the well-being of midlife white women living in New York City, Sharon McQuaide found that one strong predictor of having low well-being was if a woman’s household income was under \$30,000 a year (25). McQuaide noted that “As long as family income was above \$30,000 per year, income made no difference,” suggesting that as long as her participants had a certain level of financial stability, income would not impact feelings of well-being (for instance, women did not report exponentially higher levels of well-being as their income increased above \$30,000 a year) (25). This would suggest that living in poverty or near the poverty line has a strong impact on the meanings of midlife

for women, and that not all women equally internalize, or have equal access to internalize, the maxim that “life begins at forty.”

This counter narrative functions to create a common sense notion that midlife women gain confidence, particularly sexual confidence. For instance, comedian Carol Leifer discusses her desire to have sex with women for the first time at age forty as something that the experience of turning forty facilitated. In an interview with *ABCNews.com*, she states, “I feel people are under the false impression: ‘There are no men left, I’ll go to women now,’ . . . . After 40, I felt emboldened to have an affair with a woman—40 sort of gave me permission to do that” (James Donaldson). Leifer’s description of feeling “emboldened” renders forty as a radical turning point in a woman’s life in which she becomes open to new things she would not have considered before. We can see a particular construction here of women’s midlife in which Leifer feels “permission” to have new desires because of the experience of turning forty, and suddenly feels empowered to explore new experiences such as sex with and dating women. A January/February 2013 *Curve* magazine interview with psychologist Lisa Diamond similarly frames women’s midlife as a time of increased self-assurance. Diamond speculates that women may come out midlife because they feel more confident than they did when they were younger. Diamond dispels the idea that women come out in midlife because of hormonal shifts, and she argues that it is more likely that women gain greater sexual confidence and freedom in midlife: “I think it is much more plausible that women who began to experience and act on same-sex attractions later in life experience a much greater sense of sexual freedom and autonomy than they did when they were younger, and might have more confidence expressing themselves sexually” (“Dr. Diamond’s Tips”). The

idea of women gaining “sexual freedom and autonomy” and finding “more confidence expressing themselves sexually” counters messages about midlife women as sexually invisible or their sexuality as a source of comedy.<sup>75</sup> This vision of midlife takes for granted that women will experience life after forty as a time of getting bolder and feeling more entitled to trying new things without fearing repercussions.

However, the assumption that increased confidence and feeling empowered to try new things is a feature of women’s midlife again reveals a particular set of class privileges. Miner-Rubino et al.’s study of both college-educated and non-college-educated men and women in midlife found that even though all participants reported higher levels of confidence as they aged, class (if access to a college education is understood as a marker of class) impacted confidence and concerns about aging over life course. Non-college-educated women reported lower levels of confidence than college-educated women throughout their twenties to sixties. Additionally, even though all women participants expressed greater concerns about aging as they got older, non-college-educated women reported more concerns about aging than college-educated women from their twenties to fifties, at which point college-educated women showed a sharper increase in such concerns from ages fifty to sixty (1604). This data may suggest “that regardless of gender and social class, it is the accumulation of life experience that leads to increases in self-knowledge so that individuals feel more certain about who they are, more confident, and more aware of what and how they can provide for future generations” (1606). Yet in another sense, this data suggests that characterizing midlife as a time of confidence and empowerment might overemphasize a middle-class experience of aging, and may not take into account the



lower feelings of confidence and the increased concerns about aging that living with less financial security may incite.

Furthermore, the assumption that women experience the confidence to take risks, to try new things, and to attend to their personal growth after age forty ignores class privilege, and how a midlife woman might not feel confident to take risks if she lives in financial precarity. McQuaide's study points to such class privilege when she notes that when she compared the participants with the highest scores of well-being to the lowest, she found that both groups conceptualized midlife as a time of "freedom," but that high scorers "were more likely to feel freedom 'to' do something new (for example, develop relationships with women friends, build a career) whereas low scorers were more likely to report freedom 'from' (for example, menstruation, pregnancy, and appearance worries)" (27-28). Considering McQuaide's finding that low income correlated to low well-being, it is likely that the lowest scorers in this study represent poor and working-class women, and this suggests that freedom and empowerment in midlife may take on different meanings in these women's lives than in middle-class women's lives. Feeling freedom "from" bodily stresses such as pregnancy and menstruation is a different notion of empowerment than feeling freedom "to do" something new like start a new career. This difference implies that midlife for middle-class women might represent a time of empowerment when they can take on new challenges and pursue their own (intellectual, spiritual, sexual) development, such as in stories of women coming out midlife that feature women exploring their sexualities and challenging themselves to have new kinds of romantic relationships. Yet based on the very limited research done on poor and working-class midlife women, this sense of possibility and entitlement to take risks in midlife might not be so pronounced for

such women. Perhaps women with lower incomes might feel confined by their fewer choices and economic resources, rather than feeling confidence to take on new risks. Perhaps women with less financial security might be preoccupied with the daily business of survival and fears of losing the ability to work as they age, rather than feeling “emboldened,” as Leifer says, to start a new life or to feel that the future holds good things for them.

Empowerment in these stories is characterized by caring less what others think as one gets older, which suggests an individualized, culturally specific idea of what midlife women’s empowerment entails. The idea that midlife women become less afraid of how others view them becomes a way to explain why women might suddenly feel empowered to explore attractions to other women. Focus group participant Tami expressed this idea when she argued that her own coming out was facilitated not just by the greater time she had after her parenting responsibilities declined, but also that being in one’s forties engenders confidence to be who one really is with less fear about what others will think. Tami stated, “[O]nce you’re in your forties, you just got to be who you are. Tired of trying to play games, and care less of what other people think.” Tami frames being in one’s forties as a point when one feels the strong drive to “be who you are” and to detach oneself from “what other people think.” For women in particular, the notion of caring less what others think as they age might be empowering after feeling restricted by the social policing of women’s sexuality and the opinions of men. However, to conceive of empowerment as being less beholden to the opinions of others suggests a certain kind of individualism commonly found within particular groups rather than a universal understanding of how empowerment functions.

Caring less what others think might be an accurate description of how some women experience midlife and why some women come out in midlife, but this should not be taken as a general experience. The luxury of not caring what others think suggests a level of autonomy and individualism which means that one is not dependent on other people for one's everyday survival. Additionally, such individualism suggests that one does not have strong cultural ties to a (ethnic, religious, and so on) community in which the opinions of other community members may have a strong impact on one's sense of self. Similar to Tami's point, when I asked focus group participant Rachel if she had any hesitations telling people she had married men before she came out as a lesbian, she stated, "No. I've gotten to the point where I just don't care what people think of me." Sherry supported Rachel's statement, adding that caring less about other people's opinions is a positive result of aging: "I think that comes as you get older. ... More willing to put it out there. And if you don't like it? See the door? [points toward door]." Rachel's and Sherry's statements relay a defiant kind of autonomy and freedom from worrying what others think of them, a sort of defiance that is obviously a source of empowerment for them and may well be a source of empowerment for many midlife women. However, their sentiments of not needing the affirmation or support of other people might be desirable and accessible to them precisely because of specific class and racial positioning, and in this way, their experiences of midlife should not be generalized to represent all women.

Non-Western feminists have criticized an individualized model of empowerment as a white, U.S. liberal feminist vision of what women's empowerment means. For instance, Micki McGee notes that when the iconic feminist self-help text *Our Bodies, Our Selves* was being translated into Spanish for a Latin American audience, the editors of the Spanish

edition found the concept of “self-help” problematic and not representative of the ways many Latin American women conceptualize themselves as embedded within their communities. McGee notes:

[T]he Latin American editors of the volume roundly critiqued the North American “Anglo” notion of self-help for its individuality, pointing out that this conceptual framework ignored the roles of family, friends, and other community members in a woman’s life. The editors banished the words “auto ayuda” (self-help) from the volume and substituted a framework of “ayuda mutal” or mutual aid. (“From Makeover” 687)

The editors chose to center the experiences of Latin American women by using a framework of “mutual aid,” thereby refusing an individualistic “North American ‘Anglo’ notion” of women’s empowerment. Whereas a white, U.S. feminist notion of empowerment emphasizes a woman’s ability to be in control of her own life, these Latin American feminists emphasized that a woman’s empowerment occurs in relation to her community, and that women should not be thought of as individualized agents separate from their communities. Other scholars have noted the way that an ethos of “mutual aid” also permeates African American communities in the U.S., again suggesting that an individualized notion of empowerment might be culturally specific to white people and white-centric discourse (Bulter). Stories about women coming out in midlife circulate this particular notion of midlife women’s empowerment in which empowerment is taken to mean no longer feeling accountable to opinions of others. Yet the assumption that midlife is an individually empowering time for women is taken for granted without discussion

about the different visions of empowerment women of varying racial and cultural backgrounds may manifest in midlife.

While it may be true that women of diverse racial, class, and cultural backgrounds can feel affirmed and inspired by a counter narrative of midlife women becoming more emboldened, more sexually confident, and more empowered to care less what people think of them, it also may be that this counter narrative could ring hollow to women who do not conceptualize their empowerment in individualized terms or who do not experience midlife as a time of increased confidence to take risks. In such cases, the counter narrative of life getting better after forty might seem relevant only for women who have certain race and class positioning and privileges.

### *The Self-as-Labor in Stories of Coming Out Midlife*

Stories about women coming out midlife conceptualize the self as a product of great labor and midlife as a time when women work to uncover or develop their true selves via intense self-reflection. The self must be worked at continuously in pursuit of what is sometimes referred to as the narrator's "truth," her essential core that will guide her through life. Much like in U.S.-based self-help cultures, the proper subject in these stories looks inward to gain full clarity about the self. Conversely, to not know oneself means being out of control, a tragic or irresponsible subject who has not sufficiently labored. An American ideology of hard work and meritocracy—the belief that hard work always leads to personal success—pervades this concept of the self-as-labor. Scholars note that self-help discourse reinforces neoliberal governmentality in which citizens self-regulate by investing all of their extra time and efforts into bettering the self, rather than directing their attention

to structural oppression and collective activity (Trethewey 213–217; McGee, “From Makeover” 690). Stories about women coming out midlife support the self-help conception of the self as a product of immense internalized labor. I will discuss how this individualized approach to the self-as-labor may best serve women with some race and class privilege, including the privileges of having leisure time for self-reflection, having the resources to prioritize their well-being rather than merely focusing on their everyday survival, and feeling entitled to having a good life because of one’s particular social location.

It is worth noting that self-help cultures may contain some liberatory potentials in the sense that self-help is a space in which people can express longings for life to be different, and that there is the possibility of harnessing such longings and directing them towards collective action or new possibilities for living (Trethewey 218–221; McGee, “From Makeover” 690–691; Illouz). Furthermore, marginalized people may use self-help as a radical act of affirming and reinstating their identities on a cultural landscape that negates and distorts their selves, such as in the space of black women’s self-help (Coleman 48). I approach the notion of self-as-labor in narratives about women coming out midlife to emphasize how such a notion of the self centers particular identities that feel entitled to having a fulfilling sense of self and a good life. However I also acknowledge that this notion of the self-as-labor articulates a vision of women’s midlife which resists a master narrative of decline, and furthermore, which critiques the condition of compulsory heterosexuality that may prevent women from embracing their authentic sexual identity before midlife. Thus, the notion of the self-as-labor may not only be an outgrowth of privilege and this concept of the self may in fact be a source of personal affirmation and

collective critique for women of varying social locations. I stress that these stories call on an idea of the self that best or most easily serves particular women who are socially positioned to believe that having a fulfilling sense of self and the time to work on the self is a reasonable and attainable goal, even if I acknowledge that this is not the only possibility for conceptualizing the self-as-labor.

Stories about women coming out midlife dovetail with self-help cultures by highlighting the work and reward of finding one's true self. There is an assumption in stories about women coming out that finding "who you really are" must be a hard process, and that one must labor consistently in order to gain clarity about the self, perhaps throughout the rest of one's life. Angela Tretheway calls this approach to the self the "enterprising self" or the "entrepreneurial subject," explaining, "Formed by the discourses of consumerism and psychology, the entrepreneurial subject is made responsible for his or her own personal, professional, and economic success" (187). In her study of white middle-class midlife women in managerial positions, Tretheway found the enterprising self was used by participants as a way to combat narratives of decline that unfairly construct midlife women in the workplace as deteriorating in value, productivity, and professionalism. Much like the idea that life is better after forty, Tretheway found that her participants resisted a narrative of decline by "attempt[ing] to become something different, indeed, better than their younger selves as they moved into midlife" (212). Thus, the enterprising self puts the burden of aging "successfully" on to individual women who through their choices can make midlife a time of personal growth and enhancement, rather than being viewed as the lazy and tragic woman who ages "badly."<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Micki McGee addresses the pressures in self-help culture to continue improving and argues that

constant self-improvement becomes imperative in late capitalism when “workers are asked to continually work on themselves in efforts to remain employable and reemployable, and as means of reconciling themselves to declining employment prospects” (*Self-Help, Inc.* 16). McGee argues that the self in America’s culture of self-help is a “belabored self” inundated with the work of becoming one’s best self in addition to the other labors that are required of people.<sup>77</sup> In stories about women coming out midlife, the belabored self or the enterprising self emerges in the sense that coming out midlife is framed as work on the self, including deep self-reflection and disciplined pursuit of the true self. This work is compulsory in the sense that not knowing the true self is a source of stigma and shame in U.S. culture. Much as in self-help cultures, stories about women coming out midlife approach the self as required labor, labor that will necessarily have a big payoff, and sometimes suggest that the work of becoming one’s best, most authentic self is never done.

By approaching the self as a product of rigorous internalized labor, stories about women coming out midlife embrace a privatized self in which one’s happiness comes primarily through one’s own hard work and individual choices. Such a concept of the self best serves individuals with race and class privilege, as there are fewer social and economic barriers in place to prevent them from reaping of the rewards of their hard work. There is an inherent meritocracy ideology at work here that might be more difficult to internalize if one continually works hard and one’s life does not improve as a result. Yet these stories emphasize women’s difficult internalized labor without acknowledging that individuals’ do not benefit from their hard work equally, as some people have more external pressures undoing the impact of their personal labors. For instance, focus group participant Wilma Agnes stated that she did not like most of the labels for women who



shift identities as adults because she felt terms like “late-onset-lesbianism,” “late-in-life lesbian,” or “jumping the fence” divest women of “agency” and devalue the hard work women employ to find their true selves. Wilma Agnes stated, “So many [of these labels] sound derogatory. They sound like they really drain a lot of agency out of the women, who...do what? Dig deep inside ourselves and acknowledge some of the truths that we’re feeling?!” Wilma Agnes responded to such labels as “derogatory” because these terms fail to acknowledge the labor of self-reflection that women perform when coming out during adulthood. Wilma Agnes argued that women show a great deal of “agency” and they “dig deep” into heretofore unexamined parts of themselves and develop the bravery to “acknowledge some of the truths we’re feeling.” This discourse connotes a larger cultural value placed on being a subject who looks inward and who labors through self-reflection to uncover an authentic self. Actress Meredith Baxter similarly demonstrates the high cultural premium placed on laboring at the midlife woman’s self when she frames coming out as a lesbian at age sixty-two as excavating parts of one’s self that had never come to light before. Baxter argues that her coming out process was facilitated by her recovery from alcoholism in a 12-step program and the rigorous “self-examination” such a program requires. In a 2009 *People* article, Baxter explains, “When you’re drinking the way I was drinking, you’re not open to learning anything about yourself . . . . When you start the self-examination, focus on what’s real as opposed to fantasy, then you’re bound to start discovering things about yourself” (Zuckerman). Baxter stresses that the work of the 12-step program required “self-examination” and being “open to learning about yourself,” a kind of laboring at the self she had been able to avoid with alcohol abuse. Thus, stories about women coming out midlife emphasize internalized and individualized labor

characterized by self-reflection, self-surveillance, and knowing the self in great detail. As will be become clear shortly, only certain bodies and lives are positioned as being able to benefit the most from this type of labor, and one's social location might impact whether one has the time and resources to look inward whilst also laboring at one's everyday survival.

Keeping in line with American self-help culture's vision of meritocracy and the ethos of The American Dream, stories about women coming out in midlife maintain that the result of all this hard work will always be good (Coleman 76-80). Wendy Simonds argues that self-help literature "revitalized the age-old American notions that material attainment and personal well-being are the results of properly focused desire. Individual destiny is seen as unfolding in accordance with hard work—but a new kind of hard work in which people turn their efforts inward" (144). Narratives of women coming out midlife celebrate this type of "properly focused desire" by framing the work of coming out midlife as having a payoff that will extend to every aspect of a woman's life—personal, professional, and otherwise. For instance, focus group participant Annie argued that coming out made her "whole life open up." Whereas before coming out Annie did not have a strong sense of who she was and tried to be the person everyone else needed her to be, Annie stated, "Once I came out and lived my truth, my feet were grounded, I walked upon the earth as who I am, and *my whole life* changed. My career went like that [snaps], my relationships, my everything." Annie asserted that the process of coming out revitalized her personal and her professional life, her labor of "living her truth" had the reward of finally finding the self she was always seeking. This idea is echoed in a 2006 *Oprah Winfrey Show* episode about women coming out after being married to men in which guest

JoAnn states that after she “found out who I was, I was able to flourish” (“Wives Living Two Lives”). The idea of “flourishing” as a result of uncovering the authentic self assumes that life will inevitably get better after one does the hard work of learning who one really is. Stories about women coming out midlife emphasize the reward of such labor. Life after coming out is represented as a time of great tranquility, dangling a possibility of rest and relaxation and of not having to labor at the self any more. For instance, Tami discussed her coming out process as a great “ta da!” moment that came after years of feeling “something was amiss I couldn’t put my finger on” and much time in “therapy trying to figure out what it was.” But the end result of this process of years of laboring and devoting resources to therapy was a greater clarity and happiness than she had known before. Tami argued that everyone would have a different coming out process but the end result of these individual processes would be a similar sense of joy. Tami stated, “But all I know is once you finally get there and figure out what it is... [big happy, smiling face].” Such stories assume a joy and ease after coming out, that coming out will bring about a plateau, a resting place, which one has earned after years of struggling to know the self and the hard work of uncovering one’s authentic sexual identity.

This kind of thinking is invested in an American ideology that through hard work one can obtain a good life, an ideology that ignores the role of discrimination and oppression in preventing underprivileged individuals from obtaining a good life. For instance, Tretheway argues that the enterprising self may be a useful counter narrative for “individual (White, middle class) women” in the workforce, but approaching the self as a product of individualized labor will not respond to the structural discrimination against midlife women in the workforce, especially midlife women of color and midlife women

with low incomes (217; 221).<sup>78</sup> Similarly, framing the hard work of coming out as something that inevitably makes one's life's better gestures to a particular privileged social location—white, middle-class, cisgender, able-bodied—in which one's minoritized sexual identity is the only barrier holding one back from flourishing wholly. For instance, when Baxter was asked how she felt after coming out publically on the *Today Show*, she stated that directly after the show she was filled with the sense that “I did not have any burdens any more” (SuchIsLifeVideos). This statement bespeaks a certain amount of privilege in that Baxter—a white, affluent woman living in L.A.—no longer feels the “burden” of hiding her sexual identity, and hence, finds herself without any “burdens” left to carry. Stories of women coming out midlife emphasize the hard work to uncover and/or accept the authentic self, but these stories do not consider the question, what if your life does not get better after you come out? What if a woman has more barriers to negotiate after she has put in the hard work of finding her truth? What if those barriers prevent her from having the time and resources for intense self-reflection and truth-searching in the first place? Much like the blind spots of the It Gets Better campaign,<sup>79</sup> the assumption that the hard work of coming out will take away all an individual's burdens ignores the realities of those individuals for whom coming out does not undo the impacts of poverty, racism, transphobia, or other barriers in their lives. Thus, the self-as-labor in stories of women coming out midlife reveals an implicit investment in an American ideology of hard work and meritocracy, including the way such ideology is blind to structural inequalities that make some lives more flexible, more responsive to laboring at the self, than others. To be fair, women talking about coming out midlife generally speak only of their own personal experiences rather than making generalized statements that life will get better for everyone

after coming out. However, self-as-labor discourse in stories about women coming out midlife implies a particular social location in which a narrator's privilege facilitates the ease with which she can have faith in the idea that one's internalized labor will lead to personal success.

