Article

Sexualities
2014, Vol. 17(1/2) 63–80
© The Author(s) 2013
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1363460713511094
sex.sagepub.com
SAGE

Bisexual, pansexual, queer: Non-binary identities and the sexual borderlands

April Scarlette Callis
Northern Kentucky University, USA

Abstract
This article focuses on sexualities in the USA that exist within the border between heterosexuality and homosexuality. I first examine the usefulness of applying borderland theory to non-gay/non-straight sexualities such as queer and bisexual. I then give an ethnographic analysis of sexual self-identities on the borders, shedding light on how participants envisioned labels such as 'pansexual,' and 'heteroflexible.' Finally, I explore the ways that the sexual borderlands became tangible in Lexington, Kentucky at certain events and locations. Throughout, I highlight the ways that the sexual borderland touches on all sexualities, as individuals knowingly cross, inhabit, or bolster sexual identity borders.

Keywords
Bisexuality, borderlands, ethnography, identity, queer

Introduction

This article focuses on sexualities in the USA that exist within the border between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Though sexuality has been understood as a binary in US society for over a century (Lancaster, 2003; Rubin, 1993 [1984]; Weeks, 1985), identities that are neither hetero- nor homosexual are beginning to emerge, becoming more visible in popular culture (Rust, 2000; Udis-Kessler, 1996). Recurring bisexual characters on popular television shows, the inclusion of 'bisexual' into organization names, and the popularity of the initialism GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) are just a few examples of this visibility. Situated between more normative sexualities, non-binary identities such as

Corresponding author:
April Scarlette Callis, Department of Honors, Honors House, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY 41099, USA.
Email: callisa1@nku.edu

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

bisexual, queer, and pansexual provide a critical site for the investigation of how sexual identity is both constructed and de/reconstructed.

While the sexual binary of heterosexual and homosexual is shifting and becoming less hegemonic, it is still a powerful system of sexual categorization. In light of the continued hold the sexual binary has on constructions of sexuality, non-binary identities are best understood as a sexual borderland. Rather than forming separately from the binary system, these identities have sprung up from the cracks within it, creating an in-between space that has become wider and more pronounced in recent years. For those people inhabiting this borderland, it is a place of sexual and gender fluidity, a space where identities can change, multiply, and/or dissolve. For heterosexual and homosexual-identified people living on either side of the border, the borderland serves multiple purposes. It can become a boundary not to be crossed, or a pathway to a new identity. Because the borderlands are emerging from within the current binary system of sexuality, they interface with individuals of all sexual identities. Therefore, the sexual borderlands have in many ways become the defining point of sexual identity, rather than a peripheral afterthought.

This article offers both a theoretical and an ethnographic study of non-binary sexualities. First, I explore in greater detail the history of the sexual binary, the literature on non-binary sexualities, and theories of the borderlands. I also expand on the utility of discussing non-binary sexualities as a sexual borderland. I then turn to a discussion of the specific ways that this borderland manifests itself within Lexington, Kentucky. Drawing from 80 interviews, I look at what labels individuals used to describe non-gay/non-straight sexual identities, as well as their reasoning behind specific identity choices. I also investigate tangible locations of the sexual borderlands that I located during participant observation in Lexington.

Methods

In order to learn how non-binary sexual identities were conceptualized, I spent 17 months in Lexington, Kentucky conducting participant observation, archival research, and interviews with individuals of varied sexual identities. Lexington was chosen for this research project because, with a population of roughly 300,000 people, it is a representative mid-sized city in the USA. In addition, with four gay bars, over 20 gay, lesbian and transgendered organizations, and three queer religious organizations, the GLBT population in Lexington is highly visible.

The cornerstone of this research was semi-structured interviews. I enlisted 80 participants, a sample size large enough to reflect sexual identity variability while still small enough to allow a detailed qualitative analysis. Two criteria were used to select research participants for this project: residence and sexual identity. First, all participants were living in Lexington at the time of their interview, which allowed for ethnographic centering. Though participants often originated in other places, current residence in Lexington allowed a discussion of sexualities within this one community. Second, participants reflected the broad range of sexual identities found in Lexington, including self-identified straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

individuals. All participants were asked to choose a pseudonym, which was then the name used in all of my research notes and subsequent publications.

In total, of the 80 individuals who were interviewed for this research, 28 people (35%) self-identified as either heterosexual or straight: this grouping included 15 men and 13 women. Fifteen people (19%) can be classified as homosexual based on their self-identities, with 7 identifying as lesbians and 8 as gay men. The remaining 37 people (or 46% of participants) are best classified as having non-binary sexualities. This included individuals that identified as queer, bisexual, pansexual, bicurious, heteroflexible and 'mostly heterosexual,' as well as people who identified with more than one label and people who chose not to label at all.

A (brief) history of the sexual binary

In order to discuss non-binary sexualities, one must first have a working understanding of the western sexual binary. Foucault, in his influential work *The History of Sexuality* (1978), argued that the modern sexual binary came out of the medicalization of sexuality that occurred in the 19th century. He believed that during this time the fields of medicine and biology searched out and labeled some sexual practices as 'sexual perversions,' eventually coming to create 'sexual species.' Using homosexuality as an example, Foucault states that:

> The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life-form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (1978: 43)

Thus, what had once been merely a sex act with no particular ties to identity had now become the hallmark of a type of person.

