

Lesbians and Space: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Dayna Prest

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Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

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Abstract

In a moment when visibility and representations of LGBTTTQAI+ people are proliferating in North American society, it is important to think critically about how visibility and representations function and to interrogate their meanings and a/effects. This thesis uses data produced from five semi-structured interviews conducted with lesbian identified participants living in non-urban spaces in Ontario to demonstrate the importance of a continued lesbian specificity, to draw attention to heteronormativity and heterosexism in Ontarian society, to challenge femme invisibility and complicate the notion of femme privilege, and to move beyond the urban/rural binary as a way of making sense of sexuality. The methodological framework guiding this thesis draws on interpretive phenomenological analysis as well as feminist and queer methodologies, which facilitated a responsive and reflexive research process. This thesis is grounded in ongoing debates around identity politics and representation, drawing on literature from lesbian theories, lesbian-feminist histories, queer theories, heterosexism, heteronormativity and homonormativity, lesbian-feminist histories, white privilege studies, queer and feminist geography, and LGBTTTQAI+ rural studies.

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Introduction

In North America, we are living in a moment where LGBTTTQAI+ rights and visibility seem to be at the forefront of our social, cultural and political minds. With the recent move to legalize same-sex marriage on a national level in the United States, the American Military considering allowing transgender soldiers to join the army (Geidner, 2013), and the Liberal government in Ontario implementing a new sexual education curriculum that introduces the existence of and content on LGBTTTQAI+ folks and their identities and experiences, we are regaled with narratives about the progression and progressiveness of (Western) society, and about tolerance and acceptance. Amongst LGBTTTQAI+ communities, however, there is little consensus that these events are the victories they are presented as in popular media and discourses (Geidner, 2013; Boyd and Young, 2007; Halberstam, 2012; Duggan, 2002; Puar, 2007, 2013). The impulse to pursue LGBTTTQAI+ rights primarily and often exclusively as liberal rights is definitively labeled and critiqued as an assimilationist strategy that alienates many of the most vulnerable folks in our communities (Geidner, 2013; Boyd and Young, 2007; Halberstam, 2012; Puar, 2007, 2013; Cohen, 1997). Discussions around identity politics and the tensions between various approaches to challenging and changing the unequal divisions of power and interlocking systems of oppression that characterize the world we live in are central to this thesis. I do not understand “assimilationist” and “liberatory” approaches to identity politics as existing in direct opposition and tension with one another; instead, I endeavour throughout this thesis to work with and be critical of both approaches.

Many of the discourses in Ontario around the new sexual education curriculum demonstrate not only the continuing presence of homophobia, but also the deep-seated heterosexism in Ontarian society. While much of the media coverage is dedicated to myth-busting around the curriculum and its content (Pickles, 2015; Brown, 2015) there is a significant amount of media online in opposition to the curriculum with several letters of opposition prominently circulating among various communities in Ontario, albeit much of it explicitly and unsurprisingly Conservative (Campaign for Life, 2015; Parents as First Educators, 2015; REAL Women of Canada, 2015). A letter that has been widely circulated across all of these sites as well as numerous others, claims: “Grade 3 (age 8): Homosexuality: normalizing of homosexual family structures and homosexual “marriage” in the minds of 8 year-olds, without regard for the religious/moral beliefs of families” (REAL Women of Canada, 2015). Such a sentiment reflects a prevalent theme among articles that criticize the LGBTTTQAI+ positive content in the sexual education curriculum and that is the notion that the curriculum change is part of an agenda to normalize “homosexuality and transgenderism”. It is paramount to emphasize the way that these discourses are deeply grounded in heterosexism and cisgenderism. One of the four core objectives of this thesis is to challenge and draw attention to the way systems of heteronormativity and heterosexism function in Ontarian society. Thus, I want to emphasize the ways that the discourses about the sex-ed curriculum explicitly work to (re)inscribe heterosexual, cisgender subjectivities as natural and normal. By making claims about how the curriculum changes are promoting Premier Kathleen Wynne’s “lesbian agenda” and are trying to “normalize” “deviant ways of being”, the implication is that there is a natural (heterosexual) order that is being compromised by including

LGBTQAI+ subjectivities as acceptable ways of being among the province's youth. In response to such pervasive heterosexist, transphobic discourses, I want to interrogate heterosexism in this thesis by drawing on excerpts from my interviews with lesbian/gay/queer-identified participants who live in rural or non-urban places in Ontario. As I interpret and analyze the way that participants make sense of heterosexism and homophobia in Ontarian society, and in response to this outrage over the "homosexual agenda", I am focused on a queer rage at the heterosexual agenda (which, unlike a queer agenda, I would argue, substantially exists and threatens our safety/choices/experiences on a daily basis).

I have a clear and political interest in studying lesbianism, LGBTQAI+ communities, people, and sexuality through a queer, feminist framework that is attentive to homonormativity, heterosexism, sexism, ableism, classism, racism, cisgenderism, (trans)misogyny, and myriad other marginalizing and oppressive systems. Even with a narrow focus on lesbianism and lesbian identification in my recruitment material, the participants in my study identify in various ways and our conversations produced data that reflects the experiences of lesbian, queer, gay and women who choose to not identify with any particular label. I would be very interested in conducting similar research on other identities and experiences in the future, and from the offset I want to recognize the limitations of a study that samples only the experiences of white, cisgender women, although I work throughout this thesis to integrate such limitations into my analysis.

I chose to focus my research around lesbianism and space in particular because I noticed that spending time in cities like Ottawa and Toronto, I was having conversations with people who seemed genuinely surprised that I have a vibrant circle of queer friends

in the small town I grew up in. It became apparent to me through such discussions that people living in cities did not think about or even really acknowledge the presence of lesbian/gay/bisexual/trans/queer or other non-heterosexual identified people living outside of urban/suburban centers. As I continued to reflect on this and started to read more about it, I realized that the idea of urban spaces being the natural or best places to live as an LGBTTTQAI+ identified person really dominates the way we think about non-normative sexualities. Recently there has been an influx of popular media stories and attention on LGBTTTQAI+ identified people who live somewhere other than the urban metropolises that otherwise dominate the landscape of all LGBTTTQAI+ representation. From documentaries such as *Small Town Gay Bar* (Smith and Ingram, 2006), to projects like *Country Queers*, an oral history project that documents the “diverse experiences of rural and small-town LGBTQI folks in the U.S.A,” the experiences of non-urban LGBTQ people are becoming part of the conversation around LGBTQ lives and identities, posing a challenges to the idea that rural spaces are intolerant toward LGBTQ people (Garringer, 2014; Halberstam, 2005; Wienke and Hill, 2013). This thesis builds in particular on the work of Emily Kazyack (2011) who notes that while the literature on spatiality and sexuality now increasingly recognizes that non-urban and rural LGBTQ subjects exist, we don’t know a lot about *how* they exist and if their increasingly recognized presence means a shift in how relationships between space and sexuality are perceived.

Research Questions and Thesis Objectives:

My thesis is organized in response to three research questions: How do individuals experience lesbianism? Does space affect individual experiences of lesbianism? Do individuals understand their experiences to be affected by

heteronormativity and homonormativity? The overall objective of this thesis is to provide an interpretation of the way that five lesbians in Ontario make sense of their experiences and identities. Following an increasing number of studies that focus on the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people living in non-urban spaces in Canada (Sullivan, 2009; MacAdam, n/d; Baker, 2012), one of the primary objectives of this thesis is to explore accounts of lesbian lives and experiences that are grounded outside of urban centres in Canada, specifically Ontario. Beyond the general objective of interpreting the way my participants talk about, experience, and make sense of their lesbian identities and lesbianism, this thesis has four primary objectives which I pursue by investigating the three research questions guiding this project. My first two objectives, which I work towards throughout the entire thesis, are: to demonstrate the importance of a continued lesbian specificity and the enduring significance of lesbian identities; and to challenge and draw attention to heteronormativity and heterosexism and the way they function in general, and in Ontario society specifically. The third objective of this thesis, which is the focus of Chapter 2, is to challenge femme invisibility and to thoroughly complicate the notion of femme privilege. The final objective of this thesis is to move beyond the urban/rural binary as a way of making sense of sexuality in relation to space/place.

Although it is widely recognized within lesbian, queer and feminist literature that there is no consistent, universalizing lesbian essence (Butler, 1990, 1993; Fuss, 1989), the reification of lesbianism is pervasive within mainstream culture (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2010; Floyd, 2009; Estes and Lant, 1998; Phelan, 1993, Butler, 1993). I endeavour to maintain an awareness of the need to contextualize all analysis of lesbian identity in accounts of individual lesbians and do this by understanding lesbian identity as

provisional, flexible and undetermined. Throughout this research project, I seek to understand how lesbians make sense of and negotiate cultural understandings of lesbianism while also actively challenging the notion that there is a knowable, enduring and identifiable lesbian essence.

Methodological Framework:

In order to understand how lesbians interpret their identities and experiences and to further explore the how space/location affects participants' understandings of their identities, I conducted five semi-structured interviews using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as my method. My understanding of IPA comes from the growing literature on IPA and phenomenology as a research method established by Smith (2004), Smith, Jarman and Osborn (1999), Smith and Osborn (2003), Finlay (2008), Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006), and Larkin (2013). I envision IPA in two distinct stages to emphasize that in order to narrate their experiences to the researcher, the participant engages in an earlier step of interpreting and making sense of their own experiences. As the researcher attempts to make sense of and interpret the participant's narratives, they are engaging in a second step of interpreting the participant's earlier interpretation. Thus, IPA does not make the real world or everyday experiences of participants accessible through their accounts, but rather facilitates a collaborative process of inter-subjective meaning-making that takes into account that a participant's relationship with a phenomenon and their experiences are deeply embedded in a particular context (Larkin, 2013). The reality of interview research is that both the researcher and participants enter the research relationship from their own distinct perspectives and with their own understanding of the world (Gorman-Murray, Johnston,

and Waitt, 2012). Essentially, IPA requires that the researcher be cognisant of their own preconceptions as well as the active process of interpretation they necessarily engage in as they attempt to both make sense of and analyze the experiences narrated by participants. Throughout this section, I will expand on how these and accompanying elements of IPA as a method make it uniquely suited to conduct queer, feminist research.

I conducted semi-structured interviews following the advice of IPA scholars Smith and Osborn (2003), Finlay (2008), and Brocki and Wearden (2004), all of whom advocate for semi-structured interviewing as the most appropriate method for data collection because of its ability to maintain focus on a specific set of issues while remaining open, flexible and responsive to the particularities of participants. I used an interview guide, which was developed in conjunction with my theoretical framework and research questions to organize my interviews. The interview is not rigidly structured by the interview guide, but is simply aided by the loose structure it is able to provide (Smith and Osborn, 2003, 58). The guide allowed me to establish a rapport with the respondent, to be flexible with the ordering of questions to suit the flow of an interview with a particular participant, to probe interesting areas or topics that arise, and more easily follow the participant's interests and concerns (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Overall, semi-structured interviewing maximizes the ability of the researcher to enter the world of the participant, which is crucial to the aims of IPA research.

Active listening as a feminist practice was central to my interview process. Active listening combines listening and speaking in such a way that makes the participant feel that they are being understood and encourages them to continue sharing and discussing their experiences (Cournoyer, 2008). Instead of silently listening to a participant share

their story, active listening involves paraphrasing the participant's message back to them in a way that aptly captures their message, any factual statements, but also the intensity of the feelings and experiences they are sharing (Cournoyer, 2008). The goal of active listening is to convey to the participant that you are interested in what they are saying and are making a real attempt to understand what they are telling you (Cournoyer, 2008). In the context of IPA where the aim of the interview process is to obtain an understanding of the participant's experiences as they make sense of them, active listening is a valuable tool and also facilitates an important element of IPA: an openness toward the participant's stories and sense-making. It is crucial in IPA to actively engage with what and how the participant says what they say instead of assuming that their experiences fall into common narrative patterns or that they are reiterative of something the researcher already knows or has heard from other participants. Active listening was instrumental to my semi-structured interview process. Based on my interview process for this project, active listening techniques were effective in interviews with participants who are less familiar with the research process or who might feel as if they need to search for a "correct" or ideal answer to the questions being asked. I found that affirming what the participant was saying and paraphrasing interesting comments back to the participant was an effective probing technique. Often participants would expand on an answer or go further into a thought once I engaged with what they were saying and I felt more confident that I was understanding correctly what the participant was saying once I paraphrased back to them and received confirmation.

I enjoyed the interview process because it was exciting to have discussions around identity, sexuality, small towns and communities with my participants, who offered such

interesting and thoughtful responses. During the process of conducting and transcribing the interviews, I reflected extensively on the way I structured my questions and my approach to drafting my interview guide. Of course, after having now conducted these five interviews, there are many aspects of the research process that I would approach differently, such as: structuring the flow of my questions less thematically; allowing for a slower pace, making space for more silences and pauses throughout the interview; and offering more prompts/probing comments to participants instead of jumping to the next question. I appreciated that the flexibility of semi-structuring interviewing allowed me to easily re-phrase or ask follow-up questions when moments of misunderstanding occurred during an interview. I got the impression during the interviews that the semi-structured, open nature of my research process may have been slightly unexpected. It's possible that participants may have been expecting a more structured interview process and that I was looking for particular answers as we moved through the interview guide. It can be challenging to be put on the spot as an interview participant, as one of my participants remarked early on in our interview:

C: Um, yeah I had so many good ideas, but it's like you phoned, and now you feel like you're on the spot!

As I analyzed the interview transcripts, I spent time reflecting on strategies that may make participants feel less like they are being put on the spot and for cultivating a more conversational tone to my future interviews. Thinking back on my interviews, and with reference to my reflexive research journal (RRJ), I felt like I was able to connect more and achieve more of a conversational flow with certain participants. My interpretation of the way the tone of the interviews differed between participants is based on several factors including how close in age participants were to me, their past participation in

similar research processes or with conducting their own research, a sense of shared experiences between us, and also the interview environment. The interviews that flowed the most easily took place in the participant's homes where it was quiet and the participant was comfortable. The interviews that flowed less well were either conducted on the phone or in a more public location, such as a coffee shop or a library.

My interview with C was the one interview not conducted in person and the experience of conducting an interview over the phone was distinct. While we did not experience technological issues as we began the interview, the program I was using to record our conversation stopped working four minutes into our interview and I had to pause the interview to switch recording methods. The recording issue only took me a couple of minutes to fix, but as a result I did not have data from the first four minutes of our interview and the initial flow of our interview was disrupted. Later in the interview, we paused again so my participant could put on headphones to hear me more easily, and at several points I had to repeat a question several times before the participant was able to clearly hear it. As a researcher, I felt awkward about not being able to do anything to effectively improve the quality of our interview and as a result of that, I slightly rephrased or summarized questions after having repeated them several times, which further altered the flow of our interview.

Although there were issues with the phone interview, which I expand on in the next section, conducting interviews over the phone could be an effective and preferred choice for researchers and participants who struggle with anxiety, depression, and many other issues.

As was my objective when I decided to keep a RRJ and to situate my project

within a feminist/queer methodological approach, I reflected thoroughly on my role as a researcher and grad student and how I affect the research process in ways that I am not explicitly aware of, beyond the direct ways in which my decision to pursue this research places the topics at hand in focus. In particular, I wrote a lot about how my own personal experiences and mental health issues affect the way I think about and approach this project. In my RRJ, I focused on a moment of realization I had around one particular question from my interview guide: “What makes particular spaces feel more comfortable and safe for you?” It seemed natural to me to include questions around feeling un/safe in public spaces, but this question did not seem to resonate with my participants. Of the four responses¹ to this question, I got the impression that two participants were taken aback by the question, responding: “... I mean, I don't often think a lot about it” and “Um, I'm not really sure how to answer that.” In each of these interviews I asked follow up questions, and we moved toward discussions around heterosexism/homophobia/lesbophobia in Canada. Following the interviews and during transcription, however, I continued to think about that question and how it was almost difficult for me to believe that my participants feel secure and safe most of the time. This was a particularly helpful moment to be keeping a RRJ because I was able to become conscious of how my own experiences inform the responses I expect to receive to certain questions, as well as the way I interpret participant's responses. I think this makes an important point about how the experiences, identities, and subjectivities of researchers inevitably shape the research process. Ultimately, my reflections on this question led me to consider how this research process may have been different if an “able-minded” researcher had overseen it.

¹ My interview with L had a different flow than the other four interviews, and this question was not asked as such during that interview

I began a search for resources on researching and mental health issues or the a/effects of mental health struggles on the research process, but my initial search results gave a strong impression that there are simply no researchers with mental health issues. What I did find is that there is a growing focus on the role/effect of emotions in research within feminist methodological studies. Campbell (2001) emphasizes that there are few researchers who will admit that their research affects their emotions, or that their emotions might affect their research (Blakely, 2007). Campbell (2001) and Blakely (2007) attribute social scientists' commitment to positivist research methods and the myth that an objective, value-free, truth seeking research exists. Campbell and Wasco (2000) note that traditionally, social science is "supposed to be about thinking, not feeling" (787). However, this is a fundamental assumption that postmodern feminist methodologies seek to dismantle and a project I seek to contribute to in this thesis (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Feelings are a natural part of inquiry that inevitably shape the research process and must be recognized as such (Campbell, 2001; Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Taking up Campbell's (2001) notion of researching the researcher, Blakely (2007) emphasizes that researching the researcher and the emotional affects of research is a valuable methodological tool for feminist scholars. I want to emphasize the importance of interrogating and including feelings as part of this research project as I continue to explore how to integrate feelings and my subjectivity as a researcher more transparently into my research process.

However, while it is important to focus on how I am affected by the research process, what kinds of emotions it evokes for me and how it affects me, but also on how I affect it in the same kind of sense- how does my cptsd, my history of anxiety and

depression, affect the research process and the way I approach a particular topic/issue/interview/research process? Why are people with anxiety/depression/mental health issues confined exclusively as the subjects, and never the producers, of research? Or really, only ever as objects of research and never as subjects who are capable of research? It's ironic for me, an "out" lesbian conducting research on lesbianism, heterosexism, and coming out narratives, that while it is okay or even advantageous for me to be a lesbian researcher, it seems to be expected that I remain in the closet about my mental health issues. It is unsurprising that there is very little academic focus on researcher's mental health given the continued dominance of positivistic research methods in the social sciences. It seems that for proponents of feminist, queer, and other critical methodologies who are committed to challenging such positivist thinking, exploring the ways researcher's mental health, affect and emotions impact the research process would prove to be a valuable methodological tool (Blakely, 2007; Campbell, 2001). Working toward what Campbell (2001) terms "emotionally engaged research" within feminist methodologies is one strategy Blakely (2007) suggests as a feminist methodological strategy. Emotionally engaged research is driven by an ethic of caring, caring meaning, in this context "an emotional connection and concern for an issue, person, or persons" (Blakely, 2007, 4; Campbell, 2001). The process of emotionally engaged research requires a thorough re-consideration of one's responsibility as a researcher (Blakely, 2007) in a way that is reminiscent of Tuhiwai-Smith's (2012) insights in "Decolonizing Methodologies" and aligned with the methodological framework of this thesis.

Following the completion of the interview process, I transcribed each interview

using NVivo and then proceeded with data analysis, focusing on only one transcript at a time in order to conduct a complete and thorough analysis of that transcript (Smith and Osborn, 2003). The way that data is analyzed and understood is through a process of coding, and in IPA coding takes the form of making detailed notes on the transcripts, asking phenomenological questions of the data, and identifying objects of interest (Larkin, 2013). In IPA, coding involves a close line by line analysis of the claims, understandings and concerns of participants which the researcher codes by focusing on objects, relationships, concepts or processes that seem to be significant to the participant, what the meaning of those things is for the participant, and the ways that the participant's relationship to those things could be characterized (Larkin, 2013). This process requires a meticulous attention to detail and a sharp focus on the experiences and experiential claims of the participant (Larkin, 2013). It is important that, to the greatest extent possible, the researcher continually ground their interpretation in the words of participants, relying on the way that they explain and make sense of events rather than relying on the researcher's assumptions or instincts (Smith, 1996; Smith and Osborn, 2003). Each theme that a researcher produces during data analysis typically represents a pattern of meaning within the coding of the data (Larkin, 2013). Throughout my process of data analysis, I worked to follow the process established by Smith (1996), Smith and Osborn (2003) and Larkin (2013). This process involves not only asking interpretive questions of the data and the participant's experiential accounts, but also of the use of reflection, metaphor, and genre in the participant's accounts (Larkin, 2013). At this point, I moved from analysis toward evaluating my emerging data to ensure that it answers my research questions, to ensure that it was sufficiently interpretive, that the interpretive

account develops from a phenomenological core, and that the structure I cultivated was clear and meaningful (Larkin, 2013).

Conducting research on issues such as gender and sexuality is complicated because the identities and concepts involved are complex and dynamic; however, I selected IPA as the method for this thesis because it is well suited to actualize my objectives, and because the design of IPA as well as discussions around it harmonize with and respond to many discussions and concerns within feminist and queer methodologies. Within the traditions of IPA as a method and queer and feminist methodological concerns, reflexivity is taken up as a crucial component of a critical research process. Reflexivity is a longstanding tool of feminist and queer movements, and involves a researcher being aware of their own subject position, their positionality in relation to their participant, and how these might interact (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt, 2012). The notion of reflexivity requires a researcher to engage in a thoughtful, self-aware evaluation of the inter-subjective dynamics between themselves and their participants in a process of critical self-reflection on how a researcher's background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact the research process (Finlay, 2008, 3). While reflection involves thinking about something after the event has taken place, reflexivity aims to capture a more immediate, dynamic self-awareness (Finlay, 2008, 3).

Within the literature on IPA, reflexivity is introduced as a key concept that some scholars, including Finlay (2008), use as a way to operationalize the phenomenological reduction. The reduction is a self-meditative process wherein the philosopher brackets the natural world and the world of interpretation in order to embrace the phenomenon in its essence (Finlay, 2008, 2). In IPA, bracketing is not simply suspending the researcher's

presuppositions; rather, it is a process where the researcher is open to be moved by a participant's account and the evolving understandings of the researcher are managed in a relational context (Finlay, 2008, 3). The process of bracketing is often misunderstood as a process wherein the researcher is striving to achieve objectivity, distance or detachment (Finlay, 2008; Giorgio, 1997). However, the literature on IPA actively recognizes the researcher as being involved, interested and open to what may appear in the research process (Finlay, 2008, 3). Ultimately, the phenomenological reduction requires that the researcher becomes aware of their horizons of meaning, which means they need to be cognizant of their "range of vision" or the scope of their particular vantage point (Finlay, 2008, 9). Finlay (2008) provides an interpretation of how the phenomenological reduction fits into the framework of IPA as a method, suggesting that critical reflexivity can serve the function of the phenomenological reduction in the research process, making reflexivity a central tenet of IPA. While the reduction has been interpreted in various ways as a philosophical method, in terms of the process for IPA, it is interpreted as a need to engage in a phenomenological reduction to ensure the researcher's openness to whatever may emerge throughout the research process (Finlay, 2008, 3).

In developing my own reflexive approach in this thesis, I look to Gadamar's (1975) work on the "phenomenological stance", which articulates a concept of openness that I integrated into my framework. For Gadamar (1975), openness involves situating other meanings in relation to our own meanings and also situating ourselves in relation to other meanings (Finlay, 2008, 9). While this acknowledgement does not render the researcher neutral or objective, it allows the researcher to be cognizant of one's own

position and prejudices so that the account is able to be understood as an alternative albeit equal account against and distinct from one's own perspective (Findlay, 2008, 9). Within this approach there is an understanding that meanings are never fixed and are always emergent, contextual and historical (Findlay, 2008, 9). Thus, while one function of the phenomenological reduction is to demand openness and reflexivity in IPA, as Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. xiv, cited in Findlay, 2008) notes, "the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (10). The standard in IPA research is that there cannot be a complete reduction, meaning that a stance of objectivity or neutrality is impossible and undesirable to achieve. IPA encourages researchers to address the inevitable bearing their subjectivity has on their research process (Finlay, 2008). Considering that a commitment to challenging the guise of neutrality and objectivity in traditional research processes and an engagement with the need to locate the researcher within the research process are central to feminist and queer methodological considerations (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt, 2012; Sprague, 2005), IPA addresses some of the central queer and feminist methodological concerns.

Reflexive journaling is an important tool in feminist, queer, and phenomenological methods because it allows the researcher to continually reflect on their biases and preconceptions in order to remain as open as possible to the experiences and accounts brought by participants to interviews. In order to be able to engage thoroughly with the participant's narratives and in the interests of conducting detailed and nuanced analysis, I kept a reflexive research journal for the duration of my research process. To perform the level of data analysis that IPA demands, all of my interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. However, I took into account that the audio recording will not

reflect non-verbal aspects of the interview such as body language or the tone of social interaction; keeping a research diary provided me with additional information to consider during my process of data analysis (Nadin and Cassell, 2006; Held, 2009). The use of a research journal is helpful for IPA research because the researcher will be reminded of how they approached the interview and perceived the participant's experiences during data analysis. A reflexive research journal also encourages reflexivity throughout the research process, which I recognize as an important tenant of IPA as a method (Findlay, 2008; Smith, 2004) and also an important element of queer and feminist methodologies.

Within feminist and queer methodologies and within the literature on IPA, insider/outsider dynamics in research remain a highly relevant discussion. While earlier feminist and critical researchers embraced insider status as a strategy that was attentive to group dynamics, community needs, and that was more accountable to those who take part in its production, more recent scholarship has taken a more tempered approach to insider identification (Sprague, 2005, 62-63). More recently however, there is concern among queer and feminist scholars that a simplistic understanding of insider/outsider dynamics may result in the privileging of one particular aspect of both the researcher and participant's subjectivities over all other aspects (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt, 2012, 100-101). The risks and consequences of this stem from the reality that even among those who share insider status within a particular category, vast differences in experiences and power remain. Given that insider status provides greater access to communities, helps to establish participant's trust in a researcher, and can generally legitimize the presence of a researcher in particular spaces and projects, the way we understand and claim insider status must be carefully understood. As with other

dualisms, the insider/outsider binary misleadingly establishes two separate categories of researchers- those who share salient traits with their participants and those who do not (Sprague, 2005, 64). Recognizing that the subjectivities of both researchers and participants are complex and cannot be reduced to any one identity, the idea of claiming insider status becomes very complicated (Sprague, 2005). As a white, cisgender, Canadian-born lesbian who grew up in a working class family, I share a same sexual orientation with some participants, but otherwise I assume that I share few experiences or other identifications with many of them. Furthermore, when participants share information with a researcher based on their shared identifications there is a likelihood that both participant and researcher will rely on taken for granted assumptions that they assume they are both privy to by virtue of shared membership in a community (Sprague, 2005). The result of this kind of insider sharing is that practices or experiences that appear obvious during the interview are not fully explained and the systems of references and jargon are assumed to be understood in the same way by participant and researcher, when in reality that may not be the case and therefore insider sharing can result in overlooking possible nuance in the research (Sprague, 2005). Thus, while it has been constructed as intuitive that researchers with insider status have automatic advantages, communication can actually be just as effective in instances of difference because both researcher and participants may more thoroughly and more carefully work through their multiple, differing subjectivities (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt, 2012, 106).

The need to complicate conceptualizations of participant and researcher's subjectivities and the subject/object division is also taken up within the literature on IPA. One of the major contributions of phenomenological thought to my methodological

framework is a rejection of the Cartesian division between subject/object as two independent entities that relate to each other (Giorgio, 1997). Within phenomenological thought, the subject/object relationship must be understood structurally and holistically, which meshes with feminist and queer concerns around the way subjects and objects are constructed in the research process. Along these lines, Held (2009) discusses the need to take into account the way different aspects of a researcher's subjectivity determine the way they access and interpret spaces while simultaneously limiting the scope of their research through unacknowledged biases and tendencies. Held (2009) shows that while a researcher may have increased access to spaces (such as dance clubs, bars, community spaces, social networks, parties) that allow them to conduct their research and that would be less easily accessed by a heterosexual researcher, they will not necessarily be aware of all of the dynamics and issues happening in that space and even to the extent that they are aware of certain things, their accounts of it will be interpreted through their identifications (as white, classed, etc.) and it is important to be just as aware of differences and the assumptions and biases that are operating on the part of the researcher. Throughout my research process, I made an effort to acknowledge that I will always simultaneously be an insider and an outsider and I actively tried to reflect on this in my reflexive journals (104).

I look to Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt's (2012) queer re-imagination of insider/outsider dynamics in spatial terms as a way of integrating a critical reflexivity and consideration of differing subjectivities at the core of my focus. Furthermore, I regard the folks who volunteered to participate in my interview process as co-researchers who are sharing valuable and often personal information and narratives with me instead of

simply as participants from whom I am extracting information within specific parameters (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt, 2012). Scholarship in queer methodologies is attentive not only to spatiality in terms of locating subjectivities and considering the positionality of everyone involved in the research process, but also to spatiality in terms of how and where stories are shared and perhaps most significantly which stories aren't shared (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt, 2012). It is important to be attentive to absence and concealment because often what is not shared and what is not easily articulated are some of the most significant experiences (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt, 2012). If a researcher is able to understand why certain experiences or issues remain concealed, then there is an increased possibility that those issues can begin to be addressed. For example, in this project I am attentive to the absence of discussions around whiteness/race, cisgenderism, ableism, and homophobia/lesbophobia.

Maintaining an awareness of the phenomenological attitude itself guided my feminist, queer research process. Phenomenological research is not about attaining the purest account of a participant's experiences, but rather is about doing the most sensitive and responsive job of understanding participants' experiences as is possible (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2008, 108). One of the tenets of phenomenological work is that it engages with the phenomenological stance or attitude. My interpretation of the phenomenological attitude is one of empathic openness and reflexivity that requires that researchers to become thoroughly and thoughtfully involved in the research process (Findlay, 2008, 10). This phenomenological attitude, as outlined by Findlay (2008) and Giorgio (1997), needs to be demonstrated throughout the entire research process in order for research to be phenomenological. Thus, an IPA interview process requires the

researcher to be open to the phenomenon at hand and to be ready to interact with it in a fresh way (Findlay, 2008, 12). Engaging with an empathic, wondrous and open attitude involves an intense kind of care that demands that researchers appreciate participants' check all plural apostrophes – and check the rules descriptions of situations and also work to remain free of value judgement and external frames of reference (Findlay, 2008, 16). Researchers need to stay open toward the participant's story, even if it seems familiar or like it is a reiteration of a commonly heard theme or narrative pattern (Findlay, 2008, 18). The researcher must remain open to the possibility that the experiences in the interview process can shift their orientation and to allow them to understand and experience things in new ways (Findlay, 2008, 12).

Methods:

After obtaining approval from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board, I recruited a purposive sample of five lesbian identified individuals who have spent a minimum of five years living in a non-urban setting in Canada. I circulated the approved recruitment text by e-mail to my personal contacts, at PTS in Ottawa, on the r/actuallesbians, r/trans, and r/LGBT sub-reddits on Reddit and on Facebook where my post was shared by a few of my friends, as well as on two LGBT Facebook specific to two regions of Ontario. As I received e-mail responses, I followed up by sending participants relevant information about the study including the recruitment text and the consent form, which clearly established the scope of this project, the requirements of participation, and important information on anonymity and the ability to participate and withdraw from the research process at the participant's discretion. If participants were still interested, we set up a time and place to conduct the interview that was most

convenient for the participant. The resulting five participants ranged all identified primarily as lesbian, but also identified as queer and gay identified. They are all white, cisgender women. The participants ranged in age from 26 – 48, come from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and have spent time living in locations ranging from sparse farming communities to small towns and larger cities. All of the participants signed the consent form before the interview began and agreed to have the interview audio recorded.

There were several factors that I felt significantly affected the way my interviews went. Location was a major factor that was largely dependent on the individual participant. Three of the interviews took place in person in downtown Ottawa, two took place in a small town in South-western Ontario, and one took place over the phone. I met with two of the participants at their house at their request and I found that having a private, quiet environment in which the participants were comfortable resulted in interviews that were easy to transcribe and also that seemed more comfortable and friendly. Of my two other interviews that were conducted in person, one took place in a coffee shop downtown Ottawa and the other in a downtown library. The coffee shop interview was my first and I felt it was an okay location because I was able to easily locate and meet with the participant, we developed a friendly rapport, and while there was some background noise it was not very busy and we both felt we had enough privacy to comfortably conduct the interview. The interview at the library, however, started at a coffee shop where I met with the participant because it was a convenient location for both of us. However, as we met and started talking we both agreed that the shop was a bit too busy and loud to comfortably conduct the interview and we walked to a nearby library to

proceed. This disruption in the interview meant that the participant and I spent a few minutes walking together and discussing our lives and the interview topic before we actually started the interview. In some ways I think this was helpful because it allowed us to become more comfortable with one another before the interview and also because I think it made it clear to the participant that it was important to me to ensure she felt comfortable participating and that I would work to accommodate her. The interview that took place over the phone was by far the most challenging interview because of technical issues and also because the participant and I sometimes had difficulty hearing each other. During my data analysis, I coded for “miscommunications” or moments where participants either did not understand the question I was trying to ask or, only in the case of this interview, I had to ask questions repeatedly because the participant was not able to hear them properly due to the quality of our phone connection. I think that our ability to discuss some of the topics more in-depth was limited in the phone interview because we had to clarify things or things were rephrased when they needed to be repeated. Furthermore, we were not able to establish the same level of ease in the way I talked with other participants because we were limited in our ability to connect over the phone. On a different level, I think that phone interviews could be effective for researchers or participants who live with anxiety or similar issues because each person can be in a place they feel comfortable.

Another issue I encountered in my interviews is reflected in a particular moment where a participant interpreted a question in a way that I did not anticipate or feel comfortable with. In response to a question that I intended to be an intersectionality question, L and I had the following exchange:

L: [D:and do you think that your experiences um in terms of your sexuality have been influenced

by other factors about your life?] No, I was not abused as a child.. [D: Oh okay- I didn't, I more meant your gender/race/class/ability...] Um, nope. I can't say that.. there are six kids in my family and we were all brought up the same way.]

I had not considered the possibility of a participant interpreting a question in that way. In my reflexive journal for that interview, I noted that I probably was not following IPA guidelines by clarifying the intention of my question and not allowing the participant to continue the question as she had interpreted it. However, in that moment it was more important to me that I clarify that I did not intend to pathologize the participant's identity or imply that she has likely experienced trauma because of her identity. In other cases, participants took questions in very different directions than I had imagined potential answers going or than I had in mind when I wrote the questions and that was interesting and exciting to see. However, in this case I felt that her interpretation of my question changed the tone of the interview and potentially made the interview seem like an unsafe space- a project on lesbianism and trauma would have a very different tone, framework and considerations than the project at hand and I felt it was important for me to acknowledge that.

Outline of Thesis:

At this point I have introduced the research questions and objectives that frame my analysis, as well as why it remains important to focus on the intersection of space and sexuality as well as the need to examine lesbians' accounts of their experiences living in non-urban, rural and small town spaces. In Chapter 1 I outline the theoretical framework for this project, focusing on concepts from lesbian theories and queer theories and specifically the way I conceptualize and approach lesbianism, lesbian identities and

histories, sexual identities in general, identity politics, queer theories, and queer/feminist geography and rural LGBTQ studies. In Chapters 2 and 3, I analyze and discuss themes that emerge from the five interviews I conducted with lesbian/queer/gay identified women. Chapter 2 focuses on themes of “being” a lesbian, behavioural and appearance norms of lesbianism, and femme invisibility/privilege. Chapter 3 explores themes around spatiality and how participants make sense of and talk about urban, rural, and small town spaces differently, as well as coming out discourses and white homonormativity. The concluding chapter provides a reflection on this research process, a summary of findings and considerations, as well as possibilities for future analysis.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework and relevant literature

Theories of Sexuality:

Halberstam (2008) suggests that instead of envisioning labels/categories (lesbian, gay, queer) as signifiers or identities, they might be more usefully imagined as vessels that serve a temporary political purpose in particular contexts – not defining, but taken up at a specific point for a specific purpose. Throughout this thesis I endeavour to envision ‘lesbian’ in this way, not only because I am interested in exploring ways of opening up or queering ‘lesbian’, but also because this conceptualization is better able to reflect what I interpret as the way my participants often make sense of the identity or label ‘lesbian’ in their lives.

The fluctuation between self-descriptive identity terms (lesbian/gay/queer) suggests that the meanings or definitions of these terms is not clear or fixed, and also contributes to the project of queering identity categories by blurring the distinctions between these terms while emphasizing their lack of definitional substance and coherency (Halberstam, 2005; Stein, 1993; Gordon, 2006). None of the participants I interviewed indicated that they always (or even often) identify as lesbians. One participant does not identify with any particular label, one expressed explicit issues with the term ‘lesbian’, and three indicated that for fluctuating and sometimes no particular reason, they identify as lesbian, gay and/or queer. Although queer is intentionally ambiguous, both lesbian and gay as categories are ambiguous in different ways, and that can be taken up as a strategy of subversion and resistance in a queer project. Embracing ambiguity even further, it is also important to consider the possibilities that come from the act of refusing identity categories altogether. I will explore to what extent these

strategies are reflected in my conversations with participants, and with the participant who does not identify with any label in particular.

