The Myth of LGBTQ Mobilities: Framing the Lives of Gender and Sexually-Diverse Australians between Regional and Urban Contexts

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Abstract

Gender and sexually-diverse youth are often represented in popular discourses through concepts of movement and mobility. Conceptual stories of LGBTQ youth transitions to adulthood in particular are marked by narratives of movement from regional (rural and/or small towns) to major urban areas. Although not wholly outside lived experience, a cultural myth that portrays the experience of gender- and sexually-diverse young people entering into 'adulthood' via such mobility continues to circulate in scholarship, popular media, personal accounts of coming out, support resources and self-help guidance documents. This paper draws on a recent study of gender and sexual diversity, support and belonging to examine instances of LGBTQ youth mobility in relation to participant interviews and focus groups undertaken in an Australian project examining two generations of sexually-diverse subjects' views on growing up, support and belonging. Participants differed generationally in how they experienced mobility from regional to urban settings demonstrating that contemporary real-world accounts of such mobility are complex, nuanced and diverse and that the felt 'expectation' that one should migrate to a city in order to live a full gender- or sexually-diverse life has waned among young people in the more recent generation.

Keywords: social generations, LGBTQ, mobility, rural-to-urban migration, social support

Introduction

The life experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) subjects in Western countries are often made intelligible through accounts of mobility, movement and migration, particularly in relation to growing up and entering adulthood. Narratives that depict the migration of, usually, an isolated young LGBTQ person growing up in a small regional town to the larger city are common in the media, in coming out stories compiled in older anthologies (Shale 1999; Gray 1999) and, more recently, in online coming out videos on sites such as YouTube (Cover and Prosser 2013). They are also the driver in many popular and influential films about young LGBTQ men and women growing up (Marshall 2016), in which the culture of rural towns is depicted as homophobic and transphobic, closed-minded or even dangerous for gender- and sexually-diverse young people (e.g., *Boys Don't Cry* 1999, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* 1994).

From the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, assumptions about greater wellbeing in cities with larger LGBTQ communities should not be surprising. Conversely, arguments that rural and small-town settings are sites of risk for LGBTQ youth have regularly been made in policy and suicide research (e.g., Smalley, Scourfield, and Greenland 2005, 144). Together, these contribute to the common and recognisable 'cultural myths' that LGBTQ persons from regional areas always move to urban areas as part of transitioning to adulthood, or should do so for their health, mental health and wellbeing, or never move from an urban to a regional setting (Gray 2009). This narrative positioning of LGBTQ 'growing up' articulates such mobility as a 'compulsion' to seek out and participate socially in larger urban environments in which LGBTQ communities are more-readily found, and where services, social venues, support organisations, political groups and sexual opportunities are more readily located. According to this narrative, young non-heterosexual people who fail to move to a city hosting a major LGBTQ population risk being seen as having 'failed' to mature into proper LGBTQ adults (Halberstam 2011). The persistence of the idea of that young LGBTQ people either are 'better off' if they leave a regional area for a city location, or that rural-urban mobility is the normative pathway for all LGBTQ persons transitioning into adulthood, has had significant force across the late 20th and into the 21st Century. It depicts young LGBTQ people as always and timelessly desiring to move from regional to urban settings in order to come into adulthood and represents mobility as always uni-directional across a singular regional-urban axis.

This paper builds on Australian and international research looking at the role of mobility and movement in making intelligible the lives of LGBTQ adults and youth (e.g., Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011a, 2011b). Waitt and Gorman-Murray's focus was on mobility in one regional location in Australia, while the present study looks at mobility across generations and across three Australian states. How 'LGBTQ mobility' changes over time, and the attitudes of everyday Australian LGBTQ youth and adults towards spatial and geographic settings, together provide valuable information on how such minorities perceive themselves in relation to space, geography, community, belonging and support. While this perception of mobility may not necessary be translatable to radically different contexts, it is evident from persistent depiction in North American, British and Australian popular media culture that a 'myth' of LGBTQ mobility circulates and is experienced in ways which are both locally-specific and trans-national; but also strongly mediated by class, race and ethnic identity. The concept of myth incidentally is used here not as synonym for an un-truth, but in the context of Roland Barthes' (1993) framework of myth as a type of speech operating at the fringes of politics that becomes