This medicalization of sexuality can be traced to the decrease in the influence of the church and its discourses as well as an increase in the influence of the biological sciences (Foucault, 1978; Lancaster, 2003). Along with these changes in western society came others, such as an increase in capitalist production and industrial labor. These changes in political system and subsistence strategy 'reorganized family relations, altered gender roles, made possible new forms of identity, produced new varieties of social inequality, and created new formats for political and ideological conflict' (Rubin, 1993 [1984]: 16). The changes also led to a space being opened in society for the newly created 'sexual deviants' or 'erotic species' who could now meet outside of their homes and eventually form group identities. D'Emilio notes that it was the development of capitalism that 'allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay... and to organize politically on the basis of that identity' (1983: 102).

While Foucault notes that multiple 'species' of sexual deviants were created during this medicalization of sexuality, it was the homosexual that eventually

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

became the most important for sexual classification purposes. While the scientific and medical communities labeled some people as 'homosexual' during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became normative for laypeople in western culture to label every person as either homosexual or heterosexual by the mid-20th century. Sexual identity became 'rigidly defined by the binary place of sameness and difference in the sexes of the sexual partners [and] people belonged henceforward to one or the other of two exclusive categories' (Halperin, 1990: 16).

A study of this schematic shift can be found in George Chauncey's work *Gay New York* (1994). He notes that in the early 20th century, individuals in New York understood sexuality based more on gender roles than sexual partners. Thus, effeminate men who had sex with other men were labeled as 'mollies' or 'fairies,' while the masculine men who had sex with these individuals were not labeled in any particular way. Chauncey states that it was only in the period between the 1930s and the 1950s that the

> now-conventional division of men into 'homosexuals' and 'heterosexuals,' based on the sex of their sexual partners, replaced the division of men into 'fairies' and 'normal men'... as the hegemonic way of understanding sexuality. (1994: 13)

This change became so pervasive and culturally important that 'men were no longer able to participate in a homosexual encounter without suspecting it meant (to the outside world, and to themselves) that they were gay' (Chauncey, 1994: 22). Thus, the process of speciation was complete, as the categories created by science and medicine became both widespread and internalized, and homosexuality became a sexual self-identity (Seidman, 1994). Just as individuals were divided into categories of man and woman, so too were they now divided as homosexual and heterosexual, with these categories being thought of as innate (Jagose, 1996; Lancaster, 2003). By the 1950s the modern sexual binary was firmly in place.

However, by the 1980s, self-identified bisexuals, who identified outside of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, began to fight for name recognition in what had previously been known as 'gay and lesbian' organizations (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2003; Hemmings, 1997). By the late 1990s, the initialism GLBT began to gain prevalence in publications and organizations around the country. By the first decade of the 21st century, characters with non-binary sexual identities were major recurring characters on several top Nielsen rated television shows (*Grey's Anatomy, House M.D., Bones*). Thus, almost as soon as the sexual binary was in place, it faced competition from a visible non-binary contingent.

Literature on non-binary sexual identities

Sexologists and anthropologists have been writing about individuals who are sexually active with both men and women since the early 20th century (Fox, 1995; Lyons and Lyons, 2004). However, an exploration as to the self-identities of these individuals did not come about in the social sciences until the 1970s

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

(Blumstein and Schwartz, 1977). From this point forward, individuals with non-gay/non-straight sexual self-identities have been a topic of inquiry for a handful of scholars. The vast majority of this work has focused on one particular non-binary sexuality: the bisexual.

Starting in the 1990s, a distinct, if small, area of interdisciplinary research emerged, which is best understood as 'bisexuality studies.' These scholars, oftentimes bisexual themselves, uncovered several themes in bisexual self-identity. The first of these is the invisibility of bisexuality. In the USA, it is assumed that all people are monosexual, or attracted to either men or women (James, 1996). It is further assumed that all individuals are part of, or striving for, monogamous couplings (Ochs, 1996; Whitney, 2002). These cultural assumptions serve to completely erase bisexuality, leading to the bisexual being misread, depending on who they are with or where they are (Hemmings, 1997).

A second theme in bisexuality literature is the illegitimate status of the label. Bisexuality has been called the 'Snuffaluffagus of sexualities,' with individuals debating whether it exists at all (Macalister, 2003: 25). Bisexuals are thought to be lesbians and gays who are afraid to come out for fear of losing their 'heterosexual privilege' (Bower et al., 2002; Daumer, 1992; Ochs, 1996). Bisexual women are thought to be 'really' straight and performing for the male gaze (Entrup and Firestein, 2007: 98). Or, bisexuality is thought to be a 'transitional' phase between straight and gay, rather than its own stable identity (Rust, 2003).

Perhaps the most prevalent theme in the literature on bisexuality is the stereotyping of bisexuals. They are seen as being hypersexual, and are associated with deviant sexuality (Israel and Mohr, 2004: 121), nonmonogamy (Ochs, 1996; Rust, 2000), threesomes (Christina, 1996), swingers (Parrenas, 2007), and sexual experimentation (Bower et al., 2002). Bisexual men are assumed to be diseased (Ochs, 1996; Rust, 2003), and bisexual women are assumed to be lesbian heartbreakers just waiting for a man to settle down with (Daumer, 1992; Zaylia, 2009).

