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“You Can Fight Logic...But You Can’t Fight God”: The Duality of Religious Text and Church as
Community for White Lesbians in Appalachian and Rural Places

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Much of the research conducted on lesbians and place focuses on women who live in urban areas or highlights how participants wish to live in urban areas. Knowing that there are lesbians who live in rural and Appalachian areas that do not wish to leave to urban areas, this research examines participants' experiences living in those places. Participants discuss how religion is a socially circulating meaning system in the places they live and it dictates much of social life. I argue that religion has a two-fold meaning for participants: one, it is a religious text that is used as a social control mechanism in the lives of the women and two, it is church as community, in which the participants use church spaces to both make community among themselves as well as be a part of the larger community in their towns. This research adds to the narratives of rural lesbian women and available ways of occupying spaces by breaking down a binary of common cultural ideas about place and sexuality.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The idea that all lesbians yearn to “escape” to urban “meccas” has been the dominant discourse in LGBT popular culture and in the academic literature with regard to place and sexuality (Weston, 1995; Kazyak, 2011). The cultural narrative (Loseke, 2007), or widely circulating story that we all “just know,” about lesbians is that they should not be living in rural spaces and that cities are safer, more accepting, and offer a cultural space for them. This notion is reflected in popular culture as most lesbian movies and television shows, like the iconic television show *The L Word*, or more recently, *Orange is the New Black* and *The Fosters*, are all set in urban spaces. The women in these urban spaces have their own lesbian coffee shops and nightclubs, are accepted by people of the community, and for the most part, live the lives they want (minus being in prison, of course). The cultural narrative about rural spaces however constructed these areas as conservative, backwards, and religious – nothing lesbians want to take part in. Religion plays an integral role in the cultural construction of rural spaces, particularly southern rural spaces (“the Bible Belt”), because it is understood that religion dominates social life in these spaces. This is problematic because there are lesbians all around the United States in many different rural spaces. The question is: what do these lesbian women think about living in rural spaces? The answer is that we do not know because very few people have asked. It does not help that it is particularly difficult to reach participants that fall into these categories. People living in rural areas can often be hard to access as they can be wary of outsiders especially if they are interested in personal information. When it comes to reaching lesbians participants, this can be difficult as many women may not be “out” and methods of recruiting participants online are not always an option, as take-for-granted technologies like high speed internet are not always available in rural areas. Also, sometimes academics, like the

rest of popular culture, know that rural areas, and conversely religious culture, are “bad” so when it comes to talking to lesbians about religion specifically, little research has been on the topic. Being from a rural, specifically a rural Appalachian place, I started to notice that these notions academics claim about these types of spaces and experiences people expressed having were not sociologically congruent.

The narratives of rural and Appalachian lesbians need to be understood to add to the knowledge of what it means to have a lesbian identity within the United States and this research participates in expanding the narratives of lesbian experience. The main focus of this research is to understand how lesbian women experience rural and Appalachian spaces. Specifically, if the cultural narrative about what it means to be a lesbian is tied to a desire to live in urban settings, why do rural and Appalachian lesbians stay in these rural places? What are these experiences like? And, how does the religious culture of these spaces affect these lesbian women? Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews participants addressed these questions, and as one would imagine, everyday life and the processes around these sexual identities are complicated and messy.

These participants explain that their community ties – places, churches, family, friends, and neighbors – are quite important to them and they do not wish to leave these valuable loved ones and resources. However, because religion is such a large part of the local culture of these rural and Appalachian spaces, these women encounter a great deal of resistance to their sexual identities. Religious practices of the community start to have multiple meanings in the lives of these women. Most noticeable is the use of religious text as a social control mechanism. Religious texts, which encompasses people’s beliefs in the messages of the Christian Bible and also how people who believe these messages exercise their beliefs onto these women, became a symbolic code in these spaces and govern much of social life. Because these religious texts are a part of the local culture and the socially-circulating meaning systems, or what everyone just

“knows,” of these spaces these women have a hard time negotiating the social control associated with them. One can see though, that religion is not all bad for these women. As mentioned, it provides community to them, and community is what keeps these women in these rural and Appalachian spaces.

This research will participate in diversifying the narratives of lesbian experience by providing an example of how women want to stay in rural and Appalachian spaces – but it is not without complication. This is equally important however, as social life outside of our academic concepts is quite chaotic and complicated and it is the job of both social actors and sociologists alike to make sense of this.

I proceed by locating this research in the literature on place, specifically Appalachia, and sexuality and religion. Then, after describing the methods and participants of this project, I present the major findings.

Place

Place is important in forming identities in different ways and the ways in which identities are constructed are culturally and regionally specific. There is a cultural narrative, which is widely understood assumptions about certain types of people and how they behave (Loseke, 2007), about what it means to be a lesbian and that narrative usually involves an urban place (Crawley, 2008; Hutson, 2010; Kazyak, 2011; Kazyak, 2012; McCarthy, 2000; Wienke & Hill, 2013; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011). Much of the research conducted on lesbians unwittingly privileges particular demographic groups of urban, white, middle class, and educated women (Hutson, 2010; Kazyak, 2011; Kazyak, 2012; McCarthy, 2000; Wienke & Hill, 2013; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011). Kazyak (2011) references Weston (1995) when she states that “for some, the urban/rural binary is embedded in the very way that they think about being gay insofar as urban space signifies the possibility to be gay or lesbian and find others, while rural space signifies oppression” (563). Gray (2009) adds to this idea by framing rural areas in the United

States as metaphorical “closets” for lesbians. These descriptions of rural places set up a certain identity for lesbians in these spaces; there are only so many stories available to a rural lesbian for identity constructing. These characteristics are important in understanding the experiences that rural and Appalachian lesbians may have that differ from urban cultural narratives of lesbian experience.

