

“Google Knows Everything”

Finding Queer Media

Aaron, his boyfriend Miguel, and their friend Alex started coming to Spectrum about three weeks ago. They always show up as a threesome, although sometimes they have Aaron's fifteen-year-old brother in tow. Aaron and Alex are nineteen years old, Miguel is twenty, and all identify as gay men. They are friendly and vibrant and have brought some new energy to the space in the midst of what had been feeling like a lull. They made friends with Travon right away, and for the past several afternoons, the group of them has met up to play Bullshit, the card game. Miguel and Alex are loud and outgoing, while Aaron's quiet confidence grounds the group.

One afternoon, not long after they started coming to Spectrum, Aaron approached me and asked if he could participate in an interview. We retreat to the medical clinic and talk for a little over an hour. Aaron is a freshman in college at the state's flagship university. As a Chicanx and a first-generation college student, he is one of an elite few to attend this school. This also makes him quite an outlier within the Spectrum community as very few of the college-aged youth are attending college at all, far less attending a school of this status. He grew up in a rural part of the state, raised for most of his childhood by a young single mother, as his father had been incarcerated. He and his mother lived at times with his grandparents, who, along with his mother, have been strong sources of support and love in his life. His mother eventually remarried and had children with Aaron's stepfather. They live in the northern suburbs now.

Aaron is a film buff who aspires to be an independent filmmaker, so we swapped stories about some of our favorite filmmakers, like Robert Rodriguez and Lars von Trier. When I asked him if he feels that film has influenced his sexuality, he described his experience seeing *Brokeback Mountain* for the first time. *Brokeback Mountain*, the 2005 Ang Lee film adaptation of the E. Annie Proulx novella, tells a universal love story through the experience of two men in a secret relationship with each other. This R-rated movie includes scenes of sexual intimacy, much like any love story drama about a straight couple. Remarkably, the mainstream popularity of the film resulted in it being nominated for and winning several Oscars. This film had a profound impact on Aaron, who described watching the film in secret in his home, where he had to make sure no one was around before he watched a film about gay cowboys:

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

Aaron explained that he had “seen a bunch of, you know, heterosexual [sex] scenes by that time and was familiar with the female body,” but this was the first film he had seen that included sex between men that was not live-action pornography. Aaron's experience and his longing for a representation of a same-sex love story outside the realm of pornography demonstrates the important role media play in the sexual and romantic lives of young people. This chapter discusses how representations of queer orientations have proliferated in various media that are increasingly accessible to the youth of Spectrum and beyond. As media representations of same-sex sexuality and desire begin to proliferate, both within mainstream and alternative media, arguably most youth—not just those who are LGBTQ-identified—will have access to a new set of cultural scenarios that influence how they understand their sexuality. In other words, queer media are changing sexuality and gender for everyone.

Finding Queer Media Online

Something happened around the mid-1990s and into the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century that forever changed the tide in favor of the queer: the internet. For the first time, people across the globe had simultaneous, instant access to cultural alternatives outside the mainstream. The internet and its access to global queer community and alternative culture is probably the most significant factor in the shifting norms around same-sex desire and LGBTQ

culture for young people of this generation. Whereas previous LGBTQ-identified folks had to move to gay meccas like San Francisco, Chicago, and New York to find community, the internet provides instant community where queer culture can proliferate. In some of the earliest research done on the role of the internet on the LGBTQ rights movement, the psychobiologist James Weinrich found that “one of the most common benefits of the internet to the gay community . . . is that it permits geographically dispersed minority individuals to interact with one another as if they were a local majority.”¹ The internet and internet communities have served as a positive source of sexuality information for sexual and gender minorities worldwide who seek an alternative to the derogatory and missing representations of themselves in mainstream media and formal sexuality education settings.² Notably, the sociologist C. J. Pascoe, in her research on young people using social media, found that, whereas straight-identified youth are distrustful of the internet as a way to meet friends and build community, almost the opposite is true for LGBTQ-identified youths, who depend on the internet as one of the few safe spaces they inhabit, where they can be open about their sexualities and gender and make friends with those who share their experiences.³

Among the youth of Spectrum, access to the internet appears ubiquitous. Within Spectrum itself there is access to a multitude of computers, all of which have internet access, and wireless within the building is accessible to anyone with a smartphone. Young people have smartphones or tablets of their own, including most of the working-class youth at Spectrum whose resources are quite restricted.

One of the ways that I encourage interviewees to talk to me about their self-understanding of their sexuality is by asking them to tell me about three things that they feel have most *influenced* their sexuality. While such an open-ended question is admittedly subjective, it helps me to get a sense of the things external to the youths themselves that they consider important to who they are as sexual beings. It pushes them to consider the influence of the social on their sexuality, beyond simply the desires they experience internally. The five most common replies to this question, in descending order, are (1) some form of sexually explicit content (SEC) via media, (2) intimate relationships, (3) family influence or family members, 4) friends and peers, and 5) sexuality education (namely at Spectrum as opposed to school, where sexuality education is notoriously lacking). While interaction with other people—whether family, friends, or intimates—is clearly recognized as important by these young people, they claim that media—the internet in particular—is the most significant.

It is not surprising that some form of SEC via media is most frequently named as influential to the youths’ sexuality.⁴ Digital natives, those individuals who were born during or after the widespread use of digital technologies, are growing up in the midst of unprecedented access to information via media.⁵ The internet allows confidential, quick, and easy access to diverse, explicit sexual images.⁶ A study exploring German adolescents and pornography by media scholars found that, “for most adolescents, pornography is the only accessible source of depictions of sexual behavior; pornography might thus be used by adolescents not only for sexual arousal but also to discover sexual behavior and explore their own sexual preferences.”⁷ As Fiona, a nineteen-year-old white woman who identifies as bisexual, shared with me when I asked her about watching pornography, “You know it’s how I learned what I like to do when I was younger. Um, it’s how you learn new things most of the time. You can look up these positions or whatever. Find out how to do it.” Pornography viewing is quite common among the young people I spoke with and often informs much of what they know about sexuality.

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

Especially our generation with the . . . the smart phones, and the internet, the wifi . . . all of that. It was simple.

—Anthony, seventeen-year-old Latinx, identifies as gay

I don’t know. I wasn’t originally like looking up porn, like, that’s not how it started out. . . . I was on the computer, probably on some social website and something, and then I, like, I don’t know, it just popped in my head and I got curious, so I searched. Like, if you want to know something what’s the best way to find out? Go look [laughs]. So I did, and I found like, pictures and videos and I was like, “Oh!” [laughs].

—Travon, sixteen-year-old Black male, identifies as queer

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

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

Mary: Okay. And how did you discover that?

Fiona: Just in Google, like, "naked people" or, I don't even know, like "boobs."

—Fiona, nineteen-year-old white woman, identifies as bisexual

Mary: Where would you go to find out information?

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

—Nik, eighteen-year-old white man, identifies as gay

As these quotes demonstrate, accessing SEC on the internet is not a challenge for young people. Further, many of the youths share stories of accessing the internet and sexually explicit content in their homes with little trouble. Digital natives tend to be quite savvy when it comes to covering their tracks and in many cases are far more nimble on the internet than their parents or guardians, making it easy for them to discreetly access content that adults in their family might find questionable.⁸ Although some of the youths shared stories about being caught looking at SEC online, none of them said that their parents were using any sort of blockers or restrictions through their internet service.

It is significant to consider the profound shift that has taken place over the course of the last century when it comes to how young people become sexual. Prior to the proliferation of mainstream media, sexual subjectivity was formed largely within the family, church, and school. All three of these institutions are dominated by adults. But the ability adults have to control and influence the sexual formation of young people has shifted tremendously with the proliferation and availability of new media. And while the availability of media is not always liberating, it has expanded the available options and loosened tight social control over sexuality. Although mainstream media continues to be largely heteronormative and homophobic in nature, LGBTQ-identified youth have access to an unprecedented amount of alternative media—including self-produced media—in which representations of queer sexualities and genders are proliferating. In particular, in this chapter I discuss Spectrum youths' interest in erotic *anime* and fan fiction as alternative forms of media. But first I discuss the importance of representation to the formation of sexual scripts and the history of widespread erasure and the stigma of homosexuality in mainstream media.

Cultural Scenarios and Sexual Scripts

Dramaturgical analysis is a useful tool for demystifying seemingly "natural" human conduct. In particular, the script and all its contingent parts—the writer, the producer, the actor, the set, the props, and the stage—are metaphors to help us recognize and notice the way that shared social understandings help members of a society successfully interact with each other day in and day out.⁹ Scripts describe learned social behaviors that, when successfully deployed, are largely invisible in social interaction yet become obvious when there is a deviation or failed cue that calls for improvisation.

Sexual scripts describe learned, shared social understandings about what is and what is not sexual, as well as how to conduct oneself in a sexual interaction.¹⁰ How is it that we are able to identify that something is sexual or not? How is it that we know how to behave sexually with another person or alone? John Gagnon, who along with William Simon developed sociological theories about sexual conduct using scripting theory in the 1970s, explains scripts this way: "Scripts [are] most often treated as heuristic devices to be used by observers to better interpret sexual conduct at three levels: cultural scenarios (such as pornography and the cinema), interpersonal interactions (as in specific sexual acts), and intrapsychic processes (e.g., sexual fantasies, plans, remembrances)."¹¹ Sexual scripting theory argues that biology is a weak explanation for sexuality and that, in fact, much of what we think we know about sex and sexuality is learned behavior, not instinctual. We have to be taught and learn what sexual is (and is not) and how to engage in sex. Scripting theory makes this learning more visible.

Cultural scenarios, as one component of sexual scripts, are what help us to determine the difference between a prostrate or pelvic exam at the doctor's office and a sexual encounter with a lover, where the former is not meant to arouse us sexually while the latter is. Cultural scenarios teach the (non-)sexual script in many different ways. Children learn from adults and peers how to follow the sexual script and pay attention to cues. In U.S. culture, it is the norm to teach children that certain parts of their body are private and should be kept to themselves. For example, most children are taught, one way or another, not to touch their penises or vulvas in public. This might be one of the earliest moments of learning the sexual script, as children learn that something about their sex organs is different from other parts of their body. While the

sexual script, as children learn that something about their sex organs is different from other parts of their body. While the example I've used here is quite simple, imagine all of the ways that people are taught from family members, authority figures, and peers how their bodies are (non-)sexual. Scripting theory can help make this process visible.

Beyond family, friends, and other adults, cultural scenarios are learned through various media, including television, film, books, comics, songs, art, and social media. Society learns what is culturally appropriate through media, which in the United States relentlessly demonstrates a dominant narrative about sexuality that is heterosexual, male-centered, penile-to-vaginal, and largely monogamous. While there are certainly alternatives to this dominant cultural scenario, many of the intimate, sexual relations portrayed through media are incredibly monotonous in their portrayal of human sexuality. Of particular interest here is the rampant heterosexuality portrayed in the media. This does not mean that alternative scripts are not available, but when it comes to mainstream media and sexuality, heterosexual pairings rule the day. But heterosexual scripts are not fixed, and as society's notions of appropriate sexuality has shifted, the dominant scripts have changed, too. For example, while still largely heterosexual in nature, it is more common to see sex scenes on television or in film that ostensibly focus more on women's pleasure, like an increase in scenes where men perform oral sex on women.

In many ways, cultural scenarios via media can be helpful tools for novices who are just learning about sexuality, yet they can also stifle creativity when it comes to sexual behavior because they may limit one's notion of what's possible or acceptable when it comes to sexual conduct. In his discussion of how sexual scripts influence gender preference, Gagnon stresses that people experience "changes in gender preference in erotic relations" across the course of their lives. But he points out that this instability is particularly common among adolescents "when gender-appropriate sexual scripts are in the process of acquisition."¹² Children and adolescents typically have had less access to a diversity of scripts because of various institutionalized forms of control through family, religion, school, and restricted access to media. Too often they are shielded from a potentially diverse array of sexual cultural scenarios that inform their scripts. At the same time, they are still new to sexuality and not yet socialized into heteronormative sexualities in the same ways that adults may be.

In his critique of using scripting theory to explain sexuality, Jonathan Green argues that sociologists are guilty of relying too much on the social to understand sexuality, and not enough on the subconscious or psychoanalytic. He argues that, in addition to cultural scenarios and interpersonal interactions, both of which can be observed empirically, the intrapsychic processes are influenced by an erotic habitus that is formed largely in our subconscious but influenced by the social. He urges sociologists to consider that, "stretched into an all-purpose, one-size-fits-all framework," scripting theory fails to adequately explain sexual desire.¹³ "Indeed, a 'script' is not a master status, nor a social structure, nor an unconscious, psychic structure. Scripting processes are, however, relevant to how these elements bear on what we do sexually and with whom."¹⁴ Therefore, keeping in mind that the media we consume does not predetermine our sexual desires and sexual subjectivities, the cultural scenarios youth encounter through media provide a plethora of examples with which to explore how young people do learn *something* about sexual conduct. Given one's sexual habitus, in particular one that is queerly oriented, the absence or presence of same-sex desire and homosexuality provided via cultural scenarios is important to consider.

In a society in which same-sex erotic desire has been intentionally censored from the mainstream media (which I discuss at more length below), same-sex sexual scripts are acquired largely outside the mainstream. For example, scripts might be learned within a community of peers, like an LGBTQ center. When it comes to alternative media, same-sex sexual scripts abound in various sources on the internet, including pornography and social media, along with other forms of media like foreign film, novels, and poetry.

Therefore in the United States there is a lack of mainstream cultural scenarios that represent same-sex desire. It becomes clear within this study that the youth of Spectrum value same-sex and genderqueer cultural scenarios that they discover outside mainstream media. Arguably, as the normalization of homosexuality increases in U.S. culture, so has the quantity of representations of same-sex desire. This has implications not only for those who claim LGBTQ-identities and experience same-sex desire but also for the increasing acceptance of sexual and gender fluidity among all sorts of people. Compared to a previous generation of LGBTQ-identified people, who had to seek out community in bars, clubs, and other public places where gay people congregated, Spectrum youth have access to a global community via the internet and, therefore, a multitude of cultural scenarios that represent same-sex desire. In the coming decade, we are likely to see a mainstreaming of same-sex sexual scripts and cultural scenarios that will permanently change the sexual landscape of our culture.

Missing and Misrepresented on Screen

The twentieth-century censoring of U.S. media—film, television, and print—resulted in a cultural erasure of homosexuality.¹⁵ This, along with the medical and psychological professions' past (and in some cases ongoing) treatment of gayness as something to eliminate, rather than affirm, has contributed to a deeply homophobic and transphobic U.S. culture that we are still contending with today.¹⁶ In the context of such powerful social control, the battle for LGBTQ

rights has been difficult. While the movement has recently been wildly successful at combating institutionalized transphobia and homophobia, including the reversal of legislation like the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT), along with other major legislative and legal wins, U.S. mainstream culture continues to marginalize representations of LGBTQ lives.