In these stories, the ultimate goal of life is to gain absolute clarity about the self, and the way to successfully meet that goal is through the hard work of self-reflection. Such labor becomes compulsory in the sense that the idea of not knowing the self is framed as a shameful, tragic thing. In an interview with the *Advocate*, Baxter demonstrates the cultural imperative to gain clarity about the self, and how her own hard work of self-examination has led her to a place where she now had no "undiscovered pockets" of herself at all. When asked what has been the most rewarding part of her life since coming out publically, Baxter answers:

How do I describe this? The image that comes to mind . . . . You know with Jello, if you've ever had squares of Jello, and they've been cut up and put in a container, there's lots of air pockets. Well what came to mind was, all my squares of Jello have settled. I don't feel like there's undiscovered pockets in me, stuff I have to explain or be careful of or don't understand. I have a lot of clarity. (Von Metzke)

Baxter's metaphor of "Jello settling" to describe her experience of coming out midlife suggests a "a masterful, self-governing self" (McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.* 16), of no longer having any part of oneself that is a mystery. This metaphor carries cultural salience, as the unknown or unexamined self is viewed as a product of improper or insufficient labor. "Clarity" about the self is of utmost importance, whereas living as a person with "undiscovered pockets, stuff I have to explain or be careful of or don't understand" is

understood—understood on a larger cultural level, not necessarily by Baxter herself—as an inferior way to live by comparison. The labor of becoming clear to oneself cannot be finished until one is completely clear, enjoying the reward of being “settled,” free of all uncertainty, shame, or unknown aspects of one’s self. In a speech at a gay and lesbian rights event, tennis champion Billie Jean King<sup>80</sup> emphasizes the “discipline” it takes to become clear to oneself, suggesting that such labor might be never ending. King states, “I’m pretty clear. Hopefully I’ll get clearer ’til the day I die. ... Clarity is difficult. Finding your truth is not always easy. You have to just say that today I’m going to stay dedicated to my truth; to take the road less traveled; to follow the disciplines of life” (Planck). King’s statement, like Baxter’s, demonstrates the way that “clarity” becomes a premium in public discourse about women coming out midlife. The assumption is that clarity about the self is naturally the most desirable goal; furthermore, gaining this clarity is assumed to be “difficult,” “not always easy,” and a constant “disciplined” and “dedicated” process. This conception of the self-as-labor embraces the ideology that hard work pays off and that individuals’ well-being is directly dependent on the work they are willing to put into the self. For people who have fewer external worries—external worries such as economic pressures, the persistent threat of systemic violence, a high likelihood of employment and housing discrimination—the labor of turning inward to reflect on the self is more fruitful. Such internalized labor might seem like a better use of one’s time when one is not laboring at everyday survival. Yet differences in how some women are culturally positioned to prioritize self-reflection and to view gaining clarity about the self as a logical goal, whereas other women are not positioned to benefit from such work in the same way—or to

even believe such work is valuable compared to more pressing concerns—is not recognized in stories about women coming out midlife.

Whereas the idea of gaining clarity about the self in midlife is prized in these stories, the converse possibility of not knowing the self carries a great deal of stigma, because failing at the task of sufficiently working at the self becomes a shameful and tragic thing in a self-help orientated culture. As a result of the cultural priority placed on knowing the self, women who become aware of their same-sex desires for the first time in midlife may feel shame about having been blind to a part of their selves for most of their lives. Annie noted that when she came out in her forties she felt great shame for not knowing herself, she stated, “It is, to me, deeply embarrassing that I could go through [over forty] years clueless. How does that happen? I’ve always prided myself on my intellect.” Realizing that her true sexual identity had been unknown to her for so long made Annie question her “intellect” and to feel lacking for having been “clueless.” Such shame stems from a cultural imperative that the correct way to live involves having deep understanding of one’s self, and that the inferior way to live is to not understand one’s self. Baxter gestures to this cultural imperative to know oneself and the correlating shame of not knowing the self in her statements about coming out only after she sought treatment for alcoholism. Baxter argues that alcoholism coupled with survival tactics she used during an abusive relationship kept her “unawake and unaware” to her true self (Zuckerman). In an interview on daytime talk show, *The Joy Behar Show*, Baxter clarifies that she never hid her lesbian identity before, but she was just “so un-self-examined” that she did not become aware of her identity until after she entered a 12-step program (SuchIsLifeVideos). The notion of self-knowledge is privileged to the point that the idea of being an “un-self-

examined person”—perhaps not having the space, time, or safety for deep self-reflection, or not being interested in such a pursuit—means being a tragic figure. Both Baxter and Annie articulate shame about their past states of being “unawake and unaware.”<sup>81</sup> While certainly it makes sense that individuals would feel sadness over the social or personal barriers in their lives that kept them from embracing their authentic sexual identities, I cannot help but wonder if the maxim to know oneself might not exacerbate women’s feelings of shame when they come out midlife. Additionally, stories about women coming out midlife position women who have the most resources—free time, living in safety from violence, access to therapy and treatment, economic resources—to engage in the work of finding the true self as the most self-actualized, most healed subjects. Women who do not have such resources may be unwilling or unable to undergo laboring at the self, and as such, may be perceived (by others, by themselves) as tragic and shameful unexamined subjects.

Stories about women coming out midlife naturalize the notion that some subjects—subjects with access to white and middle-class privileges—are entitled to a good life and to have a self-fulfilling identity, and that these desires are natural and understandable things for these particular subjects to want. Feeling entitled to being the best you can be and having a life that best suits you should be understood as an outgrowth of a privileged social position, but stories about women coming out midlife do not address this entitlement as such. Certainly I would not begrudge individuals feeling entitled in this way, and I believe that the desire to have a fulfilling life can be a powerful drive that incites significant personal and collective change. Thus, I do not use the word “entitlement” with the connotation of negative judgment this word usually implies. Additionally, while this is not



to say that such entitlement can only be internalized by white, middle class people, less privileged people might not come to such entitlement with such ease and may have more obstacles continually testing their faith in the belief that a good life is possible for them. Arlene Stein points to this when she discusses the “extraordinary degree of entitlement” felt by white middle-class lesbians of the baby boom, an entitlement not shared by white working-class lesbians or lesbians of color of the same generation (131). Stein argues that middle-class and white privilege allowed women to “believ[e] that they were entitled to control their own lives and to construct a sense of self that was as fulfilling as possible—not just in sexual terms, but in all regards. Few working-class women and women of color harbored such grand hopes” (131). Stories about women coming out midlife frame the entitlement to having “a sense of self that was as fulfilling as possible” as an attainable goal, and do not acknowledge how privilege makes this type of entitlement not fully accessible to all women. As such in stories about women coming out midlife naturalize the idea that the (mostly white and/or middle-class) women featured should strive for a fulfilling life and an authentic self, but other bodies and lives are implicitly distanced from this kind of entitlement through the absence of critical attention to subject position in these stories.

Entitlement to a good life is apparent in an August 2010 *20/20* episode in which Shira Neuberger explains that part of her decision to leave her ex-husband and partner with a woman was informed by a desire to model for her daughters that they could be anything they want to be in life. Neuberger states, “I am trying to raise my children to be who they want to be. To really live out their dreams for their selves. And I realize I needed to have the courage to continue making the changes that worked for me” (“Wife Begins New

Life”). Certainly, many parents regardless of race or class have hopes for their children to “really live out their dreams for their selves” and to “be who they want to be,” yet Neuberger and women like her—white women with children living in affluent suburbs—are depicted as the kind of people for whom it is fully rational to have a life defined in terms of possibility. This *20/20* episode demonstrates a broader cultural logic in which particular subjects are positioned so that “living out their dreams for their selves” seems natural, rather than recognizing this entitlement as an artificial construct engendered by race and class privilege.

This same cultural logic is repeated in Annie’s comment that she counsels women on an online forum that coming out midlife is not “selfish,” but rather is “self-centered,” and she revises the latter term to mean a positive centering of one’s needs and goals that had been suppressed before. Such discourse makes it seem natural to put oneself at the center of one’s priorities, ignoring the ways the labor of centering the self may not be equally available to all women. Annie stated she tells women coming out midlife, “It’s not selfish, it’s self-centered. And that’s because you center yourself and you go through life living your truth.” The idea of centering one’s self relies on the privilege of believing one has a right to “center yourself” and to “live your truth.” As a professional class white woman, Annie likely had access to affirming messages during that process that it was appropriate for her to want such a thing. Learning how to “center” what one wants rather than being what everyone else wants is not an easy task, and Annie would have needed discursive resources such as the entitlement to a good life—and perhaps material resources—to help facilitate her labor of self-centering. Annie spoke of many obstacles in her life that she felt had prevented her from realizing her authentic lesbian sexuality before

midlife, including growing up in an abusive home, being raised with restrictive fundamentalist religious beliefs, and coming of age during a historical time period when there was no cultural visibility of lesbians. These are real obstacles and Annie's story is powerful because she worked through messages she received that she was not entitled to her own desires in order to live a life that centered her desires. Yet I cannot help but wonder how Annie's privilege served her through this difficult process, and how a woman with less privilege may not have found enough support and resources to feel entitled to "center yourself" and "live your truth." In a just world, the kind of hard labor Annie performed to live her truth would be possible for all, yet stories about women coming out illuminate the ways that such healing and empowering labor is not equally accessible to everyone. In the dominance of particular subject positions in these stories and the absence of critical discussions of race and class privilege, certain subjects are positioned as naturally entitled to a good life and a fulfilling sense of self, and these desires are implicitly constructed as less reasonable, less possible for other absented subjects.

Stories about women coming out midlife involve people doing hard things, and offer the pleasures of seeing women overcome personal and social barriers in their lives. Part of what makes such stories moving and empowering might be that they emphasize that the hard work of laboring at the self will end in personal triumph, and that individuals should feel entitled to having their best life, their best self. These are not bad desires to have. Instead, they are desires that speak to a particular cultural lens and center a specific subject position. Certain subjects are socialized to believe that having a good life is possible for them and a natural thing to want. These subjects have the opportunity to successfully labor at the self and to reap the benefits of this type of internalized labor. Less

privileged subjects are not culturally positioned to make this type of good life a natural, obtainable entity. They may find that if they labor at the self through self-reflection that continuous external obstacles may prevent them from benefiting from such labor, and they may view such labor as not worthy of their time compared to more urgent concerns related to everyday survival. Yet, the cultural particularity of the self-as-labor found in stories about women coming out in midlife is not explicitly addressed and this concept of the self implicitly circulates as general experience for midlife women.

### *Conclusion*

The constructs of midlife I have explored in this chapter—midlife as a second adolescence for women, midlife as an empowering time for women, the self-as-labor—reveal investments in culturally specific subject positions even as those subject positions go unmarked in stories about women coming out midlife. It is not only that certain bodies and lives are prevalent in these stories—that popular media has a love affair with white, affluent, conventionally feminine women who come out midlife—but, additionally, discourses that produce meanings about women's midlife are limited such that only some women can easily live out an empowering, affirming counter narrative about midlife.

Stories about women coming out midlife illuminate a trap operating within conceptions of women's midlife in the contemporary U.S. On the one hand, a dominant narrative of decline devalues midlife women and tells women they should expect midlife to be a time when they are no longer attractive, sexually exciting, professionally productive, or full of potential like they were when they were young. On the other hand, a counter narrative emerges as a foil for this dominant narrative in which midlife is a time of

possibility, a chance to make oneself new, and a way for women to conceive of midlife as the beginning of the best part of their lives, not the end. While this counter narrative is presented as a universal possibility for all women, looking more closely, we can see this discursive resource is actually unevenly distributed according to privilege and how certain subjects are culturally positioned so that defining life in terms of possibility is natural for them. The trap then becomes that while this counter narrative about women's midlife ostensibly promises more freedom to women, it relies on an existing social hierarchy in which only particular women can be free in this way. Furthermore, the very definition of freedom here centers certain worldviews and ignores other definitions that might be more salient to a diverse group of women. This counter narrative has limited potential to facilitate structural or collective change in how midlife women are viewed and treated because it first and foremost speaks to and for a small set of privileged women. Thus, the way to triumph as a midlife woman becomes an individualized, isolating task in which one's happiness and well-being is one's own responsibility, dependent on how hard one works at creating a fulfilling midlife self. This does a double disservice: first, women with the most privilege and the fewest external barriers will benefit the most from this counter narrative; second, the structural inequities which limit midlife women's possibilities are not addressed in this counter narrative, and thus no real challenge has been waged against misogynist institutions which devalue midlife women in the first place.

And yet, that does not mean that there are not possibilities for greater, more widespread change embedded in narratives of women coming out midlife. We cannot predict in advance how individual women might use the notion that life begins in one's forties. It could be that the recent popularity of stories about women coming out midlife

engenders more resources for women to collectively question the notion that sexual identity is forged in adolescence and to collectively reject a misogynist narrative that midlife women's sexuality is either invisible or comic. McGee notes that some pockets of self-help culture have "created discursive spaces for considering life-style possibilities that are neither conformist nor normative," and that self-help allows people to articulate desires for a different life, desires that could be harnessed into collective action to making structural changes ("From Makeover" 686; 690-691). In a similar way, stories about women coming out midlife reveal desires to reimagine women's midlife as a time of potential, especially erotic potential, and empowering change. Diamond gestures to such desires when she notes that greater cultural visibility of women's sexual fluidity in midlife might be exciting for women because it suggests that one might change in a part of one's life that one was socialized to believe would be a boring and depressing time. Diamond states:

While some people find change threatening ... others find it exciting and liberating, and I definitely think that for women in middle adulthood and late life, they might be the most likely to find sexual shifts empowering. We're an anti-ageing society. We like people to be young, nubile and attractive. And I think the notion that your sexuality can undergo these really exciting, expansive possibilities at a stage when most people assume that women are no longer sexually interesting and are just shutting down, is potentially a really liberating notion for women. (Cochrane)

Diamond's statement gestures to new possibilities for thinking about and living midlife as a woman in "an anti-aging society." Stories about women coming out in midlife reimagine

midlife as a time characterized by “exciting, expansive possibilities,” and frame change later in life not as “threatening,” but instead as “liberating” and “empowering.” Such stories may engender possibilities for living differently than a master narrative of decline. Additionally, such stories create discursive resources for women to question compulsory heterosexuality. When I asked women in my focus groups if they had been exposed—via popular culture or their everyday lives—to stories about women coming out midlife and/or after being married to men before participants began questioning their identities, many of them stated they had not but they wished they had been because such stories might have filled them with a sense that a different life was possible and they might have come out earlier or never gotten married to men in the first place. Thus, I cannot be cynical about the proliferation of stories about women coming out midlife in U.S. culture, even if such stories are limited in terms of the women they best serve and most directly speak to. These stories may center particular subjectivities and emphasize individualistic forms of freedom, but there is still the possibility of these stories having a broader impact and of being used by women of diverse social locations in unpredictable ways.

More critical work is needed to explore the experiences of women coming out midlife (and women’s midlife more generally) from a diversity of social locations. While such work might not necessarily bring to light conceptions of midlife that are different from the ones I have explored in this chapter, it is impossible to know without undertaking this kind of work on a larger scale and with more frequency than the current literature reflects. I approach stories of women coming out midlife acknowledging the range of empowering possibilities and limitations these stories encompass. Throughout this dissertation, I attend to the play of power and privilege in discourse about once-

heterosexual-identified women, and the ways that even privileged individuals find themselves having to negotiate tricky power dynamics. These figures tell stories which simultaneously complicate dominant thinking about sexuality and participate in building dominant thinking. I will pick up this tricky negotiation of power in the next chapter by looking at the inconsistent role of normalcy in stories about once-heterosexual-identified women.



## CHAPTER 4.

NATIONAL BELONGING, ILLEGITIMACY, AND ANXIETY:  
THE INCONSISTENT EFFECTS OF NORMALIZING DISCOURSES ON ONCE-  
HETEROSEXUAL-IDENTIFIED WOMEN

Scholarly and political arguments about the normalcy of LGBTQ people are well known and well rehearsed. It is popularly believed by many LGBTQ people and their allies that normalizing discourses are the best method for securing full rights of citizenship for sexual and gender minorities in the U.S.<sup>82</sup> Yet, critical scholars and radical activists underscore that normalcy is a limited and problematic respectability politics that will only benefit the most privileged LGBTQ people while further marginalizing individuals who cannot or will not meet standards of normalcy.<sup>83</sup> I argue that my research points to an under-theorized aspect of normalcy: while a politics of normalcy appears straightforward, straightforwardly effective to its supporters and straightforwardly misguided to its critics, normalcy is not nearly as simple as it might appear; it is in fact remarkably inconsistent. Depending on the context in which notions of normalcy circulate and the subject position of those employing such notions, normalcy can have dramatically different effects, even on the same group of people.

In this chapter, I examine three sites in which the idea that once-heterosexual-identified women are normal is invoked by different agents to produce contrasting meanings about such women. Rather than uncritically accepting normalcy as a road to citizenship and national belonging, or cynically understanding normalcy as only a narrow respectability politics, my context-specific approach tells a more complex story about normalcy. In this case study, normalcy operates as a way for individuals with stable sexual identities to mark once-heterosexual-identified women as illegitimate outliers in LGBTQ

communities, as a way for focus group participants to describe themselves as members of a normal majority of LBGQ people, and as a way for popular media to represent such women as strangely normal sources of titillation and anxiety. What it means to be “normal” changes in each site, which demonstrates that normalcy is not a coherent concept but rather a hollow touchstone—a shell that can house disparate meanings when invoked by different speakers. Ultimately the case of once-heterosexual-identified women should call into question easy certainty about normalcy, and draw our attention to the paradoxical, uneven effects of normalizing discourses.

Arguments that gays and lesbians are normal and hence worthy of greater social inclusion have been popular in the U.S. at least since the homophile movement of the 1950s (Richardson and Seidman), however, normalcy has recently become the dominant way to understand sexual minorities’ relationship to the nation. Diane Richardson argues that the figure of the normal gay and lesbian citizen has eclipsed older models of the homosexual as a threat to the nation, even if only some gays and lesbians can fit this national construct of normalcy (“Locating Sexualities” 394). What constitutes “normal” in this construct involves a specific set of racialized, classed, gendered, and sexual expectations: being in a monogamous partnership, ideally a legal marriage; raising children; having a conventional gender presentation; embodying middle class affect and participating in consumer cultures; downplaying racial identity; and eschewing the kinds of differences in appearance, lifestyle, and politics which LGBTQ communities have historically cultivated.<sup>84</sup> Thus, normalcy is not merely a quality one inherently has or does not have but a performance that must be constituted through specific actions and particular affective investments.<sup>85</sup> The cultural imperative for individuals to embody such a

performance is intensified in this contemporary era because sexual citizenship is currently deeply dependent on being viewed as normal.

The concept of sexual citizenship stresses that citizenship expands beyond stated rights (such as voting) to include being fully recognized as a citizen in the imaginative sphere of the nation: a fully legitimate part of the nation, worthy of protection, and part of the cultural imagination of what constitutes an “American” (Phelan 3). Individuals and social groups are given these full rights of citizenship only if they meet certain expectations. David Bell and Jon Binnie describe the “compromise” of citizenship as: “the twinning of rights with responsibilities in the logic of citizenship is another way of expressing compromise—we *will grant you certain rights if (and only if) you match these by taking on certain responsibilities*” (2–3, emphasis original). Until very recently, heterosexuality was the tantamount expectation of sexual citizenship that needed to be fulfilled for rights to be granted (Phelan; Bell and Binnie; Richardson, “Locating Sexualities”). Yet, Bell and Binnie argue that heterosexuality is less important in gaining sexual citizenship in this contemporary moment than meeting the demand of “a modality of sexual citizenship that is privatized, deracialized, deeroticized, and *confined* in all senses of the word: kept in place, policed, limited” (3, emphasis original). Under these conditions, only those sexual minorities who embody this “privatized, deracialized, deeroticized” sexuality may be recognized as good citizens. Accordingly, the construct of the “normal” gay citizen creates non-citizens (including some heterosexuals) who cannot or will not meet contemporary expectations for sexual citizenship (Warner; Cohen; Phelan; Puar; Richardson, “Desiring Sameness?”).<sup>86</sup>

Thus, critics have good reason to be wary of normalizing discourses that only affirm some LG (and to a lesser extent) BTQ people at the expense of many others. I personally have political alliances with such critiques of normalizing discourses, and it is not my intent to suggest that normalcy is not an exclusionary construct or to argue that normalcy does not confer privilege on those with the most privilege. Normalcy does in fact function in those manners. However, at the same time, the concept of normalcy is less stable than it might initially appear and can produce unexpected effects. Richardson cautions us against approaching normalcy as merely a sign of assimilation, arguing:

It is important ... to recognize that the consequences of “gay normalization” may be uneven, and we should be careful to collapse analysis into a simple dichotomy of assimilation versus contestation across all sites and locations of citizenship, or even within one particular rights issue. (“Locating Sexualities” 400)

The “uneven consequences” Richardson investigates include how gays and lesbians restructure modes of family, marriage, and citizenship, and how the new construct of the normal gay and lesbian citizen creates “self-reflexive heterosexual subjects” (“Locating Sexualities” 399-400; 402). I take to heart Richardson’s useful reminder not to be too certain about the meanings and effects of normalizing discourses as I explore three sites in which the idea that once-heterosexual-identified women are normal produces “uneven consequences.” I acknowledge that normalcy acts as a source of cultural power for privileged LGBTQ people (as are many once-heterosexual-identified women represented in media and in my focus groups), but also I pay attention to the sometimes contradictory

effects that unfold *in addition to* the potential of normalcy to give a narrow set of LGBTQ people access to privilege and belonging.

My analysis highlights the inconsistent meanings and effects of normalcy across three sites in order to demonstrate the foundational incoherence of the notion of normalcy. First, I explore how a larger cultural context challenges the legitimacy of once-heterosexual-identified women's LGBTQ identities on the grounds that such women's past romantic relationships with men and their feminine gender presentations mark them as too normal to be authentically LGBTQ. Normalcy in this site means heterosexual personal history and femininity, and this concept of normalcy is employed by individuals with stable sexual identities to mark once-heterosexual-identified women as objects of suspicion and to claim that such women cannot be who they say they are. My second site of analysis reveals how focus group participants deploy the notion of normalcy in a way that counters efforts by detractors to delegitimize once-heterosexual-identified women. Participants assert themselves as part of a larger majority of normal LGBTQ people. Normalcy in this site means performing middle-class attainment, gender normalcy, and intimate norms such as monogamous coupledness, but performing as part of a collective of normal LGBTQ people rather than participants becoming outliers in LGBTQ communities because of their normalcy. Lastly, I explore how once-heterosexual-identified women are represented in major network news stories, women's magazines, and TV talk shows as exceptionally normal, which becomes a source of both titillation and anxiety in popular media. Normalcy in this site means an ideal of how to live in terms of class attainment, feminine gender and attractiveness, and performing roles of wife and mother. In contrast to participants' attempts to blend into a normal majority, once-heterosexual-identified women are

represented in popular media as excelling at normalcy in a way that implicitly sets them apart from other LGBTQ women. However, unlike the first site in which once-heterosexual-identified are challenged because they are viewed as normal, media texts mark such women as strange because of their normalcy—as fascinating mysteries to be figured out by audiences—but the idea of normalcy is not employed to delegitimize their sexual identities. Thus, even as the word or idea of “normalcy” is invoked in each site, if we pay close attention we can see that the conceptual content of normalcy—what it means to be “normal” and how that affects once-heterosexual-identified women—changes from site to site.

