

The City, The Country, and The Sexualization of Space in American Cinema and Television

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Abstract

From hillbilly horror to middle class prestige films, the American media often renders rural space as the space of socio-sexual transgression. Recent scholarship in Queer Media Studies suggests that this repeated “Othering” of the rural derives from “metronormativity,” a discursive regime organized around a cultural rural/urban divide that gives rise to compulsory idealizations of metropolitan space while essentializing non-urban spaces into a narrow set of geographical stereotypes. In my project, I examine media representations of queerness dominated by city spaces, the cinematic creation of a metronormative frame, and forms of pro-rural media that counter urban sexualities.

Introduction

"The performance of identities is spatially contingent."
- David Bell & Gill Valentine¹

With the advent of social construction theory, and the crucial insight of queer studies that understands sexual identities as discursively produced and not biological formations, we conventionally think of sexual subjects as belonging to certain spaces; yet, as Halberstam (2003) shrewdly notes in a reflection on the status of contemporary U.S.-based critical theory, “there has been very little attention paid to date to the specificities of rural queer lives” (162). A survey of queer media produced over the past century would appear to buttress that statement, as the slow emergence of queerness in American cinema and television betrays a striking urban bias that organizes depictions of gays, lesbians, and queers around city spaces that are prominently situated in America’s collective consciousness: Los Angeles, New York City, San Francisco. However, only within the past decade has the aspect of sexual space itself – that is, “space” sexed in terms of cultural geography, regional identity, and national community – emerged as a legitimate object of study in the academy. In what follows, I attempt to address and supply this critical void by probing the question of space in relation to sexuality within the realm of media studies. To do so, I begin with the stark trends in representations of spatial queerness that characterize the present day mediascape in American society.

Since the late twentieth century, movies and television have continued to idealize metropolitan spaces as the most vital and “authentic” place for queer (i.e., non-straight) individuals to develop social networks and actualize themselves as sexual beings[†]. While non-hegemonic representations of cityscapes certainly do exist in the media (and shall be addressed later), I argue that the overwhelming majority of cinematic cities participate in this trend primarily by projecting a false social unity onto fictionalized urban landscapes, and that these idealized projections appear most prominently, though not always, in two formsⁱⁱ. Within mainstream representations, for example, there exists one type that features a proto-Modernist obsession with figuring the urban as an all-encompassing social communityⁱⁱⁱ. It is frequently implied that the “glamorous and sexy” City (which is almost always coded as having a White, upper-middle-class, homogenized social body) should thus be the central space informing a person’s life narrative. The city in this conception exists as a static Utopia, while “Other” places (small towns, suburbs, and rural parts) have no real value or use. Often they are altogether absent unless manipulated toward a forward movement into the city. In turn, the absence of non-urban areas reinforces the presumed normalcy of the city, as well as the unjustified abnormalcy (i.e., the hostility, bigotry, and cultural provincialism) of regional spaces and populations^{iv}.

I call this the fantasy model, or “Gay Village” model (in this discussion of queer representations) of the cinematic city. This city emerges quite often in popular gay and straight-oriented television shows such as *The L Word* (2004), *Sex and the City* (1998), and *Frasier* (1993), as well as in critically acclaimed filmic adaptations like *Angels in America* (2003). It is situated on a coastal axis^{††}, presumably in order to play up and into the idea that East and West coast cities lord over America’s cultural capital. In these fictionalized spaces, narrative devices and formal traits work in tandem to create a seemingly frozen, purified world where the main concerns of its elite inhabitants are always commercial, social, and private in nature, instead of culturally, racially, or geo-politically situated problems. This model lends itself to Bell’s conception of “metrosexuality,” specifically “metrosexual” queer subjectivity, which can be briefly described as a sexually ambiguous, effeminate male who embraces an urban lifestyle based around conspicuous consumption. The danger in the promotion of this imaginary lies in its implicit erasure of queerness in the urban subject. “Queerness,” defined here as a practice that resists moves toward normalization, now becomes commodified and depoliticized, rendered into something trendy to sustain a commercial lifestyle. So rather than metropolitan queerness being imagined as a potentially subversive sexual subculture, holding the power to redefine dominant sex-gender systems, we are simply left with an uncomplicated, urban-inflected form of “homonormativity.” Homonormativity is Lisa Duggan’s designation for gay/lesbian-oriented “politics that do not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them.” Homonormativity, I should add, corresponds with and also embodies contemporary “gay globalism” ideology. Symbolized in the iconic rainbow flag, which derives

[†] For additional scholarly work on this phenomenon that considers the context of media representations of queerness produced and consumed during the latter half of the twentieth century, refer to Bell and Valentine (1995); Howard (1999); Phillips, Watt, and Shuttleton (2000); and Beshoff and Griffin (2006).

^{††} The concept of *bicoastality*, which refers to the cultural fixation on major coastal cities located on the East and West of America’s borders, particularly New York City and San Francisco, is explored with some detail in Herring’s (2007) forthcoming essay on anti-urban queer print culture scenes which developed in rural America after Stonewall.

from major cities in the U.S., globalism calls for the effacement of regionalized sexual differences with the imposition of metropolitan gay norms, like coming-out, and urban-centric activist strategies like “Gay Pride Parades, demonstrations, forming gay/lesbian religious organisations, and electing pro-gay or gay candidates” (Davis, 1995; Sinfield, 2000). This is often seen as culturally imperialistic in the non-Western world, particularly within non-metropolitan areas, where such practices could prompt social alienation or at worst provoke violence from others. Accordingly, the fantasy model can be read with a postcolonial lens as a reductive consolidation of urban American sexualities that threatens the livelihood and sex-gender systems associated with a significant portion of the global audience that it implicitly seeks to recruit.

On the other extreme, witness the more nuanced and self-reflexive yet complementary “gay ghetto” model, which unfortunately appears with much less frequency. Here, we encounter different kinds of queer subjectivity located on the periphery of a hostile, heterosexed city[†]. For this reason, the stability and diversity of the community remain unstable and are often contested as much from within as from without. These depictions seem to in some ways challenge images of fantasy cityscapes, portraying what Davis has identified as post-Stonewall political realities that complicate contemporary gay/lesbian/bisexual aspirations of creating an urban “liberated zone” (1995: 284): the dispersal of progressive politics from the city, socioeconomic inequalities within gay and lesbian movement, and recurring forms of heterosexist violence. Yet, while the “gay ghetto” city should be noted for offering a potentially critical interpretation of urban gay and lesbian identities, it remains flawed for concerning itself with hegemonic urban sexualities at the expense of marginalized sexualities from the countryside and elsewhere. In this way, it reinscribes what Halberstam points out as the problematic assumption in which “erotic dissidents require urban space because in rural settings queers are easily identified and punished,” a belief that further implies “while rural communities invest heavily in all forms of social and sexual conformity, urban culture thrives upon social and sexual difference” (2003: 162). Moreover, whereas gay village cities in the media organize sexual citizenship around an ethos of consumption and fashion wherein urban space becomes affirmative, a spectacle to be consumed, the gay ghetto by contrast creates a defensive vision of queer space, a walled city where gays retreat, while offering the audience the ideal of the politicized gay/lesbian citizen. This not only polarizes dominant depictions of gay sexuality as either activist or depoliticized subjectivities, but also sacrifices productive forms of micro-level cultural politics to favor a nationalizing, collectivist agenda that, while placing tremendous faith in the liberal nation state, leaves itself vulnerable to all the procedural difficulties and problematic exclusions plaguing other oppressed groups enmeshed in histories of “identity politics,” making reactive versus productive programs for the future.

I use these spatial categories to call attention to what Halberstam (2003) has termed “metronormativity,” a discursive regime in the U.S. in which the city becomes positioned at the top of an imagined spatial hierarchy in part through the production and consumption of a rural-to-urban migration story^v. According to Halberstam’s formulation of the story, “the rural queer, within this standardized narrative, emerges from the dark night of a traditional and closeted

[†] Many urban-identified, urban-centric queer studies scholars, such as Hubbard (2001) and Warner (1998), argue that in spite of visibility and the existence of gay commercial establishments, cities are still predominantly sexed as “straight” by corporate advertising, homophobic law enforcement, and other powerful institutions of heteronormativity.

world and blooms in the sunshine of modern gay urban life” (163). She adds that the migration narrative transforms into a coming-out narrative as well, in which the small-town queer leaves the phobia and oppression of a non-urban setting to achieve sexual enlightenment in the city by turning into a visibly “out” sexual being. Metronormativity in this form can be especially counterproductive for sexual dissidents (gays, lesbians, transsexuals, and so on), partly because as soon as the space of utopian city emerges as the end-all, be-all land of sexual exploration and self-actualization, it effectively camouflages the economic and social hierarchies therein. Herring (2006) has extended Halberstam’s original concept on this point by uncovering the aspects of racial normativity, socioeconomic norms, and aesthetics that attend the migration narrative. In effect, we see in metronormativity the privileging of Whiteness, the enforcement of narratives of socioeconomic uplift, and the dependency on fashion through manner and dress. This now-standard urge to “live in a city and let go of one’s home” thus involves indirect compliance with many real-life anti-queer, urban-based power structures, including the normative biases of individuals who rally around the city as a refuge. “Taken as story, style, or both,” Argues Herring, “metronormativity buttresses the narratives, customs, and presumptions of many modern U.S. urban gays and lesbians while it simultaneously enables these gays and lesbians to govern the aesthetic, erotic, material, and affective imaginaries of many modern queers, irrespective of ‘country,’ ‘town,’ or somewhere in between” (2007: 344). In this way metronormativity can be seen as a power discourse as well; at once generative for gay and lesbian city-dwellers on one hand yet repressive for non-urban subjects on the other.

But even with these two complex theorizations, the social impact of this spatial ideal still remains somewhat obscure. We must therefore remind ourselves of what is at stake in maintaining rural spaces as “Other” than urban spaces. Because metronormative discourse frames all life along a linear path moving in one direction toward the city, we must realize that, as a consequence, alternative spaces, particularly rural ones, are camouflaged in the process, pushed aside, and become unimaginable in terms of providing a spatial context to have a worthwhile existence in. That this effectively forecloses the legitimacy and potential queerness of rural-based practices and identities[†] in advance should force us to seriously consider the value of maintaining the same media representations of queer life in metropolitan spaces from the perspective of homophobic discourse. I thus maintain that the previously described hegemonic models of the cinematic city not only participate in a system of metronormativity, functioning to overpower the possibility of imagining life-affirming spaces beyond the urban, but they also engage in a very obscure, but no less harmful and pervasive system of heteronormativity that profits from cinematic representations of binaristic sexual spaces. In other words, I want to suggest that straight culture is deeply invested in preserving spaces in terms of gay versus straight through metronormative reductions because its own continued existence depends upon such binaries and stable identity categories.^{vi}

Oppressive class divisions and the deracinating standards of Whiteness and sex-gender conduct tied to city life must not be overlooked as well in the simplified, gay-oriented fantasies of the city-as-sexual-Utopia. For many sexual dissidents of color or of low economic class, the real-life city can be far more hostile than the rural places that are so frequently dismissed in cinema and television. Many cities are racially segregated, and their purported communities and safe houses for gays and lesbians have been constantly scaled back and relocated by city officials. We should also recall that the significant cultural differences that constitute rural and

[†] For more on the sexual lives of queers in rural America, see Howard (1999).

urban sexualities tend to disappear in the media world. Discussing the difficulties facing gays when they trade rural life for city life, Rubin notes that “instead of being isolated and invisible in rural settings, city gays are now numerous and obvious targets for urban frustrations [...] The specter of the ‘homosexual invasion’ is a frequent scapegoat which deflects attention from the planning commission, the political establishment, and the big developers” (1984: 24-5). Therefore the migratory impulse in metronormativity can wind up creating nothing more than a destructive situation that leads to dislocation and alienation among queers where there was either little negative affect, like powerlessness, or none at all to begin with.

The effects of such a pattern have been closely documented by Weston (1998), whose anthropological research focuses on the so-called “Great Gay Migration” that occurred in the U.S. around the seventies and eighties. By Weston’s account, the historical conflation of the city and the homosexual gave rise to a widespread displacement of suburban and rural gay populations. She notes that “countless individuals launched themselves upon a quest for community,” moving into cities like Los Angeles or New York City in hopes of actualizing themselves in affirmative social quarters. Needless to say, not everyone found paradise in the city; many returned home, after being marginalized by the class, gender, and race-based stratifications which they encountered in their new social environments. While Weston’s interviewees claim in their personal testimonies to have left their homes on their own accord in order to find freedom from stereotypically conservative, small-town forms of oppression, her investigation suggests that, in reality, these migrants actually internalized the belief that their hometowns were inadequate and repressed only after encountering and consuming urban-based forms of homosexuality through books, movies, or television that had encouraged rural-to-urban movements by identifying the entirety of gay culture with the Big City.

As I hope I’ve indicated in these preliminary remarks, the implications of metronormative tendencies in US-based media representations are urgent and in many cases have life-and-death consequences such that we as critics must begin to consider sexuality and space together, lest we remain complicit in the ideological framework, which clearly has some contradictory, destructive power and also implicitly defines life for a number of people. Even so, it must be said that the downright hegemonic fixation on metro-life and “bicoastality” – that is, on major urban regions like L.A., S.F., and N.Y.C. – has not at all extinguished the existence of anti-urban subcultural media. More likely is that this bias has merely accelerated the development of counterpublics and alternative forms of queer identity that continue to thrive below the radar. In fact, there may be a useful paradox in this situation, one to which scholars of Foucauldian discourse can attest: as a power discourse, metronormativity indeed continues to grow more pervasive and coherent and identifiable; yet, at the same time, its ambiguities, contradictions, and hidden violences are made all the more obvious and intolerable through its very prominence, triggering the counter-production of resistant forms to destabilize it. That is to say, no matter the extent of its hegemony, other possibilities (identified or not) can be sought out for oppressed Others because its status is always unstable.

