

Family Values



Fictive Kinship,
Identity Construction,
and Conflict among
LGBT Homeless Youth

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This paper explores fictive-kinship relations among homeless LGBT youth in Chicago's Boystown neighborhood. The youth meet through a patchwork of social-service providers and organize their relationships around the concept of the "gay family." Relationships within the family create avenues to share and access various resources, from money and material goods to knowledge about social services. The family also creates a set of expectations, obligations, and responsibilities for each individual within it. Parents and other members of a family guide a child's sense of identity, teaching the child how to dress and act appropriately and how to conceptualize gender and sexuality. Conversely, through following the guidance of the parent, the child validates the parent's own conception of gender and sexuality. In this way, families serve not only to aid survival, but to create and reinforce ideas of self and propriety. This is complicated when set within the social context of the broader neighborhood—service providers and community residents carry alternate understandings of these kids' identities, challenging the self-conceptions developed within the family.

Introduction: A Stroll through the Neighborhood

'The first thing you got to know about me is that I'm homeless,' Sunny tells me.¹ We are walking down north Halsted Street in Chicago's Boystown neighborhood, scrunched into our coats against the late autumn cold. 'But you wouldn't be able to tell by seeing me walk down the street,' she says. 'I try to look like just another person going to work.' Sunny is tall and lanky, and on this day she wears a tan vellum coat and jeans. She has thick yellow-streaked bangs, which are cut straight across her forehead and drop down just above her eyes. She carries a handbag where she stores a pair of heels and a hairbrush. As we talk she occasionally pulls out the brush and combs her hair. She often smiles, but always with her lips pushed firmly together.

The street where we walk is lined by large pylons with rings the color of the rainbow. The city put them up in 1998, as part of a \$3.2 million project to officially recognize and rebrand the Midwest's largest "gayborhood." Attached to the pylons are bronze "Legacy Project" plaques, which recount historical LGBT figures as varied as Alvin Ailey, Christine Jorgensen, and Alan Turing. This stretch of Halsted is an active commercial district filled with coffee shops and bars, fitness gyms and Thai restaurants, theaters and banks. Most storefronts fly rainbow flags or sport rainbow decals in their windows. Quiet residential streets run perpendicular to the main drag, with rows of Chicago greystones and three flats adorned with orderly planting boxes.

Sunny identifies as transgender, which is what initially brought her to Boystown. She started frequenting the neighborhood when she was thirteen, often making the trip from her family's home on the West Side. She permanently moved to the neighborhood's streets when she was sixteen, nearly five years prior to our conversation. She does not plan to stay here indefinitely, however. She tells me that at some point she hopes to go to Columbia College in downtown Chicago to study performance.

1. I use single quotation marks to indicate hand transcribed or reconstructed conversations and double quotation marks to indicate dialogue that I recorded.

'Performing arts, acting singing, you know,' she says. 'I've been doing it all my life. Even now: Sunny may seem like my personality, but she's really a character.' That sort of performance didn't come naturally. Rather, she has put in much effort at improving her stage presence. 'When I came to Boystown it was a teaching process,' Sunny explains. 'I had to learn about how to dress better and how to act better. Anybody can throw on women's clothes, but that doesn't mean you look like a woman.'

Sunny's peers in Boystown proved to be the most valuable teachers. After many years, she is doing the same for others: 'I've got a lot of children out here.' In one sense, she is referring to the large and fairly insular group of queer homeless youth that inhabit Boystown. But she is also referring to a specific set of individuals whom she has taken under her wing, her family. This sort of family is not biologically determined but cobbled together from among the always-changing community of young homeless individuals who come to the neighborhood seeking a space to express and explore their gender and sexuality. 'I'm just trying to look out for them to make sure they're doing okay,' she says, referring to her children. 'Like last night in the shelter, I made sure all my kids got noodle packets.' Sunny introduced me to one of her children, Trina. 'When I first got here, I messed with everybody,' Trina explained. However, 'after doing that a while, a lot of people talked to me.' 'Who talked to you?' I asked. 'My family, Sunny here. They made me be smarter.'

This paper explores how LGBT homeless youth in Boystown organize their relationships into families and the consequences of that organization. By joining a family individuals gain help in creating and validating their self-conceived gender and sexual identities, while learning to navigate the travails of homelessness. They learn not just how to survive in a setting of social and economic marginalization, they learn what it means to be gay or bi or trans or queer. Put in other words, the family structure helps both to generate and to validate a specific conception of gender and sexuality among family members.

This paper presents a composite picture of the process of joining, participating in, and leaving a family. I do not address the nature of any specific identity, choosing instead to investigate the social dynamics that underpin all these group-derived identities. Throughout I address points

of conflict that challenge the family structure, and this comes to the foreground in the latter part of the paper. A family helps individuals to formulate identities, but those identities have their own limitations. Individuals whose chosen identities diverge too greatly from the expectations of other family members either resist family norms or are left out altogether. At the same time, individuals' peers on the streets are not the only ones exerting pressure on their self-conceptions. Social-service providers and other neighborhood residents categorize these individuals as homeless or as outsiders, which corrodes the fragile self-conceptions that they develop within their families. All this arises within a larger neighborhood and national context of increasing legal protections for LGBT-identifying individuals. This study questions the extent to which those gains have been equally distributed and shows how parts of the Boystown community use their economic and social standing to draw sharp boundaries around what constitutes acceptable behaviors, identities, and relationships.