I offer the case of once-heterosexual-identified women as a place to begin speculating on how our understanding of normalcy might change if we adopted a more-context specific view, if we acknowledged that normalcy has inconsistent effects even on the same group of relatively privileged people. Normalizing discourses may well function to maintain privilege of those who are already privileged, yet this is not the only effect normalcy creates. Normalcy is not a monolith, but rather a live entity. Normalcy moves, twists and turns, and produces effects that complicate dominant understandings of normalcy as *either* an empowering discourse for mainstreaming LGBTQ people *or* a problematic discourse which only empowers the most privileged at the expense of more marginalized people.

*Illegitimacy, Invisibility, and Suspicion: The Cultural Context in which Normalcy Challenges Once-Heterosexual-Identified Women's Authenticity*

Focus group participants gestured to a larger cultural context in which people with thus far stable sexual identities refer to once-heterosexual-identified women's normalcy to undercut such women's claims to LGBTQ identities. Participants shared stories about receiving messages that they did not meet a standard of an authentic sexual minority identity because they were supposedly too similar to heterosexual women based on their history of romantic relationships with men and their normative femininity.<sup>87</sup> These delegitimizing messages did not come from one place but rather from multiple angles: from lesbian-identified women, especially in dating contexts and from heterosexual family members. Participants' stories are not merely negative interactions with particular individuals, or merely indicative that participants did not meet subcultural standards of lesbian dating circles; rather, their stories indicate a broader cultural context in which authentic LGBTQ identity is defined by sexual stability and gender inversion. In this greater cultural context, changing sexual identity as an adult makes one an object of suspicion, and as such, it becomes easy for others to treat once-heterosexual-identified women as untrustworthy, illegitimate LGBTQ women trying to pass themselves off as something they are not.

In this first site, once-heterosexual-identified women's normalcy—normalcy figured here as their perceived heterosexuality—undermines their LGBTQ identifications and alienates them from LGBTQ communities. Being visible as a normal subject is typically understood as a source of privilege, and, as will become more apparent in the following site, once-heterosexual-identified women can access certain privileges because of their

perceived normalcy. However, in this site we see a more complicated, perhaps unexpected, effect of the idea that once-heterosexual-identified women are normal because this site illustrates that ways that normalcy can make once-heterosexual-identified women illegitimate. The idea that normalcy signals heterosexuality can actually challenge such women's attempts to define their sexual identities in their own terms. As we tell ourselves that to be perceived as normal is to access privilege, we ignore how normalcy also delegitimizes women's claims to their identities and their place in LGBTQ communities, and we simplify the full range of normalcy's effects.

The cultural tendency to associate LGBTQ sexualities with gender inversion and to doubt the authenticity of feminine LGBTQ women is intensified in the case of once-heterosexual-identified women. Feminine LGBTQ women with a history of romantic relationships with men may be doubly challenged as too normal, which is to say too heterosexual in terms of personal history and gender presentation, to be truly LGBTQ.<sup>88</sup> Participants were told by lesbian-identified women and by heterosexual family members that their feminine gender presentations signify heterosexuality, and hence, participants could not really be LGBTQ. While certainly not all participants were conventionally feminine, many participants shared stories of the ways that their femininity created obstacles and conflict for them when they were coming out. The issue of femme or feminine LGBTQ women being misread as heterosexual is certainly not distinct to once-heterosexual-identified women, and femme invisibility has long been discussed in LGBTQ women's communities (Nestle; Harris and Crocker; Hollibaugh; Rose and Camilleri; Galewski). What sets participants' experiences apart from experiences of femme invisibility generally is that focus-group participants often face *double forms of erasure*:



the notion that one is not a “real” LGBTQ woman if one is feminine compounds with the notion that if one shifts identity one is suspect and cannot be a legitimate LGBTQ woman.

Perceived normalcy and visibility can have strange, seemingly illogical relationships to one another. Cultural critics often argue that the normalcy of the feminine or femme lesbian makes her a palatable and more commercially lucrative figure than that of the butch lesbian and this is why the femme is represented in popular culture as “new,” “chic,” and “hot,” while the butch has been nearly erased in mainstream representations (Ciasullo; Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*; Kessler). Yet Rebecca Beirne points out that the femme’s visibility in popular culture does not necessarily mean that the feminine lesbian is a celebrated figure. Instead, Beirne argues the feminine lesbian is simultaneously hypervisible as a representation of contemporary lesbianism and yet not credible as a real lesbian:

[T]he masculine lesbian is figurally all but absent but is subtextually coded as the ‘real lesbian,’ while the feminine lesbian is simultaneously hypervisible (though arguably the camp femme is not) and yet signified as ‘not real.’ What seems to be merging herein are two seemingly counterposed forms of gender policing—lesbian masculinity remains unseen, while lesbian femininity remains unreal.

(*Lesbians in Television* 15)

Hence, the feminine lesbian is hypervisible in cultural “landscapes,” but still disavowed as a real lesbian within the cultural “imagination.”<sup>89</sup> This creates a cultural condition in which feminine gender presentation undermines LGBTQ women’s authenticity. Even as feminine LGBTQ women are hypervisible on account of their normative gender, most audiences do not view such women’s claims to their sexual identities as believable.

Focus group participants were well aware that their newly articulated LGBTQ identities seemed unbelievable to many people because of their feminine gender presentations. Several participants shared stories of being challenged by their parents while coming out because their parents took participants' femininities as evidence of their heterosexuality. Karen stated that her parents were "so upset" when she came out as lesbian, despite the fact that Karen has a female cousin who is gay and accepted by the family. Karen pointed out that the difference was that her cousin was "always really tomboyish" whereas when Karen was younger she was "girly and frilly" and had "long hair and braids and it was up in curlers." Similarly, Betty compared her coming out to her girlfriend's and said while it was hard for her girlfriend's parents when she came out "they kind of expected it." Betty's girlfriend wore "boy's clothes" as a child and was policed by her mother to act more "like a girl." Betty, on the other hand, described herself as a "girly girl" who dressed her cats up, played with Barbies, and loved princesses as a child. Because of her femininity, Betty states she thinks her parents had a "harder time" when she came out because they could not envision her as a lesbian. Lynlee went as far as to say that she adopted a more masculine gender presentation when she was coming out because her mother was "really not supportive" and Lynlee felt "like I had to be more gay so that she would get it. ... Like I had to be gay in a way she could think of." Thus, participants found themselves contending with a cultural context in which gender inversion equals lesbian authenticity and femininity (for women) equals heterosexuality, and they were read by their parents as too feminine—too normal—be believable as gay or lesbian women. Kelley accented this point with her converse experience. Upon coming out, Kelley adopted a masculine gender presentation and found she liked it, and now strangers read her

masculinity and “automatically think, ‘Oh that person has been a lesbian since she was four and a half,’” and are “surprised when they find out I’ve ever been with a guy, much less a slew of them.” Thus, Kelley’s masculinity makes her culturally recognizable as a lesbian, and unless Kelley announces that she has dated “a slew” of men, her lesbian sexuality is not suspicious or unbelievable to most audiences.

The widespread notion that participants cannot be legitimate LGBQ women because they are normatively feminine functions as a way for others to pointedly disregard participants’ articulations of their sexual identities. As such, perceived normalcy may not always be a source of empowerment for once-heterosexual-identified women and normalcy’s effects depend on the particularities of context. A lesbian who performs gender normalcy might be less likely to be discriminated against at work, or more culturally visible in television or fashion, but her perceived normalcy actually works against her when she wants to be visible as a lesbian at a gay bar, to her parents, or to strangers on the street. In these latter contexts, her gender normalcy signifies heterosexuality and becomes an obstacle for her to be understood on her own terms. Thus, we should pay attention to these uneven workings of normalcy. In this case gender normalcy might provide access to certain privileges, but it also has the contradictory effect of making feminine LGBQ women illegitimate, depending on the context and the subject position of who is articulating the notion that such women are normal.

The notion that conventionally feminine women are not real LGBQ women intensifies in the case of women who have shifted sexual identities because of cultural suspicion of individuals who cross borders of identity. For once-heterosexual-identified women who are both feminine and have partnered with men, there is a perfect storm to

navigate in which it is easy to assume such women are not who they say they are—and this assumption is deployed not just by people with stable sexual identities, but sometimes even by such women themselves. Invisibility as a feminine LGBTQ woman may become imbricated with feelings of illegitimacy as a woman who came out “late.” This double erasure of feminine once-heterosexual-identified women’s LGBTQ sexualities—once on the grounds of their normative gender and once on the grounds of their personal history—creates a cultural context in which such women are not believable as authentic sexual minorities because of their perceived normalcy. Annie made this connection when she stated that her girlfriend does not see Annie as a “real lesbian.” Annie came out in her forties, and she believes that she has always been a lesbian, but was not aware of that fact until midlife. In contrast, Anne’s girlfriend acknowledged her same-sex desires from adolescence onward. Annie explained that her girlfriend’s masculine gender presentation impacts this difference between them, because her girlfriend’s gender allowed her to imagine herself as lesbian in a way Annie could not as a feminine woman. Annie explains this in an exchange with Jo A.:

Annie: “[My girlfriend] cannot wrap her head around in any way shape or form how I could have gone through adolescence not knowing I was gay. Like, ‘You couldn’t have not known, I don’t care what you say. You couldn’t have not known if you were, so you weren’t.’”

Jo A.: “Did she grow up in the cave that we did?”

Annie: “The thing is she’s a jock. If I had been a jock growing up, I would have got it.”

In this moment, Annie points to the ways that her girlfriend's masculine gender presentation facilitated her coming to know her sexual identity and coming out. Annie's femininity, however, became one of many obstacles impeding Annie's ability to envision herself as a lesbian. Annie's story highlights the way that we do not come to know ourselves through some kind of natural drive, but rather through culture. In this larger cultural context where femininity equals heterosexuality, Annie as a feminine woman who has been married to and had children with a man becomes unbelievable as a lesbian to her girlfriend, and even to Annie's younger self. It becomes easier to understand Annie as not who she says she is, a lesbian who has been a lesbian all her life, because Annie's perceived normalcy signifies heterosexuality.

Participants also shared that people with stable sexual identities, especially lesbian-identified women, often perceived participants' past relationships with men as an indicator of participants' heterosexuality or desire for men, even when participants explicitly countered that notion. The concept of normalcy—normalcy understood here as heterosexual personal history—functions as a tool in these moments for lesbian-identified women with exclusively same-sex dating histories to reject or doubt women who shift identities. Detractors define authentic lesbian identity in contrast to participants' perceived normalcy and create a definition of authenticity that most closely resembles their own experience—or what they believe will continue to be their experience—of having a static understanding of their orientation. Participants' experiences should not be understood as merely interactions with rude or mean-spirited people—though that may be true—but as pointing to a greater cultural condition in which changing sexual identity makes one an object of suspicion.

Julia gave an example of this condition when she described her initial difficulty dating women. Julia stated that once potential dates found out she had recently divorced her ex-husband, they refused Julia's identification as a lesbian. Julia states that during this time she "got hung up on," "I was told I couldn't be a lesbian because I had just ended a marriage. I was told I had to be bisexual." Underlying these reactions is the assumption that any woman who could be married to a man could not legitimately be a lesbian. This assumption made other lesbian-identified women feel they could define Julia's sexual identity for her. Like Julia, Annie also experienced other lesbian-identified women attempting to define her as bisexual or straight—and Annie noted that it was clear when people did so that these acts were intended to be "derogatory." These hostile reactions to Annie's lesbian identity rely on the assumption that a woman who shifts sexual identities as an adult is not trustworthy, that she will leave her new female partner for a man. Annie said when she came out to other lesbians she was told "'Um, no, you're really bi if you're anything, I mean you were married *twice*.' ... I had people tell me, 'You're not going to get a lesbian to touch you with a ten foot pole, sweetheart, because you'll just go back to some man. Look at you, *look at you*—you're just some straight girl playing around.'" By naming Annie and Julia as "bisexual at best" or "some straight girl playing around," lesbian-identified women police the boundaries of lesbian community, making use of a cultural condition in which changing sexual identity is suspicious, and once-heterosexual-identified women become untrustworthy as LGBTQ women.<sup>90</sup>

The concept of normalcy becomes a central component of this type of policing, as lesbian-identified women with exclusively same-sex personal histories mark Annie and Julia as indelibly heterosexual by utilizing the idea that normalcy, understood as

heterosexual personal history, signifies heterosexuality. Participants suggested that being policed in this way was a common experience. Lynlee said when she first came out as a lesbian, a lesbian-identified friend told her, “If you can be with a man, you will be. You’ll go back.” Similarly, Penny, who does not claim any sexual identity label, says she does not think that she would ever “go back to a man,” however, when Penny tells her lesbian-identified girlfriend this, her girlfriend says, “No, if we broke up you’d go back to a man.” These experiences give a glimpse at the ways once-heterosexual-identified women are marked as inauthentic by a larger cultural context in which their personal history delegitimizes their claims to LGBQ identities and their desire for other women. When normalcy signifies heterosexuality, having a personal history of heterosexual relationships becomes a tool for individuals with stable sexual identities to reject once-heterosexual-identified women’s claims to LGBQ community.

In these moments, we can see normalcy functioning to delegitimize once-heterosexual-identified women, which contrasts with the common notion that being perceived as normal will make life easier, will expose one to less conflict. Once-heterosexual-identified women may have certain access to the privileges of being perceived as normal, but be simultaneously distanced from legitimacy as women who love women. Such interactions should compel us to consider the complex workings of normalcy, and how its ability to confer legitimacy depends on the context.

One might think that the logical response to such delegitimizing messages would be for participants to argue that they were not really normal, and that they fit standards of authentic sexual minority identity. However, participants effectively sidestepped expectations to meet this standard of authenticity that others were holding them to by

demonstrating that they fit a national construct of the normal LGBQ citizen, and implicitly situated themselves as part of a larger community of normal LGBQ people. Thus, when once-heterosexual-identified women describe themselves as normal, the meaning of normalcy shifts from when individuals with stable identities employ the idea of normalcy to delegitimize such women. By paying attention to how normalcy signifies differently in the following site, we can see normalcy as a fundamentally incoherent concept, a shell that can be emptied out and re-filled with new meanings in various contexts.

*“Things queer women aren’t supposed to do”: Using Normalizing Discourses to Speak Back to Delegitimizing Messages*

Whereas in the first site other people invoked the idea of normalcy to refuse to validate or recognize participants’ LGBQ identities and desires for women, participants use the concept of normalcy to center themselves as the majority of LGBQ women. When I asked participants how they, as women who have shifted sexual identities during adulthood, would ideally like to be represented in popular culture and how they usually explain their stories to others, the most common response was they wanted to be seen as normal. This was true even when participants also expressed ambivalence about or resistance to normalizing discourses at other points during the focus group.<sup>91</sup> To be normal in this site means to be the same as normative heterosexuals—the same in terms of middle class affiliations, gender normalcy, and adherence to intimate norms of romantic relationships. However, similarity to heterosexuals means being just like most LGBQ people who are also normal, rather than once-heterosexual-identified women becoming outliers in LGBQ communities because of their perceived normalcy. There is a foundational irony at work here that the notion of normalcy allows such women to claim



legitimacy and belonging to LGBTQ community on grounds that they are normal, even as their legitimacy and place in community has been challenged by others because of their perceived normalcy. I stress that the reason for this irony is that whereas normalcy in the first site signifies as inauthentic sexual minority identity, normalcy in this second site signifies as blending in seamlessly with a normal majority—be that majority most LGBTQ people or most Americans, the concept functions to imply both in this site. Thus, while I refer to the idea “normalcy” in both of these sites, I am actually referring to two different concepts—one which signifies illegitimacy and one which signifies belonging to a majority—and my aim is to call our attention to the inconsistency of how the concept of normalcy functions.

By calling upon a language of normalcy that insists that LGBTQ people are the same as heterosexuals, participants could position themselves as part of an imagined normal majority of LGBTQ people. That is, participants could perform an act of alignment; they could speak as part of a community of normal LGBTQ people rather than as sexually fluid women on the periphery of LGBTQ communities. Michael Warner argues that this is precisely one of the strengths of normalizing discourses, that one may speak for a “silent majority of ‘normal’ homosexuals” (42). This supposed “mass” of gays and lesbians are indistinguishable from heterosexuals and live lives that counter stereotypes of sexual minorities as perverse (42). Many participants argued that they were the same as heterosexuals in terms of how they lived their everyday lives, acted in romantic relationships, and their gender presentations. As participants describe themselves as normal, they reveal certain privileges that make it relatively easy for them to use normalizing discourses to access belonging to a community of normal (LGBTQ) Americans.

However, I read these privileges alongside the cultural context I explored in the previous site in which participants' normalcy might also threaten their legitimacy as LGBTQ women.

This second site in many ways illustrates what critics already assert about the politics of normalcy, that the concept of normalcy functions to confer privilege on those who already have (class, racial, gender and so on) privilege. However I stress that this is *one* effect of the notion of normalcy in a constellation of contrary effects. I agree with critics that normalizing discourses inherently function to create a "hierarchy" (Warner 66) that advantages some at the expense of others. The prevalence of the concept of normalcy in the talk of relatively privileged participants may suggest limits for whom normalcy is a useful and accessible tool for accessing belonging to an imagined national LGBTQ community. All but four participants identified as white, over half were highly educated and held professional class jobs, many presented a conventionally feminine gender, and many spoke of being part of committed, monogamous relationships. Thus, it may have been relatively easy for participants to describe themselves as normal since in most (but not all) cases participants' social locations facilitated their performance of normalcy. However, critics who would only focus on normalcy as an outgrowth of participants' privilege do not see the inconsistency operating within the concept of normalcy that I see. The meaning of normalcy is not static, and the effects of normalizing discourses are uneven, even on this same group of relatively privileged people. I acknowledge the hierarchal effects of normalizing discourses, but I must ask, what do we make of the fact that such discourses are inconsistent and may create other effects in addition to conferring privilege and belonging? My task in this second site is to contextualize the fact that

normalcy generates public belonging alongside the contrary manner in which normalcy delegitimizes once-heterosexual-identified women.

When participants argue they are normal, they mean they are the same as heterosexuals, and yet, ironically this becomes a way for them to speak in the voice of a dominant, normal majority of LGBTQ people. For instance, Jo B. argued that heterosexual people in particular are generally “surprised” to learn that she enjoys domestic activities like baking and gardening, and she framed her participation in such “normal” activities as breaking stereotypes about queer women. In this way, Jo B. positioned herself as an insider—an expert on what queer women like herself are *really* like—and implicitly spoke back to a cultural context in which association with normative gender roles undercuts the authenticity of once-heterosexual-identified women. When I asked Jo B. how she would ideally like her story to be represented, she answered that she would want others to understand, “That I’m normal. I live in a neighborhood where normal people live. I like to garden. I don’t like to cook, but I like to bake. People are surprised by that. ... Things that queer women aren’t supposed to do.” The idea that baking and gardening and living in a “normal” neighborhood are things “queer women aren’t suppose to do” frames being normal as a challenge to stereotypes about queer women. By framing her normalcy as resisting stereotypes, Jo B. can speak as a real queer woman, as part of a larger community of other LGBTQ women who also live lives beyond stereotypes.

Jo B.’s statement illuminates how normalcy in this site means performing middle class affiliation: a “normal” neighborhood suggests a “good,” middle class neighborhood; having a garden suggests owning a home and having access to a yard; baking suggests having leisure time to do so. A cynical approach to normalizing discourses might merely

emphasize how Jo B. can call on her class privilege to describe herself as normal and speak as a member of a normal majority of queer women. While I acknowledge that such privileges are at play, such a reading overlooks the way that the meaning of normalcy is shifting from context to context, from subject position to subject position. In the previous section, participants demonstrated how being perceived as similar to normative heterosexual women—similar in personal history and in gender presentation—made it easy for people with stable sexual identities to challenge once-heterosexual-identified women’s LGBQ identities. However in this site, Jo B. uses her similarity to normative heterosexuality—in participating in activities associated with middle-class femininity—to position herself as a legitimate queer woman who is just like many other queer women who garden and bake. Once-heterosexual-identified women might call on the notion of normalcy to subtly assert their belonging in LGBQ communities and their legitimacy as LGBQ women, even as others could use the idea of normalcy to question their legitimacy.

To be clear, I am not arguing that there is a causal effect in which participants receive messages that they are illegitimate and then describe themselves as normal LGBQ people as a direct response to such messages. Instead I argue that participants implicitly, perhaps even unintentionally, draw upon the national construct of the normal LGBQ citizen, a subject who is unmarked by sexual difference and who is “the same” as a normative model of heterosexuality, as a source of legitimacy. For instance, Wilma Agnes argued that normalizing representations would allow women like herself with conventionally feminine presentations to envision themselves as LGBQ women, opposing a cultural context in which authentic sexual minority identity is associated with gender inversion. Wilma Agnes invoked the concept of normalcy to speak as a legitimate LGBQ

woman, rather than an outlier, because of her normative femininity. When asked how she would ideally like to be represented, Wilma Agnes responded,

I'd want to feel normal. I remember in the 80s our icon was Annie Lennox, so the way to be queer, non-normative was to be absolutely outlandish. And I don't have it in me to be outlandish. I just wanted a normal story, somebody that I could use as a role model until I found my own, until I could establish my own ground beneath my feet. ... We still don't have enough, as far as I'm concerned, about just normal ways of being in our stories.