My reason for addressing two types of sexualized city spaces in television and movies earlier is to question the cultural function of the city-as-Utopia and the countryside-as-closet as two parts of the selfsame sexual imaginary operating in queer culture and in mainstream heteronormative culture. Moreover, I wish to ponder the social ramifications of unselfcritical urban queerness in the context of a cultural rural/urban divide in American society, and I want to discuss the implications of metronormativity as it pertains to the legitimacy of scholarly

knowledge, especially of the kind that seeks to enumerate the diversity of sexualities, identities, and genders free from destructive biases.

In terms of organization, my critical focus first turns to the formation of the metronormative frame in the media, where I analyze the narrative and formal mechanisms particular to cinema and television that assist in creating and circulating metronormative discourse. Then, I move into a discussion on the complex typologies of critically rustic queer media. By way of conclusion, I revisit and extend the core arguments of this research and assess the sociology of theory in relation to urban biases, and lastly finish by suggesting some possible areas of study for interested scholars.

Central to my project, then, is the premise that models of sexual space in movies and television generally have been and are increasingly expressed by a metronormative “frame” – that is, an urban-biased way of seeing and valuing the world produced through Otherized rural spaces and idealized cities, and a spectatorial gaze constituted and replicated through the formal specificities of each medium and/or the dictates of story and plot. Of the many formal qualities that give rise to cinematic metronormativity, I focus on three: the cinematic apparatus (or “gaze”), mise-en-scene, and the character-driven narrative mechanisms of perspective, focalization, and address. I do this partly for the sake of scope, but also because these elements establish the core of an interpretive map, which, I believe, deserves particularly intense scrutiny. As current research suggests, a metronormative frame carries over from our filmic experiences, becomes performed in real-life as a value system, and overlays itself onto geographic spaces and material bodies, designating some sexual subjects as knowable and legitimate while others are not quite so similarly categorized, to say the least. Meanwhile, the overall effects in this process continue to be the ongoing legitimation of U.S.-based sexualities that are tied to real and imagined urban spaces in America; the subsequent formation of power that upholds urban sexualities and norms as desirable and necessary through pro-urban institutions and media; and the concurrent exclusion and suppression of non-normative lifestyles, stylistics, and sexual practices that are outside the metropolitan “center,” yet which in many ways paradoxically enable its continued existence.^{vii}

Along with identifying the metronormative frame, I am interested in seeking out instances and processes which seem to subvert or de-essentialize the hegemony of sexualized metropolitan areas. To this end I orient the bulk of my project toward rural-centric, or “critically rustic” cinema and television; that is, I pay special attention to media texts which somehow appear to aesthetically or politically disidentify with or problematize the dominant spatial logic structuring the American mediascape at large^{viii}. For purposes of organization (and future study), I assign a wide variety of movie genres and TV programs with these preoccupations to three “nonce” categories: rural retrofuturism, rural magic realism, and revisionist hillbilly horror. My rationale in doing so is that these selections reflect what I believe constitute three distinctive conceptual parts in a growing counter-discourse within American media, which may have commonalities in terms of theme, tone, and subject matter, but are not necessarily governed by genre or production. They additionally offer counterpoints to traditionally urban-identified social practices (for example, rural camp) and undermine conventional models of sexual space (fantasy/ghetto cities). I maintain the importance of archiving these micro-strategies of “metro-subversion” as a way to engender new modes of seeing and recovering non-urban stylistics and alternative sexual imaginaries beyond the City.

Given the wide-ranging interdisciplinarity of this project, as well as the current lack of adequate theorization in this specific area, my research methodology has been called a case of “theoretical bricolage” (Hagopian). Indeed, throughout I tend to draw heavily from cultural geography, narrative theory, and postmodernism. Yet the locus of my work can only be described as “Queer Media Studies:” a title that refers to a scholar-fan’s passion for studying cinema and television, coupled with profound respect and personal investment in 1990s queer theory. And while my emphasis remains media spaces, I do hope that the coming analysis makes evident the applicability and wide-ranging influence of metronormative and anti-metronormative perspectives as maps for reading other spheres of culture and invites more research in the future.

The Formal Construction of the Metronormative Frame

“Power isn’t localised in the State apparatus
and nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms
of power that function outside, below and alongside
the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and
everyday level, are not also changed”
- Michel Foucault^{ix}

Perhaps by virtue of their sheer ubiquity and influence over society, dominant discourses tend to be difficult to identify and locate, in contrast to the relative ease of picking out the innerworkings of minority discourses. Indeed, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, the great thinker of power and its various formations, once argued that part of the reason power is so prevalent is simply because “power is everywhere,” and especially indicative of its extent is when its structure seems built into “the order of things,” or the natural world itself. Therefore, in this section, when I discuss the existence of a metronormative “frame” – that is to say, an urban-inflected ideological framework, that over time has reached the level of a power discourse for classifying and creating meaning in the world – we should not assume that the frame is always readily identifiable in every circumstance. However, that should not devalue the importance of pursuing the power discourse in question; as we’ve seen in the realms of critical race theory and feminist studies, often times structures of oppression and relations of power seem to be invisible because their very enabling mechanisms have deeply infiltrated our cultural institutions, our social groups, and even our psyches; under such circumstances, our task as critics is to be even more committed to thorough analysis.

In what follows, I take up a formal discussion of metronormative media, with the aim of exposing what makes it so omnipresent, yet simultaneously so difficult to perceive. My overarching objective in doing so is to lay down the theoretical groundwork to stimulate the burgeoning research field organized around the study of urban/rural sexualities. Admittedly, my method here is far from comprehensive, especially since I’d like to offer several smaller, adaptive theories about sexual space rather than give a grand theory that would resist modification in the future. Throughout, I rely upon formal analysis, though my project has interest in context and narrative as well. Formal analysis allows the analyst to unpack dominant discourses’ inner-workings at the level of a text in order to see what specific devices enable the production and circulation of meaning. Unlike some research conducted in cultural studies, this

attention to form enables the scholar to avoid theoretical pitfalls that endanger the particularity of media objects. Formal analysis therefore understands that a medium such as film or television operates in a radically different fashion than literature, music, or dance. Such awareness toward specificity is particularly urgent in the case of this project, because metronormative discourse accrues power and constitutes itself by performing generalizations that consolidate differences into harmful homogeneities. To dismantle the structure of metronormativity, then, we need to mobilize around specificities of medium, space, and sexuality; failing that, we only perpetuate metronormative biases we seek to undo.

During this section, we will see how the concealment of metro-biases in a medium's basic characteristics (e.g., setting, frame, narrative) occurs beyond most audiences' recognition, while noting that the specific formal qualities of T.V. and cinema tend to intersect and synchronize at the same time, camouflaging the crucial processes of exclusion and mystification in a text while heightening spectatorial pleasure and a viewer's emotional investment in characters, story, and so on. Accordingly, my formal analysis uses an intersectional approach toward understanding each component, recognizing for example that the gaze depends on mise-en-scene in creating particular identifications, or that setting needs perspective to be convincing for certain audiences. With that said, we begin an account of cinematic metronormativity first by looking at the way in which we as spectators are "urged" to look at certain sexual spaces, as it is through this specific relation that the metro-normative frame works strongest and conceals itself most effectively.

As media scholars are at pains to remind us, consumers of T.V. and cinematic images receive different types of lens for perceiving places and people each time they watch a movie or television show. These lenses come from the specific ways that the cinematic, or televisual, apparatus frames the action of characters within a narrative. Laura Mulvey (1988) offered a foundational, but controversial, theory about the production and effect of such cinematic modes of seeing. Borrowing from psychoanalysis and feminism, Mulvey theorized the concept of "the gaze," stating that the cinematic gaze, by virtue of being placed and configured in a male-dominated industry for male-dominated audiences, worked as a mechanism in the service of patriarchy. To this end, argues Mulvey, the gaze is always gendered male, and the object of the gaze female; therefore, the cinematic medium actively undermines the agency of women in society, transforming female actors into fantasy objects for a masculine spectator's consumption. Mulvey's groundbreaking work, which prompted many more critical forays into the hidden infrastructure of visual mediums, has nonetheless been rightly criticized through the years by many film studies scholars for being reductive, sexually essentialist, excessively narrow in focus, and heteronormative, as well as harmfully binaristic in terms of failing to consider transgendered modes of spectatorship, a point on which Jose Esteban Munoz adds: "Psychoanalytic theorizations of cross-gender identification such as Mulvey's never challenge the normativity of dominant gender constructions" (1999 :27).

Yet, in spite of its problems, Mulvey's formulation of the gaze has remained the starting point for queer media studies scholars interested in ways that the media relates to non-straight subjectivity, such as through the encouragement of cross-identification and the creation of gender-bending queer desire. Clover (1995), hooks (1992), and Straayer (1996), respectively, build on Mulvey's primary understanding of the gaze by suggesting that the gender, race, and sexuality of the gazer is never fixed in media, and that different genres provoke potentially queer spectatorial positions of gazing that require fluid, back-and-forth identifications with male and female characters (see, for example, Clover's astute account of the slasher film). While these and

other critics continue to find liberatory and subversive potential within the gaze, mainly concerning forms of deterritorialized identitarianism, I am more interested in the ways the apparatus informs and possibly deforms the production of spatial identities in the realm of non-normative sexuality. Indeed, the metro-camera Romanticizes urban sexual space in a variety of ways, depending upon the sexual ideology that informs the camera-eye. Some heterosexual texts, like Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979), charm the city, while others condemn urban life as a cesspool of queer depravity but also contradictorily stylize cityscapes as home to disaffected straight masculinity (particularly in film noir). To address the role of the gaze in maintaining images of sexual space, I extract concepts from Mulvey's findings and put them to work in recent texts that center on queerness.

Within gay/lesbian mainstream media, for example, a spatialized gaze facilitates the sexually essentialist connection between urbanity and homosexuality, a connection that subtextually manifests itself in depictions of fantasy cities. This conflation of gay identity and the city occurs through a process similar to that of Mulvey's formulation of the masculine gaze, triggering its analogous implications of objectification and domination. But the metronormative gaze has important differences. For example, according to Mulvey, the female character is encoded with "to-be-looked-at-ness," making her an object, a thing for the masculine gazer, thereby displacing any subjective agency from the female character in advance. To my reading, a metronormative gaze in gay/lesbian media operates in a somewhat similar fashion, except with the effect and implication in reverse, serving to entrap, instead of empower, a media text's imagined audience. We shall start examining this process in the context of fantastic queer cities.

Both city-dwellers and the city itself in the Gay Village model frequently undergo a process of media objectification, as the frame and camera lens, plus the elements of cinematography, work to render an urban gay imaginary as a space of glamour and sophistication, of "to-be-looked-at-ness" that is at once trendy and desirable and consumable for the spectator's voyeuristic gaze. While encoding this "to-be-looked-at-ness," the gaze of the frame tends to perceive the Gay Village, paradoxically, as an *urban pastoral*, or a city-as-landscape, using a combination of aerial shots of the city (calling to mind travel brochure imagery) juxtaposed with flattering close-ups of specially selected city inhabitants, as in *Angels in America* (2003) so as to give a sense of the city as a space of spectacle, cut off from histories of oppression or modern-day social injustices. These cinematographic choices are then compounded by various forms of mise-en-scene which literally emplace an elite homosexual class at the center of the universe by pushing the city's queer discontents out of the camera's frame, away from the spectator's gaze. The outcome of such representations, as we will see, is the creation of a segregationist outlook toward different sexual spaces and a "negative"/"positive" Romanticization of the urban that, despite any outstanding criticisms directed toward cities within a work, still upholds the deeply anti-queer view that "city residence is a precondition to homosexual identity."

Witness the movie-musical *Rent* (2006), whose pastoral conventions seek to remake AIDS-stricken New York City of the 1990's into a "timeless abstraction," a place that "evade[s] time, history, and material political realities through a retreat into a phantasmatic ideal space which is pre-cultural, if not pre-social, and often, by implication, superior and preferable" (Shuttleton, 2000: 128). But ironically, at first glance, one would be more inclined to read *Rent's* city as a "deadspace" than an urban pastoral, since the mise-en-scene repeatedly gives us the telltale signs of corruption and contagion as opposed to abstraction and liberation. For instance, there's the profusion of material evidence that indicates a decaying cityscape.

Again and again, the design of the setting highlights the unidealized, non-bourgeois aspects of the Big City: vandalized buildings, fire barrels, police cars, and wandering homeless people who populate the downtown streets. In addition, the aesthetically-realistic costuming of the city artists and the homeless offers a sense of verisimilitude, rather than one of artifice, with which to frame a bleak picture of living a hand-to-mouth existence in America's largest city. How is it, then, that *Rent* stands as an example of urban pastoralism in the queer media, especially with such outwardly critical mise-en-scene?

Indeed, at the outset, it seems that the protagonists would be threatened by this hostile urban landscape, living "dirt broke, hungry, and freezing" as they are; but, in fact, the film's metronormative gaze precludes that reading in advance, suggesting a rather contrary conclusion that, not unlike the idealized countryside of the pastoral myth, the corrupted city of *Rent* provides pleasure and spectacle in spite of harsh material realities; that, in actuality, the city emboldens resistance to oppression instead of further marginalizing minority groups within it. Indeed, rather than complement the corruption of the mise-en-scene, the gaze counter-balances and contradicts the city's manifested antagonisms. To this end, the frame empowers the main characters with a disproportionate amount of agency and mobility that, over the course of the film, work in tandem with the story to create an undifferentiated group identity. We see this process develop at the level of the cinematic apparatus whenever the mobile frame is used to parallel, enhance, and Romanticize the dynamic activity of the characters during dance numbers and dramatic moments occurring on screen, in turn creating a binary pair of active urban subjects who are defined by a sense of spectacular movement, versus a passive urban space that serves as a kind of empty backdrop for the subjects to interact and deliberate in, under the same level of freedom. The agency-producing gaze, deployed in this way so as to neutralize mise-en-scene, thus negates the impulse to critique the social inequalities affecting urban spaces. At the same time, this neutralization of setting by a pro-urban gaze also triggers an overwriting of the mise-en-scene's persistent Othering of city life, covering over images of grim conditions with a romantic portrait of gay/lesbian/straight pan-collectivity, while advancing a view of homosexuality as part of "timeless," Utopian society, unconstrained by a peripheralized, "fallen" New York City.