The framework guiding my approach to studying lesbianism embraces the fluidity and openness of any potential meanings attached to lesbian/lesbianism, meaning that I regard these terms as signs that are given meaning contextually rather than as terms that represent specific and enduring meanings as knowable entities (Butler, 1993; Stein, 1993; Halberstam, 1996). In terms of the acronyms that I make use of in this thesis, depending on the context, I use LGBTTQAI+ to refer to an inclusive community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, two spirit, queer, asexual/aromantic, and intersex folks. I sometimes deliberately use LG (lesbian, gay) to refer to mainstream, assimilationist social/political movements in North America. While the distinction between these two acronyms is often LGBTTQAI+ (or queer) versus LGBT, it is important to be conscious of the ongoing exclusion of bisexual, trans folks, and people of colour within mainstream LG movements and communities (Cohen 1997; Puar, 2007, 2013; Serano, 2007). I recognize that there are limitations and issues with any formulation of acronyms, including the use of queer as an umbrella term for our diverse communities. One of the limitations of this thesis is its lack of focus on marginalized queer bodies, including more analysis on LGBTTQAI+ people of colour, trans and intersex folks, ableism and disability.

Lesbian Theories:

While this project is interdisciplinary and seeks to bridge several approaches to understanding sexual identities, it is situated within lesbian, queer, and feminist theories.

My theoretical framework draws on queer geography and rural LGBTTTQAI+ studies, privilege studies, as well as queer, lesbian and feminist literature on homophobia/lesbophobia, heterosexism/heterosexualism, and homonormativity. Given that my overall objective is to understand the way heterosexism, homonormativity, and spatiality affect the way lesbian identified people make sense of their identities, I require a theoretical framework that can facilitate an analysis of these concepts that engages elements of queerness while maintaining an attentiveness to the significance and functions of the category of lesbian. To develop this framework, I draw from lesbian theories, lesbian feminist histories and writing, as well as queer and poststructuralist/postmodernist critiques and theories to achieve an approach that is flexible, reflexive, malleable, and attentive to context, history, and silences. Lesbian theories are made up of a diverse body of literature that spans psychology, biology, sociology, history, feminist studies, queer studies, and literary studies (Butler, 1993; Coyote and Sharman, 2011; Held, 2009; Huxley, 2013; Stein, 1993). In order to engage with its interdisciplinary nature, my approach to studying lesbianism and lesbian identified people involves assuming an open and constantly developing understanding of lesbianism and lesbian identity, based not only on academic literature and studies around lesbianism, but also on lesbian poetry, fiction, graphic novels, and media that addresses lesbian identity, my experiences living as a lesbian, and my understanding of heterosexism, homonormativity, and other related concepts. I have no interest in a theoretical framework that offers a stable understanding of what lesbianism is or what it means to be a lesbian.

I made a deliberate choice to focus on lesbianism because of my experiences living as a lesbian identified person, which undoubtedly shape this project. Beyond my

personal identity as a lesbian, I look to scholars like Malinowitz (1996) who make compelling arguments for a continued and specific focus on lesbianism. Malinowitz's (1996) observations seem to reflect the sentiments of many of my participants, who do not consider their lesbianism to be a significant part of their self: "to privilege sexuality as such a fundamental marker of selfhood is ultimately as arbitrary and misguided ... as to assert that one's being is defined by the quality of being a non-smoker or a cross-country skier" (263). Malinowitz (1996) argues that it is unclear why people choose to identify themselves with certain terms and what they hope to signify by choosing that term if the conditions signified by that word are not shared or commonly understood generally or even among the people who use it (Malinowitz, 1996). Embracing the instability of the category of lesbian and that there is no unified, common, identifiable basis that clearly defines who may claim membership within that category allows for the sign "lesbian" to be used in a variety of contexts to signify different things (Malinowitz, 1996). The reason that lesbian, as a term or category, retains its utility despite seemingly limitless flexibility (arguably to the point of non-existence or non-utility) is that it remains connected to a vibrant and important history, archive of usages, connotations, representations and discourses that can provide various functions, including facilitating self and community development. Thus, while Malinowitz (1996) interrogates the category of lesbian, she also emphasizes its enduring importance by noting that:

"Membership in the category has at various points throughout the twentieth century meant risking police raids and imprisonment, street violence, incarceration in mental institutions, expulsion from jobs, families, and religious institutions, loss of child custody, dishonorable discharge from the military... what happens when we attempt to dissolve it?" (264).

While published almost two decades ago, this is certainly still relevant in Canada today. Stein (1993) and Rich (1980) provide analysis of lesbian histories that emphasize the struggles and risks associated with lesbianism and being known as a lesbian at times in recent history. The comprehensive reviews of sexual dissidence and the marginalization/persecution of LGBTTQAI+ people provided by Stein (1993), Malinowitz (1996), Inness (1997), Kinsman and Gentile (2010), Warner (2002) and Kinsman (2000) further demonstrate the continuing occupation of a category of lesbian despite the risks, punishment, or threats associated with being a lesbian.

While I recognize the many critiques of Rich's (1980) "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," it establishes important analysis on heteronormativity, heterosexism and lesbian in/visibility that I seek to extend in this thesis. Rich (1980) is concerned both with the invalidation of lesbianism and a total neglect of lesbianism in a range of writing, including feminist scholarship, which encompasses the failure to interrogate the pervasive assumption of women's compulsory heterosexuality. Rich suggests that there is a lack of recognition of heterosexuality as a preference or orientation instead of the normal/innate way of being because it leads to a consideration of how heterosexuality has been "imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force" onto women (1980, 648). Rich (1980) calls for heterosexuality to be examined and interrogated as the system of institutionalized oppression it is. Lesbianism or lesbian existence, for Rich (1980), represents both the breaking of a taboo and a rejection of a compulsory way of life because lesbian existence has been forcibly denied, criminalized and punished, erased and destroyed throughout history. Because of this, lesbians lack access to lesbian histories, traditions, or continuity

(Rich, 1980). Rich (1980) visibilizes the deeply engrained cultural impulse to assume that women are naturally heterosexual or that they are naturally drawn toward men. I seek to extend Rich's (1980) analysis as I interpret my participant's sense-making activities and explore themes of heterosexism and lesbian/femme in/visibility in Chapter 2.

Another contribution of lesbian theory to my theoretical framework works alongside many of the concepts I draw from queer theories in this theoretical framework. I draw on the work of Wittig and Crowder's (2007) analysis on Wittig's work to establish what I see as part of the revolutionary potential of lesbianism. Wittig theorizes that lesbians exist outside the male/female binary and challenge not only the gender binary, but the concepts of gender and sex themselves (Crowder, 2007). Crowder (2007) explains that:

“For Wittig, not only gender but also the very categories of sex themselves at all levels — physical, social, psychological — are constructed by a totalitarian regime of heterosexuality. This regime forces, in many instances literally under pain of death, the division of humanity into two and only two sexes/genders through the daily repetition of mental and physical acts.” (Crowder, 2007, 491). (Wittig, 1982, *The Category of Sex*).

While queer theories on heterosexism are central to my project, lesbian theories contribute to my working understanding of these concepts. According to Wittig, lesbians disrupt the system of heterosexuality because they refuse to become or to stay heterosexual (Crowder, 2007, 492; Wittig, 1982). In this sense, lesbians are able to escape from the confines of their gender and, ideally, from male domination (Crowder, 2007, 492). Wittig envisions lesbians' continual rejection of compulsory heterosexuality and the heterosexual regime as a series of repeated daily actions that construct lesbians as “not-women and not men” (Crowder, 2007, 492). In their refusal to become or to remain women, lesbians are considered monstrous by a society that is organized around the

belief that there is nothing outside of the male/female binary (Crowder, 2007, 493). In this sense, lesbians are already quite queer – queer meaning, in this sense, unthinkable - a challenge to normalcy and naturality (Crowder, 2007, 493). I think that Wittig and Crowder’s analysis holds important possibilities for locating a sense of an empowerment or resistance in lesbian existence, even if that existence is, at times, invisible. Crowder (2007) elaborates on the potential of ‘lesbian’, noting that the lesbian body has the ability to show the “separation, multiplicity, contradiction, and fragmentation of lesbian identity into a thousand possible combinations” instead of simply illustrating a single notion of “the lesbian,” (494).

Bolsø (2008) takes up Wittig’s notion of the lesbian as existing outside the male/female binary as she seeks to investigate power and sexual desire in lesbian relationships and elaborates on a notion of lesbian specificity that accounts for the reality that lesbianism is necessarily constituted by/within heteronormative society while remaining distinguishable from heterosexuality (50). Bolsø’s (2008) analysis on whether or not there is “an ontological effect of visualizing lesbian existence in terms of lesbian desire through a socio-erotic specification” and whether theories around lesbianism affect the way culture produces and perpetuates the naturalization of heterosexuality and male/female difference are very relevant; however, it is important to note that her theorizing tends to ignore the existence of bisexual, queer, pansexual or other women, whose attraction to men and other non-women identified folks would, under this model, be erased and subsumed by their attraction to with women (59).

Bolsø (2008) draws on Søndergaard’s (1999) concept of “discursive essentialism” to articulate that while “lesbian specificity” does not exist as such, we are required to

“speak a phenomenon into existence” by establishing boundaries, and naming a core and a periphery (51). The process of discursive essentialism will inevitably result in the exclusion of possible meanings and experiences; however, this can be mediated by recognizing the fluidity, constructed-ness and situated-ness of any definition of the essential, including any definition of lesbianism (Bolsø, 2008; Søndergaard, 1999). Bolsø (2008) argues for the utility of lesbian specificity by emphasizing that a specificity allows the possibility and reality of lesbian existence and lesbian presence. Historically and continually, lesbianism or women’s desire for and attraction toward other women has been erased and ignored, in many cases to the extent that it is not even acknowledged as something that exists and thus requires prohibition. Bolsø (2008) provides the example of the Norwegian parliament criminalizing male homosexuality in 1902, yet not criminalizing female homosexuality because it remained an unthinkable phenomenon (59; Lambie, 2009; Crompton, 1981).

Bolsø (2008) argues that lesbian specificity has the potential for a queer, subversive ontological effect as a practice that exists beyond hegemonic discourses. Lesbian specificity is a way to put masculinity into play between women and an expression that women do not (only) desire men, that sexual desire itself may be a directing force in a woman’s life, and that sex is about pleasure not procreation (Bolsø, 2008, 63). Bolsø’s (2008) arguments are significant for the way they position lesbian specificity outside of dominant discourses around sexuality and certainly outside normative romantic discourses. Lesbians are women who exist as sexually autonomous subjects in a culture where women are constructed as objects for men’s active desire (Bolsø, 2008). In this way, lesbians exist between, beyond, and in tension with

discourses of masculinity and femininity, reflecting Wittig's (1982) arguments around how lesbians exist outside both the male/female binary and the category of women (Bolsø, 2008). Bolsø (2008) substantiates the claim that lesbians exist outside of the heterosexual/homosexual binary by arguing that lesbians cannot possibly be understood as "natural women" because they do not have sex with men, they use masculine strategies for "picking up women for sex", they perform sex in a way that does not potentially result in motherhood, "they are sexually serviced by women", and have sex with women (64). Bolsø (2008) posits that one cannot do all of those things and continue to exist within the social construct of woman-ness. In making this argument, Bolsø (2008) draws on Wittig (1996, 148), who posits that 'woman' derives its meaning within heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems and given that, lesbians cannot be said to be "women who have sex with women" because they cannot be said to be women (64). Both Bolsø (2008) and Wittig (1992) make a convincing case for the argument that, theoretically, "lesbians are not women" (Wittig, 1992). Such a claim is not made with the intent of underhandedly denying lesbians a place within the category of women nor to undermine any lesbian's identity as a woman, but rather as a theoretical strategy with the potential to free lesbians of the confines of the binaristic and regulatory constructed categories of homosexual and woman. Both Wittig's (1982, 1992) and Bolsø's (2008) analyses open up the category of lesbian in a way that makes space for folks who identify as non-binary or outside of gender constructs to also identify as lesbians and may also allow cisgender female lesbians to re-imagine the way they occupy or relate to the category of women. I often find the way lesbianism is discussed as relations between "women" or as "female/female" to be constraining, not only because it has and continues

to marginalize non-binary, agender, trans folks, but also because such a discussion does not necessarily challenge the naturalized, heteronormative terms that characterize the way we are taught to understand sex and gender. A conceptualization of lesbianism that displaces gender in this way also alleviates issues around gender performance, femininity and femmes because they are less relevant at the point where lesbianism is detached from restrictive and normative gender constructs within the male/female binary. Bolsø's (2008) interview data and analysis suggests that imagining lesbianism as existing outside of the male/female binary allows for more nuanced understandings of the ways lesbians take up, queer, or play with constructs of both masculinity and femininity. Not only does such a framework allow for lesbianism to serve as a politically subversive concept that has the potential to alter categories and create new phenomena, but it also allows for new ways of theorizing sexuality and eroticism against the "self-evident naturalness of the eroticism of the sexual difference between women and men" (Bolsø, 2008, 64). Bolsø (2008) comes to refer to this framework and process as "the queer politics of lesbian specificity" and posits that we need to continue to embrace a queering of what signifies sex and what signifies desire (65). I take up this project of queering lesbian specificity and the ideas of Bolsø (2008) and Wittig in Chapter 2.

This thesis draws on various elements of Wittig's theories, which imagine and work toward a world in which categories that empower some humans at the expense of others are abolished and recognizes that what it means to be a lesbian or the lesbian body is written and can and will be rewritten, thus mocking any attempt to delimit or define the lesbian body (Whatling, 2008; Crowder, 2007). Wittig recognizes that it is impossible to predict the future or what exists beyond the abolishment of our current, oppressive ways

of organizing sex and gender while looking for ways to dismantle them. As Crowder (2007) emphasizes, Wittig is careful to note that we cannot know what might follow the disappearance of categories of sex. We are not able to imagine alternative ways of organizing society outside of this context of exploitation because we are the products of an oppressive regime (cited in Crowder, 2007, 496). The role that lesbians play for Wittig is important because they provide an idea of what it might look like to exist outside of the current male/female system (Crowder, 2007, 496). While I find Wittig's analysis on lesbians and the revolutionary possibilities of lesbianism inspirational, I wonder if it adequately recognizes that most lesbians are born into and grow up in heterosexist societies and are often continually resisting (or are in some way compliant with) systems of heterosexuality. I think it is important to contend with the reality that even when lesbians resist and reject heterosexuality, they continue to be bound up in the heterosexual system. Dorothy Allison articulates this well in "A Question of Class":

"Everything in our culture—books, television, movies, school, fashion—is presented as if it is being seen by one pair of eyes, shaped by one set of hands, heard by one pair of ears. Even if you know you are not part of that imaginary creature—if you like country music not symphonies, read books cynically, listen to the news unbelievably, are lesbian not heterosexual, and surround yourself with your own small deviant community—you are still shaped by that hegemony, or your resistance to it."

While I do not attempt to impose boundaries between lesbian and queer theories, I think it is interesting to note that Burwell (1997) differentiates between Wittig and queer theorists by their understanding of the place and role of lesbian subjectivity. Wittig locates this place outside of gender and identifies it as escaping gender while queer theory locates this place at a 'point of systemic failure' within gender while dismantling it from within (Crowder, 2007, 496). While Wittig critiques the queer approach, arguing that it relies on the categories and system it seeks to displace, I draw from both theories to thoroughly ground my project in the project of challenging and resisting normative

constructs and binaries (Crowder, 2007, 496).

My commitment to drawing from both lesbian theories and queer theories is driven by my interpretation of my participants' comments, which make use of lesbian identity politics and reified understandings of lesbianism while also drawing on queer notions of fluidity and non-identification. It seems clear that a combination of lesbian and queer theories, concepts and influences bear on the experiences of my participants as well as my experiences and writing, even though their influence is rarely understood or identified as such on an everyday basis. The following section addresses the way I understand both lesbian and queer identity politics to function and how I draw from and between both approaches as I interpret the experiences of my participants.

(Lesbian/Queer) Identity Politics:

Snyder (2012) characterizes identity politics as a politics of recognition that serves as a means for a devalued group to demand and achieve affirmation and protection through legal, cultural and political institutions and strategies. Typically identity politics require a certain amount of cohesion and cooperation within a group in combination with efforts to affect other group's perception of and attitude toward their group (Snyder, 2012). Debates around identity politics are at the core of this thesis. Even proposing a project that revolves around lesbian identity and lesbianism is to take a stance that, at times, can seem to be in tension with the queer/postmodern theories. In this section I grapple with relevant debates around identity politics in an attempt to clarify the way I understand identity and identity politics for the purposes of this thesis. Part of the motivation for this project was that in spending time with my friends, most of whom

identify along the LGBTTTQAI+ spectrum, and in spending time in various LGBTQ+ communities, I noticed that fewer people ascribe to particular identities, that far more people were embracing fluidity, and that I suddenly seemed to know very few lesbians. None of these observations present a problem; however, I am interested in what these behavioural/identificatory changes mean for organizing, activism, movements, politics and culture. Throughout this section, I aim to demonstrate that the potential exists to undertake theory and activism in the name of a category / subject position, such as lesbian, reflexively and critically. To accomplish this, it is paramount to simultaneously challenge the way such a category has been constructed, the way it has functioned and continues to function to exclude certain bodies, as well as other ways in which it continues to be problematically invoked. I believe that by drawing from several approaches, continually and openly drawing attention to the limits and shortcomings of any particular approach, and engaging with critiques of such limitations productively instead of defensively, there is a greater potential to theorize around lesbianism and lesbian identities in a way that explores their enduring cultural relevance and avoids the pitfalls of essentialization.

In order to clarify this discussion on identity politics, I draw on Fraser (1997) who establishes two important analytical concepts. The first is ‘socioeconomic injustice’, which rests on notions of egalitarianism and is primarily concerned with political-economical disenfranchisement, including exploitation, deprivation, and economic marginalization. The second is ‘cultural or symbolic injustice,’ which includes cultural domination, nonrecognition, and disrespect, and is conceptually valuable in a discussion around lesbianism and experiences of being lesbian in a heterosexist society (Fraser,

1997). Fraser (1997) is careful to note that while it is useful to distinguish between two forms of injustice, any ability to do so is purely analytical and in reality the two concepts are deeply intertwined and constitutionally dependent on one another. Fraser (1997) notes that the remedy for socioeconomic injustices is understood in terms of redistribution, while the remedy for cultural injustice is cultural or symbolic change that is understood in terms of recognition. Fraser's (1997) analysis resonates with debates around how to bring about change within the lives of marginalized peoples- it is not enough to only pursue formal, political/economic equality, such as rectifying legal barriers around who can participate in political institutions, for example. While it is necessary to eradicate formal inequalities, such change will only be effective alongside broader restructuring efforts that account for factors such as the reality that certain bodies are socialized to become involved in politics or that there are material barriers to the participation of other bodies beyond an outright ban on their participation.

As I establish the way I understand identity politics in this thesis, it is necessary to address the tensions between two major approaches to identity politics. The first is what Bernstein (2005) terms as “social constructivist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist” approach and what Fraser (1997) and Cohen (1997) term the “transformative approach” to ameliorating the division between recognition and redistribution. The second is what Fraser (1997) calls the affirmative approach and what is generally understood as normative “lesbian and gay identity politics”. The point I aim to make throughout this section is that such approaches can coexist and that transformative approaches are not mutually exclusive from affirmative strategies that affect change from within the systems and processes we are forced to contend with. In order to demonstrate this, I provide an

overview of the polemic between affirmative “lesbian and gay identity politics,” which are characterized by their humanist/structuralist/modernist basis and transformative “queer/postmodern/poststructuralist” politics, which are presented as an alternative that seeks to avoid what is commonly seen as the failings of the former (Fraser, 1997; Bernstein, 2005).

In the remainder of this section, I discuss feminist theories (can you specify which ones?) at length and before proceeding, I want to first address the relationship between feminist theories and lesbian theories. Calhoun (1994) posits that lesbianism and lesbian theorizing has often been considered as the applied version of feminist theories. (this next one is a run-on-sentence -) From early lesbian theories which understood lesbianism as an inherently feminist and anti-patriarchal way of being, to the later shift to focus on women’s relationships with and to other women, which was also precipitated by feminism, Calhoun (1994) notes that lesbian theorizing is deeply intertwined with feminism. While feminism and lesbian theories should make use of and extend one another, Calhoun (1994) expresses concern that lesbian feminism and lesbian theories are subsumed by feminism and do not extend beyond it, meaning that lesbian theories are not considered to be a distinctly existing entity. Calhoun (1994) identifies this as a problem because feminism is not necessarily grounded in or committed to a critique of heterosexuality in the way lesbian theories are and may only view lesbianism as a special case of patriarchal oppression in a way that ignores the uniqueness of lesbian lives (559). As theories of intersectionality proliferated within lesbian and feminist studies throughout the decade following Calhoun’s (1994) article, the distinction between lesbian theories and feminist theories became clarified in the sense with which Calhoun (1994) was

concerned (can't end on a preposition). Many theorists have dedicated time to analyzing the interlocking relationships between heterosexuality, patriarchy and many other systems of oppression in ways that recognize that gender, sex, and sexuality are related, and yet distinct, concepts. In fact, the division between feminism and lesbian theories may have become more blurred recently in a different way as critical social movements, including feminism and lesbian studies, engage more thoroughly and contextually across various oppressive systems including sexuality and gender. However, Calhoun's (1994) analysis on the common foundational ground between feminism and lesbian theories remains relevant to this section of my thesis. Many of the critiques of lesbian theories and feminism, particularly from a postmodern/queer perspective, are pertinent to their foundational similarities and the way that they engage with, imagine, and rely on humanist/modern conceptions of power, knowledge and the subject.

Bernstein (2005) summarizes the queer/poststructuralist/postmodern critiques of affirmative identity politics as failing to challenge 'real' relations of power, ignoring the intersectionality of lived realities, forcing folks to privilege their sexuality over other aspects of their identity, failure to recognize and grapple with the diversity within groups, and for essentializing a group's identity (57; Fraser, 1997). Bernstein (2005) draws on Butler (1990, 1993) and her theories of identity and performativity to posit that making a claim in the name of a subject/subjectivity problematically relies on the notion that identity has a core or essence. The argument that Bernstein (2005) invokes here is that "woman" or "lesbian" are not pre-existing or naturally existing subject positions; the way those subject positions are constructed binaristically in relation to other subject positions (ie: man or heterosexual) needs to be revealed and deconstructed. Politics and activism

that draws on such categories is thus critiqued by many for engaging within the binaries, hierarchies and constructs that have worked to privilege hegemonic subject positions. Thus, advocacy carried out in the name of lesbian or gay subjects “appears to always result in a hierarchical ordering that marks the homosexual subject as different from and less than the heterosexual subject and will not challenge heteronormativity or systemic prejudices” (Bernstein, 2005, 57). Given the way Bernstein (2005) establishes the queer/post-structuralist understanding of lesbian and gay activism/theory, it follows that identity politics are understood as “narrow legal/political activism that fails to address cultural sources of oppression” (57). I recognize that some lesbian and gay activism, historically and today, functions within a hierarchy that continues to privilege heterosexuality as the natural and normal way of being. Throughout this thesis, one of my objectives is to continually draw attention to the way that lesbian and gay activism/theory has the potential to be heterosexist and homonormative. I am also committed to reflexively noting where and how my thesis participates in such problematic tendencies, as well as other exclusionary or hierarchal effects my and other works may have in terms of further marginalizing trans folks, people of colour, disabled folks, and other groups of people who have not been placed as the focus of this work. I want to recognize the validity of queer/post-structuralist critiques of much of lesbian and gay activism - I echo many of the same critiques throughout this thesis and am certainly concerned with the normalization and marketization of white, middle class, monogamous and otherwise “acceptable” lesbian and gay subject at the expense of other LGB, trans, queer subjects (Bernstein, 2005; Cohen, 1997; Puar, 2007, 2013). I want to emphasize that positions/terms such as lesbian can be reclaimed, re-occupied and re-signified in

ways that subvert other ways that they function or are constructed. Bernstein (2005), Fraser (1997) and Seidman (1997) recognize the clear potential for postmodern/queer approaches to deconstruct the hetero/homo binary and to affect change that not only redresses formal inequalities but the underlying, cultural and systemic sources of inequality. However, I also see the potential for terms like lesbian to disrupt the hetero/homo binary, especially in the sense that the hetero/homo binary has often been imagined in male terms with homo most generically referring to male homosexuality. Given the continual erasure of lesbianism and women/female bodies within homosexual/gay organizing, activism and theory (Rich, 1989; Calhoun, 1994; Frye, 1983), I argue that focusing on lesbianism is an equally valid way of working to disrupt the hetero/homo binary. Lesbian and feminist theorists have been and remain vocally mindful of the potential for queer theories to fall into the same problematic focus on the priorities and strategies of (white, cis, able bodied) men and masculinity, which marginalized women and lesbian issues within gay organizing and theorizing (Snyder, 2012; Puar, 2007; Cohen, 1997; Giffney, 2004; Jagose, 1996; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1993). Bolsø (2008) draws on her interviews with lesbian women around lesbian sexual/erotic practices and discourses to posit that lesbians rework heterosexual discourses by invoking and altering heterosexual power dynamics and playing with concepts like masculinity, which they construct to be quite flexible (56). The way the lesbians in Bolsø's (2008) interviews discuss sexual experiences, gender, identities, and the social mediation of sexual desire and attraction between women demonstrates the ways that heterosexuality and homosexuality/lesbianism are interwoven, mutually affecting each other instead of existing in a typical binary relationship (56).

While the above section focuses on queer/poststructuralist/postmodern critiques of lesbian and gay identity politics, there are also criticisms of the queer/poststructuralist/postmodern critiques, often emerging from feminism. These anti-postmodern critiques are organized along two themes - the first emerges from an internal feminist tension between feminist theory and feminist practice and the second contends that postmodernism is a philosophy of abandon and the absence of constructive political content undermines feminist goals. Throughout this section, I will investigate whether or not postmodernism is fundamentally in tension with feminist/lesbian goals. Ahmed (1996) challenges the perception that postmodernism interferes with or forecloses the possibility of feminist practice altogether as she grapples with the division between feminist practice and theory (71). The tension that is created by integrating postmodernism with feminism/lesbian studies results from the creation of a competition between the postmodern and humanist notions of the subject (Ahmed, 1996). Ahmed (1996) suggests that feminism, and drawing on Calhoun (1994) I would argue this extends to lesbian theories and movements, are able to bridge humanism and postmodernism, each of them contributing in a distinct manner. As liberal humanist values such as equality or autonomy come to coexist alongside postmodern conceptions of power within a feminist framework, what results is an alternative approach that is able to transform and displace some of the limitations of both humanist and postmodern positions by adopting a focus on relations of gender and sexuality (Ahmed, 1996, 72). Furthermore, any feminist positions that consider women as a collective need to recognize that their ability to conduct interventions will be necessarily limited by the interventionist's personal and socioeconomic status (Ahmed, 1996, 75). To act otherwise

is to impose a false or oppressive unity upon the category of women or the category of lesbian, which is detrimental in both theory and practice (Ahmed, 1996, 75).

Flax (1992) emphasizes the fact that much of feminism is grounded in liberal political theory, Marxism, and empirical social science, and that all three traditions are grounded in the “Enlightenment dream” and modernity, to some extent. Flax (1992) and Roseneil (1996) summarize the feminist case against postmodernism as concern that without engaging with grand structures of oppression, a postmodern feminist theory would fail to identify forms of domination and the patriarchy, which is considered an integral component of feminism. In contrast to the explanatory power and overarching cohesiveness of the narratives and values that characterize modernity, postmodernism offers far more complex, less hopeful stories to explain the relationships between knowledge, power, history and subjectivity (Flax, 1992, 449). Postmodern theories and movements seek to disrupt master narratives that claim to progress towards the altruistic “good” that will inevitably result from human progress and rational leadership and in doing so, they undermine and disrupt the notion that inclusive change can be achieved within humanist/modern structures, rules and logic (Flax, 1992). According to Flax (1992), some feminists argue that in order to engage in effective gender-based analysis and to pursue the goal of ending gender based domination, the ability to make objective truth claims and to appeal to reason are required (Flax, 1992, 457). For such feminists, modern ideals and notions are so vital to the feminist project that postmodernism threatens feminism as much as it does modernism/humanism (Flax, 1992; Ahmed, 1996). However, Flax (1992) critiques this perspective because it rests on the assumption that domination/emancipation is a binary relationship and that it is necessary to displace one

in order to make space for the other (457). While the move away from binaries and the deconstruction of universality and grand narratives is critiqued as posing an incommensurable threat to feminism, this does not necessarily have to be the case. Ahmed (1996) posits that feminism can exist outside of liberal, humanist values, and moreover that much feminist practice already challenges the modern terms of humanism. The critiques of anti-postmodern feminists emphasize the opinion that normative humanist notions are necessary for the feminist project and need to be sustained in order to maintain an “unproblematic relationship with social reality” (Ahmed, 1996, 72). However, the reliance on a humanist groundwork as a foundational necessity of feminism suggests that feminism requires the stability of the category of women that it also claims to seek to radically displace (Ahmed, 1996, 72). Given this paradox, there is a demand for alternative/divergent approaches to conceiving feminist politics.

While I do believe that postmodern theories and politics are able to bring about necessary and foundational change, I want to underscore that humanism continues to dominate politics in the sense that the subject is centered in political discourse and that there is a clear distinction between subject and object in language (Ahmed, 1996). Because of such dominating humanist tendencies, there is an enduring importance of drawing on political strategies that engage on humanist terms with the potential to alter the material political/legal/social inequalities at work in the experiences of those living non-normative lives. Ahmed (1996) critiques the impulse to understand feminist practice as humanist and feminist theory as postmodern, noting that this move constructs feminism as holding inherently contradictory positions on the subject. Ahmed (1996) posits that feminism should embrace its inbetweenness and its refusal to conform to the

terms of any particular discourse in both theory and practice and that together, feminist theory and practice destabilize and displace both humanism and postmodernism.

Extending Ahmed's (1996) arguments, Cox (2008) critiques the masculine underpinnings of humanism and further explicates ways feminism fundamentally exceeds and differs from humanism. Cox (2008) critiques Kant's critique of pure reason on the grounds that he continues to rely on the assumption that we are *autonomous* human beings who make up our own minds. Cox's (2008) issue is with the notion of individual consciousness and the idea that we may act autonomously; rather, as humans, we are inevitably connected. The rational individual is a limited concept "which fails to recognize the importance of relationships and social connections: the valuing and nurturing of others, reproduction and social involvement" (7). Cox (2008) posits that a critical shortcoming of humanism is that it rarely engages with the interconnectivity, interrelatedness, and the relational nature of our existence. Instead, humanism fundamentally rests on the concept of the individual making decisions on a rational basis (Cox, 2008). Cox (2008) suggests that in thinking about the relationship between humanism and feminism, we reject a binaristic conception of rationality/emotionality and search for productive links between reason/emotion and the individual/the social.

In response to postmodern/poststructuralist critiques of feminism or lesbian and gay activism, Ahmed (1996) emphasizes ways that feminism differs from humanism. One example provided by Ahmed (1996) is that feminist theorists understand the subject as relational and existing within a network of human relations, undermining the humanist notion of the subject possessing a self-identity that exists outside of and prior to human relations (Ahmed, 1996). Many of Ahmed's (1996) points regarding feminist theories

extend well to lesbian theories as well. A focus on collectivity in both feminism and lesbian theories emphasizes that subject positions “become intelligible only within structures of power and that change requires a politics of alliance,” thus revealing structures of domination and subordination (Ahmed, 1996, 75). Furthermore, making claims on behalf of a strategic collective that recognizes and embraces difference and partiality does not necessarily reflect a commitment to a unified/cohesive category of women or lesbian (Ahmed, 1996). In this project I am committed to drawing on theories and practices that engage on the liberal humanist terms that uncontestedly inform the legal/political systems through which we access basic rights and protections and also postmodern/post-structuralist theories that challenge the way those systems, rights, protections and the categories through which we access them are constructed.

One of the primary arguments for a lesbian identity politics is that we exist in a heterosexist, patriarchal culture that structurally functions in a way that excludes and renders non-heterosexual females invisible and illegible. It is vital to maintain a lesbian specificity that is able to provide recognition and validation of lesbian lives and struggles, historical and ongoing. In a piece reflecting on “Compulsory Heterosexuality” Rich (2004) discusses how she did not anticipate or condone all of the ways her article was taken up, noting that she considers the most significant contribution of “Compulsory Heterosexuality” to be the usefulness of critiquing the naturality of heterosexuality or the idea that heterosexuality exists “beyond question” (10). Since Rich’s (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality and later theories of heterosexism are central to this chapter, it’s important to note that “Compulsory Heterosexuality” was written in a particular context and to take into account Rich’s (2004) reflections on her earlier piece.

As with any article that is prolifically taken up, there is much critical discussion around “Compulsory Heterosexuality”. Primary critiques focus on the notion of the “lesbian continuum,” which has been interpreted as a call to reject men entirely, as implying an essentialized category of women shares a homogenous understanding of what “woman” means, and as unintentionally reinforcing the gender binary and heteronormative constructs of sexuality (Casey, 2012, 62). Despite these critiques, Rich’s (1980) objective of drawing attention to a system of compulsory heterosexuality and how heterosexuality functions more generally remains politically important. Rich (2004) notes that when university students encounter “Compulsory Heterosexuality” it is often the first time they are introduced the notion that heterosexuality is not *the* natural/normal/default way of being. Rich (2004) posits that this demonstrates how strongly compulsory heterosexuality prevails more than twenty years following her publication and, as I argue in this thesis, still today. Thus, while lesbian identity politics are critiqued for not adequately challenging the way lesbian, gay, and heterosexual are all socially constructed and regulatory categories, in this thesis my aim is to take up lesbian identity politics in a way that emphasizes and challenges heterosexism and the regulatory nature of identity constructs.

Connecting these discussions around identity politics to the comments of my participants and some of the major themes of this thesis, it is interesting to note that one of the overarching tensions is around naming and group recognition. My own objective and personal politics involves a commitment to lesbian specificity because it is my belief that we continue to live in a deeply heterosexist, patriarchal society that has not adequately redressed the marginalization, alienation, and erasure of lesbians, gay men,

bisexual folks, queer folks, trans folks, and the many other groups of people who identify (or dis-identify) as something other than heterosexual². However, at many points in this thesis and in Chapter 3 in particular, I engage in analysis and discussions around the trend of not identifying as lesbian or as any particular identity at all in favour of existing as “simply human”. I posit that because of the way ‘human’ as a neutral/normal subject position has been constructed as a heterosexual subject, making a personal decision to identify as human rather than lesbian not only requires a certain amount of privilege, but also ignores broader, prevailing societal inequalities. Fraser (1997) notes that the Marxian method of overcoming class-based oppression and injustice is to restructure social organization in such a way that class structure is abolished - the opposite of recognizing difference. In many ways, this is the way I make sense of calls for identifying as “simply human” instead of as lesbian or gay or bisexual specifically. The underlying logic at work in such claims tells us that if we do not focus on or emphasize our own differences, the inequalities that arise from those differences will erode over time. However, it is not that simple because simply moving toward redistribution and non-recognition does not necessarily address the underlying issues, culturally or economically/politically (Fraser, 1997). Fraser (1997) posits that the core tension within many social movements is between competing logics of redistribution, which seeks to eradicate gender or sexuality as such, and recognition, which aims to valorize specificity.

² Or many other injustices! I am focusing on sexuality / gender because that is the focus of this thesis - I don't mean in any way to deny the prevailing inequalities around other elements of culture, race, ethnicity, language, ability, class, and more. Just like it is not my intention to draw focus away from bisexuality or queer/non-identities by focusing on lesbianism in this thesis- I know that there are similar projects that place their focus on other identities and I would want there to be numerous studies on all/any identities like this).

Fraser (1997) proposes that a transformative remedy that understands both homosexuality and heterosexuality as reified positions that are constitutionally dependent on one another to maintain a schema that codifies human sexuality. Such a transformative remedy, according to Fraser (1997) must seek to deconstruct the hetero/homo binary. The objective of a transformative method is not to abolish sexual difference as a single/universal 'human' identity, but rather to sustain a "sexual field of multiple, debinarised, fluid, ever-shifting differences" (Fraser, 1997, n.p). The above quote effectively captures my opposition to the impulse to abandon lesbian specificity in favour of a generic human identity. As Fraser (1997) emphasizes, such a tendency is universalizing and undoubtedly liable to subsume the experiences and nuances of sexuality under a generic, heterosexual framework, leaving the processes and systems that have privileged heterosexual ways of being intact.

If society were not structurally constructed to advantage certain white, fully able, heterosexual bodies, how we identify may not be as paramount a concern and re-invoking categories such as lesbian that are bound up in various discourses, binaries and conceptualizations that have been and continue to be limited, problematic, and exclusionary may well be avoided. Theoretically, I love the idea of moving beyond terms and labels and cultivating whatever kinds of identities and lives suit each individual person; however, there is a real need to redress broader systematic issues and material inequalities that continue to marginalize those who fall outside of normative categories. Thus, while I understand and seek to integrate queer/poststructuralist/postmodern opposition to identity politics and the desire to identify as human instead of a specifically non-heterosexual identity, my position throughout this thesis is that identity politics and

recognition of difference play an important role in the struggle against marginalization, oppression and erasure.

I do not think that there is any kind of inherent tension between lesbian theories and queer theories and would posit that it is unproductive to make any such generalizing claim about the tendencies or nature of either body of theories. To make such arguments is not only reductionist, but prevents the exploration of ways of working through and with any tensions or conflicts that do exist between differential strategies and beliefs between and within lesbian and queer theories. Some queer theories do tend to reflect a white male bias (Snyder, 2012; Puar, 2007; Cohen, 1997; Giffney, 2004; Jagose, 1996; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1993) just as some lesbian theories reflect essentialist iterations of what it means to be a lesbian (Casey, 2012; Ponse, 1978). Ultimately, we do not need to choose between theories and strategies that engage in the problematic systems we are forced to contend with and theories that are critical of those systems and even those strategies themselves. Often there are limitations to identity politics based strategies even if those strategies are working to push us toward abstractly desirable goals such as more equal distribution of rights and power. A clear example of this is that on many occasions in this thesis, I critique marriage as an institution that is heteronormative and patriarchal. Those critiques extend to same-sex marriage, which extends and affirms the institution of marriage instead of transforming, critiquing or deconstructing it (Duggan, 2002; Puar, 2007; Halberstam, 2012) and as a result, creating new hierarchies and forms of exclusion among all people and specifically within LGBTQ+ communities by formalizing acceptable and unacceptable ways of being for LGBTQ+ bodies and relationships (Young and Boyd, 2007; Bernstein, 2005; Duggan, 2002). However, on

another, privileged level, political and legal gains such as the legalization of same-sex marriage can have the effect of emphasizing the way our society continues to privilege heterosexual lifestyles and lives and pushes toward equalizing the privileges that heterosexual people have access to that LGBTQ+ people do not- again, recognizing that many LGBTQ+ bodies will continue to be excluded from those privileges and that such gains only benefit certain, more privileged bodies.