culturally embedded, giving particular additional meanings to a sign that remain static and recognisable over time. In the case of LGBTQ youth, other recognisable myths include an idea of a vulnerable or lonely childhood or growing up in a homophobic family or a hostile school environment or experiencing suicidality in the setting of isolation. Much of the force of these myths derives from media stories, film and television (themselves reliant on stereotypes and the recognisability of stories for their commercial effectiveness) and on information and support resources that make assumptions about LGBTQ youth futures (Cover 2013). Although they serve as governing narratives that make LGBTQ young people's experiences recognisable to themselves and others, and thus tacitly inform health, education and social policy, this paper demonstrates not that such narratives are correct or incorrect, but that they are nuanced, complex and actively reflected upon by young people.

Drawing on interview and focus group data gathered as part of the Belonging and Sexual Citizenship among Gender and Sexual Minority Youth project (also known as the *Queer Generations* project), this article investigates the ways in which assumptions about how a normative framework of 'LGBTQ mobility' from regional to urban settings is understood, addressed, drawn upon and challenged by two generations of Australian gender- and sexually-diverse youth. Beginning with the background to the project, we begin by providing a summary of the historical reasons why the 'city' is figuratively important in LGBTQ communities, culture and media, and a brief analysis of the ways in which the regional-to-urban movement conditions assumptions about LGBTQ youth, isolation and belonging.¹ We then investigate the lived experience of young people in the study through and in relation to the persistence of a rural-to-urban mobility narrative.

Queer Generations

The *Queer Generations* project is a study examining the sources of support found most useful by young people, and the ways in which cultural formations of participatory sexual citizenship prove useful to young people in making sense of sexual and gender differences, lived realities of subjectivity and identity, and perspectives on growing up. The research involved archival, policy and media research, as well as focus groups and interviews with LGBTQ respondents in three Australian states (Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria), occurring in both state capitals and regional areas with members of two social generations: those born in the 1970s (and thus transitioning into adulthood in the 1990s) and those born in the 1990s (and thus transitioning into adulthood in the 2010s). These two generational groupings are significant for the historical shifts taking place as members of both groups experienced in their late teens and early twenties (Aggleton et al. 2019). The 1990s was a pivotal period for LGBTQ youth policy and services in Australia, with support focused on self-development and resilience through community membership (Olive 2012), the emergence of mainstream film and television representation of LGBTQ characters (Lipton 2008), narratives and stories, and the gathering of research data that profiled disproportionate health risks experienced by same-sex attracted youth in Australia. The current 2010s is likewise significant for LGBTQ-identifying young people, with the institutionalisation of support programmes and educational curricula (Hillier, Mitchell and Ybarra 2012), the availability across their lives of the Internet as a source of information about alternative sexual and gender identities, and the diversification of gender and sexual identity labels that has begun to put in question the efficacy of the more familiar LGBTQ categories and self-descriptors (Cover 2019).

Study participants were recruited through advertising; notices shared on Facebook and email mailing lists; a study website; LGBTQ community and youth groups; and snowballing. Participants self-identified their gender and sexuality. Focus groups were organised in urban and regional settings, separated by generational cohort and both groups and interviews included a range of persons by ethnic background including Australian-Burmese, Australian-Korean and Indigenous Australian, although numbers are not large enough to draw significant conclusion in relation to this latter axis of identification. Thirteen of the 50 participants born in the 1970s grew up in regional areas and most participants in this cohort identified as Anglo/Australian or white. The 1990s-born cohort comprised 71 participants, of whom 24 grew up in regional or non-urban settings. Interview and focus group transcripts were analysed thematically using six key conceptual ‘lenses’ of relevance to sexual citizenship and belonging: health, family and kinship, education, work and labour, media and communication and sex education (Aggleton et al. 2019). This method revealed both continuities and disjunctures across the two generations, as well as highlighted experiences—such as practices of identification and lived realities of migration and mobility—that were deliberately sought for in interview and focus group questions.