At this point, skeptics may argue that *Rent* is an exceptional case, that we should not fault its binarization of community and city for creating a misleading opposition between movement and stasis, because doing so ignores the fact that *Rent* unavoidably remains limited in its overall political savvy, because the genre of the movie-musical relies on Expressionism, theatricality, and the reduction of complexity in order to be financed or to be consumed; in short, the counterargument asserts that *Rent* can't help its reductionism, so therefore we should not be so quick to attack its ideological agenda. Besides, what's the value in dismissing a gay "feel-good" film anyway, especially if it accomplishes the amazing task of getting mainstream audiences to care about people suffering with AIDS firsthand?

On one hand, I cannot help but sympathize with this view, because in many ways the Romanticization of urban queerness in this case partly functions challenge the phobic climate surrounding the AIDS epidemic that existed at the time of the play's release and which unfortunately continues today; and, admittedly, I have not given details concerning these contextual factors that complicate the production or reception of such media, nor clarified my position on the issue beforehand. Indeed, that the gaze of a mainstream media text invites identification and support for AIDS-afflicted individuals, instead of condescending pity, is no small feat and definitely deserves credit, especially because so many "sick flicks" and AIDS-centered works of recent memory organize queerness around a totalizing narrative of gay death.

For instance, see the pessimistic and gay-phobic 2002 adaptation, *The Hours*, whose trans-historical account of middle-class feminist struggle features a typical counter-position which, in the ghettoized portrayal of the suicidal poet Richard Brown, subsumes affected gay identity to highly idealized thematics of mourning, exchanging queer agency for anti-political tragedy that sees despair and self-destruction as the only outcomes for queers in the age of AIDS.

But, on the other hand, we must also recognize that despite these good intentions to function as an anti-plague-ghetto text, *Rent* still encourages us to read the city not as a dystopian, or even an ambivalent place, but as a fantasy space in its construction of an urban pastoral. And the film's pastoral, as it is created in the opposition between the material space of the film (the superficially desolate yet deeply picturesque city) and the inhabitants of that space, implies such a retrograde political outlook that, to my reading, *Rent* loses its own queer, anti-heteronormative potential (that transcends generic convention) and all but negates its otherwise legitimate goal to offer new ways of thinking about and dealing with AIDS in the highly phobic atmosphere of 90's America. In short, I vehemently oppose the implications of the film's logic which presupposes that we must downplay the conflicting material and immaterial forces that characterize real-life cities in order to rally support around AIDS awareness, and that we frame AIDS as city-identified phenomena that can only be addressed within urban communities. It is in that very kind of thinking, that seemingly innocent double-gesture, in which the compulsory abstraction of the city assimilates into some other particularized crisis of gay subjectivity, that we find how metronormative framing circulates throughout mass media with hardly any notice.

For that reason, we should stress the importance of the interaction between gaze and setting, as this formal move is key to understanding the creation and maintenance of the urban pastoral in mainstream queer media. That is to say, then, without the cinematic apparatus and setting working together to coax the viewer out of perceiving the harsh material realities of the city, and shifting attention toward seeing the city as an idealized social imaginary, then the illusion of the urban pastoral – i.e., the dream of a city-based “liberated zone,” as seen in *Purple Rain* (1984), *Queer as Folk* (2000), *The L Word* (2004), in which social difference ceases to exist and every homosexual is created and treated equal – falls apart, ruptured by the manifest social disparities that structure cities into sites of social struggle, not spaces of social unity, thereby causing the Utopian image of city-as-landscape to emerge as a much less viable and non-essential model.

Another popular film, John Cameron Mitchell's critically acclaimed *Shortbus* (2006), sheds light on a second aspect of the formal construction of the urban pastoral that I've mentioned earlier, the element of spectacle, which also involves a manipulation of the cinematic gaze. To be sure, *Rent* demonstrates this aspect of spectacle quite plainly, and almost by default as a movie-musical; but because *Shortbus* is an independent film that belongs to the genre of drama, we will see a manipulation of the film form in the service of metronormative discourse that is uniquely decoupled from generic pretense or audience expectations. Along the way, the hostile city space of *Rent*'s Gay Village will be turned upside, revealing the caricatured flipside of a metronormative homosexual imaginary, one that precludes any consideration for socioeconomic and racial divisions whatsoever in favor of consolidating the diversity of urban existence to cosmopolitanized queer pleasures, such as spectacle, fashion, and aesthetics. Lest we be tempted to disregard this construction as frivolous, I will show how the film form assists in the film's narrative treatment of urban space as part of the natural order of things, of queer sexuality as natural, and of New York City as the sexual epicenter of the world.

Whereas the Gay Ghetto posits liberal politics as the answer to heterosexism, treating the heterosexed city as the perpetual obstacle for queer subjects, the Gay Village in *Shortbus* displays more interest in pursuing an ethos of consumption as an alternative to gay/lesbian movement politics altogether, such that the film's urban queer zone turns into what Steven and Malcom Miles call a "consuming city." This element of consumption occurs in accordance with the film's pastoralistic naturalization of urban queerness, so that, in the end, the consuming city ideal cannot be delinked from a vision of homosexuality. We bear witness to this process as the metro-gaze and Expressionistic mise-en-scene help create New York City into the sex capital of the world – a world perhaps more familiar to consumers of tourism media than to the occupants of the city itself. Through several intermission sequences consisting of moving aerial shots of the city, in which we enter and leave apartments and soar around the cityscape with ease, the audience comes to occupy an invisible flying eye-camera, which allows us to experience a topography of urban space that substitutes spectacle and the illusion of control and mobility for an awareness of the urban social structures that suppress the freedom of movement for many city-based queer individuals. As if in a travel brochure, we thus consume an idealized portrait of the city that necessarily excludes all internal and external threats that would ruin the fantasy. Still, this exclusion of undesirable realities that occurs in the film's formal pastoralization of the Big City is key to understanding the politics of the queer consuming city, as the compensatory theme of mobility and pastoralism precludes the subjects and experiences that would expose such a spatial ideal as a fundamentally crypto-racist, classist, and segregationist gay imaginary. As such, in *Shortbus* "the landscape-as-leisure returns with a vengeance, creating a sort of citizenship predicated on the externalization of those deemed 'undesirable' [and] through landscape, politics is fully aestheticized" (Mitchell, 2000: 138). The tourist ethos not only masks this agenda but also treats exclusionary politics, in such aestheticized form, as a fetish object.

Our gaze is further entreated to consume the city when the film turns to a place called Shortbus, a salon for "the gifted and challenged" and the imaginary endpoint in a migration narrative to which queer "kids flock" and get laid. Here, the film converts N.Y.C. from a landscape-as-leisure into the global locus for legitimate sexual variation. Justin, the overseer of Shortbus, performs this transformation in his description of the salon that compounds the city of the film's travel-brochure gaze with gay globalism ideology: "You've got the whole world and it's your playground," he tells a newcomer, pointing into a room where a wild party seems underway, with participants who appear prepared to fulfill every sexual taste of interested visitors. Justin then naturalizes the sexual playground (i.e., political outlook) of the consuming city in his conception of sexuality as a "magical motherboard that connects globally," an image which, linked to the film's metro-gaze and mise-en-scene, aestheticizes the city with transparency, control, and spectacle, at the expense of social and material barriers, in order to legitimate metropolitan sexuality as natural, and render different sexual beings as fundamentally the same, interchangeable units to be united in circuit board which figures as a metaphor for nation insofar as "the cultural heterogeneity of the city [is] denied [...] to symbolize an imagined national community" (Sibley, 1995: 108) that takes on an additional geopolitical aspect wherein Americanized metro gay nationality conflates into gay globality. Spectacle, as constructed in the urban pastoral of *Shortbus*, thus offers an ethos of consumption toward worldwide sexual assimilation of U.S. models of urban sexuality.

Other types of Gay Village cities rely upon globalism, spectacle aesthetics, and capitalistic values to varying degrees, to be sure, but *Shortbus* nonetheless gives us a glimpse into the general tendencies of a cinematic apparatus entangled in the various ideological

positions that compose the urban bias in queer media. Before we move on to narratological components of such media, we should revisit Mulvey's notion of the gaze to reaffirm the fact that the metronormative frame circulates throughout the mediascape without drawing much scrutiny. Literary scholar Nalini Paul (2004), in giving a summary of Kaplan's notion of the male gaze, illuminates the circumstances of media reception which allows this objectifying force of the frame to pass over viewers' notice, stating "the apparatus does not draw attention to itself as a process of construction; rather, this filmic process detracts attention away from itself during the experience of watching the film, allowing the spectator to get drawn into the diegesis." But even if such an objectification of gay and lesbian city life reflects hollow empowerment, instead of disempowerment as in male gazing, the effect of such a metronormative gaze still stays the same: Like Mulvey's gazed-at woman, the fantasy city becomes an image of desire for the gazer. Put another way, the gaze here transforms the city into a commodity for us to fetishize. As cultural geographer Don Mitchell reminds us, cinematic "landscapes, through their aesthetization of space, may very well be texts, and they may often be texts that revel in depictions of the good life, but they are also, always, physical concretizations of power, power that the landscape itself often works quite hard to fetishize as something else altogether" (2000: 125). I propose that the fetish we're supposed to desire in such mainstream portrayals is the imaginary ideal city that maintains the urban as the privileged term in the rural/urban divide, that views cities as paradises instead of sites of struggle, that also allows metropolitan stylistics and forms of desire to emerge as timeless, authentic, and natural rather than constructed and historically particularized phenomena. Granted, my description of the gaze pertains to fantasy models of cinematic cities, so we must refrain from generalizing about all kinds of media. Yet, even so, this general tendency to translate spaces from dynamic and material sites into flat images of desire still predominates metronormative representations of sexualities (albeit in different ways), and almost to the point where heavy stylization and objectification constitute the status quo.

Metronormative Narrational Strategies

The narrative theories of structuralist writer Gerard Genette are particularly useful for understanding the ways that the metronormative frame enlists elements of plot and story, such as perspective, focalization, and address, to narrow the field of queer voices in media representations in favor of biases held by urban-identified gays and lesbians. As defined in narratological theory, perspective has to do with the overall ideological point-of-view offered by a text. This textual viewpoint is not necessarily obvious to the eye. A work of literature, for instance, may offer an anti-imperialistic morality tale about the history of colonialism on a literal level, yet simultaneously have its sub-literal, ideological perspective designed in such a way to flatter modern-day Westerners, making readers forget the neo-colonial practices of imperialistic forces that characterize the present moment.

Perspective therefore acts as the underlying value system that forms the superstructure, or subconscious, of stories that claim to talk about values in the literal sense. For my purposes, we shall consider this definition of perspective through a Bakhtinian understanding of textuality: that textual objects always carry the potential to speak for a variety of real-life populations in the world, yet at the same time texts tend to (de-)emphasize certain values and groups depending on the work's perspective, and social context in which a text is received. The idea of address, meanwhile, centers on the desired audience of a particular voice of a text: It involves the real and

imaginary populations who are either interpellated or disregarded by any given media. The text's address in this sense is always a political relation; even if a work strives to be inclusive, say, by presenting a grand vision that tries to account for the totality of human life (e.g., the epic, some forms of lyric poetry), then inevitably the multitude of social and material specificities which define existing subcultural populations are going to be submerged under the banner of a collective "we" that tends to make sense only for people in power or people closest to a text's normative ideal. Finally, in terms of focalization, we should view this narrative mechanism as the conduit for the perspective and the address of a media text. The focalizer is the protagonist or host of characters acting as the surrogate of a text's ideological point-of-view. Focalization can be linked to gaze theory: the focalizer is often the figure in whom the audience invests its identification and carries their gaze. Together, these three components of narrative compose the textual basis that complements the visual aspect of a metronormative frame.

The perspective offered by pro-urban queer media generally works to exclude rural queer life. It does so by constructing a collective "we" that implicitly prohibits the participation of non-Out, non-urban queer individuals. The metro-normative "we" acquires this exclusionary aspect in the way that the "perspective" of a television program or movie seems to speak on behalf of all gays and lesbians, yet does so from the lockstep viewpoint of a pro-urban, pro-White, pro-middle-class ideological framework. For instance, in *The L Word*, or *Will and Grace* (1998), queerness becomes a function of a sexualized, classed, and raced cityscape, and the concomitant perspective fails to accommodate exceptions to these conditions when they do appear, instead functioning to authorize the legitimacy of urban life by making antithetical individuals (frequently perceived as "low-class" by the shows' characters) appear as deviant, stigmatized, and undesirable. The city queer is then normalized through these texts' insistent claim that urban queerness is acceptable and desirable to the extent that it is connected to a fantasy city (and the concurrent city norms of racial assimilation, corporate professionalization, and anti-political middle-class life). Numerous gay-oriented documentaries^x, such as *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989), *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), and *Before Stonewall* (1984), serve as iconic examples of the institutionalization of this pro-urban-queer narrative perspective through their implicit or explicit use of the gay migration trope as a fundamental pretext to homosexual solidarity and political activism.

A collective "we" cast as White, urban, middle-class, and anti- or pro-liberal politics focalizes itself at the level of characterization across a variety of social archetypes. These types, despite occupying different bodies and identities, still tend to display the same metronormative ideological frame in the attitudes held by the individuals (typically the protagonists) who represent the "we" of a text. These attitudes correlate to the biases Herring identified in his theorization of the rural-to-urban migration narrative.

That is to say, the characters in pro-urban queer media seem to be obsessed with upper-middle-class fashion aesthetics, committed to a standard of white-collar professionalism and enforce abstracted Whiteness that treats corporeal differences (of skin color, body type, and gender-sex identity) as a sign of deviance to be stigmatized and contained at a distance. In addition, the character-focalizers embody norms of metropolitan sexualities, such as visibility, gender nonconformity, and political activism. The focalization of these biases serve to sustain regional shame, bicoastal biases, and forms of urban gay cosmopolitanism that manifest in a cultural rural/urban divide which appears to be incontrovertible in the narrative logic of pro-urban queer texts. Hence, when focalizers encounter sexual disidentification with metropolitan

stylistics or urban socio-sexual norms, these moments are typically encoded as inauthentic and dangerous to the stability of the urban gay and lesbian community imagined by the text.