The 1915 Supreme Court case *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* ruled that the film industry—determined to be a for-profit entertainment product as opposed to a member of the press—should not be protected by First Amendment freedom-of-speech rights, leaving the film industry vulnerable to censorship. Vito Russo's extensive history of representations of homosexuality in the U.S. film industry, *The Celluloid Closet*, explains that “by 1922 there were censorship bills before the legislatures of thirty-two states, and throughout the nation the distinct odor of moral indignation was rising at an industry that at times seemed to embody wicked behavior of all sorts.”¹⁷ Homosexuality, as a form of deviant sexuality, was a censored topic in all of the various statutes. While not specifically forbidden, “cross dressing, weakness in men, and over-intellectualism were sometimes direct statements about deviant sexuality,” meaning that characters associated with the sissy were associated with homosexuality and therefore also subject to censorship.¹⁸

In addition to the state censorship statutes, the creation of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1930 (and similarly the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters in 1951) had a profound impact on the lack of representations of homosexuality in film in the United States. The role of the Code and the office that administered it was to anticipate censorship before it happened and therefore was a form of self-regulation for the film industry. Often referred to as the Hays Office (after Will H. Hays, who led the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America from 1922 to 1945), this self-censoring body ensured that films coming out of Hollywood were in line with Christian—specifically Catholic—morals and values. In addition to forbidding nudity (even in silhouette) and sex perversion (homosexuality being among the perversions), the Code forbade representations of miscegenation, the illegal traffic of drugs, white slavery, and ridicule of the clergy, among other things. Thanks to the Code and various censorship statutes across the country, representations of queerness or homosexuality, save for the most metaphorical, were successfully removed from mainstream media in the United States. The Code was enforced within the U.S. film industry beginning in the 1930s and continued through 1968, when the Motion Picture Association of America film rating system went into effect.¹⁹

Decades prior to the censoring of the film and television industries, the Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use, commonly known as the Comstock Act, also had an important impact on the repression of homosexuality and other forms of “perverse” sexuality. The Comstock Act, passed in 1873, made it illegal to send obscene materials like erotica, abortifacients, birth control, sex toys, personal letters alluding to sexual content or information, or any information about the above-mentioned items through the U.S. Postal Service. Combined, the censorship statutes, the film and television industry's self-regulation of content, and the Comstock Act effectively removed representations of same-sex desire and any notion of the homosexual from the mainstream media. This kind of censorship contributed to the formation of a transphobic and homophobic culture, taking a destructive toll on sexual and gender minorities.

A growing secularism and rejection of conservative cultural norms saw the relaxation of censorship measures in the 1960s and 1970s. In part, control of the media became less realistic as the culture globalized and technology advanced, making it impossible to censor all media. For example, foreign films that portrayed complex characters and stories with homosexual content made their way to U.S. theaters. Further, in 1952 the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned its previous decision that films were not subject to First Amendment rights, which opened the door to more freedom of content.²⁰

As the Code was slowly abandoned, representations of queerness began to surface more and more in U.S. films, but too often the narratives told were pathologizing. LGBTQ characters were portrayed as dangerous serial killers, like Jame Gumb, aka “Buffalo Bill,” in *Silence of the Lambs*,²¹ or as damaged individuals whose lives end in tragedy. According to Russo, “In twenty-two of twenty-eight films dealing with gay subjects from 1962 to 1978, major gay characters onscreen ended in suicide or violent death.”²² When gay/trans people weren't represented as pathological, they often filled the role of comic relief. Even though the gay rights movement was in full swing and various industries were paying attention to what they saw as a new market, the film industry continued to rely on old tropes. This legacy continues to this day, where LGBTQ-identified characters have proliferated but whose storylines are still commonly written as tragic, dysfunctional, and outside the norm. For example, in *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis learns from his lover Jack's wife that Jack was killed in an accident changing a tire, yet Ennis then imagines Jack being beaten to death by thugs with a tire iron, leaving the viewer with the distinct impression that Jack was killed for being queer.

Since Russo first published *The Celluloid Closet* in 1981, the treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters and lives in film has changed considerably. Elimination of the Code, the progression of the LGBTQ rights movement, and shifting mores have resulted in an increase in films that deal more honestly with homosexuality and gender non-conformance. Yet many of the sensitive, complex stories are told through independent and foreign film, while mainstream Hollywood blockbusters continue to be unapologetically homophobic. Further, among those mainstream blockbuster films and television shows that do feature LGBTQ characters, they tend to reinforce hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity.²³

and heteronormativity.²⁴

During the late 1990s, when the youth of Spectrum were children, there were few representations in mainstream media of healthy gay or transgender people or of same-sex desire. The tide began to change when, in 1997, Ellen DeGeneres came out as lesbian on national TV and, in 1998, *Will & Grace*, a sitcom featuring a successful, healthy, happy gay lead, began airing. While incredibly important icons in the cultural representation of gay people as complex characters, neither Ellen nor Will (the gay male lead in *Will & Grace*) are necessarily bastions of queerness. Too often, gay characters and celebrities who are most palatable to an ostensibly straight viewing audience are the ones who get the most screen time.²⁴

A string of significant U.S. television shows and films were produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that featured complex gay characters, breaking the spell of dangerous, broken, or absurd LGBTQ stereotypes. These include *Philadelphia* (1993), *The Bird Cage* (1996), *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), and *The L Word* (2004–2006), but much of these were geared toward adult audiences and are less accessible to young people. Television shows for teenagers with LGBTQ-identified characters—including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003), and *Felicity* (1998–2002)—have had an important influence on the young people who grew up watching them, of course, but they are exceptions, not the rule. Depictions of healthy, average, regular LGBTQ children or teenage characters on television or in the movies have been essentially non-existent until the last decade.

Children in U.S. society are largely framed as sexual innocents, therefore acknowledging a child character's sexuality is quite outside the norm. Yet, as culture scholars like Jack Halberstam have pointed out, while it may not specifically refer to sexuality, children's programming is known for being rather queer. In the book *Gaga Feminism*, Halberstam praises the animated show *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999–present)—and others like it—for transgressing gender norms: “While earlier generations of boys and girls were raised on cartoon worlds populated by cats and mice, dogs and rabbits chasing each other across various domestic landscapes, this generation has come of age to an animated mythological universe populated by characters with eccentric and often simply weird relations to gender.”²⁵ *SpongeBob SquarePants*, a favorite among the youth of Spectrum, is a recognizably queer character in definitively straight pop culture.

Teenagers are more often framed in popular culture as having a sexuality, therefore one would think that, throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, more television shows and movies portraying gay teenagers would have been produced. Despite the recent increase of LGBTQ characters in mainstream media marketed to adolescents (most of which were just coming on the air as I encountered Spectrum)—including popular television shows like *Supernatural* (2005–present), *Doctor Who* (2005–present), *Glee* (2009–2015), *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–present), *Teen Wolf* (2011–present), *The Fosters* (2013–present), and *Sean Saves the World* (2013–2014)—most characters and narratives continue to perpetuate a heteronormative world view. Same-sex attractions, behaviors, and relationships depicted in mainstream media as normal, healthy, developmentally appropriate human behavior continue to be the exception to the rule.

Half a century of social justice activism on the part of the transgender and LGB community has still only more recently succeeded in a significant increase in acceptability of media representation of members of these communities. But it has also resulted in an alternative cultural explosion, in which those whose representations are missing or distorted create their own cultural representations. Many of the young people of Spectrum, when asked what has influenced their sexuality, rarely, if ever, referred to any sort of mainstream media as a source of reliable representations of gender, sexuality, romance, and intimacy. Rather, a few described the lack of stories or representations of individuals with same-sex desires in the media.

Jack, an eighteen-year-old, white transman who identifies as pansexual but “leaning towards gay,” explains that, in fact, his lack of access to cultural scenarios that accurately represented his experience meant that he had the opportunity to develop his own authentic sexuality. He wanted information about how to be in a same-sex and/or genderqueer relationship but could not find those representations easily:

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

Through Spectrum, peers, and the internet, while young people were in the process of discovering their sexuality, they were also discovering queer media and finding a place for themselves within it.

Anime and Fan Fiction

A number of Spectrum youths mention their interest in *anime*—Japanese animation—and *manga*—Japanese graphic novels, as having been significant influences on their sexuality. *Anime* is animated storytelling, similar to cartoons in the

United States. But *anime* differs from cartoons because in the United States cartoons are largely associated with children's programming, while *anime* in Japan and other East Asian countries is produced for audiences of differing ages, encompassing a wide variety of genres.²⁶ *Anime*, a wildly popular genre of media in Japanese culture, first came to U.S. television in the 1960s but really saw broad exposure in a wave of licensing and distribution in the United States in the mid-1990s. *Anime* shows were broadcast in the United States with English subtitles or dubbing, but otherwise they were left unchanged from their original versions, resulting in a curious unintended consequence.

Given that gender and sexuality are social constructions, meaning that gender norms and roles considered appropriate in the United States might differ from those of another country or culture, Japanese animation featured characters that appeared notably queer to a U.S. audience.²⁷ Gender-bending characters who show affection and intimacy for characters that appear to be of the same-sex are normal in many *anime* stories. This is a reflection of Japan's own social constructions of gender and sexuality, where homosexuality is not criminalized to the same extent, nor is sexual orientation a strong marker of identity. Therefore, art created in a culture that is more tolerant of queer gender and homosexuality may appear queer through a U.S.-centric lens.²⁸

Many of the Spectrum youths mentioned first being exposed to *anime* as young kids through *Sailor Moon*, a Japanese *anime* show that began airing as an English-dubbed version on network television in the United States in 1995 on Fox and the WB networks and later, in 1998, on Cartoon Network's *anime* show *Toonami*.²⁹ As an example of queer gender and homosexuality, *Sailor Moon* features a character called Haruka or Sailor Uranus. Haruka, a female character who was often androgynous in appearance, if not outright masculine at times, shares an intimate relationship with another female character, Michiru, or Sailor Neptune. Although the show's original creators have acknowledged Sailor Uranus and Sailor Neptune as a same-sex intimate pairing, in a perhaps ill-fated attempt to erase their lesbianism, the two were made out to be cousins in the U.S. English-dubbed version of the show, albeit cousins who kissed, held hands, and competed in and won an "affection contest."³⁰

Another example, *Ranma ½* (pronounced "Ranma One Half"), was released on video in the United States in 1989. This popular *anime* features a boy named Ranma who is cursed when he falls into an ancient well. As a result, whenever he encounters cold water, he turns into a girl version of himself, and when he encounters hot water, he returns to his boy self. Beyond the gender bending that is inherent to the show's overarching plotline, there are various minor plotlines that raise the specter of queer sexuality when, for example, Ranma's enemy, Tatewaki, another boy, falls in love with Ranma's girl self.

Released on DVD in 2008 and airing on the Funimation cable network starting in 2009, *Ouran High School Host Club* is the story of a high school version of a host club, a type of bar that is popular in East Asia where men (hosts) cater to the needs of their female clients as a form of entertainment.³¹ In this *anime*, the hosts are male students who wait on the privileged female students of Ouran High. When a new girl student, Haruhi Fujioka, stumbles into the Host Club and accidentally breaks a ridiculously expensive vase, the boys of the host club, mistaking her for male because of her androgynous appearance, give her the option to work off what she owes for the broken vase. In addition to Haruhi's gender-bending role, the show includes a set of boy twin hosts who, in a homoerotic narcissistic twist, appear to be in love with each other. And Haruhi's father, Ryoji, is a professional cross-dresser, who works in a host bar himself.

These are just three examples of *anime* the youth of Spectrum identified to me as having queer characters and plot lines. These descriptions should not be confused for a critical cultural analysis of *anime*. Rather, I've given very brief synopses here in order to give readers unfamiliar with gender-bending and same-sex intimacy tropes in *anime* a sense of what it can look like. Debates about the various queer interpretations made about these shows exist among true fans and experts of *anime* and *manga* and are widely accessible on fan wikis, blogs, and publications. More important to my analysis is the point that, in a U.S. media culture where same-sex intimacy and queer gender has been largely suppressed, particularly in programming marketed to kids, *anime*'s representation of gender fluidity and negotiation of shifting norms around sexuality speak particularly strongly to the youth of Spectrum.

When I asked Zia—who is nineteen years old, Black, and identifies as queer—to name three things that most influenced her sexuality, she explained why *Sailor Moon* was one:

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

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

characters in *Sailor Moon*:

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

Gabe, an eighteen-year-old genderqueer Latinx who identifies as bisexual, explains here how his childhood impression of a gender-bending character in one of his favorite *animes*, *InuYasha*, changed as he got older and became more aware of queer sexuality and gender:

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

The character Gabe refers to, Jakotsu, is described on the *InuYasha* website as “a stereotypically flamboyant homosexual; examples of which would be his admiration of Kōga’s loincloth, his advances towards Miroku and Inuyasha upon meeting them, and his admiration of Sesshōmaru’s appearance during battle.”³²

Not all of the youths I encountered referenced *anime* specifically as one of the things that influenced their sexuality, but most, if not all, Spectrum youth are familiar with *anime*, associating it as part of queer culture. For example, in a conversation I had with César, Spectrum’s program director, he explained how gay kids and *anime* fans often intersect. While he was in high school, members of the Gay-Straight Alliance and members of the *Anime* Club were often the same people. *Anime*, as a component of nerd culture in the United States, has long been associated with outsider, or queer, status.

While *Sailor Moon* and other cartoons like it may have been the youths’ first exposure to *anime*, once introduced to the genre, the internet opened up an entire world of access to *anime* as queer culture. The youths quickly discovered that the seemingly deviant gender and sexuality norms portrayed in *Sailor Moon* were common in *anime* from Japan. Susan Napier describes a characteristic of *anime* as the “mode of the festival . . . for a brief moment norms are transgressed or actually inverted. The weak hold power, sexual and gender rules are broken or reversed, and a state of manic intensity replaces conventional restraint.”³³ In the United States, cartoons have typically been considered children’s entertainment. In Japan, *anime* is not just for children, but for people of all ages, and in fact, various forms of erotic-themed *anime* (cartoons and comics) exist and are accessible to just about anyone with internet access.

There are several different genres of erotic *anime*. Each genre represents a different sexual preference, orientation, or fetish. For example, the most commonly discussed among the youth of Spectrum were *yaoi* and *yuri*, boys’ love and girls’ love, respectively. Both of these genres, which tell stories of same-sex attraction, romance, and intimacy, appeal to fans of all genders.³⁴ Adam, an eighteen-year-old white man who identifies as gay, told me of his early fascination with *Sailor Moon* and how later he discovered *anime* erotica and the profound impact it had on him:

Gay *anime* was such a . . . breakthrough, I guess, because . . . I don’t even know how I even started watching it, or how it came about. . . . It was during seventh grade going to eighth grade. And I started watching—I don’t even know how I got to it—I think I was watching regular porn, and then I saw a link or something and it was like, “Oh, what’s this?” And it was two guys and I was like, “Oh, what the fuck?” And then I was like, “Oh, let’s explore this.” I think that’s how . . . I think that’s what happened. . . . So to just see like, two super hot *anime* guys like, liking each other, and going at it with each other was like, “Oh, this is hot.” That’s just . . . oh, that’s so appealing to me. And I couldn’t understand why at the time and I didn’t know what it meant at the time, but I just knew that secretly I would have . . . I would like, find it when everyone was asleep or everyone was out of the house, I’d watch it. And I was like, “Oh this is . . . this is my shit.” And I’d just watch that same *anime* over and over and over.

Isaac, a nineteen-year-old who identifies as gay and male, has a white father and a Black mother. He has a warm, gap-toothed smile with eyes so dark they are almost black. His soft, tightly curled hair is generally kept short. He tends to

Isaac is a young man with eyes so dark they are almost black. His soft, slightly curled hair is generally kept short. He tends to dress in dark clothes and often covers his head in a hoodie. Isaac is an artist and an introvert who speaks at a slow, measured pace in a deep tone. He first came to Spectrum when he was seventeen, and the summer I interviewed him, he had been showing up just about every day. A huge fan of all things Japanese, Isaac helped me to understand the varying degrees of intimacy portrayed in *manga* and *anime*:

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

Both Adam's and Isaac's comments suggest that erotic *anime* is one form of alternative media where LGBTQ youth are discovering cultural scenarios that represent homosexual sex and queerness. I discuss boys' love in *anime*, or *yaoi*, and its impact on queer culture, in more detail below.