Kazyak (2011) and Gray (2009) found that lesbian women are able to display their sexual identities through being a well-known local in the community. Since sexual identity is not as closely tied to gender presentation in rural spaces, being identified as a lesbian often happens through personal interactions (i.e. “coming out”) instead of assumptions based on appearance. Kazyak (2012) discusses how doing gender in the rural Midwest is different from hegemonic views of gender. While female masculinity, women presenting as masculine in appearance and in behavior, “is the most visible gender presentation of lesbian identity in urban context, it does not have the same meaning in rural context, since both straight and lesbian women might enact it” (826). Kazyak (2011) found that this process also helps to foster an environment of acceptance. In her interviews, she found that the stigma often associated with the marginalized lesbian and gay identities was counteracted by knowing people on a personal level. This closeness with others in the community creates a space where people are liked based on being a good person, rather than their sexuality, and helps to demystify lesbian identities. Kazyak (2011) discusses how this personalized experience of coming out leads to acceptance in rural communities that are close-knit. Communal familiarity is significant when exploring how women construct their sexual identities in rural spaces.

Appalachia

There is a growing body of literature about rural lesbians (Gray, 2009; Hutson, 2010; Kazyak, 2011; Kazyak, 2012; McCarthy, 2000; Wienke & Hill, 2013; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011) but there is almost nothing on lesbians in Appalachian regions, which offers a distinct

combination of rural and specific cultural experiences. Appalachia is a “205,000 square mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi” (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2015). While Appalachia shares many similarities with other rural places there are features that make it unique.

First, the region is split into different sections – north, north central, central, south central, and southern (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2015). Central Appalachia is where the highest concentrations of coal lie in the United States and where some of the most dangerous coal mining happens. Mountain top removal - a type of surface coal mining in which the tops of mountains are removed in order to expose the coal seams that lie in the mountain and from which the remaining debris is disposed of in adjacent valleys (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2014) - is destroying vast chunks of mountains quickly, and taking people’s land and jobs with it (Appalachian Voices, 2014). This has contributed to the poor economic state of many counties in the region. Certainly, not all of the region is in poverty, and some areas flourish economically, but, overall, the region as a whole does not do well. Overall “two-thirds of Appalachian counties have unemployment rates higher than the national average” and “per capita market income is twenty five percent lower than the nation...and in central Appalachia it is fifty seven percent lower” (Commission, 2011). This creates a unique setting for social conditions such as educational attainment, job opportunities, and family dynamics. While this economic situation generates much research on mental health, healthcare, and poverty - which are certainly important - there is not much research on lived experiences in the region, especially among lesbians, and what these socio-economic situations could mean for them.

There is a cultural narrative about rural living and this narrative includes negative stereotypes about Appalachia and the people living there. Given the unique culture and economic situation of Appalachia this is not surprising. Popular culture movies such as *Deliverance* depict rural and Appalachian people as backward banjo players who are terrifying

to encounter in their mountains because they prey on outsiders. Elam (2002), referencing Weller (1965), found that “the most common assessment of Appalachia by outsiders is of a poor, isolated, and shoeless mountain people with too many children, little or no formal education, and barely making a hardscrabble living in an inhospitable environment” (p. 11). The mountainous topography of the region also contributes to the stereotype of the “hillbilly.” Outsiders often view mountains as isolating and since people are often spread out in rural spaces, and there is not a lot of development, these spaces and people occupying them are seen as “scary.” There are some positive stereotypes about Appalachia though. However, to understand these stereotypes, it is first necessary to historically situate the economic situation of Appalachia.

Next, understanding the economic history of the area is significant to lived experience in the region. As America began to modernize, Appalachia was seen almost as a nostalgic region, as it did not modernize as fast as the rest of America did. It also did not advance as swiftly economically and while there have been improvements, there are still areas that are very poor (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2015). Nevertheless, with its agrarian ties and manual labor in the mines, Appalachia became a sight of admiration (Shapiro, 1978). Narratives of work and owning land are such an integral part of American culture and values that it is no surprise that Appalachians are, at times, glorified. The nature (literally) of living in Appalachia allows for this culture to use the land to produce a living and provide food even without a wage-earning job, they are doing some sort of work. Central to the wage-earning labor force in Appalachia is coal. Coal is a valuable and masculinized commodity in America. With Appalachia having some of the highest coal reserves in the United States, it is no wonder the wage-earning jobs there are valued (Harvey, 1986). Because work is so important to American culture and American perceives Appalachians as hard working, the positive stereotypes make sense.

This effect is evident in the federal government's attempt at ameliorating the economic decline of Appalachia via the formation of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in the 1960s, purportedly to "address the persistent poverty and growing economic despair of the Appalachian Region" (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2015). A 1964 report by the ARC given to the then-United States President Lyndon B. Johnson, offered a plan of action to help the region by creating legislation that would put the plan into action. This was the "Economic Opportunity Act" legislation for Appalachia. Legislative attention to Appalachians purported to offer economic opportunity because they are real (hard working) Americans who are just down on their luck and could adopt American values if they had some help. Ultimately, the economic plan did not advance the region economically, though it did reinforce a hesitation of "outsiders" among Appalachians because the Act failed in its goal and was patronizing toward local culture. This historic moment is worthy of highlighting because there is a lack of research done in this region. Appalachians' hesitation toward "outsiders" certainly plays a role in that. Therefore, I find it important that people who are researchers and "insiders" of Appalachia do research in the area. It is a way to not only expand the knowledge of the region for others and ourselves, but to give back to the region.