That the perspective of the text remains fixed, monolithic, and unchallenged among the urban-identified focalizers suggests Bakhtin's notion of the struggle over meaning in narrative discourse, showing that urban sexualities attain legitimacy in media by collapsing one meaning into visual and narrative symbols that have the potential to signify various things: "the ruling class strives to...extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs [in the sign] to make the sign uniaxential" (1984: 23). In other words, the characters and narratives of mainstream metro-texts offer their respective discourses in a way that is organized around an "objective, authorial voice" of the urban gay/lesbian "we." In this way, we can say that metronormative media strives for a gay imaginary that is, at its core, a *monoglossia*: an "official" perspective or "dominant ideology [that] argues there is only one unified and unifying language" or voice to articulate the condition of homosexuality in American society and abroad, one situated in the queer public offered by gay ghetto/village models.

The element of address coincides with the monoglossic aspirations of perspective and focalization such that there is the production of an imaginary feedback loop of media reception whereby the consumer of pro-urban queer media is implicitly interpellated as a member of the selfsame gay society represented on screen, and the two parties supposedly engage in a recursive relationship that reinforces the stability and unity of each other. Complications arise, of course, when sexual assimilation between media consumer and media images cannot be sustained, thus triggering a variety of implications that call into question the viability of a gay imaginary which presumes universalism yet remains highly particular in its self-constitution and in the ideologies intended for its desired audience. However, despite the disparity between the imagined community and the actual recipient of these images and stories, the realm of address is where the rural-to-urban migration narrative of metronormativity takes shape, for the affirmative communities in fantasy cityscapes implicitly call upon non-urban viewers to relocate to city spaces in order to achieve idealized forms of socio-sexual interconnection. *Shortbus* evidences this aggressive enticement in a remarkable scene where the ex-Mayor of New York offers consolation to a younger salon patron that is, in actual fact, a provocation to spur on queer diaspora and urban resettlement, directed at the film's imagined audience:

You know what's wonderful about New York? It's the place everyone goes to get fucked. It's one of the last places people are willing to bend over and let in the new and the old. New York is where everyone comes to be forgiven when you've done wrong. Home can be very unforgiving.

In this moment, *Shortbus* channels the ideological voices from the other focalizers in the film into an "official" discourse with a singular message for queer subjects: run away and find refuge in the Big City at any cost. While Weston has given substantial anthropological evidence of the harmful impact incurred by this pro-urban propaganda, I can't help but wonder at the implications the message holds amongst a middle-class urban audience. If I had to hazard a guess, I would venture to say that the rhetoric behind the idealized cityscape offered to us here carries a more or less disciplinary function to deter a critical assessment of metropolitan power relations and prohibit a style of thought that would relativize the urban imaginary to include other sexual spaces where others go "to get fucked," without the metro-biases that devalue socio-sexual difference.

Fortunately, the gay village/ghetto sexual politics in mainstream queer media have incited counter-narratives that contest the credibility of these ideals. As such, filmic and televisual resistances to metronormative framing reveal the catastrophic effect of media-based metronormativity: that the compulsory idealization of metropolitan space simultaneously causes non-urban spaces to be essentialized into a narrow set of geographic stereotypes which legitimizes urban queerness at the expense of non-urban sex-gender systems. In the next section, we see how forms of anti-urban queer media are actively attempting to overturn this pattern by re-imagining rural geographies.

Critically Rustic Media

Critically rustic media, in the most general terms, refers to a stance of reflexivity in queer-centered media representations, as well as in queer media studies, that orients issues of sexuality and space as central while simultaneously branching off into other interconnected areas of cultural geography, such as spaces and boundaries of class, race, and gender, with an emphasis on intersectional critique. Critically rustic media pursues sexual space in this way to see how spaces, real and imagined, are sexualized and sexed, and to see how this process subsequently constitutes and regulates sexual identity. Under my definition, this heterogeneous collection of film and television media acts as a critical interrogation of dominant spatial idealizations that inform mainstream American culture. At the same time, critically rustic media representations also advance the counter-production of non-urban-biased frameworks with which to assess historic and newly made artifacts and their socio-sexual implications, pointing out the constructed-ness and arbitrary nature of urban/rural sexual politics which we tend to perceive as existing forever in everyday life, and doing so often times without the influence of metronormative tendencies. This medium-specific conception of the critically rustic, which in my view has the potential to function multiply through many contexts as a media categorization, an aesthetic and political style, as well as a critical toolbox with which to conduct theoretical and social studies, draws heavily from the groundbreaking work of Scott Herring, who first analyzed and coined “critical rusticity” in addressing a crucial socio-political juncture in twentieth-century gay and lesbian history in the U.S.

In a study on anti-urban queer print media, Herring (2007) persuasively argues that, contrary to popular belief, not all gay and lesbian populations in America were satisfied with inheriting the social practices and political attitudes of post-Stonewall gay and lesbian political movements that seemed to be devolving into another national consumer culture implicitly positioned, at best, as homonormative or “assimilationist,” and, at worst, White, middle-class, heteronormative, and anti-political.

Herring traces the development of U.S.-based regional counterpublics that emerged in the seventies to contest the perceived unity of gays and lesbians in society, producing oppositional literary and social scenes that were often located outside the discursive matrix of metropolitan areas. These regionalized pockets of resistance not only positioned themselves against the normalization of queer life – a process that had been compounded by the development of such major magazines as *The Advocate* – they also tried to offer an alternative to urban sexualities by re-interpreting rural America and region-specific gay imaginaries as places that could sustain gay and lesbian populations.

Herring identifies these forms of anti-urban politics as demonstrating “critical rusticity.” Not to be confused with anti-urban attitudes of xenophobic political conservatism, Herring maintains that critical rusticity refers to “an intersectional opportunity to geographically, corporeally, and aesthetically inhabit non-normative sexuality that offers new possibilities for the sexually marginalized outside the metropolis as well as inside it” (2007: 346). In addition to the stance of pro-rural oppositionality, the critically rustic refuses or repurposes the relations of power that facilitate the ongoing sexual standardization of urban gay and lesbian communities, offering a home for critique and self-awareness that accounts for the logic of exclusion governing metronormative subjectivity in a guise of progressiveness. For instance, regional shame under Herring’s theorization no longer acts as the impetus for a rural-to-urban migration; rather, it forms the affective basis of marginal communities based in small towns or the country, leading to the formation of “bottom-up” political and social solidarity that articulates forms of sexual diversity instead of creating space-based stratifications of sex. Therefore, critical rusticity pursues alternative and productive, not reactionary, politics. By promoting queerness in this way in order to include multiple real and imagined geographic perspectives, the critically rustic thus reveals the oft-forgotten element of spatiality that determines sexuality. Osborne and Spurlin (1996) profitably clarify the importance of maintaining such sensitivity to space and sexuality, and gesture toward the ethics of implementing space-conscious criticism in gay/lesbian/queer studies, stating that “the Midwest [and the non-urban in general] is not antithetical to lesbian and gay identities and cultural practices; in fact [...] the Midwest *enables* the production of queer culture. To assume otherwise, to disparage queer location and cultural production [in non-metropolitan regions] dangerously serves and perpetuates homophobic ideologies that assert there is no place for lesbians and gay men in ‘Middle America’” (xxv).

Indebted as I am to Herring’s breakthrough study, I want to transplant his idea of the critically rustic queer text to the realm of queer media studies to explore the ways in which the dominant metronormative frame gets resisted by television programs and movies that are interested in creating a sexual imaginary which includes, and promotes, non-urban regional identities. In order to access this resistance in a medium-specific context, my study examines the position of critical rusticity from the vantage point of formal analysis. “Critically rustic media” figures in this section as the destination for queer-centric films and television that, unlike my prior categorizations of queer cities in the media, tend to display awareness about sexual space.

In what follows, I describe three typologies of critically rustic media, spanning the post-Stonewall era of the seventies and nineties to the post-post-Stonewall period of the twenty-first century. These types include what I call “Revisionist Hillbilly Horror,” “Rural Magic Realism,” and “Rural Retrofuturism.” I wish to caution readers ahead of time that by no means should these categories be taken absolute or closed, yet nor are they to be read as trans-historical or wholly permeable phenomena either.

As we will see, some tendencies from one type overlap another, while some types arise from contemporary political problems that cannot be easily connected to crises of the past. Critically rustic media of any type does, however, generally involve the same queer subversions of uncritically metropolitan media – the refusal to migrate, the indifference to hierarchized models of sociability and sexuality, the skepticism toward grand visions of the rural/urban divide, and the incorporation of what Rubin calls “benign variation,” a mode of sexual politics that undercuts standardized behaviors by encouraging plurality versus value-laden conformity. Using several assumptions of Bakhtinian theory, in this section we will also perceive how predominantly metronormative texts attempt to reign in, or become undone by, latent anti-

metronormative impulses (particularly within revisionist hillbilly horror films). For this reason, we should not concern ourselves with hunting down black and white, either/or examples of critical rusticity versus metronormativity in media. Instead, it would be better to consider these oppositional media forms as existing together in a latticework of discourse, in which particular forms are more noticeably divergent or influential than others, depending upon the medium, mode of production, and socio-historical context, yet still remain connected to each other all the same. Critically rustic media, as such, resembles Barthes definition of the text as “inter-textual,” as “a tissue, a woven fabric,” found on a massive web wherein “every text has its meaning, therefore, in relation to other texts.” The first type to undergo investigation is revisionist hillbilly horror, whose intertextuality usefully clarifies the ways that sexual spaces in the media rely upon and respond to prior representations.

Revisionist Hillbilly Horror

Revisionist hillbilly horror comes from a long-standing Western tradition of representing the rural as the space of socio-sexual Otherness. Many media historians claim that this tradition dates back to 17th century England, when Englanders constructed a cultural mythology of the mountains that associated mountain people with nature’s shames and ills (J.W. Williamson, 1995: 18). The otherization of rurality continued on through the turn of the twentieth century as “hillbilly” entered the American lexicon in mass culture, and the 1930’s saw a spike in pop cultural rural stereotypes amid large-scale economic collapse. Though many significant developments concerning images of rural life occurred throughout these historic periods, our primary interest here concerns depictions of rurality in the American cinema around the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, when a subgenre of the horror film called “hillbilly horror” emerged on the scene and seemed to generate appeal by drawing on an assortment of cultural myths about the sexual perversions of rural “white trash” people (See *Deliverance* (1972), *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), for examples). Revisionist hillbilly horror, we will see, involves the invocation of such myths from “hick flicks” and also calls attention to the urban frame through which they have been conventionally assessed in the mainstream mediascape. Also, these films and T.V. programs perform a critique of the horror conventions that give rise to a sexualized rural/urban divide that characterizes our understanding of sexual subjectivity in American society today.

David Bell (1995) conducted a landmark study on hillbilly horror, showing that popular, “lowbrow” cinema frequently creates an “anti-idyll” that inverts the “wholesome” pastoral and desexualized agrarian myth through an encounter between city-dwelling protagonists and monstrous, sexualized rednecks, creating a symbolic showdown between the city and the country. Bell observes that exemplary hillbilly horror, particularly *Deliverance*, identifies the rural world with ruralized images of non-normative sexuality – “of inbreeding, insularity, backwardness...incest and bestiality” (96) – and implicitly encodes the urban with heteronormative ideology, in turn valuing the former as a space of isolation and corruption and the latter, of enlightenment and innocence. Though the rural often dominates the mise-en-scene, these horror films provoke detachment from the countryside by deploying an Otherized setting

that suggests something intrinsically wicked and threatening about the non-urban. The rural-identified characters occupying these settings then compound the landscape by manifesting the degeneracy of “suffocating and repressive” small towns. Bell does not discuss the function of the gaze in these films, but it is clear that the viewer is repeatedly urged to regard country folk as “exotic” in the negative sense, as a counterfetish: the rural, in other words, acts as an object of hypersexualized deviant desire to be feared and abolished, or else maintained at a distance by the reaffirmation of an eternal rural/urban divide.

Revisionist hillbilly horror borrows heavily from the visual codes of traditional rural horror, but deploys these mechanisms to produce sexualized spaces for a much different purpose. In contemporary independent cinema, for example, we see an overwriting of rural horror conventions in the context of a modern “social problem” film whose story centers on the status of queer identity displaced from city spaces. The importation of horror tropes facilitates the breakdown of metro-heterosexist barriers, however, rather than fortifying them, so as to problematize the sexualized cultural rural/urban divide which a great deal of queer media takes for granted. The controversial premium cable program *Big Love* (2006), for instance, revolves around an upper-middle-class polygamist family in suburban Utah, and their extended “redneck” kin from a nearby Mormon compound in the outer parts of town, whose dysfunctional domestic situation somewhat resembles Leatherface’s grave-robbing cannibal family, with their white trash disregard for middle-class norms of propriety, dress, and urban professionalism. The show’s redneck family suggest the “white trash erotics” (Bell, 2000) of hillbilly horror when they clash with their fellow suburbanized counterparts, serving to blur the line between abject sexuality of the rural hillbilly and the illegal, yet somehow more “vanilla,” sex conduct of the non-rural polygamists, in a sexual imaginary that can only be called “queer heterosexuality.” Phil Morrison’s indie film *Junebug* (2005) likewise serves to “queer” the repressed or hypersexualized straight identities of precious, Otherized rural stereotypes. *Junebug* does so by drawing on white trash erotics through the construction of the North Carolina in-laws who express urban middle-class assumptions of feminine submissiveness and masculine sexual immaturity in the South, yet in the name of humanizing rural populations amid the film’s urban protagonists’ metropolitan condescension and fragile sense of superiority that echo the hubris of many a city-dwelling victim from rural horror. The Oscar-winning film, *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), directed by Kimberly Peirce, serves as a worthwhile example in this regard as well, as it draws liberally from hillbilly horror in its filmic revision of a popular geographic stereotype (circulating through queer culture), that of the country-as-closet.