Even in places like Canada where same-sex marriage is legal, marriage remains an exclusionary institution that, in its most generalized form, legally binds two adults. This excludes people whose relationship styles are not monogamous, not only because they are prevented from seeking a marriage (if they should want to) but also because their relationship, in a legal sense, exists in an inferior position, behind both monogamous heterosexual relationships and monogamous same-sex relationships. Furthermore, on a practical/material level, the legalization of same-sex marriage does not necessarily initiate a positive change. It is important to consider that an individual needs to occupy a relatively privileged position in order to even consider the ways that marriage may benefit their relationship or financial situation. For many LGBTQAI+ people, there are more pertinent concerns such as homelessness, family rejection, or gaining legal protections against the most basic forms of discrimination that take precedence over marriage. In the United States, for example, there are only 22 states with non-discrimination laws preventing LGBTQ+ people from being fired from their jobs or evicted from their houses because of their sexual orientation (Phelps, 2015). In the context of the United States, that means that following the Supreme Court ruling in 2015, which legalized same-sex marriage on a federal level, there are many states in which a

lesbian may marry her lesbian partner, but then be fired and evicted on the basis of that marriage (Phelps, 2015). Phelps (2015) draws a connection between the increasing demand for rights for LGBTTTQAI+ people and the resurgence of conservative and religious organizing against the allowance of those rights. While it is plausible that over time in some places, the legalization of same-sex marriage creates a more accepting culture for non-heterosexual individuals, there is no guarantee or even a likelihood of that happening in the absence of corresponding activism, re-education, and social change.

There are many important causes, cases, and activism undertaken in the name of particular “identity groups” to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to imagine alternative ways of pursuing the change we need. Instead of framing such vigorous debates and discussions as sources of conflict, tension and even weakness among theories of sexuality and gender, I embrace the plurality of strategies and opinions and the way they work both cooperatively and in tension with one another as crucial to a radical and effective movement for change.

Lesbian-Feminism and the Sex Wars:

Since each person has an individual context and individual experiences and identities that make their relationship to concepts such as lesbianism unique, any arguments or claims that comment on a generalized experience of any identity or situation act as a reduction and consequently excludes or further marginalizes other identities operating within the existing hierarchical structure. The act of defining something or saying something is (or even likely is) *this* is always an act of exclusion/excluding. Given this, I imagine the concept of Lesbianism to be contextual and dynamic, existing abstractly to inform and shape stereotypes, representations,

histories, discourses, and other elements that compose any cultural understanding of what a lesbian is and looks like. While such a cultural understanding shifts across time and space, it provides an understanding of who and what lesbians are, even if you have never met one while also affecting the experiences of folks living and identifying as lesbians. Conversely, I understand lesbianism as a floating signifier whose meaning shifts contextually and in reference to both the abstract **Lesbianism** (which I distinguish throughout this thesis using a bolded **L**) and the individual subject who makes use of it as an identity. Throughout this section, I elaborate on the notion of **Lesbianism**. In order to do so, I begin with a discussion of lesbian and lesbian-feminist histories and the way they inform concepts and perspectives that are key to this thesis.

The historical context in which lesbian-feminism emerged played an important role in shaping the direction of lesbian-feminism and future lesbian movements as they progressed over the following decades (Calhoun, 1994; Stein, 1993). Chenier (2015) characterizes the sex wars as debates over how to respond to the recognition of sexuality as a source of women's oppression and how to address problems of sexual violence, while also considering pleasure/desire and autonomy. During the sex wars, radical feminists understood sex as a patriarchal social construction rooted in a male desire to dominate women, while cultural feminists such as Rich believed in embracing authentic female selves and engaging in mutual, equal, committed relationships (Chenier, 2015). Calhoun (1994) posits that both the radical and cultural feminists imagined lesbians as operating outside of or against patriarchal, heterosexual terms and power in a way that suggested they were accomplishing a feminist goal that was not possible from within heterosexuality. According to Stein (1993) sexuality was defined almost exclusively in

male terms during the sex wars, with lesbianism being presented as resistance to the patriarchy. As a consequence of the way lesbianism was taken up in feminist discourses, desire was omitted from the conversation almost entirely and, as a result, lesbianism was presented as desexualized.

Gordon's (2006) analysis on the effects of the feminist sex wars on lesbian communities and movements emphasizes other ways lesbianism has been desexualized and marginalized within feminist movements. While androgyny and female masculinity are often upheld as preferential gender expressions within lesbian communities (Mishali, 2014), Gordon (2006) notes that during the sex wars, any behaviour that was interpreted as emulating masculine sexuality, including "anything implying an over-interest in sex, sexual objectification, or unequal sexual power dynamics" was critiqued by feminists (171; Mishali, 2014). The sex radicals felt that the work of lesbian-feminists, including Rich (1980) and her call to reject compulsory heterosexuality, served to reinforce and naturalize the gender binary and replaced heteropatriarchal dominance with a feminist sexual ideology that casts women as the moral gatekeepers of sexuality and sexual behaviour while continuing to scrutinize and police women's sexuality and enforce stereotypical behaviour among lesbians (Mishali, 2014). Lesbian-feminists emphasized egalitarianism and emotional connections, which they saw as "feminine values" and in doing so, according to scholars including Gordon (2006) and Hollibaugh (1989), effectively de-sexed lesbianism. Feminists on all sides of the sex wars make both valid and problematic arguments and I do not draw firm distinctions between their ways of knowing and conceptualizing feminist issues. To frame the sex wars as an oppositionally constructed, polemical dualism is an act that obscures the strategies and tools developed

by all kinds of feminists in pursuit of de-naturalizing, deconstructing, or disrupting the hegemony of heterosexuality and patriarchal control. Throughout this thesis I endeavour to draw from all sides, particularly as I pick up on the discussion of lesbian appearance norms and the desexualisation of lesbianism as phenomena that continue to pervade cultural understandings of lesbianism in Chapter 2.

Elaborating on the issues surrounding lesbianism during and as a result of the sex wars, Calhoun (1994) elaborates on some of the tensions between that surfaced between heterosexual women and lesbians. Calhoun (1994) draws on the example of Friedan dismissing lesbians as a “lavender menace” to women’s rights organizing as the President of the National Organization of Women in 1969, effectively citing the presence of lesbians as a deviant force who undermined the efficacy of the movement as a whole (Phelan, 1989). In response to such condemnation by heterosexual feminists, radical lesbian-feminists organized informally to protest the exclusion of lesbians from feminist discussions and eventually, as the Radicalesbians, they published “The Woman Identified Woman”. Calhoun (1994) notes that at the time of its publication, radical lesbian-feminists were in a position that demanded that they defend lesbian participation in the feminist movement (Radicalesbians, 1970). As a result, lesbian-feminists were required to emphasize their similarities to heterosexual feminists and their deep commitment to feminist values, leaving little opportunity to introduce critiques of heterosexuality as a distinct system that operates differently from the patriarchy and which affords both heterosexual men and women specific privileges that they thus have an interest in maintaining (Calhoun, 1994; Phelan, 1993). The direction and context in which lesbian-feminism emerged contributes to the ongoing struggle to separate gender and sexuality as

distinct and irreducible elements of a person's identity that are influenced by intersecting systems of oppression (Calhoun, 1994). The histories provided by Calhoun (1994) and Stein (1993) contextualize and historicize the development of theories of heterosexism, which will be discussed and elaborated on throughout this thesis. Stein (1993) quotes the owner of the last lesbian bar to close in San Francisco in 1991 as stating, "there is an absence of a lesbian community in the presence of a million lesbians" (San Francisco Examiner, footnote 2 in Stein). I am interested in this notion in particular because it seems to reflect the sentiments of my participants as well as Gordon's (2006) and McLean's (2008) participants, who indicate that while they believed some lesbian community exists somewhere, they are not experts on it and are probably not a part of it. Many of the comments made by participants seem to suggest that they do not see themselves existing as members of any naturally existing lesbian category and instead, they tend to see themselves as belonging to a more abstract group of "human beings" who are unmarked by identifications, and certainly not marked by sexual identity. These themes and discussions will be taken up as I analyze excerpts from interviews throughout Chapters 2 and 3.

Lesbianism:

One of the major contributions from lesbian theory to my theoretical framework is a notion of **Lesbianism**³ that reflects an abstract, reified and cultural constructions of Lesbianism that have been cultivated, need to be maintained and work to the benefit of interlocking systems of oppression (bell hooks, 1989, 2010). What I intend to establish

³ I intentionally bold **Lesbianism** to refer to a theory of Capital L **Lesbianism**

by elaborating on the notion of **Lesbianism** is twofold: how it serves heterosexist, white, capitalist, ableist, patriarchal systems; and how it creates and maintains hierarchies and exclusions within lesbian communities and among LGBTTTQA+ communities. It is difficult to articulate the way a social construct of **Lesbianism** functions or because it is a nebulous concept that, while difficult to pin down, seems to have a notable affect on the lives of my interview participants. I posit that **Lesbianism** exists as a cultural construct that is reflected, reaffirmed and perpetuated by and within popular discourses in the news media, social media, television, movies, music, political and social discourses, as well as any number of other ways. Throughout this thesis I use the notion of **Lesbianism** to identify and analyze various ways of understanding the effect of stereotypes and hegemonic discourses and representations of lesbians/lesbianism. In order to look at the effects and responses to stereotypes, it is important to first establish an understanding of how stereotypes function.

Stereotypes are both necessary and useful as well as limited and ridden with ideological implications (Dyer, 1999; Lippmann, 1956). Stereotypes do not neutrally reflect social realities; rather, they are imbued with highly charged feelings and play into respectability politics, bolstering traditions and hierarchies that maintain the status quo (Dyer, 1999; Lippmann, 1956; Fellows and Razack, 1998). Dyer (1999) investigates how stereotypes work through an analysis of Lippmann's (1956) work with a focus on how stereotypes function in social thought. Dyer (1999) argues that while stereotypes are not inherently harmful as an element of human thought and representation, the issue lies in who controls and defines stereotypes and whose interests they serve. I also want to think about how we might imagine stereotypes to construct an abstract cultural understanding

of an identifiable Lesbianism. While stereotypes are often understood as “short cuts” or simplified ways of understanding our complicated world, Dyer (1999) draws on Perkins (1979) to argue that the simplicity of stereotypes is deceptive, since stereotypes almost never correctly capture what they are being used to describe and what results is an “implication of knowledge of a complex social structure” (2). In Chapter 2, I look at both stereotypes referenced and circulated within popular media and also stereotypes that are referenced and circulated among lesbians on social media with consideration to how different groups/individuals/communities relate to, take up, and are affected by such stereotypes.

Engaging in a critical examination of whose interests are served by stereotypes and how they affect different people is important, considering that efficacy of stereotypes depends on a convincing assertions that this is what *everyone* thinks that members of this social group are like in a way that implies that the concept of “these social groups were spontaneously arrive at by all members of society independently and in isolation” (Dyer, 1999, 3). Dyer (1999) emphasizes that the way stereotypes function not only to maintain sharp boundaries between categories and to conceal socially constructed difference as natural, but also to alienate and sever the experiences and identities of people who fall into several social groups that are constructed and stereotyped in different ways and exist varyingly within hierarchal structures. One of the most significant functions of the stereotype is to maintain clear boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behaviour, even when no such boundaries exist in reality (Dyer, 1999). Dyer (1999) discusses stereotypes of invisible social groups as particularly insidious in the way they seek to contain unknown and fluid identities and categories that may threaten the order of things. Such

categories are invisible because one is not able to identify that they belong as a member of that category by looking at them, unless, according to Dyer (1999):

“The person chooses to dress and act in a clearly and culturally defined manner (e.g. the working-class man's cloth cap, the male homosexual's limp wrist) or one has a trained eye (as those dealing with alcoholics have?)” (5).

While this seems like a problematic statement, it effectively captures the way that one's “real” identity does not matter- a heterosexual man who happens to have the “male homosexual's limp wrist” or a “gay sounding voice” will regularly be interpreted by strangers and acquaintances as gay. What stereotypes accomplish is not an accurate classificatory schema, but a pervasive and patently inaccurate one. Dyer (1999) draws attention to the way our society ignores the fluidity of social categories and instead perpetuates stereotypes that reify difference. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are constructed as distinctly opposite despite the reality that people's experiences and behaviour are experienced by everybody during their lives and are not determined by their sexual orientation/identity (Dyer, 1999). Dyer (1999) concludes that the role of stereotypes is to make the invisible visible, known and contained with discourses that work to the advantage of dominant value/power systems. Dyer's (1999) work on stereotypes also demonstrates the way that a concept that both informs and is constituted by pervasive stereotypes such as Lesbianism is constructed to maintain and benefit interlocking systems of privilege and oppression, most notably systems of heterosexuality and patriarchy (bell hooks, 1989, 2010). I understand Lesbianism as a social construct that serves the heterosexist/cisgenderist/misogynistic/white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and functions in a neoliberal way to regulate/survey/police lesbian bodies and communities.

The works of both Duggan (2002) and Puar (2007, 2013) shape the conditions for a more nuanced understanding of the way that (homo)normativity and privilege function not only to create hierarchies within LGBTTQAI+ movements and communities, but also to the benefit of interlocking systems of oppression. Puar's (2007, 2013) concept of homonationalism effectively captures the way privilege, power, and difference operate alongside a multitude of systems of oppression, neoliberalism, and capitalism that create not only acceptable LG subjects in particular ways within nation states, but operate on a global level to shape the distribution of power, privilege and status among and between nations and international bodies/systems (Puar, 2007, 2013). In *Terrorist Assemblages* Puar (2007) identifies homonationalism as occurring through a process of sexual exceptionalism through which certain racial and sexual others are excluded or disqualified from the national imaginary, thus producing a "national homosexuality" (2). Homonational homosexuality functions to regulate and normalize gayness, queerness, or homosexuality (and lesbianism) as well as racial, national and other norms that are integral to the construction and differentiation of sexual subjects (Puar, 2007). Puar (2007) emphasizes the exclusion, marginalization and outright denial of entire populations of sexual-racial others, who are not possibly considered part of the national homosexual subject, in order to create that subject's acceptability. Puar's (2007) analyses of sexual exceptionalism, queer as regulatory and the ascendancy of whiteness are integral to the theoretical framework for this project.

In response to the increasing neoliberalization of economies, politics, and queer movements, homonationalism emerges as a fundamental critique of lesbian and gay

liberal rights discourses and the ideas and narratives perpetuated by those discourses around progress and modernity that marginalize and use racialized others (Puar, 2013). Homonationalism, for Puar (2013) is an “assemblage of geopolitical and historical forces, neoliberal interests in capitalist state accumulation both cultural and material, biopolitical state practices of population control, and affective investments in discourses of freedom, liberation and rights” (337). In this way, homonationalism goes beyond discussions of the conservatization of gay and lesbian identities and politics and is more than a way of distinguishing “bad” queers from “good” queers, an accusation or a position (Puar, 2013, 337). Homonationalism is a shift that sees some, particular homosexual bodies being reconceptualized as “worthy” of the nation state’s protection in what Puar (2013) calls a “fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality” (337). Puar (2013) explains homonationalism as a “historical convergence of state practices, transnational circuits of queer commodity culture and human rights paradigms, and broader global phenomenon such as the increasing entrenchment of Islamophobia” (337). The global conditions of homonationalism allow some states to occupy the status of “gay-friendly” versus “homophobic” for various reasons and to various effects (Puar, 2013, 337).

Duggan’s (2002) work on homonormativity provides an extended analysis on the way that neoliberal tendencies function in detrimental ways within lesbian, gay and queer movements. According to Duggan (2002), homonormativity is a politics that upholds heteronormative assumptions and policies, allowing for privatized, capitalized, gay culture that does not pose a threat to the dominant power structures of society (179). In this way, homonormativity echoes the neoliberal tendency toward privatization and

commodification, exists in tension with and is often openly critical of more radical/queer ways of organizing, undermining their legitimacy as a political strategy (Duggan, 2002). Duggan (2002) extends this, emphasizing that homonormativity is a “sexual politics of neoliberalism” that functions by positioning itself as neutrally “good”, a way of being reasonable and of adhering to universally desirable forms of democracy and economic expansion, locally and globally (177). While Puar (2007, 2013) offers a thorough critique of the notion that any system or process (including homonormativity, homonationalism) that articulates acceptable ways of being gay/lesbian/queer/other is able to accomplish anything more than a perpetuation or exacerbation of the unequal and unfairly constructed status quo, Duggan (2002) emphasizes the effectiveness of such a neoliberal strategy which conceals its agenda and constructedness by framing questions around it as “who could be against greater wealth and more democracy?” (177). Proponents of what Duggan (2002) calls the “new gay politics” collude with neoliberal political and economic frameworks to position their homonormative approach as reasonable and moderate and more politically viable than liberationist, transformative approaches to LGBTTQAI+ rights (179; Fraser, 1997). The goal of the homonormative, neoliberal politics engages on the terms of the state and seeks only to re-map public/private boundaries to produce reduced and limited “gay public spheres” and to pursue acceptance exclusively through inclusion within and access to “institutions of domestic privacy, the ‘free’ market, and patriotism” (Duggan, 2002, 179). As Puar (2007, 2013) emphasizes, it’s also important to consider the multitude of ways that many queer bodies are already excluded and positioned differentially in relation to the state and to citizenship. I will explore the implications of homonormativity using Razack and

Fellows (1998) notion of a politics of respectability and by drawing on the Puar's (2007) analysis on homonationalism and homonormativity as I interpret and discuss the sense making activities of participants in Chapter 2. As I discuss the appearance norms of lesbianism in Chapter 2, I provide more analysis on the way that functions of neoliberalism, such as individualization, and a politics of respectability (Fellows and Razack, 1998) function in regulatory ways in relation to Lesbianism and compulsory heterosexuality in the lives of lesbians, including my participants.

One such function served by an abstract and reified construct of Lesbianism is that it may introduce lesbianism as a potential way of being for people who have never previously questioned their 'natural' heterosexual. I posit that, in this way, Lesbianism may occasionally function as a positive, structuring, organizing force that is able to counter compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980; 2004) and provides some kind of definable alternative to female heterosexual existence, even if it is thoroughly problematic. Stein (1993) provides an example of the way that stable and marketable constructs of what it means to be a Lesbian can allow for the group of people who may be considered lesbians or might identify as lesbians to be extended. Stein (1993) suggests that the cultural lesbian-feminist strategy of reconceptualising lesbians as 'women-identified-women' allowed middle class women to act on desires they otherwise felt unable to as a result of compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia on the part of heterosexual feminists and heterosexual society in general. Stein (1993) understands this as the "new lesbian" approach and posits that the move to collapse the distinction between identity and desire effectively re-conceptualized lesbianism as "female bonding" and allowed more women to identify with the category in a way that is reminiscent of

Rich's (1980) notion of the 'lesbian continuum'. Stein (1993) posits that class plays an important role in understanding lesbian feminist history since lower and working class women were more likely to come out as lesbians or to participate in lesbian/homosexual communities and movements in the pre-Stonewall era because they had less concern about losing their social status than middle and upper class women. Significantly, this re-conceptualization of lesbianism was not centered on desire/sex, but focused on love, intimacy, and connection as women in a way that emphasizes lesbian's similarities to other (heterosexual) women, de-emphasizing the salience of sexuality/sex to identity (Stein, 1993). Stein's (1993) attentiveness to race and class in her analyses of lesbian-feminism, the fluctuating boundaries around conceptualizations of lesbianism and the re/production of the lesbian subject demonstrate the importance of specificity while drawing attention to the way that Lesbianism also serves to bolster the interests of middle class, white individuals. Stein's (1993) example of the "woman-identified-woman" strategy demonstrates how a knowable, identifiable, somewhat stable understanding of what it means to be a lesbian was important as a force that counters compulsory heterosexuality/heterosexism and allows folks to consider Lesbian as a viable (identifiable/existing/"real") position to occupy. However, Stein's (1993) analysis and example also make the point that any identifiable notion of what it means to be a Lesbian, whether in the form of a lesbian-feminist constructed Lesbian Nation or a pervasive cultural construct like Lesbianism creates and exacerbates inequalities, hierarchies and marginalization within lesbian communities and LGBTTQAI+ communities more broadly.

Stein (1993) suggests that a formerly identifiable/cohesive Lesbian Nation has reformed, breaking into decentered projects, movements, and meetings that are disparate, often radical, and take the form of lesbian parenting groups, organizations for lesbian ‘career women’, organizations for lesbians of colour, and support groups for women with cancer (85). Stein (1993) suggests that such disparate lesbian organizing lacks the “fundamental hegemonic logic” or core that characterized the Lesbian Nation and previous lesbian-feminist movements and allows for multiple, fluid, and even contradictory ways of interpreting and understanding lesbianism to co-exist (85). I understand Stein’s (1993) analysis of the decentered lesbian movement as an explanation of why so many lesbian identified individuals (Gordon, 2006; McLean, 2012) express difficulty in identifying, describing, or feeling like they are part of an overarching “lesbian community”. However, I also want to consider that my participants and the participants in Gordon (2006) and McLean’s (2012) work still seem to indicate that such a “lesbian community” might or likely exists and that they are not a part of it. I posit that the emergence of decentered lesbian-driven movements leaves open conceptual space that is filled by reified cultural constructs, such as **Lesbianism**. In Chapter 2, I explore ways that lesbian identified folks, including my participants, engage with, modify or queer discourses/constructs of **Lesbianism**.

While stereotypes about lesbians are an important component of **Lesbianism**, it operates beyond stereotypes and also works to change/inform stereotypes. McLean’s (2008) qualitative research on how changes in sexual identity and desire (coming out again) affect claiming and belonging in **LGBTQAI+** spaces and helpfully furthers the notion of **Lesbianism**. As I will discuss further in Chapter 2, the participants in my study

as well as the participants in McLean's (2008) study indicate that there is an identifiable, if not definable, "Lesbian" way of being and dressing; that is, there is a particular way of being that both reflects that one is a lesbian and makes one seem more legitimately lesbian. Drawing on Stein (1997) and Eves (2004), McLean (2008) posits that an ideology of authenticity arises out of lesbian discourse and holds a significant amount of power in terms of determining whether individuals feel a sense of belonging to lesbian identity and community. For the purposes of this theoretical framework, I understand an ideology of authenticity serving as the legitimizing factor in Lesbianism. McLean's (2008) analysis on the way her participants identify and grapple with appearance and behavioural norms that regulate acceptable and legible Lesbianism also contributes to an overall understanding of Lesbianism. McLean (2008) connects the rules and norms that regulate acceptable and legible appearance and dress among lesbians (the enduring norms of Lesbianism) identified by her participants back to early lesbian-feminism. Lesbian-feminists were very critical of traditional (heterosexual) femininity, including wearing make up, long hair, or wearing feminine dresses for its oppressive, patriarchal roots (McLean, 2008; Mishali, 2014; Nestle, 1992). As thinking around gender and sexuality has developed, an infinite number of gender expressions, including hyperfeminine ones, have become recognized as potentially and subversively lesbian (Stein, 1993). However, there is an enduring connection between masculine or butch gender presentations and lesbianism that results in the privileging of masculine performances over feminine ones (McLean, 2008; Cefai, 2004; Mishali, 2014; O'Hara, 2015). McLean (2008) found that for her feminine presenting, lesbian identified participants, the suspicion they were subject to because of their feminine appearance resulted in their own and others' doubts

about their lesbian identity, their lesbian legitimacy and their belonging in the lesbian community. This notion of feminine lesbian performances being devalued and rendered invisible is a strong theme in this thesis and I will further explore discussions around femme invisibility, passing, and how participants make sense of these concepts in relation to Lesbianism and privilege in Chapter 2. I will also expand on the idea of lesbian authenticity in Chapter 2 as I investigate how my participants' responses may be interpreted as reflecting and illustrating notions of lesbian authenticity/legitimacy.

In terms of the behavioural norms of Lesbianism, McLean (2008) found that her participants seemed to imagine stricter boundaries around the intimate and sexual behaviours compared to the appearance boundaries (Stein, 1993). McLean's (2008) participants felt that in order to qualify as a legitimate or authentic lesbian, it was integral that one be exclusively attracted to and sexually active with other women. This reinforces essentialist notions of a fixed, knowable lesbian identity that is static and unchanging. Stein (1993) builds on this, arguing that "the ideology of authentic versus fake lesbians implies an essentialist understanding of lesbianism, which declares that the only 'true' lesbian is the lifelong lesbian that never strays, the women for whom desires, behaviour and identity are perfectly congruent" (62). McLean (2008) found that her participants interpreted any attraction to or desire for men as undermining their lesbian identity and threatening to their place in the lesbian community, and I posit that exclusively desiring and having sex with women is also integral to the way my participants make sense of Lesbianism. I will extend my analysis on the behavioural norms of Lesbianism in Chapter 2.

While Dyer's (1999) analysis on the way that stereotypes function demonstrates one way of understanding how Lesbianism functions in a regulatory/hegemonic way, I want to draw on discussions of neoliberalism and homonormativity to substantiate the ways that a construct such as Lesbianism furthers neoliberal, heterosexist, patriarchal objectives. Throughout this thesis I am interested in exploring how representations and stereotypes around lesbianism serve to exclude certain bodies from lesbian identities, communities and spaces, particularly in Chapter 2 where I look specifically at lesbianism and femininity. While there may no longer be an identifiable "Lesbian" construct put forward by groups of lesbian identified people, I posit that Lesbianism is some reformulation of a hegemonic lesbian construct that, while affected by the experiences and voices of folks living as lesbians, affects not only how they see themselves and their own identities, but undoubtedly how the mainstream, heterosexual culture makes sense of those who identify as or are perceived as lesbians. Recalling Stein's (1993) analysis of the decentralization of lesbian organizing and movements, I posit that Lesbianism would shape the conditions for such decentralized movements, while also drawing on them to (re)inform the abstracted cultural understandings that compose such a construct.

The result of the existence of "real/grassroots/decentralized" lesbian existence and organizing alongside, in tension with, and often actively in resistance of a culturally reified Lesbianism is that individual lesbians and anyone who may consider a lesbian identity will constantly be caught between their knowledge of an exposure to lesbians/lesbianism and cultural understandings of Lesbianism. Karlan's (2015) pop culture piece on lesbian stereotypes picks up on this tension and explores it satirically. Karlan (2015) begins with a quote that states: "I know there are a lot of stereotypes out

there about being a lesbian, but come on. I'm just out here trying to live my authentic life" and proceeds with a list of "70 thoughts lesbians have about stereotypes". Karlan's (2015) stereotypical lesbian owns far too much plaid, wears a beanie, wouldn't miss the local Tegan and Sara show, plays softball/intramural sports, watches women's soccer, cuts her hair short, keeps her nails short, wears vests and loves cats, shops in the men's section, and is obsessed with at least three lesbian fandoms. It is almost entirely irrelevant whether or not these stereotypes accurately describe a number of people who identify as lesbians, they are pervasively understood to be "culturally lesbian things" and Karlan (2015) acknowledges and plays at that in her satirical piece. Karlan's (2015) commentary intersects with Dyer's (1999) argument that members of invisible social groups can choose to dress or act in a "clearly and culturally defined manner" to make themselves visible as a member of that group.

My conversations during my interview with C resonate in this discussion. In a quote that I will interpret further in Chapter 2, C comments that while there are some "lesbionic" things about her, moments where her interests and attributes align with those things considered to be stereotypically lesbian, she also defies many lesbian stereotypes and thus does not find lesbianism particular pertinent to her cultural identity. It is only at a cultural level that certain attributes and interests are imbued with a "lesbian meaning" or association- anyone could wear a vest and enjoy women's soccer without being a lesbian. However, as such stereotypes become engrained in and central to the cultural imaginary around lesbians, people who exhibit enough of them or any of them strongly enough are likely to be assumed to be lesbians. At this point I want to draw on an excerpt from my interview with R to elucidate Lesbianism because I think it is a concept that is

more readily experienced than explained. In my interview with R, she shares an experience that I interpret as homophobic/lesbophobic that involved a guy in her high school confronting her about her sexual identity:

R: One guy, I mean this again when I was a teenager, asked me if I made videos and put them on the internet (laughs) and I was like, yeah all the time. Like I just gave him some sarcastic reply cause I was like, I can't even do this right now (laughs) [D: Yeah, yeah] He was just being an idiot teenage boy. Um... and I've definitely had people ask like how does the sex work? [D: Right (laughs)] and I've really had to explain that [D: (laughs) yeah, like, do you want a diagram?] (laughs) So usually I just avoid answering questions like that. I think I once said something like, some guy was into lesbian porn and was like, would you do all that stuff? And I was like probably not! I don't know! (laughs)

I interpret this interaction as an example of the way that Lesbianism functions. Assuming that he does not know any lesbians personally (an assumption I base on R's description of her rural high school and the fact that she noted the absence of LGBTTQAI+ identified people where she lived and at her high school while she was growing up), I think it is very significant that he brings up lesbian pornography and asks if she would do all that stuff - as if lesbians and the lesbian activities in pornography accurately depict what lesbian identified people desire/do/are. This example speaks to the power of any representation to inform a person's understandings of what a particular group of people is like. Discussions and perceptions of lesbian pornography feed into the construction of Lesbianism, but it is the creation and circulation of lesbian pornography itself that continues to actively produce content that mis/informs all non-lesbian consumers on lesbianism, lesbian identity, what lesbians look like, who they are, and what they do (Puhl, 2010). Lesbian pornography also serves the function of sexualizing lesbian relationships and commodifying them for male pleasure in a way that attempts to delegitimize and contain the threat lesbianism poses to hegemonic masculinities, compulsory heterosexuality, and their many interdependent systems (Puhl, 2010; Jackson and Gilberston, 2009). This connects back to compulsory nature of heterosexuality and

the centrality of maintaining domination and inequalities through the dualistic construction of gender, sex, and sexuality in our culture (Rich, 1980, 2004).

Throughout this section I have established the way I understand Lesbianism to draw on and perpetuate interlocking systems of oppression and to produce new hierarchies and forms of exclusion within LGBTTQAI+ populations. And while there is much to critique around stereotypes and the way they function both to bolster hegemonic power systems and alienate/exclude those whose embodiment of an identity falls outside the way members of such a group are stereotypically imagined, stereotypes and stereotypical representations do serve important functions, which I will continue to explore in Chapter 2.

Queer Theories:

Queer theory is considered to be a post-structuralist field that critically analyzes the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender (Abes and Kasch, 620, 2007; Jagose, 1996). As a body of theories, it is a fluid, complex, and plural entity that embraces the unthinkable and functions as a permanently open category that refuses limitations and definitions (Casey, 2012; Halberstam, 1996; Abes and Kasch, 2007). At its core, queer theory demands a reconsideration of the way society conceptualizes the relationships between sex, gender, and sexual desire and the way these categories function as projects of normalization (Casey, 2012). Within queer movements, there is a critique of the increasing respectability politics that create hegemonic “lesbian” and “gay” subject positions (259). While civil rights are a priority for some people, recognizing “gay and lesbian” rights establishes a hierarchy wherein some forms of non-

heterosexual desire receive official sanction and others do not. These rights and discourses continue to act as the basis of experiences of oppression, discrimination, and foster inequality, and many of these critiques have been discussed in the above sections (Halberstam, 2012, 259; Young and Boyd, 2007). Extending on earlier conversations, I do not imagine queer theories and lesbian theories to be entirely distinct in any way- as theoretical bodies, they inevitably inform and shape one another to the point where it is impossible to classify certain theorists as belonging to one or the other exclusively. Queerness will not be contained within strictly heterosexual modes of being, and queer relationships may redefine or reject heterosexual notions of family, intimacy, and lifestyles (Halberstam, 2005). Queer constantly challenges the conditions of acceptability and also undermines institutional imperatives, and according to Halberstam, “queer” as a political and sexual label allows non-assimilationist gays and lesbians to make radical alliances with other groups in ways I will explore in Chapter 2 (2008, 260). Queer theories are central to this research project because they ground my commitment to challenging systems of heterosexism and homonormativity as well as any other systems that emerge as relevant throughout the course of my research.

For the purposes of this thesis, I draw on queer, poststructuralist theories of sexual identity, which have strong anti-essentialist roots. While essentializing theories of sexual identities posit that individuals express an essential self through their sexuality, queer theories re-conceptualize identities as performative (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2010; Butler, 1990, 1993; Sedgwick, 1993, 1994). Following the work of Foucault (1990), Jameson (1991), and Flax (1992) and the postmodern, poststructuralist turn, part of the impact queer theories have on earlier theories of sexual identity is the instigation of a

shift from pursuing ‘truths’ about “homosexuals” or lesbians toward a focus on discursive practices, narrative forms, and the contexts in which lesbians are produced and reproduced (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2010; Foucault, 1990). Queer theories conceive of gender and sexualities as reflecting the time and place in which they exist and as continually evolving as individuals and society affect one another, which is how I take up these concepts in this thesis (Abes and Kasch, 2007; Jagose, 1996; Casey, 2012). By maintaining that there are no objective or universal truths and that particular forms of knowledge only become naturalized in culturally and historically specific ways, queer theories place an emphasis on contextual analysis, which lends itself well to the focus on context, location, and spatiality in this thesis (Abes and Kasch, 2007; Foucault, 1990; Lyotard, 1979). Furthermore, queer theories of identity draw on concepts of liminality and performativity to argue that instead of stable, fixed, and knowable realities, identities are constantly in flux and do not conform to linear or predetermined models of development (Abes and Kasch, 2007; Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1993s). The fluidity and openness engrained in queer theories bolsters my approach to researching sexual identities with an openness toward new ways of conceptualizing, explaining, experiencing, and understanding what it means to occupy or take on a lesbian identity.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will adopt an approach that is grounded in both lesbian theory and queer theory. A hybrid queer/lesbian approach provides a dual imperative to engage with the multiple identity dimensions of participants as they provide accounts of how they make sense of their identities, and also a framework for analyzing the power structures and power relations that shape the conditions for participant’s

narratives (Abe, 2008). As I fuse these two approaches to understanding sexual identity, I draw on Abes and Kasch's (2012) notion of theoretical borderlands, and by extension Anzaldúa's (1999) concept of borderland identities. The strategy of imagining oneself as existing in a theoretical borderlands allows a researcher to straddle several theories and approaches, drawing concepts and traditions from each to facilitate a more robust and complex understanding of identity (Abes and Kasch, 2012). Recognizing that no theory is complete in itself and that there are multiple theories of identity that offer uniquely rich insights, this approach seeks an improved theoretical space that is produced by merging, crossing, and combining several approaches, combining their strengths and acknowledging their weaknesses (Abes and Kasch, 2012). An integral part of this process is embracing the notion that such a hybrid approach is constantly in flux, and that these theories will intersect varying, depending on the issues and analysis at hand.

Heterosexism, Heteronormativity and Homonormativity:

“There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (Dyer, 1997, p. 2; cited in Dottolo 2014).

Theories of heteronormativity and homonormativity are an important part of my theoretical framework because one of the strongest themes emerging from my interview data is the desire to identify as “simply a person” instead of as a lesbian and these theories are central to interpreting and analyzing that impulse. Heterosexism and homonormativity are embedded as systems of power in society and function to create dominate-subordinate binaries which privilege certain identities at the expense of others in an effort to define and maintain a notion of what is normal (Abes and Kasch, 2012). Heteronormativity refers to the way that heterosexuality operates as the standard of the

natural/normal state of being in terms of gender and sexuality in our society (Abes and Kasch, 2012; Warner, 1993). It is problematic to adopt heterosexuality as the dominant framework for making sense of sexual identities for several reasons, most significantly that it produces a binary between those who identify as heterosexual and those who identify as non-heterosexual in a process that locks non-heterosexuality as the dualistic other that is measured and devalued based on its difference from heterosexuality (Abes and Kasch, 621, 2012). This thesis will challenge the hetero/non-hetero binary by exploring its construction and how it may operate in the lives of lesbian identified individuals. I will also examine other effects and consequences of heteronormativity, including an analysis of the compulsory nature of heterosexuality in Chapter 2 as I interpret the role of these constructs in participant's sense making activities (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1994; Rich, 1980).