Another form of queer culture popular among the youth of Spectrum is fan fiction. Fan fiction writers expand on popular literary canon, like the *Harry Potter* series,³⁵ for example, by reimagining the characters and storylines to suit their own creative impulses. Typically, fan fiction is shared among a community of fans, both readers and writers, not sold or published in print. The education scholar Rebecca Black recognizes in fan fiction "the many ways in which fans are taking up elements of pop culture and then redistributing them in new forms that are imbued with meanings that are grounded in the lived realities and social worlds of fans."³⁶ Although fan fiction is not necessarily a new phenomenon, it has grown in popularity aided largely by the internet, which fosters an enormous community of amateur writers and their reading publics. Creators and readers of fan fiction flock to various webpages and social media sites to reimagine their favorite characters from *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, and more.³⁷ Like *anime*, fan fiction is associated with fandom and nerd-dom; it has largely existed outside the cultural mainstream as a site of queerness. Isaac, who not only reads fan fiction but authors it, explains the important role fan fiction plays in the lives of youths who are often misunderstood and misrepresented in mainstream media:

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

The internet greatly facilitates the distribution of fan fiction, although sharing fan fiction online is not a necessary component of the process. Red, a white twenty-year-old who identifies his gender as male and sexuality as "other," discovered Spectrum about two years ago by googling "LGBT center" right after moving here from a rural community in another state. Red is a husky kid with dark brown hair cut short up around his ears and neck. He has sideburns, long eyelashes, and a kind smile. Red loves *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, singing karaoke, and performing in the monthly drag show. His was also the first interview I did in which *yaoi manga* came up. He described *yaoi* as a form of erotic *manga* that is popular among gay men in Japan. He was first exposed to it when a friend received one as a Christmas gift. He told me that he and two friends were involved in collaborative role-play in which they lived out their sexual fantasies by writing *yaoi* stories. Each of them plays a character in the story and writes that character's part. The three swap the book around at school, taking turns with it to add their part. Although none of them were sexually experienced, Red explained that by living vicariously through these characters, they gained a certain amount of sexual experience.

Fan fiction is an outlet for creating stories and cultural scenarios that are too often missing from mainstream discourses about sexuality and gender. By reading and writing fan fiction, LGBTQ youth can reimagine characters in their favorite movies and television shows as being more like them by writing in same-sex desires and relationships or non-normative embodiments of gender among characters. By sharing their stories and reading the fan fiction of others online, as well as co-writing stories with their peers, the youth are creating a network of information about what sex and relationships can look like outside of mainstream cultural scenarios.

The Queer Story of Slash Fan Fiction and Yaoi Anime

Long before the youth of Spectrum discovered *Harry Potter* fan fiction and *Sailor Moon anime*, two significant queer cultural phenomena had begun to occur almost simultaneously in the United States and Japan, testaments to the lack of representation of same-sex desires and gender non-conformity in mainstream media. Slash fan fiction in the United States and *yaoi manga* and *anime* in Japan are both forms of amateur art in which fans of popular media—television shows and

and *yaoi manga* and *anime* in Japan are both forms of amateur art in which fans of popular media—television shows and movies in the United States and popular *manga* and *anime* series in Japan—rewrite leading male characters into same-sex romantic and sexual encounters. Both slash and *yaoi* developed during the 1970s, were created by women for a largely female audience, and were produced and shared via low-budget zines.

The term “slash” originates from the joining of two characters names by a backslash (/) to signify a story about their sexual pairing. For example, one of the first and perhaps most well-known slash pairings is between Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock of *Star Trek*, titled *K/S*. Similarly, *yaoi* artists paired ostensibly straight male characters from Japan’s most popular *anime* shows, portrayed as young, somewhat androgynous “beautiful boys.” *Yaoi* is also sometimes referred to as boys’ love (BL) *manga/anime*. Both forms of fan fiction, slash and *yaoi*, allow individuals who are fans of particular stories to reimagine storylines and character development, often with the goal of countering masculinist, sexist plots and storylines in mainstream media. Matt Thorn, who writes about the Japanese amateur comics scene, describes slash and *yaoi* creators and their readers as queer: “In a sense the two genres mirror each other and speak to the desires of those who by choice or circumstance, do not fit neatly into society’s prescribed norms of gender and sexuality. They do not see themselves as the conventionally beautiful characters who inevitably get the perfect guy or girl in mainstream media for women or men.”³⁸ Both slash and *yaoi* were outlets for women to contribute to the culture of the sexual imaginary as subjects, an imaginary they had been largely left out of because of the objectification of women in mainstream culture. Interestingly, in both Japan and the United States, virtually simultaneously, these women artists chose to explore sexuality through male-male sexual encounters, queering the hegemonic norm.

Although there are differences between these two phenomena, the role they play as tools of counterhegemonic discourse, particularly related to sexuality and gender, cannot be overstated.³⁹ Speaking about slash, Henry Jenkins, a self-described “aca/fan”—someone who is an academic who studies popular culture as well as a fan of popular culture—was one of the first U.S. academics to talk about the counterhegemonic power of slash fiction. In his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, he states that “slash . . . has many progressive elements: its development of more egalitarian forms of romantic and erotic relationships, its transcendence of rigidly defined categories of gender and sexual identity, [and] its critique of the more repressive aspects of traditional masculinity.”⁴⁰ Matt Thorn expresses a similar sentiment on the subject of *yaoi*: “There can be little doubt that both the artists and the readers who are drawn to boys’ love and *yaoi* are unhappy with mainstream norms of gender and sexuality.”⁴¹ By queering male and/or androgynous characters—as opposed to female—*yaoi* and slash creators could both avoid the male gaze that so frequently dominates representations of same-sex sexuality among women and play with the power that inherently comes with masculinity and maleness.

I encountered several youths at Spectrum who either read or wrote fan fiction and named it as a significant influence on their sexuality, namely because, within fan fiction, they were able to recognize and produce representations of themselves and their desires.

Rick is a nineteen-year-old white transman who identifies as demi-sexual. Today he’s wearing a polo shirt, cargo shorts, and flip-flops. He wears glasses and his light-colored hair is buzzed short. He discovered Spectrum when he was fifteen, and now that he is away at college, he has stopped in over the summer to reconnect. A fast talker, Rick struggles with physical and mental disabilities that can be frustrating, but he is happier now that he is away at school and successfully passing as male most of the time. Rick claims, “Everything like, everything, before Spectrum, everything I knew from sex I learned about from lesbian fan fiction. Which is, it’s good, it’s well done, and I mean it’s very accurate. . . . It’s very well done.”

Regardless of the “accuracy” of their representations of sexual conduct, for the youth of Spectrum, slash and *yaoi* are media in which queerness is represented in a way they can relate to. In her research on *yaoi* creators and readers, Akiko Mizoguchi, a visual and cultural studies expert, asserts that she is lesbian, in part, because of her love of *yaoi* as a young person. On being a reader of *yaoi* or BL, she claims that, “as I ‘meet’ these gay characters almost every week, I cannot help but think that the BL genre today is constantly holding a workshop, as it were, that pursues and experiments with case studies on gay-friendly society and gay citizens, even though the genre is mostly populated by heterosexual women.”⁴² Entire online communities have sprung up around various slash and *yaoi* stories and artists via internet chat rooms, social media like Tumblr, and websites that host authors’ works.

Several decades ago, a relatively small group of women artists in the United States and Japan started a revolution producing “amateur” media as a form of resistance to dominant narratives in mainstream media. Now young people like those of Spectrum have access to an entire genre of queer culture produced by and for queer people in the form of slash and *yaoi*. As James Welker wrote in a *Signs* article where he explored the impact of *yaoi* on the sexual subjectivity and identity of its readers, “For readers whose experience of sexuality and gender contravenes heteronormativity, works like *Song* and *Thomas* [early 1970s-era *yaoi* works] offer narrative safe havens where they can experiment with identity, find affirmation, and develop the strength necessary to find others like themselves and a sense of belonging.”⁴³ Queer media like *anime* and fan fiction not only give queer-oriented youth a sense of belonging, they have the potential to shift norms across dominant culture, as well.

Queering Sexual Scripts

Cultural scenarios play a key part in the process of adopting sexual scripts. While sexual scripts are not what make us sexual per se, they are how we learn the difference between what is and is not sexual, allowing us to interact with each other in a meaningful way. Cultural scenarios, whether coming from parents, peers, or media, are situated in what is culturally appropriate; they reflect the hegemonic norms of a society, including norms that reflect the dominant gender order, among other things. Homosexuality, as a form of sexuality that was deemed deviant and morally offensive by moral entrepreneurs of the early twentieth century, was, through a complicated process of social control, effectively rendered perverse and unnatural. The censorship of the media that took place during the mid-twentieth century attempted to control cultural scenarios, demonizing any sexuality that was not heterosexual, reproductive, and monogamous.

Young people coming of age who identify with homosexuality and queerness during the rise of the internet have access to a wealth of alternatives to the mainstream and are building community in a different way than those who came before them. Whereas LGBTQ and/or queer culture was more geographically situated before, the internet has the potential to shift geographical boundaries and gives anyone with access to a computing device and the internet almost immediate connection to community. Even though mainstream media continue to be homophobic, the vestiges of censorship and social control that lingered in mainstream media are less influential in online content. Therefore young people today can, with perhaps more ease, access information, images, and cultural scenarios that include homosexual sex and queer community and culture.

Not long before the internet became available, resistance to hegemonic narratives in mainstream media had already begun as a result of various civil rights movements, including feminism and LGBTQ rights. By way of example, I explored how women artists who were fans of particular mainstream media literary narratives reconfigured the stories and characters of those stories to better represent their own (the women's) lived experiences. In a sexist and homophobic culture that objectified women's sexuality and pathologized homosexuality, these artists were able to create their own culture as a form of resistance. Slash fan fiction and *yaoi manga* and *anime*, while perhaps initially forms of heterosexual women's resistance, have come to represent queer cultural scenarios for a new generation of young people. What was once traded among a small group of people in the form of handmade zines is now widely available and accessible by many via the internet. And while slash and *yaoi* are lifeboats for young queer kids trying to find representations of themselves in the larger culture, they are also permeating the mainstream, creating a shift in the cultural scenarios accessed by everyone in U.S. culture. Young people—LGBTQ-identified and others—have many outlets not only for discovering queer culture but also for making their own media, media that represent their experiences, emotions, and desires, and they are able to readily share that media with others. They make up for the dearth of representations of same-sex desire and behavior in mainstream media and in sexuality education curriculum through their ability to share media via the internet.

Young people of all kinds are growing up exposed to alternatives to heteronormative cultural scripts. Sexual scripts and the sexual norms they inform are shifting with the changing culture. This cultural shift has not just opened up options for LGBTQ-identified kids; it is perhaps also queering the dominant culture, making notions of sexual and gender fluidity more acceptable. Young people growing up today are less likely to associate homosexuality with deviance and immorality and instead see it as a valid, acceptable, and progressive way to be in the world. In the chapter that follows, I show how queer notions of family are challenging the straightening process of heteropatriarchal family formations, with broad implications for all of U.S. society.

“It’s Going to Be Okay”

Queering the Family

During the time I spent at Spectrum, Gabe was a regular attendee. He is incredibly warm and kind, with something nice to say about everyone. He enjoys playing Yu-Gi-Oh! (a *manga*-themed trading card game) and performing in the monthly drag show, where he is a beloved favorite and regularly beats out the competition in Spectrum versions of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Gabe was one of many interviewees who, upon disclosing their sexual and/or gender identities to their parents, were surprised to be met with kindness and support. Here he describes disclosing to his father:

There was always a general fear of what they [my mother and father] might think, what they might say, what they might do. So, I came out to a couple of my cousins first, and they were okay with it, and then I started coming to Spectrum a lot more. . . . I finally had enough courage to tell my father. I wrote him a two-page note and left it under his door for when he got back home from work, ’cause I did not know how to approach him on it at all. I kind of wrote like, about me, and I wrote that I would hope that it wouldn’t change anything between us. So when he got home from work he came to me. . . . He’s always put up such a tough front that I figured he would completely, like, either blow it off or deny it, kick me out over it, or I thought so many things that were the worst possible outcome. I didn’t think there was going to be a positive outlook on it, so . . . when we talked about it we were kind of focusing on . . . it was more of me just telling him, “This is how I feel and this is who I am,” and just, he understood it, and he listened to me when I talked and, ’cause he would ask questions about it too, . . . “How did you come to this conclusion? When did this start?” It’s just, like, he would listen to me when I would answer his questions, so [he] made me feel just that much better, the fact that he took the time to kind of talk to me, he asked questions, he listened to me, and he actually still showed that nothing was going to be any different.

While Gabe imagined many outcomes as a result of the letter he wrote his father, the idea that his father would approach him calmly and respectfully to discuss his sexuality had not crossed his mind. Although Gabe was less anxious about sharing his sexuality and gender with his mother, he still waited until he was sixteen years old and was quite nervous about her response. Not only was she supportive of him, she explained that she, too, identified as bisexual. Both of his parents were also supportive in terms of Gabe’s gender non-conformance. He described how his father was protective of him, at one point taking him out of a school where he was bullied, for example. In the excerpt below, Gabe tells of his mother attending Spectrum drag shows to see him perform:

There were several times where my mom would help me dress up for drag shows. When she manages to attend, . . . she would help people with their makeup. She’d bring a whole bunch of stuff and clothes, makeup, and she’s like, “You can help yourself to whatever. If you need help with anything just let me know.” She would be so supportive and she would actually be in the crowd and cheer me on when I got up, too. . . . it was kind of weird knowing that my mom was there, but it’s also a great thing at the same time.

While certainly not every youth I encountered had parents who supported them in their self-discovery and identification of their sexualities and genders, I was surprised by how many did, simply because the dominant narrative about LGBTQ youth is one of family rejection. I, along with so many others, including many of the adults associated with Spectrum, took it for granted that LGBTQ-identified young people necessarily struggle with their parents and families over acceptance. But what I found in many cases was simply that they don’t—at least not any more than any parent might struggle with a teenager who is becoming more sexually aware and active. In many cases, it was actually the young person, having adopted the narrative of rejection, who held back from talking to their parent. But for this particular sample of youth, their fears were not realized. Recognizing that Spectrum is a unique setting located in an urban, morally and politically liberal community, my effort to understand this phenomenon in the context of Spectrum led me to the family structures and characteristics of the youth participants. In this chapter, I suggest that the straightening effect of the Standard North American Family is weakening as all of the ways that people are queering family gain validation in U.S.

culture. The shifting of norms around gender and sexuality—along with varied family formations within working-class families and families of color—have manifested themselves in the formation of family in the United States.

Resisting Family Conventions

Heteronormativity is deeply embedded in the U.S. family structure.¹ What the sociologist Dorothy E. Smith refers to as the Standard North American Family (SNAF)—a heterosexual adult pair with children, where the man is breadwinner and the woman is predominantly responsible for child care and household chores—is the first place where humans are socialized into hegemonic norms around sexuality and gender and where sexist and heterosexist oppression is first internalized.² This family type, while largely considered natural and normal throughout modern Western cultures, is socially and culturally contingent. As the sociologist Judith Stacey argues, “Anthropological and historical studies convince me that the family is not an institution, but an ideological, symbolic construct that has a history and a politics.”³ The symbolic triumph of the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decisions that overturned Proposition 8 and found the Defense of Marriage Act to be unconstitutional is how they showed that the heteropatriarchal family formation that upholds norms in our culture can be successfully challenged. Recognition of same-sex marriage means that our society will have to rethink laws and norms around what formally defines a family, which could have an incredible impact on things like legal rights of parents (including what exactly defines parenthood), child custody, inheritance, and more: the very categories that have supported patriarchal, misogynist, white supremacist ideologies for so long.

Challenging the ideology of the SNAF has been an act of survival on the part of those who never had a shot at fulfilling its rigid requirements. While today we associate marriage equality with the LGBTQ movement, challenging norms around what is considered an acceptable family formation has long been the province of the working class, the poor, and people of color—of which some identify as LGBTQ, of course. Because the ideology of the SNAF is so deeply tied to privilege—white, middle-class, heterosexual privilege—any failure to fit into the proper family mold has been held as proof of individual deviance and pathology. Rather than acknowledge large structural systems of inequality that drive poverty and restrict access to critical cultural capital like education, the discourse of the failed family places the blame on female-headed households, children born out of wedlock, high rates of infidelity, and divorce.⁴ Further, little is said about the value of alternative family formations, given the failure of the SNAF to actually meet people’s needs, particularly those of women and children.