Benshoff and Griffin (2006) highlight the film’s dependency on an archetypal rural locale, a location that, in Bell’s words, “offers isolation and an alien environment,” stating that “everyone in *Boys Don’t Cry* is seemingly living at or below the poverty line: they are trapped, limited, and uneducated. The Nebraska they inhabit is a world of trailer parks, drug and alcohol abuse, and dead-end jobs” (281). To be sure, Pierce’s film subjects Nebraska to the semiotics of hillbilly horror in this way partly in order to enjoin pro-queer audiences in a campaign against rural homophobia and the socioeconomic impoverishment that fuels it. The film’s agenda, in other words, is not to victimize Brandon Teena in a universalist tragedy by using horror tropes to posit the straight world as a monolithic villain that devours queer life; rather, the country-as-closet aesthetics of *Boys Don’t Cry* should be read as a (problematic) attempt to critique conditions of homophobia and undermine the binary of sexual space in the broader culture which negates the existence of queer life beyond the borders of the metropolis in the first place. The film’s unique synthesis of the gaze and an exoticized countryside, along with the presence of a

polyphonic cast of rural voices, subverts the metronormative impulse that would configure the country-as-closet as another motivating factor that gives rise to a migration narrative and thus extinguish the viability of rural space as site for queer subjectivity. To grasp this anti-metronormative sensibility that characterizes *Boys Don't Cry* and revisionist hillbilly horror in general, we need to account for how the gaze, setting, and narrative work together to muddle distinction(s) between sexual spaces.

As stated before, the setting and gaze of *Boys Don't Cry* Otherizes Nebraska – at a glance, doing so only to recapitulate the metronormative image of the country as a space of repression, with the aid of horror cinema aesthetics. For instance, much of the film is bathed in darkness, as major plot points take place during night-time when the characters either party, bar-hop, or commit crimes. There are also wide angle long shots of the landscape that inspire images of an overwhelming desolate wasteland; at one point, we see part of a sci-fi movie in Lana Tisdell's house that reproduces this dystopian construction, in which a lonely astronaut treks the surface of a moon, isolated from human civilization. Perhaps the most obvious allusion to hillbilly horror concerns the portrayal of Brandon and Lana in their most private moments of intimacy, when they are in isolated cars, a moonlit barn, or darkened bedroom, shrouded in a claustrophobic pitch-black mise-en-scene that calls to mind Clover's "Terrible Place" of the rural slasher film where sexual pleasure abruptly transforms into visceral brutality and ends in death.

However, contrary to popular assumption, the iconographic country-as-closet set-up in this instance uses the aesthetic of horror not as a metaphor signifying the intrinsic ugliness of rural folk; rather, these aesthetics work in the service of a polyphonic pro-rural narrative that distinguishes between rural life as human and rural xenophobia, when influenced by economic and social factors, as inhumane but ultimately unfixed and therefore changeable phenomena. The diverse characters of *Boys Don't Cry*, which encompass pro-queer transgender and lesbian positions as well as anti-queer straight subjectivity, negotiate the rural as a contested site, where queerness manages to exist despite heterosexist hegemony. The cast also fails to comply with the narrative code of hillbilly horror that posits a Manichean distinction between good versus evil which manifests in the characters along a corresponding urban (good) versus rural (bad) axis.

In a truly admirable maneuver, the film instead entreats the viewer to perceive the flawed vantage point of the homophobic men and women, so that the horror of homophobia does not also signify the "horror" of the rural society at large, even though the story's focalization establishes Brandon Teena as the sympathetic carrier of the dominant perspective in the text. Brandon himself, by virtue of his gender performance and movements across Nebraska, acts as a counter-narrative "to the dominant stories of urban gay and lesbian and transsexual life," as Halberstam points out: "His migration was precisely the reverse of the usual move from country to city; indeed, he moved to the small geographically isolated town of Falls City from a large city, Lincoln, not in order to be a stranger with no history but because he had friends there" (2003: 164). The narrative-focalizer in this sense preempts a metro-impulse of exile in the rural Closet.

What emerges from this formal reading, then, is that the homophobic element that constructs the rural as a totalized Closet becomes revised, detached from an abstracted rural society, and subsequently concretized in the actions of specific individuals, so that the film does not implicitly naturalize a connection between rurality and repression that would overlook the crucial fact that queer beings, such as Brandon Teena and Lana Tisdell, have the capacity to explore sexual identity outside an urban spatial context (though this capacity, admittedly, gets compromised and is never unthreatened). I would add that this reading also preserves the rural as

a space that produces and sustains sexual variance, instead of characterizing it as an unmanageable “problem” that requires the physical displacement of queer populations. The true horror of *Boys Don’t Cry*, in the end, remains the self-destructive and fatal consequences of homophobic discourse, and the horrific landscapes of isolation and slaughter that it generates in small town Nebraska.

We should not forget, though, that while the film recuperates rural queerness at the expense of Closet rhetoric, it does so with the simultaneous exclusion of Phillip DeVine, the African American disabled man who played a role in the real event and was eventually killed by Nissen and Lotter. In a criticism pointing to Pierce’s filmic white-washing of the Brandon Teena case, Halberstam laments the mainstream aspect of *Boys Don’t Cry* that racializes the story as White for a mass audience, noting that “race is narrative trajectory that is absolutely central to the meaning of the Brandon Teena murders,” and adding that “the film makers have sacrificed the hard facts of racial hatred to a streamlined story of love, death, and gender impersonation in the heartland” (168). I agree with Halberstam and echo the view that, in terms of racial politics, Pierce’s film all but erases the figuration of race and its centrality to this story of rural transgenerism. As such, we must ultimately view *Boys Don’t Cry* as a complex case of revisionist hillbilly horror, insofar as the revision of metro-biased country-as-closet imagery here occurs at the same time as a counterproductive, revisionist deracination of the countryside. At the same time, I still maintain that, in revisionist hillbilly horror, race is not always sacrificed within a pro-rural critique. In fact, blaxploitation films such as *Space is the Place* (1974), *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), and African American-made underground films, particularly *Killer of Sheep* (1977), tend to display the aesthetics and politics of revisionist hillbilly horror with an emphasis on racial struggle that intersects issues of rural/urban sexual spaces. Craig Brewer’s *Black Snake Moan* (2007), though another complex case indeed, nonetheless exemplifies the critical race component attendant in some kinds of revisionist hillbilly horror. Here, the hypersexualized “anti-idyll” of rural horror collides with recycled tropes of 70’s sex- and blaxploitation in the service of a negotiated critique of gender conformity and archaic racial stereotypes in Tennessee.

Recent revisionist hillbilly horror also reverses the aesthetic and narrative norms of classic redneck cinema towards triggering recognition of the urban frame that organizes rural space in such films as either a “Southern Gothic set in a semi-mythological wilderness” (S.V. Doviak, 2005: 170) or a geographic idealization of pre-social and desexualized purity. Bennett Miller’s *Capote* (2005), in particular, offers a multi-layered revision of the narrative aspect of the urban frame that, in a manner akin to Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), “challenges and relativizes dominantly metropolitan voices, which advance powerful but limited sexuality politics and representations” (R. Phillips, D. Watts, & D. Shuttleton, 2000: 3) by showing that the urban gay imaginary is not divorced from visions of immaterial space, but is, in fact, dependent on false spatial ideals that invest metropolitan sexualities with cultural legitimacy and a regulatory power to determine and deny the status of dissident queers.

As with most metronormative media, the Kansas locale of *Capote* appears to us as another “dead space” cited from rural horror, in large part owing to the stark cinematography, which features drained out colors and many static shots of a dreary rural landscape, punctuated by a few isolated and unassuming ranch homes. The storyline confirms this dismal picture, associating the murders of the rural family with the provincial community itself, and then portraying the townsfolk as secretive and hostile toward outsiders, such as when Capote states that the people of Holcomb “won’t talk” on account of his gender nonconformity. By contrast,

New York City seems completely liberated from such narrow-mindedness. Indeed, most urban depictions in the film revolve around Capote's forays in the town's exciting nightlife, when he is either giving a reading for the general public, partying with fellow literati, or dining with his publishers. In a twin construction that smacks of allegorical Manicheanism, the rural and the urban thus take up the classic binary opposition of the pathos-ridden country-as-closet versus the Big City, a mecca of gay cosmopolitanism. The binarized mise-en-scene and visual aesthetics cooperatively position this reductive rural/urban divide in the foreground, however, so that other filmic devices reveal this myth, in which rural and urban sexual spaces are self-enclosed, static, contrasting realms, to be the product of an urban frame.

Capote probes this urban frame at the level of narrative by putting a queer spin on the standard plot formula of rural horror: Instead of having a normative protagonist encounter non-normative sexuality in the countryside, which would privilege the biases of urban straight audiences, here we have a reverse allegory where the queer figure Truman Capote acts as our focalizer, encountering a heterosexed, hostile small town in Kansas, under the pretense to unmask the mystery of the country, yet in the end showing us only the workings of dominant biases among urban homosexuals. In the process, Miller's film urges viewers to compromise identification with Truman by subjecting him to Brechtian technique, namely that of Distanciation, or "the effect of distancing or estranging a spectator through means within the form or content of a text that challenge basic codes and conventions, and therefore mainstream ideological expectations" (Hayward, 1996). This distancing effect occurs when Capote undermines his credibility as a reliable narrative voice by revealing his own class pretensions that distort his perceptions, or by exposing an inability to treat the townsfolk with respect while manipulating them for information, such as when he lies to Detective Alvin Dewey about using the town murders as the subject of a book.

In this way, the distancing effect puts Capote in the position of a double outsider to both the townsfolk and the non-diegetic audience, producing a Brechtian relation between viewer and diegesis whereby our protagonist, serving as shorthand for metropolitan sexuality and the metro-gaze, loses subjective agency as the carrier of the movie's perspective and simultaneously turns into an object to be viewed by an emergent critically rustic gaze. Our distanciation from identifying with an urban frame therefore becomes a mode of critique through which to comment on such a frame as well as the formal binarizations that, consciously or not, regulate Capote's worldview as well as inhabit other forms of metropolitan queer media.

This ambivalence toward representational codes that were, and continue to be, filtered through an uncritical urban frame acts as the common defining trait to this particular subset of critically rustic media. Other revisionist hillbilly horror films such as *The Woodsman* (2004) evoke rural horror to perform similar distanciations of queer protagonist-characters who, in defiance against norms of classical Hollywood narrative that undergird depictions of queer cities, refuse to serve as the unproblematized carrier of a film's gaze and narrative perspective. These and other formal distanciations point to the urban biases that surround mainstream depictions of rural Otherness and at the same time work to revise existing hegemonic sexual spaces with an anti-urban frame. The next type of critically rustic media to be covered, rural magic realism, continues this counter-hegemonic struggle over representations of rural queerness. As we will see in the following section, the critically rustic also goes beyond a corrective, consciousness-raising agenda, and seeks to establish the vocabulary and political outlook needed for the production of an entirely new gay imaginary divorced from pro-urban mainstreaming.

Rural Magic Realism

"My most important problem was destroying the lines of demarcation that separates what seems real from what seems fantastic"
- Gabriel Garcia Marquez^{xi}

"The queerest irony of all would be a queer world that had no place for queers"
- Mark Simpson^{xii}

Using the genre of "magic realism," Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez attempted to create a literary universe that could generate social critique which fused everyday life with elements of fantasy. Concerned as he was with the political potential of the human imagination, Marquez sought it necessary to work within a type of Spanish fiction that capitalized upon, rather than suppressed, the mysteries of the human mind toward the end of social change. In magic realism, the boundaries between objective thought and subjective experience tend to intersect to the point where neither polarity becomes sustainable without the presence of the other. As such, it is not unusual to find stories where the mundane is juxtaposed with the profound, in which the "the whole world is enchanted, mysterious," and reality conveys the "ordinary as miraculous and the miraculous as ordinary" (B.H. Rogers, 2002).

Writers of magic realism invest in a "poetics of excess" or capacity for alternative possibilities, "that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles in closed or open structures" (Luis Leal) in order to disrupt rationality, pretense, and replace normalcy with the supernatural.

But what does this definition have to do with queerness in the American media? Furthermore, how can we characterize "magic realism" as another subset of critical rusticity? And, more important, why is it necessary to incorporate the genre of the "fantastically real" into a politics of anti-metronormative representation, especially when such faith in fanciful images tends to betray cynical connotations, as seen in the case of pro-urban queer media, particularly Gay Village idealizations of the queer metropolis?

In this section, I propose a counterintuitive argument (which gets developed later on in "rural retrofuturism") that seems to contradict my previous findings: in short, I argue that the element of fantasy is crucial for the production of counterhegemonic sexual spaces in the media. I temper this statement by noting the ways in which pro-rural queer media preempt the impulse to generalize and totalize the particularity of rural life, as well as play up rather than downplay material realities to counteract the anti-politics of idyllic mythologies, in contradistinction to the problematic agendas of mainstream queer cities. Above all, my concern with fantasy relates to widening a spectrum of queer representation. For without an interest in play, imagination, or the impossible, critically rustic media fails to realize its end goal to materialize a range of alternative non-urban gay imaginaries for the occupation of queer, lesbian, gay, and straight populations.