Importantly, the limited number of people of minority racial and ethnic identities in Appalachia (Pollard, 2004) makes it a site of working-class, whiteness. The experiences of people in Appalachia often are not characterized by class privilege but when it comes to racial identities, "all whites have access to the symbolic capital of whiteness" (Lewis, 2004; 628), and the experience of lesbians here will certainly encompass that.

These concepts are important in understanding the lived experience in the region. The participants living in this region are situated in a historical moment and in order to understand the impact this could have on their experience as lesbians taking up place as a research topic requires first understanding the historical, cultural, and economic landscape of that place.

Sexuality and Religion

Historically in the United States, lesbians and gay men were well hidden from mainstream society until about the mid-1950s (Fetner, 2008). During this time, the federal government and American culture began to view lesbians and gay men as “perverts who posed a communist threat” (Fetner 2008:2). They discriminated against people in this category in social spaces, particularly in work environments, firing anyone thought to be lesbian or gay (Fetner 2008; D’Emilio, 1983). However, Christian religious groups and lesbian and gay activists did not cross paths until about the late 1970s (Fetner, 2008). Once they did, Christian religious groups condemned lesbians and gay men, adding to the rhetoric that they were perverts and also emphasizing that they were pedophiles (Fetner, 2008). Because Christian religious groups had the advantage of being accepted in dominant American culture, Christian social movements and rhetoric to discriminate against and belittle lesbians and gay men was received well in the larger culture (Fetner, 2008). The idea that lesbians and gay men were deviant and not worthy of acceptance in American society became the cultural narrative that was accepted by many (Loseke & Cavendish, 2001).

However, religious identities and sexual identities can be made congruent. Loseke and Cavendish (2001) detail how a group of gay men and lesbians who were devout Catholics were able to maintain both their religious identities and sexual identities. While many people who identify with a sexuality that is not accepted in the dominant culture leave religion behind for lack of understanding and acceptance, these members believed that their religious identity was equally a part of who they were and as important as their sexual identity. They were able to create a new narrative and new organizations around sexuality and religion that enabled them to be deemed worthy of acceptance in this religious space (Loseke & Cavendish, 2001). Similarly, in 1968, the Metropolitan Community Church was founded. This church, which is international and continues to grow, brings together Christian LGBT people so they can practice their religion

openly and safely. Metropolitan Community Church identifies as: “a global movement of spiritually and sexually diverse people who are fully awake to God’s enduring love. Following the example of Jesus and empowered by the Spirit, we seek to build leading-edge church communities that demand, proclaim, and do justice in the world” (Ministries, 2016). The popularity of this church reveals the desire and need lesbians and others have for this type of community space. It is interesting to note that many of my participants had, at some point in the past few years, attended an MCC church.

Notably, most of the women in my research do not identify as deeply-ideologically religious nor do they actively participate in religiosity as the lesbian and gay men did in Loseke and Cavendish’s research. Unlike Loseke and Cavendish’s participants, my participants do not claim a religious narrative that downplays their “deviant” sexual minority status but they also cannot adopt a narrative that completely reject religious notions. Rural and Appalachian spaces are particular spaces where churches play a huge role in the daily lives of people living there as well as in the overall culture of these spaces (Edwards & Asbury, 2006), and this creates unique situations for lesbians. Even if my participants were not actively participating in Christian religiosity, or claiming narratives of that religion, local culture and community practices around churches are embedded in the socially circulating meaning system of the space and the women in my research have to negotiate with those ideals. Clearly, Appalachia as a particular place plays a big role in the experiences of these lesbian women.

Appalachian and rural spaces are unique sites of study resulting from the local culture, where religiosity is deeply embedded in the everyday life. The women in my research are living in rural spaces, which are not the spaces that match the dominant cultural narrative (urban spaces) for lesbians, and navigating this religious culture. Because very little work is done on rural lesbians, particularly in Appalachian spaces, the purpose of this research is to understand how lesbian women experience rural and Appalachian spaces. If the cultural narrative about

what it means to be a lesbian is tied to a desire to live in urban settings, why do rural and Appalachian lesbians stay? What do these experiences look like since they are few and far between in the literature? And how does the religious culture of these spaces affect the experiences of these women?

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

My data are from 14 in-depth interviews, all conducted in person. I asked each participant the following: Tell me a little bit about yourself. What's it like living here? What do you think life would be like if you were straight? What do you think it would be like to live somewhere that is more like a big city? I allowed the interviews to stray from these questions, when needed, knowing that the experiences of my participants may be outside of anything I had considered, which allowed them talk about what was important to them (Charmaz, 2002). I did the interviews in various locations that the participants chose such as coffee shops, restaurants, parks, and their homes. It is also important to note that of the 14 people interviewed, ten participated as couples. I completely transcribed all interviews. During the transcription process I gave all participants pseudonyms and they are used throughout the data presented here. Once all transcriptions were completed I coded the data for emergent themes.