For example, the sociologists Michael Bennett and Juan Battle raise the argument that there is a distinct lack of inclusion of Black LGBTQ people in mainstream research and textbooks on the Black family. Using the various debates in sociological scholarship that either support or refute the now notorious Moynihan Report,⁵ they argue that the debates continue to center around the notion of a heterosexual family formation. Even among the detractors of the Moynihan Report, Bennett and Battle state that research “often does not interrogate the practice of using low rates of single parenthood and divorce as measures of ‘successful’ families. This model fails to consider that many families, especially with LGBT parents or members, may be better off with non-married co-parents of the same sex, or the divorce of parents who are not compatible, or various extended family structures.”⁶ Bennett and Battle’s critique is important to the argument I make here because they insist that it is a mistake to consider LGBTQ families as distinct from Black families; rather, they urge researchers to recognize how alternative family forms are the result of Black LGBTQ families. Again, the battle over family law in the United States ought not just be about same-sex marriage.

In a heteropatriarchal society, the SNAF can be an incredibly dangerous place for women and children.⁷ Although the narrative of risk and threat faced by LGBTQ people tends to focus on harassment and bullying outside the home—much like the myth of the stranger rapist/pedophile as a threat to women and children—the most dangerous place for queer children is actually their home, since most physical and sexual abuse is perpetrated upon children by adults in their family.⁸ Families where traditional gender roles and norms are particularly valued can create conditions for homophobic and transphobic harassment and violence.

Yet, because of its significance as a site of socialization, the family also has the most potential for inspiring radical change in society when it comes to gender and sexuality norms. The fight for marriage equality is not just about equal rights for same-sex couples in the United States; it is a very real threat to heteropatriarchy, which is arguably why the fight has met so much resistance. The sexual and gender order that has long been the undergirding structure of dominant U.S. society is threatened by the institutionalization of queer family. And while the possibility and formation of a new kind of family has been theorized and analyzed by feminist and queer scholars for decades, the Spectrum generation are really the first to have been socialized in a world where gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual identified people have—on a large scale—publicly formed families.⁹ Whereas their parents’ generation came out in the context of a narrative that being gay meant forgoing family ties of any sort, a significant number of children of this generation are being raised by same-sex couples and queer people—whether that be their parents, their aunts and uncles, neighbors, teachers, mentors, coaches, or other important adults in their lives.¹⁰ The possibility of a non-heterosexual existence and a reframing of the gender binary is simply more available to this generation. And even though the SNAF maintains its iron

remaining of the gender binary is simply more available to this generation and even though the binary remains as a firm grip on normative behavior in U.S. culture, even among heterosexual, non-queer families, tolerance of same-sex sexuality and gender non-conformity has increased radically.

LGBTQ-Identified Youth and Their Parents

Even though not all parents are hostile toward their gay children, the simple absence of same-sex desire as a healthy, valid option has often foreclosed on any sense of validation a child with same-sex desires might have. Beyond simply being absent, if there is acknowledgment of homosexuality, too often it is framed as something to feel pity about, if not abhor. Of course young people internalize these spoken and unspoken messages about homosexuality and queerness that they learn from their families at a very young age, making the SNAF a key site of oppression for kids who are queer.

Despite the major shifts in LGBTQ visibility and rights witnessed by society in the past several decades, the dominant narrative about LGBTQ kids and their families continues to be one of peril. Advice for parents of LGBTQ children suggests that having a gay kid will likely be a traumatic experience, requiring one to seek professional help as it is likely to trigger grieflike emotions.¹¹ Having a LGBTQ-identified child is still publicly painted as a problem that needs fixing (if not a tragedy), rather than something to celebrate or even something unremarkable. Although it has historically been the case that LGBTQ-identified people have waited until they had achieved emotional and financial independence from their families before disclosing their identities, today people are disclosing LGBTQ identities at much younger ages.¹² Young people faced with disclosing details about their sexuality to their families fear rejection and abandonment, fears that too often are fueled by the barrage of claims in the news media about the precarity of LGBTQ youth.¹³

For the young people of Spectrum,¹⁴ being out to one's parents is the rule, not the exception. A distinct lack of traumatic stories about disclosing their identities to parents, in particular for sexual-minority-identified youths, marked this group as unique in light of the dominant discourse of precarity. Compared to others, what is different about these youths that made their coming out experiences generally positive ones? What is different about their parents? Are these young people exceptions to the rule, or is there more to the taken-for-granted narrative of tragedy that surrounds LGBTQ-identified people and their families? My findings reinforce some of what we already know to be true, that gender atypical children are more likely to adopt an LGBTQ-identity at a younger age and that this is less of a shock to their already suspecting parents.¹⁵ But they also shine light on a different trend, one that is likely the result of several decades worth of feminist and LGBTQ organizing and visibility—the queering of families. Spectrum youth typically come from non-traditional families (families that don't fit the SNAF formula) and often have an LGBTQ-identified parent and/or relative. The LGBTQ rights movement, with its focus on abolishing the closet and adopting pride for sexual and gender diversity and the resulting normalization of homosexuality, has had a profound impact on family formations in the United States.

Parents' Unexpected Reactions

While horribly destructive, acts of physical violence or abandonment are hardly the only ways that queer kids are harmed by their families. LGBTQ-identified children face the ultimate rejection by loved ones when they are simply not accepted by their families because of their gender or sexuality. Therefore many of the young people of Spectrum expressed deep anxiety and stress about the anticipation of talking to their parents about their sexual and/or gender identity.

Many of the young people I interviewed told me how scared they were to share their sexual identities with their parents. The specific fear that their parents would disown them and force them to leave the house was particularly vivid for them. After his mother discovered some gay pornography websites he had been looking at on the computer, Travon—a sixteen-year-old Black boy who identifies as queer—was terrified that he would be forced to leave the house:

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

Aaron, the film buff from chapter 4, a nineteen-year-old Mexican-American man who identifies as gay, had a similar experience when his stepfather sat him down for a talk after discovering a somewhat suggestive photo of Aaron and his boyfriend:

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

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

Fueled by, among other things, media-driven fears about the consequences of sharing their identities with their parents, neither Travon nor Aaron had any intention of telling their parents outright about their sexual desires. Rather, as was often the case with Spectrum youth, their disclosure was in some ways involuntary and a matter of circumstance. Whether confronted by their parents, or disclosing to their parents for the first time, in most cases, their parents were surprisingly warm and supportive.

In fact, for some youths, coming out to their parents was a non-issue. They were not afraid and more or less knew they would be supported. For example, when Brian, a twenty-one-year-old white youth who identifies as queer—he's the kid from chapter 2 who first learned what a drag show was when he started attending Spectrum—told both his mom and dad he was gay in seventh grade, his dad then accompanied him on his first visit to Spectrum. He describes his experience as very non-traumatic:

Honestly, my coming out and my growing up gay wasn't that bad of an experience, I mean there were some times that were a little difficult, but I didn't have . . . the, you know, . . . *Lifetime* movie. . . . I wasn't kicked out, I wasn't abused for it. And I went to relatively good schools that were accepting.

Ditto, a twenty-year-old biracial youth who identifies as bisexual, described how it felt when her dad asked her one evening on the porch if she was gay. She says, "It was the most casual . . . it was kind of like asking me, is your favorite color blue? That's what it felt like. There was no judging." Isaac—the fan fiction writer from chapter 4—a nineteen-year-old multiracial Black man who identifies as gay, explains how before she knew anything about his sexual desires, his mother had already "introduced" him to the LGBTQ community, making it clear that, in her opinion, same-sex desire was an acceptable option for him: "Another thing that influenced [my sexuality] was my mom's openness with it, so I never really had what a lot of kids have . . . this foreboding." In the case of these examples, these young people seem to have never gotten the message that being LGBTQ-identified was a problem. It was only later, when they learned that they were supposed to have been afraid, that they describe themselves as lucky or different from most kids.

Of course, not every Spectrum youth had good experiences disclosing to their parents. When I asked Miguel (a twenty-year-old Mexican man who identifies as gay) how his father reacted to him disclosing his identity, he told me his dad returned to Mexico because of it, leaving him in the United States to fend for himself (although his father has since apologized to him for reacting this way). While Adam (an eighteen-year-old white man who identifies as gay) has a very supportive mother who has always been open about the option of same-sex desire, he has had a particularly hard time getting along with his father throughout his life. The conflict with his father seems largely to do with his father's disappointment in Adam not being the son he had expected. Adam has been gender atypical his whole life, enjoying singing and dancing, dressing up in costumes and girls' clothes, and wearing nail polish. Because of his father's intolerance, Adam continues to identify to his father as bisexual rather than gay, as he feels that this identification alleviates the tension between them to some degree.

Nor was it just fathers rejecting their gay/queer sons. Lucy, a seventeen-year-old white girl who identifies as a lesbian, lives with her mother and stepfather in a rural, religiously conservative community. Lucy's mother is very punitive in her reactions to Lucy's sexual identity. Lucy's mother confronted Lucy about her sexuality after reading her diary, and in reaction to Lucy's expression of her sexual desires, she frequently takes away her posters and music and forbids her from going out of the house. Although her mother claims to not have a problem with gay people, she insists that Lucy is not a lesbian and told her once that Lucy "didn't turn out the way she thought she would."

The experiences of transgender-identified youths disclosing to their families were somewhat different compared to those disclosing sexual identities. In four out of six cases, transgender youths first told their parents they were lesbian. These four individuals were sexed female at birth, went through a period of identifying as lesbians, but not long after came to realize that what made them different from their heteronormative peers was their gender identity not their sexual identity. They therefore began to recognize themselves as transgender and not necessarily lesbian. The other two participants were sexed male at birth but never identified as gay before identifying as transgender, and both now identify their sexuality as pansexual. They were similar to the previously described group in that they initially were grappling with their sexualities, but they quickly began to realize that it was their gender identity more so than their sexual identity that was of issue. In the case of the previous four individuals, being transgender was more complicated than being lesbian, primarily because it was less understood by their parents. These individuals experienced various microaggressions from

primarily because it has less influence by their parents. These individuals experienced various interaggressions from their parents, such as a parent failing to identify them with the pronouns they preferred or a parent being selective about when and where they would or would not recognize their child's gender change.

In the case of the two transwomen, both experienced extremely negative reactions from their parents to their transgender identity. They were both forbidden from dressing as girls at home and severely punished for violations. At the time I met with each of them, they were estranged from their parents and experiencing homelessness. Much like sexual identity, disclosing a transgender or genderqueer identity to family can be fraught. Norms around misogyny and sexism result in experiences being quite different for transwomen compared to transmen.

It is worth noting that in all the cases where parents reacted in a severely negative way to youth disclosure, there was evidence of lifelong dysfunction and/or abuse of the children by their parents. Consistent with Ritch Savin-Williams's argument, the youth with particularly hostile parents were coming from very unsafe family situations in which their disclosure of LGBTQ identities was just one part of the violence they were subjected to throughout their lives.¹⁶

Mother's Instinct

Gender atypical young people share their queer sexual identities with their parents at younger ages.¹⁷ Those children who are particularly non-gender conforming are more likely to be confronted about their sexuality by friends and family at a younger age because of the way society conflates homosexuality with non-normative gender expression. Friends and family of flamboyant boys and butch girls often assume them to be gay or lesbian. Coinciding with this assumption, parents of gender atypical children have had some time to prepare themselves for the fact that their child might identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and therefore they are less likely to react negatively and may be better equipped to deal with the disclosure when it comes. Interestingly, as mentioned above, parents and peers often push gender atypical children towards an LGB identity, sometimes only to learn later on that their child or friend is transgender-identified. The experiences I share below are those of sexual-minority-identified youths, not transgender-identified youths.

In chapter 3 I explained how certain boys described always having known they were gay and how this was often related to their gender atypicality in childhood. Particularly among the boys, when they disclosed their sexuality to their mothers, many claimed to have always known their son was gay. The youths sometimes described this experience as some version of "mother's instinct." Parents associated moments in their son's childhood where they behaved in gender atypical ways as signs of them being gay.

An eighteen-year-old white, gay man, Nik is a tall, lanky blond with blue eyes. Today his hair is buzz cut, but it used to be longer and is typically dyed a different color every time I see him. He is wearing a green and white striped tank top with a low-slung neckline, black skinny jeans rolled up into capris, a cardigan sweatshirt, and flip flops on his feet. He's got iridescent blue eye shadow on his eyelids and he kicks his crossed leg up and down gently while we talk. It was during his junior year in high school when Nik told his mother that the hickies on his neck were from a boy not a girl. When I asked him how she responded, he told me she said:

"I always kind of knew." And I mean there was no way she couldn't've! I mean when I was four, I had watched the [musical] *Cats* VHS so many times that I actually broke it. And she refused to replace it. I was like, "Mom!" She actually finally ended up caving in and getting another one. And then when I was in fifth grade I absolutely had to have the Cher *Ultimate Collection* CD.

Parents' conflation of sexuality with gender—in this case, Nik and his mother associating an interest in Broadway musicals with queerness—led the parents to *assume* their gender atypical child was gay, and therefore they were not surprised when this turned out to be the case. Although I'm making some assumptions here about Nik and his mother, anecdotal experience leads me to believe that had Nik been a girl obsessed with *Cats*, this would not have become a marker of a queer sexuality for either mother or daughter.

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

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

you're having feelings for guys," or "Adam, it's okay to explore." And I was just so appalled. I was like, "How could you even think that of me?"

Later when Adam did disclose his gay identity to his mom, she responded with, "I told you. I knew it." When Gabe, described in the introductory narrative to this chapter, talked to his mother about his sexual identity, she replied, "I've known since the day you were born." When he probed her, asking how a person could know something like that, she ascribed it to mother's intuition.

During my time at Spectrum, the agency was experiencing an unprecedented number of contacts from parents who were seeking resources for children under the age of thirteen (the minimum age for youths to attend drop-in at Spectrum). This resulted in the development of a program aimed specifically at these children and their parents that was held outside regular drop-in hours. Since they fell outside the scope of my human subjects protocol, I didn't conduct any formal research with this group. But I have anecdotal evidence, based on the few interactions I observed and my conversations with staff and interns, that the kids coming to the under-thirteen drop-in were grappling with gender identity issues more than sexual identity issues. Either the parents of these kids reached out on their own to their local LGBTQ center for help, or concerned teachers, counselors, or other community members might have referred them there. Regardless, this is an example of a significant shift in the age when parents and children begin to address matters of marginalized sexualities and genders.

One explanation for why the participants in my study so frequently disclosed their sexual identities to parents at a young age is their genderqueerness. Many of these young people expressed queer genders, therefore their parents, conflating sexuality and gender, suspected they might eventually identify as gay. Similarly, the lack of negative experiences might also be due to the fact that the parents of these children had more time than other parents to prepare themselves for that moment when their child might disclose to them and therefore were able to react in a mild manner. But not all of the youths of Spectrum could be described as genderqueer. What follows is a discussion about the queering of family and its effect on youths' experiences disclosing their identities to their families.

Queering Family

Exposure to LGBTQ-identified parents, relatives, and family friends was another common characteristic among the young people of Spectrum. Eight of the mothers or fathers of youths interviewed claimed a gay, bisexual, lesbian, or pansexual identity, meaning that more than 20 percent of the people I interviewed had an LGBTQ parent. Similarly, of the youths I interviewed, nine had gay, lesbian, or bisexual brothers and sisters. In fact, there are two pairs of siblings among my participants. Youths in my interview pool identified fourteen LGBTQ cousins, aunts, uncles, godparents, and grandmothers in their families (not to mention several other friends of the family). These youths constituted more than two-thirds of the youths I interviewed.

