Queer Media Studies in the Age of the E-invisibility

Mary L. Gray, **Out in the Country: Youth**, **Media**, **and Queer Visibility in Rural America** (Intersections: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Genders and Sexualities), New York: New York University Press, 2009, 279 pp. $18.94 (paperback).

Christopher Pullen, **Gay Identity**, **New Storytelling and the Media**, New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2007, 266 pp. $72.91 (hardcover).

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While sexual and gender minorities' struggles for equality in marriage, military service, and other aspects of social life move haltingly forward, long-standing and powerful aspects of queer infrastructure crumble.

One of the "Top Ten LGBT [Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans] Stories of 2009" at *The Huffington Post* was the closings of queer-specialty and -friendly bookstores (Browning, 2010). Recent closures, some of stores over four decades old, include Oscar Wilde in New York City (this country's oldest gay bookstore and considered by many to be the world's first), Lambda Rising in Baltimore and Washington DC, Suspect Thoughts in Cleveland, Bailey/Coy in Seattle, Out Word Bound in Indianapolis, OutLoud in Nashville, White Rabbit in Raleigh, NC, and A Different Light in Los Angeles. Closures earlier in the first decade of the 21st century included A Different Light in New York, Out Word Connections in Roanoke, Beyond the Closet in Seattle, Equal Writes in Long Beach, CA, A Brother's Touch in Minneapolis, and Creative Visions in Manhattan. Others still open, such as Common Language in Ann Arbor, have had to throw fundraisers in a struggle to remain open. Meanwhile, venerable queer news publications skittered on the edge, with Atlanta's *Southern Voice* and DC's *The Washington Blade* the oldest LGBT paper in the U.S., each going bankrupt and closing in 2009, only to be bought and relaunched in 2010. The year 2009 saw final runs of *The South Florida Blade*, *411 Magazine*, *David Magazine*, the *New Mexico Voice*, the *New York Blade*, *HX* magazine, *Genre* magazine, the *New England Blade*, and the *Houston Voice*. The landmark national newsmagazine *The Advocate*, which began publication in Los Angeles two years before the Stonewall riots, what many consider the start of the modern LGBT rights movement, became an insert within sister publication *Out*. Finally, although not receiving comparable attention, evidence also seems to suggest a decrease in urban gay bars (Sullivan, 2007).

Many bars provided community centers, HIV prevention and testing, and other offerings lost in transition when much socializing—like news and book buying—moved online. Indeed, bars, bookstores, and publications formed a network and infrastructure upon which a great deal of the modern LGBT rights movement was built. The historical significance and future implications of these changes are beyond my

scope, but I note them to frame the two books reviewed here, suggesting another function of this queer infrastructure—that of visibility.

In addition to providing information, social services, and communal connections, bars, bookstores, and print media are visible objects seen in the world. Therefore, their ancillary social functions are not the only thing lost in the move online. Even their primary functions, now safely ensconced in servers, can be thought of as newly invisible. A new kind of virtual closet has developed, even if not one actually hidden. True, unlike a nameless storefront with windows painted black, online queer infrastructure can be easily found and recognized. It announces itself proudly on its dynamic, electronic pages. It is not geographically or spatially limited. If one has Internet access—a condition far from universal, especially if it needs be unfettered—tech-savvy sexual and gender minorities can easily google queer e-resources. Yet, to the rest of the world, they have retreated to invisibility. Save for unintended search results, queer e-resources are typically only seen by those who look for them.

A fundamental strategy—indeed, the core, if not uncontested strategy—of modern queer politics has been visibility. The first step in being protected, understood, and treated equally has been thought to be the assertion of existence: coming out of the closet. This applied to individuals, but also to the larger community and movement. LGBT media and public spaces perform this work 24/7, unlike their online successors. Much like the visibility activism of bumper stickers, lapel pins, or dollar bills stamped "Gay $," store fronts, stacks of papers, and bars announce to straight and other passers-by the existence and vitality of the LGBT world. When non-queer-identified people reach for a local alternative newsweekly and see stacks of LGBT paper(s), or walk past crowds in a gay bar's window, drive past poster-sized book covers on transgender erotica, gay athletes, or lesbian pop singers, the political work of queer visibility is carried out. Now, instead of shouting, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" to the world, online queer infrastructure resembles the unnoticed wallflowers at a high school dance. You can find them, if you're looking for them, but for most everyone not looking, they generally do not exist.