Literature Review

This study begins by examining existing research on how individuals make ends meet and create meaningful worldviews within a context of extreme material deprivation, such as homelessness. The United States experienced a drastic increase in the population of homeless individuals due to Reagan-era cutbacks of social-service funding and support. (For extended discussion see Wolch and Dear 1993 and Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010.) At the same time, qualitative research into homelessness rapidly increased as investigators began to grapple with this new phenomenon and its impact on both the homeless and the communities in which they were situated.² Two competing sociological accounts of homelessness emerged over the following decades. "Survival strategies" stress the functional ways that social networks can help homeless people to gain access to a wide range of material necessities. On the other side, culturally situated

2. This increase in research is related to the funding cuts, which had a large impact on the sorts of social-science research projects that could be undertaken in the era.

“worldview” approaches attempt to understand the different ways in which homeless individuals make sense of their surroundings. Most studies of youth homelessness employ the survival-strategies approach. I hope to show how broadening survival strategies to incorporate worldviews can help us better understand the world of LGBT kids on the street while expanding the analytical purview of worldviews.

Survival Strategies

This approach looks at the ways homeless individuals leverage their social settings for material ends. I will highlight a few examples of major works that study youth homelessness using this instrumental approach. Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) argue that homelessness amplifies negative developmental patterns that originate in a young person’s domestic family situation, which makes a youth more prone to self-destructive behavior. Karabanow (2006) looks at the process by which new “street kids” enter into a career on the street—this primarily entails learning the necessary “survival routines” from older street kids. Stablein (2011) examines the social network of young homeless people in a city in the northeastern United States. He is most interested with how individuals leverage social capital and foster ties with non-homeless youth in order to gain access to a wider range of resources. These three accounts foreground the material deprivation of homelessness and provide similar explanations for how young people meet their material needs in such situations.

Desmond (2012) provides a textured theoretical framework that accounts for the specific pathways by which individuals in extreme poverty help each other. He examines eviction cases in Milwaukee, arguing that those forced out of a home often form “disposable ties” with people they hardly know in order to survive—helping each other to find shelter, food, money, and a whole range of other resources. However, these ties are often brittle and break as quickly as they form. This is a useful framework, but Desmond’s emphasis still remains on access to material support. Desmond and others risk portraying the social world as simply a set of tools to obtain food or drugs or shelter. They lose the ways in which different understandings of the social world can lead individuals down different paths and even change what individuals consider essential

to survive. This approach necessarily minimizes the different roles an individual might play as family member, friend, or romantic partner. As a consequence, it struggles to account for how people's different conceptions of the social landscape can influence their action.

Inquiries into youth homelessness within Chicago have been carried out mainly by social-welfare researchers using the survival-strategy approach. The Center for Impact Research undertook the most comprehensive study in 2004 (Levin et al. 2005), surveying the needs of homeless youth at the behest of the Chicago Department for Children and Youth Services. The study trained twelve homeless youth to interview other young adults living on the streets, who in turn surveyed over four hundred individuals. Researchers found that they could divide their subjects roughly into five groups: youth on the street, young teens, parenting youth, LGBT youth, and youth with criminal records. All groups suffered primarily from domestic instability (Levin et al. 2005, iv–vi). Furthermore, the researchers found “a significant disparity between the needs reported by homeless youth in Chicago and the services available for meeting them” (Levin et al. 2005, ix). Significantly, the survey presupposed a survival-strategies framework by asking individuals what they need to survive.

Culture and Poverty

Some have taken issue with structural-functional survival-strategies accounts, arguing that researchers tend to emphasize material needs in the lives of those in extreme poverty (Snow and Anderson 1987, Gowan 2010). The turn away from a survival-strategies approach opens up space for the reemergence of meaning making as a fertile subject in studies of homelessness.

In Snow and Anderson's (1987) foundational work on the management of homeless identity, the authors propose three strategies of “identity talk”—distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling—as ways of creating a stable and respectable understanding of self in reference to homelessness. Additionally, they make the distinction between “perspectives *in* action,” how individuals' worldview influence their interactions, and “perspectives *of* action,” how individuals explain their interactions. Homeless individuals are limited in the ways they can present

themselves, such as the ability to afford new clothing. Even within those restrictions, however, individuals build an understanding of self and surroundings in ways that are by no means foretold by their material deprivation. This framework stresses the extent to which any homeless identity is constructed and the creative ways those identities can vary.