Part of the reason studies that identify and actively resist heteronormativity are important is because while lesbian and otherwise non-heterosexually identified people are aware of and continuously grapple with the insidious networks of heteronormativity that make up our society, heterosexual people and heteronormative institutions themselves need to become aware of the way heteronormativity functions and how its effects can be resisted and subverted (Abes and Kasch, 2007). Heteronormativity is rarely the focus of analysis and not by coincidence. It is a tactic of the heteronormative system to consistently place homosexuality at the centre of all analysis and examination; it is homosexuals, not heterosexuals, whose lifestyles, relationships, and psyches are probed, whose lives and experiences are problematized, and whose existences and histories are silenced and erased (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2010). Fellows and Razack's (1998)

analysis on identity and dominance through difference extends this discussion usefully. Fellows and Razack (1998) focus on the way that dominant groups exist as unlabeled, unnamed entities. White people are often understood to not have a race, just as heterosexual people are often understood to not have a sexual orientation (Fellows and Razack, 1998). Identity boxes or identity categories, Fellows and Razack posit, are intrinsically linked to subordination and are only invoked to mark those who are excluded from dominant groups (1998). This notion of the way dominant groups embody the norm in a way that is beyond question and beyond naming is crucial to the way that members of those dominant groups maintain their innocence in the domination and subordination of others (Fellows and Razack, 1998). Thus, it is imperative to place heterosexuality under analytical examination in order to begin to reveal its coercive, constructed nature and this thesis seeks to contribute to this effort (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2010). While heterosexism and heteronormativity are similar, I draw on conceptualizations of both throughout this thesis. Heterosexism is “a system of attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favour of opposite-sex sexuality and relationships” (Jung and Smith, 1993); it is reflected in structural, institutional practices as well as in everyday social interactions (Land and Kitzinger, 2005). Heterosexism not only reflects discrimination against and oppression of LGBTTAQI+ people, but it also reflects and conceals a heterosexual privilege (Land and Kitzinger, 2005).

As Abes and Kasch (2007) and Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1994) note, the way that normal is constructed can generate a variety of barriers and tribulations for people trying to make sense of their sexual identities (Abes and Kasch, 634, 2007). But heteronormativity does not function alone to impose an understanding of what it looks

like to be normal in our society regarding sexual identity; over the past decade, scholars have identified a system of homonormativity, which describes the process of mainstreaming and cultivating normative, acceptable homosexual identities. Duggan (2002) describes homonormativity as a “politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized, gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). Fraser’s (1997) work on affirmative versus transformative identity politics allows homonormative politics to be understood as affirmative or humanist/liberal identity politics (Ahmed, 1999), recognizing their utilities and maintaining an awareness of their risks and limitations.

In terms of political movements, homonormativity manifests itself in the assimilatory strategies that are taken up by increasingly mainstream LG movements. Canada has a rich history of LGBTTTQAI+ organizing and activism, as archived by Kinsman and Gentile (2010), Warner (2002) and Kinsman (2000); however, much of this work focuses on and was attributed to affluent, prominently white and male individuals and is thoroughly grounded in an urban setting. Lesbians, people of colour, Aboriginal peoples, non-able bodied people, non-urban dwellers, and lower/working class people were marginalized and excluded from prioritizing and strategizing efforts and ultimately are less the beneficiaries of mainstream LGBT organizing than privileged, white, gay men (Warner, 2002; Kinsman and Gentile, 2010; Duggan, 2002; Casey, 2012; Calhoun, 1994). While liberationist activity remains a priority among sections of the LGBTTTQAI+ community, the more prominent stream of LGBTTTQAI+ organizing and activism in

Canada, and in North America more generally, is an assimilatory and homonormative approach that places equality with heterosexual people as the pinnacle of LGBTTTQAI+ success (Warner, 2002; Duggan, 2005; Halberstam, 2005; 2012). The homonormative approach to rights seeks to cast LGBT people as ordinary citizens who reflect mainstream values and practices despite their same-sex orientation and generally promotes a heterosexist model of life in the form of state sanctioned monogamous, sexist, forms of organizing relationships and families (Warner, 2002; Duggan, 2002; Halberstam, 2012; Doty, 2010). While this rights based, equality focused approach to LGBT movements has been taken up by mainstream society as the standard for pursuing change and progress for LGBT communities, for the multitude of LGBTTTQAI+ people who cannot or do not want to conform to the assimilatory model, all this means is that they are further excluded (Puar, 2007, 2013; Warner, 2002; Young and Boyd, 2007). Additionally, the realities LGBTTTQAI+ Canadians face in terms of homelessness, access to health care, and as victims of harassment and hate crimes strongly suggest that increased access to legal and political rights and substantive equality do not sufficiently bring about the change LGBTTTQAI+ Canadians need (Warner, 2002; Che, 2013; Ryan, 2003; Young and Boyd, 2007; Abramovich, 2014). An objective of my thesis is to consider why this might be and how these issues may be differently understood and addressed. I will extend this analysis on the status of LGBTTTQAI+ folks in Canadian society as I interpret and analyze my discussions with participants around lesbianism in Canadian society in Chapter 3.

While queer theories espouse a commitment to challenging and resisting heteronormativity, homonormativizing theories and movements make little effort to

challenge heteronormativity and actually actively seek inclusion as part of the heteronormative system. By fusing lesbian theories with queer theories for the theoretical framework for this thesis, my aim is to maintain an awareness of the presence and effects of homonormativity as I explore and interpret how participants understand and adopt homonormative strategies in their lives, and ultimately to expose and challenge the way homonormativity functions as a system of power. However, while challenging homonormativity is a political objective I am committed to, it is important to apply theories of homonormativity carefully. When I draw on theories of homonormativity in this thesis, it is not a move I intend to be inherently critical of individual practices that may be read as homonormative. Rather, the act of reading experiences/actions/movements/anything as homonormative is a way of pinpointing systems of power and domination that shape the conditions for and affect even the most radical queer spaces. It is not my intention to judge or criticize the actions of individual participants or anyone else whose experiences may be identified as homonormative and following Brown (2012), I want to emphasize my own (and he would say all of our) participation in homonormativity.

White Privilege and White Homonormativity:

Extending this analysis on homonormativity, Kennedy (2014) posits that whiteness works alongside homonormativity to determine which subjects/subjectivities are visible within the heterosexual gaze. Kennedy (2014) argues not only that whiteness plays a crucial role in formulating normative LG subjectivities, but also that homonormative impulses promote the invisibility of whiteness and white privilege. As I

interpret and analyze the discussions I had with my participants, it becomes clear that behind the visible silence around of lesbian identity is an even deeper silence around whiteness and white privilege, to the point of complete non-recognition. As a racial category, whiteness effectively functions as nothing because it is invisible and because it determines what normal is, in the sense that whiteness informs our epistemologies, identities, and assumptions about the world (Kennedy, 2014). Kennedy (2014) uses the term “white homonormativity” to refer to the relationship between whiteness, homonormativity, and lesbian visibility, and I seek to apply this framework to my project as I analyze the sense-making activities of my participants around lesbian identity, homonormativity and whiteness in Chapter 3.

Recently there has been an increasing amount of work published on critical race theory, whiteness, and lesbians/lesbianism (Dyer, 1997; Greene, 2000; Kanuha, 1990), including a special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* on lesbians and white privilege in 2014. As a white researcher interviewing white participants, it is important for me to maintain a constant awareness of white privilege and role of whiteness engrained in my project. The fact that it feels awkward for me to theorize, analyze and discuss whiteness reflects the intense invisible/neutral/privileged position of whiteness both in lesbian/queer theories and communities, academia in general, and Canadian/Ontarian society. A key feature of privilege is that those who have it are unable or unwilling to recognize its presence, effects and benefits, and white privilege is a prime example of the way this functions (Dottolo, 2014 and McIntosh, 1988). The silence around issues of race and the absence of discussion on race/whiteness in general in my interviews is one of the several significant absences I will interrogate further in Chapter 3.

According to Arnesen (2001) and Logie and Rwigema (2014), white privilege is “an epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial ‘Others’ and oneself” (Arnesen, 2001, 9). In their qualitative study of perceptions of white privilege among lesbian, bisexual, and queer women of colour in Toronto, Logie and Rwigema (2014) note that white privilege, which is constructed as normative and central to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer identities, is actively re/produced through social norms, media representations, and everyday social interactions. Furthermore, Logie and Rwigema’s (2014) participants indicated that representationally and practically, the normative idea of queer is a white person. Representationally speaking, their participants identified not only that LGBTTQAI+ representations tend to reflect privileged white people, but also that in general, even in heterosexualized representations and spaces, Black women and women of colour are very underrepresented/invisible. Particularly as I analyze my participant’s discussions around lesbian in/visibility and femme identities in Chapter 2, it is paramount that I continually acknowledge that while my white participants struggle with in/visibility, the experiences of LGBTTQAI+ people of colour would experience such struggles differently. In their study, Logie and Rwigema (2014) specifically note that representations and the cultural imaginary around what it means and looks like to be femme is a particularly white construct.

Another point that is particularly relevant to this project is Logie and Rwigema’s (2014) analysis on the way white privilege is constructed and maintained through spatialized practices. Drawing on Nash and Bain (2007), they argue that white privilege is engrained in the way LGBTTQAI+ spaces are constructed as and remain invisibly

racialized as well as the process of policing these spaces to maintain racial boundaries (Logie and Rwigema, 2014). Expanding on this, Logie and Rwigema's (2014) participants note the double standard in the way that white LGBTTQAI+ people do not hesitate to call out or critique racialized communities for the presence of homophobia or perceived discrimination against LGBTTQAI+ people, but those same white people refuse to interrogate their own and their community's white privilege and racism (Puar, 2007). White privilege and colonialism construct queerness as white and perpetuate the idea that racialized communities are less likely than white communities to accept LGBTTQAI+ people, just as rural spaces are less likely to accept LGBTTQAI+ people and racialized people in a way that ignores the existence of a multitude of people of colour who identify as LGBTTQAI+ (Logie and Rwigema, 2014; Puar, 2007; Cohen, 1997). I will return to this analysis as I interpret the way my participants make sense of space and race in Chapter 3.

The existing literature on race and racism within LGBTTQAI+ communities clearly indicates that racialized gay men and lesbians experience microaggressions, sexualized racism in the form of being sexually objectified, masculinized, feminized, exoticized and/or characterized as undesirable by the white LGBTTQAI+ community, as well as experiencing vulnerability to racist homophobic violence (Puar, 2007; Dottolo, 2014; Logie and Rwigema, 2014; Greene, 2000). It is important to keep in mind that Logie and Rwigema's (2014) Toronto based study of lesbian, bisexual, gay and queer identified women of colour found that they experience intersectional stigma on a daily basis and that white privilege re/produces their marginalization, particularly in terms of who is read as legitimately queer. Because I do not have data that includes the

experiences of women of colour, I want to acknowledge that a major limitation of my study is a lack of analysis and attention to issues of racism and the experiences of people of colour by emphasizing an analysis of white privilege and racism as factors that shape lesbian experiences in Ontario (and everywhere). However, Dottolo (2014) notes that white lesbian researchers will often do what I have done here, which is to acknowledge their privilege and, in this case, the privilege of my participants, in a way that does not extend past the point of confession. As I interpret and discuss the themes from the discussions I had with my participants in Chapters 2 and 3, I endeavour to include an analysis of how privilege functions and affects this project. Overall, I seek to incorporate and extend Logie and Rwigema's (2014) analysis by interrogating and visibilizing white privilege and the ways it is enacted spatially and discursively to marginalize women of colour.

Theories of Space:

A common source of confusion that I have encountered in this project is around the way I use and define the terms urban, rural, and non-urban. Just as I reject enduring definitions of terms like lesbian and queer, I do not have an interest in offering a definition of urban/rural/non-urban for the purposes of this project and, drawing on Weston's (1995), I would argue that it is not possible to stably define or pinpoint what/where is considered rural and urban. Weston (1995) reflects that while conducting her work on gay migration, she realized that she was not necessarily able to clearly differentiate between "rural" and "urban" women. Complicating the issue, Weston (1995) asks if someone who temporarily moved to the city to pursue education is urban or rural or if someone who left their home in the countryside within the last few years counts as rural or urban and if that changes if they have only lived in the city for a few

months. Weston (1995) posits that not only does the focus on the urban/rural binary prove difficult to apply to individual subjects, but more troublingly, that the urban/rural binary functions to constitute gay and lesbian subjects themselves. Furthermore, it is important to note that what is considered urban and rural changes across time and space and is context dependent.

Another part of the reason I am disinterested in definitions of urban/rural is because I am deeply committed to moving beyond the urban/rural binary in terms of thinking about the intersection of space and sexuality. When we use the urban/rural binary to make sense of our experiences, the result is generalizations about the experiences of an imagined “most” LGBTQ people in urban spaces versus rural spaces, which are actually not very useful for understanding the experiences of a majority of people. Halberstam (2005) furthers this argument, noting that the urban/rural binary constructs a deterministic relationship between (urban) space and queer communities and overlooks the nuances of the experiences of LGBTQ people living in both small towns/rural areas *and* in urban areas. To this end, I use the term non-urban as an initial way of disrupting the urban/rural binary. The use of non-urban was particularly useful to me as I recruited participants into this project because, as I suspected as someone who grew up in an area that is generally considered to be rural, very few people who live in rural areas identify with that term or apply it to themselves. The following excerpt from my conversation with a participant, K, illustrates this well:

K: Um, would you consider X non-urban? [D: Yeah, yeah I guess! I sort of leave it open to interpretation, but yeah] Sure, yeah, I would consider urban to be like Toronto, Y [130 000], Z [30 000].

The fact that K is unsure if the place she lives, a town of around 8000 people, is considered urban, non-urban, or rural speaks to the lack of utility of these categories. Furthermore, I would question the utility of a category that is meant to represent the experiences of LGBTTQAI+ people living in a town of 30 000, a city of 130 000, and a city of over a million people. Overall, I do not interpret a distinction between urban, rural, non-urban as important concepts in the sense-making activities of my participants and they did not seem to draw any clear distinctions drawn between these types of spaces.

Queer and Feminist Geography:

The scholars I draw on in the fields of human geography, and specifically feminist/queer geography, provide the foundation for thinking in new ways about the interactions/relationships between bodies and spaces. I want to contribute to these conversations by interpreting the way particular participants understand their experiences as spatialized, both through their reflections on and responses to questions about ways/feelings of being in specific spaces, but also through the way participants make use of spatial terms / spatiality to make sense of their experiences.

Grosz (1995) analyzes several ways of understanding the relationship between bodies and space, and city spaces in particular. Moving past conceptualizations of city/body as externally related to one another, Grosz (1995) argues for a model that considers the body as active in the production of and transformation of the city while recognizing that neither the body nor the city is able to entirely determine the other. While the city is only one element that socially constitutes the body, and is never necessarily the most significant, Grosz (1995) argues that the “form, structure, norms of

the city affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality” (385). I think it’s important to consider the way that space and where we live e/affects how we see each other, how we understand our alignment/orientation in space, and how we are physically and materially affected by space – in the way we organize our time, where we socialize, where and what we eat, who and what we see, or how our bodies and muscles are impacted by the physical environment we occupy (Grosz, 1995; Ahmed, 2006). Grosz (1995) emphasizes not only how bodies are representationally transformed, explored and contested by space but also the way that bodies transform landscapes by changing their demographic needs, continually pushing the limits and boundaries of spaces.

Grosz (1995) also argues that there is no natural or ideal environment for the body and that there is no space that is necessarily better at facilitating one’s health and wellness. Her conclusion, essentially, is that there is nothing intrinsic about the city which makes it alienating or unnatural and that our focus should not be on determining which spaces are conducive for particular bodies or activities, but rather examining how different spaces actively produce the bodies of their inhabitants. This resonates with my aim of considering narratives around specific bodies in particular spaces; it is not useful to allow generalizations to predetermine the way we imagine possibilities for certain bodies in certain spaces.

In terms of foregrounding some of the analysis in Chapter 3, I want to emphasize the significance that theories of spatiality have to interpreting the sense making of participants - for example, depending on the nature of a space, lesbian visibility politics can operate in very different ways. In a larger urban space characterized by a dense

population and its resulting anonymity, a lesbian identified person may have to continually (re)assert their lesbianism in order to be read as a lesbian, whereas in a smaller town space characterized by a low population and close interpersonal networks, a lesbian identified person may be more regularly read as a lesbian because she is known by her neighbours and community, and a knowledge of her as a person includes her lesbian identity (in a way that may be less ceremonious or that may make lesbian visibility politics less relevant). I think there is a great deal to consider when theorizing the relationships between bodies and spaces and I explore this intersection further in Chapter 3.

LGBTQAI+ Rural Studies

The literature on rurality and non-normative sexual identities reflects that rural spaces are not typically seen as compatible with the needs and desires of LGBTQAI+ people (Wienke and Hill, 2013; Gorman-Murray, 2007; Herring, 2007; Halberstam, 2005; Weston, 2009; Bell and Valentine, 1995). Until recently, studies on sexuality and spatiality have been set in and focused almost exclusively on urban settings, noting the presence of rural LGBTQAI+ subjects only in ways that draw on them as the disadvantaged counterparts of urban queers (Wienke and Hill, 2013, 1257). More recently, however, the literature on sexuality reflects a move to challenge the assumption that rural areas are inherently hostile toward and detrimental for the development of LGBTQAI+ people and communities (Wienke and Hill, 2013; Kazyak, 2011; Gray, 2009; Weston, 2009). Kazyack (2011) notes that while the literature on spatiality and sexuality now increasingly recognizes that non-urban and rural LGBTQAI+ subjects

exist, we don't know a lot about how they exist and if their increasingly recognized presence means a shift in how relationships between space and sexuality are perceived. My project seeks to use participant-generated accounts of lesbian/queer/gay experiences living in small towns and rural settings to complicate the way we imagine space to affect experiences around sexuality and the way we might imagine LGBTTTQAI+ lives and identities to be possible in non-urban spaces.

I want to begin by looking at how we might understand the urban/rural binary and its effects both structurally in the way we imagine possibilities for living lives in particular spaces, and as it operates in the lives of individual LGBTTTQAI+ subjects. According to Cloke and Johnston (2005), categorization is a necessary part of our societies as a way to cope with complexity and serves as a way to make sense of our individual and collective identities. While the categories we identify with, such as urban/rural, male/female, or hetero/homo are socially constructed abstractions with no specific or enduring meanings, they provide significant meaning and structure in people's sense-making activities. Because of the centrality and significance of binary categorizations to making sense of our experiences, Cloke and Johnston (2005) posit "we need to know about the categories being deployed in order to appreciate the society we are studying, and we need to deploy our own categories in order to undertake that study". Taking up this project, I seek to interpret the way participants draw on the urban/rural binary to make sense of their experiences as a way of beginning to understand how these constructs affect the way people experience and move through spaces. According to Cloke and Johnston (2005) the urban/rural binary continues to structure the way we think about space, despite many attempts to de-centre it:

“The rural/urban binary...has survived this onslaught of material reality and philosophical re-positioning. Calls to recognize the city's countryside as an integrated system (Bryant et al. 1982), to emphasize the significance of events and problems that transcend the rural/urban divide (Hoggart 1990), and to identify a ‘post-rural’ condition (Murdoch and Pratt 1993) have failed to de-stabilize the categorization, identity and power of urban and rural classification. Attempts to establish middle ground from the rural polarity have had little effect. Meanwhile, urban geographers have seemed not to notice any possibility of de-centring the city as a category of understanding.”

At this point it is helpful to look to analyses of dualistic thinking and the powerful way that binaries can function to structure the way we make sense of the world. Dualistic thinking dominates Western thought in general, which makes it unsurprising that binaries also structure the way we think about geography/space. According to Gibson-Graham (2000), “the first term in the binary is endowed with positivity at the expense of the other: presence and value are attached to [factory] while [non-factory] is absent and devalued (pp. 97–8)” (cited in Cloke and Johnston, 2005). Halberstam’s (2005) concept of metronormativity builds on such an understanding. Metronormativity “maps a story of migration onto the coming out narrative” which constructs a normalizing narrative that conflates being urban with being visible and suggests that LGBTTTQAI+ subjects are only able to fully express their sexual selves once they have come out into a community of urban gays/lesbians/queers (Halberstam, 2005, 37). Metronormativity reveals rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary that governs the spatialization of sexual identities (Halberstam, 2005).

The works of both Herring (2007) and Kazyak (2011) also emphasizes that although queer and non-normative sexual practices and desires have long existed in rural spaces, the construction of modern gay and lesbian identities locates them exclusively in urban spaces. A major component of this process is the overwhelming cultural impulse to advise gays and lesbians who live in rural areas to move to a big city as soon as possible (Weston, 1995). Weston (1995) examines this notion more closely in her study

of the “great gay migration” of the 1970s and 1980s, which saw tens of thousands of gays and lesbians migrating to major cities. Cultural tropes such as the rural gay man or lesbian who flees to the city to come out, find community and liberation (Weston, 1995) as well as the homophobic rural heterosexual serve to maintain the urban/rural, tolerant/intolerant binary (Kazyak, 2011). Only by actively (re)affirming the rural as backwards and inhospitable to gays and lesbians can the urban continuously secure its oppositional position as sophisticated and welcoming to gays and lesbians (Kazyak, 2011; Boso, 2013; Halberstam 2005). Within most of the literature on rural gay and lesbian lives, social isolation, unsupportive social environments and a complete lack of services and facilities are cited to imply that gay and lesbian identified people have little choice but to move to the city (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Weston, 1995). Ultimately, most authors assume that urban spaces are the most desirable site to come out and find queer community (Kazyak, 2011; Gorman-Murray, 2007; Weston, 1995; Halberstam, 1996, 2005). I offer an interpretation of how such discourses and the structuring narrative of the urban/rural binary shape the comments and experiences of my participants in Chapter 3.

There are two dominant trends in the literature on rurality and non-normative sexual identities: that rural life is less beneficial to gay people’s wellbeing than urban life and that rural life is uniquely suited to foster gay people’s wellbeing compared to urban life (Wienke and Hill, 2013). The first, more dominant perspective is congruent with the urban/rural binary and consistent with most of the current literature as it emphasizes the challenges of rural living, which include social isolation, conservative values, and a more homophobic, hostile social climate (Wienke and Hill, 2013; Bell and Valentine, 1995).

Rural spaces are seen as generally less hospitable because they cannot offer the support networks, gaybourhoods, and organizations, bars, churches and other facilities that cater specifically to LGBTTTQAI+ people, which are readily found in urban areas (Wienke and Hill, 2013). Kazyak (2011) notes that “the rural and Midwest are spaces where gay and lesbian sexualities are unclaimed, stunted, and destroyed, and in contrast, urban spaces are where those identities are constructed and made visible” (561).

The alternative perception in the literature on rurality is that rural life is more beneficial to gay people’s wellbeing than urban life, which is less supported by the available literature but reflects the increasing trend of challenging the depiction of rural areas as inherently hostile to gay people (Weinke and Hill, 2013; Halberstam, 2005; Weston, 1995). This perspective, following the tradition of writers like Simmel (1976) risks romanticizing rural life by suggesting that its inhabitants are in a better mental condition than their urban counterparts because they are less affected by the strains of modern life that overwhelm city dwellers (Weinke and Hill, 2013). Bell and Valentine (1995) examine the way that rural utopianism represents the rural as “an imaginary mythological wild space” that is sought by all kinds of non-normative bodies because it offers freedom from the undesirables of modern life and the space to create communes and alternative lifestyles (114, 118). From circuits of women-only, lesbian-centric farms that comprised a form of “dykeland” throughout the countryside to the formation of an anti-urban, anti-heteronormative, anti-middle class rural fairy groups and publications, rural spaces have been able to foster a variety of LGBTTTQAI+ identities and communities (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Herring, 2007). However, it is important to note that this alternative perception of rural spaces as amenable to rural LGBTTTQAI+

identities does not significantly disrupt the urban/rural binary. To the extent that rural spaces are reclaimed as legitimate spaces for LGBTTQAI+ people, urban spaces are disparaged or negatively constructed or the benefits come from an understanding of rurality as a simple, slower kind of life in opposition to fast paced, urban living.

Given that this urban/rural binary functions to control the way our cultural imagination classifies and understands LGBTTQAI+ identities, and given that there has been a significant move to challenge this binary, it follows that an increasing number of recent studies focus on reconstructing both the rural and the urban as more complex spaces with the potential to both foster and impede fulfilling queer lives. Studies by Wienke and Hill (2013), Kazyak (2011), and Gray (2009) engage in ethnographic and empirical research that addresses the differential experiences of urban and rural gays and lesbians without framing their participant's experiences through the urban/rural binary.

I am interested in contributing to these projects and in particular, in examining the effects that this assumption of urban as free and rural as closeted has on the lives of LGBTTQAI+ people. The reason I think it is so important to share and make sense of the ways LGBTTQAI+ identified people are living in small town and rural spaces is because often times in our cultural imaginary, they are not thought to exist and certainly not in positive, fulfilling ways⁴. I think for many LGBTTQAI+ identified people, the feeling that you have to leave your small town or that the kind of life you want is not possible in the place where you have spent most of your time and where the majority of your social and familial networks are located can be very difficult even if it takes years to realize it. The other side of how difficult leaving home can be is that the urban spaces we enter into

⁴ There are a few important exceptions to this statement, notably Clare (2010), Gray (2009), and Garringer (2014)

do not necessarily hold all the possibility they're constructed to. Drawing on theories of the way we understand the concepts of urban versus rural and writing that gives voices to the experiences of so many people who are living lives in rural/small town spaces, I argue that we need to continue to complicate the way we understand the intersection of sexuality and spatiality by focusing on specific contexts and specific experiences instead of allowing one overarching narrative to determine the possibilities for living certain lives in certain spaces.

Chapter Two: “Being” A Lesbian: Appearance and Behavioural Norms

This chapter examines excerpts from the interviews I conducted with the five participants in this study with the objective of understanding the relevance and effects of lesbianism as a construct, an identity, or in any other possible way in their lives. I am interested in exploring how each participant situates themselves in relation to lesbianism, what this can be interpreted to reveal about lesbianism and how I understand the notion of Lesbianism to aid this process. One of my primary objectives in this thesis is to emphasize the importance of a continued lesbian specificity, not to the detriment or erasure of other identities, but as one possible identity signifier among many valuable options. This chapter begins with a consideration of what it means to “be” a lesbian by drawing on interview excerpts and elaborating on Lesbianism, particularly how we might identify Lesbianism in social media and popular culture. The remainder of the chapter is comprised of thematic analysis of interview excerpts organized around themes of appearance/gender and behaviour/desire (Gordon, 2006; McLean, 2008). Throughout this chapter I endeavour to demonstrate ways that Lesbianism shapes the conditions of knowledge around lesbianism and how my participants navigate and negotiate reified constructs of lesbianism, behavioural norms around lesbianism, and also appearance norms and the devaluation of femininity and femme lesbians.

“Being” A Lesbian:

In this section I analyze excerpts from my interviews with participants, building on the notion of Lesbianism established in Chapter 1 as a way of referencing the reification of lesbianism as an identifiable, occupiable, commodifiable concept. I identify generalized statements about a knowable construct of “Lesbian” in order to engage in an

analysis of the way lesbian identified folks relate to lesbian stereotypes, abstract notions of what it means and looks like to be a Lesbian, on imagined parameters and boundaries of Lesbianism and also how such constructs inform their experiences and understanding of lesbianism. As I expand on the idea of Lesbianism, I want to draw on the following excerpt from my interview with C because the way I interpret her comments helpfully demonstrates the presence and effects of an abstracted, cultural understanding

Lesbianism. C states:

“I feel like it's not really a part of my cultural identity because the things that I identify with and that are important to me are not anything that's ever been stereotypically lesbian. And I mean the few stereotypical things that I do have that are kind of lesbionic are just a small part of the things that I do so I've never really been someone who you could point to and say, oh that's a lesbian! It's never been an obvious thing about me, so I guess I feel like it's never been as important for me to be seen as a lesbian.”

The way that C remarks that what she identifies with is “not anything that’s ever been stereotypically lesbian” suggests that there are things that *are* stereotypically lesbian or that particular attributes, activities, interests and other things are considered stereotypically Lesbian. What is understood to be stereotypically lesbian varies among and between people who identify as lesbian, LGBTTQAI+ communities more generally, heterosexual women and heterosexual men. Throughout this section I contend that there are multiple, mutually constituting/reliant, abstract stereotypical understandings of Lesbianism that have both positive and detrimental effects on the lives and experiences of not only lesbian identified individuals, but also folks who are not lesbians, such as people who identify as bisexual, queer, pansexual, or heterosexual women whose appearance and/or behaviour aligns with what is culturally imagined as Lesbian.

Continuing with an analysis of C’s comments, she also notes that there are some “stereotypical things” about her that are “kind of lesbionic,” which reinforces the idea that folks’ everyday experiences, including the way they understand themselves and their

own interests and identity, are influenced by an abstract conception of what lesbianism means, looks like, involves and doesn't involve. C is one of the participants in my study who does not usually/consistently identify as a lesbian; yet, significantly, stereotypes surrounding Lesbianism and notions of an abstractly definable 'lesbionic-ness' play into the calculations she makes about her identity. C's comments suggest that even this abstract, cultural understanding of Lesbianism is not entirely stable/enduring.

Lesbianism is contextual- the stereotypes, associations and images connected with Lesbianism shift across time and space (Kazyak, 2012) and vary based on the ways that lesbianism intersects with other facets of a person's identities. In the following analysis, I aim to engage with both the way my participants talk about lesbianism in their own lives and at a more abstract level and how stereotypes and reified understandings of Lesbianism play a role in the development of identities and communities.

Drawing on Dyer's (1999) work on the role of stereotypes, I am interested in investigating the roots and affects of pervasive lesbian stereotypes and also in the way that lesbian identified folks relate to, make use of, and are affected by stereotypes and abstract understandings of their group. For example, the other day on Instagram I posted a picture of myself wearing a plaid shirt and holding my cat and I hashtagged it #lesbian. In the world of social media, hashtags can be used in any number of ways- primarily as a way to catalogue social media content to maximize activity on one's content (#likeforlike) and also as a way to connect with the other people posting related content (Scott, 2015). The range of people who use social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr is diverse and the motivation for posting as well as the stylistic and content choices people make are just as vast (Scott, 2015). Sexuality hashtags are intriguing

because they are used constantly and in infinite ways. On Instagram and Tumblr, there is a seemingly endless number of hashtags relating to lesbianism- #lesbian, #lesbians, #lesbiansofinstagram, #lesbianpride and #lesbianlove are the top five. On its own, #Lesbian returns 8, 313, 186 posts on Instagram (Instagram.com). On Tumblr, similar trends exist with #Lesbian returning millions of posts (Tumblr.com). Of course, the Tumblr example is even more interesting considering that Tumblr has periodically banned both #Lesbian and #Gay hashtags because they contain too much pornographic content (Bennett Smith, 2013; Hiott-Millis, 2013). A current Tumblr search⁵ for content that has been hashtagged “lesbian” returns mostly selfies of people who, one might assume, identify as lesbians. The prominent commonalities among these images, often also demarcated by a hashtag, include plaid, tattoos, rainbow everything, beanies, and pictures and Gifs of lesbian and bisexual characters and scenes from popular media content. The content of the images as well as the way they are tagged and catalogued suggests that the people who use such hashtags are aware of and are making reference to common lesbian stereotypes, and in doing so they may be affirming those stereotypes, modifying those stereotypes, or rejecting those stereotypes.

As Hall (1997) notes in his foundational text on the field of representational theories, the ways that people communicate are mediated by the degree to which they share conceptual maps and concepts of language/signifiers that allow them to make sense of the world in similar ways- what is considered as belonging to the same culture. Hall (1997) suggests that one way of understanding culture is as an aggregation of shared meanings, shared conceptual maps alongside a shared language and system of signs that allows us to communicate ideas and meanings to one another. Hall (1997) emphasizes

⁵ As of October 12, 2015.

that the meaning of signs is always arbitrary and never determined in the sense that the meaning of signs is never fixed or essential. Even though within particular cultures, there are ways of understanding certain signs that are so deeply associated with certain signifiers it is difficult to imagine that such signs could be differently understood, and Hall (1997) underscores that the meaning of any sign is contextual and relational. In reality, there are many competing ways of understanding the world and even within cultures and subcultures, meaning that there is no universal, enduring or obvious truth, even within specific groups (Hall, 1997). Throughout this section, I investigate various ways of interpreting the meaning of discourses around lesbianism.

Hall (1997) emphasizes that the meaning that we take away from any act of communication will never necessarily be the specific meaning intended by the producer nor will our interpretation be the same as other viewers'. While we cannot prohibit or prevent any negative or unintended connotations from being associated with any particular word or message, there is what Hall (1997) refers to as a "constant sliding of meaning in all interpretation, a margin- something in excess of what we intend to say- in which other meanings overshadow the statement of the text" or put a new/unintended twist on what is being said (33). Hall (1997) draws attention to the limitations of structuralist approaches to language/meaning for their inattentiveness to power relations, drawing on Barthes' theories of semiotics to focus on a different level that interrogates the meanings and implications of events. Casey (2012) similarly calls for a shift in focus from simply identifying what things are, as she asks:

"Why are we so preoccupied with "what is it?" when it comes to understanding identity? As structured identity becomes displaced by postmodern theories of strategic recognizability, the more relevant questions becomes "for whom and for what purpose?" (4).

Asking “for whom and for what purpose” reinforces the importance of contextualizing and challenging any impulse to identify *as* or with anything in particular (Casey, 2012, 4; Butler, 1990). As I analyze the following interview excerpts, it is interesting to note how participants seem to reflect this notion of assuming particular identities, signifiers, or not doing so, depending on their situation. Returning to social media and identity hashtags, asking “for whom and for what purpose” are we tagging photos #lesbian yields interesting results. As previously mentioned, people who use #lesbian may be affirming those stereotypes, modifying those stereotypes, or rejecting those stereotypes. Using such a hashtag is certainly referencing and recognizing the relevance of lesbian as a signifier and can evoke a range of significations (ideas/stereotypes/connotations/experiences) depending on factors like the context and the people involved in the exchange. Of course, drawing on Hall’s (1997) theories of representation, depending on who is viewing the photo, how much context they have of the person posting the photo and/or the subject of the photo, the way its message or presence will be interpreted varies greatly. I believe this demonstrates the potential power social media holds as a re-signifying device or as a way of writing/posting back or at least significantly complicating stereotypes and cultural assumptions. I imagine that many people, like myself, use hashtags as a way of playing at cultural stereotypes (while I don’t hashtag all photos of myself as #lesbian, I often do so when I am wearing plaid, holding a cat, or doing something else I understand as stereotypically “lesbian”).

There are many blogs and social media accounts that are dedicated to representing the experiences of lesbians of colour, disabled lesbians, disabled queer femmes, queer lesbians, femmes, hard femmes, high femmes, and writing back against generalized

“Lesbian” stereotypes that these bloggers identify as constraining and limiting their ability to be who they want to be. Examples include Autostraddle.com, and particularly their First Person section, which regularly features pieces by trans lesbians, femmes, rural lesbians, lesbians of colour; “Everyday Feminism”, “The Queer Fat Femme Guide to Life”, “Sublime Femme”, and of course, on social media and most notably Tumblr, where there is an infinite number of blogs from any conceivable perspective, including fluid articulations of high femme, hard femme, and queer femme labels/identities. What I love about many of these blogs is that they are writing back at the reification of Lesbianism and are challenging it from within the lesbian label. Another example of the way social media and hashtags are used to productively “post back” at hegemonic, reified understandings of particular identities is discussed by Michaelson (2014) in a piece about the online movement “#WhatFemmeLooksLike”. The hashtag “#WhatFemmeLooksLike”, along with other tags including #WhatButchLooksLike, #WhatBiLooksLike, #WhatTransLooksLike and #MyQueerFamily provide folks with an organized, searchable way to participate in a movement that redefines or un-defines what it means to identify in a particular way and who identifies a particular way in an effective challenge to reified understandings of what it looks like or means to be femme, butch, bi or trans.

I posit that because folks living as lesbians or as non-heterosexual women are aware of Lesbianism, including lesbian stereotypes, and thus are subsequently cognizant of moments wherein their experiences, preferences, expressions and choices align with those constructs- or, in other words, are aware of moments in which they are a Lesbian or, as C puts it, “lesbionic”. I also think that sexuality hashtags serve an interesting

purpose in terms of outness. While I recognize that it is impossible to control how many people will view any post or how they might react to it, I think there is significance in the way that social media allows us the power to create and share statements about ourselves to those around us. Especially given the influx in coverage and analysis around the devaluation of teenage girl culture (Moss, 2015), which includes social media and selfie culture, there is increasing recognition of the power of the selfie as a tool that not only has the power to re-inscribe and re-write hegemonic meanings, but also allows groups of people who are often spoken for, devalued, or erased to make themselves immensely present (Tatum, 2014). Thus, while content exists that is produced about lesbians by non-lesbians (and of course, even within that category of content, whether the content is produced by a gay man, a heterosexual feminist woman, or a heterosexual man, to provide a few examples, will affect both its intended meaning and the way it is interpreted) there is also an increasing amount of content that is produced about lesbians by lesbians and there is certainly no “central essence” or consistency to this content, often explicitly so. Again, I posit that this is intentional- a manifestation of the desire to contradict and post back against **Lesbianism**.

The rest of this chapter derives its structure from McLean’s (2008) qualitative research with women who have “come out again” by relinquishing a non-heterosexual identity either for another non-heterosexual identity, a heterosexual identity, or to be non-identified. McLean (2008) understands her participants as commonly drawing on notions of authenticity to differentiate between “real” and “fake” lesbians in their discussions of identity and community. McLean (2008) notes that her participants identify the boundaries containing what they identified as “authentic lesbianism” predominantly

around appearance and behaviour and I found that a similar thematic framework of appearance and behaviour was a helpful way of analyzing the core components of the way participants talked about lesbianism in our interviews. Thus, the first section of this chapter focuses on the behavioural aspect (McLean, 2008) or what Gordon (2006) identifies as the sexuality component of lesbianism and the second section focuses on the appearance aspect (McLean, 2008) or the gender component of lesbianism (Gordon 2006).

Sexuality: Behavioural Norms of Lesbianism

Bolsø (2008) argues that social sciences would be meaningless without the ability to make some generalized statements about the social and that making some generalizations is permissible alongside a methodological acknowledgement that such generalizations are being taken up. According to Bolsø (2008), it is necessary to be able to theorize lesbian desire and practice as “something that is possible to delimit, describe and name, in a continuous process of deconstruction, construction and struggle over the politics of theory and practice” (51). Thus, while I recognize that offering any definition of lesbianism involves making some kind of generalization, I chose to ask participants for possible definitions of lesbianism near the beginning of our interviews as a way of probing how they talk about, experience, relate to, or make sense of lesbianism as a generalized concept. Participant’s responses reflect interestingly on the notion of behavioural norms of lesbian sexuality. Below I analyze the definitions of lesbianism

offered by four of my five participants⁶ in response to the question “Do you think it's possible to offer a definition of the term lesbian?”