In Wilma Agnes' statement normalcy signifies blending in with conventional, dominant norms of appearance and ways of living—just being an ordinary person, not necessarily a person who is fabulous (or famous) like Annie Lennox. This subtly challenges the notion that queer people self-fashion their identities, as seen in the ways that historically same-gender-loving people have cultivated gender presentations that announce their sexual identity, either covertly to insiders or flamboyantly to all.<sup>92</sup> However, Wilma Agnes' uses normalizing discourses to forgo that type of self-fashioning labor, and here normalcy presents the opportunity to simply blend in with dominant culture, while still being legitimately LGBTQ-identified. She suggested that representations in her youth of “queer, non-normative” icon Lennox did not serve her well because she could not see herself in these “absolutely outlandish” representations, she did not see possibilities to live a “normal” life as a queer person. In this statement “normal” means someone who does not seem as theatrical or flamboyant as Lennox, perhaps someone who is more gender conforming. For Wilma Agnes, more “just normal ways of being in our stories” would offer a point of identification for other LGBTQ women who “don't have it in [them] to be

outlandish.” Thus, when participants use the concept of normalcy to signify belonging to a mass of normal LGBTQ people, women with conventional gender presentations do not have to be disqualified from an LGBTQ identity.

We can see certain gender-based privileges embedded in this construction of normalcy. If the gender expression that Wilma Agnes feels most comfortable embodying is not generally considered “outrageous,” that would suggest that she is easily accepted as a normal, properly gendered woman, something that may be less possible for trans women, women of color, or other women whose femininity is constructed as excessive and vulgar compared to white middle-class femininity. However, as I explored in the first site, there is real pressure in knowing that if one is conventionally feminine one might not be seen as a legitimate LGBTQ woman. Wilma Agnes’ statement about being normal functions as a subtle act of alignment with a larger community of conventionally feminine LGBTQ women, counteracting the notion that to be feminine is to be somehow less believable as an LGBTQ woman. She advocated for “normal ways of being in *our* stories,” invoking the idea of a majority that normalizing discourses connote, positioning herself as belonging to that normal majority. Once-heterosexual-identified women can claim belonging and legitimacy by centering themselves within an imagined community of LGBTQ women with conventional genders, even as such women’s normative femininity might be used by people with stable identities to disavow their belonging to LGBTQ communities.

Participants called on a discourse of normalcy to argue that their intimate relationships functioned the same as heterosexual relationships, implicitly demonstrating an allegiance to a larger majority of LGBTQ people who love in normative ways. Participants aligned themselves with “dominant intimate norms,” by which LGBTQ people

may “demonstrat[e] at both individual and collective levels a desire for, and commitment to, loving, stable, marital-style couple relationships” (Richardson, “Locating Sexualities” 397). Critics argue that such intimate norms denigrate LGBTQ people who do not care to engage in monogamous, long-term relationships. I acknowledge this but also stress, again, that the idea of being a normal person—a person who is the same as heterosexuals—incites different effects based on the context. In the previous context, once-heterosexual-identified women were rendered inauthentic by others because they were too similar to heterosexuals and had too much experience in heterosexual relationships. In this site, once-heterosexual-identified women describe themselves having same-sex relationships which function the same as heterosexual relationships, but this proximity to intimate norms associated with heterosexuality functions to move such women from the position of outliers in LGBTQ communities to the center of an imagined normal LGBTQ majority. In a discussion about representations of women who love women, Penny stated that she liked the reality TV show *The Real L Word* because the focus on the show was on romantic relationship issues between women, “the challenges they have a couple,” “and it’s the same struggles that every heterosexual has.” Penny argued that she believed the show was an accurate portrayal of women in same-sex relationships, because “we have the same problems and marital issues [as heterosexuals].” The other participants in Penny’s focus group had not seen the show, but they agreed with her that same-sex relationships are “the same” as heterosexual relationships, and that it would be positive for that sameness to be stressed in popular representations. Participants deployed ideas about normalcy to imply that most same-gender-loving people perform “dominant intimate norms,” and adhering to this normative way of loving becomes something that unites participants with other LGBTQ

people. Like Wilma Agnes, Penny uses the notion of a collective—“*we* have the same problems”—signifying that being like a normative heterosexual couple means being part of a majority of same-gender-loving people.

In one sense, this is an instance when once-heterosexual-identified women use their privilege as people in monogamous partnerships to assert their legitimacy, to implicitly center the way they love as the way that most LGBTQ people love, implicitly marginalizing LGBTQ who are not invested in monogamous coupledness. In this instance when normalcy signifies monogamous partnership, participants affirm a hierarchy that privileges the monogamous couple (Warner 66-67). However, I stress that normalcy’s function to build hierarchies in this instance should be viewed alongside how the idea of normalcy is employed in a contrasting manner when others reject once-heterosexual-identified women because of such women’s experience with heterosexual romantic relationships. In one context, lesbians with stable sexual identities assert that loving the same way as heterosexuals—as a woman with a history of dating men—makes once-heterosexual-identified women interlopers in LGBTQ communities. In another context, once-heterosexual-identified women assert that loving the same way as heterosexuals makes them exactly like most LGBTQ women. In this way, normalcy reveals its foundational incoherence; adhering to intimate norms associated with heterosexuality can dually function to delegitimize or to legitimize once-heterosexual-identified women’s identities, depending on who is deploying the idea of normalcy.

It is also important to keep in mind that espousing normalizing discourses does not have to mean that one is duped by the dominant political paradigm for how to live as an LGBTQ person. Participants described themselves as normal in one moment and then in



other moments of the focus group they questioned the political value of normative goals such as marriage equality and affirming the gender binary. This contradiction of embracing normalcy in one moment and critiquing it in another does not have to mean that participants act in bad faith by describing themselves as normal, or that their inconsistency reflects their own poor logic. Rather, this contradictory use of normalcy indicates the fact that *normalcy itself is paradoxical and inconsistent*: it is unstable and can produce multiple, sometimes contrary effects as it is deployed from moment to moment.

For instance, Wilma Agnes stated very clearly that she wanted to see representations that would affirm her normalcy, but this was after she expressed that she did not want to “participate normal scripts that I grew up with in white, heteronormative, suburban, kind of rural [Midwest].” The “scripts” Wilma Agnes objected to included getting married, buying a house and uncritically participating in consumer cultures, and supporting a rigid gender binary. Instead, Wilma Agnes spoke throughout the focus group about wanting more messages that “you’re not half a person if you don’t get married,” and she expressed wanting to live in “a both/and culture” that would embrace gender and sexual fluidity. Considering this, it was surprising to me that Wilma Agnes said she wanted more representations of “normal” LGBTQ women. I was similarly surprised when Gloria, who expressed being critical of gay communities’ investment in marriage, downplayed her sexuality as an important aspect of her self, which is a key feature of normalizing rhetoric supporting marriage equality. These sorts of contradictory, perhaps surprising, moments emerged throughout the focus groups.<sup>93</sup> These moments may simply point to the ways that we all contradict ourselves in conversation. Or, these contradictions may reaffirm the power of normalizing discourses, as Shane Phelan reminds us that we should never be

surprised when those who have been excluded from participating in full citizenship status attempt to do so by assimilating into concepts which are important to citizenship (83–84). However, in addition to these possibilities, I see participants' contradictory uses of ideas about normalcy as further evidence of the inconsistency of normalcy as a concept. Perhaps these contradictions emerge again and again around normalcy because normalcy itself is a paradoxical, slippery concept, a figurehead with no real conceptual coherence, but rather is a shell that can be continually filled with contrasting meanings.

Participants and their detractors both invoke the figurehead of normalcy but the concepts that they refer to signify differently: in the mouth of one speaker normalcy signifies belonging to a majority, in the mouth of another speaker normalcy signifies being a fraudulent interloper. The inconsistency of normalcy's meaning becomes further apparent in the following site when popular media texts describe once-heterosexual-identified women as normal to the effect of making them strange. In media texts, once-heterosexual-identified women's normalcy is not something that makes them blend into a majority, something that makes them stand out as exceptionally normal. However, once-heterosexual-identified women's seemingly flawless performance of normalcy shows some cracks, as they are normal except for the fact that they love other women. Once-heterosexual-identified women's normalcy creates both titillation and anxiety in popular media because such women call into question the stability which normalcy is suppose to ensure.

*Perfectly Normal: Normalcy Signifying Strangeness and Inciting Anxiety in News Media about Once-Heterosexual-Identified Women*

Whereas focus group participants described themselves as normal to the effect of stressing their similarity with other LGBTQ women, in popular media such women are treated as strange and newsworthy because they appear so normal, which is to say they appear unlike other LGBTQ women in the popular imagination. News stories, magazine articles, and talk shows highlight the lives of women who were considered especially successful heterosexuals, what I refer to as “perfectly normal.” Perfectly normal once-heterosexual-identified women are represented as being winners of the game of heterosexuality, their success evidenced by their former loving marriages to men, their competency as mothers, their impressive and tastefully decorated homes, their professional careers and financial security, and their personal style and beauty. News stories represent once-heterosexual-identified women as normal not in the sense that they are average, but in the sense that they embody an ideal of normalcy.<sup>94</sup>

Rather than normalcy functioning as a way for once-heterosexual-identified women to blend in with a normal majority of LGBTQ people, in media texts such women become objects of fascination because of their perceived normalcy. Once-heterosexual-identified women in this site are implicitly opposed to the notion that lesbians are failures at normative heterosexuality, a notion exemplified in the popular imagination by the figure of the butch lesbian.<sup>95</sup> Yet, unlike in the first site, popular media texts do not reference such women’s normalcy to discredit their LGBTQ identities, and they are framed as legitimate LGBTQ women in such media, albeit mysterious LGBTQ women who must be figured out by audiences. Once again we can see normalcy encompassing new meanings and producing

inconsistent effects as the context changes and the subject position of who invokes the notion of normalcy shifts.

In this third site, normalcy means an ideal of how to live, how to live in terms of class attainment, taste, feminine gender presentation, and familial role. Once-heterosexual-identified women in these stories appear to embody an ideal of normative womanhood: they are conventionally feminine, often fulfill roles as of wife and mother, often white, almost always middle class or wealthy and portrayed amongst their enviable material goods. However, this idea of normalcy is troubled in popular media because such women are normal in every way except for the fact that they have shifted from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity. This single misstep in the performance of normalcy is what makes once-heterosexual-identified women fascinating, titillating, and often sources of anxiety in popular media. There is a kind of cruel optimism operating in these stories in which normalcy should signify stability and certainty, and yet these perfectly normal women surprise audiences and themselves. Lauren Berlant theorizes cruel optimism to mean an attachment to an object that cannot achieve whatever happiness it promises, but the subject continues to need this object in order to make sense of themselves and give meaning to their lives.<sup>96</sup> The promise of normalcy is that if we see a soccer mom with three children, a husband, and a suburban home we should know exactly who that person is and be assured that this person will not change. When normalcy does not deliver on its promise of stability—when these perfectly normal women shock audiences (or are framed as shocking to audiences) because they show that being normalcy is not a guarantee that one will stay reliably the same—normalcy is exposed as unable to provide what it promises. Yet normalcy persists to be alluring to media and audiences as a way to make sense of

individuals, as a concept that can signify particular ideals of how to live. I argue that one reason that once-heterosexual-identified women have become a hot commodity in recent U.S. media is that the failure of normalcy to deliver on its promise of stability incites all kinds of titillation and anxiety for audiences, and in this section I explore the simultaneous pleasures and troubles which perfectly normal once-heterosexual-identified women incite.

Normalcy in this final site complicates the notion that normalizing discourses function to mainstream LGBTQ people into the national body, because media texts make once-heterosexual-identified women strange. While critics frame normalizing discourses as assimilative strategies meant to make LGBTQ people seem more palatable to heterosexuals, I argue that this is not exactly what is occurring in this site, or at least, that this not the *only* function of normalcy in this site (Vaid; Chasin; Walters, *All the Rage*; Walters, *The Tolerance Trap*). I stress that in addition to the mainstreaming effects of the idea that once-heterosexual-identified women are perfectly normalcy, we can see normalcy making such women strange objects of suspicion and fascination rather than making them relatable, and furthermore, we see their normalcy becoming a source of anxiety. Whereas in the past, the figure of the lesbian was framed as “mad, bad, or sad” in popular culture and she produced anxiety because of her deviance (“Desiring Sameness?” 523),<sup>97</sup> the case of once-heterosexual-identified women is a bit different because it is not their deviance that makes cultural producers and audiences anxious, but instead their seemingly flawless performances of normalcy, and the way their performances calls into question the sexual stability of presently heterosexual-identified women.

Popular media texts convey astonishment that women who did so well as heterosexuals could shift into LGBTQ identities. We can see how once-heterosexual-

identified women are represented as perfectly normal in an August 2010 broadcast of the news show *20/20* which features the story of Shira Neuberger, a woman who fell in love with another woman while married to a man. We are introduced to Neuberger with shots of the suburban community where she lives. We see a church steeple with a cross, an American flag blowing in the wind on a porch, and then Neuberger, a thin white woman with long curly hair who looks to be about forty, driving her car. The voiceover states, “She seemed to be the perfect wife with the perfect life: a handsome husband, two beautiful daughters, and this pretty house outside of Philadelphia” (“Wife Begins New Life”). We see images of what constitutes this “perfect life”: Neuberger standing in a backyard smiling with her husband, two little girls playing in the snow in bright-colored snowsuits and hats, and a two-story house with a big tree on its landscaped lawn. Neuberger’s introduction as “the perfect wife, with the perfect life,” exemplifies the way that once-heterosexual-identified women become newsworthy because of how well such women supposedly embody an ideal of normalcy. The *20/20* story presents a particular image of heterosexual life that includes marriage, children, a house in the suburbs, middle-class affluence, and a respected place in community, and Neuberger appeared to fit right in this idealized image. The narrator continues: “But last year, Shira Neuberger stunned neighbors in this quiet suburb by splitting with her husband and inviting a new partner into her home. Even more surprising, the new love of Shira’s life wasn’t another man, but another *woman*.” As this reveal unfolds, we see more images of the “quiet suburb” including similar large, well-kept houses, another American flag, and a traffic sign showing the 25mph speed limit. Ominous music plays, drawing to mind crime shows. At the end of this sequence, we see a shot of Neuberger walking in a park with her young

daughter and her female partner. What makes Neuberger's story notable enough to be featured on a weekly news program is her "stunning" behavior of deviating from this image of the "perfect wife" to partner with another woman. Similar to the larger cultural context in the first site in which changing sexual identities makes women untrustworthy, Neuberger becomes an object of suspicion here, as the report draws on true-crime news techniques, stressing that Neuberger "*seemed* to be the perfect wife," but then showed herself not to be an emblem of normalcy. However, unlike the first site, suspicion about Neuberger's change in identity does not undercut the legitimacy of Neuberger's attraction to another woman, and the episode represents Neuberger's new relationship as a genuinely loving one. Instead, this suspicion of change is intended to fascinate and to titillate audiences, and some of the pleasures that news stories such as this one offer include puncturing an ideal vision of normalcy. That pleasure, as I shall show, can also lead to anxiety.

Popular media's fascination with how successful once-heterosexual-identified women were at leading heterosexual lives manifests as excitement over how once-heterosexual-identified women appeared to be flawlessly normal. In an April 2009 *O Magazine* article, "Why Women are Leaving Men for Other Women," Macarena Gomez-Barris is introduced as a woman who "seemed to have it all—a brilliant career, two children, striking looks" (Fischer). Similar to coverage of Neuberger's story, the reveal in this article hinges on this idea that Gomez-Barris "*seemed* to have it all," but then walked away from her perfect life and partnered with a woman after divorcing her husband. The choice to begin this story by stressing how she "seemed" so perfect, her life so enviable, implicitly suggests that Gomez-Barris' shift in identity is all the more shocking because of

her normalcy. Reportage of J. Crew creative director Jenna Lyons' partnership with a woman upon her divorce from her husband also involves a fascination with the supposed contrast between Lyons' perfect heterosexual life and her decision to date a woman. In stories about Lyons' new relationship, she is represented as the epitome of a modern, chic wife and mother. She is heralded as a tastefully no-frills feminine style icon, this point often highlighted by the fact that Michelle Obama is a fan of Lyons' understated-yet-elegant vision for J. Crew ("Jenna's New"; Karpel; Blakeley); Lyons' and her husband's brownstone home had been featured in lifestyle magazines for its chic décor ("Jenna's New"; Givhan); and she's a hip mom who took flack from conservative pundits when she did a fashion spread with her young son in which she was painting his toenails pink (Bindley; Karpel). Thus it is precisely because Lyons—a glamorous, model-thin, rich white woman who is a powerful arbiter of middle-class taste—embodies this ideal of perfectly normal heterosexual life that her decision to partner with a woman is newsworthy. Responding to the flurry of news reportage about Lyons' relationship with a woman, Robin Givhan points out that were the genders reversed, no one would think it was newsworthy that a once-married male fashion designer began dating another man (Givhan). Lyons' story is news precisely because she is a perfectly normal woman, and apparently does not fit the image of a typical LGBTQ woman. In this way, women like Neuberger, Gomez-Barris, and Lyons who supposedly "had it all" while living heterosexual lives become fascinating because of their normalcy, and this fascination makes them stand out as different from other LGBTQ women. These stories function to titillate audiences, offering the pleasures of seeing tiny cracks in an idealized image of normalcy.



The tendency of media texts to represent once-heterosexual-identified women as perfectly normal but then to titillate audiences by rupturing the perfect façade of normalcy complicates the typical mainstreaming function of normalizing discourses. These stories offer audiences the delight of scandal, relying on the notion that such women are strange objects of suspicion to be figured out. To be clear, in arguing that once-heterosexual-identified women are made strange in these stories is not to say that they are rendered as deviant. Nearly all of the news stories I cite in this section are generally positive representations of LGBTQ identities: they affirm the decision of the respective woman to come out or to partner with another woman, and generally end on a happy note about how fulfilled the woman is now. However, like the first site, these stories draw upon a cultural context in which to change sexual identity is suspicious, and this manifests itself in how perfectly normal once-heterosexual-identified women are represented as mysteries or figures embroiled in a true-crime thriller. For instance, a synopsis for an October 2006 *Oprah Winfrey Show* episode entitled “Wives Confess They are Gay,” represents such women as perfectly normal, then relishes in the scandal of undoing that ideal of normalcy. The synopsis begins, “You never know what you’re going to find behind your neighbor’s white picket fence” (“Wives Living Two Lives”). This phrase invokes a particular image of normal heterosexual life: the white picket fence of an affluent suburb, much like the one *20/20* makes a point to show where Neuberger lives. Yet, the tagline is almost sinister, a titillating tease that there is something out of place lurking behind this image of normalcy. LGBTQ blog *AfterEllen* jokes about this sort of true-crime framing of once-heterosexual-women’s stories, commenting on a commercial for a March 2009 *Oprah Winfrey Show* episode, “Women Leaving Men for Other Women.” Blogger Karman Kregloe quotes from

the commercial advertising the upcoming episode and jokes about how the show seems to represent these women as if they are suspects in a murder case: “‘A house in the suburbs... a mom’s secret exposed.’ Is this *The Oprah Winfrey Show* or *Forensic Files*?” (“‘Women Leaving Men for Other Women’ on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*”). Kregloe’s joke points to the ways that once-heterosexual-identified women are represented as dubious, even as nefarious. Audiences are encouraged to take prurient interest in stories of women coming out after living heterosexual lives, to be titillated by “secrets being exposed,” and to enjoy the undoing of the picturesque image of normalcy found “behind the white picket fence” or in “a house in the suburbs.” I argue this sense of scandal stems from a cultural context in which to change sexual identities is a suspicious act, but unlike the first site I explored, these stories do not challenge the authenticity of once-heterosexual-identified women’s LGBTQ identities. Instead, suspicion about such women functions to make them strange sources of titillation for audiences, and these stories invoke a certain naughty pleasure in watching an image of perfect normalcy be (only slightly) tarnished by a woman who seems normal in every way except one.

The cruel optimism of normalcy—its inability to deliver on a promise of stable and knowable identity and media’s continued faith in normalcy as a stable touchstone for how to live—can produce some pleasures for audiences; however, such pleasures are riddled with anxiety. Showing that LGBTQ people are “just like” heterosexuals is often understood as a central goal in a politics of normalcy, and is popularly understood an effective method for mainstreaming LGBTQ people into the national body (Fetner 96–97). Yet, in the context of media reportage about once-heterosexual-identified women, these women’s normalcy can seem unsettlingly similar to heterosexuals, implicitly calling into question the potential

fluidity of women who currently identify as heterosexual. LGBTQ women who were once heterosexual-identified may incite anxiety that stems not from the ways such women are viewed as deviant, but from the ways such women are assumed to have a greater proximity to normalcy than other LGBTQ women. Phelan argues that LGBTQ people in the U.S. are positioned as “strangers,” a term she borrows from Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis of Jews in Europe. The stranger sits in a liminal position between the “us” of the nation and the “them” of enemies of the nation. Phelan notes that the stranger is a troubling figure precisely because of its ambiguous position: the stranger is “neither us nor clearly them, not friend and not enemy, but a figure of ambivalence who troubles the border between us and them. The enemy is the clear opposite of the citizen, but the stranger is fraught with anxiety” (4–5). Anxieties about LGBTQ people stem from the ways that sexual minorities exist as part of every community, enfolded within the lives of heterosexuals, and perhaps are not readily distinguishable from heterosexuals. Media depictions of once-heterosexual-identified women’s supposed normalcy intensifies this anxiety over the ambiguity of the stranger, as such women not only straddle the line between “us” and “them,” but they have also have been the “us” of the heterosexualized nation, and have lived especially successful heterosexual lives. Moments of trouble emerge in media representations of once-heterosexual-identified women when their normalcy—that is, their similarity to normal heterosexual women—incites anxiety about the stability of other apparently normal heterosexual women’s sexual identities.