Unlike metro-queer media, rural magic realism uses fantasy for a rather unfantastic purpose: to situate the subject in a densely intricate world and to uncover existing relations of power that constitute that world. It accomplishes this contradiction by fusing together two

aesthetic practices that seem directly opposed to one another: mythology and the aesthetic of realism. In terms of myth, these films and programs tend to project aspects of stereotypical rural idylls from a dominant heterosexual imagination or the homoerotic pastoral fantasy of the gay literary tradition, echoing mainstream representations of rurality as either a “rural milieu [...] cast as the site of cultural tradition and heritage” (Folwer, Helfield, 2006: 12) or as an egalitarian countryside delinked from power. However, the presence of progressive realism, as both a style and a political goal, inform these constructions to shift their functioning as fantasy away from escapism or xenophobia toward using them to construct an alternative imaginary which recognizes the differences that constitute lived queer experience beyond the metropolis. Shohat and Stam offer a useful explanation of this double-sided realist aesthetic, stating that “realism as a goal – Brecht’s ‘laying bare the causal network’ – and realism as a style or constellation of strategies aimed at producing an illusionistic ‘reality effect’” are not opposite artistic approaches, that, in fact, “realism as a goal is quite compatible with a style which is reflexive and deconstructive” (1994: 180). In effect, through a double-pronged realism composed of mimetic art and small-scale, real-world politics, rural magic realism situates the iconographic countryside fantasy in a network of power relations so that country mythology inhabits a historical and socially divided world which revolves around the lives of rural gays and lesbians, without the harmful presence of metro-framing that would devalue non-urban sexuality and demand sexual assimilation.

Along with having this aesthetically and ideologically rustic frame to contextualize and recuperate rural queer milieu in the media, rural magic realism lays out a diverse narrative discourse of rural subjectivity to preclude the metronormative impulse to homogenize different perspectives and subject positions into one normalizing imperialistic voice. Instead, we see “a delegation of voice” traded for anti-normative Bahktinian polyphony, a “simultaneous combination of voices” often expressed at the level of voice-over, narration, and focalization – such as in *Palindromes* (2004) where Surrealistic role-reversing characterization undoes blue state versus red state binarizations of enlightenment versus tradition – expanding a text’s overall narrative perspective into a confluence of multiple ideological positions that encourages many readings without overlooking other possibilities. In this way, this subset of critical rusticity shares features with what Bahktin calls the polyphonic novel: “the polyphonic novel presents a world in which no individual discourse can stand objectively above any other discourse; all discourses are interpretations of the world, responses and calls to other discourses” (Allen, 2000: 23). By definition, rustic polyphony, with its variety of clashing, ever-shifting, boundary-crossing viewpoints, thus serves to call into question the fictive rural/urban divide which gives rise to a monoglossic and exclusionary urban “we” in fantasy and ghetto queer city media; and which also sustains an increasingly “homogeneous, monologic” mainstream queer culture in America by enforcing a compulsory relationship between queerness and urban space that essentializes homosexuality into a representational binary, regulating and restricting the agency of producers belonging to metropolitan elite and non-metro-Other populations alike.

The rural magic realist text, ironically, reclaims the fantastic imagery of myth, and narratively fractures the totalizing voice and “controlling, omnipotent narrator” (Allen, 2000: 24) of mythic grand narratives so that Lyotardian “little narratives” are given a level of representational autonomy to thrive beyond compulsory stories of metronormativity, particularly rural-to-urban migration, while reintroducing countryside images as fantastic “liminal spaces” to sustain, not essentialize, rural queer subcultures. Gregg Araki’s controversial film, *Mysterious Skin* (2005), is a key text in this regard. Neither reactionary nor indifferent to rural/urban

sexualities in its perspective on sexual politics, Araki's film negates the impulse to "speak of the urban and rural in oppositional terms" – disrupting a rhetorical strategy of dominant pro-urban queer media – and instead uses rustic polyphony at the level of narrative to show that rural/urban sexual spaces are "inextricably linked as points of tension rather than points of contrast" (Fowler, Helfield, 2000: 3), a relationship necessitating the participation of formerly subjugated discourses.

The film centers on two rural Kansan teenagers, Neil McCormick and Brian Lackey, and their attempts to reconcile their childhood experiences with a pedophilic Little League coach. In McCormick's memory, the coach remains a sympathetic catalyst who triggered his own homosexual awakening, while Lackey, by contrast, was so traumatized as a child that he spends years unaware but haunted by his previous relations with the coach, until he finally has a fortuitous encounter with McCormick at the end. *Mysterious Skin* splits the narrative between these two focalizers, as such, using double-voiced narration and an alternating gaze to probe intergenerational queerness with stark perspectives that resist one-sided Romanticization or condemnation, and also to construct two competing, self-consciously critical idylls around homoerotic rural space.

In McCormick's story, for instance, rural Kansas becomes sexualized at first through the idealized sexual encounter with his coach, and later via his status as a young rural queer and local gay prostitute. Yet, unlike the hypersexualized rural from contemporary hillbilly horror or the gay pastoral, McCormick's idyll negotiates rural queerness across different material sites (the small town and the big city) and at different temporal contexts (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) to de-glamorize as well as de-vilify depictions of rural sexuality that rely upon static, contradictory geographic stereotypes. In the process, we see the many various functions of rural sexuality that metropolitan biases chronically misperceive as inauthentic or counter-revolutionary for not being overtly political or visibly Out in public. For instance, in an early flashback to October 1983, pre-adolescent Neil McCormick goes out trick-or-treating on Halloween with his fellow soul mate and partner-in-crime, Wendy. After a random bout of bullying, McCormick accidentally injures another boy with firecrackers, but assures Wendy that he knows how to keep parental authority at bay and proceeds to perform oral sex on the would-be tattletale, while saying "there are things we can do to get him on our side." Thus, at the moment McCormick's carefully sustained rural idyll could disintegrate under the reality of adult punishment, the sexual practices of pre-teen rural homosexuality are used as de Certeau-ian "tactics of the weak" in order to preserve queerness from harm. In this instance, his Kansan idyll becomes complicated as well by acknowledging relations of power, an awareness echoed in another scene in which McCormick as a young hustler services a Kansan businessman who warns him about the danger of law enforcement busting gay cruising around parks. These moments of filmic realism colonize fantasies of rural homoeroticism without invalidating rural sexual space as fundamentally inoperative.

Lackey's idyll suggests far more pathos and implies a desexualized rural imaginary, as the element of fantastic imagery (flying UFOs, alien autopsy rooms) coincides with a realist agenda to counteract idealizations of rural intergenerational sex. Throughout *Mysterious Skin*, Lackey appears to inhabit an exoticized countryside ripped out of a science fiction universe, yet the fantastic imagery of this world consistently acknowledges its own constructedness; for example, other characters constantly question Lackey's whimsical perceptions, none of which find any parallels whatsoever in the gritty ethos that characterizes McCormick's story. This self-awareness renders fantasy as a coping mechanism for Lackey, to be sure, but it also indicates that

the film knowingly uses artifice in part to relativize sexual space and to preempt the naturalization of any particular identity in its depiction of rural landscape. In contrast to metronormative gay pastoralism, then, in which the fantasy of unencumbered sexuality thrives without external or internal disruption, the magic realist pastoral for Lackey is pregnant with rage and confusion at a system of sexual abuse which seeks legitimacy in a guise of innocence offered, unwittingly or not, by a conception of rural sex as intrinsically wholesome.

With these polyphonic idylls, we also see a violent and blunt blurring of gaze and setting which replicates the brutal trauma at the center of the story. Partly through the aid of double-voiced narration, which alternates between McCormick and Lackey, the cinematic apparatus urges us to identify with both protagonists but also to appreciate the regional specificity and the subjective positionality which defines them, so that, unlike in metronormative modes of identification, these characters do not lose the crucial distinctions of class and sexuality that define them as individuals who are subjected to larger forces of power.

The Expressionistic setting highlights these distinctions by making the landscape externalize the very different psychic lives of the two boys. McCormick leads a nomadic life, moving from Kansas to New York then back to Kansas again, undergoing a painful reversal of the rural-to-urban migration narrative, and the mise-en-scene expresses the difficulty of maintaining such displacements by associating McCormick with the diverse sites of travel frequented by people on the margins: seedy hotels, cramped apartments where he enjoys control, as well as classy bars and upscale city penthouses where he appears powerless. The gaze delivers a sobering account of McCormick's migratory trajectory, as we witness in extremely close detail his encounter with an AIDS-afflicted sex client and his rape by a sadistic marine. Lackey, meanwhile, remains in Kansas alongside "the miraculous and the ordinary;" yet everyday places like barns and roads take on a threatening, alien aspect of Otherness, as the science fiction iconography serve as manifestations of his damaged subconscious. The gaze likewise sutures us to his justifiably paranoid perspective, denaturalizing the film's rural idyll up close so that it loses status as a signifier of male homosexuality to become an anti-idyll of trauma. Together, the interaction between gaze and setting uphold a rural fantasy that is at once concerned with mystery and the unknown but also deeply committed to verisimilitude and addressing the hard facts of sexual suffering in the Heartland.

Patty Jenkin's *Monster* (2003) manipulates a disjunction between a sympathetic cinematic gaze and the anti-heroine's focalization as a victimized prostitute turned serial killer to depict a lesbian rural imaginary that is corrupted by patriarchal power and tragic naïveté. As in *Mysterious Skin*, the magical symbolism displayed in the visuals and the voice-over narration (delivered by Aileen Wuornos) acts as a cover for sexual trauma. In the opening montage, for instance, we see glimpses of Aileen's childhood and adolescence, depicted in the grainy visual style of home movie footage, suggesting a state of innocence forever lost. Wuornos, as narrator, describes her youthful dream to become beautiful and rich like her role model, Marilyn Monroe, and calls herself a romantic as her fairy-tale tone suddenly shifts to a sense of ironic detachment with the appearance of teenage Wuornos stripping for the enjoyment of a group of boys. This theme of contaminated fantasy extends to other moments in the film, such as when Wuornos' rape by a john shatters the prospect of continuing prostitution, causing her to seek out a more respectable line of work without any success, or when Selby realizes that her new life with Wuornos is not going to be a leisurely vacation but a struggle for survival with barely any money and no job. These disjunctions between attaining the good life and fighting to eke out a meager existence in a harsh rural milieu serve to reinforce a conception of rural space that retains fantasy

as a crucial imaginative force for non-urban lesbian subjects but also maintains an aesthetic of realism to point out the very unforgiving consequences of sexual violence that threaten to extinguish queer life. That the focalization and persistent identification with Wuornos continues throughout the story without interruption suggests that the film's overall perspective situates a rural fantasy around this specific case in order to enact a critique of the sexist prejudices and socioeconomic conditions that led to a killing spree and ended in the imprisonment of Wuornos, factors that oppress female sex workers and lesbian subjects across America.

As we've seen in *Mysterious Skin* and *Monster*, rural magic realist texts aim for a rather complicated relationship with the unknown and the concrete facts of oppression. Rather than do so to neutralize the connotations of shortsighted pastoralist politics, or to launch a compulsory rural-to-urban migration that would secure the centrality of urban imaginaries, I believe that this type of critical rusticity sheds light on the aspect of critically rustic imagination in terms of expanding a vision of gay utopia. These films and programs hold on to a dream of future possibility for rural subjects, while giving us unyielding critiques of present-day injustices informing their lives, so that the sexual space of the rural remains a key component to the development of a future world where stigma and power hierarchies do not absorb queerness in all its various incarnations. In the next section, we discuss the question of futurity from the viewpoint of postmodern critical rusticity to see if the products of an urban frame can be retooled toward change.

Rural Retrofuturism

“Utopia would seem to offer the spectacle of one
of those rare phenomena whose concept
is indistinguishable from its reality,
whose ontology coincides with its representation.”
-Fredric Jameson^{xiii}

What is the social value, if any, in cultural stereotypes? Is it possible that, in our current postmodern epoch, stereotypes can be represented in ways that transcend the oft-decried purpose of xenophobic reductionism? If so, is the political utility of such forms always limited to respond to the exigencies of the moment, or can seemingly one-sided images paradoxically bring forth emancipatory possibilities that alleviate present crises yet also help build a future that enlarges the diversity and social prospects of human life?

A quick look into gay and lesbian history reveals a paradox that suggests an answer to my queries above: Despite the sustained hegemony of heteronormative culture, queer subjects have exercised the capacity to not only fashion counterhegemonic forms, but they have also managed to repurpose the aggressive heterosexist functions of even the most adamantly anti-queer objects. Perhaps the most well-known, and effective, anti-heterosexist discourse available to queer culture today is what's known as “camp.” In *Flaming Classics* (2000: 82-3), media scholar Doty defines camp as a discursive practice:

Camp's central interests are taste/style/aesthetics, sexuality, and gender--or, rather, sexuality as related to gender role-playing (via style codes). Camp's mode is excess and exaggeration. Camp's tone is a mixture of irony, affection,

seriousness, playfulness, and angry laughter. Camp's politics can be reactionary, liberal, or radical, depending on the example you are considering and your ideological agenda as a reader. But one thing about camp is certain--at least for me: Camp is queer. There is nothing straight about camp.

Camp thus defined as a tool to be used against compulsory heterosexuality gets at the heart of my opening questions. With the case of camp, then, we see that oppressed populations have the power to reconfigure the meaning of oppressive texts.

Indeed, elsewhere, cultural critics have pointed to the existence of feminist camp, black camp, and many others, all of which offer differently minoritized subjects a critical sensibility with which to resist a dominant reading, appropriate and decontextualize stigmatized images and stories, and produce a subversive element out of texts that try to stereotype and contain Otherness. Furthermore, these diverse sensibilities continue to aid the counterproduction of resistance throughout the years so that repurposed texts add to the future empowerment, rather than “symbolic annihilation,” of subjugated peoples.

Having said that, in this section we revisit the stereotypical countryside mythology of metronormative discourse, but with a twist: we aim to examine the functioning of anti-rural, anti-queer cultural stereotypes when appropriated by critically rustic media texts that display a political interest in maximizing the futurity of a rural gay imaginary. In effect, we will witness a widespread deconstruction of heretofore urban-specific queer practices. For instance, we see how rural camp aesthetics break urbanity away from being a precondition to queer artistic resistance. Finally, this section closes by pondering the long-term potential of postmodern politics that encourages a playful collage ethic amongst isolated depictions of rural and urban sexual spaces. We will consider if a critically rustic stance of incredulity toward grand visions of urban gay imaginaries (i.e., Ghetto and Village spaces) have the potential to productively inflect what can only be termed “gay utopianism,” or the belief in working toward the creation of a society that values sexual variation.