This stereotyping has led to significant stigma surrounding the identity. Bisexuals have been called the 'white trash of the gay world, a group whom it's socially acceptable not to accept' (Pajor, 2005: 574). Eliason found, in a study of heterosexual college students, that bisexuals were less accepted than lesbians or gay men (Eliason, 2001: 141). Herek found that 'respondents' attitudes towards bisexual men and women were more negative than for all other groups except injecting drug users' (Herek, 2002: 271).

Little research has been done on individuals with non-binary identities outside of bisexuality. Rust notes that most of her research participants chose more than one term to describe their non-binary identities, and often preferred 'alternative identity terms like ''queer'' or ''pansexual'' over ''bisexual''' (Rust, 2001: 226). Entrup and Firestein found that individuals between the ages of 15 and 35 have 'a sexuality that is characterized by fluidity, ambisexuality, [and] a reluctance to label their sexuality' (2007: 89). However, these authors note that social scientists 'do not yet have the language to encompass the different identities that are arising' (Entrup and Firestein, 2007: 95).

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

Borderland theory and non-binary sexual identities

While trying to frame non-binary identities, I turned to theories of ethnic and racial borderlands. Borderland theory points to the creation and maintenance of identities that fall outside of cultural norms, asking how borderlands simultaneously develop their own cultures while challenging hegemonic ideology. Specifically, I drew on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Renato Rosaldo, and Pablo Vila when exploring the commonalities between racial/ethnic and sexual borderlands.

Gloria Anzaldúa's influential book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* was published in 1987. This work focused on the border between the USA and Mexico, and on the culture surrounding those who lived on and crossed over that border. She describes the border as 'una herida abierta' or an open wound where 'the Third World grates against the first and bleeds... the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture' (Anzaldúa, 1987: 3). Individuals living on this border are described as having plural personalities (Anzaldúa, 1987: 79), as 'seeing double' (Anzaldúa, 2002: 549), and as having a unique insider/outsider perspective. Though Anzaldúa was writing about a specific borderland, she goes on to say that the 'psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest' (Anzaldúa, 1987: i).

The idea of borderlands was also utilized by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo in his 1989 work *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Rosaldo felt that anthropologists had a history of ignoring cultural borders and cultural change. However, he argued that the borderlands between cultures 'should be regarded... as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation' (Rosaldo, 1989: 208). Again, though Rosaldo focuses on the border between the USA and Mexico, he explained that 'borderlands surface not only at the boundaries of officially recognized cultural units, but also at less formal intersections, such as those of gender, age, status and distinctive life experiences' (1989: 29).

Pablo Vila felt that Anzaldúa and Rosaldo only 'partially address[ed] the much more complex process of identity construction' with their borderland theories (Vila, 2000: 6). He claimed that border identities needed to be written as heterogeneous, rather than as one homogenized identity (Vila, 2003: 608). Rather than focusing solely on 'border crossers,' theorists needed to discuss 'border reinforcers,' and 'the myriad of different identities' performed on the border (Vila, 2000: 9, 2003: 610).

From the early 1990s, social scientists have taken these works and applied them to a variety of cultural situations, using 'the border-as-image' approach (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 35). Though a widespread practice, several authors have spoken out against using borderland theory to describe phenomena outside of the USA–Mexico border. Heyman, who feels that the borderlands have become a 'general metonym for mazeways' (1994: 48), states that academics need to 'locate some of the bitter realities of border life... rather than simply using the life of the border as intellectual fodder' (Heyman, 1994: 46). Vila also speaks out against the

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

generalization of borderland theory, stating that 'it is one thing to write about the metaphor, but quite another to cross it daily' (Vila, 2003: 313).

I am sensitive to these critiques, and do not imagine that the daily lives of bisexual and queer individuals in Lexington exactly mirror the lives of individuals waiting on bridges, going through immigration proceedings, and being harassed by Border Patrol (to paraphrase Vila, 2003). With that said, I find the theoretical and metaphorical borderlands to be a productive space to understand identities that are complex, multiple, and existing both within and outside of a binary system. Nor am I the first to make this connection. Anzaldúa specifically mentions sexuality as an aspect of the borderland, both in her 1987 foundational work and in later writings. James discusses bisexuals as 'border-crossers,' in opposition to those who police the heterosexual–homosexual border (1996: 222). Pallotta-Chiarolli describes bisexual youth and multisexual and polyamorous families as existing within a borderland with 'complex and multiple realities' and 'a dual and nuanced perspective' (2010: 5–6). In all of these cases, the borderland has served as an apt framing for fluid, in-between identities.

I was originally drawn to borderland theory because of the similarities between descriptions of the borderlands and descriptions of queer. Queer is a non-label that implies 'not everybody is queer in the same way,' because 'there is nothing in particular to which [queer] necessarily refers' (Daumer, 1992: 100; Halperin, 1995: 62). Queer, as an identity and as a basis for a theoretical school, is an ambiguous, fluid concept that can and does change. Likewise, Anzaldúa described the borderlands as 'an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries' (Anzaldúa, 2009b: 243). Thus, queer identity and cultural borderlands are both understood as nebulous; difficult to define and/or contain. Barnard, who believes that Anzaldúa was writing 'queer theory' before it was given an academic name, states that 'Anzaldúa's mestiza reflect[s] the anti-identitarian, anti-nationalistic potential of the Queer Nation' (Barnard, 1997: 41).