A March 2009 episode of daytime talk show *The View* illustrates how the normalcy of once-heterosexual-identified women becomes a source of anxiety that calls into question the stability of presently heterosexual-identified women’s sexuality. The four hosts,

Barbara Walters, Joy Behar, Sherri Shepherd, and Elisabeth Hasselbeck, prepare to interview comedian Carol Leifer, who discusses in her memoir becoming attracted to another woman for the first time at the age of forty. The hosts argue that there is a recent trend of women like Leifer, women who come out as lesbians after the age of forty. Before Leifer's interview, the hosts ponder "What do you think a relationship with another woman gives you that a relationship with a man does not?" ("*View Sounds Off*"). The hosts seem perplexed by how women such as Leifer could be lesbians after having lived such normal heterosexual lives. I speculate that implicit in the hosts' confusion is the ways that Leifer so easily aligns with an ideal of normative heterosexuality. Leifer had been married to a man at one point, and had only partnered with men before, including a high-profile romantic relationship with comedian Jerry Seinfeld (James Donaldson). Additionally, Leifer fits conventional standards of female attractiveness, with long strawberry blond hair, a slim figure, and a feminine, professional presentation. Thus, even though it is never explicitly stated, Leifer's normalcy—in her appearance and her sexual history up to age forty—seems quite similar to the way *The View* hosts perform normative feminine heterosexuality. By trying to find the cause for why a woman like Leifer could unpredictably shift sexual identity in midlife, there is an implicit anxiety in the need to make sense of this incredible situation. At the root of such anxiety is the unspoken question: how could normal heterosexual women—women *like us*—be lesbians?

There are a couple of moments in this discussion when anxiety surfaces around not knowing why women like Leifer suddenly find themselves attracted to women in midlife, and what that could mean for women who presently identify as heterosexual. Walters begins by framing Leifer's experience as part of a growing trend of "more and more

women over forty are taking female partners.” Behar turns to the studio audience and asks, “How many of you have done that?” and the audience lets out a big laugh. Behar’s joke works because it plays with the anxiety that a story like Leifer’s provokes around the instability of the homosexual/heterosexual binary. Behar’s joke relies on the assumption that shifting sexual identities in midlife is an incredible experience, one which most in the audience would not have experienced. But there is a slippage here between those heterosexual women who are being interpolated to find Leifer’s story astonishing and the once-heterosexual-identified women who might agree that they would have also found her story incredible before they shifted identities. This anxious slippage between heterosexual women and once-heterosexual-identified women emerges again when Shepherd makes an argument that sexual orientation might be able to change, but then quickly reinforces her own heterosexual identity in the midst of her argument. In response to Behar’s comment that women who come out after forty “have been faking it for thirty-nine years and they’re tired of doing it,” Shepherd refutes this idea, stating, “I would disagree with that.” Shepherd elaborates by describing the intimacy in heterosexual women’s relationships, initially seeming as if she is making an argument that women might find themselves becoming attracted to female friends who they already have emotional bonds with. Shepherd states, “I have my friendships with women, really close friendships and I cry on their shoulder.” In this one moment, Shepherd could be offering an explanation for why women shift sexual identifies in midlife: already intimate relationships between women might develop into romantic relationships. Such intimacy would call into question the fixity of sexual identities. Yet, in the next breath, Shepherd asserts, “I like men. [laughter from audience] They just...Something about a man. You can’t recreate it.” Even if she

seems open to the idea that others might experience a shift in desires, Shepherd seems uncomfortable at the possibility that her platonic female friendships could potentially develop into romantic relationships, or uncomfortable that viewers might hear her comment as revealing her own sexual fluidity. Shepherd firmly secures her own heterosexuality in this discussion about fluidity. The laughter from the audience when Shepherd quickly states “I like men” heightens this sense of anxiety, almost as if the audience was nervous about what her comment about women’s intimacy might mean for Shepherd or for heterosexual-identified women more generally. These moments of jokes, laughter, and awkward verbal stumbles reveal anxiety about the precarious certainty of sexual identity—a certainty that normalcy is supposed to guarantee.

In these moments, anxiety is produced not by the deviance of LGBTQ identities, as would have been more common in an earlier era of sexual minorities on talk shows, but by the *normalcy* of Leifer and the supposed masses of other women coming out after forty. Leifer is not represented as a “lesbian sicko” (Faderman 130) but as a perfectly normal woman who shifted from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity in midlife, and it is Leifer’s normalcy that causes *The View* hosts to approach her as an enigma to be explained and as an object of anxiety. If Leifer fit a standard of authentic lesbian identity—if she had a masculine gender presentation, if she had never been married to a man, if she described her same-sex desires as something she had known since childhood—her story would not be a source of anxiety in this episode of *The View*. She would be easily legible as a lesbian in the space of *The View* and not a confusing or uneasy figure. What causes anxiety over Leifer’s story is that it highlights that being normal is not a guarantee that one’s sexual identity will be stable or that one will not surprise oneself or others if one is normal. Thus,

while Leifer's normalcy ultimately makes her newsworthy and provides a certain amount of titillation—it seems unlikely that her sexual identity would be the basis of an entire show segment if she had identified as a lesbian throughout her life—such excitement about once-heterosexual-identified women is racked with the anxious possibility that one cannot know if one will change, even if one performs normalcy perfectly.

At the heart of Shepherd's defensive comment about "liking men" even though she shares intimacy with women is anxiety over how, in a society that sanctions emotional and physical intimacy between women, one can know when a normal heterosexual woman is really an LGBTQ woman. Such anxiety surfaces in a March 2009 article in women's lifestyle magazine, *More Magazine*, about the "new" phenomenon of midlife women partnering with other women. The article frames this phenomenon by noting the ways that women, regardless of sexual orientation, are socialized to appraise each other's bodies. There is an implicit anxiety around the idea of how one would know if one is a normal heterosexual woman who can appreciate the beauty of other women or if one's appreciation is really indicative of being sexually attracted to another woman. Author Tamara Jones posits that most "straight women" would "readily admit to having been captivated, at least momentarily, by another woman's allure. From kindergarten to retirement home, we size one another up and compare attributes" (Jones). The practice of "sizing each other up" and sometimes becoming "momentarily captivated" by another woman seems a part of normative heterosexual female socialization. As I discussed in chapter two, the notion that women are inherently capable of creating strong emotional bonds creates common sense logic in U.S. culture that women are more likely than men to develop romantic feelings for same-sex friends. Shepherd's comment on *The View* about

her intimacy with her female friends similarly illustrates this popular acceptance of women's intimacy as a natural part of heterosexual women's experiences. However, Jones then asks, "But where is the line between responding to another woman and desiring her?" (Jones). The ambiguity of the "the line" between an innocuous "response to another woman" as a straight woman and "desire for her" that would indicate one is sexually attracted to women is left murky. Normalcy is exposed as no guarantee of stable (heterosexual) identity, and this leads to trying to conceptualize a "line" that would shore up sexual identity categories in the face of confusing, socially sanctioned intimacy between women. As such, once-heterosexual-identified women's supposed normalcy—having the normal experience of admiring other women's bodies and relying on close women friends for emotional support—is the source of anxiety here, which complicates how normalcy is generally viewed as a tactic for making LGBQ people seem less strange in mass media.

In one sense, we can see how once-heterosexual-identified women's performances of perfect normalcy makes them palatable to heterosexual audiences, as the women in these news stories seem like ideal mascots for the notion that LGBQ people are normal. However, when normalcy means an ideal way of life as it does in popular media, the concept of normalcy does not function only to make such women seem relatable to heterosexual audiences. Once-heterosexual-identified women's normalcy becomes a point of fascination, and there is a mystery and suspicion built up around such women—how could one be a suburban wife and mother and then come out as a lesbian? Such mystery is intended to offer certain pleasures to audiences who are titillated by watching the image of the perfect homemaker being undone. Yet this titillation proves to be rife with anxiety, because the fact that perfectly normal women can change sexual identity calls into question



the promise of normalcy. Normalcy should signify heterosexuality and life-long stability of identity, especially when a woman shows herself to be an especially successful heterosexual, and yet it does not. In this way the normalcy of once-heterosexual-identified women becomes a source of anxiety, making audiences consider the instability of identity and what this might mean for presently heterosexual-identified women. I stress that the effects of normalcy are not limited to making once-heterosexual-identified women more palatable and profitable figures in mass media; instead, we can see how an ideal of normalcy *also* functions to make these women strange, fascinating, and anxiety producing.

### *Conclusion*

The case of once-heterosexual-identified women highlights the inconsistencies of the ambiguous concept of normalcy. Normalcy encompasses multiple meanings and produces a flurry of contradictory effects across these three sites. When individuals with stable sexual identities invoke the idea of normalcy, it functions to make once-heterosexual-identified women too similar to heterosexuals in terms of personal history and gender presentation to be legitimately LGBTQ. When once-heterosexual-identified women describe themselves as normal, they position themselves at the center of a normal majority of LGBTQ people who act and look just like heterosexuals. When popular media texts frame such women as perfectly normal, they represent them as strange oddities and offer audiences pleasures and anxieties in watching these mysterious LGBTQ women. This instability across these three contexts should cause us to consider the multiple, inconsistent effects of normalcy, rather than distilling normalcy into a solitary effect—seeing normalcy only as a set of discourses that function to create proper citizens at the expense of others.

Future research exploring the foundational incoherence of normalcy would be useful. In what other cases might the idea of normalcy produce contrary meanings about the same group of people? Furthermore, what would the political implications be for having a more context-specific understanding of normalcy as a concept that shapes contemporary sexual citizenship in the U.S.?

I do not currently have ideas about where following this line of inquiry might lead, but it seems necessary to engage such questions considering normalcy is a crucial construct impacting what it means to be LGBTQ in contemporary U.S. culture. Critics largely agree that we are in an “era of mainstreaming” (Beirne, *Lesbians in Television* 7) LGBTQ lives into popular media, and to a lesser extent, granting full rights of citizenship to select populations of normal LGBTQ people—with an emphasis on normal gays and lesbians (Vaid; Warner; Phelan; Richardson, “Desiring Sameness?”; Walters, *The Tolerance Trap*). Furthermore, normalizing discourses are a hallmark of neoliberal governance, because if the way to access sexual citizenship is to adequately perform normalcy then this creates the “self-regulating citizen, who has internalized the norms and goals of new liberal governments” (Richardson, “Locating Sexualities” 393). It seems apt then to end this dissertation with a chapter about normalcy, because throughout the dissertation I have explored major concepts in contemporary thinking about sexuality as they emerge in discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women. Stories about once-heterosexual-identified women give us insight into how significant concepts informing the construction of American sexualities function and circulate, concepts including “born gay” discourse, ideas about women’s sexual fluidity and person-based attractions, and counter narratives about midlife women’s experiences of empowerment and sexual liberation. In this chapter,

analyzing discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women has proven fruitful for better understanding the central inconsistency of the concept of normalcy, which seems essential to understand given normalcy's prominence in national sexual politics.

I conclude this dissertation by ruminating on the promising potential of continuing to explore discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women. As I have shown throughout these chapters, stories by and about once-heterosexual-identified become illustrative of so much more than individual women's experiences. Instead these stories give us insight into "our time," in Ken Plummer's terms, showing us the assumptions and paradoxes that constitute how sexualities are constructed and made sense of in the contemporary U.S.

## CONCLUSION:

BECOMING NEW, BECOMING OURSELVES:  
THE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF THINKING OTHERWISE AND DIRECTIONS  
FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this dissertation I have analyzed discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women to better understand current thinking about sexuality in U.S. culture. The contested, often contradictory, and sometimes outright strange terrains I have covered include “born gay” discourse and its paradoxical interactions with supposedly antithetical alternative discourses of surprise and agency; “the person, not the gender” discourse and the ways it can in one moment deconstruct, in another question, and yet in another reaffirm dominant thinking about sexuality; the formative role of whiteness and middle class identity in determining what it means to be a midlife woman, what women’s empowerment looks like, and what it means to see the midlife self as a product of internalized labor; and the inconsistent meanings and effects of the concept of normalcy. Analyzing discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women has allowed me to pause in these rich, illustrative spaces, and to gain insight into how we come to understand sexuality in the present moment, and how our understandings of sexuality intersect with age, race, gender, class, and national identity.

I began this dissertation with a central contradiction informing discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women: these stories are highly visible, all around us, and yet not entirely socially legible. A reoccurring theme in my research is that once-heterosexual-identified women may feel that others do not hear them on their own terms or that their place in LGBTQ communities is challenged because of their experiences of shifting sexual identities. Despite this illegibility, these stories proliferate and are newsworthy in the

contemporary moment. The in-between cultural positioning of such stories occurs because discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women simultaneously contains thinking about sexuality that is socially illegible and thinking that is so familiar that it seems like common sense. On the one hand, discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women suggests the possibility of becoming new: feeling new desires, becoming a new person in response to falling in love, reckoning with the sudden emergence of a new sexual orientation, experiencing a midlife metamorphosis full of unanticipated potential, embodying a new identity and re-learning how to be a person in the world, experiencing feelings that cannot be neatly accounted for in dominant identity labels. Such radical remaking of the self challenges our typical thinking about identity as essential, comprehensively knowable, and static. On the other hand, discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women supports familiar thinking about the unchanging, core self. These stories also suggest the possibility of becoming ourselves, the self that was always already within: bringing dormant desires to light, unearthing the true self through the hard work of self-reflection, looking back to find evidence to make sense of new feelings, loving others in a way that stems from women's essential need to create emotional connections, experiencing new midlife potential as an outgrowth of one's life-long social location. Contradictory discourses about once-heterosexual-identified women waver at some place between being deeply strange to many audiences and confirming what is already largely accepted as true about sexuality. This paradox is what makes discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women a productive space of inquiry, because we can see a struggle in such stories involving which ideas about sexuality seem credible in this contemporary moment and which seem incredible.

In the introduction I framed my central research questions using Ken Plummer's concept of "the tale and its time," noting that a credible story is one that has "come into [its] time when a community has been fattened up, rendered ripe and willing to hear" such a story (121). Until the right historical, cultural, and political conditions occur, some sexual stories will remain incredible. However, Plummer's concept should not be understood as a linear process in which sexual stories will gradually come into their time, crossing over the line from incredible to credible. Plummer addresses sexual stories that are spoken out of their time, stories that are told but not sympathetically heard or supported by a sustained community, such as the stories of pedophiles (116-119). Plummer argues that out-of-time stories might linger in the realm of social illegibility, as something to be silenced rather than believed on their own terms, and these stories might remain private rather than gaining "*an interpretive community of support* which enabl[e] them to flourish" (121, emphasis original). While I do not think stories about once-heterosexual-identified women garner the same kind or amount of hostility and disbelief as stories about pedophiles, Plummer's point causes me to speculate that stories about once-heterosexual-identified women are (in)credible: they blur the line between what is credible and incredible in this historical moment, and perhaps such stories will never fully function as definitively either. Rather than follow a linear progression towards social legibility and acceptance, these stories may continue to waver in the space of the simultaneously familiar and illegible. Stories about once-heterosexual-identified women illuminate the dynamic workings of discourse, as we see meaning tenuously formed, contested, and dismantled from moment to moment, from context to context. Whereas we often do not have the right vantage point to be able to see discourse in motion—discourse as it moves erratically across the cultural

landscape to create meaning from one moment to the next—it is precisely because of the ambiguous (in)credible position of stories about once-heterosexual-identified women that discourse in motion becomes visible. These strange stories illuminate the workings of discourse that we might otherwise overlook or take for granted.

By paying attention to these specific stories I have been able to unpack crucial ideas related to how we imagine and experience sexuality in the present-day U.S. While before analyzing these stories we might have agreed that “born gay” discourse dominates LGBTQ rights rhetoric, after looking more closely at these stories we gain insight into the multiple models of identity circulating in this moment, and the paradoxical interweaving of supposedly antithetical models. Or maybe we would have acknowledged that women are assumed to be more sexually fluid than men in U.S. culture, but these stories provide us with a robust sense of how PNG discourse helps define women’s sexuality in terms of emotional connection rather than gender-specific desire. Or we might have noticed popular media’s investment in broadcasting stories of attractive, affluent white women coming out in midlife, but we might not have paid attention to how these stories help circulate a counter narrative that defines women’s midlife in terms of possibility, yet relies on the experiences of certain women to make this general claim. Lastly, we might have been aware of the ways once-heterosexual-identified women benefit from the politics of normalcy, but we might have overlooked the inconsistent meanings of normalcy circulating around such women, which reveals normalcy to be a more incoherent concept than we typically assume. These stories help us understand things about “our time;” they help us understand how major concepts relating to LGBTQ identities, women’s sexualities, and sexual fluidity are forged in the present.

### *Directions for Future Research*

There is still much to learn from discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women, much more than I could have addressed in a single dissertation. For instance, if I had analyzed fictional stories in television and film instead of non-fiction texts, I might have focused on different issues. As I conducted my research, classmates, colleagues, and focus group participants recommended shows or movies they had seen featuring a woman shifting from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity.<sup>98</sup> As I noted in the introduction, I focused on non-fiction narratives primarily because I am most interested in texts that carry the authority of “real-life” accounts, but also simply for the sake of crafting a manageable project. Having only taken a cursory glance at the fictional representations that surfaced during my research, it is difficult to say if studying these texts would draw out different issues than I have discussed in this dissertation. However, the form of television and film undoubtedly raises different questions than those I have asked, including questions about how directors, writers, actors, and producers render women shifting sexual identities and what understandings of identity function in fictional texts; what kinds of stories and lives are most visible; how these stories are marketed; and how different audiences receive and engage with such texts. Analyzing fictional representations of once-heterosexual-identified women could be a productive area of inquiry for scholars interested in representations of LGBTQ women in U.S. culture.

Inevitably there were pieces of my research that had to be set aside for different projects. One aspect of my focus group interviews that I was unable to incorporate into this dissertation relates to what resources participants used during their processes of coming out, questioning, or shifting identities. Considering there is little scholarship exploring



coming out processes for adults and how they might differ from the coming out processes of adolescents, this is a promising area of inquiry that should be developed in the future. I found that women questioning and shifting sexual identities as adults often felt isolated early in the process, but used cultural production about and by LGBTQ women such as films, novels and short stories, music, television, anthologies of first-person essays, and erotica to feel less isolated and to learn the norms of LGBTQ women's communities. For instance, Gabrielle shared that as she was coming out she read books documenting lesbian subcultures to learn what might be expected of her in lesbian communities and to give her context for the new spaces she was entering. Miriam and Kate stated that listening to women's music such as Cris Williamson and Melissa Etheridge was an important part of their coming out process that made them feel connected to a larger imagined community of LGBTQ women. Tami and Rosie spoke of how they felt affirmed early in their coming out process by watching films that centered lesbian identities. Clair and Betty stated that watching *The L Word* was a way for them to bond with their female partners and feel included in LGBTQ communities. Wilma Agnes and Faith both shared that reading fiction about women who love women made them feel less isolated. Thus, throughout my research there is evidence to support the notion that women use cultural production as part of their coming out processes as adults. While existing scholarship explores how young women use cultural production in developing their LGBTQ identities (Driver; Liming), I have yet to find studies that consider how women further into adulthood or in midlife might (or might not) use such texts differently than younger women. Exploring the role of cultural production in once-heterosexual-identified women's coming out process could be part of creating models of sexual identity development that attend to the particularities of coming

out during adulthood as opposed to adolescence. Additionally, social workers and mental health professionals working with women coming out in adulthood would likely benefit from understanding how adult women use cultural production while coming out. These professionals might familiarize themselves with texts about women who love women and women shifting sexual identities and recommend them to their clients. One of the post-dissertation projects I am considering is to create a Wiki organizing such texts to be a resource for women who are questioning or coming out and for mental health professionals.

Another area of my research that fell outside of the scope of my dissertation is the role of once-heterosexual-identified women's communities, support groups, and self-help networks. Investigating the ways once-heterosexual-identified women build communities would be fruitful for scholars interested in women's organizing and communication practices. During the course of my research I found online and in-person support groups for women coming out midlife, especially communities created around the label "late bloomers."<sup>99</sup> These groups offer women peer support in their processes of questioning their sexual identities and coming out as adults. These are rich sites for understanding how women who may feel isolated or culturally marginalized create community with each other. Scholars who are interested in the formation of LGBTQ communities—especially online communities—and how identities are created and contested in such spaces could benefit from exploring the work once-heterosexual-identified women are doing.

Additionally, professionals such as social workers or psychologists have built booming businesses around offering therapy and support to women coming out in midlife or while married to men. One example is social worker and once-heterosexual-identified

woman Joanne Fleshier. Fleshier is the author of the self help book, *Living Two Lives: Married to a Man and In Love with a Woman*, she runs a counseling website that includes a message board where women can post questions and Fleisher will answer them, she gives lectures and workshops for women questioning their sexual identities, she has been cited in many newspaper and magazine articles, and she has appeared as an expert on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to discuss women coming out while married to men (Fleisher; “Married Bisexual Woman”; Jones; “Oprah Examines”). Scholars interested in self-help industries might find once-heterosexual-identified women’s self-help an illustrative arena for further considering how self-help regulates subjects and/or offers transformative potentials.