Sample/Participants

I obtained the sample through snowballing. While this technique has its problems, it is the best method to reach marginalized groups (Weiss, 1994). To reach participants I distributed the call for this project on a personal social media account (Facebook). I also sent the call to multiple friends in my lesbian community in Southwest Virginia. I did not use any formal institutions to find respondents.

The sample was 14 women ranging in ages from 25 to 67. All the women identified as white. The education levels of these women were varied. Some women had Master's degrees, while others did not complete high school. Overall, half of the women had at least a Bachelor's degree. The occupations of these women also varied and included: banking, telecommunication,

graduate study, customer service, retired, research positions, public service, and healthcare.

The socio-economic status in which these women identified with also varied from working class to middle class. The women lived in various areas in the Appalachian region across Southwest Virginia and Northcentral North Carolina. Participants had to be self-identified as lesbian to participate. To be clear, this does not mean the participants had to be “out” to anyone in particular, only “out” to themselves and to me as the researcher.

Positionality

The environmental, economic, and cultural exploitation that occurred and continues to occur in the region has an impact on the abilities of researchers to enter the area. Many outsiders are met with hesitation from locals for fear of this exploitation. Because I am an insider who grew up in this region, the opportunity to do research was available to me, but not without challenge. I had to “prove” my connections to the region, and lesbian sexuality, on more than one occasion. I identify as a white lesbian who grew up and spent much of my life in rural Appalachian towns, and these identities influence the interactions that I had with my participants. It was important to me to use the “language” that these women used. It was also important to me that my participants be involved in the research process, for without them, I would not have the data. I have kept contact phone numbers, emails, and social media contacts in order to stay in touch with my participants. I encouraged them to contact me if they had any questions about the research or wanted to share anything with me after the interview process. I have also promised to provide my participants with their own interview transcripts if they would like them as well as copies of the final research project.

Analytical Framework

Because I used a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2002), I was led to exploring concepts I had not yet thought about prior to the interviews. The data led me to ask more broadly if the cultural narrative about what it means to be a lesbian is tied to a desire to live in

urban settings why do rural and Appalachian lesbians stay in their spaces. What do these experiences look like since they are scarcely described in the literature? And how does the religious culture of these spaces affect these lesbian women? For the purposes of this research, I will use the concepts of symbolic codes, socially circulating meaning systems, cultural narratives, and personal narratives as I examine how these lesbian women experience rural and Appalachian spaces and why they stay in these spaces.

Symbolic codes are systems of ideas that can become social and cultural structures. They are broad, shared ideas that people within the same culture can understand such as “family values, love, romance, aging as decline, sympathy, violence, and victim (Loseke, 2007: 666).” In this research I explore the symbolic code of religion. Similar to stereotypes, cultural narratives or socially circulating meaning systems, help people break down and understand the complications of social life. They often portray certain people as certain types of characters, but not pinpointing any one person in particular – i.e. lesbians. In this research, I analyze the socially circulating meaning systems, in conjunction with the symbolic code of religion, to understand how the “message” of religion dispersed throughout the culture of a place. At the most intimate level of social life there are personal narratives. People like having a sense of identity and these types of narratives help people to understand their lives (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Loseke, 2007). Personal narratives about identity have to have a cultural narrative reference point as “people *must* use socially circulating stories as a members’ resource in crafting their own narratives of personal identity” (Loseke, 2007: 673). This is part of the reason why producing personal narratives about identity are so messy. Society is diverse but has few cultural narratives about identity available. People have to piece together parts of cultural narratives that work in their lives and cut out other pieces that do not fit to have a narrative they feel is representative of their self.

It is not just cultural narratives that people pull from to make sense of their personal identities. Holstein and Gubrium talk about local culture and its importance in identity narratives. Local culture “refers to the locally shared meanings and interpretive vocabularies that participants in relatively circumscribed communities or settings use to construct the content and shape of their lives” (1995:50). Local culture certainly plays a role in the cultural and personal narratives that lesbian women in rural and Appalachian areas can call upon, thus why it is so important to consider place when examining these experiences. By using these tools to examine place, I am able to understand why rural and Appalachian lesbians stay in their spaces when the cultural narrative about what it means to be a lesbian is tied to a desire to live in urban settings and what do these experiences look like.

A strength of using parts of narrative as a method is that it allows for multiple “truths” therefore regarding each participant’s story as real and true. This is possible because “narrative is underwritten by the epistemological conviction that there is no single, objectively apprehended truth. Conversely, the *epistemological* claim that there are multiple truths is based on the recognition that knowledge is socially and politically produced” (Ewick & Silbey, 1995: 199). I highlight this because my goal is not to find “the singular experience that defines life as a lesbian in rural places”, because there is not one, but to understand the complexities of this experience and the multifaceted ways in which different people piece together personal identities. This means as the researcher, I interpret and piece together these narratives to build an understanding of these experiences (Ewick & Silbey, 1995). And just as there is no single true narrative there is also no single correct interpretation of these narratives. I have used suggested analytical methods (Loseke, 2011) in my interpretation process but I am not without my own views of the world and biases in this topic.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