Beyond this, borderland theory was originally constructed to explain the lived experiences of people caught between two labels, two communities, and two ways of being on the border of Mexico and the USA. The border itself was between two groups with vastly different access to power and resources. Thus, individuals living on this border were caught in a power struggle, attempting to hold on to pieces of both cultures while being told that one culture was worth more. Likewise, if sexuality is understood as a shifting terrain made up of two binary identities, then the individuals who label as bisexual, queer or in some other non-binary way are caught between two communities and two labels. Further, as heterosexuality has long been viewed as natural and correct, while homosexuality has been created as an unnatural abomination, the borderland between these two identities is also fraught with power struggles.

The tension between the two areas means that the individual trying to live in-between ends up fitting into neither location. On the Mexico–USA border, individuals are seen as too Mexican by one side, and in danger of becoming agringados or overly Americanized by the other (Vila, 2000: 4). This leads to a situation where

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

individuals with borderland identities are not read or are misread by people outside the border, both not accepted and invisible. The same is true for individuals with non-binary sexual identities, who are both constantly misread and also 'twice-rejected,' both from the straight population for being too queer and from the queer population for being too straight (Shokeid, 2002: 1).

Also, viewing non-binary sexualities as a borderland allows it to be understood as an area of multiple actions. On a cultural–national borderland individuals are able to cross over the border, or to live within it. People are also able to fight against others crossing the borders, or to fortify borders (as mentioned earlier by Vila). An individual can approach, or inhabit, or depart from the borderlands at multiple points in their life, and with different perspectives each time. So too are non-binary sexualities the location of multiple actions. While some people interviewed had labeled as bisexual or queer for decades, thus inhabiting the borderlands, others had labeled as bisexual for only a transitory period, entering the borderland before darting back the way they had come, or continuing on to cross the border.

The border between the USA and Mexico is also a place of furtive crossings, as individuals attempt to sneak across the border without being caught. If these individuals make it across, they are then constantly looking over their shoulders, caught between trying to survive in a new culture and the fear that they will be found out and forcibly removed. This metaphor of the border fugitive lends itself to a study of sexuality, in which, for instance, lesbians discuss their secretive sexual behaviors with men and heterosexual men have relationships with other men on the down low.

Further, Vila states that the cultural borderlands are experienced differently for every person who inhabits/crosses/fortifies them (2000). The sexual borderlands are likewise experienced differently by every person. The polyamorous pansexual, the monogamously married bisexual, and the ex-gay struggling with sexuality can all be read as having borderland sexualities within a shifting binary system. Yet each of these people would understand their identities in completely different ways, and not necessarily feel as though they shared any commonalities with one another. The strength of the borderland construction is its ability to bridge disparate identities and allow commonalities of experience in sexuality, race, ethnicity and class to come to light.

The USA–Mexico borderland is one where ethnic and racial tensions run high, and where people on both sides feel as though they can read others based on their coloring. Here, regardless of what side of the border you are living on, you can be categorized based on whiteness or brownness. The sexual borderland is harder to visibly police. A queer identified woman married to a man looks identical to a heterosexual woman in a similar relationship. Likewise, as Hemmings has pointed out, if lesbians and bisexuals are marching in the same parade, lesbians cannot retain their visibility (Hemmings, 1997: 22).

However, the sexual borderlands are fraught with their own ethnic and racial tensions. Numerous authors have noted that race is always sexualized,

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

and sexualities are constructed through the lens of race (Barnard, 1997; Collins, 2004; Nagel, 2000). If homonormativity and 'gay and lesbian community' carry notions of whiteness, then non-white individuals are pushed towards the borders when forging their own identities. Further, individuals having relationships 'with the ethnic "other,"' find themselves on the 'ethnosexual frontiers' (Nagel, 2000: 113). And, non-binary identities are understood differently across racial/ethnic communities, which can be seen in the phenomenon of African-American men identifying as heterosexual MSM, rather than 'bisexual' or 'queer' (Millett et al., 2005).

It was exactly this overlay of identities that Anzaldúa was writing about in her groundbreaking work. She was writing from the position of lesbian, woman, and chicana (which she describes as itself a mixture of Indian, Mexican, and white), all of which influence her experience of and place within the borderland (Anzaldúa, 1987). Pallotta-Chiarolli charges that academics tend to construct a 'homosexual/bisexual vs. ethnic/polarity rather than examining the multiple sites of connection and tension' (1999: 194). A borderland construction allows for identity multiplicity, where sexual self-identity is understood through and informed by racial, ethnic, religious, and class identities (to name just a few).

Of course, there are some ways in which the theory of borderlands does not fit neatly with an analysis of non-binary sexual identities: namely, the Mexico–USA border is a physical location. To cross this border is oftentimes a physical crossing, while a border barricade will likewise be something tangible. The sexual borderlands are not physical locations, and their boundaries are upheld not by actual blockades, but rather by cultural pressures and internal limits. Foucault stated that once the identity 'homosexual' was created, it was internalized (1978). In his earlier work, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault talks about the ways that society's laws become written into our bodies, so that we discipline ourselves rather than relying on external governing. He relates this to the panopticon, a prison system where the prisoner never knows if he/she is being watched, and therefore moderates his/her own behavior. In much this way, the borders of sexuality have been internalized, and we moderate our actions and desires to fit both how we think we should act, and how we think others think we should act. We each fortify or cross the sexual binary within ourselves, rather than interacting with a geographic location.