K: Just it's, uh I guess, society's term that they've given [D: Yep] to categorize women who love other women or are attracted to other women... (laughs) Yeah, I think it's just that same thing, that's just the societal category for women who are attracted to other women.

I chose to begin with K's definition because she seems to interpret lesbianism as a socially constructed concept that is projected onto people (“society's term...to categorize women who love other women”) instead of identifying lesbianism as something that some people essentially *are*. I connect her identification of lesbianism as a societal term for women who love women as gesturing toward a theory of Lesbianism that is culturally relevant in the sense that it is commonly used, but not necessarily relevant in the experiences of all people living lesbian lives. That aside, this definition clearly indicates that lesbianism refers to an attraction between two women. This reflects a common theme that runs throughout the definitions of lesbianism offered by participants, and that is a lack of interrogation of the category of women. R's definition is the exception, as she is the only participant to challenge the universality of the category of women as she notes:

R: Definition? Okay, so we're getting like, more dictionary style... [D: Yeah (laughter)] [laughter] okay... um, ahh... I don't know, I guess I probably. pretty similar⁷, just someone who identifies as a woman, not like, I don't want to say cis, I don't know, anyone who identifies as a woman [D: Yeah]... who wants to .. I guess have romantic relationships with or sleep with other women.. exclusively. I'm not saying that everyone who is a lesbian will only ever sleep with women [D: mhm, yeah] but like..., you know, you picked the label for a reason...

⁶ Because of recording issues with the phone interview I conducted with C, I was not able to transcribe or draw data from the first four minutes of our interview.

⁷ R is referencing her response to my previous question wherein she had already begun to offer a definition of lesbian/ism. My previous question was: “and in your opinion what does it mean to identify as a lesbian? Like what does lesbian connote or sort of bring out for you?”

One element of R's definition that this quotation shows is that she recognizes that providing a definition of lesbianism is a bit awkward by pointing out that we were getting "dictionary style" and also by hedging in a way that indicates not only that it seems unnatural to provide a definition but also that it is not something she can clearly or easily do. By explicitly noting: "I don't want to say cis," R is acknowledging the presence of trans lesbians and that it is not only cisgender women who are lesbians. This marks one of the few moments in my interviews where trans lesbians are acknowledged. For the most part, my other four interviews do not mention or include trans lesbians, meaning that my research and this thesis in general reflects the erasure of trans lesbians, which is an ongoing process in lesbian and LGBTQ+ communities (Serano, 2013). Although I do not intend to exclude trans women from my analysis of lesbianism, I am aware of the importance of explicitly recognizing and making clear the intention to include trans women and trans lesbians in lesbian/feminist spaces. Due to the historic and ongoing exclusion and marginalization of trans women in general and by lesbian and feminist movements in particular, it is important not to simply assume that other people know your use of the term "women" is intended to be trans inclusive. In the conclusion of this thesis I more thoroughly consider the way the category of lesbian relies on the category of women, what that means, and considers possible ways of moving beyond it.

Another component of R's definition of lesbianism that I want to explore is her comment: "I'm not saying that everyone who is a lesbian will only ever sleep with women". In relation to McLean's (2008) findings, whose participants seemed to imagine stricter boundaries on the behavioural norms of lesbianism than the participants in this study, R's response acknowledges that while lesbianism is understood to imply that one

is interested in romantic and/or sexual relationships with women exclusively, not all lesbians have or will exclusively engage in romantic/sexual relationships with women. Yet despite the degree of openness allowed by the recognition that not all lesbians have only ever had relationships with other women, her final comment “you picked the label for a reason” is interesting. Such a comment could be interpreted as invoking a notion of lesbian specificity or at least heavily implied lesbian behavioural norms- that being that lesbians do not engage in relationships, sexual or romantic, with men. To extend this analysis, I look to another participant, A, who provided the following response for her definition of lesbianism:

A: Um I don't really know um (laughs) just two females in love! I don't know, yeah!

I think that the lack of certainty reflected in A’s response is indicative of how challenging it is to offer a definition of a concept as nebulous as lesbianism. I interpret the way A hedges her definition repeating, “I don’t know” twice, to suggest that she is disclaiming her authority to provide a definition. While the definitions provided by each of my participants are fairly similar to one another, I got the sense that some of my participants felt like they lacked expertise on lesbianism. Gordon (2006) found that among her participants there was a clear sentiment that everyone else in the community is aware of all of the governing rules and norms around behaviour and appearance, except the participant herself, who is not privy to them and thus imagines herself to be unlike other lesbians because of her lack of knowledge. One of Gordon’s (2006) participants expressed concerns to her that they might “ruin her study with their ignorance” about lesbianism, being a lesbian and the lesbian community, despite their lesbian identity (177). The definitional content that A provides, “two females in love,” reflects the same

minimum qualifications for lesbianism as the other three participants- that a lesbian is a woman who loves an/other women. L's definition indicates this as well, as she responds:

L: Basically that you prefer to sleep with women, that's it.

Though concise, this definition holds a great deal of potential in its openness. While other definitions focus on a person's actual actions or what they do, L chooses to specify that a lesbian is someone who *prefers* to sleep with women. I think the split between what one does and what one prefers to do is important, especially in the context of expressing one's identity, orientation and desires. I interpret this word choice as an attempt to take into account the reality of heterosexist societies, which is that almost everyone, including lesbians, are raised under an ideology of compulsory heterosexuality that is ubiquitously enforced and encourages people to pursue heterosexual relationships by constructing them not only as the preferred option, but often the only way of being (Rich, 1980, 2004). Due to this, many women come out after having been in heterosexual relationships for many years, for various reasons and often because they have not considered that there is an alternative to heterosexuality, or because there are vast political, social and economic incentives to ignore any alternatives (Rich, 1980, 2004; Phelan, 1993; Wittig, 1982; Stein, 1993; Abby, 2015). My interpretation of L's definition is influenced by my knowledge of who she is and her life based on her disclosures during our interview. Since she is in her late 40s and is older than myself and the other participants, she may be more aware of how difficult it was to come out as a lesbian or to choose to live a lesbian life in past decades. My interpretation of her definition is influenced by L's disclosure that she had been married to a man for a period of time. The recognition that many lesbians have had sexual or romantic relationships with men in the past is often absent from discourses of lesbianism because it complicates

the tidy narrative of lesbians being “woman loving women”; however it makes sense that someone who has spent a portion of their life in a heterosexual marriage would be more attentive to the inclusion of lesbians who have had relationships with men. In Abby’s (2015) article, many of the women she talked to about their experiences of coming out later in life, or after having been married to men, expressed confusion or a sense of loss over the heterosexual future they had imagined for themselves. This discussion also invokes Halberstam’s (2005) notion of queer temporality and heterotemporality, specifically in relation to one of the women quoted in Abby’s (2015) piece who noted: “For 30+ years I envisioned myself with a husband, not a wife.” I understand such a disclosure not only to speak to the ubiquity of compulsory heterosexuality, but also to the way we experience time/temporality in a heterosexualized way. Halberstam (2005) emphasizes that that “respectability, and the notions of normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of temporality,” which asserts that the mature adult emerges from a period of angsty, unruly adolescence in a way that places longevity/reproduction/stability as the most laudable goal (5; Fellows and Razack, 1998). Informed by a naturalized heterotemporality, the women interviewed for Abby’s (2015) piece expected and imagined that after their teen years, they would meet a man and get married, likely eventually purchasing a house and having children. These heterosexualized ways of imagining temporality and the “respectable” progression of our lives is also deeply reflected in hegemonic coming out narratives, which imbues non-heterosexual identities with legitimacy based on how early in one’s life they become aware of their non-heterosexuality. Normative and acceptable temporalities of coming out not only ignore/erase the effects of compulsory heterosexuality, but make it more

difficult for those people, including the women in Abby's (2015) article, to pursue their desires. I discuss coming out narratives in more detail and in relation to conversations with my participants in Chapter 3.

To summarize, the four definitions of lesbianism produced by my participants were as follows:

A: Um I don't really know um (laughs) just two females in love! I don't know, yeah!

L: Basically that you prefer to sleep with women, that's it.

R: Definition? Okay, so we're getting like, more dictionary style... [D: Yeah (laughter)] [laughter] okay... um, ahh... I don't know, I guess I probably. pretty similar¹, just someone who identifies as a woman, not like, I don't want to say cis, I don't know, anyone who identifies as a woman [D: Yeah]... who wants to .. I guess have romantic relationships with or sleep with other women.. exclusively. I'm not saying that everyone who is a lesbian will only ever sleep with women [D: mhm, yeah] but like.., you know, you picked the label for a reason...

K: Just it's, uh I guess, society's term that they've given [D: Yep] to categorize women who love other women or are attracted to other women... (laughs) Yeah, I think it's just that same thing, that's just the societal category for women who are attracted to other women.

Looking at all four definitions together, it is clear that they all draw on an understanding of a coherent category of women. The definitional entanglement of woman-ness and lesbianism has had damaging consequences in lesbian and feminist communities, often resulting in the exclusion of trans women (Serano, 2006; 2007) and intersex people from lesbian spaces, as detailed by Pattatucci-Aragon (2013) in her work on lesbian norms, homonormativity, and lesbian identity, in which she conceptualizes both lesbianism and the category of women as one of many socially constructed, mutually constitutive and dependent concepts. While this could suggest that Lesbianism holds no subversive potential and can only serve the function of bolstering the heterosexist white-supremacist

capitalist patriarchy, I look to theoretical arguments and my participant's accounts of their thoughts and experiences to trace the radical potential of lesbianism. Furthermore, all four definitions indicate that lesbians need to at least prefer to sleep with women, although my interpretation of the definitions provided by K, A and R suggest a stronger behavioural component of lesbianism- that lesbians only have relationships with women. I also think it's significant to note that none of my participants added any qualifiers about the appearance norms of lesbianism in their definitions, although appearance/gender does emerge as a theme throughout the interviews.

My overall interpretation of the way my participants make sense of their experiences as lesbians or as non-heterosexual women is that they see themselves as resisting norms of heterosexuality simply by not being heterosexual. They do not seem concerned with whether their experiences are interpreted or read as authentically lesbian, but that could also be because most of the participants were not concerned with and, at moments, actively wanted to distance themselves from a lesbian identity. Significantly, it's not that they prefer specific others labels or to not be labeled in a fluid/queer sense, but that they simply want to be recognized as just a person. Drawing once more on the following quote from C illustrates this well:

C: (Laughs) I think, I feel like lesbianism is a cultural identity for some people and a sexual identity for some people and I'm a member of the latter... I guess I feel like .. it is still, for a lot of people, an important part of their cultural identity because um.. I don't know, um.. I shouldn't speak to that, I should speak about what I feel (laughs) that probably makes more sense. I feel like it's not really a part of my cultural identity because the things that I identify with and that are important to me are not anything that's ever been stereotypically lesbian. And I mean the few stereotypical things that I do have that are kind of lesbionic are just a small part of the things that I do so I've never really been someone who you could point to and say, oh that's a lesbian! It's never been an obvious thing about me, so I guess I feel like it's never been as important for me to be seen as a lesbian. I'm a lesbian when I'm at home or when I'm out with my girlfriend or whatever, but most of the time I'm just a person.

The way I interpret this excerpt is that the cultural concept of Lesbianism actually deters some lesbians, C included, from identifying strongly with the signifier ‘lesbian’. She does not want to be reduced to or have the parts of her that may align with Lesbianism to be considered as more important than other things about her and she indicates that the things that comprise Lesbianism are generally not important to her or in her life. I also understand this response as recognizing that for some lesbians, cultural Lesbianism is important for them to make sense of their desires, to find community spaces, to meet other lesbians, and generally in developing a sense of self. Yet at the same time, C also recognizes that the lesbians who reject cultural lesbianism or who are lesbians in the sense that they sleep with women but have no other affinity with Lesbianism or lesbian spaces or communities are just as legitimately lesbian. I want to be careful not to devalue either cultural or sexual lesbianism (if such concepts can actually be said to exist and if so, if they can be said to exist separately) because I think that both serve important functions at certain moments and that both need to be critiqued or taken up carefully at other moments. C’s comment that lesbianism is a cultural identity for some and a sexual identity for others seems to resonate with this idea. This discussion about the existence of distinct cultural and sexual lesbianism has roots in lesbian feminist movements that historically constructed lesbianism as a political extension of feminism and as the only true way of subverting the heteropatriarchy. This notion will be taken up in the second half of this chapter on lesbian appearance norms and lesbian feminist history.

Additionally, I will return to the latter part of this quote in Chapter 3 as I draw on Kazyak (2012) to explore the spatial elements of being a lesbian in certain places or with certain people and being “just a person” in other spaces or at other times.

Based on my interpretation of my participant's remarks, I posit that they make sense of their identities by conceptualizing their lesbianism as something they *do* as opposed to something they *are*, and by recognizing that there is an external, culturally constructed understanding of what lesbian is. This cultural construct, what I refer to as Lesbianism, affects other's perceptions of them and also shapes the way they make sense of their own experiences and themselves. Most of the participants do not make use of Lesbianism in the sense that they measure themselves against it or inform themselves based on it (though some seem to indicate that they have done so in the past), but rather by their non-identification with it. While the heterosexual mainstream may make use of Lesbianism to understand who lesbians are, what they look like, what they do/like, and how they live, it seems that some lesbians (some of my participants at least) shape their experiences by disavowing the Lesbian construct and all it represents.

While the definitions of lesbianism offered by my participants illustrate aspects of the behavioural norms of Lesbianism, their responses to questions about why they choose to identify (or why they chose not to identify) as lesbian instead of gay/queer or other labels and how they differentiate between such terminologies provide more insightful reflections. On this, R remarks:

R: Um, I guess... if I say that you're queer, it's sort of really open to interpretation like, I think a lot of people choose that because they don't like having to fit inside other labels, which is totally fair.. um, [D: Yeah]... and some are flexible, or less specific.. for me, I feel like lesbian just fits. like, I'm ... [D: Yeah] It's easy for me I guess... it's not as complicated as maybe for some other people.

My interpretation of this excerpt is that R is differentiating between a more specific lesbian label and an intentionally elusive queer identity. In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler (1993) asks what a person actually reveals when they disclose

that they are a [lesbian]. In this case, my interpretation of R's remark is that they are able to draw on Lesbianism as a referent that provides some level of understanding about what she says when she identifies as a lesbian. While I would imagine that at least some of the things that people would assume they know about her because of her lesbian identity and their understanding of Lesbianism are untrue, stereotypical or detrimental, the fact that the referent is there to provide some sort of explanatory framework may be one explanation of why she says that identifying as a lesbian makes things easier for her. Identifying as queer, on the other hand, would be more complicated because definitionally, queerness eludes definition. I will expand on this notion throughout the remainder of this section on the behavioural aspects of lesbianism.

Privilege also plays an important role here- I would posit that the more privilege a person holds, the easier it is for them to fit into preexisting categories and frameworks that are designed with privileged bodies in mind. As R comments, "It's easy for me I guess... it's not as complicated as maybe for some other people". Those 'other people' could include people of colour, trans people, people who identify outside of the gender binary, people who did not have the privilege of attending University, disabled people, or people of different class backgrounds, to name a few. While there have been many lesbians whose identities intersect with the aforementioned categories, many of whom are historically and presently hugely important to the development of lesbian communities and spaces, such folks are often alienated and erased as categories such as lesbian continue to be white-washed and reformulated to serve the interests of homonormative, privileged LG bodies and their interests (Cohen, 1997; Puar, 2007, 2013). For example, despite the reality that trans women and people of colour have been fundamentally

important to LGBTQ+ movements such as the infamous Stonewall riots, their contributions and priorities are devalued and often completely erased from our cultural memory. A clear example of this is that an upcoming Hollywood film called Stonewall focuses on the narrative of a cis, white gay man, and only mentions Marsha P. Johnson, a trans woman of colour who was central to the riots, in passing and ignores other non-white, non-male prominent figures from the riots entirely (Truitt, 2015). The point that this furthers is that despite the reality that all kinds of folks identify as lesbians, the label as it operates in Canadian society continues to be constructed to reflect primarily the experiences of white, cis lesbians. While R's quote and the structure of this section may suggest that queer is a viable alternative for those people who feel they do not identify with lesbianism or its politics, it's important to note that queer is not an oasis that has managed to overcome the shortcomings of LG movements. Also, as Logie and Rwigema (2014) emphasize, the way queer and femme bodies are imagined/constructed are often as white bodies. Queer theories, movements, and spaces can equally be constructed in ways that exclude some of the most vulnerable members of our communities (Cohen, 1997; Puar, 2007, 2013; Jagose, 1996).

Gordon's (2006) study of the rules and norms governing lesbian relationships in a white Mid-western middle class lesbian community focuses on the way the lesbians she interviewed perceive the effect and presence of heterosexual norms, community norms, the norms of white, middle-class femininity, and the way they relate to such norms. In particular, Gordon (2006) explores how her participant's comments and experiences reflect the legacy of the sex-wars and lesbian-feminism. Gordon's (2006) analysis around how her participants are able to clearly identify heterosexual rules and norms but

not their lesbian counterpart speaks to the nebulousness of Lesbianism. I would argue that on some level, Lesbianism seeks to fill this function of providing guidelines and rules for lesbians; however, because it is so regulatory and controlling, many lesbians, including my participants, actively resist its stereotypes and the effects it has on their lives. While I consider the presence of homonormativity and normalizing impulses in the next chapter, I want to extend the idea that some lesbians resist the label because of their disdain for or desire to escape from the regulatory powers of Lesbianism (Duggan, 2002; Butler, 1993). I would argue that a large part of the reason that they are able to do this, however, is because other options outside of Lesbianism (such as queer, gay, or fluidity) exist and they see them as viable options.

In many ways, the presence of Lesbianism seems to serve as a constraining and regulatory purpose in the lives of lesbians/non-heterosexual women, causing them to distance themselves from it, Gordon's (2006) participants also express frustration that non-heterosexual relationships are made more difficult not only because of heterosexism/compulsory heterosexuality, but because there is a lack of rules or well-established guidelines to guide the process of engaging in relationships. Gordon's (2006) participants indicate that identifying behavioural norms and dynamics within heterosexual relationships is relatively easy because they are well established, suggesting that the lesbian world seems confusing because it lacks the rules provided by the heteropatriarchal structure. Beyond patriarchal compulsory heterosexuality, is unclear who calls first, who makes the first move and how you know if you're just friends with someone or if it's a dating situation. In Gordon's (2006) analysis of her interview data, "(Lack of) understandings of rules of sexuality and dating in their lesbian community"

emerged as one of the primary themes (177). Gordon (2006) posits that frameworks like heterosexuality and Lesbianism become so prevalent because people want guidelines that regulate and clarify the dating process and struggle to communicate and interact with one another in their absence. It is interesting to note that the one rule that Gordon (2006) observed most of her participants delineating, even if they said they were not knowledgeable on any of the rules, that, in the words of one of Gordon's participants, "you are breaking the rules if you are a lesbian and if you have been with or are with guys..." (178). While the participants in the research for this thesis in general clearly do not reflect or uphold the strict behavioural boundaries that govern legitimate membership in an identity category, it is clear based on Gordon's (2006) research and analysis and a plethora of pervasive lesbian stereotypes that such boundaries continue to be imagined and enforced to various effects. Of relevance to this discussion is a short piece on Feministing.com on the MTV "lesbian star ranking" phenomenon (Feministing.com, 2009). According to the article, a "'Platinum star' is when you have never done anything with a man, 'gold star' is when you have only kissed a man etc. etc. The 'precious metal star' you are decreases in value depending on how much you have done with men" (Feministing.com, 2009, n/p). The author points out that she has never used any of these star rankings and suspects that not many other lesbian/bi/queer women use them either; instead, they posit that these labels are used by men to talk about women, and lesbians in particular. Feministing (2014) connects such "star" discourses to the virgin/whore complex, wherein women are valued based on their perceived purity/virginity in a framework that devalues them for having sex with men, while also discounting sexual violence (Feministing.com, 2014). While the star system in general was likely created

and invoked only on/by MTV, the notion of the “gold star lesbian” as a lesbian who has only ever had sex with other women is culturally pervasive, and is notably referenced throughout the run of the influential lesbian-centric television series “The L Word” (Season 3, Episode 7, 2006). While platinum and precious medal star classifications are not constructs I have encountered, I would posit based on my own experiences living as a lesbian and spending time in lesbian communities that the label of the “gold star” is occasionally invoked, usually in a somewhat humorous way, to refer to lesbians who have not had sex with men, with an underlying implication that they may be seen as more authentic lesbians. The experience of someone being nervous or self-conscious about identifying as a lesbian is not only produced by compulsory heterosexuality and heteropatriarchy, but also by the implementation of hierarchies and rules/norms within and around the category of lesbians. Such boundaries include behavioural rules, such as the belief that lesbians must not have ever and may not ever have sex with a man and also rules about appearance, as will be discussed in the next section.

It is important to consider that just as lesbians are erased under compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) in the sense that their potential existence is denied because to be female is to be heterosexual, both heterosexual women and men are also disadvantaged by heterosexism in differential ways. Publications by the queer community centre PTS Ottawa (2012) and scholars such as Smith (1997) and Schlichter (2007) theorize the existence of the “hetero queer” or queer heterosexuals, which are understood as folks who engage in relationships that may be understood as heterosexual, but actually exist outside of heterosexism by queering ways of understanding power, gender, and sexuality. The Urban Dictionary includes a definition of “hetero queer” as “a

sub-category under Q in LGBTQ. A person who has a queer persona in many respects except for the fact that they only engage in sexual intercourse with the opposite sex”. Such theorizing suggests that even in heterosexual spaces and relationships the regulatory construct of heterosexuality is being cast off as heterosexual people, and notably heterosexual feminists, work to recreate less problematic heterosexual dynamics and scripts. Deconstructing heterosexuality is a massive task because it is bound up with so many other systems that maintain the inequalities that characterize our world, including the heteronormative gender binary.

In “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens” Cohen (1997) looks critically at queer activism and issues of power and privilege, theorizing a transformative queer politics that embraces non-normativity and marginal positions, operating in opposition to dominant binaries. Cohen’s (1997) analysis significantly points to the dichotomized relationship that is (re)constructed, primarily by privileged, white LG and queer theorists, between heterosexuality and queerness. Cohen (1997) emphasizes that the understanding of heterosexuality offered by many of these privileged, white queer scholars was reductive and ignored the various historical and current examples of stigmatized and prohibited heterosexual relationships. Looking to the work of activists and scholars such as Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, Cohen (1997) posits that by recognizing shared spaces and experiences of oppression and resistance between LBTTQAI+ and heterosexual people, we are able to more effectively engage in radical coalition building that may bring about more transformative change. For the purposes of this thesis, I draw on discussions around heteroqueers or queer straights to support my objective of drawing attention to and challenging heterosexism and compulsory

heterosexuality and the ways they function detrimentally not only in the lives of lesbians and LGBTTQAI+ folks, but to the detriment of everyone, including heterosexual folks. Throughout this thesis, I repeatedly make the point that we should embrace the fluidity of lesbianism. Within lesbian studies, there are ongoing discussions around “queer straight” identities (Schlichter, 2007). Lesbian scholars including Suzanna Danuta Walters (1996) echo sentiments that cast the queer straight as an unwelcome intruder and raise concerns that the deconstruction of identity politics allows for the cooptation of categories such as lesbian by heterosexuals (Schlichter, 2007). I would challenge this argument by pointing out that within the LGBTQ+ community, and especially the white LGBTQ+ community, we notoriously do not interrogate our privileges and instead of allowing concerns around unexamined privilege to ensure the exclusion of specific bodies, we should embrace the expansion of our liminal boundaries with a commitment to more thoroughly interrogate our privileges (Puar, 2007, 2013; Fellows and Razack, 1998; Cohen, 1997). Cohen (1997) critiques queer theories and activism for their unwillingness or inability to effectively challenge heteronormativity, noting that the tendency to rely on a dichotomy between those who are queer and those who are heterosexual, in a way that focuses exclusively on sexuality at the expense of the many other multiple and intersecting systems of power that shape the experiences of queer folks. Cohen (1997) calls for queer theories that embrace non-normative positions on the margins, working towards progressive transformation instead of existing in binaristic opposition to the heterosexual. The radical potential of queer theories is in its ability to produce spaces that exist in opposition to dominant norms (Cohen, 1997).

Extending the discussion on “heteroqueers” or “queer straights”, I would argue that if monogamous male/female couples want to identify as part of and participate in the queer community, it is very possible that they are drawn to the alternative model of relationships that queer spaces offer as a way to build more open, communicative, equal relationships that do not rely on the doctrine of heterosexism and the gender/sex binary (Bolsø, 2008; Hill Collins, 1990; Spade, 2006). Furthermore, “heteroqueers” or “queer straights” and their project of queering straightness/heterosexuality serve to fundamentally challenge the homosexuality/heterosexuality dichotomy that is foundational to normative culture (Schlichter, 2007).

While gender and sexuality are often conflated under the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality, it is paramount to consider lesbian’s experiences more intersectionally (Cohen, 1997). This means recognizing that the discrimination/oppression experienced based on one’s gender and gender presentation is distinct from and shaped by one’s sexual orientation and conversely, the discrimination/oppression one experiences based on their sexual orientation is distinct from and shaped by one’s gender and gender performance (Johnson, 2013). I think that the tendency to conflate gender and sexuality in lesbian discourses is partially the result of a pervasive understanding of Lesbianism that is innately tied to femaleness. The way Lesbianism is constructed and understood requires a pre-existing category of women in order to understand lesbianism, which under Lesbianism is conceived of as a sexual or romantic relationship between two women. Almost all of my participants reflected this connection between lesbianism and womanhood in their definitions/understandings of lesbianism, as discussed above. One of the core tensions of Lesbianism is around gender and the gender performances of

lesbians. This was a prominent theme throughout my interviews, and in the following section I explore discourses and experiences pertaining to gender and specifically femme identities.

Gender: The Appearance Norms of Lesbianism

The notion that feminine lesbian performances are rendered invisible emerged as a strong theme in my interviews. Taking up discussions around femme invisibility and passing, I want to explore how participants make sense of these concepts in relation to Lesbianism and privilege. In order to challenge femme invisibility, we need to challenge definitions and conceptions of who and what queer looks like, or in other words, to challenge Lesbianism (Mishali, 2014; O’Hara, 2015).

Discussions of femme-ness, femme privilege and femme invisibility are grounded in radical and lesbian-feminist critiques of feminine gender practices as submissive to and actively cooperating with patriarchal systems (Mishali, 2014; Stein, 1993; Calhoun, 1994). Mishali (2014) argues that the act of denying the existence of the femme lesbian is the result of a continued reproduction of a dichotomy between feminism/femininity and the pairing of lesbianism and masculinity. Mishali (2014) posits that the position of the femme challenges the heteronormative sex/gender/sexuality continuum while also displacing feminist, lesbian, and queer theories and strategies that marginalize femmes and femininity (O’Hara, 2015). The dichotomy between feminism/femininity may also be understood as a response to a larger fusion of femininity and heteronormativity that is informed by compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1989; Calhoun, 1994) and continues to pervade our cultural consciousness (Mishali, 2014; Rich, 2004). In “Gender Trouble”

Butler (1990) examines the way that gender and the differences between masculinity and femininity are constructed, drawing particular attention to the way that femininity is rarely understood as anything beyond mimicry or masquerade, some kind of rejection of masculinity. In an analysis of Rubin's (1975) "The Traffic of Women: The 'Political Economy' of Sex", Butler (1990) draws on the following quote from Rubin (1975):

"Gender is not only an identification with one sex; it also entails that sexual desire be directed toward the other sex. The sexual division of labor is implicated in both aspects of gender- male and female it creates them, it creates them heterosexual" (180).

Butler (1990) understands the above quotation to reference the way that a sex/gender system works to produce a differentiated gender hierarchy that both relies on and produces an obligatory or compulsory heterosexuality (Rubin, 1975; Rich, 1980). For Rubin (1975), the breakdown of compulsory heterosexuality results in the subsequent breakdown of gender itself because gender is no more than a function of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Such arguments reflect Wittig's theories on lesbianism existing outside of the heterosexual gender binary and Bolso's theories of lesbian specificity and the way lesbianism may pose a challenge to heteronormativity and the heterosexualized gender binary. Butler's (1990) notion of the 'heterosexual matrix' further explicates how 'intelligible genders' become embedded in a structure of presupposed heterosexuality by emphasizing the ways in which 'doing gender' may be simultaneously understood as 'doing heterosexuality'. Allan (2009) notes that even among younger girls, there is a strong focus on attaining and maintaining hyper-femininity that is deeply tied to a belief that girls need to make themselves desirable for boys and the male gaze under a system of compulsory heterosexuality. Allan's (2009) analysis of her ethnographic research on young girls, hyper-femininity and

heterosexuality suggests that to be hyper-feminine is to be heterosexually desired. The deep cultural connection between femininity, an appeal to the male gaze, and heterosexual desirability pressures girls to make and keep themselves attractive, not only in general but relationally compared to any other girls around them, so that they may get a boyfriend and secure their place in the heterosexual system (Allan, 2009). Interestingly, Allan (2009) notes that because she conducted ethnographic research in an all-girls school, many of her participants told her that they felt an increased pressure to exhibit hyper-femininity in response to a fear that they may be misrecognized as lesbians. Such a finding also speaks to the continued devaluation of lesbianism as a deviant and undesirable identity (Allan, 2009). The comments of Allan's (2009) participants may be understood by drawing on McRobbie's (2004) notion of individualization within the context of postfeminism. McRobbie (2004) conceptualizes individualization as a neoliberal imperative that may encourage girls to emphasize or perform hyper-femininity because being hyper-feminine and, by extension, heterosexuality is clearly presented as the "right" choice within a neoliberal, compulsorily heterosexual framework. Postfeminist discourses perpetuate a notion of female individualization, which locates responsibility for all choices and their outcomes within the individual and demands that individuals engage in self-monitoring practices, that they reflexively plan and realize every detail of their life, and consequently that they take responsibility for any resulting failure and blame (McRobbie, 2004). McRobbie (2004) emphasizes that the individualizing, neoliberal, postfeminist shift does not address or rectify the structural differences that constitute unequal power relations/systems- it simply ignores them, and in doing so, it perpetuates and further conceals their constructedness and effects. Such a

move only produces new categories to distinguish between those who have the ability to make “good/right” choices and those who do not, while completely ignoring the reality that certain subjects are constructed as more or less able and likely to make what are constructed as the “good/right” choices (McRobbie, 2004). These postfeminist strategies and imperatives can be understood as a consequence of neoliberalism, as a byproduct of assimilationist/affirmative political strategies, and as part of the legacy of compulsory heterosexuality (Cohen, 1997; Fraser, 1997; Fellows and Razack, 1998). McRobbie (2004) and Allan’s (2009) analysis is reminiscent of Stein’s (1993) example of the way that the cultural lesbian-feminist strategy of presenting lesbians as “woman-identified-woman” made lesbianism more appealing to and occupiable by white, middle class women, who otherwise were not willing or able to identify as members of an “unacceptable” category.

Fellow and Razack’s (1998) notion of the politics of respectability extends a consideration of homonormativity, homonationalism, and the insidious ways in which neoliberal tendencies and the regulatory power of acceptability operate in our everyday experiences. Fellows and Razack (1998) identify the concept of respectability emerging alongside the rule of the middle class and the making of the middle class home at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe. The late nineteenth century middle class home was a locus of self-control, self-discipline, and order that not only operated as a literal home, but was crucial to the production and reproduction of class identity and one’s place in the emerging liberal democratic social order (Fellows and Razack, 1998; Davidoff, 1995). Middle class respectability allowed the middle class to maintain and legitimize their status and self-respect against both the lower classes and the aristocracy, asserting their

superiority in terms of physical and moral health by identifying degeneracy within all other kinds of people (Fellows and Razack, 1998; Mosse, 1995). It was by occupying or achieving middle class respectability that one earned their place in the middle class, and by extension their power and domination over lower class others, who were cast as degenerates (Fellows and Razack, 1998). Fellows and Razack (1998) understand the pursuit of respectability as a pursuit of domination through difference that relies on and invests in various systems of domination that require specific and unequal gender hierarchies, colonial economic orders that relied on specific, imperial ways of relating to racial and class others (Stoler, 1995; McClintock, 1995). Drawing on McClintock's (1995) analysis on the way discourses of degeneracy functioned throughout the nineteenth century, Fellows and Razack (1998) argue that respectability relies on the operations of systems of domination, but also on structured and hierarchal relations within categories, including among women (347). Through their analysis of domestic workers in the middle class home, Fellows and Razack (1998) substantiate the way that respectability alienates those bodies who are integral to its constitution and continuation through their concept of the "toehold on respectability" (348).

Respectability also functions in a way that places so much focus on achieving and maintaining a certain rank and amount of power within the framework of respectability to the point that it becomes difficult to identify the way the overall framework functions to the advantage of a small, privileged class of people and even more difficult to identify alternatives outside of it. Drawing on Mosse's (1995) analysis of the way that eighteenth and nineteenth century bourgeoisie morality became everyone's morality in the twentieth century, Fellows and Razack (1998) emphasize the way that respectability continues to

mark the boundaries between those who are included in the body politic as citizens and those who are excluded in a way that resonates with Puar's (2007, 2013) nuanced analysis on the multiple, overlapping processes by which such a feat is accomplished along racialized, sexualized, classed and other lines. As Fellows and Razack (1998) underscore, because a politics of respectability continues to determine who may put forth a viable or inalienable claim to citizenship, the notion of respectability remains crucial in the process of drawing attention to practices and systems of domination. The theories and concepts put forth by Puar (2007, 2013), Duggan (2002), and Fellows and Razack (1998) provide the framework to understand the way that neoliberalism, colonialism, and normative productions of what one gains by striving for acceptability/respectability functions on both a personal level, a national level, and an international level. Drawing on Fellows and Razack's concept of the toehold of respectability, I want to emphasize that class and race play a major role in this discussion, and it's important to note that there are lesbian subject positions that are more "respectable" than others based on various things, but particularly gender, class, and race. Drawing again on Duggan (2002), Puar (2007, 2013), and Young and Boyd (2007) and Cohen (1997) 'acceptable/unacceptable' ways of being a lesbian (or any other non-normative subject) only become more demarcated as oppressive social/legal systems, such as marriage, are extended to include some LGBTTQAI+ subjects. Throughout the remainder of this section, I consider and complicate how the position of the "femme" may be seen as a respectable position that does not pose a significant challenge to heterosexuality and heterosexualized gender roles, which is one interpretation of the lesbian-feminist

demonization of the femme. Overall, I endeavour to maintain a focus on the subversive potential of the femme as I analyze the remarks of my participants.

Duggan and McHugh's (1996) "Fem(me)inist Manifesto" declares that "femme is not an identity, not a history, not a location on the map of desire," but rather may be conceptualized as "a fetish production at the hands of subject becoming object" (153-154). In response to the question "So a fem(me) is a she?" Duggan and McHugh (1996) respond that "that is the pronoun a fem(me) often inhabits," in a way that recognizes the deep cultural association with woman-ness/lesbianism and especially woman-ness/femme, but significantly leaves space for queering, reinterpretation and increased fluidity for the category/term 'femme' (154). Duggan and McHugh (1996) trace the precarious position occupied by the fem(me) throughout "lesbian (her)stories," noting that the fem(me) never occupies a stable position and is consistently (re)imagined along and between boundaries across time and space (155). Cohen (1997) provides insightful analysis on the radical queer potential located in those identities, experiences, and positions along the border, those who are neither here nor there, in or out, and are thus able to elude and move beyond the dichotomous framework that constrains discourses on sexuality and gender. The way that Duggan and McHugh (1996) construct the fem(me) presents the fem(me) as an interesting concept through which radical queer re-imaginings may be explored. While I explore the comments made by participants in relation to femme privilege and invisibility, it is important that I clearly establish that I understand femme identities as holding the same subversive/queer power as any other gender performance. Having made that clear, I want to maintain an awareness of Logie

and Rwigema's (2014) analysis of their Toronto-based interviews, which found that representationally and culturally, the femme exists as a particularly white construct.

Drawing on the lesbian histories and the history of lesbian feminism and the feminist sex wars that I reviewed in Chapter 1, I want to consider the way such histories impact the relationship between femininity and lesbianism, in particular. Lesbian-feminists identified feminine signifiers as patriarchal tools and encouraged lesbians to change their style and appearance in order to be accepted as part of the movement. In response to the historical tensions between the sex radicals and lesbian feminists, Gordon (2006) usefully points out that both made arguments that rely on essentialist, binaristic conceptualizations of sex and gender that accept men's and women's nature and sexuality as inherently different from one another. Thus, while these historical arguments are important because they establish the groundwork for modern lesbianism and lesbian theories, they need to be contextualized with the notion guiding this thesis that lesbian sexuality (and all sexuality) are always constructed within existing power relations in addition to within and by lesbians and lesbian communities (Gordon, 2006).