With rural retrofuturism, we enter a sphere of critically rustic media that is enchanted with postmodern representation and actively pursuing its political mindset of perpetual skepticism (minus conservative nostalgia), with tongue planted firmly in cheek. This emphasis on playfulness, irony, reflexivity, and deconstruction reveals as much about the emancipatory potential of emergent anti-normative sexual space in media as it does about the deep-rooted limitations in maintaining metronormative framing. For instance, retrofuturist media texts like *Wild At Heart* (1990) and *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1979) offer a conception of spatiality that emphasizes open-ended-ness, fluidity, and sexual dispersal, as opposed to the proto-Modernist tendencies of mainstream queer cities that assert the centrality of urban sexual space at the same time that they marginalize the non-urban, in turn producing closed sexual spaces through the formal manipulation of gaze, narrative, and mise-en-scene. In addition, whereas metronormative queerness makes claims of universalism and sexual essentialism with an unselfconscious aesthetic of realism, retrofuturist countrysides by contrast acknowledge a high level of self-constructedness in terms of aesthetic composition to undermine faith in anything but a fierce avowal of difference. *Wild At Heart*, for example, obsessively reminds the viewer, using all manner of visual and aural clues, that its filmic portrayal of regional identity cannibalizes dominant cultural myths of rural life, as seen in its humorous remixing of *Wizard of Oz*, Elvis Presley lore, and Southern Gothic. Here and elsewhere we see an attempt to reconfigure these myths with a sense of space that promotes disillusionment with monoglossic pro-urban images,

encouraging the revaluation of such images toward converting them into a heteroglossia that, in offering a discourse composed of many conflicting voices, is able to broaden a field of queer representation without subsuming differences to the violent consolidation of an urban-dominated “we.”

The rural retrofuturist accomplishes a widening of queer representation in part by challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about queer politics that compulsively associate the urban with gay/lesbian subjectivity. Using formal analysis, we see how retrofuturist texts deploy the cinematic form to call attention to this process, particularly in the case of John Waters’ infamous *Pink Flamingos* (1972), in which the attitude of radical incredulity exhibited by the trailer-trash protagonists comes to be highlighted and dramatized by the similarly lowbrow aesthetics of the cinematic apparatus. Though there are many critically rustic components to be analyzed in this particular example, at this point we will study how Waters’ film “queers” dominant forms of queer social practice through a formal re-evaluation of queer camp, which, until only recently, had been widely understood to be the exclusive representational domain of White urban gay men.

Susan Sontag’s seminal “Notes on ‘Camp’” (2001) conducts a spectacularly cheeky and equally brilliant pioneering investigation into the camp sensibility that has been long identified with homosexual subcultural practice in the U.S. To Sontag’s understanding, camp as a concept involves an imagined relation between media consumer and media object whereby the unconscious, naïve “seriousness” of the latter transforms into an object of ridicule or sympathy to be embraced by the former beholder-consumer. This occurs through the beholder, who makes a resistant identification with the object such that there is a negation of its presumed authority and dominant meaning, and a subsequently ironic incorporation of it. As a result, even a media text that is adamantly heteronormative, such as a Douglas Sirk melodrama, comes to be invested with a subversive meaning that is externally overlaid onto it to repurpose its pro-straight ideology into a queer aesthetic. For Sontag, we must continue to acknowledge a relationship between camp and gay urban subjectivity, since the camp aesthete, in demonstrating “Dandyism in the age of mass culture,” reveals derivation from “an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste” (2001: 289-290).

Up to this point, Sontag’s definition of camp has largely resisted critical reappraisal. However, her implicit claims that camp as a practice is neither political nor social, that it originates in and remains the exclusive sensibility of an elite subset of the Anglo-American urban-identified gay subject, have been rightly decried as narrow-minded and ultimately essentialist by a second wave of camp theorists. Indeed, scholars beholden to Sontag’s original work have taken pains to delink the White gay American male from the plainly widespread and globalized constitution of the critical sensibility, which, among other things, has thrived in other contexts as a feminist strategy against patriarchy, or as a non-American queer strategy for subverting the racist tendencies of upper-middle-class Anglo gay populations located throughout major port cities, as seen in the anthropological work of Manalansan which covers the social conventions of diasporic Filipino gay men in the U.S. who “drew a distinction between their style of cross-dressing, which is akin to ‘femme realness,’ and the comedic drag of Caucasian and mainstream gay men” in order to “negotiate between the hegemonic imperative of assimilation and the subaltern option of total defiance” (2000: 191, 200).

Pink Flamingos, likewise, participates in undoing previously metronormative readings of camp, and other gay/lesbian-identified modes of resistance, by using the film form and narrative discourse in tandem to create critically rustic queer subjectivity that manifests queerness as a

“process of spoilage” (Herring), resisting the socio-sexual normalization of metropolitan notions of middle-class respectability, affirmative culture, and self-abstraction. The gaze does so partly by composing an anti-aesthetic of bad taste. For example, we first enter the diegesis through a grainy long shot showing the exterior of a decrepit trailer, which would seem like another threatening (and stereotypical) hillbilly horror locale, if it weren’t surrounded by kitschy lawn ornaments which convert the horror iconography into tokens of a self-aware and ironic subcultural style. After the credits, we then cut to a closeup of a poster showing the “Filthiest Person Alive,” the transvestite Divine, who, we’re told via a cartoonish voice-over narration, “adopts the alias of Babs Johnson” and now resides in the woods with her freakish family. Throughout, the camerawork remains purposely (and perfectly) shoddy, to give the impression of low-budget porno cinematography, and the film’s minimal range of camera techniques consist of amateurish stationary shots, pans, zooms, and the occasional gratuitous closeup. Rather than glamorize or vilify subjects with such composition, the cinematic apparatus wants to self-consciously invert the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of exoticized countrysides in order to provoke critique and distancing from binarized “positive” and “negative” valuations of sexual spaces often represented in the urban-biased media, giving rise to a self-mocking critically rustic position, which is then echoed in the narrative, that can be seen as traces of an emergent anti-urban camp sensibility.

Though many of the varied characters provoke pity and ridicule as opposed to identification, the figure of Divine/Babs Johnson, along with a few members of the Johnson family, do emerge as retrofuturist camp figures, carrying the capacity to encourage sexual disidentification with the metropolitan gay imaginary, in spite of (or, maybe, because of) the film’s reliance on tired hillbilly stereotypes in its construction of the characters. Divine, for example, is the concrete embodiment of the urban drag queen figure – over-the-top and highly visible in terms of presenting her nonconformist gender identification. But at the same time, she remains an uncompromising “hick-chick,” with her penchant for white trash fashion, excessive profanity, and a love of filth counteracting the metro-norms of gay cosmopolitanism and middle-class taste. By fusing supposedly contrasting traits of rural and urban identity into one sexual being, she thus becomes the paragon of retrofuturist critical rusticity insofar as her own identitarian hybridity suggests the possibility of overcoming the seemingly unbridgeable divide in the cultural rural/urban opposition. In addition, the film’s narrative discourse promotes such skepticism to rural/urban opposites by situating Divine as the rural-identified focalization of its manifestic ideological perspective: a refusal to the classist and exclusionary values of the “seething metropolis,” as embodied by her status-obsessed urban/suburban rivals Raymond and Connie Marble, and the promotion of an alternative ethic of excess, play, and (literally) eating shit, a boundary-crossing ideal which reconfigures forms of urban power, particularly regional shame, into shame at not being so similarly hybridized.

Retrofuturism often summons and remixes metronormative gaze strategies to further synchronize a fusion of rural and urban representations via critically rustic narrative and gaze counter-tactics. Once again drawing on existing Otherized rural depictions, *Pink Flamingos* produces Cotton Johnson, a hyper-feminine Southern belle, and her brother, Crackers Johnson, a momma’s boy redneck who lives in a chicken coop next to Divine’s trailer and recalls every rural horror archetype in the book. The film calls attention to and then deconstructs these fairly commonplace metro-models of rural heterosexuality by radically recontextualizing them in a queer domesticity situated in the backwaters of Phoenix, Maryland. In particular, the incestuous “white trash erotics” which occur between Cotton and Crackers reveals the ways in which

retrofuturist texts can appropriate patterns of urbanized voyeuristic gazing to impair their tendency toward privileging forms of social hegemony. As such, when Crackers voluntarily engages in bestiality with a chicken for the erotic spetatorial enjoyment of Cotton, *Pink Flamingos* thus constructs a relation of male objection and female voyeurism that not only reverses Mulvey's male-serving formulation of the gaze, but also leads to the production of feminist agency which, unlike the metro-gaze, reflects an active and mutually empowering relationship between desire, gazer, and gazed-at. Hence, retrofuturism revalues fetishism toward a non-hierarchical productive end, as the usage of objectification often serves to highlight patterns of power in depictions of sexual space to trigger a change in representation (or recognition) that would address such inequality.

Frequently, the rural retrofuturist emphasis on constructedness, on the arbitrary and unstable division between sexual spaces in the media, correlates with the presentation of a self-consciously ironic and deliberately constructed rural idyll that revitalizes the stereotypical pastoral with postmodern pastiche ethic, in an effort toward legitimizing formerly marginalized subjectivities, particularly women, lesbians, and queers of color. *Wild At Heart* and *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) thus stand as two queer media texts that subversively re-inhabit the stereotypical masculine pastoral in order to explode its anti-feminist politics with the construction of masculine caricatures and portrayals of powerful "hick-chicks." Though *Wild At Heart* focalizes the narrative around Sailor Ripley and his escapades through a conventionally heterosexed and exoticized countryside, the film actively denies identification with its male protagonist insofar as he's characterized as a satirical composite of over-sensationalized media masculinities: part Elvis persona, part John Wayne cowboy, and one-hundred-percent stereotypical southern "rugged" manhood, Sailor enacts the spectacularization of rural male-ness rather than its oft-repeated male-serving glorification. Meanwhile, the murderous strippers in Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat!* reclaim the female component that is often submerged in straight and gay masculinized idylls with a vengeance, offering deviant images of hyper-sexualized female masculinity that trigger a pro-feminist "return of the repressed" toward the elimination of rural-based structures of male domination.

The reappraisal of hegemonic sexual spaces not only queers and camps an extensive cultural mythology of gay and straight anti-ruralism for the purposes of extending representational possibilities of queerness in the future; in fact, this paradoxically forward-backward gesture also orients the rural retrofuturistic subset of critical rusticity to the question of queer utopia. In other words, this and other similarly media-based trends of dissent, which continue to contradict ahistorical and exclusionary models of sexual space offered by a dominant gay imaginary in this way, do so to seek out a more inclusive model of queer society. Indeed, we see as much through the chronic questioning and formal obliteration of oppositional rural/urban sexualities or in the ironized notions of taste and respectability that pervade the rural retrofuturist text. Ultimately, this typology uses the postmodern practices of skepticism and aesthetic play to advance a rather peculiar, but undeniably progressive, political goal: the recuperation of formerly segregationist sexual spaces with reparative representations that promote socio-sexual differentiation by recovering rather than exterminating problematic images.

Conclusion

Thus far I have endeavored to discuss the various forms of media images of queerness and their social implications in the post-post-Stonewall era of late twentieth century America. Throughout my discussion, I have held to a number of arguments that I introduced in the beginning and later expanded. Since this is the so-called “ending” of my paper, some further explanation of the implications of these arguments may help readers contemplate the overall significance of this media studies project, as well as gain some guidance in conducting further studies. That said, I want to resist creating a sense of closure that would imply my work in this area is finished; on the contrary, my personal investment in rural/urban studies and Queer Media Studies has expanded considerably, and revealed to me the tremendous extent to which scholars need to theorize space and sex together. The following notes about my theoretical claims underline both of these realizations and also, I hope, work to remind people about the seriousness of continuing research on media representations with a self-reflexive, space-conscious mindset.

The first thing I want to address is my earlier analysis of what I have termed the “Gay Ghetto” and “Gay Village” models of queer space. From the outset, I critique these dominant formations for, among other reasons, their conceptual limitations and their amplification of an already crippling disjuncture between media conceptions of sexuality and sexual space, versus the social realities of sexuality as considered in different rural/urban spatial contexts. Yet, in doing so, I do not wish to imply that these fabrications should be purged completely, or that they yield no productive function for gay and lesbian subjects (let alone for straight audiences), or that queerness itself should be delinked from oversimplified imaginary cities. Such implications run the risk of misreading my analysis as little more than dangerously reactionary commentary, instead of seeing it as the balanced, productive, and legitimate critique I truly believe it is.

While I do level many criticisms at hegemonic representations of queer sexuality, let me say that I remain deeply sensitive to the fraught media history of gays and lesbians. As Benschhoff (1995, 2006) and other media critics observe, images of queerness have largely been one-dimensional, Otherized, and all but repressed by a heterosexist American society. In this respect, then, we must always remember that, on a historical continuum of media representation, gays and lesbians have arguably made significant advances in expanding representational diversity, especially in the sense that “queer” as an identity category has entered national discourse and currently enjoys a dynamic status in the media. However, that fact alone should not preclude us from critically engaging trends in media representations that, on the surface, appear benevolent and progressive, but in reality only further stigmatize already oppressed populations, while at the same time lulling spectators into the comforting illusion that they are trustworthy and valid depictions so that critical intervention is unnecessary or, worse, counterproductive.

The argument I’m foregrounding here, which I draw from the media research conducted by Jhally and Lewis (1992), is simply that audiences should always remain wary of so-called “positive” images. In many ways, my examples of ghetto/fantasy sexual spaces act as a case study of the limitations and long-term consequences of positive images. Yet, while *The L Word*, *Rent*, *Shortbus*, and others continue to garner near-universal praise for being affirmative queer media, the implicit exclusions and acts of epistemic violence embedded in these media texts persist with hardly any notice.