In spite of this difference, within both cultural and sexual borderlands exists the potential for border breaking. When Anzaldúa speaks of the revolutionary potential of the border crossing mestiza, she is referring to a breakdown of the ideological categories of race and gender, rather than a breakdown of the physical border between two countries. The new mestiza stands against hegemonic ideologies of correct womanhood across multiple cultures (Anzaldúa, 1987). Likewise the queer, the pansexual, and the individual who refuses to label her sexuality stand in opposition to the sexual binary. However, just as Vila (2000) argues against valorizing those people on the border, so too must we resist the urge to make noble the queer savage.

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

After analysis, it seems clear that non-binary sexualities can be usefully viewed as a borderland. As the binary ideology of sexuality shifts, space opens up where this borderland can exist and thrive. Further, the recent visibility of non-binary sexualities enlarges this borderland as individuals modify their understanding of the sexually possible. Within this borderland a plethora of sexual identities have emerged, such as bisexual, pansexual, and queer. The rest of this article focuses on these identities and the themes that go into their construction. I also analyze moments, places and events in Lexington that can be understood as physical and temporal manifestations of the sexual borderlands.

Borderland identities

My first goal when interviewing and researching in Lexington was to find out what labels people used to describe/encapsulate borderland sexualities. The national media tends to show bisexuality as the only non-binary alternative, if any non-binary identities are shown at all. This was also true of the local *GLSO News*, a monthly Lexington publication which referred to the lesbigay community in the 1990s and the GLBT community in the 2000s without mentioning other alternatives. However, interviews with 80 Lexingtonians showed that they had used a variety of labels to express their sexual identities.

The label 'bisexual' was indeed prevalent in discussions of non-binary sexual identity. Combined, almost 40% of the individuals interviewed had used or considered the label of bisexual at some point in their life. Rivaling bisexual as the most popular non-binary identity was the identity of 'queer.' Seven women identified primarily as queer, while an additional five individuals (one woman, one transwoman and four men) used queer as one of multiple identity labels. Interviewees defined queer in a multitude of ways. Rosario, who identified her sexuality solely as queer, said that queer meant 'I can be attracted to any gender. I don't believe in the gender binary.' Queer-identified Katie said that using the term 'queer' was more acceptable in the GLBT community than 'bisexual.' Therefore, she thought that 'people who might call themselves bisexual are starting to identify as queer or pansexual.'

Several individuals mentioned that they identified as queer because of the problem with fitting attraction to transpeople into labels like bisexual and homosexual. Both Katie and Rosario had identified as lesbian before coming out as queer, and both had changed identities in tandem with dating trans-identified individuals. Scout told me that 'I used to identify as lesbian, but I now identify as queer... I believe that there are multiple genders, not just two, and I don't think that is expressed in the term lesbian.' Queer was also often mentioned as a more academic label, and Logan, Jason and Scott Roberts all explicitly tied their use of 'queer' to classes they had taken in college on feminism and gender studies.

Some individuals felt that queer was an ideal identity because it did not have a fixed meaning. Michael identified as queer, and said that if he was pressed, he would identify as 'straight-queer.' He said that he preferred the term queer because

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

it 'creates a space' with its lack of definition. He felt that this lack of solid definition led to queer being an identity that confused or troubled people, but that this was a good thing, and that 'you have to be troubled by it or it's not queer.' However, other individuals did not like the term queer because of its lack of clear definition. For example, Jenna (who identified as a 'woman who used to be a man who is attracted to women but dating a man' at the time of our interview) said that 'people would call how I identify as queer, and that's the term that they've told me I should use. But that's one of those terms that doesn't have a clear meaning to a lot of people, so I don't use it.'

Pansexual was another borderland label that individuals in Lexington used to describe their identities. Fruit identified solely as pansexual because, 'If I'm going to be with someone, I don't want to let things like genitalia, skin color, or social status get in the way.' She also felt that pansexual was as close as she could get to not having a label at all, and that she only used it because she could not say 'I don't have one.' Lucy said that she had considered using pansexual as a label, but rejected it because, unlike the label 'queer,' 'pansexual has a definition.' However, this definition was not apparent to many of my participants. Jean said that, of the three labels she used to identify her sexuality, pansexual was the one people were least familiar with. Liz, who identified as lesbian, and who was considering identifying as queer at the time of our interview, said 'I couldn't be pansexual because it confuses me.'

Other individuals created their own identities to encompass their non-binary sexualities. Krystal identified as 'mostly heterosexual,' clarifying that 'I am in a long term monogamous relationship with one man, and I've had more relationships with men than women. I'm pickier when it comes to women.' Ice, who sometimes labeled as gay, also used the label 'bicurious' to describe his identity. He said that while he had only been with men, he wanted to have sex with a woman to 'try it out,' which he thought made him something other than gay. Sarah said that she liked the label 'heteroflexible,' because 'I have pretty much tried everything, mostly in the heterosexual realm but that doesn't mean I haven't ventured out.'

Five of the individuals I interviewed did not use any particular identity to describe their sexuality. For example, Emma told me that 'I haven't labeled myself, and I don't even think about it. I'm just with her.' Sydney identified as 'mostly nothing. I feel like it's more important to other people, that they need to know what's going on. It doesn't really matter to me.' Other individuals, such as Opren, Fruit and Kitty, felt that they would prefer not to label, but thought that society required a sexual identity label for all individuals.