This project has led me to examine the cultural narrative about what it means to be a lesbian and that being tied to a desire to live in urban settings, thus questioning: why do rural and Appalachian lesbians stay in rural places when the cultural narrative predicts they would want to live in urban spaces? And what do these experiences look like since they are scarcely described in the literature? And how does the religious culture of these spaces affect the experiences of these women? In analyzing the data religion becomes an important factor and it has various meanings in the data. Overall, religion is a symbolic code, for it can generate the rules surrounding social life. This symbolic code is so important in these spaces that religion becomes a part of the socially circulating meaning system. This makes it interesting for these women to experience their sexuality because the personal narratives that construct their lesbian identity are latent with a socially circulating meaning system that is not necessarily congruent with their lesbian identity. However, the culture of these spaces also fosters a close sense of community for these women that they highly value. Religion is an oppressive aspect in the lives of these women and feminist scholars tend to focus only on how negativity of this oppression (Winkelmann, 2004). While that oppression is not to be taken lightly, this approach leaves out the experiences that are positive from religion and the community it provides. Simply put, negotiating everyday life is complex and these women describe that fully in their interviews. The following will break down how religion is used in this data and how these women make sense of their everyday lives in these rural and Appalachian spaces.

Throughout these findings, I explore how religious text as a social control mechanism and church as community space shape the experiences of these rural and Appalachian women. These interviews reveal just how complex and multidimensional the experience of living in these

rural and Appalachian areas are for these lesbian women. Participants know the socially circulating meaning system of being a lesbian – to leave any rural spaces and go to the “city” in order to be oneself. However, that is not necessarily what these woman want. Although religion is an oppressive tool in their lives, it also provides the community that is so important to them, that keeps them in these places.

Religion is a word that encompasses a wide variety of ideas and concepts in both academic literature and in everyday life. For the purposes of this project, it is important to clearly define what is meant by religion because its use is twofold in the data. The first definition of religion is religious text as a social control mechanism. This includes in any ways in which the norms, values, and “messages” from the Christian Bible are used. Participants often use language that is centered around the text of the Christian Bible and the messages they have received from that text and this text ultimately becomes a social control mechanism in their lives. It became a symbolic code (Loseke, 2007) for the local socially circulating meaning system of how one is “supposed to be” in these places. Participants described this “proper way of being” that is closely aligned with cultural ideas of traditional Christian households and of expectations to follow the ideals of the Bible. At times, families use this social control mechanism to enforce the message that being a lesbian is not acceptable. Sometimes, even the participants use the message against themselves. Because the symbolic code of religion is so deeply engrained in the culture of the area, the norms and values of this religion govern social life.

The second way in which religion is defined in the data is that of church as community space. A characteristic of rural and Appalachian spaces is that a lot of community building, family gathering, and friendship making revolves around religion, whether it is going to church, participating in Bible studies, or gathering with people that participate in these types of events. When there are not many things to do or social activities to gather around, religion becomes the organizing factor of social life. Therefore, it is understandable why these women, although not

particularly religious, involve themselves and wish to be accepted in church – it is code for community and they want to be accepted into their community.

The following is a quote from Allison where she explained her feelings about place and sexuality. She really set the stage for the duality of her experience, and the experiences of many of these participants. She experiences similar emotional struggles, but her experiences raise safety concerns:

You know, as far as the place and sexuality and comfort and all these things, I've thought about this stuff a lot over the years, and Maura and I both really love the mountains, we love being in a small town, not being a part of the hustle bustle of the city, and but I think for me there is an element of me that feels sad because I feel like I could never move back to my hometown. And we love that small town feel, and you know, I just it brings back a lot of PTSD for me and it's like I just don't, I feel bad because I do have that attachment to place but I feel like I can't live there. We would never be accepted in the community as a whole and that you know, I think we may be subject to hate crimes just because it's, we live outwardly usually.

This is an important point to include in this data because all the other women I interviewed stayed more or less in their rural and Appalachian towns. Some women moved closer to the nearest city, not exactly staying in their hometowns, but still in the area. It is a real possibility that it is not always the safest choice. For example, Allison shared that her tires had been slashed at once point in her life and verbal threats had been made towards her because of her sexuality in her hometown. Even when the positives of community and attachment to place are present, the influence of the religious text and the consequences of the culture around it can be too great to stay in Allison's case. This is a good example of how complicated and messy life in these places can be and that emotional struggle that comes with these experiences. This ambiguity of wanting to be in these Appalachian and rural places with their communities, while not wanting to deal with the religiosity of it all is presented throughout these findings.

Cultural Organization of Social Life

First, I explore the overall cultural feel of this area. The following data demonstrate how the participants often think about and organize their social life around the religious text and church as community of the cultural they occupy in conjunction with their sexuality. As Kazyak (2011) has highlighted, “knowing” of someone typically integrates that person into the community. These are instances where people in the community are inclusive of these women because they have gotten to know them. These women have a desire for not only having community with the people around them, but for a rural space that exists in which they can have community in general. Take for example Maura’s neighbor:

Um, and I had a like a really like, he was like a pretty crazy dude. He was the only guy that lived near me. He was old. But, um, you know he was pretty like hardcore republican, right winged, very religious, and he never, he understood that we were lesbians, you know but like he never, he always brought us like, he would go dumpster diving for coupons and he brought us, you know kind of like how your grandpa would bring you like milk and groceries. He always did that kind of stuff and like, that wasn’t, I know that wasn’t in his nature, in his like political post to be that way but I was his neighbor and he knew me as his neighbor, and I think that makes a big difference.