As in many studies, participants were asked to reflect on their youth after the event, via what Plummer (2010, 173) notes as “speculative remembering and restorying to capture the past.” How sexual and gender minorities frame the past, including early childhood, is often influenced by the languages, identity norms and cultural expectations of present liberal-humanist perspectives on sexual and gender identity as well as by perspectives of individual ‘progress’ towards identity coherence and belonging (Cover et al. 2017). There can be a tendency to ‘historicise’ past events of growing up LGBTQ, and Love (2007, 17) among others notes that practices of personal historicisation seal “it off from the present, burying it in a superseded realm of ignorance, shame, and suffering.” However, for many participants in both elements of this study (the 1970s-born generation and the 1990s-born generation), narratives of ‘growing up’ continued to have resonance in their lives as we will see below.

Theorising Histories and Assumptions: Rural Isolation and Urban Belonging

In cultural and geographic terms, what is it that LGBTQ people are typically and stereotypically assumed to ‘move’ toward in contexts of mobility? The city has long figured in LGBTQ culture as a space in which belonging, and networks of engagement can be found. Writing in the mid-1990s, Kath Weston (1995) recounts her own story of migration to the ‘gay mecca’ of San Francisco’s Bay Area in the 1970s as well as oral interviews she conducted in the 1980s. Weston notes that while from a theoretical perspective she would question the validity of a rural/urban binary for classifying the experiences and mobility of subjects, a symbolic contrast made more explicit through migration towards cities was central to the organisation of many of the coming out stories she encountered through her work (255). Waitt and Gorman-Murray’s (2011a) study of lesbians and gay men in Townsville challenges this “understanding that condemns the lives of LGBTQ people outside metropolitan centres to one of purgatory” (1398), although likewise they point to the utilisation of migration stories in LGBTQ life narratives in relation to space and geography. Distinctions between urban and rural or regional areas are indeed arbitrary ones (Legg 2005, 145-146), and the ways in which different generational groups perceive spatial, migratory and symbolic classifications and distinctions differ in different time periods and contexts (Wyn and Woodman 2006). Importantly, how space informs affective, felt senses of identity and belonging involves practices of both

perception and challenging those perceptions, motivating action and activity and thereby movement and mobility (Munt 2002, 4). More recent studies (Power et al. 2014, 870-71) have pointed to the way in which internal rural-to-urban LGBTQ migration in New Zealand and Australia has actively associated rural spaces with perceptions of being unfavourable to LGBTQ persons, primarily through the perception that urban centres host gay friendly neighbourhoods.

Historically, the figure of the 'city' is important in the early development of LGBTQ communities and in the political, social and cultural frameworks that emerged during the second half of the Twentieth Century in which community consciousness and frameworks for belonging begin by being shaped by spatiality, geographic sites and physical togetherness. While the city has figured as the conceptual futural space of queerness, the rural/urban distinction is, of course, further complicated by the increasing association between gender and sexual minorities and suburbia (Tongson 2011). In the Australian context, while rural and regional settings are often viewed through a nostalgic lens, the lived experience of young people growing up away from major cities is regularly represented as a challenge or a struggle (Driscoll 2014). With this narrative circulating in popular culture through stories, narratives, books, biographies and then film and television stories of North American gay and lesbian life, the myth of the city as the site of LGBTQ urban belonging was cemented by the late Twentieth Century. As a result, in Esther Saxey's (2008) words, a "sense of the incompatibility of rural or small-town life with same-sex desire is installed at the heart of lesbian and gay urban identity . . . The model gay man or lesbian moves to the city as soon as is feasible" (119). Through contrast and distinctiveness, then, such non-urban settings (whether in North America, Europe and Australia) have come to be depicted as a site of non-belonging, homophobia and exclusion—something which scholars (e.g., Gray 2009; Herring 2010) are beginning to point out as erroneous, finding sites and practices of LGBTQ youth belonging in a range of non-urban settings worldwide.

The stereotypical assumption of LGBTQ mobility towards the city is foregrounded in much research on LGBTQ youth in the 1990s and early 2000s on LGBTQ youth, development, suicidality and vulnerability. And we are not, of course, the first to observe the problem of sexual subjectivities being "neatly mapped onto space by a simple urban/rural binary and explanations of sexual liberation versus sexual oppression" (Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011b, 1240). As Doreen Massey (2005) notes, different spatial orderings produce different kinds of belonging for young people in both cities and rural settings. 'LGBTQ mobility' may here be understood as a disjuncture in the lifecycle of the LGBTQ youth growing into adulthood. For Jack Halberstam (2011), LGBTQ culture arguably "enacts *rupture* as substitution as the queer child steps out of the assembly line of heterosexual production and turns toward a new project" (72). In the context of youth mobilities, the LGBTQ subject is located first in the rural, small-town setting which is the space not only of heterosexual production, but the over-determination of heterosexual exclusiveness, while the new project implies the fashioning of LGBTQ selfhood produced in relationality with other LGBTQ people in an urban setting.