This demonstrates that a significant number of the youths who are LGBTQ and attending Spectrum on a regular basis have been exposed to LGBTQ people in their family circles. In liberal, urban communities like the one where Spectrum is located, the normalization and routinization of same-sex desire, behavior, and relationships has resulted in far less stigma being attached to homosexuality today than in decades past.⁴⁸ Many more people identify—in friend, family, and professional circles—as LGBTQ, therefore it is not surprising that so many of the young people of Spectrum have adult LGBTQ family members, particularly aunts, uncles, and cousins. But it is also likely that being LGBTQ at a younger age is aided by the reality of having an LGBTQ-identified parent or sibling, simply because early exposure to same-sex desire, same-sex relationships, and gender atypicality presents this identity as a viable option for these youths. In other words, LGBTQ-identified family members, particularly parents, are counterhegemonic to compulsory heterosexuality.

Trevor, a twenty-year-old white man, first identified as bisexual, then as gay, not long after he got out of high school. A daily regular at Spectrum since I started coming, he is a bit naïve for his age. He's a round-faced kid with acne, a gap between his two front teeth, and a warm, joyful smile. He often wears oversized, black pants that are covered in buckles, pockets, and zippers, along with concert T-shirts of his favorite bands. He's often sporting various accessories purchased from Hot Topic, like a pink faux fur hat that hangs down like ponytails on either side of his face and fingerless gloves. Although he is a fan of all kinds of music, he is crazy about Lady Gaga and names her first when I ask him to tell me who the most important people in his life are. Trevor has been raised by his grandparents. He told me it was through his introduction to his estranged lesbian sister that he learned about being LGBTQ:

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

This is not to suggest that LGBTQ-identified parents necessarily raise LGBTQ-identified children, as research shows that correlations between sexual identity of parents and the sexual identity of their children should not be confused with causation. Rather, as the sociologists Judith Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz argue, the influence a parents' sexuality—heterosexuality included—has on the sexuality of their child has more to do with patterns of gender roles and cultural socialization than it does with any notion of inherent sexual orientation.¹⁹ Young people who are presented with alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality may be more open to exploring their feelings of same-sex desire as well as more open to assigning an identity label to those feelings such as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Similarly, youths who spend time with transgender or gender atypical family and friends may be more open to questioning and exploring their gender identity.

It's also worth noting that lack of exposure to LGBTQ identities results in a different framing of queer sexualities and genders. In his discussion of space and sexuality, Jack Halberstam reflects on the experiences of "rural queers," suggesting how little they may have in common with LGBTQ-identified people in U.S. urban areas: "In climates where homosexual identity is not forbidden but simply unthinkable, the pre-adult sexual subject who pursues same-sex eroticism may do so without necessarily assuming that this sexual activity speaks the truth of one's identity."²⁰ I use Halberstam here to show how sexual identity formation is influenced by space and place, suggesting that "normal" is contingent on the context within which you live.

Ernie learned from and felt supported by his mother's roommate, who at the time we spoke was a transwoman, but who was living as a man when they first met. He told his mother's roommate he was gay before telling his mom:

Me and her would talk all the time. Well, before, she was a drag queen. So she would do drag. And sometimes . . . she would sneak me in the club with her when she'd do her drag shows. So that was cool, but me and her would just talk. . . . At first I was like, "What are you talking about?"

Both Trevor and Ernie describe how LGBTQ family members and family friends had a profound impact on their understanding of themselves as LGBTQ-identified. Consistent with stories told by other participants, these LGBTQ family members often encouraged the youths to embrace their identities and provided the support they needed to do so.

In and of itself, this finding is not a surprising one. But it's important to reflect on how the queering of family has implications for the larger U.S. society. The visibility of LGBTQ people in U.S. society has meant not only that most people know someone who is LGBTQ but that most people are likely to have a family member or loved one who identifies as LGBTQ, therefore compassion through empathy for a friend or family member has been a powerful strategy of the LGBTQ rights movement. It has also meant that even within traditional SNAF structures, tolerance, if not acceptance, of LGBTQ people has been on the rise. This broadening tolerance and acceptance results in expanded options for everyone. This process of normalization has resulted in a paradigm shift when it comes to U.S. culture and homosexuality. The youth of Spectrum—and their adolescent peers—have grown up in the midst of this normalization that their parents' generation has worked to achieve. This has resulted in more LGBTQ-identified young people, but, more important, it has also resulted in a shift in how all young people form their sexual subjectivities.

Non-Traditional Family

As mentioned above, growing up genderqueer and having LGBTQ-identified parents and other adults in their lives both might explain why some of the Spectrum youth had non-traumatic experiences sharing their sexualities and genders with their parents at relatively young ages. Another important reason that parents of these youth were more accepting of them may be that their family formations don't resemble the SNAF model. In particular, a lack of conformity to traditional gender roles, adherence to secular rather than religious belief systems, and life-course patterns that differ from the middle-class norm were characteristics of the families of many of the Spectrum youths I spoke with.

Among the family characteristics of the study's participants, it was striking how few of them came from households that fit the SNAF model with a father and a mother who fulfilled traditional gender roles. I saw this manifested in several different ways, including father-headed single-parent households (five), mother-headed single-parent households (eleven), and LGBTQ-identified parents (two lesbian mothers, three bisexual mothers, three gay fathers, and one pansexual father). For example, this is how Isaac describes his mom, who has raised him without his father's involvement:

My mom is . . . to put it like very bluntly, sort of the hippie mom. She struggled a bit with me growing up being that I was like a first child, and when my father left, she had to play the role of both the disciplinarian and the nurturer. So it got a bit confusing for a while. But she's always been really open and accepting of basically everything.

accepting or basically everything.

Even among the youths who grew up in a household with a heterosexual parent couple, there were often things that suggested that the parents were not modeling traditional gender roles. These include both parents typically working outside of the home and family structures where the mother was more often the biological parent of the child and therefore the dominant parent in the family.²¹ These parents were often described by their children as rebellious, as having been teen parents, and/or as having had children from multiple partners. One mother had a burgeoning career as a professional dominatrix. The youths of Spectrum had fathers who were primary nurturers and mothers who were wage earners. I would characterize few of their parents as fulfilling traditional gender roles.

Devout religiosity can often be a driver for the maintenance of traditional gender roles in the family.²² While the majority of people interviewed did associate their upbringing with some nod to religion (only nine youths did *not* identify their families as being religious at all), only a small handful were raised in a devoutly religious home. Two youths who were siblings were raised practicing Wicca, a religion that rejects the traditional family and gendered ideologies of the Judeo-Christian majority in the United States. Another youth became an evangelical Christian of his own accord in late adolescence but was raised by non-religious parents. The fourth was raised by a devoutly Catholic mother and identifies himself as a devout Catholic. Among the other youths who identified themselves with a religion, they typically described their families as being casually religious, attending church irregularly, if at all. Or, as was often the case, they may have had devoutly religious grandparents who exposed the youths to religion, but their parents had not maintained a strict religious practice in the home. When I asked Gabe if his family practiced religion, he explained that his maternal grandmother was religious and would sometimes “ride” him and his cousins about religion, but his parents were not:

My grandmother, she’s, the term I would use is “overly Christian.” So . . . she’s kind of targeted me, she’s targeted my cousins . . . she still accepts us and everything, but she has her moments where she just kind of, like, rides on us just a little bit. She apologizes for it every time but just, there are times where . . . she’s the only one who’s really had any negative outlook on it in any way when it comes down to religion. . . . One thing that I enjoy about my family is that we’re all kind of, like really open with religion. . . . We believe different aspects of all kinds of different religions so in a way we all kind of live in our own kind of religion that best suits us. So there was like never any religious pressure or anything.

More important, while many of the youths had stories about attending worship, being involved with a church at one point, and in some cases experiencing discrimination in these spaces, I would not describe their home lives as devoutly religious. With the exception of two white, gay men who had Catholic family members, religion was not mentioned by participants as a point of contention when it came to disclosing their identities to their parents. It is clear that secular belief systems are more prominent among these young people and their families and could be a contributing factor to parental tolerance and acceptance of an LGBTQ-identified child.

Finally, the SNAF model relies on conforming to a dominant series of normative middle-class life-course stages that include getting a college education and pursuing a career, marriage with a suitable partner, and having children, strictly in that order.²³ This life-course pattern may simply not be an option for many people living in poverty, for members of the working class, and for some communities of color that bear the legacy of centuries of economic disadvantage and oppression. Considering that graduating high school was a challenge for many of them, the opportunity to attend college and earn a degree seems out of reach for many of the youth of Spectrum. Many people outside of the middle and upper classes in the United States do not get an education, start a career, get married, and have children, in that order. Their lives follow a different course, sometimes one that does not include college and a career at all and, in many cases, one in which children come before or outside of a marriage.

Are parents who hold more dearly to middle-class expectations of life-course patterns more deeply disappointed when they learn their child is not going to conform to a heteronormative pathway? Perhaps the parents of Spectrum youth did not see their child’s gender or sexual non-conformity as a sign of failure, either theirs or their child’s. Further, the middle-class pressure on parents who see their children as extensions of their own success doesn’t extend in the same way to the families described here.²⁴ This does not mean that these parents do not hold high hopes for their children; rather, what those hopes are and how they manifest themselves as successes and failures are different for families outside of the hegemonic norm. The very fact that many of the youths’ parents had themselves not followed the dominant path towards a SNAF family formation may be a reason for their compassion for their queer kids.

The Counter Hegemonic Power of Queer Families

Most of the participants in this study had relatively positive experiences with their parents regarding the disclosure of their sexual identities, and they identified as LGBTQ to their parents at a rather early stage in their lives. These positive

experiences might be due to the gender non-normative behavior of the child, which prepares parents in advance for the possibility of having a child who identifies as LGBTQ. Further, I suggest that having LGBTQ-identified family members and the non-traditional nature of the child's family structure may be significant factors in how families respond to their LGBTQ-identified kids. While it should come as no surprise to the reader that the more traditional (and hegemonically normal) the family formation, the less tolerance there is for queerness in its midst, this discussion serves to remind all of us that the battle over family and marriage is not just one that belongs to the LGBTQ movement. The far-reaching implications of marriage equality—as an LGBTQ initiative—has the power to reorganize one of the most entrenched social norms in our society.

As the sociologist Jessica Fields shows in her study on Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) members, parents' anxieties about having sexual minority-identified or gender atypical children are linked to the parents' heteronormative expectations of their children: that they will grow up to marry and have children and that they will not be queer in a society that rewards normality.²⁵ Yet the queering of family, as demonstrated by the experiences of Spectrum youth, likely contributes to parents' positive reception to the disclosure of their LGBTQ-identified children because the less invested parents are in being normal, the less of a threat a queer child poses to their sense of themselves as "good" parents.

Further, queer family formations are counterhegemonic to compulsory heterosexuality and the SNAF. The gender order has shifted profoundly in the last fifty years, and parental acceptance of LGBTQ-identified children, along with young people's understanding of gender as malleable and unstable, could very well be part of the result. In the book *Gaga Feminism*, Jack Halberstam discusses the possibilities that open up in the face of queer family:

The butch dad and the femme mom raise the possibility of authority without patriarchy (because the butch does not access male privilege), gender polarity without compulsory heterosexuality (because the femme does not always access heterosexual privilege), and they make possible an education for potentially gender-normative kids in the arbitrariness of all gender roles—so kids raised by a femme mother and a butch father might learn about gendered forms of power untethered to gender hierarchies; they might see masculinity and femininity as more malleable, and they might understand gender as something that someone does rather than something someone is.²⁶

Children raised within family formations that reject the dominant gender order—or what has historically been the dominant gender order—are not likely to reproduce that order themselves. These changes have implications across all family formations, including those that are formed around heterosexuality.

The stories shared here by the youths of Spectrum contradict the discourse of tragedy, danger, and risk that surrounds the phenomenon of LGBTQ children coming out to their parents. Of course, for some parents, learning that their child is LGBTQ-identified is upsetting or perhaps even tragic, and for some young people, telling their parents about their sexuality is risky, if not outright dangerous. But, with changing cultural acceptance of sexual diversity and gender atypicality, perhaps more parents will learn to celebrate their children's sexual and gender development—queer or otherwise—as a regular process of self-discovery, maturity, and independence, a complement to their roles as parents in their children's lives, and not as a sign of their failure.

A non-traditional family structure opens the options available to a young person, particularly at an exploratory stage of their lives. Homosexuality is a modern social construction, the definition of which is dependent upon biological and psychological presumptions about sexuality. At the same time, we have entered a postmodern era in which we understand sexuality and gender to be socially and historically constructed, not simply biological. We have shifted from defining homosexuality as pathology to the adoption of identities that more accurately reflect the fluidity of individual sexual and gendered desires, behaviors, and communities. Exposure—through family and peers, media, and other cultural resources—to same-sex desire, sexual fluidity, and the expansion of categories and options for identification results in a larger group of young people who are more willing to explore their same-sex desires in a visible way. In other words, queer sexualities are the result of the destabilization of fixed categories. Youth sexualities reflect this instability as adolescents begin the journey of discovering and exploring their sexual selves. The young people of Spectrum and their peers across the country are learning how to be sexual and gendered beings in an era in which LGBTQ rights are more and more being accepted as human rights. They are the children of a generation that invested in dismantling patriarchal systems of oppression. Therefore their explorations of self reflect a more open, fluid, queer relationship to sexuality and gender.

Because heteropatriarchy is the bedrock of the SNAF, this adoption of fluidity as a way to understand sexuality and gender has profound implications for family formation now and into the future. Heteropatriarchal family structures limit young people's sexual options. They are the normal that queer is organized in opposition to. What does a society that rejects heteronormativity look like? Have we achieved the goal of eliminating the closet? Are we moving toward a society in which LGBTQ identities are not just celebrated but perhaps unremarkable? Or will it simply be the case that same-sex

attractions, couplings, and family formations will be acceptable only inasmuch as they resemble the heteronormative? I reflect on these questions and more in the conclusion.

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Conclusion

The New Normal Isn't Queer

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

—Travon, sixteen-year old, identifies as Black, queer, male

We are facing a sea change in norms around sexuality and gender in U.S. culture. Homosexuality, as a form of sexual conduct, increasingly fails to automatically signify one's sexual identity or orientation. Mainstream acknowledgment of transgender people is becoming commonplace. There has been a rapid proliferation of sexual and gender identities people may adopt to communicate their desires, orientations, and sense of self to others. Notions of binary sex, gender, and sexuality are giving way to fluidity and pluralism. Given this paradigm shift, we are likely to see a loosening around the categories that make up what we now consider the LGBTQ community as sexual and gender variety and fluidity become more integrated into society.

LGBTQ politics—and, by default, all LGBTQ-identified people—occupy the middle ground of a battle between normal and queer. On the one hand, the LGBTQ movement strives toward social equality for LGBTQ-identified people, while, on the other, the queer critique argues that the very identities that the movement has based its political goals upon are unstable. I have shown how adolescent negotiation of sexuality and gender is rife with ambiguity, confusion, and uncertainty. LGBTQ-identified youth in particular make visible the processes of *becoming* while simultaneously demystifying the process of naturalization. Teenagers struggle with understanding who they are, not because their essence has yet to materialize, but rather because they have yet to learn the rules of the game. As adults we forget the various processes by which we were socialized to be sexual and gendered beings. But Travon demonstrates in his statement above that young people are not born in a box that will neatly describe them forever; rather, as they grow up, they seek out existing boxes that align with who they feel they are.