Mishali (2014) posits that the emergence of lesbian-feminism marks the collusion of political obligation, gender appearance, and sexual orientation that was focused on abdicating femininity. Such a move also resulted in the refusal to understand femme presentations as "an intelligible and legitimate form of lesbianism" (Mishali, 2014, 55). Under this model, femmes were forced to choose between femininity and feminism and their gender expression is constructed as in conflict with their lesbianism. It became culturally known that to be lesbian is to be *not* femme – lesbian recognition hinges on the denial and disavowal of one's femininity (Mishali, 2014). The impulse to interpret

femme lesbian presentations as derivative gender imitations that are not able to challenge the existing social order connects to the idea that femininity is always weak/passive/submissive (Mishali, 2014). Mishali (2014) posits that by continually questioning the validity of femme lesbians within lesbian movements, the conditions to be recognized as a lesbian require femmes to reject their femininity. Most of the stereotypes and tropes around Lesbianism discussed throughout this chapter are not feminine. Mishali (2014) substantiates this denial by drawing on the work of lesbians like Joan Nestle (1992) who wrote about having to choose between their feminine gender expression and their ability to be included within lesbian communities/movements. To demonstrate the imperative for lesbians to abandon femininity in order to position themselves as legitimately lesbian, Mishali (2014) draws on the work of Slone and Mitchell (2002), Nestle (1992), Sheiner (1997), and Maltry & Tucker (2002) who write from different perspectives on the experience of relinquishing femininity as they came out as lesbians only to reclaim it later when they felt more established and secure in their lesbian identity. In this way, it almost seems that, at moments, a behavioural component of lesbianism involves an active disavowal of femininity. Mishali (2014) argues that femmes were not only made to feel as if their identities as lesbians were illegitimate, but also that their identities held no subversive potential (Maltry & Tucker, 2002). Throughout this section I want to underscore the subversive potential of lesbians and femme lesbians in particular. Mishali's (2014) analysis is particularly reflected in my interview with R, as demonstrated in the following two excerpts from our interview:

R: I guess, I mean obviously there's the stereotype of like, someone who's more androgynous or butch... so, there's a certain style [D: yeah] I don't want to say hipster, but that's kind of [D: yeah! (laughs)].. short hair, um.. [D: And do you think those are the sorts of [stereotypes] that are tied into this idea of the lesbian community?] No, more just like, outside perception [D: Right] For people who don't know anyone or who don't really... have any exposure to that.

R: Mm. I guess. I mean. as someone who's like . I don't know, what's the word. I don't identify myself as like a femme, but I'm like [D: Right] feminine in appearance. I feel like there's a certain amount of invisibility cause people don't really realize [D: Right, yeah] unless they have gaydar (laughs) [D: Yeah (laughs)] or. but like straight people are much less likely to know unless I tell them, so I think that would definitely change your experiences as a lesbian, [D: Yeah] the way other people perceive you and treat you [D: Yeah, for sure]

While R identifies that there is an association between lesbianism and butchness/androgyny or perhaps a correlation between lesbianism and *non*-femininity, she identifies it as an external perception of lesbians rather than a perception among lesbians. This certainly connects back to the idea of Lesbianism and heterosexual people assuming that feminine looking women are heterosexual women, which is informed by compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexism/heteronormativity. The following excerpt from my interview with C reinforces this idea. In response to a question about her experiences with being stereotyped as a lesbian, she commented:

C: No, I never really have. I'm, I don't know, I guess I'm pretty straight passing. Nobody knows I'm gay unless I tell them so it doesn't really come up].

While C does not discuss her gender identity in our interview, I interpret this quote as reflecting the cultural impulse to assume that all women are heterosexual, even if they identify and present in ways that are associated strongly and stereotypically with lesbianism, such as butch or masculine identities. I think this general divide is couched in heterosexism and heteronormativity, which causes heterosexual people to assume that everyone is heterosexual because of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Even among lesbians and gay women there is still a perception that femmes might not be real lesbians (Mishali, 2014; McLean, 2008). While the following quote from K reinforces the notion that less feminine women are more easily accepted as legitimate lesbians, it's important to be cognizant that many non-feminine presenting LGBTQ women struggle to have their identities understood and respected:

K: Um I would say that a lot of people probably weren't surprised because I'm a tomboy [D: Right] it's that whole tomboy stereotype, I think [my wife] breaks the mould a little more from that [D: Yeah] than what I would from that traditional lesbian stereotype [D: Mhm (laughs)] you know, I'm athletic and play sports and am good at all that so I kind of fit that [D: Yeah] general mould and so I think she broke that mould a little bit more [D: Yeah (laughs)] for others which was good, but [D: Yeah].

K's comments about her being a tomboy growing up serving to almost foreground her lesbianism later in life resonate with Mishali (2014) and McLean's (2008) analysis.

Because Lesbianism is deeply associated with more masculine or androgynous gender presentations, it is easier for heterosexual people to believe that non-feminine women are lesbians. I also think K's comments about her wife's more feminine gender presentation are interesting and significant. I interpret this as speaking to the lesbian desire to openly embody femininity and live as a femme lesbian as an ongoing challenge to their ongoing erasure. The active inclusion of femmes in lesbian communities actually disrupts the heterosexual /lesbian binary for women by demonstrating that not all ways of being lesbian directly contradict what are understood as heterosexual gender roles, but instead may queer them or play with them in a way that detaches them from their heterosexual context (Mishali, 2014). It is important for me to acknowledge that while, guided by the comments and my interpretations of my participant's comments, femme identities and femininity are the focus of my analysis in this chapter, there is much important work on female masculinity, masculinity and lesbianism, and the violence and particular issues that masculine or masculine of centre lesbians/folks are subject to for various reasons, including the way their existence poses a challenge to the heterosexualized gender binary (Halberstam, 1998; Human Rights Watch, 2000; Stein, 1993; Malinowitz, 1996).

In my own experiences, when I tell people about my childhood and how I was into sports and being "one of the boys", it seems to help heterosexual people make sense of my lesbianism. Conversely, heterosexual people often struggle to make sense of my

partner's lesbianism based on their knowledge that she is more feminine than I am and was hyperfeminine growing up. In *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick (1993) argues that the creation of space between "sex" and "gender" has been a massively important, influential, yet still problematic, project of feminist thought, noting that the relations and analytical relations between sex, gender, and sexuality remains slippery (27). Both Sedgwick (1993) and Rubin (1975) argue that gender and sexuality are not the same thing and must be considered as interconnected but distinct entities. In making such arguments, which are now accepted in almost all lesbian/feminist spaces, they draw attention to the ways we continue to associate sexuality and gender as interwoven and dependent concepts (Sedgwick, 1993, 30). What Sedgwick (1993) argues in particular is that without a concept of gender, there would be no conceptualization of heterosexuality versus homosexuality (31). Disentangling gender and sexuality is an immensely difficult task, especially within a context of heterosexism, and I find the ways my participants make sense of gender and sexuality as interlocking, yet distinct, systems interesting.

My participants and I did not specifically discuss whether or not the people presuming they are straight based on their appearance were predominantly people who identify along the LGBTTTQAI+ spectrum or whether it is mostly heterosexual people making such assumptions. However, I interpret the following remark by C to indicate that for some lesbians/gay/queer/bi-identified women, their feminine appearance means they pass as straight even in lesbian or queer spaces:

C: Hm, how do I navigate my invisibility? (laughs) Um, I guess I'm.. I don't have too much of a problem with it, probably mostly because I've been in a committed relationship for most of my adult life. So it doesn't really come up too much for me. When I'm in a lesbian space or whatever, I'm usually with my girlfriend so it's fairly obvious and if I'm not it doesn't tend to matter. I don't tend to think about it too much, but I think if I were single it would probably be frustrating.

This quote aptly captures the idea that for women who are not read as lesbian based on their gender performance, the effects of continual non-recognition can be detrimental to one's sense of self. Mishali (2014), Sandoval (1997) and Rugg (1997) reflect on the consequences of conflating butch with lesbian, noting that it reinforces the exclusion/invisibility of femmes among lesbians, the rest of the LGBTTQAI+ community, and the heterosexual population. Furthermore, such a conflation means that femme lesbians do not experience or have access to the same kind of solidarity as more visible/legible lesbians, and as a consequence, they may face more social isolation, and experience doubt around the authenticity of their own lesbian identity, which can be detrimental to femme lesbian's experiences and mental health (Mishali, 2014; Rugg, 1997). Extending this, Nestle (1992) notes that femmes have long been regarded as unreliable lesbians within the community and are often regarded as lesbians who will inevitably abandon lesbianism for the safety of heterosexual approval (Mishali, 2014; Sandoval, 1997). The dismissal of femmes as illegitimate or temporary lesbians is undermining the ability of femmes to know themselves, but also "reinforces oppressive gender mechanisms that associate 'realness', confidence and stability with masculinity and insecurity, inconsistency, and a lack of credibility with femininity" (Mishali, 2014, 62).

Numerous lesbian scholars, including Mishali (2014), Maltry and Tucker, 2002; Nestle (1992) and Sheiner (1997) find that femme lesbians express that they were only read and accepted as "authentic lesbians" after taking on a more androgynous or masculine gender presentation, which connects back to Lesbianism, and also reflects the comments of several of my participants. McLean (2008) notes that the particular dress

codes seems to revolve around a masculine or butch aesthetic and that many of her participants who did not conform to this look were very aware of the way their (gendered) appearance affects the legibility of their sexual identity. Many lesbian (or formerly lesbian) identified participants in McLean's (2008) study whose appearance was more typically feminine discussed feeling a lack of acceptance by "real" lesbians or lesbians who are more legibly lesbian. Mishali (2014), MacCowan (1992), Stein (1993) and Calhoun (1994) argue that femme lesbians have often been excluded from lesbian liberation movements, as was discussed in more detail in Chapter 1. This is because the imperative to disavow femininity constructs femininity as an "inner essence" that maintains the heteronormative determinism among gender/sex/sexuality and refuses to recognize femininity as a chosen and agential gender presentation (Mishali, 2014, 56). Furthermore, femininity and admissions of femme-ness among lesbians are often interpreted as an internalization of sexist and heterosexist ideals (Mishali, 2014; Sheiner, 1997). Mishali (2014) understands the construction of the movement's image of lesbianism as androgynous/genderless, independent, and assertive as an attempt to resist women's gender oppression, a move that has, ironically, resulted in the exclusion and oppression of femme lesbians. The exclusion of femmes as an appropriate or legible lesbian appearance constructs certain gender performances as proper while delegitimizing others, revealing the process and conditions that create feminist/lesbian visibility (Mishali, 2014).

I also want to note that the devaluation of femininity extends beyond lesbians and is an issue that continues to pervade feminist thought today. There are countless online publications, as well as ongoing discussions, wherein authors defend women's right to

wear heels and make up and, in essence, to embrace femininity. Gazdag (2013) articulates many of these arguments in a piece on how femininity and feminism are not mutually exclusive. In particular, Gazdag (2013) emphasizes that arguments that femininity harms feminism are not only grounded in a patriarchal and heterosexist belief that femininity is synonymous with submissiveness, but also collude with rape culture and other pernicious systems that implicate and use women's style of dress and appearance to justify violence against them. Gazdag (2013) argues that there is no "feminist aesthetic" in an important way that counters the belief that feminists must emulate masculinity in order to harness authority and be taken as equals. While tensions around femininity certainly persist within feminist movements and communities today with arguments around false consciousness abound, there is a great deal of writing that recasts femininity as feminist and I think it's important to recognize that heterosexual and other non-lesbian women also struggle with a politicized relationship to femininity. While conceptualizations of lesbians and lesbian relationships have moved beyond the butch/femme binary in which femmes occupied a secondary status; however, butchness continues to be upheld as the lesbian idea and femme-ness as a legitimate way of being lesbian continues to be challenged (Mishali, 2014). The result of this is that butches, androgynous lesbians, but also femme lesbians themselves, question the authenticity of femme lesbians (Mishali, 2014). These processes of exclusion and legitimacy connect back to the idea of Lesbianism and the lesbian-feminist histories established in Chapter 1.

While femme invisibility does allow femmes a level of protection in the public sphere, whether or not they want it, in what is often called "passing privilege", femme invisibility in lesbian and queer spaces reinforces the reduction of lesbianism to the

visible butch (Mishali, 2014). Several of my participants indicated that they experienced some level of passing privilege. In response to a question about privilege, C responded:

C: Hm, [D: And take your time! If you want to think for a couple minutes]. Actually, I've probably never really thought about it before this phone call, but the fact that I'm straight passing has probably.. coloured my view a lot, with privilege. As far as anyone is concerned, the world treats me like a straight woman, so I don't feel like I've dealt with a lot of the problems that maybe some other lesbians have.

This quote speaks volumes about what it means or feels like to live as a lesbian in Canadian society, as C notes that because she passes she evades the issues that accompany being openly read as a lesbian. Therefore, this also indicates that C identifies that lesbians, or some lesbians at least, do experience oppression and discrimination. It's interesting that C does not seem to interpret the continuous misidentification of her sexual orientation as a form of erasure or denial, understanding it instead as an act of accessing heterosexual privilege. I will return to this quote below as I seek to complicate the notion of femme privilege. The above comment also represents one of the only times in my interviews that the idea other, less privileged lesbians exist. I will return to this quote later in a discussion about white homonormativity in Chapter 3. Comments made by R reflect a similar sentiment. According to R:

R: Oh, well I guess again it could be because the perception of me .. isn't the most obvious. And I mean, some people maybe feel .. threatened by people who are less like, fitting into the role they should fit in to.. I mean, I guess it could be argued that some people are more okay with .. people who are acting like what they think they should act like in their own gender [D: Right] like my gender presentation is rather, like, casual but you know female, whereas other people might um experience some backlash because they're not fitting into like the nice little neat box of what other people want them to look like [D: yeah] or act like..

R indicates in this passage that she is aware that because her gender presentation is read as more normative, she is privy to some amount of passing privilege that is not afforded to gender non-conforming lesbians. I interpret these remarks as indicating that gender is often paramount in situations involving violence and persecution. The above quote suggests that women who exhibit certain gender performances

(butch/masculine/androgynous performances) are more intensely policed or punished because they are transgressing the norms of femininity. R also shared experiences of discrimination, noting:

R: So I mean, my experiences, yeah, were mostly in high school, just like, word gets out obviously, like I had my first girlfriend in high school and for me, it wasn't really a secret. It was kind of awkward sometimes [D: Yeah] so I mean, people and strangers would feel like it was okay to yell "dyke" at me from like down the hall [D: Right] and I was like: Yup! (laughs) Like I didn't know what else to say. Or like I know there was one day three separate strangers approached me about it, some in more negative ways and I remember the last one... was just like this, he was probably like in grade nine, and I must have been in grade eleven [D: yeah] and he came up to me and was like, are you a lesbian? Or I don't know if he said are you a lesbian or are you a dyke, I don't remember how he phrased it, I think he said: are you gay? And I was like: are you gay? And he was like, no! And I was like, mind your own fucking business! [D: Yeah!] And I think he was really surprised by how angry I was, because like, for him, I guess he thought he was just asking me a question, but I was, at that point I had already had to deal with two other people that day [D: mhm] and I was like, I'm so sick of it! But I was just too angry and seventeen years old to do [D: Yeah] so I mean..

R's comments speak to the way that experiences of discrimination, harassment, or homophobic microaggressions add up over time and result in a sense of overwhelming frustration. The term microaggression was introduced in the 1970s as a way of describing "subtle forms of discrimination toward African Americans in the media" (Nadal, 2012, 41). Nadal's "That's So Gay! Microaggressions and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community" offers a thorough exploration of the concept of microaggressions, the study of microaggressions, and the a/effects of microaggressions. While discussions and studies focusing on microaggressions emerged around issues relating to race and ethnicity, other marginalized groups began to adopt discourses around microaggressions to discuss their experiences and work on microaggressions began to develop frameworks and taxonomies that included women, disabled folks, and LGBT folks (Nadal, 2012). Nadal, Rivera and Corpus (2010) propose a theoretical taxonomy on sexual orientation and gender identity microaggression, listing eight categories of microaggressions that LGBT people may experience. These

microaggressions include: use of heterosexist or transphobic terminology; endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture and behaviours; assumption of universal LGBT experience; exoticization; discomfort with/disapproval of LGBT experience; denial of the reality of heterosexism or transphobia; assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality; and denial of individual heterosexism (Nadal, 2012, 47). Nadal (2012) shares excerpts from interviews conducted with a range of LGBT identified people and identifies four major categories of emotional responses, including: discomfort/lack of safety; anger and frustration; sadness; embarrassment/shame (155). Nadal's (2012; Nadal, Wong, Issa, et al. 2011) work reflects a strong notion that folks who experience microaggressions are concerned for their safety, and that they are unsure how to react in the moment they experience microaggressions. This finding is reflected in the excerpt above from my interview with R, as she notes that she "didn't know what else to say" when confronted by people yelling slurs at her or asking her personally invasive questions in the hallway. Her comments capture how it might feel to respond to the difficult and intimidating reality of not knowing what kind of violence you will encounter on a regular basis. The process of navigating high schools or work places where it is not clear who knows what about your identity and how they might react if they were to know seems to result in a similar phenomenon to what Rajiva (2014) calls "horizons of violence".

The above excerpt from my interview with R also demonstrates the way that **Lesbianism** informs and perpetuates stereotypes that have real, and often negative, effects in the lives of people who identify as lesbians. This particular excerpt demonstrates one example of how lesbians are forced to negotiate reified constructs of lesbianism. Such

incidents do not have to be physically violent, but include the kinds of violent microaggressions described by R, where people feel as if they have the right to ask you invasive questions or to provide negative commentary on your choices based on your identity. While none of my other participants shared experiences they interpreted as homophobic, in the following quotations from C and L, they posit that men experience homophobia more intensely than women do:

C: Hm, I guess, I feel like guys get the short end of the stick when it comes to homophobia. I mean, realistically, I don't have a lot to say about it because, as I said, I haven't dealt with it a whole lot personally. But most of the things I've seen, it does tend to be worse for my male friends. [D: Yeah, and I can see that having sort of... there are maybe more issues around masculinity and the way men react to things I like that. I'm sure there are lots of people researching that too (laughs)] Oh right, exactly.

L: I don't.. I haven't really had any. I've had a pretty.. honestly, I've never run into any issues. [D: okay]. And I guess I'm lucky in that way and maybe women don't have it as rough as men do so I never had any experiences like that, don't know why, but I've never had an issue. [D: Yeah, okay].

My interpretation of these excerpts is that it was a common theme among participants to minimize any potential experiences of lesbophobia (Human Rights Watch, 2000). The lack of acknowledgement of lesbophobia may be understood as a consequence of living in a heterosexist world where we are taught and incentivized to internalize and minimize our experiences of oppression. While I do not want to suggest that my participants have experienced violence they are unaware of or that they are simply not classifying as violence, it is important for me to include ways of making sense of the lack of representation of experiences of violence and oppression in this project as a way of recognizing such violence and internalization as an ongoing possibility for LGBTTQAI+ people. I think that another part of this discussion is that growing up in a heterosexist society as a lesbian, you have to learn to be resilient because heterosexism is (hypothetically) everywhere. Considering that my participants indicated that they think

heterosexism will continue to characterize our society/culture, it makes sense that they have gotten used to putting up with a certain level of intolerance around their non-heterosexual identity, that they have grown accustomed to people assuming they're straight and denying your relationships, which will be explored below as a form of violence in itself. While I do not want to deny the experiences and perceptions of my participants, it's also important for me to reframe a discussion around lesbophobia in a way that does not erase or undermine the violence that lesbians experience. Femmes may have the privilege of not having to confront violence or negative experiences because of their gender presentation as often as butch/MOC/androgynous women or as gay men, they are subject to other forms of policing and violence (Mishali, 2014; Stein, 1993; Human Rights Watch, 2000; Atkins, 1998).

Within the literature on the violence of passing, "passing" is understood as "how one conceals *normal* information about oneself to preserve, sustain, and encourage others' predisposed assumptions about one's identity" or the process of ensuring that some knowledge about oneself remains undisclosed to those with whom they interact (Spradlin, 1998, 598; Anderson and Holliday, 2004; Goffman, 1963). The suppression of normal exchanges of information, such as speaking about primary relationships, friendships and hobbies/activities, which works to sustain an implicit and heterosexist "don't ask don't tell" policy, is an oppressive task that requires LGBTTTQAI+ folks, among others, to conduct themselves carefully, self-monitor, and to develop passing strategies (Spradlin, 1998).

Anderson and Holliday (2004) contextualize their discussion of the violence of passing by recognizing that at times among lesbian communities, passing behaviours are

accepted as necessary for protection and resilience and passing has not always been regarded as negatively as it has been within the past fifteen years. Anderson and Holliday's (2004) analysis based on their qualitative research with lesbian participants on passing suggests that most of their participants view passing as a "necessary evil" and that only three out of forty participants viewed passing in a completely negative manner (33). The majority of Anderson and Holliday's (2004) participants viewed passing as an understandable response given a context where lesbians lack civil rights and protections. As Anderson and Holliday (2004) analyze excerpts from their interviews, the notion that lesbians are making calculations that balance their identity and their desire to express their identity with concerns about their safety and survival clearly emerged (33-34).

Spradlin (1998) identifies the following six passing strategies that she implemented to pass in organizational settings: distancing, dissociating, dodging, distancing, denying, and deceiving (599). Spradlin (1998) recounts how for more than twenty years she "carefully edited, internally rehearsed, and de-lesbianized each speaking turn to pass as heterosexual within work environments. I feared the consequences if my lesbianism was revealed" (598). Spradlin's (1998) reflexive article demonstrates some of the consequences of the violence of passing, which include the prevention of authentic, healthy relationships within the workplace, diminished self-esteem and integrity, and tension and negative effects on personal relationships (603). Kahuna's (1997) study of lesbians and passing found that guilt and shame are the most common feelings lesbians report experiencing during and after moments of passing. Kahuna (1997) posits that lesbian's reported feelings of guilt and shame in relation to passing are predicated on an investment in the notion that if one *can* come out, they ought to come out, which points to the significance

of unpacking discourses around passing, heterosexism, normativity, coming out, and outness. As Kahuna (1997) and Anderson and Holliday (2004) emphasize, moments of individual passing must be contextualized within a dynamics of oppression, which shifts the responsibility from the individual to a social context characterized by compulsory heterosexism and lesbophobia.

In my experience, making a split second decision to pass can be a difficult and emotional process. Sometimes I am aware that I'm entering a situation where everyone will assume I am heterosexual and I am expected to avoid correcting that presumption. Other times, I am alone in a cab and do not have the energy to confront a discussion around my sexuality. While I am sometimes pleasantly surprised when I decide to correct the heterosexist presumption (Land and Kitzinger, 2005), usually by referencing my girlfriend, the reality is that I am continually in situations where I am passing despite my attempts not to because the heterosexist presumption remains so prevalent. Overall, the literature on passing and the violence of passing reinforces the compulsory and hegemonic nature of heterosexuality/heterosexism; I expand on these discussions in Chapter 3 during a section on coming out discourses.

It's important to consider how these heterosexist discourses are deeply intertwined with violence against lesbians and lesbophobia. In a zine entry, originally written for the Tumblr zine/project "Femme Dreamboat", Johnson (2013) writes against the concept of "femme privilege," dismissing it as the product of misogyny that denies the intersectional violence that femmes experience on the basis of their gender and sexuality. Johnson (2013) also argues that theories of femme privilege also problematically assume that all femmes have cis privilege and that they identify as

women, which is not the case and effectively erases the experiences of trans and non-binary femmes. She extends this argument, noting that in order to access passing privilege, the group that one passes as a member of must hold a certain amount of privilege and that is not the case for hetero femme women who live in patriarchal society and experience sexism in various forms including street harassment on a regular basis. As an example of this that Johnson (2013) shares is that she has been correctively raped twice in her life. I find it interesting that much of the work on corrective rape is set in non Euro-American settings, suggesting that corrective rape is more common in and more associated with “Other” cultures, or as Puar (2007) would term it, countries who become understood on a global level as “homophobic countries”. Much of the work on corrective rape focuses on countries including South Africa, Uganda, India and Peru, with a notable focus on South Africa where corrective rape is reported as a serious and recurring issue (Nandipha, 2013; Anguita, 2012). Corrective rape is a particularly violent manifestation of heterosexism and the belief that all LGBTTQAI+ people can and should be forcibly converted to heterosexuality, and involves a person being raped or sexually assaulted with the intent of forcing or scaring them into conforming to a heterosexual lifestyle. It is important to note that it was only earlier in 2015 that Ontario became the first province in Canada to ban gay conversion therapy, and even that move was met with opposition and debate from people who believe that gays should be subject to such traumatic “therapy” (CBC, June 2015).

Expanding on the violence faced by lesbians and non-heterosexual women, the sexualization of lesbians and femme lesbians in particular is important to consider.

R: One guy, I mean this again when I was a teenager, asked me if I made videos and put them on the internet (laughs) and I was like, yeah all the time. Like I just gave him some sarcastic reply cause I was like, I can't even do this right now (laughs) [D: Yeah, yeah] He was just being an idiot

teenage boy. Um... and I've definitely had people ask like how does the sex work? [D: Right (laughs)] and I've really had to explain that [D: (laughs) yeah, like, do you want a diagram?] (laughs) So usually I just avoid answering questions like that. I think I once said something like, some guy was into lesbian porn and was like, would you do all that stuff? And I was like probably not! I don't know! (laughs) [D: Yeah, like, I haven't seen all the lesbian porn that you've seen?] (laughs) I don't know what you're watching! (laughs) Yeah, definitely, I mean people feel, I think, when you're doing something . that like is different or considered like a minority they feel like they have this right to know about it [D: Yeah] like, you chose to identify as a lesbian, be a lesbian, so like, suddenly your business is their business [D: Right] like people think that someone being trans makes their body their business, you know what I mean, like I realize that's totally on a different scale and it's not the same, [D: Yeah, but it's a similar sort of attitude] It's a trend where people think that you're doing something different, you're sort of standing out in some way, so like I have the right to ask you about it, and like weird personal questions that like, I shouldn't ask. [D: Yeah, very invasive]

The above quote from R speaks to the sexualization of lesbians and femme lesbians in particular. Because of the sexualization of femme lesbians and the way the sexualization of lesbians is often used to undermine lesbian sexuality and relationships, there is a tendency to disavow any such representations of lesbians. Jackson and Gilbertson (2009), however, note that while the dismissal of the stereotypical 'hot lesbian' may function to erase femme lesbian identities and re-inscribe butchness or androgyny as the authentic way of being a lesbian, the hot lesbian is an exclusionary position as well in the sense that it privileges femme bodies and specifically white, pretty, thin, young, middle-class bodies (Mishali, 2014). It is important to note that many dominant cultural representations of lesbianism portray what Jackson and Gilbertson (2009) term 'hot lesbians'. Mishali (2014) argues that while these representations privilege certain privileged bodies, we must critique them carefully as to not reproduce femme exclusion and misogyny and also in ways that recognize that they do represent possible positions inhabited by some lesbians in reality. An excerpt from my interview with R demonstrates the sexualization and harassment of femme lesbians and captures the complexity of femme "privilege":

R: Hm, [D: No?]. Not in a long time. [D: Ok!] I've definitely seen it happen to other people. I was out with a friend of mine, and she's like very pretty like, she's very feminine [D: right] like, doesn't

look stereotypical in any sense. And this guy just approached us when we were in the market and he was trying to hit on her, so she . we weren't together, but she was just like: oh, this is my girlfriend [D: right] And he was like: I would believe it about her, and he pointed at me, whatever [D: yeah], but he was like: I don't believe it about you. Like he got all offended and angry, so like we ran into a restaurant [D: yeah! Just to get away...] (?) um for me, it's I guess, only challenged in the sense that like, people are like, how do you know if you didn't try it.

This quote illustrates compulsory heterosexuality / heteronormativity through the assumptions that, in this case, a heterosexual man made about the sexuality of feminine presenting women. This excerpt also aptly demonstrates how lesbians are not exempt from sexism and related violences, such as street harassment. While each individual lesbian will have their own set of issues based on their particular identifications, in this chapter I seek to demonstrate that regardless of gender presentation, lesbians experience both homophobia and sexism and their experiences of homophobia and sexism are mutually constitutive. Interpreting the above quote further, R's comment that her friend looked "very pretty" and "very feminine" and therefore "not stereotypical at all" reinforces that while lesbians know that femme lesbians exist, we also make use of Lesbianism as a way to make sense of experiences. In this case, a stereotypical lesbian is a non-feminine lesbian. The last sentence of R's comment "um for me, it's I guess, only challenged in the sense that like, people are like, how do you know if you didn't try it" was reiterated by K as she remarked:

K: Um, I just think that like, my mother really really questioned it at first [D: mhm] but you know, like you've had boyfriends in the past [D: Right] but that doesn't mean that's what I want, [D: Yeah] and even when I was first coming out, it was like, you know, she's trying to figure out whether A and I were more than friends or not [D: Right] and she was like, you know, it's okay to experiment [D: Mhm] but this is, you know [D: Yeah] how it has to be. She was definitely the most challenging in terms of that. But never anyone really out in the public. I had an aunt who didn't come to our wedding, and I know she couldn't support it [D: right, yeah] no skin off my back (laughs) [D: Yeah].

The idea that comes up in K's comment about being out and her mother questioning her identity (or delegitimizing it) because of her past involvement with men definitely connects back to this "authentic lesbian ideology" and how it's not just enforced

internally in individual lesbians or within lesbian communities but by heterosexual people and society in general. This impulse to challenge someone's lesbian identity because they have never tried being with a man or because they were with a man in the past is deeply grounded in heterosexism and the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality. Heterosexism informs our culture that a heterosexual identity and lifestyle is the best, easiest way of living in our world. For many LGBTTQAI+ identified people, "well intentioned" family and friends often express their homophobia/heterosexism in the form of concern over how difficult living an alternative lifestyle can be and the discrimination one might face, ignoring the fact that they are initiating that discrimination through such comments. And even if that was the case, it is only because of the prevalence and effects of heterosexism. LGBTTQAI+ movements have long pointed out the hypocrisy in heterosexual people constantly challenging LGBQA people about how they know they are actually or exclusively the identity they claim they are if they have never tried being in a heterosexual relationship- how many heterosexual people would even consider trying to be with someone of the same sex before entering into a long term heterosexual relationship? This also denies the heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality engrained in our culture which means that almost everyone is raised with the expectation or assumption that they are or will become heterosexual; most LGBQA people will contend with the idea of being heterosexual as they grow up because it is presented as the only or at least the optimal option. For lesbians, compulsory heterosexuality results in a double-edged sword- if one resists and has never been with a man, their lesbian legitimacy is challenged because there remains a possibility that they would actually enjoy being with a man. Conversely, lesbians who have been with men in the past have

their legitimacy challenged on that ground. Bisexual women likely face this impasse and violence often since the underlying heterosexist message in these comments is: as a woman, if you can be with a man you ought to be.

Although my participants did not disclose any experiences of physical violence, I wrote frequently in my reflexive journals about how important it is for me to focus on the violence that many lesbians across the gender spectrum face in Canadian society.

I would like to share the following entry from my reflexive journal on this topic:

When I think of homophobic violence that I have experienced, there's the "But you don't *look* like a lesbian!" and the backhanded "You know you're like, *so* pretty though, I'd never know you were gay". But I think beyond that, the most hurtful side of femme invisibility is the denial of femme relationships in my own life. I've been with my girlfriend for over three years now, and only recently did our families regularly start introducing us as girlfriends to family, friends or strangers instead of introducing us as friends. I'm really struggling to think of something that bothers me more than having my relationship erased in that kind of way. Well, I think I've also experienced an extreme case just following the moment in my second year of undergrad when I had come out as a lesbian (having previously identified as bisexual). I was at a party with friends, we were drinking, and hanging out. I didn't know many people, I'd come along with a friend and it was mostly people who were five or six years older than me, young working professionals in Ottawa. My friend was interested in a guy there and so I spent most of my night mingling and meeting new people- I'm extroverted, that's no problem for me! But the problem for me was that one of the guys at the party decided that he really liked me and spent most of the night hovering around making passes at me, trying to play on my insecurities, and eventually focused in on my sexuality as he realized I didn't identify as heterosexual. See, I wasn't worrying about things like that at this party because these were all people who were supposed to have Liberal values and they wouldn't disrespect a lesbian, right? Well, N proceeded to spend the next several hours harassing me about how I can't really be a lesbian, I'm "bisexual at best" (one of my personal favourites to hear), I was just too young and it would be irresponsible for me to base this decision off of only having slept with inexperienced eighteen year old guys and that obviously if I slept with him, I'd change my mind. A close friend of N's raped me that night at the party after my friend left. The next time I was able to go out with people again following that experience, N was also there and drunkenly whispered to me "I saw what happened at the party- you can't try to tell me you're not into guys anymore!"

While not every lesbian will experience this kind of violence, it is politically important for me to include personal examples of these experiences because not including them would contribute to the erasure of the violent landscapes with which lesbians are forced to contend. I would also posit that such examples and analysis substantively critique the notion of femme privilege. While there may be moments where femmes access a passing privilege in the sense that they are able to avoid homophobic confrontations,

butch/androgynous/masculine-presenting lesbians could also be said to hold privilege in certain moments where they more comfortably accepted as part of lesbian spaces⁸. Furthermore, any notion of privilege and passing relating to lesbians only exists in reference to stereotypical understandings of what heterosexual women look like (feminine) and what lesbians look like (not feminine). As previous analysis has demonstrated, such assumptions are not only incorrect, but are detrimental to all women.

I want to emphasize the importance of a radical rethinking around the category of lesbian that is less reliant on heterosexist gender assumptions, the gender binary, and that is less informed by the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality. Mishali (2014) calls for an articulation of the category of lesbian that includes all lesbians, including those who do not identify as women, and that simultaneously incorporates and exceeds the category of women. Women should not have to choose between lesbianism and womanhood and lesbians should not have to identify as women (Mishali, 2014). Drawing on Butler's (1990) theories of gender performativity, Mishali (2014) emphasizes that femme performances "neither rely on a female essence nor propose an ideal which dictates a homogenous model of femininity" (59). Hollibaugh (2000) extends this as she writes about how her femme role models were drag queens who actively construct and perform female identity in a way that reveals how femme-ness and femininity are not natural, but rather are performances. These performances of femininity, both by lesbians and by drag queens, reflect a conscious reclamation of femininity outside of its natural/normal configuration and emphasize the ongoing production and performativity at play (Mishali, 2014). Mishali (2014) emphasizes that even if there are no visible distinctions between

⁸ I also want to be clear that I am not casting femmes as the exclusive victims of corrective rape or other forms of violence; I recognize that butch, androgynous or masculine-of-centre lesbians also experience such violent and abhorrent experiences.

femme-ness and traditional femininity, the lesbian appropriation of femininity can still be read as queer. Mishali (2014) captures the subversive power of lesbian femme identities as she writes: “Femme efforts are not aimed at pleasing men but work to arouse and inspire women and other gender outcasts, thereby challenging the very objective of femininity- heteronormative obedience” (59). Thus, femme lesbians are in fact not less able to challenge compulsory heterosexuality than butch, androgynous or otherwise presenting lesbians. Femmes challenge compulsory heterosexuality and actively queer the heteronormative assumptions that govern the way we imagine gender and the correlation between gender and sexuality. One of the objectives of this chapter and this thesis in general is not only to challenge compulsory heterosexuality and to draw connections around the way lesbians experience and are affected by heterosexuality, but also to explore the deep connections between gender and sexuality, to begin to untangle those connections, and to investigate the effects of the interconnection of gender and sexuality.

In a piece on femme invisibility within queer communities, O’Hara’s (2015) begins by noting that her three past girlfriends had all commented to her that she “looks straight,” drawing attention to the reality that even to the women/people femmes are in lesbian/queer relationships with, the legitimacy of their identity and desires is called into question because of the way their gender embodiment. Within our culture, femininity is deeply associated with heterosexuality to the point that feminine attributes are almost always interpreted as a sign of submission to men, whether that femininity is displayed by a (heterosexual) woman or a (homosexual) man (Mishali, 2014). I think on any level, these discussions speak to how difficult and complicated it is to articulate a non-

heterosexual identity as a woman and to have that identity taken seriously and respected. Again, this underscores the pervasive compulsory nature of heterosexuality. It's important to talk about this kind of discrimination against femme lesbians and the way that hegemonic scripts of compulsory heterosexuality, heterosexism, are desperately trying to work out their self-perpetuating repetition onto femme lesbian bodies, to discursively control and contain the threat that (femme) lesbian bodies pose to the interlocking systems of gender and sexual oppression (Butler, 1990). Bolsø (2008) notes that while the presence of the phenomenon of girl-girl kissing is often understood as a demonstration of postmodern tolerance for and acceptance of lesbians, this may alternatively be interpreted as the media's increased tolerance of the visual of girl-girl kissing that exists within a context that simultaneously rejects and denies the desire such an image may represent (Puhl, 2010; Jackson and Gilbertson (2009). While lesbianism is over-sexualized in the sense that lesbian porn and "girl-on-girl action" is continually represented as the object of hetero male fantasies (Bolsø, 2008; Puhl, 2010; Louderback and Whitley, 1997), lesbianism in everyday life is de-sexualized in many ways (Bolsø, 2008; Puhl, 2010), including the apparent pervasive confusion over how lesbians actually have sex (Buzzfeed, 2013) or the popular concept of "lesbian bed death" (Ali, 2014; Sterling, 2015), to name a few. Extending this analysis, Puhl (2010) draws on studies of the attitudes of heterosexual men toward both lesbians and gay men (Louderback and Whitley, 1997) to suggest that it is not "lesbianism as homosexuality" that heterosexual men eroticize, but rather "lesbianism as sexual interaction between two feminine, gender-conforming women" and that the eroticism taking place is of the women depicted as women, not lesbians (9). Puhl's (2010) work on the sexualization of lesbianism aptly

recognizes that pop culture and media that eroticize lesbianism or romantic/sexual acts between two women (whether or not they are lesbian-identified) perpetuates discourses of lesbians (but only particular, feminine, gender-acceptable lesbians) as sexy and desirable, but does not take into account or take seriously the political context of lesbianism or the radical potential of lesbianism.