The mobility of bodies from non-urban to urban habitation is, however, not the only form of mobility relevant here. Indeed, as sociologist Thomas Faist (2013) has pointed out, there is enormous productive potential in thinking about different forms of mobility together. These include spatial mobility, in the sense of movement and migration from an identifiable place to a different identifiable place, alongside social mobility as the upward shift in class, education, affluence and status. The latter is particularly significant in coming to a sense of

the corporeal and relational place of LGBTQ narratives of growing up and coming out (which we understand are not simultaneous, but may often be read as such). Importantly, social mobility implies the shift in social status of groups, communities, cultures and populations, usually measured by education, affluence, health status, literacy rates, employment types and/or education (Borgatta and Montgomery 2000, 2711). It is often framed in generational terms, such that to be mobile is to belong to a (usually) higher class or socio-economic demarcation than one's immediate forebears in ways which tie normativities to a notion of inter-generational progress (Lareau 2003). While social mobility is therefore usually perceived to be a means to produce a "better life" for one's children, in a mobilities context it can be perceived as the means to produce a "better life" for one's self (Cover 2013). Our approach also recognises how geographic and social mobilities converge in the experience of young people growing up.

The LGBTQ subject of mobility is therefore a rich site for the study of the combined force of geographic movement as both physical and social mobility. In line with the dominant discourse of contemporary LGBTQ mobility, young LGBTQ adults, having moved to an urban setting, are rendered intelligible as subjects who have transitioned between two rather different states of being. They begin by being located in a space that requires them to be marginalised, closeted, a social pariah or in which pain and reduced local standing are experienced. They are then framed by a 'later' space (and, indeed, temporality) marked as one that fosters more equitable participation in a minority community, and which tolerates social participation of minority group members within the wider urban environment due to the perception of that environment as a convivial one. LGBTQ mobility, then, is mythically understood to produce social advancement by shedding the perception of isolation, loneliness, health and mental health risks and other markers of dysfunction that are often associated with depictions of growing up LGBTQ in rural environments. Belonging, here operates not as the membership of a category (e.g., to be a Sydney-living gay man) but as an "achievement" (Bell 1999, 3) that is constitutive of social status in the form of contemporary LGBTQ adulthood.

In some scholarship seeking to map LGBTQ lives and space, the city is noted as having been depicted as the site of LGBTQ belonging (e.g., Bell and Valentine 1995; Skeggs et al. 2004; Brown 2009), and mobility towards the city is thus figured as uni-directional, singular axis of movement necessary for LGBTQ identity development and participation in community. However, a number of scholars who have investigated contemporary late-Twentieth and early-Twenty-first Century LGBTQ cultural life have also pointed to the growth of LGBTQ culture in regional settings and small towns, as well as the content and liveable lives of many LGBTQ identifying persons choosing to remain in smaller towns and farming districts or deliberately moving away from cities to inhabit such spaces (e.g., Sears 1991; Gray 2009; Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011a, 2011b). Where the *Queer Generations* project builds upon existing challenges to erroneous or simplistic assumptions about LGBTQ youth (or LGBTQ movement for that matter) is in interrogating why the idea of LGBTQ mobility is so important in understanding young lives and transitions to adulthood; how this is changing in contemporary Australian contexts by investigating generational practices; and how the relationship between media, digital communication and contemporary identity reveals new understandings of rural and urban formations of belonging. We begin this task by working through understandings of LGBTQ mobility in regard to three key themes: (i) identity and the closet; (ii) the role of digital communication in urban and regional settings; and (iii) mobility towards the regional.