Where the negotiation of gender and sexuality is the most visible is in the gray area between binary categories. Youths' explorations of non-binary sexualities and transgender identities indicate not only a conscious resistance to adopting a binary category but empirical evidence that the recognized identity categories (straight, gay, lesbian, man, woman) fail to encompass the lived experiences of individuals. Sexual desires may be innate to human experience, but our understanding of them as same-sex or other-sex in their orientation is a sociohistorical artifact. The fact that our taken-for-granted assumptions about biological sex—that one is either a boy or girl—are inaccurate renders any natural correlations among biological sex, gender, and sexuality false.¹

The New Queer

Throughout *Growing Up Queer* I have shown how the queer-oriented youth of Spectrum struggle with being othered by a society that depends on normalization as a form of disciplinary power while at the same time finding promise in deviating from straight culture. By paying attention to intersecting forms of penalty and privilege, the experiences of Spectrum youth demonstrate that queerness is not simply a matter of one's sexuality or gender but is tied to race, class, ability, and other identity categories, making it a mistake to generalize about an LGBTQ subject.² It's important that we pay attention to the forces of normalization that sort out members of society, particularly in the context of a white supremacist and capitalist economic and political structure. If normal relies on queer to prop itself up, as LGBTQ becomes the new normal, what becomes the new queer? This is why I stress a distinction between the mainstream LGBTQ community and queer-oriented others like the youth of Spectrum.

In his memoir about having a gay son, *Oddly Normal: One Family's Struggle to Help Their Teenage Son Come to Terms with His Sexuality*, *New York Times* correspondent John Schwartz talks at length about how he and his wife, Jeanne, suspected their son was gay from a very early age. Schwartz explains that, among their peers in a highly educated, well-to-do, liberal enclave in the northeastern United States, one was not disappointed about having a gay child. Schwartz understands sexuality—whether straight or gay—to be natural and biological and “as baked into who you are as eye color and height.”³ While the Schwartz's story about their son Joseph is compelling and heartfelt, in many ways it is less a story about having a gay child and more about a parent's desperate search for an explanation as to why his child is so odd. From

early childhood, Joseph struggled with succeeding at school, was diagnosed with a variety of learning disabilities, attended therapy, and acted up in various ways. Schwartz describes how Joseph's trouble at school ramped up in second grade: "As the year progressed, the teacher seemed to get overwhelmed with the daily grind of school, and she had less energy to deal with Joseph's problems and moods. His anger was close to the surface, and meltdowns were growing more common. Some students made a game of making him blow up, like the boy who would enrage Joseph by calling him 'Lemonhead' every time he wore his yellow raincoat. . . . Other kids would hide his sweatshirt at recess, day after day, to see him fall apart when he couldn't find it. Each outburst humiliated him more."⁴ Joseph begins to disclose his feelings of same-sex desire first to his parents but later at school, which results in a humiliating experience and a failed suicide attempt.

Throughout the book Schwartz associates Joseph's queerness with his latent homosexuality. The story becomes one of hopefulness and survival as Joseph starts to regularly attend a community-based drop-in center for LGBTQ youth and begins to form a gay identity. In my interpretation, it was not the case that the Schwartzes were unhappy about having a gay child. Rather, their struggle was with having a child with a learning disability, who was bullied and disciplined frequently at school, and who was not popular among his peers.

Coincidentally, the same year that *Oddly Normal* was published, Jack Halberstam published *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*, which I have quoted from earlier. Halberstam, an English professor and director of the Center for Feminist Research at the University of Southern California, describes his own gender as "improvised at best, uncertain and mispronounced more often than not, irresolvable and ever shifting."⁵ While Schwartz's memoir is about his family's struggle with having a queer child, Halberstam's book is a call to arms for a new kind of feminism that rejects the category of normal entirely. "Gaga feminism" is described as "a gender politics that recognizes the ways in which our ideas of the normal or the acceptable depend completely upon racial and class-based assumptions about the right and the true."⁶ Halberstam is decidedly not interested in creating a place where being gay or lesbian is normal, instead having aspirations that a new generation of young people will grow up with radical ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality, resisting the heteronormative impulse to adopt gay, straight, or lesbian and male or female identities, and as a result, upend the racist and classist harms caused by normalization.

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

For Halberstam, the significance of a Gaga feminism is in its potential to remake society. This vision rings true with the experiences of the young people of Spectrum. The way their experiences as queer adolescents differ from generations that came before them is evidence of a shift in society. Halberstam states, "We do not think about how changes in one sphere create changes in other spheres: and so the momentous shifts in the meaning of gender and sex and sexuality that have allowed for the emergence of transgenders and transsexuals globally have also created massive, if unnoticed, shifts in the meaning of heterosexuality, male and female."⁷ These shifts will also have significant effects on the heteropatriarchal laws that govern social behavior as well, as I argued earlier. As meanings attached to sexuality, sex, and gender shift, so will the identity categories that the LGBTQ rights movement has depended upon to maintain its momentum. Can the movement withstand a fundamental shift in the way society thinks about and understands gender and sexuality? Is this a shift away from identity politics?

Yet where does that leave Joseph Schwartz and the "oddly normal" youth of Spectrum who daily are facing institutional sources of oppression whose distinct purpose is to normalize? The pressure is unrelenting upon these young people to figure out who they are as they merge into adulthood. Although Travon resists putting himself into a box, this moment of time as an adolescent may be the only period in his life that he will have the luxury to claim to not know who he is. The institutions that govern society do not allow for ambiguity with respect to identity—whether referring to sexuality, gender, or, as I discuss below, even citizenship status.⁸ But for society to advocate for the most marginalized among us, it is profoundly important to acknowledge the way that sexualities, genders, and other identity categories are formed, transformed, validated, and contested.

Not Just Sexuality and Gender

In June 2012, right in the thick of my time at Spectrum, the youth movement to slow the Obama administration's rate of deportation of undocumented immigrants and to raise awareness about the plight of Dreamers—young, undocumented immigrants whose parents brought them to the United States as minors—reached its pinnacle. As part of the Campaign for the American DREAM (CAD), a group of Dreamers set out in May to walk from California to Washington, DC, to

raise awareness about the DREAM Act and immigration reform. In Spectrum's hometown, young people staged a days-long consciousness-raising event about the issue.

At Spectrum, Miguel (a twenty-year-old gay man) is an undocumented Mexican migrant who as a minor was brought to the United States by his father and was particularly interested in the immigrant rights actions taking place. I arrived at Spectrum one afternoon to find Miguel and Aaron painting a big banner for the protest. Painted in black on a long, white sheet of butcher paper, it said "Stop the Deportations!" Miguel and Aaron had been going to the site of the protest to show their support for the movement, but Miguel explained that it was hard to find the location. He thought his sign could be held out on a busy street nearby, where it would attract more attention to what was happening. He explained to me that the previous evening there had been a candlelight vigil where he had spontaneously joined others in speaking publicly as an undocumented youth. He told me how scared he had been and how his voice quavered as he "came out" as undocumented to the crowd. Even though he was afraid, in the face of all of the young people risking their safety in the name of immigrant rights for all, he felt he had to speak up. That summer, as the CAD walk made its way through town, there were many parallels drawn between the Dreamer activists and the LGBTQ movement's strategies; both are formerly hidden populations taking a risk by coming out and claiming pride in their identities in the face of potentially severe consequences.

A few days later, Miguel and Aaron showed up to Spectrum in the afternoon. Aaron had just picked Miguel up from his job at a restaurant where he washes dishes. Miguel, normally cheerful and energetic, looked exhausted and said it was really hot in the kitchen at work. It's remarkable to me how down he looks when he comes from work compared to his usual self. He hates his job and would really like to attend college, but because of his immigration status he would have to pay out-of-state tuition to do so. Since we had last seen each other, the Obama administration had announced an executive order to address some of the barriers Dreamers faced. This was not a passage of the DREAM Act, but it was a temporary remedy, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).⁹ I asked Miguel if he was happy about the news. He stated he was but that, at the same time, he'd lately had to take a break from Facebook and the news on the matter in general, as it was wearing on him emotionally. In the end, Miguel never applied for DACA status. He felt it wasn't enough and that he would keep agitating for more just reform.

I use this account of Miguel's experience as an example of a queer orientation that moves beyond sexuality and/or gender. Historically, undocumented youth in the United States have lived hidden lives where they appear to be just like all of their peers until they graduate from high school and no longer have access to the same paths forward. Some undocumented youths have known about their status for much of their lives, while for others it comes as a surprise as they begin to approach various markers of adulthood like applying for college or getting driver's licenses and identification cards. Undocumented young people become marginalized in society as they become adults. Vulnerable to labor exploitation and economic uncertainty, unable to access health insurance, unable to travel far, they experience depression and mental health challenges as they lose connections with peers who set off on a path toward adulthood with fewer barriers. Undocumented youth end up on paths that stray from the straight lines that govern so many other people's life course. Being gay, as I learned from interviewing and spending time with Miguel, is a very important part of who he is, but in terms of his day-to-day struggles, being undocumented is a much bigger barrier to his quality of life. The point is that Miguel is both gay and undocumented, he is not one without the other, so how do we as a society make room for the multiple ways that youth experience marginalization?

The hegemonic power of heteropatriarchy and its racialized, gendered, classed implications are deeply significant to the formation of identity for the young people in my study. Almost three decades ago, Gayle Rubin predicted that some forms of homosexuality would become acceptable within the "charmed circle" of sexuality. But she also predicted that many sexualities would remain banished to the "outer limits."¹⁰ Rubin likened the growing acceptance of some sexualities, along with the continued exclusion of others, to racism.¹¹ But as many have argued, race—and other embodiments and identities—are intrinsic to the boundaries that form the charmed circle in the first place.¹² Heteropatriarchy isn't *like* racism, it *is* racist.

Therefore it will behoove us to be careful that efforts to support queer young people are not limited to just sexuality and gender. Marginalization occurs not just to LGBTQ kids but also to children with disabilities, children of color—Black and Latinx kids in particular—immigrants, children in poverty, and those who are not Catholic or Protestant Christian, to name a few. Of course, the more marginalization one embodies simultaneously, the more vulnerable to interpersonal and state violence one is likely to be. Must opportunities for validation and support of youth push them into over-identifying with their sexuality or gender compared to their other identities? Similarly, how might the over-emphasis on sexual and gender identities result in masking other sources of marginalization?

Moving beyond Identities

By describing the youth of Spectrum as queer oriented, I have attempted to show how some bodies—both consciously and unconsciously—resist the straightening effects of heteronormativity. I have argued here that not all LGBTQ-identified people are queer, and I have suggested that queerness is about characteristics beyond sexuality and gender. Without negating how some youths self-identify as queer, the use of a queer orientation allows me to move beyond a strictly identity-based conversation about sexual and gender minorities and toward one focused on structural drivers of inequality. I think it's a way out of the rut that identity politics gets stuck in. Rights-based policies that protect LGBTQ-identified people rely on the ability to be able to accurately identify who is and is not LGBTQ. Yet as we have learned from the youth of Spectrum, this is an elusive subject to nail down. As human rights regimes expand to a global level, the ability to define a category that is socially, culturally, geographically, and historically situated becomes harder and harder to do. If human rights protections insist on protecting LGBTQ people, as opposed to protecting those who resist normalization, then only those people who can successfully pass as LGBTQ will be protected.¹³ Given that this very individualistic approach to rights is a product of a largely U.S.-centric worldview, the result is an imposition of individualism onto societies that are more collective and cooperative in character.¹⁴ It also results in the reification of identity, whereby arguments made *against* LGBTQ rights are made in the name of rights of straight people. The North Carolina bathroom legislation, for example, uses arguments for the rights of women and children as its defense.

Organizing or providing services under the banner “LGBTQ youth” is limiting both because it requires participants to locate themselves within the context of sexual and gender identities and because it misses the opportunity to amass a broader spectrum of youths who are queer for reasons other than their sexuality or gender. No matter how much access the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement accomplishes with its current liberal strategies, the youth of Spectrum will likely continue to exist outside of its boundaries because of the ways in which they are excluded from and resist the hegemonic sexual order.

It is not my intention to devalue the successful efforts of identity-based rights movements that rocked the second half of the twentieth century. Rather, what I learned from the youth of Spectrum points to a particular way forward, where the spirit of democracy goes beyond formal legal recognitions to include an ethical spirit of honoring and respecting difference.¹⁵ It is no longer enough for progressive politics in U.S. society to honor the rights of so-called LGBTQ people on the basis of people having been “born that way”; rather, difference should be honored because it is the right thing to do. What's exciting about queer orientation is that it manifests a cross-coalitional politics that some have argued went missing with the neoliberal political turn U.S. politics took in the wake of the Civil Rights Act.¹⁶ Given that the most powerful criticisms of identity movements and their various movements for social justice are that they are essentializing, queerness as an identity, a theory, and a political movement includes multiple axes of oppression, from anti-racism organizing, to the rise in disability studies, to fat positivity movements, and therefore is inherently coalitional.

Let me be clear that I am neither arguing for a queer-er world nor a world without queerness (where all difference is accepted as “normal”). Rather, what would it mean to honor that which deviates from the normal because it is necessary to our humanity? Sara Ahmed explains it this way:

Queer is not available as a line that we can follow, and if we took such a line, we would perform a certain injustice to those queers whose lives are lived for different points. For me, the important task is not so much finding a queer line but asking what our orientation toward queer moments of deviation will be. If the object slips away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, out of place, what will we do? If we feel oblique, where will we find support?¹⁷

The queer movement has been powerful in that it has not been solely concerned with the rights of gender and sexual minorities; rather, it has engaged in the critique of capitalist, neoliberal politics that results in the marginalization of all queer people. Given the particular challenges that progressive politics face under the current conservative administration, the time is ripe for social justice movements that lead us toward organizing in a way that is less about the liberal political goals of accessing equal rights for various identity groups and more about coming together across difference toward similar goals of democracy, by focusing our efforts on the most marginalized among us.

Coalitional Social Justice Organizing

Two twenty-first-century social movements that exemplify the kind of multicoalitional, queer organizing that I mention above are Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the transgender movement.

Black Lives Matter, which began spontaneously as a hashtag and has grown into one of the most high-profile, international grassroots movements of our time, was founded in 2013 by Black, queer women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—in reaction to the murder of an adolescent Black boy, Trayvon Martin, and the resulting acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman. Although the name “Black Lives Matter” may appear on the surface to simply

acquaintance of his niece, George Zimmerman. Although the name Black Lives Matter may appear on the surface to simply be a movement about the liberation of Black people, the mission of what is now a global network of member-led chapters is deeply intersectional, addressing gender, sexuality, ability, class, nationality, and more. As the “Herstory” page on the organization’s website explains, “Black liberation movements in this country have created room, space, and leadership mostly for Black heterosexual, cisgender men—leaving women, queer and transgender people, and others either out of the movement or in the background to move the work forward with little or no recognition. As a network, we have always recognized the need to center the leadership of women and queer and trans people.”¹⁸ One of the beliefs that guides the work of Black Lives Matter is that the liberation of all of us is bound up in the liberation of those most marginalized among us: “We work vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, all people.”¹⁹

Similarly, the transgender movement, a broad collection of grassroots efforts towards trans* recognition and inclusion, is also inherently intersectional. Recognizing that the most at-risk trans* people are transwomen who are poor and working-class people of color, the movement is simply not just about transphobia but about racism, classism, and sexism, as well. Using the difficulty transgender people face accessing accurate identity documents as an example, in her book *Transgender History* Susan Stryker explains that “the restrictions on movement in the post-9/11 United States give transgender people more in common with immigrants, refugees, and undocumented workers than they might have with the gay and lesbian community.”²⁰ Both Stryker and Dean Spade—among others—have shown how the administration of gender by the bureaucratic state has resulted in a transgender justice movement that “increasingly involves joining campaigns and struggles that might seem at first to have little to do with gender identity or expression—but everything to do with how the state polices those who differ from social norms and tries to solve the bureaucratic problems that arise from attempting to administer the lives of atypical members of its population.”²¹ Therefore efforts at addressing discrimination and hate crimes targeting trans* people are intersectional.

Without recognizing and making visible the white heteropatriarchal privilege that bolsters the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement, we run the risk of continuing to reproduce the same, tired bigotry that continues to poison the well of social justice efforts in the United States.