If fundamental components of queer infrastructure that supported many forms of visibility are disappearing (in the sense of both closing and moving into new online invisibility), and if visibility-as-political-action has been a (if not the) key political strategy of the modern LGBT movement, then this is a good time to consider alternatives to the political logic of visibility. Two new books on queer media studies offer promise. Mary L. Gray, an assistant professor of communication and culture at Indiana University at Bloomington, provides new approaches in subject, theory, and method in *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. Christopher Pullen, a senior lecturer in media studies at the UK's Bournemouth University, takes a more traditional, text-based, LGBT media studies approach, but applies a more expansive conceptualization in *Gay Identity, New Storytelling and the Media*. Both, to varying degrees, suggest ways for thinking beyond the foundational logic of visibility.
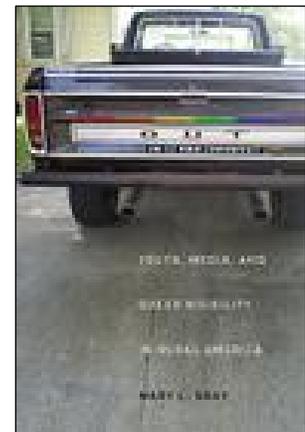
In attempting to understand what gay media visibility means to rural youth claiming and contemplating various queer identities, Gray conducted ethnographic research on several groups of queer youth and their advocates in small towns and rural communities in the Central Appalachian Region, mostly Central and Eastern Kentucky, but also in areas along Kentucky's borders with Indiana, Illinois, and Tennessee. Gray, author of a previous book on queer youth, attended formal events and informal gatherings, where she interviewed 34 rural queer youths. Through this project, *Out in the Country* offers several provocative moves and interventions, such as rethinking the category of "youth" from a more performative than developmental model, but I wish to focus on her decentering media in (new) media studies and her challenging the urban focus and visibility logics of queer politics and media studies.

If media are fundamental to the modern project of queer visibility and to the personal development, progress narrative it implies, by decentering media, Gray seeks to create space in her inquiry to see how rural youth engage differently with a politics of visibility. "We seem to be 'stuck' on visibility politics," she writes (p. 143) and attempts to intervene in several ways: by arguing for greater ethnographic attention in studies of media use and meaning-making, shifting away from the focus on impact derived from media-effects models, and challenging distinctions between online and off-line worlds. Her approach draws on media ethnography, but expands it in productive ways. Rather than examining the media text—the context of its consumption within private and public spaces—and then interviewing to ascertain its reception, Gray takes a broader, more discursive approach. She seeks to place media texts within, but not at the center of, social activity, meaning-making, and identity work. Borrowing from archaeology, she calls this approach to studying media "in situ" and notes, "This approach requires tracing the circulations and layers of socioeconomic status, race relations, and location in the lives of people I met that make their media engagements meaningful to them" (p. 127).

Such an approach is particularly amenable to media scholars trained and/or working within communication. Gray's case studies examine citizens lobbying their congressman after he publicly stated there were no homosexuals in his district, a Homemakers Club's efforts to mount a public forum on youth and homosexuality, struggles to form gay-straight alliances in high schools, youth performing in drag in the aisles of Wal-Mart and online, the broad, networked "genre of queer realness" (p. 29)—online coming-out stories, news and information, personals, and chat rooms—and a 1985 documentary on transsexuals and transgender identity, *What Sex Am I?,* her only chapter on a single text. However, Gray examines the text less as originally broadcast than she does its 1999 2001 recirculation, when its viewing was formative in the developing identities of two transgender youths. Taken collectively, Gray's topics almost beg the question, "Where's the media?" This, I suggest, is precisely her point: Texts appear within the stories she tells, but generally they are not the central focus, opening line, or dominant subject of analysis. It is a shift from examining media and contexts to demoting media to one of several elements and actors within a larger sociological story.