Conceptual understandings

Mobility Narratives, Generational Adaptions, Identity and Outness

Although the *Queer Generations* project did not set out specifically to ask questions related to mobility, internal migration, regional-to-urban transitions and other kinds of geographic and social movement, these topics emerged strongly in participants' accounts of growing up in both interviews and focus groups conducted in Australia. In these mobility narratives (Boyer, Mayes and Pini 2017) we observed a number of tropes related to LGBTQ transitions to adulthood. Greater than half the participants in our study described having experienced some form of mobility, broadly defined, in ways which were valuable for them to recount in articulating their stories. These included moving cities for a partner, partners moving away and the impact that had on health and belonging, being moved across different schools for various reasons, suburban-to-inner-urban migrations, and the more typical movement from a regional setting to a larger city either for university, for deliberate participation in contemporary LGBTQ culture or political work, to increase sexual opportunities.

Both sets of participants (those born in the 1970s and those born in the 1990s) described experiences of moving away from a regional environment to a larger city—usually the capital city of the same state, although sometimes to a city in a different state. In each generation, there were narratives that described the regional town in which one was brought up as a site in which one experiences the everyday shaming practices of homophobic acts and violence (McDermott, Roen and Scourfield 2008, 819) and anti-gay behaviour that manifested itself in bullying and violence (Mishna et al. 2009, 1599). While both generational cohorts understood their towns of origin to be 'homophobic', the older cohort generally associated the town with homophobic experiences. The younger cohort tended to move—when they did—for reasons of work, study or social factors, or often because their specific family was a setting for homophobic exclusion of sexual and gender diversity.

More significant, however, was the figuration of the regional town (and sometimes family) as a site or space in which it would be impossible to be able to articulate one's gender or sexual diversity openly, whereas in contrast an urban environment was either perceived or experienced as a place in which that could occur. That is, secrecy and closetedness among the public in the town was pivotal for the older generation, even if they did have a very supportive family. For example, Susie, 39, who participated in the older cohort interviews, described her experience thus:

... my mum did tell me to be discreet because she said that it's a tough road. ...I got some, hassled at work when I was young, like when I was 18, 19, that made it difficult because I felt like I hadn't been discreet. So, I didn't go to them for help ... I moved very quickly into the city, and, when I was 19, I got a job in a café (Susie, 1970s, female 39, lesbian, urban).²

For Susie, the requirement for discretion in her regional setting despite the very strong support of family is notable as it draws us to consider how the closet, the process of coming out, and the spaces in which coming out is deemed to be tolerable or supported are figured in the process of growing up LGBTQ. Public commentary continues to present the closet (and

coming out of it) as *the* most pivotal moment in everyday LGBTQ life. It tends to frame this process as one marked by a temporal ‘before and after’ (e.g., Jones 2017), that helps narrate identity in chronological terms (Saxey 2008, 3). Coming out is also described within charts of developmental milestones which provide a normative temporality to assumptions about LGBTQ youth and growing up (e.g., Cass 1979), sometimes presenting the ‘growing up’ of young LGBTQ subjects in a very narrow temporal, chrononormative trajectory (Cover et al. 2017). However, the extent to which it is still meaningful for younger persons today is debatable. Our research underscores the power and persistence of scholarly and popular narratives which assume the cultural condition of discretion or closetedness—and coming out of the closet—operates in the same way for all LGBTQ persons across all generations and time periods (Rasmussen 2004). However, as a compulsion for mobility towards an urban setting, it is the experience of the town as a space of public interaction rather than the stereotypical notion of the town as the setting for homophobic private and domestic family life that operates as a driver or ‘push factor’.

Among the 1990s-born cohort, participants generally did not describe their experience in the terms of closetedness or hiding that could be mapped onto a rural-urban distinction. For example, Tyler noted that he “didn’t have to hide” in his country town, even though he chose to move to a city (Tyler, 1990s, male, 22, gay, regional). The distinction between the older and younger cohorts that emerges here, is that the town or regional setting is no longer necessarily perceived as the reason for discretion but that, for some, discretion is a necessary part of life in relation to school rather than other spaces. For 1990s-born Dylan, the desire to leave his regional setting had little to do with the performance of his identity, discretion, or with a particular desire to discover himself and forge an identity in the city. Rather, his exemplary account points to more practical reasons of sociability:

‘cause a lot of my friends have moved to [city], I have felt a little bit secluded, you know, because they’re all going to, you know, all the things each weekend. So, I sort of do have almost this sort of feeling that I’ve gotta go there if I wanna, you know, socialise (Dylan, 1990s, male, 25, gay, regional).