Coming out of this work, we can see several examples where researchers strive to understand the worldviews of different homeless populations. Gowan (2010) argues that discourses around homelessness, both among the broad public and among the homeless themselves, constitute three major framings of homelessness: sick talk, sin talk, and structure talk. These discourses explain how homeless individuals constitute meaning around different identities and subsequently how they act in regard to those homeless identities. Perry (2012) looks at a group of homeless individuals who spend their nights in a Chicago Dunkin' Donuts as a way to manage their homeless identity.

In these studies homelessness is the prevalent identity category, but for LGBT youth homelessness is only one of several identities. The move to integrate a more cultural understanding of poverty clearly informs this paper. The community I examine in this study is dealing with issues of gender and sexual identity alongside the more material needs of extreme poverty. Where Snow and Anderson convincingly show the ways in which homeless identity is constructed, it is entirely plausible that those identities can run along multiple dimensions in ways that their work does not address.

Part of the reason that the homeless identity is so visible in these studies is the approach of the researchers. Valentine (2007), in his ethnography of the transgender category, writes: "This book is a call to think about gender and sexuality as political formations: not simply in terms of the politics that attach to gendered and sexual systems, experiences, bodies, and identities but in the very constitution of gender and sexuality as social and analytical categories" (19). His approach asks us to consider the ways in which different identities—gender, sexuality, or otherwise—are generated and deployed to specific ends, and with specific consequences. Competing social designations can become sites of conflict themselves as well as sources of considerable social tension. As we will see, this holds true for homelessness as a category.

Fictive Kinship

I have made a few passing references to cultural approaches to homelessness, which merit further explanation. Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010) lay out seven approaches to culture, including one they call “symbolic boundaries.” In their schema, “symbolic boundaries constitute a system of classification that defines a hierarchy of groups and the similarities and differences between them... Like narratives, symbolic boundaries are integral to social identities, but while narratives focus on links to others, symbolic boundaries illuminate the cultural basis of group division” (17). A common example of this is the notion of kinship. The language of the family works itself into a dazzling range of situations, put to use by many different individuals and groups. “Brothers and sisters” is a phrase familiar to churchgoers and union members. “He was like a father to me” is used to describe a mentor. The language is meant to evoke a particular sort of intimacy. Here I focus on several examples where the language and concept of the family is appropriated by different socially marginalized groups.

Over the years, there have been a number of studies that address fictive kinship in communities with concentrated poverty (Leibow 1967, Anderson 1978, Newman 1999). Stack (1975) provides the most in-depth approach to this subject, exploring kinship networks in the pseudonymous midwestern town of Jackson Harbor. Kinship in this context is more complex than simply a description of biological relations: “Members of the community explain the behavior of those around them by allowing behavior to define the nature of the relationship. Friends are classified as kinsmen when they assume recognized responsibilities of kinsmen” (60). Kinship denotes a system of rights and responsibilities between individuals, with the title of kin formalizing those whom an individual can count on to get goods and services in times of need. Stack’s model of social exchange and domestic-kinship networks is predicated on the material necessity of poverty—such relations allow individuals to access money, material goods, and services such as childcare when they have absolutely no other options.

LGBT communities enact families in several different ways. Gay parents have become increasingly common and are a part of a long move

toward nonbiological families holding the same sort of legitimacy as biological ones (Weston 1991). In the United States we see this rapidly becoming normalized in the gay-marriage movement. Family comes up in quite a different sense in ball culture, as shown in the documentary, *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990). Balls involve walking in competitions which are judged by how well one can pull off a certain identity, such as Butch Queen Vogue Femme or Runway Diva. In the documentary the competitors come from lower-class African American and Latino families and belong to "houses." Michael Cunningham, profiling the New York ball scene for *Open City* in 1995, writes: "The House of Xtravaganza, like the House of Corey and the other houses, consists of a mother and a father and a big raucous band of 'children': drag queens, butch queens (gay men who dress like men), transsexuals, a few real girls and one or two straight guys."³ Houses sponsored balls, and children compete to win recognition for their house. Many individuals in the ball scene have been challenged and kicked out by their biological families. Yet they use the terminology of family to describe a new, divergent form of social organization.

Fictive kinship also plays a role in the community of highly transient street kids in New York City, detailed by Finkelstein (2005). Most of the people she met referred to each other as family: "In order to compensate for their lack of family relationships, many kids formed familial-like bonds with other street kids and often believed that their 'street family' was more important to their lives than their 'real' family" (44). However, she does not go beyond gesturing to this concept—we do not get a sense of perspectives in action. This leaves many questions unanswered. For example, what does this notion of family tell us about the interactions between street kids? What delimits a family? When is it invoked in social interaction, and when is it not?

3. Cunningham, Michael. 1995. "The Slap of Love." *Open City* #6, Retrieved in 2012 (<http://opencity.org/archive/issue-6/the-slap-of-love>).

Methodology and Data

This study considers the meaning-making processes of family in a broader context. I ask to what extent are these family identities accepted by others? The attempts of individuals to distance themselves from a homeless identity will only have limited significance if the broader community still perceives them as part of a homogeneously homeless group. This research project hopes to (a) make us attentive to broader or alternate identities within the context of poverty, (b) evaluate the extent to which those identities are validated or negated by others outside one's community, and (c) explore the implications.