Familiar and surprising texts, media, and technologies appear throughout these chapters: *Will and Grace*, *Ellen*, *Baywatch*, *An American Family*, *Brokeback Mountain*, news Web sites, local newspapers, online personal ads, cable television, queercore music performance, retail stores, car window decals, personal Web sites, and shared photographs. Moreover, these are experienced directly or through years of memory, in different contexts, audiences, and settings, as well as with contrasting receptions and effects.

Combined with ethnographic data, a rich, complex portrait emerges of media as not merely providing a stimulus—a plea for wider acceptance, a jolt of recognition (imparting new education, understanding, or tolerance), an identity template—but a component within multiple discursive streams of knowledge, information, institutions, lives, and identities. Gray does not tell a story about queer media or even queer media users, but a queer story in which media play a telling, but not the most significant, part.

Gray also challenges the urban focus of queer politics and media studies, and not solely in her choice of topic. This book has more ambitious aims than simply documenting a neglected population. Her focus on rural queer youth does this admirably, but even more impressive is how she uses her topic to unpack what Jack Halberstam calls the "metronormativity" of queer scholarship and its implications for politics of visibility. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others, Gray posits the rural as urbanity's Other. Just as the closet and the closeted must exist to constitute through contrast an "out" member of a sexual minority, conceptions of the isolated, closeted, helpless, abused, invisible, rural homosexual constitute the communal, out, proud, strong, hypervisible urban queer. As the archetypal narrative of homosexual pilgrimage and migration from rural to urban spaces attests, these in-out, rural-urban, visible-invisible dualisms are not neutral but poles on a progress narrative, the path to ideal queer identity. Gray admirably challenges this by taking a presumably vulnerable and unevolved population (within this narrative) and documents their agency in queer politics and identity formation, without romanticizing or denying their unique challenges. Significantly, they often do not or cannot rely on urban logics of visibility. Without infrastructures of media, community, meeting spaces, or political power, many efforts based on visibility simply are not viable. Instead of efforts that visibly assert difference and demand respect, they work within networks of local familiarity and solidarity, using conceptual frameworks such as family, not to instill conformity, but to create empathetic recognition. In so doing, Gray reveals not only the combined urban-visibility biases of modern queer politics and identities but also suggests alternatives that may be useful now more than ever.
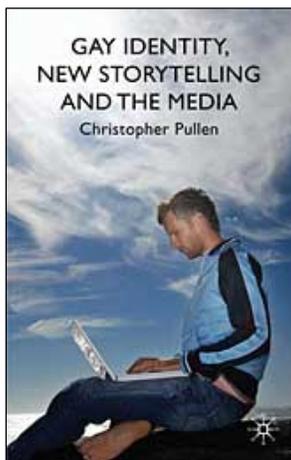
Christopher Pullen's interventions are less in method and topic, but more in their theorization. Author of a recent book on gay men and reality television and documentary film, Pullen takes a familiar course of examining media texts, producers, and public figures in *Gay Identity, New Storytelling and the Media*. He examines these, using exclusively textual analysis of primary and secondary sources, a method that, aside from a few supportive citations, he does not discuss at any length. Although a valid approach, it does make his book perhaps more appropriate for English, cinema studies, or other disciplines more exclusively textual than that of communication. However, Pullen attempts advancing media studies in two major ways: a more discursive approach to textual analysis and, especially, his concept of "new storytelling." While I found his efforts at the former mostly successful, I remained unconvinced of the latter.