Maura does not expect her neighbor to be accepting or extend the gestures that people of the community normally would to each other since she is a lesbian and her neighbor knows that. Her neighbor is older, very religious, and his political stance does not typically align with accepting sexual minorities, however, she says that because he took the time to get to know her, he did accept her as a part of the community.

Erin has even more of a positive experience with her work after the company has gotten to know her over the years:

Like she said about her work, they're wonderful. And like my work is wonderful. The owner of the company asked about her all the time. My boss asks about her all the time, makes sure everything is going ok, you know, they gave us money for when we went to Hawaii, to have our dinner after we got married. Like they gave us so much money, and we got to have dinner on them for our wedding, and just things like that, and everybody at work is supportive towards me. There's a few rednecks in the company, guys, but they don't say anything verbally and if they would, I wouldn't be scared to say anything to my boss.

Erin's workplace not only asks about her wife, acknowledging and accepting her sexual identity, but also took part in funding her wedding. Erin was certainly accepted into her community and the community played an important role in her marriage (as it would if she were not a lesbian). The experiences of Maura and Erin underline a broader insight into how community serves as a positive for participants in their daily social lives and why they have a desire for this community - the people of the community offer support and care and these women want to be apart.

Religious Text as Social Control

Religion operates as a symbolic code for the local culture socially circulating meaning system of these spaces and this narrative explains how these women should be and act. This "proper" way of being is framed by Christian beliefs and these beliefs govern everyday social life. The ways in which religion operates as a social control mechanism, through religious texts, is pointed out many participants. One participant, Maura, said:

But it's [being accepting of lesbians] all very religiously based I think, especially in Appalachia where it's, religion is really very, very important. I think that's where, predominantly like one of the barriers to being accepting of gay people is religion, you know where it's not congruent, and that's your moral soul on the line, so if that's what you've been indoctrinated and conditioned to believe you know, you can't fight god. You can fight logic, you can meet new people, but you can't really fight god. And what you think is God's word.

Maura's point is important because lesbian identities are not accepted in these religious spaces, nor included in the local socially circulating meaning system, therefore these religious texts serve to disenfranchise these women when they bring up or engage in their sexual identities.

This has serious implications for how these women talk about their understandings of their sexuality. One effect they experience is a desire for normativity. These women have been socialized into what is "normal" and at a certain point in their lives they deviate from that. Allison talks about her desire for normativity in her interview and says how deeply she wished she could be "normal:"

Now that I look back I think I've had chronic depression my entire life and I was always scared of...you know, burning in hell and displeasing my family and uh...I remember praying to god even...you know probably eight or nine years old that you know, god, I think I'm gay, and please make me not gay, you know, please make me normal and take these feelings away.

Later in her interview she said that it's only been recently in her life that she has been able to feel at peace with herself and her lesbian identity. Religion is code for both social control and community in this narrative. The religious message of "burning in hell" is a social control tactic used to scare anyone not adhering to the norms of Allison's hometown, and it is clear that the tactic is working because Allison recognizes that she is "not normal" and needs to change. There is also an element of community in this narrative. Allison's family would be upset with her for being a lesbian and she fears the loss of those relationships. Allison's story shows the power of how embedded socially circulating meaning systems can be that they deeply affect one's understanding of self and the desire for normativity.

There were multiple stories where women explained how hard it was to accept themselves in their lesbian identity because of the social control (through religious text) that was exercised against them. A few participants explain the effects of religious text in their lives through their families. The following participants come from families in which they take the

Bible (religious text) very literally and strongly believe in its message. One participant, Amy, explained to me that she comes from a family that is extremely religious. They are strict followers of Southern Baptist beliefs and this results in strong beliefs about sexuality and how “wrong” it is. Amy tells of similar struggles:

A friend and I ended up kissing and I locked myself in my room for two days. Because I thought I was totally fucked. Yeah...so, I didn't come out, I didn't eat, I didn't talk to anybody, I was so embarrassed, so upset, because I, I, I just thought I was the worst person in the world. I mean, I just thought that I was god awful. I thought that I was crazy, I thought that I was fucked up, and I thought that I was going to go to hell. I was ready to drop out, I started looking at other colleges to move.

Again, the social control of religious text plays a role in how Amy feels. “Going to of hell” is a fear in this story along with the cultural understanding that there is “something wrong” with a person if they are a lesbian. Amy said later in her interview that she still struggles with her identity and this shows a desire for normativity that laces these women's narratives. For a kiss to make one feel they should switch colleges is a serious consequence of these deeply engrained cultural ideas of religious text that her family believes in and influenced her with.

Similarly, Jackie shared in the experience of dealing with family. She explains, after her parents found a letter from a woman in her room and told her she could not be gay, that she is really conflicted about trying to come out to them again:

My cousin is a lesbian and she's been with her now, wife, for a long time, and my family disowned her. Like they don't talk to her, they don't invite her to holidays, nothing. So I knew that would be part of it, so, I didn't tell them, they found out. I had this conviction inside of me that I was doing something wrong, that's the way I was raised, what I was taught. I love my family to death, I can't imagine losing them, and I would anticipate that happening, you know. They pretty much gave me an ultimatum, one they used the word disappointed, which I hate. But they basically gave me an ultimatum, they were like, you know, you can live that lifestyle, but we're not going to be there to support you.

Jackie knows the consequences of a lesbian identity in her family – no longer being accepted and a part of her family. The socially circulating meaning systems that many family members adopt into their personal narrative is that they cannot have a child who is a lesbian, that it is morally wrong. The control that the religious texts have in dictating feelings about sexuality is clearly very resilient. This is difficult for Jackie because her family is very important to her and she has a desire for normativity that leads her to want her sexuality to be accepted by her family.