It draws from a variety of observational data, ethnographic encounters, and interviews with a broad range of people in Chicago's Boystown neighborhood. Over my time in the field, I talked to social-service workers, artists, activists, and medical professionals. At the centerpiece of this analysis are eight individuals who were using youth homeless services at the time I knew them. Five were black (one of Caribbean origin), two were white, and one was Latino. We spent time wandering the neighborhood, hanging out in various social-service spaces, talking about and questioning the ways in which they thought about themselves and how they fit into the neighborhood. I conducted research from September 2012 to March 2013.⁴

To find informants I approached individuals on the street and asked if they would be willing to discuss their sense of community in Boystown. I approached individuals indiscriminately. The reason was twofold. On the one hand I was interested in broader community dynamics and wanted to understand a broad set of perspectives. More pragmatically, none of my informants held signs, saying "I'm Homeless." They were well-kempt and didn't engage in stereotypically homeless behavior, such as panhandling. I had no clear way to tell that a person was homeless or using social services other than by talking to them. I met five of my eight informants

4. The University of Chicago's Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board approved this research project (IRB12-1331) on August 2, 2012, with my thesis advisor, James Evans, listed as the principal investigator.

in this manner. The other three I met through those five informants. For all of the eight, we carried on at least one long, unstructured conversation in various places around the neighborhood.⁵ Most of our interactions were unrecorded, so much of my data has been reconstructed from notes jotted down immediately following our interactions.

Cast of Characters⁶

- **Sunny** (21) — *mother of Vincent/Trina*
- **Vincent / Trina** (18) — *son of Sunny*
- **Kymbir** (20) — *sister of Jorge*
- **Jorge** (24) — *brother of Kymbir*
- **Derrick** (19) — *in family, not related to other main informants*
- **Eleanor** (25) — *aged out of family*
- **Harrison** (19) — *no longer in family*
- **Taylor** (22) — *never in family*

Throughout my time in the field I attempted to be as forthcoming about my research intentions as possible. At various points in conceiving and carrying out the research, academics and informants questioned why I did not go undercover and try to pass as a homeless youth. On one level, I did not want questions of authenticity to creep into the project. My principal informants lead uncertain and unstable lives, and I did not see how any level of deceit on my part could have increased their desire to talk to me and trust in me. As we will see, the people in Boystown have travelled all sorts of routes to the neighborhood, and each has encountered the neighborhood and fellow residents in quite different ways. This leads to my second, more theoretical reason: I am interested in capturing

5. This list omits the many other individuals, homeless and otherwise, whom I met in passing; I never got a chance to talk to these familiar faces for a longer period of time.

6. The names are pseudonyms. Biographical facts, locations, service providers, etc. are unchanged.

the entire spectrum of these experiences. I feared that, in going undercover, my own experiences would flatten the whole set of individuals and experiences I hope to understand. I can and did inhabit many of the same spaces as my informants, but that does not mean we were seeing the same world.

There were tradeoffs with this approach. For example, I did not witness any acts of violence that some of the informants mentioned, which means I did not probe as deeply into interpersonal conflict. This also limited my inquiry into highly sensitive topics like prostitution or interactions with the police. Many of the events I describe come from the perspective of the person who described them to me. I had no way to verify an individual's side of a story or understand how the events might be viewed differently by others. But, at the least, we can assume this is how they wanted me to view their world.

Analysis

'My family is all my friends, everyone on the street who wants to express themselves like I do,' Vincent says. 'Family is always looking out for each other.' Vincent had only been in Boystown for six months, after spending a few years bouncing around in halfway homes and foster care. He introduced himself to me as Trina, his female name, and often was in drag, though he did not identify as transgender.⁷ 'Is this in place of your biological family?' I asked Vincent. 'No,' he replied. 'It's to show you that you could be gay or transsexual, that there are others like you.'

It is exactly this that I hope to probe: how Vincent and others on the street come to a sense that there are others like them and how they enact and perpetuate this sense of sameness. In one way, Vincent is referring to his family as everyone who is out on the streets. Yet he is also referencing a more specific notion of family: the "gay family," as he and others referred to it. This gay family serves as a means of structuring relationships within the homeless LGBT community in Boystown. This

7. Vincent decides what name he uses based on how he is feeling—Trina reflects his calmer side.

structure helps individuals meet material needs, along the same lines as would be expected by the survival-strategies literature. Yet perhaps more importantly, the family provides a structure for an individual to formulate an identity in line with how they perceive their gender and sexuality. In this way, the family reproduces a shared understanding of what it means to be queer and living on the streets in Boystown.