Spectrum and the Promise of Queer

What makes Spectrum so important to the lives of the youth who spend time there is that it validates their humanity. At Spectrum, young people who have spent their lives feeling out of place, unrecognizable, and queer meet others who have lived their lives feeling the same way. Beyond simply finding peers who share their experiences, the youth of Spectrum are validated by adults, too. Adult staff and volunteers not only recognize and affirm queerness but encourage it by, among other things, teaching the proud history of the LGBT and queer movements, passing on the revered drag tradition, and hosting queer prom as a valid alternative to the heteronormative initiation of the high school prom. For queer young people, Spectrum is an oasis of inclusion in a desert of exclusion.

Early in my field research, I participated in a sex education workshop at Spectrum. There were about six youth present along with César and myself. The focus for the module was on sexuality and gender. César began the session by explaining terms we use to describe sex and gender. Sexual orientation is similar to being left- or right-handed. Sexual identity is how you come out to folks. Sexual behavior is “who you do” and can occur along a spectrum with heterosexuality on one end and homosexuality on the other and lots of iterations in between. For gender, he explained that one has a biological sex, which is your genitals, hormones, and chromosomes; a gender identity, again, similar to being left- or right-handed; and a gender expression, which is the gender you appear to be to others, along a spectrum of femininity and masculinity. The point of these definitions is to make it clear to the group that sexuality and gender do not always line up the way folks think they should and particularly not how the heterosexual world wants them to. One participant appreciated this information, stating that sometimes he wakes up feeling manly and sometimes he wakes up feeling “femmy.” Another was vexed by the fact that being bisexual meant people were always telling him he had to choose.

One of the activities involved examining stereotypes about LGB and T people’s sexual behavior. Some examples of sexualized stereotypes the group came up with included things like “lesbian bed death,” gay men using drugs and hooking up randomly with other men, and that trans* people are either assumed to be sex workers or asexual.²² The exercise allowed us to speak honestly about these negative stereotypes, then think about how we are sometimes guilty of reproducing them in our own lives. César asked the group to look at how stereotypes get attached to gender norms. For example, he stated that, among gay men, “straight acting” is really code for “masculine.” He pushed the group to consider how sometimes LGBTQ-identified people reproduce normative gender roles in their sexual and intimate relationships. He then countered this notion by pointing out how LGBTQ-identified people, in many cases, have more gender egalitarian relationships than straight-identified people and how straight people are learning from their queer peers how to do relationships better. César explained that there are so few gay role models for queer folks to relate to, and we questioned whether that was good or bad. I stated that there are too many bad role models for straight people, while one of the youths pointed out that queer people get to write the book, in a sense, because there are no rules. César echoed this comment, that

pointed out that queer people get to write the book, in a sense, because there are no rules. César echoed this comment, that being queer is already deviant, so crossing the line into deviant sexual behavior may be less scary for queer folks. Someone else suggested that queer people are better at experimenting and then deciding if they do or don't like something. I love the way this conversation shows the promise of queerness and queer youth in particular. It demonstrates that sexualized stereotypes are shifting along with the sexual mores and gender norms that feed them.

At the beginning of *Growing Up Queer*, I explained that my objective was to explore how teenagers become sexual and gendered today by sharing what I have learned from this very particular group of kids. The youth of Spectrum are clearly products of the LGBTQ rights movement that had its origins in the 1970s. That movement established the importance of claiming a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity and being out and proud about it. As I have argued, though, the queer movement that became prominent in the 1980s pushed back against the essentializing of identity that much of the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement has relied on. This generation of young people, regardless of their sexuality or gender, have come to understand themselves through the lens of these movements that have liberated marginalized sexuality and gender and therefore have transformed the act of becoming sexual or becoming gendered. They may not abandon identity—in fact, they seem to be proliferating it—but they also seem to be making more room for fluidity and intersectionality of identity.

In much the same spirit as the Black Lives Matter claim that, when Black people get free, everyone gets free, the youth of Spectrum have helped me to understand that when the queerest among us get free, everyone gets free. When I arrived at Spectrum for the first time so many years ago, I expected to find vulnerable young people who needed support and help, albeit not necessarily from me. I expected to be spotted as different and an outsider because of my straightness and cisgender privilege. Yet what I found were young people who hurt, yes, but who also were joyful and excited to be alive. I found a tolerance for weirdos and a community of people that nurtured each other. I learned that all of us at Spectrum were part of becoming together, mutually constituted in the ways we self-identified, attributed identity to each other, and explored fluidity and ambiguity. I learned about the ways that queer culture has an influence that makes the mainstream better: better at doing family and better at pushing the envelope of representation. Yet Spectrum is no utopia. Within the Spectrum community, boundaries are still drawn and domination still occurs, but it has tremendous potential to imagine and manifest something better. This is what gives it so much promise.

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Shelton, Wendy Smith, Ryan Stubbs, Julie “Jet” Thompson, Trevor Trumble, Wendi Walker, Eric Walsh-Buhi, and Maggie Walsh-Buhi.

I completed a portion of this book during a writing retreat at the Dorland Mountain Arts Colony in Temecula, California.

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came up behind me, my nieces and nephews Skyler, Fiona, Matilda, Nakya, Ethan, and Charlie.

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Appendix

Profile of Research Participants				
Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity
Shane	20	Male	Gay	White
Ernie	21	Gender queer	Queer	Chicano
Brian	21	Two spirit	Queer; gay	Human/Euro
Trevor	20	Male	Gay	White American
Matthew	21	Male	Primarily gay	White
Hunter	21	No preference	Gay	Mixed
Zia	19	Gender neutral; some queer	Queer	Mixed
Red	20	Male	Other	Caucasian
Jack	18	FTM; male	Pansexual leaning towards gay male	White/hillbilly
Jamil	17	Male	Open; bisexual	Multiracial
Gabe/Kaylee	18	Androgynous	Bisexual	Native/Hispanic
Travon	16	Male	Queer	Black/Mixed
Miguel	20	Male	Gay	Mexican
Grace	21	Female	Bisexual	White

Profile of Research Participants				
Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity
Aaron	19	Male	Gay	Mexican American/ Chicano
Isaac	19	Male	Gay	Multiracial
Alex	19	Male	Gay	White/Caucasian
Anthony	17	Male	Gay	Hispanic
Corey	18	Universal; not male or female, just me	Energy; bisexual	Mutt/mixed
Avery	19	Female	Lesbian	White
Lucy	17	Female	Lesbian	White
Lee	20	Female	Lesbian	White
Nik	18	Male; androgynous	Gay; attracted mostly to masculine guys	Caucasian
Ethan	19	Male	Straight	Biracial
Ditto	20	Female; sometimes genderqueer	Bisexual	Biracial
William	16	Male	Gay	Multiracial/Black
Rick	19	Male; transmale	Demi-sexual	American-mutt/White
Taylor	18	Female; transfemale	Pansexual	Viking-Scandinavian
Spencer	19	n/a	n/a	n/a
Fiona	19	Female	Pansexual	White
Adam	18	Male	Gay	White
Jude	22	Female	Pansexual/Transplus	Caucasian
Jose	20	Male	Gay	Hispanic
Note: Age, gender, identity, sexual identity, and race/ethnicity are all by self-identification. More than one term indicates that the participant described themselves in multiple ways. FTM = female to male.				

Profile of Research Participants (cont.)
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Profile	Research Participant	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity
Pseudonym (continued)		Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity

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Notes

Introduction

1 I use the acronym “LGBTQ” as an umbrella term to describe people who are not straight and/or cisgender identified because it seems to be the most commonly understood way to collectively describe this group. Throughout the book, while continuing to use “LGBTQ,” I simultaneously problematize the various identities the acronym encompasses, the ways it conflates sexuality and gender, and the ways it conflates queerness with non-heterosexual sexualities and gender normative people.

All names of people and places in this book are pseudonyms to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants.

Regarding pronouns, I asked interviewees to share their gender identity with me but did not ask what pronouns they use. I did not realize what an oversight this was until I was completing the book and found myself unsure in a few cases which pronouns a youth uses. Therefore I use the pronouns that, to the best of my memory, the youth regularly used to describe themselves and their peers in the space. While five interviewees described their gender identity as non-binary (using various terms), it was not the case that these same youths insisted that others use gender neutral pronouns to refer to them. The most common scenario among Spectrum youth who did not state a preference for a gender binary pronoun was to state that they did not care what pronouns people used to describe them. Therefore, I am fairly confident that I have used pronouns that the youths themselves would identify with, but I acknowledge that I may have erred in a few cases and offer my apologies. I discuss pronouns in much more detail in chapter 3.

2 Ghaziani (2010).

3 In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed (2006: 19) borrows a phrase from landscape architecture as a metaphor for orientation, “desire lines,” which describe “unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow. . . . Such lines are indeed traces of desire; where people have taken different routes to get to this point or that point.” While heterosexual desire would be an example of a path one is “supposed to follow,” I’m arguing here that it still suggests choosing a path.

4 Ahmed (2006): 566.

5 Ahmed (2006): 554.

6 Waidzunus (2012): 219.

7 Savin-Williams (2005): 21.

8 Pascoe (2007): 65.

9 See Fields’s (2008) ethnography of how debates over abstinence-only-before-marriage sex education versus comprehensive sex education play out across three different school districts in North Carolina. She finds that administrators and educators advocate very differently for students depending on their race and class and that sex education curriculums are heterosexist and heteronormative.

10 For more on the ways that girls, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified people often bear the brunt of sexual health interventions, see Fields (2008); and M. Fine and S. McClelland (2006).

11 For good examples of the point I am trying to make here, see Cauterucci (2016) and P. Y. Lee (2016), two editorials on the way women are held solely responsible for pregnancy in the wake of recent outbreaks of the Zika virus in Latin America.

12 Dennis Altman (1994: 508) discusses the ways that community organizations responded to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the face of neoliberal policies that privatized various services that had once been the responsibility of the state via public health departments. He states, “If the epidemic developed in a world of structural adjustments and privatization, it also developed in a world in which feminism and gay assertion meant the existence, in at least some places, of existing organizations and communities able to respond to the new crisis. The very idea that community-based organizations should play a leading role in meeting the challenge of a public health crisis is related to a whole series of political and social developments over the past twenty years.” In the United States, as community organizations like LGBTQ centers responded to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the face of government neglect, these organizations became de facto experts on matters of public and sexual health. It was through the efforts of community organizations, not the government, that accurate, evidence-based information about how to prevent the spread of diseases like HIV made their way into communities.

13 Overby (2014).

14 For more on how strategic essentialism has been important to LGBTQ identity and social movements, see Gamson (1995); Seidman (1993); and Vance (1989).

15 For a concise account of how social constructionism in sociology pre-dated and therefore influenced queer theory, see Epstein (1994). See Ward (2015: 84) for a critical account of the “hegemony of bio-evolutionary accounts of sexual desire.”

16 Rich (1980); Rubin (1984); and Warner (1993).

17 Ferguson (2004): 149.

18 Nagel (2003); and Stoler (1995).

19 Beyond the notion that choosing not to have children resists the straightening effects of heteronormativity, Edelman (2004) argues (largely symbolically) that refusing to reproduce is a queer act in that one refuses to perpetuate myths about a hopeful future.

20 On the least-adult role, see Mandell (1998).

21 See *Mean Girls* (2004).

22 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2009).

23 "Assent" is the term used to distinguish a child's agreement to participate in human subjects research from "consent," the term used to describe an adult's agreement to participate. Although the two terms are very similar in meaning, assent is not legally binding since a minor is not a legal adult.

24 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2009).

25 Williams (2014): 232.

26 For more on the social construction of adolescence and youth, see Best (2011); Buchholtz (2002); and Lesko (1996).

27 Waidzunus (2015); and Ward (2015).

Chapter 1. Welcome to Spectrum

1 When I was at Spectrum, the survey had about one hundred questions in total and was completed by youth on a computer. Although the hope on the part of the researchers was that every new visitor to Spectrum would complete a survey, this required quite a bit of diligence on the part of the staff. Therefore, completion rates were quite low. It's possible that this was a result of some resistance on the part of the staff to subject youth to research surveillance, but it also could have simply been a result of failed communication.

2 Ghaziani (2010).

3 Protection of privacy and confidentiality as determined by human subjects research protocols prevents me from identifying the name and location of the city in which I did my research and therefore prevents me from citing the source of this demographic data.

4 Dank (1971); and Plummer (1981).

5 Although many would argue that the Stonewall and Compton Lunch Counter riots in New York City and San Francisco were youth led, there was not a visible youth movement comparable to that of the Civil Rights Movement's Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, for example.

6 Miceli (2005).

7 See Melinda Miceli's (2005) work for a comprehensive history of LGBTQ youth organizing in the 1980s and 1990s, in particular regarding gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in schools.

8 Gibson (1989).

9 See the sociologist Tom Waidzunus's article (2012) for a complex explanation of the matter of the Gibson numbers and the resulting risk/resilience narratives about gay youth. See also Gibson (1989); Miceli (2005); Savin-Williams (2005).

10 The sociologist Tom Waidzunus (2012) uses Ian Hacking's (2006) idea of "making up people" in his thorough exploration of the rise of the gay youth suicide discourse. In order to argue that LGBTQ youth are vulnerable in society, they have to be countable, which requires a shared understanding of what defines an LGBTQ youth. Is it based on self-identification? Identification by others? Sexual conduct? Genderqueerness? As the LGBTQ youth subject has become institutionalized in society through resources like GSAs and LGBTQ centers, for example, the very subject under investigation changes. In other words, there is a risk of essentializing sexual orientation/identity by labeling gay youth "at-risk," rather than focusing attention on the social conditions that give rise to problems like homophobic bullying.

11 Miceli (2005): 4.

12 Marx and Kettrey (2016): 1269.

13 Walls, Kane, and Wisneski (2010).

14 Kosciw et al. (2016).

15 CenterLink (n.d.).

16 Romijnders et al. (2017): 346.

17 Herdt and Boxer (1993).

18 Whittier (1994): 290.

19 Hacking (2006): 23. It is thanks to Tom Waidzunus (2012) that I discovered Hacking's article "Making Up People," which influenced my thinking here.

20 Barnes (2013); and Bumiller (2011).

21 Calmes and Baker (2012).

22 Parker-Pope (2010).

23 Markoe (2012).

24 Dvorak (2012); and Padawer (2012).

25 Although the 113th Congress passed ENDA, it never went up for a vote in the House of Representatives, as it was not expected to get the votes it needed to pass. After Congress's vote of support, President Obama signed an executive LGBT non-discrimination order that applies to federal contractors and protects federal employees. As I write this, ENDA has still not passed into federal law. In March 2017, President Trump rescinded the Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces Order, an Obama-era executive order, effectively preventing the federal government from ensuring compliance with the LGBT non-discrimination order.

26 Ford (2017).

27 Fording (2017).

28 Peters, Becker, and Davis (2017).

29 Hirschfeld Davis and Cooper (2017).

30 Southern Poverty Law Center (2017).

31 Donovan (2017).

32 Leatherby, Manibog, and Kao (2016).

33 See Lilla (2016) and Soave (2016) for discussions about the effect so-called political correctness had on the election of Donald Trump for president. To be clear, I am not arguing that it is in fact true that identity politics resulted in Trump's election. Rather, among those who voted for him, there is a pattern of expressing a strong distaste for identity politics and political correctness.

34 Schilt and Westbrook (2015).

35 Judith Halberstam (2005): 37.

36 Mary L. Gray's (2009) award-winning ethnography, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, is a good example of sociological research that complicates the urban/rural divide as relates to sexuality and youth.