Avery, like Jackie, is still struggling with family acceptance of her identity, but she is less ambivalent about the situation after her family treated her so poorly:

She was like, are you gay?! Are you with her?! And I'm like no, I'm not! And like a week later, I invited that girl over just to hang out, and I think my parents set me up, and she saw us kiss because she was standing outside peeking in through the blinds. And like two minutes later, my mom yells from upstairs, telling that girl she has to go, and tells me to come upstairs. And I get to the top of the stairs and my mom just turns around and whips me across the face and tells me to go shower...and she, let's see, how did she say it, so I could shower the dyke off of me.

Her narrative is one of the more extreme situations that a participant experienced. It is a painful reality for Avery that her mother believes so strongly in a religious text that this type of abusive behavior happens. While she still keeps in contact with her mother and family, she has given up on sharing her life with them because of this experience.

Some of these narratives express how complicated situations can be for these women. Sometimes participants experienced both negative reactions from the community as well as positive, and sometimes all the while dealing with religious texts and the effects of that. Erin and Elizabeth describe a similar situation, but with a church. Their way of finding and building community is through going to church but it was not what they had hoped for:

We've gone to 10, 15 churches, and we haven't found one that, and it's not that people don't make you feel comfortable, but then they sit up there and preach and they say, well gay people are going to go to hell. So then we look at each other and we're like well, might as well not come back here, because you know, why do we want to sit here with them when they think we're going to hell? Another church welcomed us, but you couldn't join their church if you were gay, you couldn't be a member.

While Erin and Elizabeth were able to go to the church, and the people were nice, the religious text that the people in the community follow is still not accepting of their lesbian identities. This is an example of where these women are both using religion as community and that effort is being subdued through the use of religious text as a social control mechanism to literally keep lesbians out of the church space.

Some participants experience similar situations, but not tied to the church. Maggie talks about how community reactions play a role in social her life. Her experience is connected to the socially circulating meaning system of the local culture:

I think sometimes Siobhan and I shy away from activities that sort of aren't either exclusively gay or with exclusively gay groups of people, like our friends are almost all gay women and I feel like we shy away from doing other sort of public things. I really want to take a pottery class and Siobhan really wants to go with me, right, but I think there is a part of us that shies away from doing that because we don't want to have to explain who we are to people, right? What a fucking waste! That's a horrible way to feel. Right, you have to emotionally come out to people! It's like a constant thing!

Maggie's story reveals how isolating interacting within the community can be and how frustrated she is by that. She and her wife are unable to do things in the community that would like to do because they do not want the added emotional work, and potential rejection, of having to explain their identities to others.

All of the experiences from my participants highlight just how powerful and dominant beliefs from religious texts are in these spaces. All of the participants understand that these situations have happened because of their own or their family's, friend's, etc. ties to messages

from those religious texts and the social control that they have in the culture of their rural and Appalachian spaces. Through these data it is evident that the social control exercised upon these women through the religious text is disconcerting.

Church as Community

Even though the community at large has played a role in making these women feel unwanted and bad about their sexual identities, it is not all bad. These participants also talk about the positives of religion as community and the welcoming experiences they have had around their sexual identities and at large. These positive experiences play a role in why many of these women decide to stay in these rural and Appalachian spaces. Michelle talks about her experiences:

So she was like, I kinda miss the community of church even though I don't believe in the Christian message, so that's how we started going to that Unitarian Universalist church. And it's just like you get around people that are good people but you don't have to believe in anything or you can believe in the exact opposite of what they're believe in, they're just there to like, further human kind, I don't know. They have like, they have like Wiccan groups, they have Christian groups, they have gay groups, they have like any, anything you can think of, and everybody goes to church and then like if you want to go into your little group Tuesday night, whatever it is, and so it meets up here and it's like super accepting. And I mean like, you don't have to belong to any of those groups, you can just go to church and they read out of like, Buddhists readings and like whatever Dao, any religion, any you can think of they read out of. And it's awesome, like it feels really good to go and like I said, the first time we went there they had the gay flag out, and we were like, what the fuck? We're in the middle of Southwest Virginia, I didn't ever, ever think we'd see that.

Here Michelle talks about how she and her wife use religion as community. While this is a traditional use for religion, the people who gather, the texts they read, and the message they produce are resistance to traditional notions of Christianity and instead provide a space that welcomes people of all identities. It is evident here that community is framed around a religious event, but is used in very positive ways for these participants.

Erin has a similar story of her use of religion as community:

So that's why we have our own little bible study, so we can decide, you know, we can all, and everybody has different opinions, so it's fun that we all get together and have our own opinions and it's not like [whip sound]. Yeah. And I never grew up in church so it was like, whatever, I'm here, I made my decision, or whatever. And it's just a group of us, like a group, and we get together, we try to get together once a week and we just decide what we're going to talk about or whatever. So it's not church related, just community, and then we're comfortable around each other and we can talk about whatever we want and we wouldn't be judged within our group.