The parent-child relationship anchors the family structure. However, unlike the nuclear family, it is negotiable and nonexclusive. Parents and children choose each other, and one can have many parents and many children. Beyond this central dyad, the gay family is multidimensional, like a biological family. There are grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. Unlike a biological family, however, these extra relatives are defined more by degrees of separation than by specific roles. The grandmother does not engage in actions particular to the grandmother, nor does the uncle have a unique set of duties. Rather, they exist two steps away from the child, with almost identical relations to the child. Both function as weak ties that children can lean on for certain resources, without invoking the larger and more comprehensive set of obligations and responsibilities of a parent-child relationship. Extended family also helps to sculpt and reinforce the identities which individuals come to through the family. However, the self-perceptions that the family cultivates are fragile and easily undermined by others outside the family. This becomes clear when we look at how LGBT homeless youth are situated in the larger neighborhood. Many residents and business owners do not think of these individuals as queer, but as homeless outsiders who are detriments to the neighborhood.

My analysis follows an individual's life course through the family, in four parts. First, I deal with arriving in Boystown and joining a family. Next I look at the family from the perspective of children and parents. Throughout this discussion I talk about both the material stakes and the consequences for one's identity. Third, I look at those who are not in any family, either because they left their family or because they never joined one in the first place. In the last section, I move to tease out the conflicts between family members and the broader Boystown neighborhood.

Out on the Street

Few individuals in this community lived in Boystown before they become homeless. Instead, their routes bring them from around the city, region, and country. I begin this section by addressing patterns of migration: individuals journey to the neighborhood based on their understanding of their gender and sexual identity, drawn by the neighborhood's reputation as the center of Chicago's LGBT community. These new migrants congregate around a set of social-service providers. Potential parents who have been using those services for a while can tell who is new and vie to incorporate those migrants into their family.

Journey to the Neighborhood

Kymbir, Jorge, and Vincent demonstrate the wide range of paths that lead individuals to the neighborhood. Kymbir identifies as a transgender woman. She is originally from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, which is located on the southern shores of Lake Winnebago about one hundred fifty miles north of Chicago. She left home at the beginning of 2012, and after spending several months in Milwaukee, she headed for Chicago. She walked fifty miles along the freeway to Zion, Illinois, where she found a medical nonprofit that gave her enough money for a train ride to Chicago. After spending a few days downtown she came to Boystown, where she has remained since. She began transitioning shortly after she arrived, in mid-July 2012. Jorge is the son of Latino immigrants. He arrived in Boystown in the fall of 2012 after leaving his family in Chicago's western suburbs, after coming out. He has been desperately attempting to work on his English skills, which proved to be his biggest barrier to finding a job. Vincent comes from the western suburbs as well, though he ran away from his family several years ago. He identifies as bisexual. After leaving the suburbs, he bounced around the youth-justice and foster-care systems. He ran away from his most recent foster home at the end of the summer and came directly to Boystown.

For these “sexual migrants,”⁸ kids who have been cast out or abused at home due to their nonnormative genders and sexualities, Boystown presents an attractive destination. Boystown is ostensibly a space where a plurality of nonnormative identity categories are accepted and even encouraged. In the 1970s young gays and businesses catering to gays started to congregate in the neighborhood, then known as New Town. This was one of the emerging “gay ghettos” that started to grow in cities around America, building on the momentum of urban-gay activism in the 1960s (Levine 1979, Aldrich 2004). The residents and businesses were drawn both by low rents and by each other—a community of similarly marginalized individuals in search of friends, jobs, and a place to openly express their sexuality. The first Gay Pride Parade went down Halsted Street in June 1970. The neighborhood has changed much since that time, and now it is an attractive place to live for many young urban professionals regardless of their sexual orientation. As we saw in the introduction, however, there are many highly visible markers of the neighborhood’s queer past and its continuing role as a center for Chicago’s LGBT community.⁹

Within the shifting composition of the neighborhood, a steady handful of core institutions—community centers, nonprofits, and religious

8. I borrow this term from Rubin (2011). Writing in 1984 she states: “Many of the sexual migrants who flock to places like San Francisco are downwardly mobile... Sexual migration creates concentrated pools of potential partners, friends, and associates. It enables individuals to create adult, kin-like networks in which to live. But there are many barriers which sexual migrants have to overcome.” (164–66).

9. Suttles (1984), exploring collective representations and urban culture, writes: “If local collective representations grow in number but do not change, they nonetheless take on a different evaluative hue... Those artifacts and images which represent an earlier period are a known quantity, and they may especially contrast with the more alarming ones that foreshadow an uncertain and contestable future” (299). Despite large social and economic changes to Boystown over the past thirty years, the omnipresent flags, decals, and physical markers, as well as the Gay Pride Parade and other annual events, continue to lend the neighborhood historical continuity.

organizations—provide services for homeless kids. These include the Crib, the Center on Halsted, and the Broadway Youth Center. The Night Ministry runs the Crib specifically for young homeless LGBT individuals who feel unsafe in adult shelters. All eight of my subjects had stayed there, if not the night before I talked to them then recently. (The shelter consistently turns people away due to a greater demand for beds than the amount available.) The Center on Halsted is a community center located around the corner from the Crib, sharing a building with a Whole Foods. It provides a range of services for young LGBT individuals. Nominally they are for anyone, homeless or not, but the primary users tend to have unstable housing situations. Situated several blocks to the east, the Broadway Youth Center opens three times a week to provide health care, food, showers, clothing, and access to the Internet to LGBT youth. A handful of churches also open up at different points during the week to allow kids to hang out in a semiprivate safe space.