The most urgent implication of my dissertation is that we need more research—both empirical and critical—that explores the experiences of women of color and/or low-income women who come out as adults or who experience sexual fluidity. Completing research for this dissertation has stressed for me the overwhelming dominance of whiteness and middle-class subjectivities shaping sexuality studies scholarship, especially scholarship about women’s sexual fluidity. Recent scholarly interest in women’s sexual fluidity and women’s use of non-binary labels has been on the rise and garnering a lot of attention from both academic and popular audiences (Rust; Peplau; Diamond; Bower, Gurevich, and Mathieson; Callis; Better; Brooks and Quina), but there has been very little work asking what role racial, ethnic, and class identities play in these experiences.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, who gets heard in such studies is often limited to white, middle-class participants, obscuring diverse ways that women might articulate and make sense of sexual fluidity and coming out in adulthood.

During the course of this research, I briefly reviewed anthologies of coming out stories by women of color, with the hope that analyzing these texts might provide a more diverse sample of narratives by once-heterosexual-identified women than looking solely at anthologies which center women shifting identities in adulthood (Silvera; Trujillo; Ratti; Moore). However, I did not find many stories authored by women of color that spoke to coming out in midlife, coming out after marriage to men, or experiences of sexual fluidity. When I did find stories that touched on these experiences, such experiences were not discussed in the same detail as my other primary sources. At this time I have not completed enough research to do anything more than to speculate that perhaps unless a collection is specifically organized around the idea of women shifting identities, once-heterosexual-identified women's experiences will be lost or glossed over in the larger genre of LGBTQ women's coming out stories. It is also possible that once-heterosexual-identified women of color do not place the same amount of significance on coming out "late" or coming out after marriage to men as their white counterparts. I noticed that once-heterosexual-identified women of color, in stories I read and in my focus groups, expressed less turmoil about coming out late and fewer feelings of illegitimacy than most white women I encountered. These are areas of inquiry that my current research could not fully explain or account for, and I encourage critical sexuality studies scholars to pursue the implications of these differences I noticed between white women and women of color in my research. LGBTQ women of color might be more comfortable thinking of sexual identity as unpredictable. LGBTQ women of color may not internalize pressure to have absolute clarity about the self in the same ways as LGBTQ white women and feel less shame about not knowing the self when they shift identities.<sup>101</sup> Perhaps LGBTQ women of color better

understand the (cultural, emotional, economic) circumstances that lead women to partner with men, and communities made up primarily of LGBTQ women of color may not mark once-heterosexual-identified women as illegitimate in the same ways that many white women in this study described. There is a great need for more research that looks to women of color's experiences of sexual fluidity and coming out in adulthood, to address the issues I raise here and others. Future research could give insight into the identity labels and models of identity once-heterosexual-identified women of color create and use, how such women participate in broader LGBTQ women's communities, and how such women might understand their experiences differently than or similarly to once-heterosexual-identified white women. Both cultural critics and social scientists should be aware that this is an under-explored area of inquiry that could benefit from their attention.

As I have stressed throughout this dissertation, there is a greater opportunity to ask what discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women tells us about culture, and I encourage other scholars to approach this discourse with a cultural lens. Existing scholarship on this topic is dominated by psychological studies, and while these studies are important, cultural critiques should be a part of the effort to better understand once-heterosexual-identified women's experiences. If we gain more insight into the models of identities at work in once-heterosexual-identified women's experiences, and the power dynamics shaping what it means to be a woman shifting sexual identities, then we can create better resources supporting women coming out in adulthood. These might include discursive resources that more accurately account for the diverse ways people experience, articulate, and understand their sexual identities.

*Conclusion: Learning to Think Otherwise*

While writing this dissertation, I have been asked by friends, acquaintances, family members, and strangers sitting next to me on trains and planes what I am researching. I have become practiced at summarizing my topic in a short statement, “I am studying stories about women who once identified as heterosexual but then shifted into a lesbian, bisexual, gay, or queer identity at some point during their adult lives. I’m asking what these stories tell us about how we think about sexuality.” When I say this, people almost always respond, “Oh, I know someone who that happened to,” and then proceed to tell me a story about their sister, their mother, their friend’s mother, or a friend from high school who shifted sexual identities as an adult. While I was already aware of the commonness of such experiences when I started this dissertation, it has struck me in these conversations how many people personally know, even if in a tangential way, a woman who has come out as LGBTQ as an adult or decided to partner with a woman after a lifetime of partnering with men. Of course, if you add to this number individuals who know men with similar experiences or individuals who know women who used to identify as LGBTQ and then shifted into a heterosexual identity, we get an even larger sense of how many people know someone who has shifted sexual identities. This anecdotal observation was significant to me because it stressed how we see sexual fluidity and people coming out as adults all around us, and yet the discursive resources we have to talk about sexuality skew towards sexual stability and models of sexual identity development that focus on adolescence.

In writing this dissertation I aim to illuminate and linger on the complexity of sexuality that is so often elided or disavowed in the language that we have available. Even as we live lives full of complexity and paradox, and we see how others have confusing or

contradictory lives, the discourse we have to make sense of our sexual lives and identities offers much more simplistic, and perhaps sometimes more comforting, ways to understand sexuality. As many critical sexuality scholars have done before, I use this dissertation as an opportunity to interrupt a cultural tendency to ignore or conceal the complexity of sexuality, and to instead think how we might keep multiple confusing, contradictory, or potentially troubling notions about sexuality in mind simultaneously without one notion becoming more true than another. How can we see the multiple effects and implications of discourse as it cuts across a cultural landscape? How can we view our everyday lives with an eye for the complexity there, and make our discourse better reflect such complexity?

This dissertation is inspired by women who think otherwise despite cultural pressure to maintain the social identity one already inhabits. In the spirit of thinking otherwise, I ask how we might also reimagine and reorient our understandings of sexuality in contemporary U.S. culture to express more of the diversity, contradiction, and unpredictability that living entails.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For examples of this surge see other recent popular representations of women who once identified as heterosexual but then shifted into a non-heterosexual identity, including *Oprah Winfrey Show* episodes on the topic in 2006 and in 2009 (“Wives Living Two Lives”; “Women Leaving Men for Other Women & Sexual Fluidity”), articles in women’s magazines (Fischer; Amatenstein; Jones), network news stories and posts on LGBTQ blogs (James Donaldson; Autostraddle; Killeen), as well as the public presence of other celebrities who publicly came out midlife and/or shifted into an LGBTQ identity as adults, such as Kelly McGillis, Wanda Sykes, and Maria Bello. There are also popular press anthologies, collections of interviews, and self-help books devoted to the subject of women becoming LGBTQ as adults (Cassingham and O’Neil; Walsh and André; Abbott and Farmer; McCoy; Fleisher; Strock; Wilton). In this same time period, social scientists, especially in psychological fields, have sought to better understand the experiences of women who come out in midlife and sexually fluid women, and how such experiences might challenge and revise existing theories of sexual identity development (Kitzinger and Wilkinson; Jensen; Diamond; Peplau; Chivers et al.).

<sup>2</sup> For examples of studies that examine women becoming heterosexual-identified after having been LGBTQ-identified, see chapter six of Arlene Stein’s *Sex and Sensibility* and Ellen Schecter’s dissertation, “Women-Loving-Women Loving Men: Sexual fluidity and Sexual Identity in Midlife Lesbians.”

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, stories about once-heterosexual-identified women are marketed to suggest that sexual fluidity is one-way, and that women who have experienced this shift are now firmly located in their new LGBTQ identity. Individual storytellers might contradict this assumption by highlighting the possibility for another change in their identity in the future, or by stating that they do not comfortably occupy any sexual identity. Yet, the focus of these stories as they are marketed to the public is on women “leaving” heterosexuality.

<sup>4</sup> While I explore how the assumption that women are more sexually fluid than men manifests in contemporary U.S. culture, this assumption is not a recent one. Historically women’s sexuality is framed as a mystery in Western cultures, and women are characterized as fickle and unstable in their thoughts, emotions, and actions, while men are comparatively characterized as certain and reliable.

<sup>5</sup> The popularity of Diamond’s work will be evident throughout this dissertation, as Diamond is cited in many of the texts I analyze, especially articles in women’s magazines. Additionally, Diamond appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in March 2009 to discuss her research (“Women Leaving Men for Other Women & Sexual Fluidity”), Diamond wrote the foreword for the anthology *Dear John, I Love Jane: Women Write about Leaving Men for Women*, and, against her intent, Diamond’s work was cited by anti-gay groups arguing that homosexuality is a reversible choice (Diamond 248).

<sup>6</sup> My research found that most scholarly work about men coming out in midlife or after marriage to a woman focuses on mixed orientation marriages. For examples of such studies, see Tornello and Patterson; Matteson; Higgins; Hernandez, Schwenke, and Wilson. Overall, I have not seen as many studies of the experiences of men who shift into a GBQ identity as adults compared to similar studies examining women’s experiences. I did not find any popular press collections of personal essays of men writing about changing



sexual identity similar to my primary sources. Representations of men's sexual fluidity are less prevalent in contemporary film, television, and other media sources than representations of women's sexual fluidity. However, this could be changing. For instance, as I finish this dissertation, Netflix debuts a new series in May of 2015, *Grace and Frankie*, a show about two midlife female friends whose husbands leave them for each other.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault gives examples of how discourses are "productive" in this way in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* when he outlines how medical, legal, and religious discourses produced a proliferation of sexual identities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (25-49).

<sup>8</sup> I realize one of the flaws of this term is that not every woman I refer to in this dissertation thought of herself as heterosexual at one point. For example, three focus group participants stated they had never identified as heterosexual to themselves, but they did not share their same-sex desires with other people until they were well into adulthood. However these women had the experience of living a large part of their lives perceived by others as heterosexual women married to men. In these cases, I argue the term "once-heterosexual-identified" describes how they moved across social identifies from heterosexual to not heterosexual, identifying as heterosexual to the world around them at one point, even if they never identified as heterosexual to themselves.

<sup>9</sup> I have not found any narratives about women shifting sexual identities that account for trans women's experiences. However, Diamond does note in *Sexual Fluidity* that a few of her participants came out as trans men over the course of her research (193-201).

<sup>10</sup> When I refer to "culture" in this dissertation, I am influenced by critical postmodern approaches to culture as multiple, rather than a cultural consensus model which would group diverse practices and spaces under the umbrella of a monolithic (national, ethnic, subcultural) culture. I map out how such cultural contexts are informed by historically-situated racial, sexual, classed, and gendered dynamics, but I understand that these contexts are always partial and in flux and do not represent the whole of U.S. culture. I envision culture as "a symbolic reference system whereby humans manufacture and reproduce a meaningful, real-world action and interaction," and this view of culture "stresses human agency in the creation of meaning" (Allan qtd. in Baldwin et al. 141). This definition of culture looks to the ways people both individually and collectively construct, read, and refashion signs to give their worlds meaning. Additionally, this dissertation focuses on discourse, and, hence, the production and circulation of ideology within this meaning making process is an important part of my definition of culture. This view is very much influenced by a Foucauldian framework that sees discourse as a vector of power, and also by postmodern theorists who have theorized ideology as a way of creating social norms (Gramsci; Baldwin et al. 143).

<sup>11</sup> While the specific tactics that one might use to carry out Roof's vision are vague, Roof's proposition ultimately suggests affinity with queer theorists who embrace an antisocial thesis and who see political efficacy in associating queerness with death and anti-reproduction (Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"; Bersani, *Homos*; Edelman; Caserio et al.).

<sup>12</sup> In the essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," Sedgwick cautions against the tendency of

critical scholars to simply anticipate the hegemonic and problematic elements of a text. She calls an analysis that primarily seeks to uncover these problematic elements a “paranoid reading.” She advances the notion of the “reparative reading” as a style of critique that remains open to what in a text might surprise us if we give up the anticipatory notion of knowing the text’s limitations. A reparative reading acknowledges a text’s problematic biases and ideological underpinnings, but it also asks *what else* is there, and how a text functions within complex matrices of power.

<sup>13</sup> Lesbian history as a field became institutionalized in the U.S. academy approximately in the late-1980s and early-1990s. From the late-1970s onward, feminist scholars such as Blanche Wiesen Cook worked to uncover lesbians in history, but most efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to archive lesbian history were largely undertaken by non-academic writers and activists, such as the grassroots collective maintaining The Lesbian Herstory Archives, or Joan Nestle’s writing about butch-femme subcultures of the 1960s (Cook; “History and Mission”; Nestle, *A Restricted Country*). Historian Martha E. Stone argues that Faderman “all but invented lesbian history as a field worthy of serious scholarly endeavor” (37). Faderman’s monograph is cited in nearly every text about lesbian history that I have found in my research, and she is even referenced in a couple popular anthologies and self-help books.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of working-class lesbian bar cultures, see Nestle, *The Persistent Desire*; Kennedy and Davis; Harris and Crocker; Faderman; Stein. However, it is important to note that other scholars have challenged the tendency to focus on bar cultures as the locus of lesbian culture in the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, Rochelle Thorpe examines postwar African American lesbian communities in Detroit and finds that because of the segregation of public spaces and racism within white lesbian bars, African American lesbians created separate cultures via house parties. Furthermore, Faderman notes that middle-class lesbians in the postwar era were unlikely to frequent bars because of differences in class norms and fear of losing public respectability. Such women created private social circles and could often pass as heterosexual in their everyday lives (182–186).

<sup>15</sup> See chapter ten of *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*.

<sup>16</sup> See chapter five of *Sex and Sensibility*.

<sup>17</sup> One reason for this shift in identification may be a result of radical activism around AIDS in the 1980s that created urgent necessity for solidarity between LGBTQ men and women.

<sup>18</sup> For cultural criticism of representations of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in twenty-first-century television, see Akass and McCabe; Leaker; Beirne, *Televising Queer Women*; Beirne, *Lesbians in Television*; Heller, *Loving The L Word*. For scholarship on representations of queer women in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries film, see Stuart. For a discussion of the ways lesbian women coming out in the contemporary moment utilize much older lesbian novels as part of their identity construction, see Liming. For a discussion of lesbian-produced media, such as comics and pornography, see Beirne’s *Lesbians in Television and Text After the Millennium*. See Driver for a study of how queer girls and young women consume a variety of contemporary media representations. For a broader view of the relationship between cultural representations of lesbians (and gay men) in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century U.S. culture, see Walters’ *All the Rage*.

<sup>19</sup> See Seidman; Robinson for overviews of these positions.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion about the political implications and limitations of LGBTQ visibility, see Vaid; Seidman; Walters, *All the Rage*; Chasin.

<sup>21</sup> None of this is to suggest that social or psychological analyses do not take into account power dynamics, the relation of multiple, complex contexts, or cultural meanings. Several of the social scientific studies I cite consider the larger contexts of identity construction and the role power plays in such constructions. For example see Kitzinger and Wilkinson; and Jensen. However, understanding culture, power, and the larger context for social and cultural meanings is a secondary part of these analyses, not the main objective of the study.

<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Rupp disregards the notion that women exhibit more sexual fluidity than men, briefly stating, “one could argue for a long history of male sexual fluidity as well, at least in the sense of what has been called situational homosexuality (in prison, on board ship, on the frontier)” (854).

<sup>23</sup> Feminists of color investigating the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality have demonstrated a particular commitment to a politics of position, creating bodies of scholarship that interrogate racist and imperialist practices in U.S. feminism (Hull et al.; hooks; Mohanty), as well as theorizing how women of color create situated knowledges stemming from their particular social locations (Moraga and Anzaldúa; Collins; Anzaldúa; Hernandez and Rehman).

<sup>24</sup> For examples of feminist scholarship that attends to the nuances of positionality as one navigates a matrix of power, see June Jordan’s “Report from the Bahamas” and Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart.”

<sup>25</sup> “Late bloomers” is a term used to refer to women who came out as LGBTQ-identified or same-gender-loving in midlife.

<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that while I analyze these texts as a set of sources, there are differences between them, especially between texts that were published ten or more years apart. The more recent collection of first-person essays I use, *Dear John, I Love Jane*, includes more unconventional coming out stories than the earlier collections I explore, stories which draw on the notion of sexual fluidity and include narrators who refuse to claim any sexual identity label. This is not to suggest that earlier collections do not include unconventional stories, but as will become apparent in throughout this dissertation and in chapter two especially, the notion of women’s sexual fluidity has gained a great deal of cultural salience within the past ten years. Therefore, newer anthologies and self-help books reflect the increased cultural visibility of sexual fluidity as a concept shaping contemporary American sexualities.

<sup>27</sup> Most of these older sources were newspaper and magazine articles about women coming out as lesbian after being married to men or reportage of celebrity outings such as the scandal surrounding Billie Jean King’s affair with Marilyn Barnett. Most newspaper and magazine articles from the 1970s and 1980s approached such stories as a forum for debating homosexuality as a moral issue, and this was not the case in more recent articles. I found that contemporary discourse about once-heterosexual-identified women stresses the idea of sexual fluidity more than these older texts, and seem less invested in questions of morality.

<sup>28</sup> Google Hangout is a video chat platform.

<sup>29</sup> I was influenced by grounded theory methodology in my processes of coding data and memoing, but this is not a grounded theory project. I have not constructed a theory as a

result of coding data, and I have not created a code to account for every concept that emerged in my data and then figured out the relationship of each code to each other. Instead I use the word “coding” to mean I enacted what Charmaz would describe as initial or open coding (48-53). Grounded theory coding methods allowed me to identify and organize significant concepts emerging from my research—to “stick to the data” (Charmaz 49) and allow conceptual categories to emerge and drive my research rather than approaching my data with a prescribed notion of what I would find. However, I am not “doing” rigorous grounded theory research in this dissertation, I am borrowing the best methods for conducting this project, as is a hallmark of cultural studies methodology.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmed clarifies that this process of becoming a lesbian and learning how to “inhabit a lesbian body” is true for all lesbians, including those who experience their lesbianism as an innate part of themselves since childhood (*Queer Phenomenology* 100). Furthermore, Ahmed argues that “becoming straight” is an effect of the repetitions of compulsory heterosexuality and “tending toward” heterosexual objects (80).

<sup>31</sup> This assumption is informed by a Foucauldian framework that understands identity as an effect of power. Foucault argues that discourse shapes identities and that power functions through knowledge. See Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* and “*Society Must Be Defended*.”

<sup>32</sup> Butler reminds us of this point when she argues that identifying as a lesbian is an anxious, but necessary, “politically efficacious phantasm” that never fully accounts for the full range of possibilities of an individual’s sexuality (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 13). Butler calls for approaching lesbian or gay identity as a “strategic” and “provisional” “sign” whose meaning can be revised and contested in future uses: “There is a political necessity to use some sign now, and we do, but how to use it in such a way that its future significations are not *foreclosed*? How to use the sign and avow its temporal contingency at once? In avowing the sign’s strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism), that identity can become a site of contest and revision, indeed, take on a future set of significations that those of us who use it now may not be able to foresee” (19, emphasis original). I approach discourse with this same sense of provisionality in this dissertation, paying attention to how individuals strategically use the ideas and languages available to them from moment to moment, context to context.

<sup>33</sup> As addressed in the introduction, scholars including Bidy Martin, Robert McRuer, and Esther Saxey demonstrate how this kind of continuity and closure of identity in the coming out story best serves androcentric, white, Western conceptions of sexuality. Yet, these three scholars, among others, also explore coming out stories that challenge the pervasive white, masculinist, and Western conceptions of sexuality in coming out stories by not adhering to key genre conventions (see Martin, “Lesbian Identity”; McRuer; Saxey; Jolly).

<sup>34</sup> Feminist theorist Bidy Martin gives an example of this when she argues one can see the influence of lesbian feminist politics in lesbian autobiographies of the 1970s and 1980s. Martin states that these stories discuss lesbianism in terms of love and solidarity with women rather than sexual desire—a reaction to the “homophobic reduction” of lesbianism to a deviant sexual practice in most scientific literature of the time (Martin, “Lesbian Identity” 147). In this case, lesbian feminist discourse makes certain kinds of stories recognizable as “lesbian autobiography” (lesbianism as love for and political identification

with women), and makes other stories seem homophobic and outdated by comparison (lesbianism as eroticism and sexual desire).

<sup>35</sup> Historian Martha Vicinus reminds us of this fact by exploring multiple “scripts” of lesbian identity in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries. Vicinus shows how several different scripts of lesbian identities co-existed or intersected in each era. In doing so, Vicinus argues that historians must construct a lesbian history that can account for a wide array of conflicting, incomplete, or confusing scripts of lesbian identity, as opposed to crystallizing single scripts as the definitive model of lesbianism in any particular era.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of this historical shift in thinking about homosexuality see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* 42-44; Faderman 39-45; Vicinus 480; 484-485; and Weber 680-681.

<sup>37</sup> For example, many scholars note the ways that Radclyffe Hall aligned her iconic 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, with Havelock Ellis’ theories of congenital inversion (see Newton; Faderman; Vicinus). Ellis provided a preface to the novel, in which he argued, “same-sex desire should be tolerated based in its purely innate roots” (Weber 681). Furthermore, Hall’s protagonist, Stephen, exhibits many of the indicators of the female invert which sexologists attempted to quantify, especially her large, masculine body. Vicinus argues that Hall used congenital invert theories to wage a “militant demand for [social] recognition” and that these theories about homosexuality as “an innate, and therefore unchangeable, defect” were desirable to Hall because they carried “the status of scientific veracity” (488).

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of this cultural-political shift within gay and lesbian communities, see page 156 of D’Emilio and chapter five of Stein.