While some individuals did not use any label when defining their sexual identities, other individuals used multiple. For example, when asked to tell me her sexual identity, Jean said that:

> Depending on context, my identity is different. When I want to try to be simple, I say bisexual, because most people sort of know what that means. Pansexual is probably the most accurate, because I like people of more than two gender identities.

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

> Sometimes I just say queer because that makes it all the more hazy. I'm a person and I like people and let's not get any more specific than that.

In total, 17 individuals with borderland sexualities listed more than one identity when asked to describe their sexuality. This correlates to Paula Rust's 2001 research, where she found that 'only thirty-eight percent of respondents who identify as bisexual use only the term bisexual to describe themselves sexually' (Rust, 2001: 40).

Just as Vila noted on the USA–Mexico border, the identities within the sexual borderland were various. In total, the 37 individuals I interviewed with non-binary sexualities used 21 different terms or phrases in multiple combinations to label their sexual identities. Despite the wide array of labels used, all of these identities were formed as a reaction to the binary of heterosexual/homosexual, and each moved within and beyond this binary.

The sexual borderlands in Lexington were also a place of multiple actions. While Scout labeled as 'queer' in a deliberate move against the binary, Jenn identified as a 'lesbian married to a man' rather than bisexual because she 'hated the connotations that came with being bisexual – like I will have sex with anything that moves.' In this scenario Jenn was fortifying the boundary between heterosexual and homosexual, even as her identity (a woman identified as a lesbian having a monogamous married relationship to a man) defied that boundary.

Borderland sexual identities were often presented in conjuncture with other, non-sexual identities. The local newspaper warned that black women should fear 'black men on the ''down low,'' ' who served as 'bridges' for HIV infection from the homosexual to the heterosexual population (Villarosa, 2004). Rosario labeled as 'queer,' in part because of 'the racism in the lesbian community' that she encountered as a Latina individual. Fruit chose the label of 'pansexual' for much the same reason. Logan chose not to label as 'queer' in certain work situations because of the class and educational identities she felt it implied. Jenna did not take the label of 'lesbian' because of concerns about the authenticity of her gender identity. So too were USA–Mexico borderland identities a combination of national, racial, ethnic, sexual, and gendered identity.

Lexington's tangible borderland

Throughout my research, one of the major stumbling blocks I faced was trying to 'find' the sexual borderlands. If the borderlands were a state of being, and a system of self-identity, then how was I to conduct an ethnography of these borders? Furthermore, how could I even read borderland sexualities in the field, when every relationship looked from the outside to be either heterosexuality or homosexuality? In a culture where monogamous relationships are the norm and the sexual binary is still prominent, borderland sexualities are almost impossible to read (James, 1996; Whitney, 2002).

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

Through time in Lexington, I found that the sexual borderlands were not conveniently found at any one location. There were no queer/bisexual/pansexual advertised bars, nor were there any organizations exclusively for individuals with non-binary sexualities. Yet, there were certain moments that allowed the borderlands to become visible. Two shows I attended at Al's Bar in September of 2009 and March of 2010 were products of and consumed by borderland people. For two nights Al's became a place of shifting sexuality. Queer-identified biological women wore shirts proclaiming them to be 'fagettes' and transmen sang about packers. People I danced with identified as queer, or pansexual, or with multiple labels, or with none. Most of these people knew one another and were associated with the University of Kentucky's OUTsource, or with the local band the Spooky Qs. The majority of them saw sexuality as something other than binary, and therefore did not read binary sexualities onto one another. At these shows the borderland was not so much performed as the sexual binary was ignored.

This tangible borderland moment was also found at the Unitarian Universalist Church during the Tranny Road Show, where individuals of multiple genders and sexualities performed music, spoken word, puppetry and magic tricks. One performer chose not to label her sexuality, but rather acted it out with a skit involving a series of puppets – three bears and a platypus. Another performer cracked jokes about his struggles as a transman in a lesbian relationship trying to pass as a straight couple in a small town. A video was shown which mingled body parts with androgynous faces and spoken word poetry. Throughout the show, without being able to rely on assumptions about gender/sex, all of the performers were read as having the potential to be any sexuality.

The borderlands were likewise found in Robyn Ochs's presentation at the University of Kentucky. At this event, 55 people arranged themselves along a seven-number sexuality continuum laid out on the floor according to sexual identity. We then shifted positions as we were asked about our actions, attractions, past identities, and sexual fantasies. Here we all visibly experienced the fluid nature of sexuality; only six of the 55 participants did not change their number/space on the floor at least once while we were questioned.

The yearly student-run Beaux Arts Ball, which has a Mardi Gras/Carnival-esque emphasis on turning accepted cultural practices upside down, is another instance of borderland in Lexington. The event is advertised each year at both gay and straight bars, and also all over the University of Kentucky's campus. Hosted by UK's College of Design, the event raises money for local charities; several hundred people attend each year. Attendees dress in outlandish costumes that mix sex and gender cues, or forgo dressing at all. Two men dancing together might be in a gay or bisexual relationship, or might instead be two straight-identified fraternity brothers playing with conventions of sexuality at an event where cultural taboos are normalized. Because it is not billed as either 'gay' or 'straight,' and because sexual and gender fluidity is celebrated during this event, Beaux Arts can be read as a yearly homage to, and tangible manifestation of, the borderlands.