Service providers play an important role in fostering specific sorts of identities relationships between individuals. Desmond (2012) writes: “Institutions charged with managing the poor, those that brought together people with similar needs, were sites par excellence for the formation of disposable ties” (1,311). These institutions bring together individuals with the goal of providing care, but they also have a significant secondary consequence: those individuals are brought into contact with other individuals who have a similar set of needs and are facing similar life circumstances. Boystown, and more specifically the social-service providers in Boystown, attracts individuals because those individuals see themselves in terms of a particular queer identity. In turn, the facilities that cater to these individuals help to manifest these imagined communities. This means they play an active role in reifying those identities. By bringing together the collection of homeless kids, the Crib, the Center on Halsted, the Broadway Youth Center, and other community institutions provide the space and the sustained contact for relationships and identities to form.

For some, the path is more gradual and home is closer. Sunny still occasionally visits her mother, though her mother gets angry if she isn't in her male form, “Tokyo.” For others, the move is abrupt and more urgent. Kymbir explains: ‘My dad would come here and kill me if he

knew I was gay. And not that I'm just gay, but also trans.' As we saw, Kymbir's path to the city was long and indirect: she arrived here after a stay in Milwaukee, a hike along the highway, and a sojourn in downtown Chicago. These individuals all felt the need to leave home, but the act of leaving does not necessarily suggest a destination. For those who ended up in Boystown, their route was clearly driven by their understanding of their gender and sexuality.

Finding Family

Individuals come to Boystown with a vague sense of the neighborhood as a safe space but with little knowledge of actual people and places within the neighborhood. This opens up a space for socialization within the homeless community, which is where the family comes into play. Individuals can become a part of a family through a direct request from a prospective parent or child, though often it is more implicit, like the process of friendship. Usually prospective parents make the request. For example, Derrick explains how he became Romeo's father: "I saw him for three months—I took him in and he started calling me 'gay dad,' and I started calling him 'gay son,' and it took him three weeks just to call me 'gay daddy' while I was calling him 'gay son.'" Though Derrick first presented the partnership as mutual, he quickly clarified that he was the first one to start calling Romeo "gay son." Kymbir, on the other hand, asked her prospective father to take her in. That said, the parent is usually the initiator.

While this negotiation is built in part upon the ability to get along with another person, a lot also rests on one's visual appearance. Prospective parents pick up on common cues that someone is new to the neighborhood and without a family. Derrick says new migrants have a "wretched" appearance, referring to torn clothing and ripped wigs. Sunny gives voice to a similar idea: she can identify new individuals by their lackluster appearance, because they have not yet learned how to look. This reveals the extent to which the family community values visual presentation. 'Image is everything,' Eleanor tersely puts it. She is no longer in a family, but while we stand on a street corner on Halsted one midafternoon she describes the process of evaluating individuals on the street when she was

in a family. 'For every person the question is "what is this person giving me?"' she states. 'See that person?' she says, pointing to a middle-aged woman walking out of a store. 'She's all about the soccer mom. See that person? She's giving me butch queen.' Each of these contains a different value judgment about the identified person's worth and background. Within this perspective, newcomers are identifiable because they do not have what longer-term residents view as a knowledgeable appearance. Acceptance into a family is built in part on a person admitting that their appearance and demeanor are in some sense wrong. At the same time, they demonstrate a potential to reconfigure themselves to align with their parent's set of values.

All in the Family

Within the family, the child and parent roles each comes with a set of expectations and responsibilities. Parents share their knowledge of the neighborhood with their children and exert social control over them. For children there is an expectation that they will listen to their parents and take them seriously. Children can also access social and material resources from their parent's set of family relations and from their siblings. This section explores the various codes that define the role of the child and the parent.

Getting What You Need

In many ways the family operates as the survival-studies literature would expect, helping individuals to obtain material resources, such as food or money. Individuals new to the neighborhood have a lot to sort out in terms of both knowledge of the neighborhood and access to resources. When I first met Jorge and Kymbir they were headed to an LGBT sexual-health study. By signing up, Jorge would receive thirty-five dollars with additional money for subsequent participation, and Kymbir would get twenty dollars for referring him. In addition, Jorge would receive regular checkups and access to basic health care. Jorge and Kymbir are both siblings; here they are working together to pool resources. In addition to

tangible goods, such as money or health care, the family helps with more intangible resources. Eleanor dropped out of high school on the city's South Side, while she was beginning to identify as transgender. After this she moved to Boystown and quickly joined a family, having known kids in the neighborhood from before. Pretty soon after she joined, her parents encouraged her to get her GED and helped direct her towards a program to do so.