There are many benefits of enfranchising femmes or opening up the way we imagine Lesbianism. However, it is also important to be clear that such an opening is conceptual and applies to the culturally constructed concept of Lesbianism. It is important to recognize that it's not there are not femme lesbians living femme lesbian lives or that there haven't always been lots of femme lesbians and lesbians embodying gender across the spectrum. Rather, the problem is rooted in the limited ways that lesbianism/Lesbianism is imagined. Mishali (2014) argues that the historical exclusion of femme lesbians has resulted in stripping femmes of their identities and also the ability to understand their identities as subversive. There is a lot to gain from including femmes in lesbian-feminist histories and in current lesbian movements, including re-constructing femme as an intelligible way of being lesbian and challenging the connection between gender and sexuality (Mishali, 2014). While femmes have a rich history of re-signifying femininity outside of heterosexuality and lesbian-feminism despite the exclusion and oppression they faced from both sides, the repercussions of this exclusion and oppression resonate in feminist and lesbian circles today (Mishali, 2014; Walker, 2012). Mishali (2014) locates subversive possibilities in femme lesbian presentations as these women re-inscribe and queer femininity by using it to connect women erotically and to challenge pervasive assumptions about femininity in general. Extending this, Mishali (2014) notes

that femme lesbians' gender performances work to reveal the mechanism of gender and sexuality and more significantly, they challenge the hetero/homo binary in a way that renders all feminine women "suspected lesbians" (58). Furthermore, femmes challenge the homogenized understanding of femininity by creating their own beauty norms and queering the way they embody femininity by re-negotiating femininity, including reclaiming fat bodies as beautiful, fusing classic femininity with tattoos, piercings, punk haircuts, burlesque costumes, or other elements that are not typically associated with traditional femininity (Mishali, 2014). Mishali (2014) notes that some of these performances are actively adopted by femme lesbians as a way to make themselves visible or legibly queer/lesbian.

Gordon (2006) found that while her lesbian identified participants actively resisted gender norms of femininity, their resistance to heterosexual norms of sexuality is a resistance of masculine, and not feminine, sexuality. Interestingly, my participants did not seem concerned with articulating specifically lesbian or specifically non-heterosexual ways of being. What my participants more clearly discuss in their responses is the desire to be seen as just human instead of as a lesbian, as demonstrated by the following excerpt:

C: It's never been an obvious thing about me, so I guess I feel like it's never been as important for me to be seen as a lesbian. I'm a lesbian when I'm at home or when I'm out with my girlfriend or whatever, but most of the time I'm just a person.

Moving beyond discussions of appearance, behaviour, gender and Lesbianism, I interpret these remarks to reflect a homonormative impulse to integrate into and claim heterosexual privilege rather than subverting and challenging heteronormativity (Duggan,

2002; Puar, 2007, 2013). I will complicate my interpretation of these comments as I more thoroughly analyze themes of homonormativity and space in Chapter 3.

Chapter Three: Coming Out In Space

In Chapter 2 I looked at ways that my participants understand lesbianism, how they make sense of the regulatory powers of Lesbianism and how they understand cultural constructs of Lesbianism to affect their experiences. This chapter focuses on how participants understand space, place, and community to affect their experiences of coming out, being out and living as a lesbian. Throughout the chapter, I explore how space affects identity and specifically how “urban bias” and the structuring narrative of the urban/rural binary affects the way we culturally imagine LGBTQ+ communities and the way individual LGBTQ+ people experience and make sense of their identities (Boso, 2013). The first section investigates the way participants understand and make use of the urban/rural binary with an emphasis on the way community and acceptance function in small town settings. The second section focuses on and seeks to complicate coming out narratives. The third section interrogates the notion of “white homonormativity” by looking at the way white privilege and a lack of focus on race and issues of racism shapes the experiences of my participants and LGBT movements more generally.

Urban Bias and Sexualities:

The literature on space and sexuality reflects general assumptions around space/place, where urban spaces are imagined to be developed, progressive, and modern while rural/small town spaces are constructed as less developed, backwards, antiquated counterpart (Halberstam, 2005; Gray, 2009; Wienke and Hill, 2013; Boso, 2013; Weston, 1995; Bell and Valentine, 1995). I noted in several of my interviews that cities are

imagined to be generally more tolerant of LGBTQ+ identities and the stereotype of small towns and rural areas as intolerant is acknowledged, but then based on their own experiences, participants express that they have had more positive experiences in small town/rural spaces, and also that they would prefer to live in small town/rural spaces. This is demonstrated through the following quotes:

C: I would prefer to live somewhere fairly rural, like a small town with less of 25 000 people would probably be ideal... I think that's a lot of just personal preference. I like being outside, I like working outside, doing farm stuff like that. So basically I think that you can develop the kind of community that you need, you can make friends being a queer person anywhere. So given that I believe that, my personal preference leads me to want to live in a small town.

R: Hm, I would definitely consider it! [D: Yeah?] I mean, having grown up in the country I really miss it sometimes (laughs) Like not the people and stuff, I miss just being away from all of the people (laughs). That sounds so anti-social! [D: Yeah] It's nice to be in sort of more isolated areas, closer to nature. I'm into like camping and hiking and the outdoors and stuff like that.. privacy (laughs) [D: Yeah] cause I grew up on a country road, my neighbours were kinda far away, and when it was dark and quiet it was actually dark and quiet [D: mhm] it was not like the city at all.

Thus, while participants occasionally make use of the urban/rural binary, they are conscious of that and also often challenge the binary and its assumptions either in the same response or later in the interview. The following excerpt from my interview with K exemplifies this:

K: I like that I go out and see people I know [D: Yeah] you know, I'm teaching the kids of parents I know, and I think that school and home connection is so important for the kids too [D: mhm]. I like that the kids, you know, because it's a smaller town and they know me, they see me in the community [D: Yeah] and they know um you know about my relationship, and I think it's just, it's good for them to just [D: mhm] and we can just be normal and be that, I guess, I think of ourselves as a bit of a role model [D: Yeah] for some of them, cause there aren't you know, there are a few more openly gay couples around town now, [D: mhm] than what there used to be, and you know that we've kind of discovered over the last five years [D: Right] but yeah, I just do like that you know everybody [D: Yeah] some people really hate that but [D: Yeah (laughs) I guess it's true, some people really don't like it] (laughs) some people wanna be on an island but [D: yeah] um yeah, you know, the more interconnected a community can be, the better able [D: yeah] I think it's, you know, you don't find very often, it used to be that the neighbourhood would, and it's probably just cause I read an article about this the other day, and neighbours used to, you know, watch out for one another [D: Right] so if your kid walked to the park by yourselves at, you know, eight years old, it wasn't a big deal because you knew every house along the way was watching the kid walk to the park [D: For sure] whereas now that house along the way is calling the cops and saying, [D: Yeah] you know, this eight year old is traveling on its own. I don't think we have that so much here [D: Yeah] which is nice [D: It is still much more of a like classic community] Yeah, we still watch out for one another a little bit, you know. For now. [D: Yeah (laughs) who knows].

K establishes several reasons, including a sense of “classic community” where most residents do not just know each other, but actually look out for one another, as part of the reason she enjoys her small town community. Later in the chapter I discuss how several of my participants, notably K and R, discuss how they had a lack of role models both in the media and in their communities while they were growing up. I think it’s awesome to see K taking on the role of a role model in the community in general, but specifically within her school in her position as a teacher.

Turcotte’s (2005) report for Statistics Canada on social engagement and community participant in rural and small town versus urban residents picks up on the idea of small town communities functioning in different ways compared to urban communities. Turcotte (2005) finds that contrary to popular perception established by scholars like Putnam (2000), urban residents are no more likely than their rural and small town counterparts to experience social isolation or to see friends less frequently. Putnam’s (2000) perspective is supported by analysis dating back to Simmel’s (1903) argument that urban dwellers are detrimentally affected by the nature of urban life, resulting in isolation and depression. What Turcotte (2005), Putnam (2000), and Simmel’s arguments fail to disclose, however, is that while they invoke an abstract, universal category of “residents/dwellers,” they are actually commenting on the experience of a privileged group of people, excluding, most relevantly to this project, the experiences of LGBTQ+ populations. I find it interesting that despite this near consensus (which would have been even more the case a decade ago) that LGBTQ+ people and their experiences in regards to safety, community, or isolation are entirely absent from this report. According to the report, while there is not a notable difference between how

often rural/small town and urban residents see their families and how close they feel they are to family members, Turcotte (2005) found that the more rural a place, the more individuals know their neighbours, with some small communities reporting that they know all of their neighbours. The following comments by L during our interview reflect on this:

L: I find in the country, you know your neighbours. [D: Yeah] in the city you don't. There are people who live like five feet away from each other, and they'll call [the bylaw office] rather than talk to their neighbour about the barking dog or the [D: Right] junk on the lawn or whatever. So I know my neighbours. My neighbours visit me, I visit them, and it's more a sense of community. And my kids went to kindergarten through high school, everybody knows my two sons and they know they have two moms and it's a Catholic school and they accepted me and them so [D: Yeah] I just think there's more a sense of community.

The above excerpt furthers the idea that visibility and acceptance may function differently in small town or rural settings than in urban spaces. When L comments that “everybody knows my sons and they know they have two moms,” I identify strong parallels with the following quotes from K and A:

K: [D: is there a reason that you choose or don't choose to identify as a lesbian? Like that term in particular?] Um, I just don't see the need for it. [D: yep] Personally, there are times, like, I guess, people want to have their little boxes [D: mhm] to put people in so if they, it's not something [D: Yeah, you see it more as] go off on people about if they use it [D: Yeah, right, it's more of an externally imposed] yeah [D: It's not something you take on, cool.]

A: um, I don't know if I like the word lesbian? I don't know. [D: Okay! You can also talk about that! I'm very interested in what people think about that] I don't know, yeah exactly, it's difficult too, being in a small town, but uh, I find that we, us just being us and knowing a lot of people in X, it's, I haven't felt a lot of negativity [D: mhm] so it's been yeah, really good [D: yeah, that's good!] I think for others coming out as being a lesbian couple, yeah it's been a very positive response [D: yeah] yeah.

While I initially interpreted these responses- “I just don't see the need for it” and “just being us and knowing a lot of people, I haven't felt a lot of negativity” as part of the homonormative trend of people disavowing identity politics and their use of categories such as lesbian, gay, bisexual to identify themselves because they do not want to be activists or thought of as different, they just want to be people. I will pick back up on the homonormative trend to extend my analysis of small town acceptance later in this

chapter. Drawing on the work of Kazyak (2011, 2012) on rural and small town lesbian and gay lives, I re-interpreted these responses as an expression of a differentially functioning politics of visibility in small town and rural settings. In her study on rural lesbian and gay life, Kazyak (2011) found that her participants used three understandings of rurality- being known as a good person, having ties to the community, and the close-knit nature of rural life- to make sense of their experiences. I interpret the way that my participant's makes sense of their acceptance into their communities to be influenced by similar understandings of how rural/small communities function: the fact that they both grew up there and have family/friend/work connections throughout the community. The following quote from my interview with C expands this discussion in several ways:

C: ...I guess I feel like when I was in small towns, sometimes it can be more of an issue where, it sounds really like stereotypical, [D: mmm] but it's true, where people are rednecky and they have a problem with gay people because it's kind of, you know, the moral culture, but at the same time, when you are in that space and you do have your group of friends they're a lot more fiercely protective of you. So I feel like you get more of a buffer between yourself and anyone who might want to start shit with you [D: Yeah]. Um, whereas in a city I feel like you can feel a lot more free to be out, but I've actually had more people call me names and kind of be slightly nastier to me in cities and stuff than I ever did in small towns [D: Okay, yeah, that's interesting for sure]. Um but at the same time, it seems like when there's something that comes up, I've never really experienced, well maybe once, but I've never, mostly never experienced any violence because of being a lesbian, but I.. in my experience with people that I know, when they have, it's been worse in small towns, so there's that as well.

The way I interpret this response is that this participant is conscious of the way she draws on stereotypes or assumptions that are informed by the urban/rural binary such as the idea that small towns are a place “where people are rednecky” and “they have a problem with gay people”. While she invokes some stereotypes, she also challenges them. By both invoking and challenging stereotypes of the rural and stereotypical understandings of the rural, I interpret C's comments to both speak to the kind of “urban bias” that shapes our understanding of the rural as a place where people “have a problem with gay people” while simultaneously subverting such stereotypes, allowing for a reconceptualization of

the rural as a place where communities and groups of LGBTQAI+ people are protective of each other, connected through kinship networks. Further to that, her disclosure that more people have said nasty things to her in cities counters the urban bias that constructs urban spaces as necessarily tolerant and safe for LGBTQ+ people. Such a challenge to the urban/rural binary draws on an understanding of the urban as anonymous and therefore more impersonal because of its dense population. While anonymity is often thought to serve the expression of alternative ways of being, C's quote emphasizes the other side of this- anonymity also functions to allow people to harass or discriminate against others more anonymously. Conversely, in small towns people may be less likely to harass or discriminate against someone because it is likely that they know you or your family and that you know who they are or who their family is. Significantly, C notes the way that close kinship circles function as "buffers" that protect her from negative experiences in the small town space. In my own experiences, I found that having a circle of close friends in my small town community was crucial as I experimented with and developed my sense of self. However, this also raises an important point around determinants of positive experience in small town or rural spaces. In order to establish a close circle of friends that can serve as a buffer or provide a safe space within any space one is living in, it is necessary to have a certain level of connection with/in the community you live. When I presented some preliminary findings from this project at a conference, in the discussion period it was noted how important it is to emphasize the difference in experience of LGBTQ+ people and couples who have strong ties in the community and those who move to a small town or rural community where they do not

have roots or kinship ties. Later in our interview, C expanded on this notion of the importance of a close circle of friends in small town settings, saying:

C: ... I think that once you get kind of your support group and stuff when you're in a small town then yeah, it's a lot more protective and stuff and you do have more of a bubble around you in a lot of ways in a small town and that's just sort of more once you can develop that community, you do kinda have a buffer that isn't the same as what you have in the city. In the city you might get more, you know, experiences, and you have more exposure to different opportunities and stuff, but at the same time.. in a way, people in cities are more vulnerable to not having that kind of community.

There are several other moments in my interviews with K and A which address the way that acceptance and community support function uniquely in small town settings. In the following excerpt, K reinforces the point C makes in the above quotes by demonstrating the importance of having connections within and being active in one's small town community. K notes:

K: Oh for sure! I think that's, you know, what we're doing by just living our life [D: Yeah] and being a part of the community. You know we're both, and myself, you know, I've been president of the ladies slow pitch league, I've coached soccer, I've um I'm a board member at the curling club, we're very out there in the community. A works at the [community centre] with seniors [D: mhm, yeah] you know, I'm in the school every day, you know, we have quite a lot of connections I think, we do help to foster um foster that sort of [D: Yeah] um community in here as well. Not that, you know, we're all together as a community or anything, but just you know, as a whole [D: Yeah] it's just an inclusive community in general of all types [D: yeah].

I interpret K's comments to mean that she attributes her and her wife's active involvement and participation in her community as probably the foremost factor in explaining why they have been met with overwhelming acceptance by their community. This also connects back to the strategy that A and C discuss of intolerant people becoming more accepting as they get to know individual LGBTQ+ people in their own lives. C and A indicate that they see acceptance and tolerance of LGBTQ+ people more tied to the strength of personal relationships than to any particular place. The following two excerpts demonstrate this:

C: I think the biggest factor is somebody getting to know you. Um, I ended up making friends with people who were when I first met them they were, you know, "you're a fag" and all kinds of

epithets and stuff, and they just didn't know really gay people or didn't realize they knew any gay people. I really think that's the biggest factor, is personal relationships.

A: Yeah, I think it just depends on the person. Some people just have it in their minds that they don't agree with it, and it's hard to change that mind frame until they are around people who are in same-sex relationships [D: yeah, so it's a lot of like, when you know someone personally and you know their..] For sure, yeah exactly.

I think these examples also interestingly comment on how different people perceive similar experiences differently, depending on their identities, location, experiences and orientations. While C commented throughout our interview that she has not had many negative experiences and has been lucky to not have many homophobic experiences, she also shares experiences such as the above quote where people use anti-gay epithets toward her. In my own experiences growing up in a small town, I also encountered these sorts of backhanded situations where a friend's boyfriend would comment to me that while he used to think all gay people should be killed, since he had gotten to know me and one of our other close gay male friends he no longer felt that way. On some level, I reflect C's sentiments that it is a good thing that people become less homophobic as they interact with and get to know LGBTQ+ people; however, I also consider such comments to be not only homophobic, but violent. Thus, while the prominence and success of strategies for LGBTQ+ acceptance than hinge on individual homophobes becoming more tolerant as they interact with LGBTQ+ people is reflected by multiple of my participants, I want to recognize that such a strategy places LGBTQ+ people in unfairly violent, unsafe, and hostile situations. Referring back to the discussion around identity politics, neoliberalism and individualization in Chapters 1 and 2, I am skeptical of strategies that place the onus for achieving acceptance on individual LGBTQAI+ subjects, largely on

their ability to appeal to heterosexual subjects and heterosexualized, white, middle class politics of respectability (Fellows and Razack, 1998; Duggan, 2002; Puar, 2007, 2013; Cohen, 1997).

Extending my analysis on small town acceptance and community, I want to draw on the following quote from my interview with R:

R: Um, I feel pretty comfortable in either place. Like I'm fine with myself and I'm fine with other people like, people react negatively to me for any reason I usually just assume it's something about them [D: Yeah] it has nothing to do with me, but I know some people may be more vulnerable about that type of thing. Um, but when I go there, I guess I'm always kind of . looking around me in a different way, whenever I'm at the grocery store and I see someone who I can tell is gay, I'm just like oh my god, what are you doing in Y (laughs) [D: Yeah, it's more exciting when you see someone (laughs)] yeah, it just feels different. I just want to like, secret handshake with them, and [D: Yeah (laughs)] like, I'm just visiting, but hi!

I interpret this this excerpt as speaking to the reality that LGBTQ+ people inhabit space differently because of their identities. When R states she is “looking around... in a different way” with an attentiveness to any other people she interacts with who may also be LGBTQ+ identified. While heterosexual people may not read certain things, identifiers or people as different, I interpret this to mean that among LGBTQ+ people living in smaller locations, there may be unspoken ways of communicating with one another that constitute a different kind of less visible community than you might find in the city. I found the notion of a differently functioning politics of visibility in small town spaces versus the typical understanding of visibility politics in urban queer communities an interesting commonality among several of my participants. The following remark by A captures this well:

A: Um, yeah, we just kinda.. I think a lot of our friends knew (laughs) [D: Okay] so it wasn't a big, like I don't know, yeah. We didn't go around saying, I don't know. People just knew. Like I said, it's a small town, so people just kind of put it together.

The way I interpret her comment “it’s a small town, so people just kind of put it together” is that because small towns do not have the same anonymity that often structures the way visibility functions in urban queer communities, there may be less of a need to continually come out because of the nature of the small town where people know you, they know your family, and they know basic things about you and one of those things for K and A is that they are a married (lesbian) couple. K extends her analysis on how acceptance functions in small town communities as she reflects on how in a small town, instead of forming a distinct and separate subculture, the LGBTQ+ population integrates into the general, small town community:

K: Yeah, well you don't really have a choice I think [D: Yeah I guess there's not enough people in general to make a little subset] But yeah, I just think that when we were in Toronto, you know, even going to the Eaton Centre, it's just a ten minute walk from like the Church and Wellesley village, but walking around the Eaton Centre you'd think that everybody is heterosexual [D: Exactly, yeah] and you know, that's the identity that everybody's portraying in there, and then you go ten minutes North [D: Yeah] and all of a sudden, everybody's out [D: Yeah] and it's kinda, but that's their safe space to do it, while I feel like this town is my safe space [D: Yeah] as a whole [D: mhm. That's really nice, that it feels that way, yeah.] Yeah.

I find the notion that there does not need to be a distinct LGBTQ+ community because the town community in general is able to accept and make space for all kinds of people to safely and meaningfully take part in it. However, I think it’s important to underscore the reality that for LGBTQ+ people who do not have well developed community ties where they live and especially for people who are new to an area, it could be more intimidating to become involved in the community and the process of feeling accepted within the community could be more challenging. While the comments provided by C, K, and A suggest that if such individuals put themselves out there and become involved in their community, it’s likely they will be met with acceptance, it may not always feel that way to newcomers, especially if they have not spent large amounts of time living in or visiting small town or rural areas and if their opinions on rural and small town areas are

influenced by the urban/rural binary. In the next section on white homonormativity I complicate this notion by considering how one's race, class, ability (among other factors) may affect how easily they are able to get involved in a small town or rural community and how easily they will be accepted.

Another relevant theme that emerged from my interviews was the way participants perceive differences between Canada and the United States in terms of acceptance and the way shape affects their experiences. The following excerpt from my interview with K in response to a question about whether or not she ever intentionally is "less out" at particular times or places reflects the idea that Canada is more accepting and safe than the US:

K: Like where we're more in? [D: Yeah] I mean, we're planning on travelling to Tennessee in another week [D: Okay] and we're making jokes at the curling club the other night about the banjos and the pickup trucks, and you know [D: Yeah] in the Southern states it's really not as accepted as it is here, even um a couple weeks ago we were crossing the border into Michigan and you know, they ask you how do you know the person that you're with? [D: Right] And I said, well, she's my wife and the border guard was like, oh! Is that all like, fully legal up there? And you know, I think he was on our side, but [D: Yeah] he was like, yeah, you know it's still in the Supreme Courts here and it's such a battle, and so it always just kind of [D: Yeah] sits in the back of your mind, you know, our relationship isn't considered legal in many places in the world still [D: Yeah] we're very fortunate to be here. And we are aware of that.

In her response to my questions on lesbianism, outness and Canadian society, C reflects a similar opinion on the state of LGBTQ+ acceptance in Canada versus America:

D: Okay, so section four is on lesbianism and Canadian society in particular. Um, so do you feel comfortable or have you felt comfortable holding a girlfriend or partners hand in public? [C: Yes]. And like I know you were saying before that you find that Canada is sort of more nonchalant about lesbians and queer people than American society, so is that something, like you feel comfortable most of the time no matter where you are in Canada? [C: Everywhere I've been. I feel like Canadians are kind of just over it.]

I interpret these comments as part of an overarching perception that the differences between urban and non-urban spaces in Canada are less prominent than in the United States, and also that Canada is more generally accepting of LGBTQ+ people and communities than the United States. Obviously the political and legal contexts both

influence the perception of Canada as more tolerant and accepting, and also substantively make it more legally tolerant and accepting since there is more legal protection and more access to services in Canada than in the US as a whole. It is important to emphasize, however, that such perceptions can never be more than generalizations because there will always be discrepancies in how accepting certain places are and space alone will never be able to definitively dictate the likelihood of LGBTQ+ acceptance (Halberstam, 2005; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Weston, 1995; Gray, 2009; Kazyak, 2012). In my interview with R, she acknowledges this by also specifically commenting on potential differences between different areas in Canada:

R: In my experience I feel like I've always lived in Ontario, more like Southern Ontario [D: Okay] and wherever Ottawa lies I guess that's like [D: Yeah, I guess we're Eastern (laughs)] Eastern, (laughs) yeah. I feel like I've always lived in areas where it's been relatively accepted. Um I feel like if I lived in like the far North or maybe, I've heard things about what it's like in the Maritimes from people who haven't lived there in a while, so I don't know [D: Right, that it's less] it might, I might have had a different experience, but I've never really been to either of those places so I can't say for sure. I feel like it probably has helped to live in such a densely populated portion of the country.

While R's comments recognize that tolerance/acceptance is affected by a variety of factors and changes across space, she also draws on cultural narratives that suggest that living in densely populated areas means it is more likely that one's LGBTQ+ identity will be accepted. Often, participants draw on general understanding of the urban/rural binary as they discuss their experiences, but they also often challenge it. The following section further challenges the explanatory power of the urban/rural binary by drawing on quotes from participants. The way they perceive and explain differences they have observed or experienced between or among urban, rural and small town spaces challenges the assumptions of the urban/rural binary.

Coming Out and Being Out:

While space and place clearly structure the way participants make sense of their experiences and identities, space also affects ways participants come out and their process of “being out”. In the following section, I provide an analysis of coming out discourses, queer and feminist critiques of coming out discourses, as well as how my participants make sense of their own experiences of coming out and being out. Bochenek and Brown (2001, xiii) define coming out as the process of

“becoming aware of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others. A person may be selectively “out” in some situations or to certain people without generally disclosing his or her sexual orientation or gender identity”

Coming out was initially understood as a series of developmental stages that begins with people recognizing a difference in themselves and then experiencing dissonance as they make sense of the significance of that difference until they reach some sort of internal balance and finally express their sexual orientation outwardly (Dunlap, 2014; Cass, 1979). While they do note that this is a process that may take many years to unfold for some people, Rasmussen (2004) critiques this neat conception of a closeted/out binary. Rasmussen (2004) points to the amount of literature, including pamphlets and guides to aid youth and their parents with the coming out process, and emphasizes that such literature reinforces the notion that coming out is always a valuable act that has benefits for the outed individual, their family and peers. Coming out is imagined to be the primary way of reducing stigma around being LGBTQ+ and to increase the well-being of LGBTQ+ people (Bridgewater, 1997). The closeted/out binary constructs the closet as a position that represents cowardice, exclusion, and suggests that those who are not “out” are not being honest or open about who they are (Rasmussen, 2004).

Coming out has become so central to the way we imagine LGBTQ+ identities that there is a “National Coming Out Day” in America (also celebrated widely in Canada), which falls on October 11 in 2015. Many prominent critiques of coming out discourses receive the most publicity around National Coming Out Day. An article in *The Atlantic* raises concerns that the imperative to come out may benefit the group more than the individual and often overlooks the risks associated with coming out for some individuals, especially coming out in relation to gender identity with the high levels of violence, murder, and homelessness and other issues that trans and non-binary people, particularly those of colour, experience (Mitchum, 2013). Mitchum (2013) emphasizes that while the LG community is normatively constructed as made up of financially secure, white people, the reality is that many LGBTQ+ people belong to several marginalized communities, which significantly impacts the calculations they make around coming out. Mitchum (2013) suggests that we need to be mindful of how we can offer more support to LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those who face greater degrees of marginalization, and underscores that our support of any LGBTQ+ person must not be hinged on them being “out”. Mitchum’s (2013) article also raises questions for me around how social media affects the way coming out functions. While I understand coming out as a continuous process that can never be complete in a heterosexist culture, I think that for people who actively use social media, posting a coming out message on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram may be a more permanent way of coming out that allows a person to reach an unlimited number of friends, family and potentially the public in a single post.

Feminists and queer theorists critique coming out discourses as essentialist, calling for a reconceptualization of coming out discourses that were contextualized and

resisted the positivistic, linear model of change (Dunlap, 2014). The closeted/out binary constructs an understanding of sexuality as something that is innate to one's being that must be discovered and then revealed. The argument that LGBTQ+ people are "born this way" makes an argument for LGBTQ+ rights based on the idea that non-heterosexual, non-cisgender identities cannot be discriminated against because they are natural and we have no more control over whether we are gay than we have control over the colour of our eyes. Bennett's (2014) article on "born this way" discourses examines both the Lady Gaga song of the same title as well as a popular blog, also called "Born This Way," which aggregates submissions by LGBTQ+ adults of photos from their childhood (ages 2-12) that reflect on early memories and the beginnings of their "innate LGBTQ selves" (213). Bennett (2014) traces the effectiveness of the "born this way" strategy, noting that a large number of adults in the United States believe that sexual orientation is innate, and that many LGBQ folks understand their sexuality to be natural/inborn and not something they have choice over. While it may be modified and played with by folks who make use of it, overall the "born this way" trope problematically reinforces a version of LGBT politics which implies that identity is knowable/stable and does not recognize the fluidity of sexual and gender identity. As Bennett (2014) recognizes, an extreme consequence of the born this way movement could be a eugenics/biology driven quest to eradicate "gay genes" (215). Walters (2014) critiques the movement as both bad politics and bad science, recognizing the way it takes the possibility of biological factors as causation and allows the case for LGBTQ+ rights and protections on the immutability and innateness of sexuality. Furthermore, any analysis of the "born this way" movement and its discourses must consider Puar (2007, 2013) and Cohen's (1997) work on the way that not all queer

bodies are equally positioned in relation to the state and the rights, and protections provided therein. Even if one were to accept a born this way discourse, ignoring the problematic ways it overlooks the fluidity of gender and sexuality, they would still have to contend with the hierarchies and exclusions within the queer community, notably the fact that racialized queer bodies are further marginalized and excluded as white queer subjects become further enfranchised (Puar, 2007, 2013; Cohen, 1997). Discourses that seek to naturalize and de-threaten difference in this way only exacerbate hugely problematic, often eugenic, discourses that seek to naturalize an ordering of bodies based on their sexuality, race, ethnicity, gender or other socially constructed elements of one's being.

Rasmussen (2004) emphasizes the significance race and age as factors that affect individual's coming out processes and decisions to come out. While I address race in the next section on homonormativity, the notion of age affecting the coming out process was a theme in my interviews. Dunlap (2014) and Savin-Williams (2008) also identify age as a significant factor in discourses around coming out. Younger generations likely have different coming out experiences than older generations because they have grown up in a culture that associates less stigma with LGBTQ+ identities and which legally recognizes same-sex marriage (Dunlap, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2008). Dunlap (2014) attributes the increased exposure to positive messaging and representations of LGBTQ+ people to the increased ease with which younger LGBTQ+ people can come out. As he notes, younger generations are more likely to maintain their relationships with families and friends than people who came out in previous generations (Dunlap, 2014). The following excerpts are pertinent to this discussion around age and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people:

L: I've lost friends over it. Like people that I grew up with, high school friends [D: Yeah]. They found out through my ex that I had the son with and they, you know, they've kind of cast me aside. It doesn't really matter to me, if that's the way they want to be, that's the way they want to be.

Other than that I haven't ever really been rejected in any way, shape or form [D: Yeah]

As she is in her late forties, L is the oldest of my participants and I find it significant that she is the only participant to share stories about how coming out resulted in the loss of some of her friends. Having grown up in a different generation is not only seen as a factor affecting one's ability to come out, but also as a factor that is seen to determine the degree of homophobia or intolerance, as the following quote from A suggests:

A: Um, not really, no. Growing up my father used to always make joke about people of different colours, and gay people, but that was just their generation, right? So anyways, [D: So you think it's largely a generational thing where older people maybe have..] Yeah, definitely [D: more of an issue with things] Yep.

I find it interesting that in the above quote, homophobia and racism are explained as a byproduct of having grown up in a less tolerant time. As I formulated this project, I received feedback that it was inadvisable to include both people who grew up and came out pre-same-sex marriage legalization in 2005 and older participants who grew up and came out long before then because their experiences would be too different. However, I feel that including the experiences of someone like L strengthens this study by providing more diverse experiences, but also to challenge the idea that people from older generations are necessarily more homophobic or less tolerant. To make sense of such discourse, I draw on Projansky's (2001) analysis of postfeminist movements in the United States, particularly her notion of postfeminism as asserting a linear history for feminism that ends in death. Projansky (2001) analyzes postfeminist popular culture representations and discourses to draw attention to a narrative that asserts that, culturally,

we have “followed along a linear historical trajectory focused ... almost exclusively on ‘equality’ for white, heterosexual, middle-class women” and that feminism has now died because women have achieved access to high paying jobs, full independence, and choice (71). I posit that these postfeminist discourses informs the narratives my participants draw on, which suggest that we are making progress along a linear path from next to total non-acceptance / non-existence of LGBT people in the past toward a present and a bright future wherein full equality and acceptance is inevitable. Such a narrative is also consistently perpetuated around political beliefs, in addition to feminist and pro-LGBT beliefs, suggesting that we only need to wait until older generations die off and the progressive, liberal, young generation comes to power and guarantees equality and acceptance for all. However, Projansky (2001) calls attention to the way that postfeminist discourses, implying that they have moved beyond feminism, actually perpetuate very particular iterations of feminism that revise and depoliticize many goals of second-wave feminism. While postfeminism and its many discourses are ubiquitous in popular culture, Projansky (2001) emphasizes that such discourses are limited by their “overwhelming focus on white, heterosexual, middle-class women (and sometimes men)” and by their reliance on universalizing, essentialist logic (68). Consequently, the way postfeminism shapes our cultural understanding of feminism and women’s positioning in society denies the importance of race, sexuality and class in a way that obscures and denies ongoing marginalization and the realities many people face. I pick back up on this analysis of postfeminism and Projansky’s (2001) work in the next section in a discussion of “post-gay” discourses.

The following quote from K reinforces this notion that there is nothing inherent about age that makes a person more or less likely to be tolerant or intolerant of LGBTTQAI+ people, thus complicating the linear narrative of acceptance:

K: ...There were over like 250 people that came out to our big party [D: Awesome] that was really great, cause my Grandmother who's going to be 84 um, you know, she's an old German lady [D: (laughs)] has some cultural issues of her own surrounding it all [D: Yeah] but even for her to come out and see that you know what, here's all these people who are here supporting them and loving them and [D: Yeah] want this for them and it was a real eye opener for her [D: yeah] so that whole support of the community has really helped I think in my family as well [D: mhm, to see that].

This quote supports the idea that there is nothing inherent about age, being older, or being from an older generation that necessarily indicates the likelihood that someone will be accepting or intolerant of LGBTQ+ identities. While there is no clear answer provided by my participants to explain what other factors may be more likely to determine any person's level of acceptance, I posit that neither space nor age are adequate determinants. Other theories suggested by several of my participants go back to the idea of getting to know individual LGBTQ+ people as the biggest determinant of acceptance. However, as this section has begun to critique, that theory is also flawed.

In our interviews, I asked each of my participants if they found coming out narratives useful. Their answers provide a great deal of insight on the way these participants identify, understand outness and builds on the previous section on small town acceptance and visibility and also connect into the next section on homonormativity. Several of my participants indicated that they see coming out as an empowering and helpful way of making sense of LGBTQ+ identities, if not for themselves, then for other people they know. As R and K note:

R: [D: Are coming out narratives useful?] I think so, I think a lot of people talk about, when they meet someone else who's gay or queer or whatever for the first time, [D: Yeah] it's like a conversation that you always end up having like, [D: Yeaah] when did you come out? How did it go? How was your family? And it can have such a huge impact on someone's life, like especially when it comes to family.

K: No, I think it is. I've had lots of conversations with friends and family about that process and getting to that point, and um, it's different with different people too. Like I really felt with my Dad there was no coming out process, like I really didn't think of it as a process, it's just when you're ready [D: yeah], and ready to come out, and it was just kinda, you know, I think Dad always kinda knew [D: Yeah] and we just showed up one day and it was all good. Whereas with my Mom it was a process [D: Right] it was a battle, and you know, she wasn't sure how to take it [D: Yeah] and, are you really sure? And more of the questioning back and forth with her and it took a lot more time [D: Yeah] but you know, all's good now (laughs) [D: Yeah, that's good!].

I interpret these excerpts as indicating that both R and K identify coming out as a way to bond with other LGBTQ+ people over shared experiences of having to navigate that process and having to engage in conversations and disclosures that, even if well received, are often stressful. In particular, I think K's comments about how coming out is a different process with different people depending on their perception of her and also their general acceptability of LGBTQ+ identities. However, others, including some of my participants, do not find coming out discourses meaningful in their sense-making activities because they do not see themselves to have ever "come out" in the way the term is usually deployed. L's response indicates that for her, coming out as an act was not particularly important in the formation of her identity. She comments:

L: I don't.. I don't introduce myself as being gay all the time. I just, I am who I am and if it matters than, than yeah that would happen. But normally, honestly, I never really came out to my family. I just showed up with a woman [D: right] for five years and they never said anything about it, kind of thing, and they just assumed.. so, and they know that if they were not going to accept me and my new partner than they wouldn't see me, [D: right] so they just basically, that's it, you know? [D: Yeah, yeah] That's L, she's with a girl now. [D: Yeah, okay!]. Yeah, so when I meet new people, I'm not saying well, I'm gay, you know. The places I go usually indicate that I'm gay. I don't get out much because I have kids, but (laughs)

C also reflects this notion in our interview when she states:

C: ...When I'm in a lesbian space or whatever, I'm usually with my girlfriend so it's fairly obvious and if I'm not it doesn't tend to matter. I don't tend to think about it too much, but I think if I were single it would probably be frustrating.

I think the notion of "achievable outness" or the partiality of outness is an interesting place to start analyzing the way my participant's take up coming out narratives, because

both comments clearly draw on spatial elements. Analyses of femme invisibility helpfully complicate the notion that the degree to which one's LGBTQ+ identity is implicated by their occupation of a "gay or lesbian" space depends on their gender presentation, as well as who they are with. The way I interpret C's comment is that for her, being out is indicated relationally and spatially in the sense that the places she goes and the person she is with (her girlfriend) indicate her sexual orientation so she does not have to. While critiques of coming out discourses emphasize that despite being constructed as a one-time confessional event, coming out is actually an ongoing process because we live in a heterosexist society that continually assumes everyone is heterosexual. I interpret my participant's comments about how they do not feel the need to come out or tell people they are gay when they meet them in several ways. While I discuss another way that these quotes could be interpreted in the upcoming section on white homonormativity, another potential explanation is that they are confident in their identity and do not feel it is their responsibility to correct against the potential for people to presume that they are heterosexual by asserting their identity in any situation where it may be unclear. I think this could potentially be an empowering way to counter heterosexism, because obviously someone incorrectly reading your identity as heterosexual does not make you heterosexual and eventually their incorrect assumption will be corrected as they become acquainted with you and learn more about your life and experiences. As their incorrect presumption of heterosexuality is later corrected, either explicitly or implicitly, that heterosexual individual may become more aware of the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality and stereotypes, both fuelled by Lesbianism and those around the necessary heterosexuality of feminine women, shape their understanding

of the world and maintain their heterosexual privilege. In my own experiences, I find that not knowing if someone is reading me as heterosexual and not knowing if I should make my identity, or usually my non-heterosexuality, clear or not can be a stressful occurrence. R reflects this in our interview as she recounts an experience:

R: I don't know, sometimes like, a guy..I don't know, I'm like: he's just being nice! [D: Yeah] So I'm like, I'm being nice back kinda but maybe not? .. But there's always like a weird line there [D: Yeah!], where I'm like, I don't know if I'm encouraging you or if I'm just like, being nice, we're both being nice to each other, I don't know. [D: Yeah, it's definitely hard to tell!] [Both laughing] But um, I don't feel like I ever intentionally do it.. There have been times in the past where.. if I didn't want to get into the conversation with someone who I thought was creepy (laughs) [D: Right, yeah yeah yeah] where I'd just be like [D: yeah, I get that]: no, I'm in a relationship or just like, not even [D: Just sort of ambiguous] yeah. Cause there are people obviously who like want to make it a big conversation or like, have you ever tried... And I don't wanna, I don't want to go there.