Although following friends who move from one location to another is not in itself unusual among any social grouping, it is significant for Dylan that as his LGBTQ friends moved away, he was left experiencing greater isolation in his regional setting than he might have earlier, with the ‘loss’ of his sense of community among LGBTQ locals of his age-group. That is, isolation is not endemic to rural settings in the way traditionally perceived in the literature. While the younger generational cohort’s experiences do not therefore dislodge the narrative of LGBTQ regional-to-urban mobility, they modify the narrative so that it can incorporate the displacement of the significance of the closet and processes of coming out in everyday young people’s lives.

Continuities and Disjunctures: Networked Communication, Belonging and Mobility

From as early as the late-1990s, researchers have pointed to the opportunities of online forums for forging communities among LGBTQ youth, especially those who had limited opportunities for face-to-face engagement with LGBTQ peers (e.g., Berry and Martin 1998). Much subsequent research has noted the creative ways in which young people of

marginalised or diverse identities utilise digital communication for particular kinds of belonging, regardless as to whether they are growing up in regional or urban settings (e.g., Pullen and Cooper 2010). LGBTQ media scholar Larry Gross (1998) once pointed to the fact that film, television and magazines provided a much-needed “saving refuge” for those in areas unable to access face-to-face LGBTQ community engagement (98)—a conceptual space of belonging rather than a purely geographic one. Indeed, geography and location now have much less to do with access to opportunities for inter-youth communication, support, information, ‘role models’ or practices of belonging given the affordances of networked media.

Many participants from the 1970s-born cohort described their childhoods as “pretty isolating” (Barry, 1970s, male, 45, gay, urban). Katy, for example, who grew up in a semi-rural area on the far outer-suburban ring of a city described her growing up with a lack of LGBTQ, gender or sexually-diverse role models to inform development of a sense of identity and provide meanings and contexts to attraction:

I knew I was attracted to girls but . . . I suppose I wasn’t very sexually aware through high school. Wasn’t really ’til I moved on into university where I even saw the possibilities because where I grew up in [suburb] on the edge of [major city] there, yeah, no role models whatsoever. It was never discussed. You know, not even, you know, people who were identified and bullied. That just, I was never exposed to it at all (Katy, 1970s, female, 40, bisexual, urban).

Members of the older generational cohort also tended to frame their rural and regional upbringing not only through isolation from urban settings but self-reflectively in generational terms, as experiencing “life pre-Internet” as a lack (Heather, 1970s, nonbinary, 37, bisexual, urban). Those born in the 1970s may have begun to have access to the early Internet in the mid- to late-1990s, although in many cases the rural and remote reach of the Internet as well as socio-economic distinctions between some regional and urban young people would have restricted this until they were much older. Understanding regional experiences as isolating by applying a retrospective framing in which digital communication is seen as a ‘lack’ in one’s adolescence points to one of the ways in which regional-to-urban mobility narratives continue to structure understandings of LGBTQ youth belonging and liveability.

Participants from the 1990s-born cohort routinely discussed the role of the Internet, digital and mobile communication in their experiences of growing up in regional settings, not only as an information resource, but as forms of communication affording creative engagement and the generation of content (Byron 2015, 324). Youth-oriented sites that provided opportunities for creative experimentation and occasional anonymity, such as *Tumblr*, were most popular and regularly discussed. For example, Oscar (who was raised in a small regional town and interviewed after he had moved to a capital city) described his use of *Tumblr* as follows:

But I spent hours when I was a teenager. I joined most like, I dunno eight years ago or something. Like I was just on there for years, and years, and years. Non-stop, like it taught me a lot. And getting to read other people’s viewpoints and information. And since the

transition of people looking at it more of like a social thing, to an incredibly political website. Definitely helped me further my knowledge and shaped the person I am today (Oscar, 1990s, male, 22, gay, urban).

Here, digital communication operates in the interstices between access to information resources (in the framework of Gross' "saving refuge") and engagement (through the capacity to substitute for face-to-face communication with others as a form of belonging). While there are of course geographic variances in access to digital networks in Australia, no lack of Internet access was noted by any participants from the younger generation growing up in regional areas.