On the other hand, individuals can use their family relations in a more exploitative manner. Many of my informants discussed how prostitution can be woven into the family structure. The parent will find someone willing to pay for sex and introduce that individual to their child. The two split the profits. 'You have a lot of parents trying to set you up,' Derrick explains. Both Sunny and Vincent say they've been mistaken for prostitutes and propositioned for sex by strangers, though both strongly deny that they have been involved in the sex economy. All three speak poorly of those parents who attempt to prostitute their children, and I did not speak to any parents or children who talked about being involved in the sex economy. While an extreme example, prostitution shows how the family structure can be utilized by an individual to gain extra social resources, such as money, in addition to education, knowledge about the neighborhood, or access to health care.

Encouraging Constraints

This nuanced family structure departs significantly from the materialistic conclusions of the survival-strategies literature. Parents provide advice and criticism to their children based on their own understandings of self. We see this in how Derrick views the role he plays in his children's lives. Derrick struggles with his son Romeo: "His behavior and his sexuality, he hides it. I already know but he still does. He wants to stay on the DL."¹⁰ "How do you help him with that?" I ask. "I'm working on that with him, to get him to open his eyes to let him know how to tell everyone that he's

10. In the black community, "down low" or "DL" refers to men who have sex secretly with other men, but consider themselves heterosexual (Barnshaw and Letukas 2013, 480).

bi, gay. On his Facebook it says bi but his reaction says gay. But he has only straight friends and bisexual friends.” From Derrick’s point of view, his son is expressing his sexuality in the wrong way, paired with the wrong identity. Crucially, however, Derrick believes that Romeo will listen to him and can be persuaded to align his view of his sexuality along Derrick’s perspective. Here we see an example of how a parent uses his parent-child relationship to promote his specific notion of sexuality and gender and exerts pressure on his child to change.

Derrick also plays a large part in maintaining the peace and safety of his children. His daughter Rainbow gets angry when people call her names, such as “wretched-ass hoe” or “flappy ass.” Derrick finds himself often trying to talk her down, to keep her from getting into a fight. “What do you say to her?” I asked. “Like say, ‘I know you like fighting, but don’t fight her because she’s not worth it, she’s just a piece of fish and she’s strained,’” he replied. “Don’t let no one put yourself down in a hole where you can’t get out of, because they’re no kin to you and they’re nothing to you.” Derrick notably invokes kin in this situation—it is both a way to claim his own importance in Rainbow’s life and a reassurance to Rainbow that her parent will support her. On the flip side, Derrick doesn’t care about what happened to others, only his own children: “I got to think about my children and what can happen to them and what can affect them.” On the street, identity is constantly negotiated from situation to situation, and challenges through name calling and bad talking can lead to trouble. Yet Derrick reminds Rainbow that his opinion as a parent ought to be more important to her.

Individuals can feel more passive pressures at work on their identity as well. ‘I like aggressive talk ’cause I talk aggressive,’ Vincent says. ‘I had an auntie named Erica Kahn, she taught me, and she was a bad bitch, so I’m a bad bitch.’ In this context, “bad bitch” refers to Vincent’s set of preferred gender pronouns. Vincent understands this part of his identity through his affiliations within his family—he says he no longer sees Erica that often, though he still cites her as a major influence on how he views himself, as evidenced in his preferred set of gender pronouns. While he came to Boystown with a rough sense of his identity and sexuality, Vincent has developed a new self-conception that bears the strong imprint of his

family members. This goes from clothing and behavior to what Snow and Anderson (1987) have deemed perspectives in action. However, we also see a significant departure from Snow and Anderson's framework. In their study of homeless men in Austin the authors investigate men's responses to a broad stereotype of the homeless identity, sorting out how homeless individuals generate their own identities that confer self-respect. Accordingly, the authors look at a set of strategies that individuals use to distance themselves from or embrace various stereotypes of homelessness. Yet this obscures alternate identities or categories that the men might hold, such as race, gender, or sexuality. In Boystown individuals are not as concerned with their homeless identity. Instead, they are creating understandings of their gender and sexuality, albeit from within a situation that scholars and social-service providers would categorize as homeless.

Out of Bounds

This section delineates the boundaries around the family. Looking at who falls outside of family can give us a clearer idea of what exactly the family does and for whom. First, I address how a person leaves the family and the different motivations for doing so. This analysis shows the role that spatial proximity and trust play in maintaining the family. Second, I examine who is not included in any family in the first place. This provides a better sense of the boundaries that restrict the identities created by the family.

Leaving the Family

A person leaves their family via three principal routes: they leave the neighborhood, they age out of social services, or they come into conflict with family members. As we will see, the first two are predicated on spatial separation and the last can be understood in terms of violating trust.

The first way a person can leave the family is by leaving the neighborhood. Eleanor recounted numerous individuals who had left Chicago, often with extended biological family members, or who were in jail. When someone becomes physically separated from their family, those bonds become harder if not impossible to sustain.