<sup>39</sup> The phrase “boy crazy” is used repeatedly in these three anthologies by women who argue that they did not see any signs of same-sex desires in their childhood or adolescence. “Boy crazy” signifies as “real(ly) straight” in these narratives. It is interesting that heterosexuality is generally assumed, but in these cases, narrators have to prove that they were really heterosexual as youth, to work against the assumption in “born gay” discourse that sexual identity is a stable trait that announces itself by adolescence.

<sup>40</sup> Adrienne Rich theorizes the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” in her foundational lesbian feminist 1980 essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” In it Rich asserts that women’s primary bonds are with each other but women’s natural connections have been obscured by male power and the erasure of lesbians from history. Rich notes that compulsory heterosexuality—“[t]he assumption that ‘most women are innately heterosexual’” (648)—prevents women from seeing lesbianism as a possible existence. Hence Rich critiques the notion that heterosexuality is a “preference” and instead highlights the ways heterosexuality is “an institution” which “has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained by force” (648). Therefore, Rich asserts that coming out as a lesbian *appears* to be an unnatural or reactionary act only because the condition of compulsory heterosexuality makes heterosexuality *appear* to be “innate.”

<sup>41</sup> This notion of queer(ed) agency—seeing agency in sexual acts and personas that have typically been understood as passive—can also be found in discussion of femme sexuality and gay male bottoming. For examples, see chapter two of Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive*

of *Feelings* and Susan Kippax and Gary Smith's "Anal Intercourse and Power in Sex Between Men."

<sup>42</sup> Weber critiques the assumption that sexuality cannot be influenced by same-sex environments, asserting: "[T]he implications that it is ridiculous to think single-sex environments affect sexuality conflicts radically with my experience of shifting sexual identities, both my own and others', after beginning school in the context of a queer-affirming women's college. . . . Simply put, the film mocks the idea that sexuality can shift with environment and instead promotes an inborn view that is consistent with larger biologically homonormative discourses" (693). For another example of a queer theory approach to environment-based sexualities, see "'No Trespassing': Girl Scout Camp and the Limits of Counterpublic Space," by Kathryn R. Kent, in which she discusses girl scout camp as a space that cultivates "lesbian pedagogy."

<sup>43</sup> In Ahmed's argument, compulsory heterosexuality creates an environment where "straight orientations are shaped by contact with others who are constructed as reachable as love objects by the lines of social and familial inheritance" (*Queer Phenomenology* 94). Conversely, lesbian orientations are shaped by contacts that might pull a person "off course" from the line of compulsory heterosexuality—contacts that could expand one's possibilities for living a non-heterosexual life.

<sup>44</sup> This analysis takes a Foucauldian view of how power and pleasure function within alternative discourses of surprise and agency. Foucault notes that rather than merely being a force that limits, power produces. This production includes pleasure, both the pleasure "that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light" as well as the pleasure of "having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 45). This duality of pleasure and power becomes apparent as narrators interact with power as it manifests in "born gay" discourse, and sometimes articulate the pleasures of not replicating a generic coming out story.

<sup>45</sup> For examples of gay and lesbian activists and cultural workers who perceived Heche's comment as controversial, see "The Happy Couple" (Vilanch) and "Chasing Anne" (Koehl and Gordon).

<sup>46</sup> The "homosexual panic" is a legal defense in which a heterosexual defendant argues that the sexual advances or flamboyant behavior of a homosexual victim triggered a violent attack. Sedgwick points out that, on the one hand, the perpetrator's defense upholds the heterosexual/homosexual binary by suggesting that no heterosexual man could withstand homosexual advances without being compelled to violence. Yet, on the other hand, this defense points to an underlying uncertainty about the stability of sexuality, suggesting that a heterosexual could be turned by the sexual advances of a homosexual, hence, why violent force was necessary as protection (*Epistemology of the Closet* 19–20).

<sup>47</sup> Psychologist Lisa Diamond refers to the notion that women can fall in love with someone based on who they are as a person, regardless of that person's gender, as "*person-based attractions*" (172). In interviews with one hundred women over the course of ten years, Diamond notes that about one fourth of her participants stated that they primarily created intimate relationships with people based on emotional compatibility rather than based on gender (172). Diamond notes that participants who articulated person-based attractions were resistant to label their sexual identities (183). While Diamond theorizes

person-based attractions as one reason for women's sexual fluidity, in this chapter I explore how person-based attractions are being constructed as a way to understand women's sexuality in general in contemporary U.S. culture.

<sup>48</sup> I will use the term "unlabeled" to mean women who do not use sexual identity labels—such as "gay," "queer," "bisexual," and so on—to describe their sexuality.

<sup>49</sup> In the five focus groups I conducted with a total of twenty-seven women, there were three unlabeled participants who explained on the demographic survey before the focus groups took place that they did not use a label and/or they did not use the language of "coming out" to describe themselves. Additionally, three other participants identified as lesbian on the demographic survey but then explained during the focus groups that they only used the label "lesbian" provisionally and they did not personally identify with a sexual identity category.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, in a follow-up with Gloria I asked her how she felt about the label "queer" and she said she liked it and thought it was probably an accurate way to describe her sexuality. However, she said she does not use the term to describe herself partly because she feels that she would use queer to mean an open and undefined "great big umbrella of people who do things a little different." Gloria said she thought of the term "queer" to be "inclusive" of people of variety of sexual orientations, including heterosexual allies, and she liked that "queer" could "be related to a lot of things" in addition to sexual orientation. However, she felt if she were to identify as queer, other people would generally understand it as an umbrella term for LGBTQ or as synonymous with lesbian: "But I think if I were to say [queer], how that would fall on someone else's ear would probably mean, 'oh LGBT' or 'lesbian.' And so I'm careful about using it because I would want to have the chance to explain it." Thus, even if Gloria liked the openness of the label "queer," she argued that in the practice of everyday life "queer" would become defined and limited to existing sexual identity categories.

<sup>51</sup> Additionally, Clair stated she was not comfortable with the label "bisexual." In a follow-up she stated this was because she wanted to stress her commitment to gay and trans community, and she feels that being bisexual allows "one to live between both communities and identify with both (hetero and homosexual) cultures." Clair felt that labeling as bisexual would downplay the significance of gay and trans culture and politics in her life: "I live with a women (sic), love a women (sic), and advocate for the gay and transgender communities 100% of the time. The gay community and culture is my community and culture and a huge part of what defines my life with my partner."

<sup>52</sup> For instance, see the way that the phrase "love is love" is branded on t-shirts and buttons promoting marriage equality at <http://www.zazzle.com/marriage+equality+gifts>. Considering that most participants alluded to being part of LGBTQ communities with liberal politics, it seems reasonable to assume that discourse about love as universal was familiar to them and permeated their social milieus.

<sup>53</sup> I use the term "neoliberalism" to refer to not just economic policies that have redistributed wealth and eroded the welfare state over the course of the past forty years, but also neoliberalism as "a cultural project" that involves the "embodiment of new market projects" and the creation of self-regulating subjects (Barnard Center For Research On Women).

<sup>54</sup> While I explore how neoliberal ideology erases differences between identities to support a supposedly universal identity, it is important to keep in mind that neoliberal capitalism also proliferates and correspondingly commodifies identities. PNG discourse resists this commoditization in some sense by allowing individuals to refuse a coherent identity, to evade the commoditization of their identity, at least in momentary acts of resistance. However, PNG discourse and the ideas about the radical fluidity and uncertainty of sexual identity it contains are not beyond the reach of neoliberal capitalism. We can see how sexual fluidity becomes commodified, for instance, in the way that “heteroflexible” or “bi-curious” women have cultural cache as desirable objects for heterosexual-identified men to consume and for heterosexual-identified women to emulate (Fahs).

<sup>55</sup> I use the term “gender-blind” to draw parallels with the notion of “color-blind racism.” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva defines color-blind racism as a post-Civil Rights racial ideology that supports white supremacy even as it loses much of the overtly racist rhetoric of the Jim Crow-era. Bonilla-Silva demonstrates how color-blind thinking makes it possible for most white Americans to believe that racial discrimination is no longer an issue, that segregation and inequality are the result of individuals’ choices, and that talking about racism amounts to being unreasonable. Bonilla-Silva highlights how color-blind racism operates in linguistic maneuvers such as using diminutive language to discuss discrimination (66) or disavowing racialized thinking right before expressing a racist sentiment (59). Just as statements such as “I don’t see race” deny the existence of racism, claiming that gender is of no importance can similarly disavow the significance of gender in a social, cultural sense, including the continuance of gender-based discrimination. Within the post-identity worldview of neoliberal societies, both gender-blind and color-blind ideologies flourish.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, Miriam remarked upon how it could get exhausting to have to come out all the time to new people, sometimes not knowing if the person one is talking to will be homophobic. To prove her point, she shared a story about being on a cruise ship with her wife, and at one point realizing that all the same-sex couples on the cruise ship preferred to sit as couples for meals rather than at group tables. When her wife asked one of the gay men on the ship why he thought this was so, he stated that he thought gays and lesbians get tired of having to come out constantly (as they would by explaining who their partner was to a group of strangers at dinner) and just preferred not to have to deal with it, even if it meant being isolated in pairs. Miriam’s story gestures to the labor of being marked as a sexual minority and the labor of having to anticipate and negotiate others’ potentially hostile reactions to one’s identity.

<sup>57</sup> For instance Kelley stated that when people ask how she identifies, she will often say, “I’m a Kelley.” Gloria shared a similar story, saying that when other people assume she is a lesbian, Gloria’s partner will jokingly correct them and say, “No, she’s just a Gloria.”

<sup>58</sup> For instance, McRobbie explores how feminism has been “taken into account” in neoliberal regimes so that feminist ideals such as women’s empowerment or independence are incorporated into social institutions such as beauty culture or government, but the need for feminist movements is disavowed on the basis that feminism has already been included in the social structure (8; 150).

<sup>59</sup> Berlant begins her text by noting that the female complaint becomes something that “everybody knows” (*The Female Complaint* 1) on a larger cultural level—namely, that women suffer at the hands of men and that women love men at their own disadvantage.



<sup>60</sup> Williams cites Diamond explaining that male sexual fluidity is less common than female sexual fluidity because emotional intimacy is a socially sanctioned part of relationships between women, but not between men: "In part, it's because [men are] not naturally tender with one another, so that physical transition is a real stretch ... Women are highly intimate with one another, and these bonds can easily spill over into erotic feeling and action" (Williams). While Diamond's phrasing leaves open the possibility that women might be socialized to foster emotional bonds and intimacy, Williams frames Diamond's comment as evidence of a natural difference between men's and women's emotional competence. Williams states, "Fact is, it's more of a natural shift for females to make that leap."

<sup>61</sup> Descriptions of sex with other women are important in once-heterosexual-identified women's narratives because these descriptions become a way for a narrator to authenticate her LGBTQ identity and/or her desires for other women. In many coming out stories by once-heterosexual-identified women, narrators give detailed examples of how sexual experiences with women confirmed that they were essentially orientated towards women and not men. Often narrators in print anthologies (and sometimes in focus groups) describe feeling an intensity of desire for women they never felt for men and experiencing a heightened sense of pleasure having sex with women that was absent in their sexual relationships with men. The gendered bodies of other women are central in these descriptions of sex and desire, as narrators discuss being more excited by the bodies of women than the bodies of men. When PNG discourse in popular media downplays women's lust and explicit desires not necessarily for "the person" but for the gendered body, this discourse disavows the significance of desire for other women in once-heterosexual-identified women's experiences.

<sup>62</sup> For instance, we can see a flurry of popular news media coverage about women coming out midlife between 2008 and 2012. Many of these articles frame the idea of women coming out midlife as a hot topic or a new "trend." For some examples see "Kelly McGillis Is the Latest Late-in-Life Lesbian" (James Donaldson); "'Family Ties' Mom Meredith Baxter Joins Group of Later-in-Life Lesbians" (Marikar); "Why Women Are Leaving Men for Other Women" (Fischer); and "Why Women Like Maria Bello Come Out at Midlife" (Jones). Also, for a critical view of this "trend" see posts on queer women's blog *Autostraddle*, "Another Day, Another Lesbians Coming Out in Midlife Trend Piece" (Autostraddle), and on feminist blog *Jezebel*, "*O Magazine* Discovers New Trend: Lesbians!" (North).

<sup>63</sup> As Ken Plummer reminds us, sexual stories often come into their time because they affirm dominant discourse: "Most stories that 'take off' in a culture do so because they slot easily into the most accepted narratives of that society: the dominant ideological code" (115). In this case, a counter narrative about midlife as empowering for women may be in competition with a more traditional or dominant narrative as midlife as a time of decline for women, but the former is certainly more prevalent in media marketed to midlife women.

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of the features of a master narrative of decline and how women combat this narrative, see Jennifer Paff Ogle and Mary Lynn Damhorst's "Critical Reflections on the Body and Related Sociocultural Discourses at the Midlife Transition: An Interpretive Study of Women's Experiences," and Angela Trethewey's "Resisting the Master Narrative of Decline: Midlife Professional Women's Experiences of Aging." For a discussion of how

popular culture facilitates this shift from the “traditional” idea of middle age as a time of “resignation and bodily decline” to “the new attitude towards middle age which is celebrated in the popular media” (Featherstone and Hepworth 201), see Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth’s “The Midlifestyle of ‘George and Lynne’: Notes on Popular Strip.” Additionally, see Rose Weitz’s “Changing the Scripts: Midlife Women’s Sexuality in Contemporary U.S. Film” for a discussion of how midlife women’s sexuality is being reconceptualized in film in contrast to a master narrative of decline, with increasing representations that affirm midlife women’s sexual pleasure and autonomy.

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of the types of labor that self-help cultures promulgate, see Micki McGee’s discussion of the “belabored self” throughout *Self-Help, Inc.*; McGee’s review of scholarly work that approaches self-help culture as “central to the compliance industries required for neoliberal governmentality” (“From Makeover” 686); Wendy Simond’s discussion of “identity-as-machine” and “identity-as-growth” self-help books in chapter five of *Women and Self-Help Culture*; Brenda R. Weber’s discussion of the gendered and racialized labors within make-over television in *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*; and Laurie Ouellette and Julie Wilson’s argument about the patriarchal structure of self-help culture that keeps women laboring at the behest of male authority figures (McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*; McGee, “From Makeover”; Simonds; Weber; Ouellette and Wilson).

<sup>66</sup> There has been a boom of studies in the past twenty years that argue that women experience midlife as a positive time in which they gain self-confidence. However these studies rely almost exclusively on the experiences of white, middle-class, college-educated women. For examples, see Zucker et al.; Ogle and Damhorst; and Stewart and Ostrove. Tangri et al. note that “perhaps the most striking gap in this research literature is still the kinds of women who have been ignored: single mothers, older women, women living in poverty, rural women, lesbian women, and women who are members of ethnic and racial minority groups. Middle class, urban and suburban, white married women with children living at home are the most studied group” (114). One reason for this significant gap in literature about women’s midlife could be that middle-class white women have the most time and resources to be able to participate in studies. Another reason could be that white researchers might experience difficulty in or lack cultural competencies for recruiting women of color.

<sup>67</sup> For instance, Lisa Coleman notes that black midlife women are a hot niche market in the publishing industry, as evidenced by the wild popularity of authors such as Terry McMillan (56). For an example of non-fiction popular texts addressing black women’s midlife, see *Age Ain’t Nothing but a Number: Black Women Explore Midlife* (Brice). However, there does seem to be fewer popular texts—books or otherwise—marketed to midlife women of color who are not black.

<sup>68</sup> The anthology *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life* is a good example of a text that includes stories from women of a variety of racial backgrounds and some authors in this collection do speak explicitly about how their racial identities intersect with their sexual identities (Abbott and Farmer). However, stories with a critical lens regarding race are few in the collection, and as a whole such stories are not typical of anthologies about once-heterosexual-identified women.

<sup>69</sup> For example, see Flores' discussion of how Latinas "reconstruct" master narratives about midlife to assert their own desires and affirm their sexuality (Flores). Coleman argues that black women's self-help texts raise the political question of how to be "whole, healed, modern subjects" in a white supremacist patriarchal culture that negates one as these things (48, emphasis original). Thus Coleman asserts that black women's self-help is inherently about "redirect[ing] the symbolic order" (48). Additionally, Stewart and Osgrove argue that while their study found that college-educated women experience midlife as a time of increased confidence, women with fewer privileges may also experience midlife as a time of greater confidence. They reference Schultz's study to note that midlife Navajo women gain "strength and confidence" from their "experiences coping with adversity" (1192).

<sup>70</sup> Scholars note the assumption that midlife is a time of renewal for women contrasts with the tendency to conceptualize men's midlife as a crisis (Tangri et al. 122).

<sup>71</sup> We can see this type of "second adolescence" metamorphosis in media marketed to midlife women such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (the books and the films).

<sup>72</sup> "Putá" means "whore" in Spanish.

<sup>73</sup> For instance, see Carolyn M. Elliott's collection *Global Empowerment of Women* for critiques of a Western liberal feminist notion of women's empowerment. This anthology centers conceptions of empowerment based on the experiences of women from the Global South and indigenous women.

<sup>74</sup> "Late bloomer" is a term used to describe once-heterosexual-identified women, especially women who come out in midlife.

<sup>75</sup> Rose Weitz argues that film representations of midlife women's sexuality are becoming more "positive" in recent years, noting, "as a group these films suggest that midlife women should have sexual desires, should act on those desires, should experience sexual pleasure, and should not kill their own sexual needs for a man's" (30). However she also notes that most of these representations are "subdued by contemporary standards," and that more explicit representations of women's midlife sexuality tend to be comedic (22; 30).

<sup>76</sup> Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth also point to how aging well is increasingly figured as a series of choices privileged individuals can make to live in contrast to a "traditional" narrative of midlife as decline (201). They argue that a new construct of midlife compels individuals to stave off the effects of aging by participating in a "midlifestyle," constantly laboring at the body and participating in the work of consumer culture and leisure.

<sup>77</sup> McGee states, "Not only is extensive and ongoing labor on the self required of working people under advanced capitalism, but the labor of caring for others and managing the details of domestic life collides head-on with the imperative that everyone—man, woman, and child—focus on inventing an autonomous or self-sufficient self" (*Self-Help, Inc.* 16). Furthermore, McGee argues that women might feel particularly belabored from this extra expectation to create a "a masterful, self-governing self" (16), because laboring at the self-actualized self is often a "third shift" of the paid and unpaid labor women are expected to perform ("From Makeover" 689).

<sup>78</sup> McGee makes a similar point when discussing the revolutionary possibilities of self-help, and how these possibilities will only be realized if people can mobilize those longings for a better life towards collective action (“From Makeover” 690–691).

<sup>79</sup> Dan Savage and Terry Miller launched the It Gets Better campaign in 2010 in response to epidemic of LGBTQ youth suicides. The campaign involves YouTube videos in which LGBTQ and ally adults give testimony and offer support to youth, asserting that life as a happy LGBTQ adult is possible (“What Is the It Gets Better Project?”). The campaign has been criticized for ignoring the complexities of the lives of queer people of color, trans\* people, and poor people by centering the stories of affluent, white gay and lesbians. For discussion of both the criticisms and the transformative potentials of the campaign see Kruttsch; Goltz; Grzanka and Mann; and Majkowski.

<sup>80</sup> King’s public midlife coming out was marked by scandal when her former relationship with Marilyn Barnett became headline news in 1981. She did not openly speak about her lesbian identity in the press until over a decade later.

<sup>81</sup> Even women who did not have the experience of awakening to their sexual identities in midlife acknowledge the shame and stigma surrounding the idea of not knowing oneself. Participants were asked to comment on a statement actress Cynthia Nixon made in an interview, saying she felt “insulted” when people suggested she had been “walking around in a fog” before she fell in love with her wife (Witchel). Lynlee, who did not come out in midlife but in her late-twenties, asserted that she understood why Nixon would be insulted by the notion that she was unaware of her true, unrecognized self. Lynlee asserted that to say someone was “in a fog”—meaning unaware of themselves—was “offensive” because, “It’s like saying you just slept for twenty-seven or twenty-eight years of your life. You really had no understanding of yourself or your feelings...or just sense of self, period.” In a different focus group, Dani agreed that the idea of “walking around in a fog” was “insulting.” Dani implied that the idea of not knowing oneself seemed more demeaning than being accused of having hid one’s identity.

<sup>82</sup> The most obvious proponents of normalizing discourses are conservative gay (male) writers who argue that gays are normal people who embrace American values and lead lives regular lives centered around family and work (Bawer; Sullivan). Beyond these particular conservative, “post-gay” arguments, normalcy extends ubiquitously into current LGBTQ-affirming discourse. From the 1990s onward the place of LGBTQ people in the U.S. has been redefined through increased media representations; gay niche marketing; a boom of “lesbian chic” in fashion, film and TV; the growth of gay and lesbian entrepreneurship; the proliferation of national-level LGBTQ rights organizations; and corporate sponsorship of Pride festivals and other LGBTQ events (Clark; Ciasullo; Budge and Hamer; Walters, *All the Rage*; Chasin). This explicit incorporation of some gays and lesbians (and to a lesser extent trans people and bisexuals) into consumer cultures and capitalist markets has been heralded by many LGBTQ people and their allies as a sign that the U.S. as a nation is becoming increasingly accepting of LGBTQ people (Chasin; Walters, *All the Rage*). Such visibility and social inclusion hinges on the notion that sexual minorities are “just like anyone else,” meaning they fit standards of normalcy.