Pullen attempts to broaden media studies, not by augmenting textual analysis with more methods and approaches, such as history or ethnography, but by adding more texts. Whereas Gray expands analysis beyond visibility, Pullen expands the range of visible things. He traces commonalities

across numerous literary and vernacular texts, examining radio documentaries, online discussion forums, fictional films and documentaries, popular music, theatre, reality and scripted television, experimental film, and Web sites. In addition, he incorporates a performative perspective that looks at storytelling in the form of publicly-lived lives, news-mediated lives, courtroom trials, documentary depictions, and other representations of figures such as Oscar Wilde, Gore Vidal, Quentin Crisp, Peter Wildeblood, Ellen DeGeneres, George Michael, Pedro Zamora, Dirk Bogarde, and others. Pullen's use of the storytelling umbrella to break limitations of genre and medium is productive and appealing. Also useful is his conceptual framework of examining texts as a "relay of narratives" (p. 8), a diachronic web or network of not merely intertextuality but also of influence, appropriation, evolution, reworking, and challenging previous myths, ideals, and archetypes in queer stories. In his conclusion, Pullen argues that his book "has revealed the coalescent nature of narrative, and how stories may be connected through a progression of diverse opportunities within the media, leading to confidences in identity, and new political, community, and identity actions" (p. 229). With an increasing recognition in media studies of the complexity and multiplicities of texts, if not the near impossibility of delineating a discrete text, his approach is an agile and expansive one that allows tracking ideas across wide swaths of representations and expressions.

In terms of theorizing visibility and changing media infrastructure, Pullen's approach suggests the useful combination of media studies and performance studies. Objects are not the only things seen, so are actions. Moreover, considered as elements in discursive relays, the closings of LGBT newspapers, bookstores, and bars might be more productively examined within the larger frame of the health of the discursive and expressive network: Ponder less the state of queer storytelling venues and more that of queer storytelling and storytellers.

Unfortunately, the argument to which Pullen puts this approach did not impress me. After a century plus of new media hyperbole, exaggeration, and rhetoric, it behooves media scholars especially to deploy the term "new" with the utmost care. Pullen's "new storytelling" concept confused me on several points. It is described and refined throughout the book, for example:

> When new storytellers offer their life stories as examples of identity, new role models are formed, audiences are potentially educated and democratic ideas may develop. The life story is the centre of narrative progress, which for gay men and lesbians reveals the potential to challenge myths, enabling the idea of self-storytelling. (p. 230)

Yet, the humanizing, uplifting, and stereotype-bashing effects of reflexive gay and lesbian life stories signify a long-standing political strategy, as evidenced by decades of LGBT nonfiction books and documentaries with "stories" in their titles. This calls into question the relative newness of the ongoing phenomenon Pullen documents. If, as is widely accepted and Pullen notes, a stable gay identity began in the late 19th century, then, based on this book's title, we are dealing with a timeline of roughly 130 years, suggesting anything "new" would fall in at least the last quarter of that range, say, since the late 1970s. Yet, several of his examples predate this. "New" is a relative term, and his use of it seems unclear and inconsistent. Moreover, many of his arguments seem not particularly innovative: "I argue that media offer a discursive arena through which debates are played out" (p. 75), or "Participatory new media stimulates the coalescence of an imagined gay community, formed through the sharing of narratives" (p. 136).

Claiming that an online discussion forum—a medium that has been in use (and used by gays and lesbians) for decades—"represents a vivid new social formation" seems hyperbolic and particularly outdated, given the critical turn of much new media studies. Finally, despite the cover image of a young man using a laptop, new media are in relatively short supply, consisting of only three of his more than 30 major examples.

Finally, even if one accepts Pullen's new storytelling model, its relation to gays and lesbians is unclear. Reflexive narratives of identity formation in media texts and lived performances—ones that challenge dominant negative narrative and inspire new stories— are surely not exclusive to queers. Yet, the book does not significantly consider similar new storytelling from feminist or critical race perspectives, for example, begging questions such as: Is this form of storytelling merely new to gays and lesbians? Was, for example, Sojourner Truth a new storyteller when she famously asked, "Ain't I a Woman?" If not exclusive to queers, is there something unique in their stories, performances, or relays of narratives? For a pronouncement as grand as that of a new form of narrative performance—storytelling, argued by some to be the defining act of humanity (Fisher, 1985)—such ambiguity and omissions are significant.

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