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

Moments that could be easily read as borderland were few and far between in my 17 months in the field. However, these moments did exist, and provided both a temporal and geographical space for a borderland that otherwise existed internally. All of these moments had in common a lack of sexual labels or the assumption of labels. At The Bar Complex, a well-known 'gay bar' in Lexington, individuals were generally assumed to be gay or lesbian because the location was read as 'gay.' The drag performers would call individuals up on stage during their performances and say 'you are gay, aren't you?' before joking about Celine Dion or plaid shirts. Sometimes the performers would choose nervous looking individuals from the audience, and then ask them 'gay or straight?' Straight individuals were teased that they just needed to 'try it in the back, because you'll never go back.' Here, if sexuality was not gay, it was automatically straight. Bisexual, queer, and other borderland sexualities were not read, and were not mentioned during nightly performances.

Similarly, at the GSA Pride Prom the students pointed at male/female couples dancing and joked, 'Who let the straight couples in?' One teenage girl said to me 'they have their own prom, why would they come to ours?' while pointing to a mixed-sex couple. As with The Bar, individuals at the Pride Prom were assumed to be gay, or in a few cases straight. Borderland sexualities were not read, despite the openness of several GSA members about their bisexuality.

The instances that I read as borderland had two things in common. First, borderland moments were those that were not advertised to strictly gay or straight crowds. The performances at Al's Bar were presented as GLBTQQIA-friendly, while the Beaux Arts and the Tranny Road Show were not advertised towards any particular sexuality. Second, borderland moments were often found in conjuncture with groups of individuals who did not identify their gender as either masculine or feminine. In the absence of clear sex/gender cues, sexual identity (which is visible only through gender) was ambiguous. At Al's Bar, or at the Tranny Road Show, the number of transpeople, individuals in drag, and individuals who presented their gender as androgynous made it impossible to read couples as gay or straight. A transman dancing with a drag queen looks neither gay nor straight (or perhaps both gay and straight) and therefore becomes a performance of the borderlands.

However, my reading of the 'tangibility' of the sexual borderlands might be very different from that of a participant of any of the above-mentioned events. Perhaps a group of friends at the Pride Prom, all of whom identified as bisexual and queer, danced with one another and experienced the event as a borderland moment. Perhaps the African American clientele that generally frequented Al's Bar, but who were mostly absent from the Spooky Qs shows I attended, found these events to be exclusive and a product of the racial binary, rather than the sexual borderland. These multiple readings add to the complexity of identity, and to any attempt to study a group of people standing apart from the hegemonic ideology.

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

Conclusion

In the 1980s, scholars began to describe identities formed on the boundary between the USA and Mexico as inhabiting an ambiguous, both-and-neither place that they called the 'borderlands.' Though having ties to a geographic location, the borderlands denoted more than this, referencing a divided and pluralistic way of viewing both the world and oneself. This borderland was viewed as a place of cultural productivity and possible revolutionary potential, as individuals who inhabited it created their own versions of culture while standing against hegemonic understandings of race and gender.

Non-binary sexualities can also be viewed as forming a borderland between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Though the sexual binary is beginning to shift away from its previous hegemonic status, it still remains the dominant sexual schema in the USA. Thus, all sexualities outside of gay and straight are still created within this binary, forming in the cracks between these two 'species.' However, as identities such as queer and bisexual become more visible through local and national discourse, this borderland has grown, touching all sexual identities, binary and not.

The 'lesbian married to a man' who refuses to label as bisexual, or the 'mostly heterosexual' woman who tells everyone she is straight – both of these individuals are purposely choosing not to inhabit the borderlands. The straight woman and the gay man who refuse to date a bisexual man are also interfacing with the borderland in their very refusal to interact with it. Anzaldúa has described the borderlands as 'the one spot on earth which contains all other places within it' (Anzaldúa, 2009a: 184). Though the sexual borderlands can be viewed as containing only non-binary sexualities such as bisexual and queer, in reality they touch on every sexual identity. Individuals of all sexualities react to the sexual borderlands, by crossing them, inhabiting them, fortifying against them, or denying them. In these actions the sexual borderland becomes an integral way of defining the sexual binary, just as the sexual binary provides the boundaries of the borderland.

Funding

The write-up of this research was made possible in part by a Bilsland Dissertation Fellowship, provided by Purdue University.

References

Anderlini-D'Onofrio S (2003) Women and bisexuality: A global perspective: Introduction. *Journal of Bisexuality* 3(1): 1–8.

Anzaldúa G (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

Anzaldúa G (2002) Now let us shift... the path of conocimiento... inner work, public acts. In: Keating A and Anzaldúa G (eds) *This Bridge We Call Home*. New York: Routledge, pp. 540–578.

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

Anzaldúa G (2009a) Border Arte: Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera. In: Keating A (ed.) *The Gloria Anzaldua Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 176–187.

Anzaldúa G (2009b) (Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces. In: Keating A (ed.) *The Gloria Anzaldua Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 243–248.

Barnard I (1997) Gloria Anzaludúa's Queer Mestisaje. *MELUS* 22(1): 35–53.

Blumstein P and Schwartz P (1977) Bisexuality: Some social psychological issues. *Journal of Social Issues* 33(2): 30–45.

Bower J, Gurevich M and Mathieson C (2002) (Con)tested identities: Bisexual women reorient sexuality. *Journal of Bisexuality* 2(2–3): 23–52.

Chauncey G (1994) *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*. New York: Basic Books.

Christina G (1996) Bi sexuality. In: Tucker N (ed.) *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries, and Visions*. New York: Harrington Park Press, pp. 161–166.