37 Marantz (2017); and Penny (2017).

38 Penny (2017).

39 Marantz (2017).

40 Peters, Alter, and Grynbaum (2017).

Chapter 2. "That Makes Me Gay"

1 Warner (1993): xxiii.

2 Ahmed (2006): 562.

3 Puar (2007): 3. Much of my analysis regarding the queer orientation of the youth of Spectrum is strongly influenced by Jasbir K. Puar's (2007) *Territorist Assemblages: Internationalism in Queer Times*.

4 Ahmed (2006): 566.

5 This example using the non-sexual interaction with a doctor to describe sexual scripts comes from Gagnon and Simon (1973).

6 D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2008); Gibson (1989); and Savin-Williams (1998).

7 Savin-Williams discusses this point in his book *The New Gay Teenager*. He attempts to clarify a variety of misleading assumptions about the origins of same-sex attraction and orientation, including the notion that gender atypical kids must be gay. He states, "Perhaps the best early subjective predictor of a same-sex orientation is a child's feeling of being different from peers. Objectively, this is usually linked to atypical gender expression. In other words, if 'inverted' in one, then 'inverted' in the other. . . . Influenced by stereotypes of their culture, adolescents with same-sex attractions come to understand that their pervasive sense that something is 'not quite right' and their acting like a tomboy or a sissy are the first signs of homosexuality" (Savin-Williams 2005: 94). He goes on to explain, as I have as well, that gender atypicality is most certainly not a universal experience of those who have same-sex attraction and orientation.

8 See Stephen Seidman's (1994) *Beyond the Closet*, where he argues that same-sex sexuality is becoming more normalized and therefore heterosexuality less compulsory. He asserts that people are more likely to identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual and less likely to conceal these identities among family, friends, and co-workers. In his book *Straights* (2015), James Dean looks specifically at how many straight women are more likely to embrace sexual fluidity and reject notions of compulsory heterosexuality, especially compared to straight men.

9 Ward (2015).

10 Ferguson (2004): 53.

11 Ferguson (2004): 149.

12 Magic: The Gathering is a trading card game, and D&D is Dungeons & Dragons, a role-playing game.

13 Warner (2000).

14 Duggan (2004): 50.

15 Warner (1993).

16 The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the leading advocacy group for LGBTQ kids in the United States, formed in 1990 and began conducting its biennial National School Climate Survey on the school-based experiences of LGBTQ youth in 1999. Prior to the 1990s and the rise of the gay-straight alliance (GSA) movement, there was virtually no acknowledgment of LGBTQ students in schools, but of course that does not mean there were no LGBTQ-identified young people prior to this time. See Miceli (2005) for more on GSAs.

17 Ward (2015): 202.

18 Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999).

19 The well-known sex advice columnist and gay rights activist Dan Savage's (2015) critique of NYU Press's *description* of Jane Ward's (2015) *Not Gay* is a good example of this.

20 Diamond (2008); Waidunas (2015); and Ward (2015).

21 Pascoe (2007).

22 Waidunas (2015): 16.

Chapter 3. “Let’s Be Trans”

- 1 When I was conducting fieldwork around 2010–2013, “preferred gender pronoun” was the language being used in queer spaces like Spectrum. Since then, it has become more acceptable to drop the “preferred” part, as it suggests one’s gender is somehow inauthentic. I’ve chosen to use “preferred” in my account since it is consistent with what was happening at the time.
- 2 Ahmed (2006): 60.
- 3 Butler (2004): 216.
- 4 Butler (2004): 217.
- 5 Muñoz (2009): 185.
- 6 Stryker (2006): 9.
- 7 Serano (2007); Stryker (2007); and Stryker and Currah (2014).
- 8 Dean (2015): 249.
- 9 Each of the following three readings are nuanced discussions about the intertwining relationship between gender and sexuality: Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997); Valentine (2004); and Vidal-Ortiz (2002).
- 10 As Valentine (2007) explains, the term “transgender” was not widely in use until the mid-1990s in the United States. Therefore, the use of this term to describe children is a new phenomenon. See Meadow (2011, 2018) and Travers (2018) for more on the experiences of parents raising transgender, gender non-conforming, and genderqueer kids.
- 11 Dvorak (2012); and Padawer (2012).
- 12 Walsh (2015).
- 13 Petrusich (2015).
- 14 Kessler and McKenna (1978).
- 15 Kessler and McKenna (1978).
- 16 One of the reviewers of this book commented that she was surprised at these findings since her gender studies students are very adept at using gender neutral pronouns. While I think there are certain geographical and cultural locations where the use of gender neutral pronouns are becoming more common, my research leads me to believe that these places remain exceptions to the norm in the United States.
- 17 Lucal (1999): 785.
- 18 For more on the pathologizing of trans*, see Bryant (2008); Butler (2004); Irvine (1990); Mason-Shrock (1996); and Stone (1991).
- 19 Parekh (2016), citing American Psychiatric Association (2013).
- 20 The Parable of the Lamp is found in three of the New Testament gospels, Matthew 5:14–15, Mark 4:21–25, and Luke 8:16–18.
- 21 Butler (1990).
- 22 Lucal (1999): 791.
- 23 In my interviews with youth who identified as transgender, I intentionally did not press for information about surgeries, medical treatments, or hormone therapies because I felt that doing so would reinforce existing ideas about who is and is not a legitimate trans* person. Some participants disclosed this information to me, and at times I mention these details when I think it’s contextually important, but it was not the case that among the people I interviewed being trans* also meant taking hormones or having surgeries. I approached this matter from the perspective described by the critical studies scholar Julian Carter (2014: 235), who discusses the term “transition” for *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*: “Many North American trans-communities insist that ‘everyone transitions in their own way’: open-ended refusal to define ‘transition’ is a principled stance against institutionalizing any given form of trans-being. Such resistance reflects decades of struggle over who decides what counts as legitimate trans-/gender expression—struggle that clings to the word itself.” Therefore, when I talk about gender attribution and how secondary and tertiary sex characteristics play a role in how we interpret each other’s gender, I’m not concerned with *how* a person came by these characteristics but, rather, how they function in the attribution process.
- 24 Hormone replacement therapies involve prescribing hormones or hormone blockers to people for a variety of different reasons. For transgender people, hormone replacement therapy is a form of gender confirming healthcare that can alter the effects of secondary sex characteristics in order to align with one’s gender identity.
- 25 For more on being genderqueer or gender ambiguous, while not feeling as if one is the “wrong” gender or wanting to change gender, see Devor’s (1989) concept of “gender bending,” Judith Halberstam’s (1998) “female masculinity,” and Lucal’s (1999) personal experience of embodying gender ambiguity.
- 26 See Davidson (2007) for a smart and concise discussion of the ways in which the term “transgender,” as an umbrella term, is understood within the trans* community. In particular, Davidson addresses some of the contestation between those people who have transitioned from one gender to another (transbinary) and those who embrace gender fluidity and non-binary gender.
- 27 Spade (2011): 152.
- 28 In October 2017, the State of California became the first to allow a non-binary gender option on birth certificates. Both Washington and Oregon have non-binary gender options on driver’s licenses.
- 29 Westbrook and Schilt (2013).
- 30 Schilt and Westbrook (2009).
- 31 North Carolina General Assembly (2016).
- 32 U.S. Department of Justice (2016).
- 33 Schilt and Westbrook (2009).

- 34 David Valentine (2004) troubles the relationship between sexuality and gender as categories showing how once we assign a label to an experience, there is a risk that the label becomes the fact, not the experience. He is pointing to the difference between a theoretical separation of gender and sexuality—often in the service of social justice activism, academic research, and service provision—and the actual lived experience of one's gender and sexuality, which is interwoven. Valentine suggests there is some risk in society's increasing emphasis on gender identity. How much do the categories—often created to describe others—come to subsume people's lived experience of their sexualities and/or genders? Further, whose genders and sexualities get erased in the process of categorization?

Chapter 4. "Google Knows Everything"

- 1 Weinrich (1997): 62.
- 2 For a sampling of various empirical studies and theoretical analyses on this topic, see Bryson (2007); Craig et al. (2015); Gray (2009); Jack J. Halberstam (2012a); Muise (2011); Saraswati (2013); Stryker (2008); and Weinrich (1997).
- 3 Pascoe (2011). See also Craig et al. (2015).
- 4 Charmaraman and McKamey (2011) used focus groups with urban-based youth to learn about sexuality and relationships. Media was found to be a common and influential way that youth were exposed to and learned about sexuality.
- 5 Prensky (2001).
- 6 Döring (2009); and Weber, Quiring, and Dauschmann (2012).
- 7 Weber, Quiring, and Dauschmann (2012): 410.
- 8 Pascoe (2011).
- 9 Goffman (1959).
- 10 Gagnon and Simon (1973).
- 11 Gagnon (2004): 118.
- 12 Gagnon (2004): 125.
- 13 Green (2008): 605.
- 14 Green (2008): 606.
- 15 Fejes and Petrich (1993); and Keilwasser and Wolf (1992).
- 16 Sedgwick (1991).
- 17 Russo (1981): 27.
- 18 Russo (1981): 30.
- 19 G. Black (1994).
- 20 G. Black (1994).
- 21 *Silence of the Lambs* (1991).
- 22 Russo (1981): 52.
- 23 Avila-Saavedra (2009).
- 24 Avila-Saavedra (2009); and Kanner (2003).
- 25 Jack J. Halberstam (2012a): xix.
- 26 Napier (2005).
- 27 Roncero-Menendez (2014).
- 28 Hall (2010).
- 29 *Cartoon Network Wiki* (n.d.); and *Anime Savvy* (2010).
- 30 Roncero-Menendez (2014).
- 31 The closest U.S. equivalent to the Japanese host/hostess bar might be a strip club, but host club workers do not typically engage in nudity, dancing, or sex acts inside the clubs; they play the role of chaperone while entertaining their upscale clients and, most important, getting them to spend as much money as possible while in the club. *Ouran High School Host Club* is not a depiction of high schoolers engaging in sex work; rather, the host club is a social space where the wealthy girls of Ouran High go for fun and to flirt with boys.
- 32 *InuYasha Wiki* (n.d.).
- 33 Napier (2005): 13.
- 34 Napier (2005).
- 35 Rowling (1997–2007).
- 36 R. Black (2008): 13.
- 37 Collins (2008–2010); Meyer (2005–2008); and Rowling (1997–2007).
- 38 Thorn (2004): 183.
- 39 R. Black (2008); Busse (2005); Jenkins (1992); Kustritz (2003); Scodari and Felder (2000); and Somogyi (2002).
- 40 Jenkins (1992): 219.
- 41 Thorn (2004): 179.

74 Mizoguchi (2010): 159.

42 Mizoguchi (2010): 159.

43 Welker (2006): 866.

Chapter 5. “It’s Going to Be Okay”

- 1 In her work examining the social construction of the pedophile and its relationship to shoring up the patriarchal family, Elise Chenier (2012: 174) claims, “In the modern western state, the family is ground zero for sexual normalization.” See also Ferguson (2004); and Stoler (1995).
- 2 D. Smith (1993).
- 3 Stacey (1993): 545.
- 4 Hill Collins (1994); Neubeck and Cazenave (2001); D. Roberts (2002); and Stoler (1995).
- 5 The Moynihan Report is a 1965 report published by the then assistant secretary of labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Moynihan’s objective was to convince Congress that civil rights legislation by itself would not solve the problem of racial inequality, arguing that some of the causes of inequality could be found within the structure of the Black family itself. The Moynihan Report has been a source of fierce debate since it was published, one of the strongest critiques being that it blames the Black family for problems that are in fact institutionalized in U.S. society. See Geary (2015) for an annotated edition of the Report published in the *Atlantic*.
- 6 Bennett and Battle (2001): 56.
- 7 See Ferguson (2004).
- 8 For more on ways that heteropatriarchal family formation makes women and children vulnerable to violence and reinforces gender norms, see Chenier (2012); Gordon (1988); Kaye (2005); and Stacey (1993).
- 9 See Moore’s (2011) work on gay Black women, in particular her discussion of the recent shift among Black people to live openly as gay, which Moore argues is resulting in shifting norms around homosexuality in Black communities. See also Weston (1991).
- 10 See Weston (1991) on LGBTQ kinship. For more on shifting norms regarding same-sex parents and families, see Biblarz, Carroll, and Burke (2014).
- 11 Martin et al. (2009); and Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998).
- 12 D’Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2008); Gibson (1989); Herdt (1989); Savin-Williams (1998); and Troiden (1989).
- 13 See Savin-Williams (2001) for a complex analysis of problems with the data on sexual minorities and suicide, in particular his discussion of the “suffering suicidal” script.
- 14 The reader should understand that I am primarily referring here to the coming-out experiences of sexual-minority youths, and this discussion does not necessarily reflect the experiences of young people coming out to their parents as transgender.
- 15 The gender atypical children in question do not include trans-identified youths but, rather, cisgender youths whose gender expression and presentation marks them as atypical males or atypical females. See D’Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2005).
- 16 Savin-Williams (2005).
- 17 D’Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2005); and Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998).
- 18 Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999).
- 19 Stacey and Biblarz (2001).
- 20 Judith Halberstam (2005): 40.
- 21 Moore (2011).
- 22 Newman and Muzzonigro (1993).
- 23 Edin and Kefalas (2005); and Fields (2001).
- 24 Fields (2001).
- 25 Fields (2001).
- 26 Jack J. Halberstam (2012a): 58.

Conclusion

- 1 Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2000b); E. Stein (1999); and Wade (2013).
- 2 Hill Collins (1990).
- 3 Schwartz (2012): 13.
- 4 Schwartz (2012): 43.
- 5 Jack J. Halberstam (2012b).
- 6 Jack J. Halberstam (2012a): 26.
- 7 Jack J. Halberstam (2012a): 81.
- 8 In October of 2017, the State of California became the first to allow a non-binary gender option on birth certificates. Both Washington and Oregon have non-binary gender options on driver’s licenses. For more on how institutions regulate gender, see Currah and Mulqueen (2011);

Fogg Davis (2017); and Spade (2011).

9 Preston and Cushman (2012).

10 In "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Gayle Rubin (1984: 13) describes a hierarchy of sexual value in which "good, normal, natural, and blessed" sexuality—like heterosexuality, monogamy, reproductive sex, and vanilla sex—resides within the "charmed circle," while "bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned" sexuality—like homosexuality, promiscuity, unmarried sex, and sadomasochistic sex—resides in the "outer limits."

11 For more on whiteness and the color line, see Gans (1999); J. Lee and F. Bean (2004); and Steinberg (2004).

12 Duggan (2004); Ferguson (2004); and Puar (2005).

13 For a particularly surprising look at some of the ways the state compels asylum seekers to prove their sexual identities, see Rachel A. Lewis's (2014) *Sexualities* article.

14 See the concluding chapter in Waidzunus (2015), in which, based on his research in Uganda, he makes a compelling argument for rethinking the way human rights agendas frame sexual orientation.

15 In her book *Respectably Queer*, Jane Ward (2008: 149) calls for "a movement-based return to ethics" and a rejection of profit-motivated calls for equality.

16 Gilmore (2007); Rodríguez (2007); and Spade (2011).

17 Ahmed (2006): 570.

18 Black Lives Matter (2017a).

19 Black Lives Matter (2017b).

20 Stryker (2008): 150.

21 Stryker (2008): 150. See also Spade (2011).

22 These are common stereotypes or myths that circulate within the LGBTQ community, so common, in fact, that the young people in our discussion group had no problem identifying them when prompted. A colloquial reference to research similar to that found in *American Couples: Money, Work, Sex* by the sociologists Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (1983) suggests that women in long-term lesbian relationships tended toward being less sexually active than other couple formations. The notion of lesbian bed death has been criticized for being a myth and not truly representative of lesbian intimacy. In contrast, gay men are portrayed in the popular imagination as hypersexual partiers who use drugs to intensify sex. Again, while there is no denying that sex and partying are components of gay male culture, they are not actually representative of all gay men. Finally, stereotypes of transgender people often result in either hypersexualization—as in the transwoman sex worker—or asexualization—the idea that trans people are not sexually desirable.

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