<sup>83</sup> Critics of the politics of normalcy argue normalcy confers privilege on the most privileged LGBTQ people, and thus normalizing discourses reinforce gender norms; heteronormative values regarding monogamy, marriage, and parenting; the supremacy of

whiteness and middle class status; and the desexualization of LGBTQ people for the sake of respectability (Cohen; Warner; Vaid; Walters, *All the Rage*; Chasin; Sycamore). These critics argue that the increased cultural visibility of LGBTQ people disavows the continuance of structural homophobia (Vaid; Walters, *All the Rage*; Walters, *The Tolerance Trap*). Additionally, critics of normalizing discourses argue that the emergence of the figure of the “normal” gay and lesbian citizen creates deviant sexual others, further marginalizing communities of color and immigrant communities, LGBTQ people outside of the U.S., poor people, bisexuals and transgender people, and LGBTQ people who are unabashedly sexual (Cohen; Puar; Phelan; Richardson, “Desiring Sameness?”; Warner).

<sup>84</sup> Michael Warner takes up this issue throughout *The Trouble with Normal*, especially in chapter four where he discusses attacks on public sex, and the meanings of public sex in gay men’s subcultures. Similarly, Lisa Duggan theorizes the concept of

“homonormativity” in chapter three of *The Twilight of Equality?* and argues that homonormativity “promis[es] the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50).

<sup>85</sup> Normalcy is performative in the sense that it must be maintained through the (often unconscious) repetition of particular ways of being and adherence to a worldview that supports this construct of normalcy. My understanding of normalcy as “performative” relies on Judith Butler’s theorization of performativity (*Gender Trouble*), as well as Sara Ahmed’s conceptualization of the embodied experiences of performing sexual orientation (*Queer Phenomenology* 80).

<sup>86</sup> Examples of people who have a harder time being recognized as good, normal citizens—or who are outright excluded from this construct—include queer people who have sex in public, people in non-monogamous relationships, single mothers, poor people receiving public assistance, people of color who live in criminalized communities, and sex workers, to name a few.

<sup>87</sup> To be clear, not all participants articulated feelings of illegitimacy. For instance, some lesbian-identified participants with masculine gender presentations stated that their lesbian identity was generally assumed and unquestioned. However, the experience of having received messages about being illegitimate was threaded throughout the focus groups.

<sup>88</sup> While theories that homosexuality is a result of gender inversion are generally associated with nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, the idea that gay men must be effeminate and lesbians must be masculine still shapes popular contemporary understandings of sexuality.

<sup>89</sup> I make this point borrowing from Ann M. Ciasullo’s argument about butch invisibility in popular culture. Responding to Arlene Stein’s observation that the butch is “synonymous with lesbianism in the public imagination,” Ciasullo states, “it is important to underscore the distinction between the butch’s presence in the cultural *imagination* and her lack of presence on the cultural *landscape*” (579, emphasis original).

<sup>90</sup> Participants also described having their present-day identities undermined by straight people in their lives who used participants’ relationships with men against them. For instance, Kelley stated that when she came out as lesbian to her mother and her grandmother, both assumed that Kelley was not because she has a child with a man. Kelley stated, “Most people believe it’s not true. ... Especially when you have a child.”

<sup>91</sup> I did not have any questions specifically related to normalcy in my interview protocol. Instead normalcy emerged as a significant concept in participants' talk, and one that shapes what it means to be a once-heterosexual-identified woman.

<sup>92</sup> For some examples of how same-gender-loving people have historically self-fashioned their identities in tangent with queer cultures, see discussions of gay men's cultivation of camp sensibility (Cleto; Tinkcom); George Chauncey's discussion of the creation of gay culture in nineteenth century New York City (Chauncey); Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis' ethnography of butch/femme lesbian subculture in mid-twentieth century Buffalo, New York (Kennedy and Davis); and feminist discussions of femme subjectivity (Harris and Crocker; Rose and Camilleri).

<sup>93</sup> For instance, Nicole argued that normalizing representations which downplay the importance of sexual identity are positive, but she described her own bisexual identity as a political act intended to challenge bisexual erasure, suggesting that sexual identity was central to her sense of self. Or Jo B. argued she wanted to be seen as normal, but also described her gender as on the "genderqueer" or "gender neutral" spectrum, being comfortable not fitting into a normal gender binary.

<sup>94</sup> Warner notes how normalcy is not understood as a "statistical norm," as in that which is average, but instead normalcy is understood as "an evaluative norm," an ideal to aspire to as "a standard, a criterion of value" (56).

<sup>95</sup> The figure of the butch lesbian, while popularly envisioned as the epitome of authentic lesbian identity, is also understood as a symbol of failed heterosexuality. So much so that her masculine gender presentation makes her "not a 'useful' body" in the context of consumer culture: straight women cannot identify with her, and straight men cannot, or would feel anxious about the possibility of, desiring her or identifying with her (Ciasullo 604). Thus the butch becomes impossible to represent in most popular culture texts on the account that she is positioned thoroughly outside of the heterosexual economy (Ciasullo; Kessler).

<sup>96</sup> Berlant defines "cruel optimism" as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world" ("Cruel Optimism" 94, emphasis original). For instance, the notion in U.S. culture that owning a house is a sign of adulthood and the good life continues to be powerful even after the mortgage crisis. Or, the notion that higher education leads to success remains poignant even in the midst of unprecedented national student loan debt and mass unemployment.

<sup>97</sup> For example, see Lillian Faderman's discussion of the figure of the "lesbian sicko" in 1940s popular culture (130–138).

<sup>98</sup> Some of the television representations of once-heterosexual-identified women that people recommended to me included Erica on *Grey's Anatomy*; Jenny, Phyllis, and Tina on *The L-Word*; Stef on *The Fosters*; and Sarah on *Transparent*. Films that were recommended to me included *Elena Undone* and *Losing Chase*.

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<sup>99</sup> For instance, the Yahoo group Latebloomerz.

<sup>100</sup> The only source about once-heterosexual-identified women which focuses on race that I could find was D. Dionne Bates' study, "Once-Married African-American Lesbians and Bisexual Women: Identity Development and the Coming-Out Process."

<sup>101</sup> By speculating that LGBTQ women of color might feel less shame or stigma about shifting sexual identities than white women, it is not my intention to disavow stigma women of color navigate that white women do not, such as the intersection of racism and homophobia and being a person with several minoritized identities.

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## APPENDIX A:

### FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

My list of interview questions below indicates that there were six central topics (listed in bold) that I covered during each focus group. I asked specific questions to engage those topics (the numbered questions), and I have also listed possible follow-up questions I might have asked (listed as indented under the numbered question). However, questions were altered in response to issues that participants raised. Therefore while the overall structure of the focus groups was consistent in terms of the major topics discussed, the specific questions I asked changed depending on what participants wanted to discuss and what issues emerged in the group interviews.

#### Opening script

Hello and welcome. I'm Clare Lemke and I will be moderating this discussion today. I am a student in the American Culture Studies PhD program at Bowling Green State University. I'm conducting focus groups as part of my dissertation research. My dissertation looks at how women with stories perhaps similar to yours are represented in U.S. culture. So representations of women moving from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity in their adulthood. I'm interested in hearing your opinions about these representations, and also your views about the kind of resources available to women coming out as adults. Also, I want to learn more about how you make sense of your sexual identity and how others have responded to your sexual identity. I am interested in this topic because I think stories like yours are important for understanding sexuality and the diversity of ways people might be LGBTQ.

Because this is a group setting, what you say here today cannot be guaranteed to be confidential. However, I ask that you please do not discuss anything that other group members say outside of this meeting. So, do we all agree that our conversation today will be private? If you want to talk about something, but you don't want to discuss it in the group, you can always contact me individually. My contact information is on the consent form.

I also want to stress that I'm interested in hearing your opinion. I don't have certain answers to my questions in mind. I'm not hoping that you'll all agree, and I'm not hoping that you'll all disagree. I genuinely want to hear your thoughts about the questions I raise

today. We might have as many different opinions as there are people in this room. And all of those opinions are valuable. Even if only one of you in this group holds a particular opinion, there might be hundreds or even thousands of women who've had this experience who feel the same way that you do. So, I want to stress that every opinion counts, so please feel free to share your thoughts with us today.

I am going to start recording this conversation at this point. It can be hard to hear everyone on the tape when people talk at the same time, so please try to speak one at a time. Thank you!

### **1. Introductions**

Let's start by going around and introducing ourselves. Please share your first name only, and tell us, what is your favorite thing to do on a Saturday afternoon?

### **2. Do once-heterosexual-identified women see themselves represented in public discourse or popular culture?**

Introduce and read aloud news story about Cynthia Nixon describing her change in sexual identity as a choice and the reactions she received (see article here: <http://www.fridae.asia/newsfeatures/printable.php?articleid=11506> )

#### **1. What do you think about this story? What are your initial reactions?**

Are you surprised that people had such strong reactions to Cynthia Nixon's statement?

What do you think about Nixon's statement that she resents people suggesting that she was "walking around in a fog" when she was partnering with men?

What do you think about Nixon's statement, "I've been straight, and I've been gay, and gay is better"?

Do you think she should say this, or might it be irresponsible for her to say this in a public forum?

#### **2. Do you see your experience as a woman who changed sexual identity represented in popular culture?**

If so, where have you seen these representations/stories?

What do you think about these portrayals—do they seem accurate? Do you think they are positive portrayals?

If you had your way, how would you ideally want to see an experience like yours represented in popular culture?

### **3. What identity labels do once-heterosexual-identified women use?**

1. How do you identify—what term do you use to describe your sexual identity? Why do you use your preferred term over other terms?

Have you always used this term since coming out?

2. How do you feel about the terms you have available to describe your sexual identity?

Do you like them?

Do you find them limiting?

How do you think other LGBT women you know feel about these terms?

Do you think there are good terms out there to describe your specific experience of shifting sexual identity?

#### **4. Do once-heterosexual-identified women use anthologies and self-help books about women changing sexual identities?**

1. I'm writing about books that are written for an audience of people like yourselves—women who came into a lesbian, queer, gay, bisexual, or unlabeled identity as adults. I have some here I can pass around for you to look at. Have you read any of these books?

2. If so, what do you think about these books?

Do you find them helpful?

Do they seem true to your experience?

Do you wish these books were different in some way?

3. Did you use books or other resources (like websites) when you were first coming out/questioning your sexual identity? If so, what resources did you use? What did you think about these resources?

#### **5. How do once-heterosexual-identified women articulate their experiences to others? How do others respond to their stories?**

1. Do you tell people that you used to be heterosexual-identified or that you used to be in a relationship with a man? If so, how do you explain your change in sexual identity to people?

If not, why do you generally choose not to tell people that you've had this experience?

Do you have fears or hesitations about explaining your story to other people?

Do you think this kind of history is common among the other LGBTQ women you know?

Do you feel like you were heterosexual and then changed, or do you feel like you always had the capacity to love or be attracted to women and just realized it later than most people?

2. How have people responded when you've told them about your past?  
How have other LGBTQ women responded when you've told them?  
Have you met other women with similar experiences?

## 6. Closing

**If you'll bear with me for a couple minutes, I'd like to summarize what we've talked about today. This way you can let me know if I've understood you correctly and if there's anything I'm leaving out.**

Is there anything you would like to add to what we've talked about today? Have I missed something important?

What advice do you have for me as I go forward with this project?

If you know someone who may be interested in participating in a focus group, please take a flyer to pass on to them.

APPENDIX B:

SAMPLE PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC

SURVEY

1. How old are you?

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2. Where do you live?

---

3. What do you do for a living?

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---

4. How do you describe your sexual identity?

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5. How do you describe your racial identity?

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6. How old were you when you first “came out” (i.e. identified as not heterosexual, either to yourself or to others)?

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7. Have you ever been married to a man? If so, how long did your marriage(s) last? If you are currently married to a man, how long have you been married to your spouse?

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8. I will use a pseudonym to refer to you in any transcripts or write-ups of focus groups. Your real name will never appear in any writing about the study. What name would you like me to refer to you by in write-ups of the study? (First name only)

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APPENDIX C:  
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY  
RESULTS

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	Age	Location	Occupation	Sexual Identity	Racial Identity	Age at Coming Out	Ever married to a man?
1	33	California	Academic	Bisexual	White	20	No
2	36	California	Administrator in higher education	I don't use labels because I don't believe they fit my experiences. I am currently dating a woman.	Caucasian	I don't use the term because it doesn't describe my experience. I first dated a woman at the age of 31.	No (but with a man for 12 years).
3	70	Victoria, Australia	Retired correctional nurse	Lesbian	Caucasian	59	Yes, for 36 years.
4	48	North Dakota	Doctoral student	Lesbian	Caucasian	45	Yes, twice (marriages lasted 3 and 4.5 years respectively).
5	52	Ohio	Professor	Gender-neutral	Caucasian	38	Yes, for 15 years.
6	64	Maryland	Retired	Lesbian	White Australian of British descent	Began questioning sexual identity in early 20s, came out to others at 55.	Yes, for 16 years.
7	42	Michigan	Professor	Lesbian and queer-identified	White	28	Yes, for about 4 years.
8	54	Ohio	Professor	Lesbian	Caucasian	38	Yes, for 16 years.
9	31	California	Doctoral student	Lesbian	Black/West Indian/American Indian	24	Yes, for 4 years.
10	29	Ohio	College student	Lesbian	Melungeon, but since it is not federally recognized, Caucasian.	20 (to self), 21 (to select others)	No

11	25	Ohio	Graduate student	Bisexual (but I think of my own sexuality on a scale. I am more attracted to men than women, though).	White/Caucasian	24 (to self), I have only come out to a few others.	No, but I have been dating a man for 8 years.
12	61	Ohio	Logistics specialist	To others, I don't describe it. To myself, I describe myself as probably gay.	Caucasian	About 57, but only to a few.	Yes, for 26 years.
13	45	Ohio	Production scheduler at a steel coil processing facility	Lesbian	White	27	No, but was engaged to 3 different men before I came out.
14	36	Ohio	Professor and part-time director of religious education	Non-practicing submissive masochist/bisexual/political lesbian	White	17	No, but was partnered to a man for 5 years.
15	48	Ohio	Consultant	Lesbian but somewhat fluid	Caucasian	17 (to self), 42 (to others)	Yes, for 12 years.
16	37	Ohio	Stay-at-home parent and a disability coordinator and advocate	Lesbian	White/Caucasian	26	Yes, for 7 years.
17	48	Ohio	MRI technologist	Lesbian	Caucasian	40?	Yes, twice. Once for 11 years and once for 6 years.
18	52	Ohio	Sort line inspector for a plastics recycling company	Lesbian	Caucasian	43	Yes, for 17 years.



19	33	Ohio	Baker	At this point I don't want to define myself as a certain subject of sexual identity, because I'm not sure if I would ever be with a man again or another woman.	White	I'm not sure if you could call it coming out, I fell in love with a woman.	Yes, for 9 years.
20	32	Ohio	College student and technology consultant	Lesbian	Caucasian	25	Yes, for 10 months.
21	44	Ohio	Graduate student and teaching associate	I'm attracted to both men and women, and have had sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women throughout my life. I'm okay with the word bisexual.	I am of mixed race, my mother was White, and my father was Puerto Rican and Dominican.	19 or 20	Yes, three times. First for 8 years, second for a year, and currently has been married for 2 years.
22	61	Ohio	University instructor	Lesbian	White	45	Yes, for 22 years.
23	61	Ohio	University administrative assistant	Bi, leading more towards lesbian	White	42	Yes, twice. Once for 7 years, once for six years.
24	58	Ohio	Director of a university center	Lesbian	Caucasian	44	Yes, twice. 10 years each time.
25	39	Ohio	Grade school teacher and union leader	Good question. I've been in love with a woman for years and plan on spending the rest of my life with her.	Caucasian	30	Yes, for 5 years.

26	66	Ohio	University lecturer	Lesbian	Caucasian/Jewish	22 (to self), 37 ("officially")	Yes, for about 15 years.
27	22	Ohio	Graduate student, multiple part time jobs	I consider myself pansexual, but I choose to identify as a lesbian (or dyke if it's safe to do so).	White	18 (to self), 19 (to parents)	No



DATE: January 10, 2014

TO: Clare Lemke

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [537190-2] Women's Experiences of Shifting from a Heterosexual to a Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and/or Queer Identity

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: January 9, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: December 16, 2014

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please add the text equivalent of the HSRB IRBNet approval/expiration date stamp to the "footer" area of the electronic consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 32 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on December 16, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FOR: Women's Experiences of Shifting from a  
Heterosexual to a Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and/or Queer Identity

• **INTRODUCTION:**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Clare Lemke, a PhD student in the American Culture Studies department at Bowling Green State University. I am conducting focus groups with women who shifted from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity (i.e. gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, etc.) as adults. Your participation in this study will contribute to research for my dissertation in which I am seeking to understand what women who have changed sexual identities think about representations of experiences like theirs in popular culture and how such women describe their own sexual identities. You were identified as a possible volunteer in the study because you are a woman who identifies as having changed from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity at least once in your adulthood and you contacted me to volunteer your perspective and time to the project.

• **PURPOSE AND BENEFITS OF THE STUDY:**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to current understandings of non-heterosexual women's identities and representations of women's sexual fluidity. The goals of this study are:

1. To better understand how women who have shifted from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity interact with, shape, or critique representations of experiences like theirs in popular culture.
2. To learn more about what resources women use in the process of questioning/changing their sexual identity, and their opinions about the value of such resources.
3. To learn more about how women who have shifted from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity describe their sexual identity to others, including the terms they use and how others have responded to their stories.
4. To ask if and how women who shifted from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual see a meaningful connection between their sexual identity and feminist politics.

The benefit of this study is to facilitate more discussion about the many ways women might experience non-heterosexual identities, and to learn more about how individuals respond to

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**IRBNet ID # 537190**

**EFFECTIVE 01/09/2014**

**EXPIRES 12/16/2014**

popular messages about women's sexual fluidity. You will be contributing to a larger body of research on women's sexual fluidity and women coming out as adults. Your contributions will create better understanding about experiences of sexual fluidity that are not often acknowledged in positive ways in popular culture or mainstream society. Your participation may help others be more inclusive of diverse experiences of sexuality. There are no tangible or monetary rewards for participants associated with this study. However, your contributions to the study are greatly appreciated. Also, it is my hope that the focus group is a positive experience for you and gives you a chance to express your opinions about your sexual identity and about representations of women's sexual fluidity in general.

- **PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES:**

1. With your voluntary participation, you will be given information about this study and your contribution to it. You will be given the chance to ask any questions about the study. You will be asked to provide consent to participate in the study before any focus group takes place.
2. I will conduct a focus group with you and 5-7 other women who have also experienced changing from a heterosexual to a non-heterosexual identity. Focus groups will last approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. During the focus group I will ask you questions about how you identify, the resources you used while coming out/questioning your identity, how others have responded to your experience, your views about how stories like yours are represented in the media, and any connections you may see between your sexual identity and feminist politics. I encourage you to share whatever you feel important to reveal about your perspective about these topics. Focus groups will be conducted in-person or via Google Hangout. In-person focus groups will take place in a quiet, private setting (e.g. a library meeting room, a college conference room, etc.).
3. I will tape the focus groups with a digital audio recorder for in-person focus groups, and with screen recording software for Google Hangout focus groups. If you are participating in a Google Hangout focus group, you may choose to turn your camera off during the focus group. Focus group recordings will be listened to only by me and remain on my password protected computer in a locked, secure university office to maintain confidentiality. After I partially transcribe the recordings and complete the analysis, the recordings will be erased.

4. Portions of your focus group will be quoted word-for-word in written reports of the study. However, your words will be used to discuss themes that emerged in the study as a whole along with other participants' words, and no one participant's story will be told in full. Your real name and identifying information will be changed in the written reports.

5. In the case that this research develops beyond a dissertation and is approved for a journal article or a book, I will send you any of my analysis that pertains to your story. You will have the chance to suggest corrections, add clarifications, or raise any concerns you may have. This will occur before any work is published. I am interested in your story and I want to make sure I understand it correctly. If we disagree about my analysis of your story, I will acknowledge your opinion in the final publication.

- **VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY:**

You may decide to participate in this study or not. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. If you decide to participate, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason. Your decision to participate or not participate in the study will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University. You may decide to skip any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. You may end your participation in a focus group at any time.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

1. Since focus groups are conducted in a group setting, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in this study. However, all participants will be asked not to discuss what others have said outside of the focus group.
2. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym of your choosing in transcripts and written reports of the focus group. Identifying information (i.e. name of your school, city of residence, names of friends or family members, etc.) will be changed or omitted in transcripts and written reports.
3. All recordings, transcriptions of those recordings, and signed consent forms will be locked in a secure university office and stored on a computer only accessible to me.
4. I will be the only person who listens to the focus group recordings.

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5. Recordings of interviews will be deleted when the study is complete. Signed consent forms will be destroyed after two years.
6. After the focus group, you can feel comfortable asking me to delete or change anything that you have said if you feel it may identify you or violate your confidentiality.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:**

1. Risk of participation is not greater than that experienced in daily life. I am asking you for your opinions and insights, so anything that you are uncomfortable sharing is completely at your discretion. If our focus group touches on topics that you do not want to discuss, you are free to not comment. If you do experience emotional distress after the focus group, please consider using the list of resources I have provided for you.
2. Since this study is not anonymous (you and I will meet with several other people), there is the risk of breach of confidentiality. Please see the previous section for procedures I will use to minimize the risk that confidentiality will be compromised.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** You may contact me at [crlemke@bgsu.edu](mailto:crlemke@bgsu.edu) or 716-348-9942. You may contact my advisor, Dr. Sandra Faulkner, at [sandraf@bgsu.edu](mailto:sandraf@bgsu.edu) or 419-372-1998. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions about this study or your participation in this research. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact the Chair of Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University at 419-372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu).

<b>SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT</b>
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I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research. I have been provided with a copy of this form.

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Participant Signature