Collins J (2004) The intersection of race and bisexuality: A critical overview of the literature and past, present, and future directions on the borderland. *Journal of Bisexuality* 4(1–2): 99–116.

D'Emilio J (1983) Capitalism and gay identity. In: Abb S, Stansell C and Thompson S (eds) *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 100–113.

Daumer E (1992) Queer ethics; or, the challenge of bisexuality to lesbian ethics. *Hypatia* 7(4): 90–105.

Donnan H and Wilson T (1999) *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*. Oxford: Berg.

Eliason M (2001) Bi-negativity: The stigma facing bisexual men. *Journal of Bisexuality* 1(2–3): 137–154.

Entrup L and Firestein B (2007) Developmental and spiritual issues of young people and bisexuals of the next generation. In: Firestein B (ed.) *Becoming Visible: Counseling Bisexuals across the Lifespan*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 89–107.

Foucault M (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.

Foucault M (1978) *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*. New York: Vintage Books.

Fox R (1995) Bisexual identities. In: D'Augelli A and Patterson C (eds) *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities over the Lifespan*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 48–86.

Halperin D (1990) *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*. New York: Routledge.

Halperin D (1995) *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hemmings C (1997) From Landmarks to Spaces. In: Ingram GB, Bouthilette A-M and Retter Y (eds) *Queers in Space: Communities/Public Places/Sites of Resistance*. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, pp. 147–162.

Herek G (2002) Heterosexuals' attitudes towards bisexual men and women in the United States. *Journal of Sex Research* 39(4): 264–274.

Heyman J (1994) The Mexico–United States border in anthropology: A critique and reformulation. *Journal of Political Ecology* 1(1): 43–65.

Israel T and Mohr J (2004) Attitudes toward bisexual women and men: Current research, future directions. *Journal of Bisexuality* 4(1–2): 117–134.

Jagose A (1996) *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

James C (1996) Denying complexity: The dismissal and appropriation of bisexuality in queer, lesbian, and Gay theory. In: Beemyn B and Eliason M (eds) *Queer Studies: A*

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology. New York: New York University Press, pp. 217–240.

Lancaster R (2003) *The Trouble with Nature: Sex in Science and Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lyons A and Lyons H (2004) *Irregular Connections: A History of Anthropology and Sexuality*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Macalister H (2003) In defense of ambiguity: Understanding bisexuality's invisibility through cognitive psychology. *Journal of Bisexuality* 3(1): 23–32.

Millet G, Malebranche D, Mason B and Spikes P (2005) Focusing 'down low': Bisexual black men, HIV risk and heterosexual transmission. *Journal of the National Medical Association* 97(7): 52–59.

Nagel J (2000) Ethnicity and sexuality. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 107–113.

Ochs R (1996) Biphobia: It goes more than two ways. In: Firestein B (ed.) *Bisexuality: The Psychology and Politics of an Invisible Minority*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, pp. 217–239.

Pajor C (2005) White trash manifesting the bisexual. *Feminist Studies* 31(3): 570–574.

Pallotta-Chiarolli (1999) Diary entries from the 'Teachers' Professional Development Playground'. *Journal of Homosexuality* 36(3–4): 183–205.

Pallotta-Chiarolli M (2010) *Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers.

Parrenas J (2007) What kind of –Sexual? *Lesbian News Magazine* March: 20.

Rosaldo R (1994 [1989]) *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Rubin G (1993 [1984]) Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In: Abelove H, Barale M and Halperin D (eds) *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 3–44.

Rust P (2000) *Bisexuality in the United States: A Social Science Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rust P (2001) Two many and not enough: The meanings of bisexual identities. *Journal of Bisexuality* 1(1): 31–68.

Rust P (2003) Bisexuality: The state of the union. *Annual Review of Sex Research* 13: 180–240.

Seidman S (1994) Queer-ing sociology, sociologizing queer theory: An introduction. *Sociological Theory* 12(2): 166–177.

Shokeid M (2002) You don't eat Indian and Chinese food at the same meal: The bisexual quandary. *Anthropological Quarterly* 75(1): 63–90.

Udis-Kessler A (1996) Identity/politics: Historical sources of the bisexual movement. In: Beemyn B and Eliason M (eds) *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 52–63.

Vila P (2000) *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders: Social Categories, Metaphors, and Narrative Identities on the US–Mexico Frontier*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Vila P (2003) Processes of identification on the US–Mexico border. *The Social Science Journal* 40(4): 607–625.

Villarosa L (2004) Black women fear HIV from 'down low' – bisexual men 'bridge' to heterosexuals. *Lexington Herald-Leader* 6 April: A1.

Weeks (1985) *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015

Whitney E (2002) Cyborgs among us; performing liminal states of sexuality. *Journal of Bisexuality* 2(2–3): 109–128.

Zaylia J (2009) Toward a newer theory of sexuality: Terms, titles, and the bitter taste of bisexuality. *Journal of Bisexuality* 9(2): 109–123.

April Scarlette Callis is a lecturer of Honors at Northern Kentucky University. She received her MA from the University of Kentucky in 2004, and her PhD in anthropology from Purdue University in 2011. Her areas of specialization include cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, non-binary sexualities, and queer theory. Her current research project focuses on the interface between religion and sexuality through an investigation of "sexual integrity" and Protestant recovery groups.

Downloaded from sex.sagepub.com at Edge Hill University on October 21, 2015