At the same, we cannot map precisely a pre/post Internet to a 1970s/1990s experience of growing up in a regional area with the assumption that a pre-Internet era sponsors a move to an urban environment whereas a contemporary digital generation are more content to remain where they are. In other words, digital media has neither overcome the myth of regional-to-urban mobility and the perception of the city as the site of LGBTQ culture, nor the need to engage with others in larger-group settings face to face. For example, Megan, also growing up in a small regional town, pointed to the fact that, while useful, the opportunities of media, television and digital communication did not preclude the need to migrate to a larger city:

This isn't really a media thing 'cause like there's very little good bi representation in like TV shows and stuff. It's basically like you know, bad representation. Um, but going to like rallies and stuff was amazing, 'cause I grew up in the country like I didn't move to [city] until I was 16. So, there was just, nothing. I couldn't go to queer stuff until I moved to [city]. So yeah going to rallies . . . like equal marriage . . . was just like incredible. And then going to [university] and there being like a queer community and stuff. It was just like, amazing. So yeah that was like, so like less media stuff and more community-based stuff (Megan, 1990s, female, 20, bisexual, urban).

Access to digital information and to creative and interactive uses of digital media for communication with peers is considered very important in young LGBTQ people's lives. It is understood to enhance engagement with others (Nip 2004; Byron 2015), although among participants the digital access experienced by the younger cohort did not in itself operate as reason to remain in a regional town. Rather, its presence in the lives of young people complexified the cultural narrative that presents regional LGBTQ life as isolated and lonely and the move to a city as necessary step to overcoming isolation. That is, isolation and loneliness no longer serve as conceptual 'push' factors for such mobility at the point of transitioning into adulthood.

Reversing Narratives: Mobility towards the Regional

Finally, it is important to remark on the way in which the cultural narrative of LGBTQ regional-to-urban mobility is often presented in a linear framework in which the story of mobility is

perceived to end in settlement in the city. Among participants from both generational cohorts, there were many who had either left urban environments to settle in smaller country towns, several who were content to remain in regional communities, as well as several who remarked that they desired to return from the city before long to a country town (whether one in which they grew up, or a different one). What this may suggest is that although constraining LGBTQ mobility narratives continue to circulate and have force; this force may be diminishing. That is, a more nuanced cultural understanding points to the way in which it is difficult to map the experience of isolation on to discrete geographic spaces or to continue to depict regional settings as spaces LGBTQ people universally seek to escape from.

As members of the 1970s-born cohort were older, it was not surprising that several of them had moved—or desired to move—from an urban setting to a regional one. The relative age of these participants indicates a greater likelihood of being partnered, having children and a mortgage and focusing on domestic habitation. In that context, regional settings were sometimes depicted as attractive places for LGBTQ couples, particularly those with children and extended families:

Yeah. You know, I have a lot of gay friends who have moved, a lot of queer friends who have moved out of [city] to live in country areas or to live up in the north because they just, you know ... And my partner and I talk about it all the time, you know. “Let’s buy a lottery ticket and go live somewhere else.” It’s too expensive [living in the city]. It’s too hard. And there’s not much fun anymore (Jeremy, 1970s, male, 46, queer, urban).

Contrasting with the more recognisable depiction of LGBTQ persons aspiring to move to the city to find a liveable life, several of the 1970s-born participants had moved to the country at various points between young adulthood and later life. Brenda (1970s, female, 38, lesbian, urban), who was raised in a larger city, moved to a country town with her partner and their children to live for a number of years. They found that however desirable a regional setting was for raising their children, it continued to have problems, including the kinds of support that could be found for children where reduced choices result in the likelihood of health and education service providers who express heterosexist judgements in front of the children. Such participant views on mobility were therefore not a complete reversal of the rural-to-urban logic but indicate the continuing nuances and complexities associated with a distinction between living in an urban environment and inhabiting a country town that condition both the myth and reality of regional-to-urban mobility.