Here, Erin, who does not identify as a "Christian," and other women use the term "bible study" to describe a group of women, all of whom identify as lesbian, that get together for intellectual conversations, which does not involve "church" – but church and religion are being used to forge a community. This church as community space sometimes offers the participants a way to integrate themselves into the broader community, as Michelle mentions. However, what seemed to be more common of church as community is that it brought together lesbians, not as much entering them into the community at large. It was described that a group of lesbians would come together to create a space that mirrored a church setting, such as Erin described. This highlights the importance of the role of church as community as organizing factor of social life.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I used the concepts of symbolic codes, cultural narratives, socially circulating meaning systems, and personal narratives in order to explore how the participants discussed their experiences of place and sexual identity. These concepts not only enable participants to communicate complicated information about identities but reveal hidden cultural meanings in the culture of a place (Loseke, 2007; Loseke, 2011; Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Grubrium & Holstein, 1995).

Focusing on place, I started examining rural spaces. Rural spaces are unique in that physically they are spread out but often times have a sense of community and close family ties (Dyk & Wilson, 1999; Keefe, 1988). Appalachia is defined as a region that requires attention because of the lack of research done in the area on marginalized identities, particularly those of lesbian identity. Geographic spaces can limit people's availability to available narratives about one's self in relation to sexual identities. With a dominant cultural discourse about lesbian identity and its ties to urban areas, the narratives of rural and Appalachian lesbians contribute to the knowledge of what it means to have a lesbian identity within the broader United States. This research illustrates how rural and Appalachian places offer the ambiguous push/pull factors in which being known by others can be both comforting and exposing, whereas urban places allow for and even foster more anonymity and difference.

With a cultural narrative (Loseke, 2007) about what it means to be a lesbian, which is normally white, middle class, educated women in an urban area (Hutson, 2010; Kazyak, 2011; Kazyak, 2012; McCarthy, 2000; Wienke & Hill, 2013; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011) there are not many stories rural lesbians can use to construct their personal narratives. This is complicated

by the socially circulating meaning systems that circulate in rural spaces, particularly in the local culture of the Appalachian region, where religion is used as a symbolic code that tells these women what is considered acceptable behavior by standards of religious text. These women have to use the available social circulating stories about identity to create their own personal narratives about their sexual identities, and this process highlights the difficulties and positives of both religious text and community.

These experiences revealed that religion is a symbolic code for the rules one should follow in the culture these women live. This symbolic code is so important in these spaces that religion becomes a part of the socially circulating meaning systems and these women incorporate this into their personal narratives. Therefore, when they talk about their experiences in these rural and Appalachian places, it is framed around religion and religion has a two-fold meaning. The first is that religion, following the symbolic code, is a religious text that is used as a social control mechanism to govern social life for these women in these spaces. The second is that religion is also code for community. Community is defined as the places, families, friends, and other people that these women interact with and care about. It is this sense of community that is so important to these women and what keeps them from leaving these rural and Appalachian spaces.

This research highlights the importance of intersecting identities in these women's lives. Their socio-economic and white identities allow them to focus on their two main intersecting identities of sexuality and place because social class and whiteness otherwise organize place (Brown-Saracino, 2015). Both of these identities allow the participants to move about these places and focus on their sexuality and its relation to place. Because rural, Appalachian places are primarily white spaces, whiteness is not an identity the participants have to negotiate, it is the normal. Likewise, many participants shared in the social class of rural places, in particular of Appalachian places, which also negated the need for them to focus on this identity.

The desire for normativity that these women experience reveals that other identities, i.e. rural and place-based Appalachian identities, are equally important as their lesbian identity. Being a lesbian is not a “master status” for these women, as the cultural narrative would suggest, but this identity gets integrated with other defining identities (i.e. place attachment). It’s important to note that the cultural narrative that lesbians should want to escape to urban areas is not lost on these women. They do not have a false consciousness about living in a rural space. They know the realities of Appalachian and rural spaces but they want to stay because this identity and these spaces are important to them. Brekhus (2003) finds similar outcomes in his research on suburban gay men. Lesbian identity for these women is not their first or a separable identity in these Appalachian and rural spaces as the cultural narrative might suggest. Instead they wish to integrate their lesbian identity into the larger experiences of social life.

Overall, these stories are important because they add to the narratives of rural lesbian women and available ways of occupying spaces by breaking down a binary of common cultural ideas about place and sexuality. This does not mean that in trying to handle the social control through religious text that is being forced upon them while simultaneously fitting into their communities in both positive and negative ways that it is not messy or painful. It is – but these women give descriptions of why it is necessary. Their ties to these communities, these places, to their families, to the life of a small town are strong and important and they do not necessarily want to leave. The data suggest that many of these women want to work to create a new narrative about lesbian identity and the places they occupy.

Some participants did share that they had lived more comfortably and happily in other areas of the country, but not particularly in major cities. It would be beneficial for future research to consider the experiences of loss these women feel when they cannot live comfortably in the spaces they wish to - because for these women, choosing how to foster many identities simultaneously – lesbian, rural, Appalachian, community member - is surely difficult.

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APPENDIX A:
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
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7/13/2015

Jessica Altice
Sociology
4202 E. Fowler Avenue, SOC107
Tampa, FL 33620

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#: Pro00022596
Title: Embodiment of Appalachian Lesbians

Study Approval Period: 7/12/2015 to 7/12/2016

Dear Ms. Altice:

On 7/12/2015, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):

Protocol Document(s):

[Protocol Version #2 7/6/15 Clean](#)

Consent/Assent Document(s):

[Informed Consent Form 7/6/2015](#)

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.117(c) which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either: (1) That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or (2) That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kristen Salomon', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board