Furthermore, their attendant ideological framework, which I've explained elsewhere to be a multi-faceted, "metronormative" frame, has subsequently been overlooked and hence multiplied itself indiscriminately, causing the naturalization of an urban bias in television and media which only recently has received attention from academic fields. But even so, the implications – representational restrictions and the politics of shame – are, in fact, secondary to what I consider to be a more insidious effect of unchecked metronormative queerness: the strengthening of heteronormative ideology through the promotion of an urban bias and the circulation of a rural-to-urban migration story in the queer mediascape. In particular, the metronormative belief that queerness can only legitimately exist and grow or receive social tolerance in major cities allows heterosexism to flatten and binarize the sexual geography of American society into a matter of "red state" versus "blue state" differences, in which the "gay and lesbian problem," or the threat of queerness, can be controlled by simply relegating queer life to the margins of an urban setting. I insist that metronormativity feeds into and sustains heteronormativity by spatializing a binary opposition of homo/hetero into a sexualized binary of rural/urban wherein the rural stands for heterosexual and the urban homosexual. However, compounding matters further, dominant society still views cities as "straight," a double standard which not only thrusts urban queers out of sight, but also imposes a double invisibility onto rural queers. As the logic goes, rural queerness displaces itself onto the city for authenticity in a social and private sense, because *the Big City is the only essential place for homosexuality*. Compulsory heterosexuality relies on this binaristic segregationism, as well as on cultural formations that actively mystify the fluid distinctions of sexual space. Indeed, without these reinforcements of the notion that binary sex is an either/or phenomenon that has been so for all time, the hegemony of heteronormative discourse would lose all sense of legibility and authority in our world.

Having said that, I now want to highlight my second point about "positive" images of metronormative queerness: namely, that metronormative media, whether empowering for some gays and lesbians or not, works to empower systems of heterosexism, including forms of homophobia and violence. Metronormativity can thus be seen as both a homophilic and a homophobic phenomenon in its sexually essentialist connection of space and sexuality: while it flatters and valorizes the existence of a few, it comes to worsen life for just about everyone else. For this and other reasons, we as critics need to study spatial identities in conjunction with sexual identities. In so doing, we may delve deeper into the internal contradictions of metronormative discourse, and at the same time observe the forms of culture that resist it and gesture toward a theoretical position that is reflexive about space and sexuality. To induce such a "spatial turn" in queer theory would not so much cause a revolution as build on a slow but steadily growing trend.

Within the past decade, for instance, there has been a growing emphasis on cultural geography as a central component in the construction of American sexualities. Scholars such as Howard (1999), Clare (1999), and Bailey (1999) point out in their work that while the continued fixation on heteronormativity in the American academy is legitimate and productive inquiry, it is one that often transpires through an urban filter, which tends to efface valuable concerns of spatial relations that deeply inform the interactions between marginalized sexual groups and give rise to the existence or oppression of them. In this sense, theory itself is at times metronormative.

Indeed, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, an urban bias has increasingly attached itself to academic investigations of gay, lesbian, and queer life. Invisible to some, while deeply felt by others, this bias can be seen most simply in a pervasive, yet almost unconscious preference for the urban as the overriding place for one to conduct an exploration into any and all things queer. Clearly, most critics do not treat the city as a static, unproblematic Utopia. In fact, the vast majority take great pains in weighing both the comforts and injustices facing urban queers, and argue that most American cities are still “sexed” as straight, through zoning laws and practices of law enforcement personnel, in order to naturalize heterosexual power (Hubbard, 2001). All the same, we must realize that sexuality studies is, by and large, urban in spirit and in subject matter, and a gap in knowledge exists where there could be many studies on non-urban queer life. It is important to note, however, that by identifying metronormativity in intellectual output or creative artifacts, I don’t mean to suggest that this trend remains unchanging in every context and time period. Furthermore, I’m sensitive to the plights and struggles of urban lesbians, gays, and queers; with my study I do not want to devalue the lives of people in cities, but rather aim to contribute more diversity and reflexivity to media studies and queer theory.

My last conclusion is that we should continue to affirm the connection between media and our perceptions about the world. After all, metronormativity exercises cultural hegemony in American society today because television and cinema, being two modes of mass cultural transmission, actively serve as outlets for the perpetuation of urban-centric values, perceptions, and spatial imaginaries. And, in large part due to the preponderance of metronormative media and a lack of critical inquiry into this situation, the fiction of the rural/urban divide in American society persists in the collective consciousness as another biological difference in the natural order of things, as a never-ending conflict between “us” versus “them,” and thereby masks how this fictional binary privileges urban power in reality. We as critics must remind ourselves that the rural/urban imaginary is not a simple, obvious fact of difference; to do so would take it out of history, out of the possibility of social change. Rather, we need to understand the current rural/urban schism as a culturally and socially produced system of meaning and power which influences and shapes power and meaning. We must affirm awareness that stories and images, not the facts of materially geographic differences, are what construct a dichotomous relationship as a simple, obvious fact. Our understanding of rural/urban distinctions in culture therefore needs to arise from an understanding of rural/urban not as geographic reality, but as *performatives*: that we perform a nonexistent binary over and over so that is retroactively created. The binary may be nonexistent, yet performativity, and the binaries of class, gender, and sexuality, as manifested in cinema and television, put the rural/urban imaginary into a material being that is extremely difficult to dislodge from everyday lived existence, from the realm of facticity, since these meanings, images, and practices so thoroughly saturate the world and regulate human thought.

To study and, perhaps, alter this situation, we should look back on Stuart Hall’s time-honored “politics of image.” As Hall states, media critics must “interrogate the image,” and ask questions of culture in order to expose the mechanisms that hide processes and effects of representation which function to suggest that conceptually limited stereotypes and compulsory stories of the dominant ideology are the only inhabitable reality for us. By destroying the closed intelligibility and naturalness of dominant sexualized spaces through media criticism, we thus open up new possibilities for what Hall terms the “practices of signification,” so that problematic aspects of culture that dictate our relationship to ourselves and to the world become changed. In particular, critical rusticity is a media-based form of such social critique, denaturalizing the stereotypes of queerness in the gay village/gay ghetto and gesturing towards alternative

possibilities. Critical rusticity allows us to conduct a politics of image that considers space and sexuality as central to the production and maintenance of identity, and should therefore be treated as another site for cultural critics to pursue critiques across the cultural landscape that productively coincide with issues of class, race, and gender also.

In our own research, we need to consider the formal qualities that distinguish different mediums, for each cultural form (literature, movies, music, and so on) develops and circulates ideologies differently, depending on the structural factors and external or internal conditions that constitute it. As I've noted previously, scholars such as Herring and Halberstam have focused on metronormativity as it is created and spread through the language of literature; therefore, in my study, I concentrate on (anti-)metronormative media, to see how spatial imaginaries are mapped out in visual language. I adopt this somewhat medium-conscious approach because I see culture as a varied and uneven realm, and also believe that the most illuminating work in cultural studies acknowledges distinctions between cultural forms. Also, since metronormativity adapts itself to other spheres that signify in differing or incompatible ways, the only legitimate way to claim any knowledge about such a huge discourse is to conduct many studies within specific fields that offer potential insight on the micro-level. These insights may then reveal the operation of a particular facet that is either symptomatic or divergent of a process belonging to the whole.

More research in urban/rural studies can be conducted in other realms of culture. Within political science, for example, one may study the myth of polarized America, and the ways in which the red state/blue state split gets sexualized and gendered through political rhetoric; similarly, research on how tourism promotes rural/urban idylls could provide insight into the commodification of space, but other options abound. By studying metronormative discourse in these and other areas, only then can we begin to separate ourselves from its extensive reach so that we clarify our relationship to sexual space without prejudices. More importantly, beyond simply minimizing our complicity in a system of power, from a humanitarian standpoint we need to pursue further research to diversify and value the range of possible and existent social life. Such pursuits remain crucial if we hope someday to be able to think within a spatial imaginary that does not treat spatial and sexual differences as a basis for power hierarchies but instead as part of the natural "benign variation" that empowers and, indeed, produces humankind.

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Mediography

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Endnotes

ⁱ Bell, D. & G. Valentine (Eds.). (1995). *Mapping desire: geographies of sexualities*. London; New York: Routledge.

² I want to offer some brief remarks on my understanding of rural and urban space. I do this so as to dispel any semantic ambiguity beforehand, and also to clarify one of my critical objectives in this project. Rural/urban spaces do not (always) pertain to biological, empirical, or geographic realities. When I discuss rural or urban, I therefore do not necessarily imply the populations and regions as defined by the data on the U.S. census report. Instead, I insist on a conception of *cultural* spatiality that merges the imagined and the real. The “imagined” used here refers to what Said (1978) once called “imaginative geography.” In other words, my object of study is the “collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about” oneself, one’s sexuality, one’s community, one’s nation, as well as the “Other,” or the unknown. Additionally, the imagined to me is “often the sense in which someone feels himself...based on a very unrigorous idea of what is 'out there,' beyond one's own territory” (54). Yet the imagined always has a basis in, and correspondence with, the “real” (i.e., that which we grasp through our senses in the material realm), and so it includes the memories and artifacts of previous generations and retains the imprint of individuals who have affected us. Admittedly, I do privilege the imagined in this project, as part of what I want to do is draw a link from conceptions of rural and urban worlds from the recent past and see the ways in which they build on, diverge from, or meld into our ideas of the rural/urban split relative to sexuality, identity, and gender formations in the present.

³ Because cinematic cities are not ahistorical, monolithic constructs, they may signify differently according to the spectator. Hence, just as Levy (1991) once dismissively remarked that the “Big City” has long been a symbolic “villain” in the American collective psyche, so Fowler & Helfield maintain that “urban space in the cinema has been endlessly represented and theorized” (2006: 1), as well as considered in largely idealized, uncritical ways. Such outwardly contradictory statements happen, I believe, not because the authors are wrong (quite the contrary), but because the countryside and the city signify multiply, depending on the beholder’s agenda and world perspective, not to mention his or her sexuality, race, gender, or class.

^{iv} Circumstantial evidence suggests that this gulf exists within lived experience as a fundamental divide in queer life in America (Clare, 1999); however, this schism of queerness only assumes a façade of naturalness because such sexual spaces organized by an urban bias achieve a level of credibility and popularity in mainstream queer culture.

⁵ Since the first section cannot sustain a longer analysis of Halberstam’s rural-to-urban migration, I offer here insights from scholars that seem to build on metronormativity and gesture toward other areas of research (American studies, rural cultural studies) in order to further study the phenomenon. In detailing the rise of globalization studies within North America, Grewal and Kaplan (2001) note that American studies and sexuality studies programs have adopted terminology that tend to generate discursive divides which exclude the experiences of people in

suburban, rural, or diasporic contexts. Moving their critique alongside Halberstam's notion of the rural-to-urban migration, Grewal and Kaplan state: "the process of migration to [...] metropolitan locations is figured as the movement from repression to freedom. That is, 'backward,' often rural subjects flee their homes and/or patriarchal families or violent, abusive situations to come to the modern metropolis, where they can express their true nature as sexual identity in a state of freedom" (670). Thus, the rural/urban divide that lies at the heart of metronormativity, which sometimes expresses itself in migration narratives, gains the added valence of tradition versus modernity. Meanwhile, the rural is cast as a space out of time, something permanently stunted or frozen causing degeneration and death, whereas the urban is the symbolic space in which Modernism's "march of progress" continues unabated, keeping up an appearance that is always dynamic.

Correspondingly, Cloke and Little (1997) address representations of rural experience in which the rural is positioned as lesser, inferior, exotic, or "Other," by combining a study of the rural/urban divide with aspects of Orientalist discourse. Mainstream depictions of rural-ness are typically portrayed as Other for an imagined urban or suburban spectator's consumption, even if the "countryside that lies behind the images does not seem to quite match up to rural ideals" (Murdoch & Pratt, 1997). Akin to Said's notion of Western Orientalism (1978), Cloke and Little suggest that this process of Otherization imposes a Sameness onto a heterogeneous group of rural populations and locales, which on the one hand acts as a projection of the fears and desires held by mainstream audiences, and on the other, works to colonize rural life to dominate it.

⁶ As Judith Butler notes in the introductory chapter to *Bodies that Matter* (1993), the delusion of stable binary sexuality always serves to reinforce the dominance of straight culture. The straight subject is "constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (3). This straight/non-straight binary which springs forth categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality (as well as causing its own auto-deconstruction) is then further fortified through metronormativity, which insists on the maintenance of a permanent cultural division between urban and rural that is simultaneously sexualized as essentially gay and straight.

⁷ This tendency to exclude the rural dweller for being "Other" – against which the American mainstream understands its own "self" – often comes into being alongside an axis "structured around centres and margins" (Philips & Watt, 2000), which can either reaffirm existing power relations amongst competing sex-gender systems or create new possibilities for the disruption and reconstitution of them. Alan Sinfield (2000) notes that contemporary gay communities, which occupy the cultural centers in America, tend to view themselves through a largely metropolitan frame, failing to accommodate the differences held among rural homosexuals, while nevertheless claiming to speak on their behalf. Consequently, rural queers are stripped of legitimacy in larger national discourses, doubly displaced by being alienated from straight culture and also by lacking support from mainstream homosexuals. Still, the non-recognition of marginal sexualities, whether in film, television, or real life, is productive in the sense that sexual non-assimilation can serve as the basis for creating alternative communities that don't reproduce similar hierarchies of power.

⁸ “Critical rusticity” is a term borrowed from Herring (2007) in a discussion on the mode of critical thought and cultural production that occupies an oppositional stance in the face of dominant forms of style, class, and sexual norms that converge in an urban imaginary.

^{ix} Foucault, M. & C. Gordon (1980). *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.

^x Though film critics tend to regard documentary as having a closer relationship to objectivity or “truth” than narrative film, in the case of metronormativity we must consider both genres on the same terms, and refrain from privileging one to the other. After all, urban biases circulate and frame many different types of film, no matter the assumptions or limitations of industry or political economy.

^{xi} Fernández-Braso, M., & G. G. Márquez (1969). *Una conversación infinita*, Madrid: Editorial Azua.

^{xii} Simpson, M. (1996). *It's a queer world*. London: Vintage.

^{xiii} Jameson, F. (2004, January-February). The politics of utopia. *New Left Review*, 25, 35-54.