Unequivocally, the stories shared by my participants reflect that the heterosexist impulse to assume everyone and anyone is heterosexual has substantive effects on the experiences of lesbians and the way they navigate their lives. The above quote from R demonstrates that while she is out and has been for many years, she continues to encounter situations where she has to explain her sexual orientation. I interpret the end of her comment as bringing up the common trope of “how do you know you are *really* a lesbian if you have never tried to have sex with a man?!” which is clearly a product of heterosexism, which assumes that if someone can possibly engage in heterosexual relationships, they should be. The discussions, theories and concepts of scholars including Wittig (1982), Rich (1980, 2004), McLean (2008), Gordon (2006), Stein (1993) included in Chapter 2 around the behavioural norms of Lesbianism and the way they function and are enforced among lesbians provide an understanding of the pervasive ways heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality work to delegitimize the experiences and identities of lesbians.

Discussions around heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality raise the idea that for many LGBTQ+ identified people, it may be easier to allow people to figure out that you

are not heterosexually identified on their own, rather than having to engage in often frustrating conversations that are ridden with heterosexist discrimination.

Although my participants make use of coming out narratives and several participants express that they view coming out as an important and meaningful activity for many LGBTQ+ people, it is important to be mindful of the many legitimate critiques of coming out narratives offered by feminist and queer scholars. Among these critiques is the notion that coming out is teleological or that one has uncovered their 'true' or essential orientation, which runs contrary to the belief that sexuality is fluid (Dunlap, 2014). Within the literature on coming out narratives, many scholars including Cass (1979), Coleman (1982) and Troiden (1979) identify interaction with LGBTQ+ subcultures as an important part of the self-discovery process. I find this notion intriguing because I have an interest in understanding ways that lesbians make use of or relate to Lesbianism and the many stereotypes and media representations of lesbianism in our culture. None of my participants expressed that any direct exposure to LGBTQ+ subcultures played a significant role in their process of identity formation (as much as they can be said to have one), and yet they all managed to come out. R expresses this clearly as she discusses her lesbian role models, or lack thereof, growing up in rural/small town areas:

R: I mean I was close to places, but I didn't have a car (laughs) if I wanted to walk into town it would take me like, half an hour (laughs) [D: Yeah] just cause there were a lot of hills and stuff, but um.. in a bigger area.. it might have been. Like I might have had more.. I would have probably been exposed to more gay people in general, I would hope (laughs) so I might have been like, more. okay with myself when I first .. cause again, I had like no examples, except maybe a little bit from TV [D: Mhm] and not very much.[D: Yeah that was...] I remember me and my sister like, staying up late to like, watch Queer as Folk together [D: Right]. And being like, oh my god we're watching this. There was nothing wrong with it, but it was like our secret.. [D: Yeah] And I think that was the main, that was it. There was that.. I can't think any of like actually any shows.. there were like two lesbians on that show..

There is certainly more LGBTQ+ inclusive media produced today than there was fifteen years ago when R was growing up, and R's comments, as well as the work of Cass (1979), Coleman (1982) and Troiden (1979) and Gray (2009), underscore the importance of such content especially to rural and small town LGBTQ+ youth, for whom such representations may serve as their only connection to the community. K also expressed issues with the lack of exposure to LGBTQ+ representations growing up in a small town:

K: Yeah, like I think it related for sure, because it was just never something that was ever presented as an option [D: Yeah]. You know, you maybe saw a little bit of it on TV, but you never really heard about homosexual couples. We did, on our farm, there was another lesbian couple that moved in up the road [D: Oh okay], and I can remember I would babysit for them, and, you know, my Dad did a good job of they were just the other family [D: Right] up the road. They weren't there very long, that was kind of my first encounter with it [D: mhm] and it was kind of like, is this weird? [D: (Laughs) yeah] Is this okay? Like, what is this? This is different [D: yeah], you know it was kind of my first experience ever encountering anyone like that, but again, never, that was it in my early teens and I really didn't encounter anything else [D: mhm] until those University years [D: Right] to start really, you know, maybe thinking about it for myself. Post University, you know, it really didn't smack me across the head until I met A [D: Right] (laughs) and it was like oh! (Laughs) [D: (laughs) yeah]

This notion of coming out as a process of coming to the realization that one is not heterosexual and the consequential disclosure of one's sexuality prevails as the dominant narrative about how "coming out" functions. This problematically assumes and reinscribes heterosexuality as the dominant / natural / normal way of being, the way that everyone in the LGBTQ+ community is imagined to be until they have continually asserted enough times that they are finally accepted as being non-heterosexual. The following quote from C and R comment on this perception of the temporality of coming out:

C: I think that's something that's really hard for me to judge because I never really was like in the closet, [D: Okay] I was like thirteen or so when I told my Mom I liked girls, so I don't really, it's kind of like if you can ask a fish what it's like when they lived in a climate that's really wet. But I think that's a hard question for me to answer.

R: Yeah I guess. I mean, it's kind of hard to imagine for me, cause like, I came out when I was sixteen [D: Okay] so it's been a million years, it feels like. um. I mean I still . hear about or encounter people who . like, I was talking to my co-worker today, actually, [D: Right] and I was like, when did you tell your parents that you were a lesbian? And she said oh, in my thirties- she's

still in her thirties. [D: Right], she's like thirty-six, and I was like, it's been like six years, [D: Yeah] maximum since you told them and she's engaged to a woman right now [D: Right] so I was like, so what were you in the meantime? Like what were you doing? Like, did you come out? I guess she was just .. um, well she said she was tramping around with guys [laughs], those were the words she used. But she, I mean, also women, but [D: Yeah] I guess she just became more a little more...

C's indication that she has difficulty pinpointing a moment of coming out because she feels as if she has always been out is a wonderful disruption of the typical trajectory of coming out narratives. R's reflection on her coworker's coming out reinforces the sense that because it is so much more acceptable to be LGBTQ+ now than it has been in previous decades, it is almost confusing that some people wait until later in life to decide to come out. These narratives ignore, however, the fact that it may not be safe or comfortable for certain people to come out earlier in their lives or until they feel they are in a position where they have a support network and enough dependency from people, typically family, who may take issue with their orientation. It also ignores the reality that many people do not consider that they might be interested in exploring non-heterosexual, non-cisgender or non-binary orientations and relationships until they are older. While some people who come out later in life may have been suppressing their "true" orientation as they engage in heterosexual relationships, other people simply may experience a shift in attraction or desire at a certain point in their life. My quotation of "true" in the above section is meant to indicate my ongoing critique of narratives that construct identity as stable/innate and static.

Extending my analysis on the temporality of coming out, I think it's important to note that culturally, we continually doubt the ability of LGBTQ+ youth to know their own identities- in some ways mainstream culture looks for examples of LGBTQ+ people who have known "since birth" or since they were as young as possible, if not already the knowledge that they are gay, then at least a keen awareness of their difference. Yet at the

same time, when kids express at a very young age that they are trans or that they are gay, our cultural impulse is to not believe them. There is no clearer proof of this than the fact that Ontario recently became the first province to ban the practice of LGBTQ conversion therapy in June 2015 (Ferguson, 2015). While it is very important that such legislation passes, it speaks to the ongoing heterosexism in Canada - in every province except - Ontario parents are still legally able to send their LGBTQ identified children to conversion therapy and can often bill their insurance companies for the process (Ferguson, 2015).

While my participants' comments on coming out and being out both make use of and challenge traditional and often problematic narratives of coming out and identity development, I interpret many of the responses analyzed in the above section as reflecting a trend of homonormativity via the overwhelmingly expressed impulse to just "be human". I have already begun to analyze such narratives as part of a different kind of visibility in small towns and rural areas; however, in the following section I want to explore the role of homonormativity in these discourses.

White Homonormativity:

I draw on the work of Duggan (2002), Puar (2007, 2013), Richardson (2005) and Brown (2012) to inform my understanding of homonormativity. Brown (2012) argues that the changing position of many LGBT subjects in the "Global North" is less of an expression of social liberalization and more an expression of what Duggan (2002) calls the "emergence of a sexual politics of neoliberalism", which privileges particular subjects who are typically white, middle class, cisgender gay men at the expense/exclusion of other less normative subjects. Duggan (2002) further describes homonormativity as a

“politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized, gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). The homonormative approach to LGBT rights repositions LGBT people as ordinary citizens who reflect mainstream values and practices despite their same-sex orientation and generally demands subjects who commit to promoting a heterosexist model of life by participating in state sanctioned monogamous, sexist, forms of organizing relationships and families (Warner, 2002; Duggan, 2002; Halberstam, 2012; Richardson, 2005; Doty, 2010). While discussions of homonormativity are typically grounded in urban spaces and directed around gaybourhoods and gentrification, homonormativity is just as relevant in discussions around LGBTQ+ visibility and acceptance in small town and rural areas as studies such as Smith and Holt (2005) demonstrate.

There are two distinct issues I want to analyze in this section. I begin by interrogating what I identify as homonormative or “post-gay” discourses both in general and in the comments my participants as they deliberately distance themselves from membership in the LGBTQ+ community. While I addressed alternative ways of interpreting these impulses as connected to a politics of small town visibility, I find it relevant to explore other possible interpretations. Secondly, I want to explore the way acceptance in a small town community functions and what may be required of LGBTQ+ subjects who are accepted as part of their communities. While the importance of being known as a good person, having ties to the community, and the close-knit nature of rural

life community were discussed as ways of gaining community acceptance, it is important to understand what other factors may be at work in that process.

One of the most striking commonalities among my participants is that they distance themselves from LGBTQ+ identities in an appeal to being just a person. The idea of LGBT people distancing themselves from those labels or the community is not a new concept. Certainly this trend is not only reflected by my participants, but is actually quite common within mainstream representations of LGBT people. Drawing on Duggan (2002), Puar (2007, 2013), and Fellow and Razack's (1998) analysis on homonormativity, homonationalism, and the way that certain subjects occupy positions that are closer to the privileged, hegemonic (hetero)norm, it follows that it is more possible/viable for certain privileged subjects to identify with the universalized position of the "human" instead of allying themselves within an identity politics strategy.

Fellows and Razack (1998) emphasize that there is immense power in occupying a position in a dominant group who can claim to be "simply human" or "simply women". Those with privilege are not identified with specific identity categories, meaning that white people are not defined or understood as members of a race, and heterosexual people do not define themselves as having a sexual orientation (Fellows and Razack, 1998, 341). To be named as a particular identity becomes synonymous with being subordinated, while the positioned of being unmarked or unnamed signifies membership in a dominant group and suggests that one simply embodies the norm, obscuring the way such norms are actively produced and sustained at the expense of others (Fellows and Razack, 1998). This is the theory that frames my understanding of the impulse to identify as a "human loving human" as a move that requires and consolidates a certain

amount of privilege and can therefore be understood as homonormative. Elaborating on the concept of a politics of respectability, Fellows and Razack (1998) note that the pursuit of respectability is the pursuit of “domination through difference” and relies on all systems of domination, inscribing hierarchies of race, gender and class. The underlying argument Fellows and Razack (1998) make is that claims of justice or of the achievement of the kind of social equality that allows us all to be seen as “just human” are not transformative if their success is dependent on marking others

A: I think just being, coming out and realizing other people who are in same-sex relationships too, just that they're yeah. That it's not considered different and it's not a bad thing, it's just two people who love each other and I don't know, yeah. It's just, yeah.

While not made explicit in the above statement, I interpret the idea that same-sex couples do not have to be “different” and it’s not a “bad thing” because it’s just two people loving each other as implying that other ways of being LGBTQ+ that are perhaps more different may be considered bad. Certainly this notion marginalizes any LGBTQ+ folks (and heterosexual folks) who are polyamorous or who pursue less traditional monogamous relationships. Phelan (2001) posits that the legalization of same-sex marriage and the extension of other heterosexualized institutions and practices to include LGBTQ+ people risks reconstructing the idea of a responsible citizen in a way that includes LGBTQ+ subjects who are able to satisfy criteria of economic independence and general respectability. Young and Boyd (2007) caution that extending such rights to LGBTQ+ people holds the possibility of constructing a subject position of the responsible and acceptable lesbian or gay who, among other criteria, is married. This creates a particular kind of enfranchised LG subject or a “good” LG subject who participates in the state and its heteronormative institutions and exists in opposition to the “bad” LG or queer subjects

who do not marry, who do not or cannot mimic heteronormative values or otherwise pursue the path of least resistance to accessing political and legal rights.

It's important for me to recognize that I do not intend to include people who identify as fluid or non-binary as part of this critique. I understand such identifications explicitly and queerly subvert binaries and even subverting the notion of spectrums of gender, which are typically still grounded by constructs of "male" and "female" on either end of the spectrum. Thus, I distinguish between these queer, subversive positions and what I identify as normative LG positions, which consolidate norms instead of subverting them. I specifically want to critique the notion of distancing oneself from association with the LGBTQ+ community as a way of achieving a toehold of respectability, which is Fellows and Razack's (1998) concept that describes the phenomenon of a certain group of people, in this case privileged subjects, achieving liberation and rights for themselves while the subordination of other more marginalized members of their group continues. Furthermore, I want to emphasize a point raised by Brown (2012) where he argues that critical queer scholars may "wag accusatory fingers at these normative, assimilationist approaches to gay life" and cautions that researchers should 'never underestimate the importance of being ordinary' (1223). It's important for me to think about applying theories of homonormativity as not a move that is inherently critical of individual practices that may be read as homonormative, but rather as the act of reading experiences/actions/movements/anything as homonormative as a way of pinpointing the systems of power and domination that shape the conditions for and effect even the most radical queer spaces. It is not my intention in any way to judge or criticize the actions of this participant or anyone else whose experiences may be identified as homonormative.

In fact, following Brown (2012) who argues that we are all complicit in normalizing processes, I want to emphasize my own (and he would say all of our) participation in homonormativity.

Overall, I understand the impulse to identify as “human” instead of as a part of the LGBTQ+ community similar to the phenomenon of heterosexual people becoming offended when they are called hetero/straight because to name heterosexual as an identity is an act that interrupts the repetitive and invisible process through which heterosexually continually (re)installs itself as natural/normal and occupies the status of the unnamed (Butler, 1993). The trend of appealing to humanity instead of identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ reflects a cultural and political trend toward normalizing the LGBT movement and is also reflected in postfeminist movements (Projansky, 2001). However, as I established in the earlier discussion on the concept homonormativity, such strategies reflect neoliberal tendencies to place the onus on individuals to respectably integrate into (heterosexual) society and does not substantively challenge the heteropatriarchal norms, which I have established have a wide range of detrimental effects on the lives of LGBTQ+ people. The discourses I have discussed and critiqued in this section may be usefully understood as “post-gay”, which functions in a similar way to postfeminist discourses and is defined as “an ideology that sees each sexual orientation – homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, and asexual – as being equally valid forms of human expression, and therefore not worth segregating with labels. Both “postfeminism” and “post-gay” are informed by liberal/neoliberal ideologies that cast sexuality and its expressions as human rights and celebrates abstract discourses of freedom and rights over discussions of material inequalities (Butler, 2013; Projansky, 2001). Drawing on Duggan (2002) and

McRobbie (2004) who articulate theories of homonormativity and individualization/neoliberalism, respectively. McRobbie (2004) explicates that female individualization places responsibility for all choices and outcomes on the individual in a demand that every person not only engage in self-monitoring practices, but also that they reflexively plan and realize every detail of their life, accepting that they will have to accept responsibility for any failure and blame they experience. McRobbie (2004) emphasizes that the neoliberal shift does not rectify the structural differences that constitute unequal power relations/systems. Instead, it ignores them, and in doing so, it exacerbates and conceals their constructedness and effects (McRobbie, 2004). The result of such individualization is the production of new categories that distinguish between those who have the ability to make “good/right” choices and those who do not, while completely ignoring the reality that certain subjects are constructed in positions where they are more or less able and likely to make what are constructed as the “good/right” choices (McRobbie, 2004). Butler (2013) contends that the increased individualization and autonomy encouraged under neoliberal models do not challenge, but rather bolster hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, and class and produce new, insidious forms of power. Just as postfeminism suggests that the success of the feminist movement has produced a cultural space in which feminism has become irrelevant, post-gay discourses suggest that LGBT movements have been successful in securing rights and normalizing LG relationships to the point where such politicized movements are no longer necessary or relevant (Butler, 2013). Such analysis clearly disregards the reality that many LGBTQ+ people, particularly including trans folks and LGBTQ+ folks of colour, continue to be subject to much higher rates of violence and discrimination than other,

more privileged members of the LGBTQ+ community and certainly more than their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts. Butler (2013) posits that scholars who argue that postfeminism excludes women of colour and non-heterosexual women ignore the way that many women of colour and LGBTQ+ women are included in, make use of or perpetuate postfeminist discourse. Thus, rather than conceptualizing postfeminism as a discourse that excludes women of colour, Butler (2013) suggests that postfeminism primarily affirms a white heterosexual subject and perpetuates the idea of the white, heterosexual female as the universal female subject. Projansky (2001) emphasizes that those who engage with such discourses may only do so to the extent that they conform to normative conceptions of gender, sexuality, race and class. While “post” discourses allow space for women of colour, their participation is highly regulated and policed (Projansky, 2001; Butler, 2013).

Above, I established the ways that homonormativity and “post-gay” discourses function to extend heterosexualized rights to the more privileged LGBTQ+ subjects or to those less privileged subjects who are willing to engage with the rules and hierarchies that characterize the status quo. The latter part of this section focuses on what factors may be at work behind the acceptance of certain LGBTQ+ subjects into their small town communities. The following quote from my interview with K allows for further analysis on this:

K: Um, there are times sometimes in my job. Like, I'm very, with staff and everyone, I'm very out. And with the kids, when the kids at school ask me, you know, about my relationship, I am open and being in and living and teaching in a small community, many of them do know that I'm married to [my wife] and all of that. I know many of their parents, and we play baseball together and different sports, but I guess I'm not out in the sense that it's like, everywhere, you know. I don't have our picture on my desk, I don't have rainbows plastered around my classroom (laughs). I also at the same time don't want that because I want to just be seen as another couple in the community, not as that separate category sort of thing.

My interpretation of this remark is not only that participating in activities like baseball and other sports is a way of maintaining active connections and gaining acceptance within the community, but also that the balance the participant alludes to of being open/out, but “not in the sense that it’s everywhere.” I interpret this to mean that in small town spaces, LGBTQ+ subjects must work to balance their identities and desires with what they interpret as being expected by their community and recognizing that there may be limits or inconsistencies in the way they experience community acceptance.

Another way of interpreting this response is that it reflects a homonormative culture that compels this desire to be seen as “as similar as possible” to heterosexual couples and the community or to live as an ordinary citizen who reflects mainstream values and practices and participates as an upstanding and respectable member of the community.

One way I saw this participant as modifying traditional (heterosexual) small town traditions is expressed in her response to the following question:

K: No I've.. the community's been really great. I think they've really acted like, I've felt over the process of our wedding and our relationship in general I feel like the community has really rallied around us and supported us, you know, we did our Doe and Doe [D: Oh okay] in the summer time out at my Uncle's place. There were over like 250 people that came out to our big party [D: Awesome] that was really great, cause my Grandmother who's going to be 84 um, you know, she's an old German lady [D: (laughs)] has some cultural issues of her own surrounding it all [D: Yeah] but even for her to come out and see that you know what, here's all these people who are here supporting them and loving them and [D: Yeah] want this for them and it was a real eye opener for her [D: yeah] so that whole support of the community has really helped I think in my family as well

My interpretation of this response is initially how central the process of becoming married (being engaged, having a doe & doe and a wedding ceremony) is in the participant’s process of making sense of their community acceptance (“I've felt over the process of our wedding and our relationship in general I feel like the community has really rallied around us and supported us, you know”). This supports the idea that

conforming to a heterosexual politics of respectability by getting married and becoming a legally recognized couple may create LG subjects who are more easily accepted as part of heterosexual communities. Furthermore, marriage typically produces a certain kind of responsible, economically stable citizen who is profitable and desirable to the neoliberal state. Framing this experience as homonormative, Kennedy (2014) argues that some lesbian and gay subjects are able to achieve acceptance as long as they do not pose a challenge to the centrality of “neoliberal, middle-class values that also squelch racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender diversity”.

At the same time that I interpret this as a homonormative occurrence that extends the institution of heterosexual marriage and traditions that surround it to include some particular lesbian and gay subjects- I also want to recognize how it dually functions in a more subversive way in the way it re-inscribes and appropriates very heterosexual traditions and frameworks and uses them for a queer purpose. As someone who grew up in a small town where Buck & Doe’s (or Stag & Doe’s) are a huge part of small town life and the fastest way news of an impending wedding spreads through town, the idea of queering the Buck & Doe concept to celebrate, announce, and raise money toward the marriage of two local women is an awesome way of making gay/lesbian/queer relationships visible in a small town context. Also even if we read the Doe & Doe as part of a homonormative process, there is substantive value in the role the participant sees it playing in her life- facilitating family acceptance and acting as a tangible demonstration of the community’s support and acceptance of their identities and relationship, which contributes to a feeling of safety/openness in the lives of this participant and her wife. However, in a broader sense I want to reinforce the idea the participant’s whiteness

positions her as more closely aligned with the small town community, which is very white. For more thorough work on the construction of people of colour as “out of place” in rural and small town settings, see Cloke (2006) and Agyeman and Spooner (1997).

As a racial category, whiteness functions without being interrogated because it is invisible and because it determines what is normal in the sense that it informs our epistemologies, identities, and assumptions about the world (Kennedy, 2014). Kennedy (2014) uses the term “white homonormativity” to refer to the relationship between whiteness, homonormativity, and lesbian visibility. Similarly in their analysis of white privilege in Toronto’s LBQ (lesbian, bisexual, queer) community, Logie and Rwigema (2014) draw on their qualitative research to explore the way white privilege is central to the way LBQ+ identities are constructed and reproduced. They found that their participants indicated that they experience intersectional stigma on an everyday basis, that they felt excluded from both white LBQ spaces and racialized communities (Logie and Rwigema, 2014). One of the ways I understand the normative power of whiteness to function draws on the earlier analysis from Fellows and Razack (1998) who argue that there is no more powerful position than that which is unnamed or unmarked. Whiteness is not understood as a race because it is accepted as normative. This is overwhelmingly reflected in my interview process. In my interview guide, the question I intended to be the ‘intersectionality question’ was “Do you understand your experiences as a lesbian to be shaped by other aspects of your identity, like class or race for example?” Only one of the responses I received in response to this question engaged with the ways that race, class, ability or other characteristics may affect their experiences. In fact, many of my participant’s answers to the above question are quite telling:

A: I don't think so, no.

L: Um, nope. I can't say that ... there are six kids in my family and we were all brought up the same way.

K: Um, I'm.. I don't know! (laughs)

Diverging from the other participant's, R's response to the intersectionality question was as follows:

R: I'm a white person, so I'm like living in my white bubble. um..

It is important that I note that I interpret the silence around such categories to mean that my participants hold a relatively high amount of racial privilege. Because I am particularly interested in how white privilege affects discourses of space and sexuality, in retrospect, wish I had asked participants questions more explicitly about whiteness or if they perceive white privilege as a factor in their experiences. Based on the interviews I did have, I posit that the silence around issues of race, class and ability speaks clearly to the unnamed, uninterrogated role of whiteness in Canadian society. Furthermore, the fact that even when whiteness comes up as a factor, neither R or myself seem to have the words to discuss the way it affects our experiences. Clare (2010) writes eloquently about the struggles encountered by marginalized people, people who do not meet the criteria of the privileged class around and for whom society is organized. Clare's (2010) work illustrates the way that we are not supposed to have the words to articulate or share the way our marginalization or our privilege feels. The collusion of systems of white supremacy, able-bodiedness, capitalism, and patriarchy purposefully leave us unable to grasp normality, unable to reach the summit of Clare's (2010) metaphoric mountain, which the privileged sit atop of, perpetuating and rigging mechanisms that make it impossible for anyone else to achieve their definition of success. It is not just that my participants and I lack the words to talk about race, whiteness, and privilege- it's that our

society is designed with the intention of preventing us from developing or accessing such a language because once we do, their hegemony becomes less secure. My intention is not to criticize my participants for their lack of engagement with racial issues, but rather to point out that we seem to entirely lack frameworks that allow us to have these sorts of discussions and explore these kinds of issues. It is telling that as white people, we are so accustomed to not having to interrogate our white privilege and not having whiteness recognized as a race or a factor in our lives that when we try to engage in such analysis, the result is silence, laughter, and awkwardness. As Schlichter (2007) emphasizes, white lesbian and queer theorists continue to inadequately acknowledge the contributions of feminists and lesbians of colour who continually challenge the way lesbian and feminist constructions of gender and sexuality reflect hegemonic white, Eurocentric standards. Taking this into account, I recognize that as a white researcher I need to make more of a point of engaging with the theories, writing, and experiences of people of colour in a way that recognizes their contributions and significance without appropriating their ideas or speaking on their behalf.

To expand on this analysis, I want to look at a few more quotes that I think raise interesting points about the way individual gay and lesbian subjects may find acceptance in non-urban/small town communities. The following excerpt from my interview with C is relevant here, as she suggests:

C: I think the biggest factor is somebody getting to know you. Um, I ended up making friends with people who were when I first met them they were, you know, "you're a fag" and all kinds of epithets and stuff, and they just didn't know really gay people or didn't realize they knew any gay people. I really think that's the biggest factor, is personal relationships.

The often repeated belief that acceptance and tolerance of LGBTQ individuals come from the increasing exposure of non-gay, non-gay friendly people to LGBTQ individuals in their everyday lives – again this raises two things that I want to address – 1) this seems to be the case for this particular participant- she knows and grew up knowing a lot of people in the community who also know, like and respect her as a person so even if they were/are homophobic or not accepting of LGBTQ lifestyles and rights, they may be open to accepting this particular woman and her partner or changing their views because of their close personal relationship with them. K seems to make reference to this process of gaining acceptance via connections and exposure to the community through responses such as this one:

K: Like I said, we have all sorts of clientele that we see on an everyday basis from you know, age 12 - 92 kind of thing, so to have everyone from all those different age groups... And I think that's been even more so since we made the decision to get married and do that.”

This returns to the centrality of the decision to get married in this participant’s sense making activities and further suggests that the participant’s acceptance into her small town community is highly influenced by her willingness and ability to participate in activities that are read as homonormative, such as getting married, in addition to factors like her professional position and her whiteness position her as a subject who is included in community life. The analysis established by Duggan (2002), Puar (2007, 2013), Cohen (1997) and Fellows and Razack (1998) on homonormativity, homonationalism, and the way that certain subjects are positioned closer to the (hetero)norm and in a more desirable place on a hierarchy of respectability substantiates this idea that subjects who are willing to engage in heteronormative institutions, appeal to their similarities and shared privileges with hegemonic heterosexual subjects, and commit to maintaining

heterosexualized ideals of respectability are more likely to earn more rights and privileges under assimilatory/affirmative models of pursuing change. The second point I want to make around this quote is that we need to be cognizant of the fact that more homonormative subjects are the ones who are likely to be meeting and interacting with homophobes, anti-gay people or people who are skeptical of gay rights because these homonormative subjects are the ones who will already be in or will be able to become a part of community and familial spaces with these sorts of people. As Kennedy and Brown argue, the kinds of white, middle-class gay and lesbian subjects that dominate media representations of the LGBTQ+ community both promote the invisibility of white privilege and are increasingly being situated as the “right” or normative way to live lesbian lives. In effect, we’re increasingly faced with homonormativity’s greatest feat—the production of “good” and “bad” LGBTQ bodies that creates new hierarchies and new, subtler forms of discrimination and exclusion. Moving beyond homonormativity again, I think it’s also important to be aware of the continuous struggle for lesbian visibility and the notion that getting engaged/married seems to have made a real impact in the experiences of this participant in terms of validating her relationship and making it visible.

The reason I think it is so important to share and make sense of the ways LGBTQ+ identified people are living in small town and rural spaces is because often times in our cultural imaginary, they aren’t thought to exist and certainly not in positive, fulfilling ways (Halberstam, 2005; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Wienke and Hill, 2013; Gray, 2009; Kazyak, 2012). And I think for many LGBTQ+ identified people, the feeling that you *have* to leave your small town or that the kind of life you want isn’t

possible in the place where you've spent most of your time and where the majority of your social and familial networks are located can be very difficult even if it takes years to realize it – Eli Clare writes about this eloquently in *Exile and Pride* (2010). The other side of how difficult leaving home can be is that the urban spaces we enter into don't necessarily hold all the possibility they're constructed to (Clare, 2010). Using Ottawa as an example, while there is a gay village, lots of really neat queer organizations, groups, and action happening around the city, it can be difficult to find and meaningfully enter those spaces and it certainly doesn't happen overnight.

Drawing on theories of the way we understand the concepts of urban versus rural and writing that gives voices to the experiences of so many people who are living lives in rural/small town spaces, I argue that we need to continue to complicate the way we understand the intersection of sexuality and spatiality by focusing on specific contexts and specific experiences instead of allowing one overarching narrative to determine the possibilities for living certain lives in certain spaces. I want to end by considering how the experiences of a working class lesbian couple or a non-white lesbian couple, or a lesbian couple who hadn't grown up in that community may be vastly different than my experiences and the experiences of my participants.

Conclusion

I was directed toward the topic of sexual identities, lesbianism, and space through experiences in my own life and the lives of my friends, family and communities. Having stumbled through a tumultuous and non-linear “coming out” experience, I have years of first hand experience of having my identity (as heterosexual, as bisexual, and as lesbian) denied and challenged, and I was very aware of the kinds of violence and unkindness that certain identifications could provoke. The way I understand and feel the constant possibility of violence or unkindness because of my identity, or the condition of living in a heterosexist society. I am deeply committed to studying and drawing attention to not only the presence and functions of systems of domination such as heterosexism, but to the way it feels to live as an other within those systems. To that effect, my thesis was organized around three research questions: How do individuals experience lesbianism? Does space affect individual experiences of lesbianism? Do individuals understand their experiences to be affected by heteronormativity and homonormativity?

The overarching objective of this thesis was to provide an interpretation of the way that five lesbians in Ontario make sense of their experiences and identities. By working with the content provided by my participants, I aimed to provide an interpretive account of the way they make sense of their identities, identity work, of lesbianism as a concept/identity, and how space/place shapes their experiences. Throughout this thesis I interpreted and discussed excerpts from the interviews with the five participants in my study, which were informed by the above three questions. In particular, one of the primary objectives of this thesis was to challenge and draw attention to heteronormativity and heterosexism and the way they function in general, and in Ontario society

specifically. Throughout all three chapters I endeavoured to maintain focus on, provide examples of, and explicate the way that heterosexism, heteronormativity and Rich's (1980) notion of compulsory heterosexuality were reflected in the responses of my participants, in our conversations, and in popular culture/society.

Another objective of this thesis was to challenge femme invisibility and to thoroughly complicate the notion of femme privilege. In Chapter 2, I interpreted excerpts from my interviews, investigating how my participants might identify or understand appearance and behavioural norms of lesbianism, particularly around notions of femmess, that are enforced or perceived around lesbian communities. Engaging with feminist, lesbian and lesbian-feminist histories, I grounded my complication of femme privilege in the context of the sex wars, early lesbian organizing, and notions of respectability, while also drawing attention to the very real "horizons of violence" and lesbophobia/heterosexism that shape the experience of lesbian identified folks (Rajiva, 2014; Fellows and Razack, 1998). My focus on femininity and femme identities emerged from my interviews with participants, and such a focus furthers my objective of challenging femme invisibility.

By focusing on the narratives and experiences of people who live in, or have spent significant periods of time living in, rural or non-urban areas, I seek to contribute to the project of complicating the representation of rural/non-urban LGBTTQAI+ subjects as closeted, stifled, isolated subjects who only remain where they are because they cannot relocate to a city (Wienke and Hill, 2013; Kazyack, 2011, 2012; Halberstam, 2005, 2012; Weston, 1995; Bell and Valentine, 1995). In direct relation to this, one of the objectives of this thesis was to move beyond the urban/rural binary as a way of making sense of

sexuality in relation to space/place. While the focus on the experiences of folks who live outside urban centers challenges the “urban bias” of the majority of work on space and sexuality, (Boso, 2013), I also reject the notion that people can be clearly or easily categorized as either urban or rural in a meaningful way. In Chapter 3, I also focused on how visibility may operate differently in small town communities and by doing so I complicate the urban/rural binary by focusing on a category that is not understood as fitting neatly within either category.

The final objective of this thesis was the importance of a continued lesbian specificity and the enduring significance of lesbian identities. One way I worked toward this was by articulating a notion of Lesbianism as a way of exploring the enduring relevance of the Lesbian subject in popular culture, the way such reified constructions of a Lesbianism are both useful and detrimental in the experiences of my participants and theoretically in the lives of not only lesbian identified folks, but also bisexual, queer and heterosexual folks. Another way I worked toward achieving this objective was by exploring lesbian histories, and ways we can imagine more open, reflexive, queer, liminal lesbian futures. One way of moving toward a more open, reflexive lesbian future is by complicating lesbianism’s relation to the category of women. Instead of conceiving of the relationship between the category of women and the existence of feminism as a causal or deterministic one, this relationship needs to be re-conceptualize as a shifting, fluid, liminal one in the sense that neither concept has an enduring/core meaning that does not shift (often drastically) over time and space, that neither consistently or naturally exists, and that neither is necessarily implicated or connected to the other.

I draw on Butler's (1993) "Gender Imitation and Insubordination" to return to some of the questions that initially directed me toward this project: What does identifying as lesbian accomplish? What do you know about a person when they come out as a lesbian to you? Throughout this thesis, I posit that the act of identifying with lesbianism allows you to be understood in reference to a culturally constructed Lesbianism, which allows you to play on and to be filtered through a particular identity sign that does not consistently convey anything, but has the potential to be effective in terms of communicating particular things in particular situations. Such identification also allows for folks to connect with similarly identified/oriented people, to find and access new communities, and to feel and organize in solidarity as part of a particular community.

I think the real issue with lesbianism is in the way that Lesbianism and identities in general are constructed in humanist terms, implying that there are pre-existing identity options that we must choose from or develop into (there are several options: you are heterosexual [aka never have to think about the fact that there are options], you are lesbian, you are gay, you are bisexual) and because those "identity options". These options do not naturally exist, but have been carefully socially constructed and naturalized over repetitious processes (Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1976), which means that we cannot be born into them or naturally become them- we are always working, either subconsciously (but often) consciously to make ourselves legible within the identities we feel most aligned with. The process of adhering to or narrating one's experiences to align with a particular coming out narrative and to fit within a particular identity were explored in the section on coming out, being out, and hetero-

temporality/queer temporality in Chapter 3. I also investigated several ways in which such identity work takes place in Chapter 2 in relation to Lesbianism, social media, and the appearance and behavioural norms of lesbianism, particularly around femme existence. I identify this feeling of being forced into the Lesbian box to be the source of my participant's rejection or disavowal of the lesbian label. Certainly, based on my interpretation of my participants, they reasons they choose to not identify as a lesbian or with the lesbian label because it does not adequately reflect how they see themselves or how they want others to see or understand them, and as a consequence, they do not perceive it as relevant or useful in their lives.

I am so grateful to the five people who offered their time to participate in my project. I want to end by considering what I interpret as the most salient observation among my participants about how to affect positive change and substantively improve the lives of rural/non-urban/small town LGBTTQAI+ folks. All of my participants strongly indicated the importance of having a close group of friends who understand or at least unconditionally support anything you may be going through and who can act as an active support network in the process of self-development and identity exploration. In Chapter 3, I discussed the emphasis my participants place on visibility in a small town context. Both K and C shared thoughts and experiences that I interpreted as speaking to the effectiveness and importance of the visible presence of LGBTTQAI+ identified people in small towns as a way of facilitating heterosexual folks familiarity and acceptance and also as a move that challenges heteronormativity in the small town context. Such a move provides other and potential LGBTTQAI+ folks with role models, representations, and a

normalized understanding of their identities, and more significantly, of people like them living in places like them.

Moving forward from this project, I want to continue to think about the way that we experience our identities, how we make sense of the identities of the people around us, and how we may continue to challenge not only heterosexist, heteronormative, patriarchal and lesbophobic systems that characterize our societies, but also to focus more on how those systems intersect with systems such as white supremacy, classism, ableism, and many more. I am interested in thinking more about how we relate to and are affected by the spaces we occupy as well as how we interact with and are affected by cultural reifications such as Lesbianism. This project has strengthened my resolve to challenge and write back at femme invisibility and heterosexism both in my work and in my everyday experiences.

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