Finally, among the members of the younger cohort, it was not uncommon to find participants who had made a move to a major city, yet desired to move back to their regional site of upbringing, finding that they did not like living in an urban environment after all. Dylan, for example, found that the city was less amenable to face-to-face networking than imagined after moving from a regional town to a large metropolitan area:

“it really stemmed my curiosity to see, you know, what is out there and, you know, I sort of found that it was a lot more challenging to get those sort of resources and find other people in the community” (Dylan, 1990s, male, 25, gay, regional).

Austin moved from a small country town to a major city when he was nineteen years of age for sexual and romantic purposes, and then lived in several different cities and rural areas while participating significantly in the drag performance community, ultimately settling down in a country town. He found city living to be:

too loud, too noisy and people rush too much. I like [regional town] for how quiet it is. I love it for how picturesque and beautiful it is. I don't like buildings. I don't like the smog. I hate how people just rush and push, and push. . . . I love the country. It's not so good for the drag thing but it's great for me personally (Austin, 1990s, male, 26, gay, regional).

Such comments are helpful in reducing the nostalgic and utopian framing of the city within mobility discourses, reversing the narratives of regional-to-urban mobility that have long been communicated and experienced as a social norm for LGBTQ persons both in Australia and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The cultural narrative or myth that LGBTQ young persons growing up in rural and regional settings always (or should) migrate to a larger urban environment in order to experience a social life and community belonging in the process of transitioning into adulthood has been a powerful one informing scholarship, public and popular assumptions about LGBTQ lives. All cultural myths have some historical truth, but they also tend to mask or hide more complex empirical realities and diversities of experience. In addition, they persist over time in ways which obscure new complexities, attitudes and experiences that are found in more recent generational frameworks.

Our study has shown how the LGBTQ mobility narrative can be seen as more complex and nuanced in three respects. Firstly, in the accounts provided by members of the younger generational cohort growing up in regional settings, their LGBTQ childhoods were not figured through concepts of closetedness, secrecy, isolation, loneliness non-belonging or growing up in homophobic rural households. Rather, participants demonstrated the way in which regional settings are not always exclusive, homophobic and violent, nor spaces in which families marginalise diversity. Instead, the regional town is positioned more as a benign space that may lack the affordances of the city such as social life, universities, and cultural participation. Secondly, the study pointed to the need to make sense of the relationship between digital communication, regional settings and isolation: on the one hand, an older cohort deployed a pre-/post- Internet distinction to discuss their regional lives, while the younger cohort neither associated Internet access with overcoming isolation nor with mobility in contrast to earlier scholarship. Finally, the study noted the significant instances of participants among both generations for whom the LGBTQ mobility narrative did not inform their continuing perception of LGBTQ belonging, whereby moving to regional areas or remaining in country towns was either experienced or desired.

Taken together, these findings build on and extend existing research regarding how LGBTQ mobility narratives operate in the lives of two generations of Australians. They indicate how LGBTQ cultural narratives are not stable over time but adapted by new generations who find secrecy and closetedness less necessary, or experienced in different ways, in regional

settings. They highlight how, for many, the notion of regional-to-urban mobility is not the only framework through which to make sense of growing up. Nor is it universally desired or desirable. Indeed, there are significant reversals, refusals and challenges to the dominance of this expectation and LGBTQ structures of feeling.

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Footnotes

1. In the Australian context, the term 'regional' is usually used to indicate areas of the country that are not major urban or capital cities, including state capitals. Regional can include rural towns, mining towns, non-capital coastal towns, and more remote areas including the 'outback' and desert regions. This study interviewed participants from urban and regional settings which included both rural and coastal towns (for ethical reasons we do not name the towns). When referring to the myth of LGBTQ mobility as it is derived from the North American context, we sometimes use the term 'rural' to describe the geographic spaces in which young people from non-urban areas are often depicted as growing up. In Australia, practices and capabilities of moving towns and cities differs over time, with increasing urbanisation and also increasing financial impediments for younger people to leave their parental home, including to attend university. While these are important issues, this paper does not intend to investigate that important backdrop, focusing instead on how the discourse of a 'compulsory migration' from non-urban to urban settings is both replicated in and differs across the two generational cohorts.

2. To protect the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used and the names of cities, towns and organisations have been de-identified. To provide context, each participant is described by generational cohort, gender identity at time of participation, age, and sexual identity stated at time of participation as well as their present state of residence as urban or regional.

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