Second, individuals can grow too old for the family. This cut-off age is generally around twenty-five, the point at which individuals can no longer access services at most youth-specific social-service providers. For example, in mid-February Eleanor aged out of the shelter system. She has been coming to Boystown since she was in high school and took up more permanent residence when she turned eighteen. As such, service providers in the area are familiar with her. A day after her birthday, she was waiting in line at the Night Ministry, when one of the volunteers tapped her on the shoulder and told her to step out of line. She asked why, and the volunteer told her that she was too old to remain at the shelter. Another volunteer came over and tried to give her a bus pass, but the first volunteer wouldn't let her have the pass. Eleanor then called a friend with an apartment to spend the night. I found her at the Center on Halsted three weeks later; she had been avoiding the neighborhood and scrambling to figure out her living situation. 'A lot of people don't see it coming,' she said. Aging out prevents individuals from occupying many of the places where the family is spatially located—the Crib, youth hangout spaces, youth service providers. This exclusion has as large of an impact as moving out of the neighborhood in terms of maintaining relationships with family members.

Lastly, interpersonal tension can sever family ties. As discussed in the last section, interpersonal conflict pervades the social scene. While in some instances parents attempt to mitigate conflict, families can also be a source of it. Harrison left his family in the fall of 2012 after a series of escalating incidents. He remembers clearly the moment that he decided to leave. One day he was hanging out at the Center on Halsted with his family, with his cell phone out on the table where they were all situated. He got up to talk to someone at another table, leaving behind his phone. When Harrison came back, he found it gone. No one in his family said a word. That was enough for him: "If I'm not going to listen to my real mom, why would I listen to my pretend mom?" He hasn't forsaken the idea of a family altogether, though. When I ask him if he thought the family wasn't for him, he simply replies, "Not yet. With me it's just, I really don't know."

Eleanor also left her family and made a cleaner break. She left after

her best friend and gay sister got pregnant, feeling that her family handled the situation poorly. After she left the family but before she aged out, Eleanor would still help her friends out, but much more reluctantly than before. For example, she would share cigarettes, but only with the expectation that the others would reciprocate in the future. She says there were several instances where she would ask for a cigarette later in return and was refused. In these cases she would simply remember not to give them any more cigarettes. She says the most difficult process was 'learning to say no,' but now she's pretty good at turning people down who she thinks they are trying to use her.

Harrison showed the same hesitation after he left his family. For one, he was much more careful about whom he let borrow his new phone, and when he did lend it out he made sure to keep it in sight at all times. But it extends beyond that. He no longer lends money when someone asks. He's wary of individuals using him for sex. He wants to get his GED, but he's afraid that he wastes too much time in the neighborhood to do so.

In the cases of both Eleanor and Harrison, we see how the family creates a sense of trust between members. This makes members more willing to share what they have and listen to others. When that sense of trust is violated, an individual chooses to leave the family and treat everyone around them with an increased skepticism.

Outcast

One day Harrison and I were sitting in the Center on Halsted, talking about whether or not it is possible to tell if someone was gay on first sight; he insisted everyone knew he was gay from when they first heard him speak, and I was more doubtful. We decided to see: as people he knew walked past us, he would ask whether they first thought he was gay from his voice. 'I took one look at you,' one said. 'I knew from the moment you opened your mouth,' another said. Most of the responses were along these lines, the one exception being Taylor: 'I don't care, I don't really see the point in that sort of label.' Later on, when I asked Taylor if he was in a family, he curtly responded: 'I don't want to talk about that. They are stupid.' Taylor dismisses the idea of a family, for the same reason he

refused to answer Harrison's question. His live-and-let-live attitude translates into a lack of interest in the sorts of questions about gender and identity that the family is predisposed to encourage.

Taylor has straight black hair and wears tight black pants and boots. He is originally from Mississippi, and he moved to Chicago to live with his sister. 'There are a lot of similarities between the South and Chicago,' he says. When he first arrived he struggled to find a job and did not want to go to school. His sister confronted him with her opinion that he wasn't doing anything with his life, and he left on unfriendly terms. He originally stayed in Wicker Park, but he quickly decided it was not for him: 'A lot of the punks there, they see you wearing makeup and they're like "fag".' In some ways, this exemplifies what makes Taylor opposed to the idea of a family. His experience in Wicker Park is a stark example of prejudice, but in a different way those same social forces are at work in Boystown. He does not want someone to teach him how to look or how to behave. He simply wants to do what he wants to do. His disinterest in aligning his gender or sexuality with any sort of group standard helps explain his disinterest in joining a family.

Others struggle to find a place within the family because their chosen identity conflicts with the normative pressures of the family. Kymbir provides an example of this. Harrison, Kymbir, and I were sitting in the Center on Halsted watching people come in and out of the building, when Kymbir got up to find a bathroom. 'I sometimes feel bad for Kymbir,' Harrison told me as soon as she was out of sight. 'Why?' I asked. 'You know how she can be sometimes,' Harrison said, suddenly becoming quieter with a bashful look on his face. 'With the whole magic stuff, sometimes people make fun of her.' Kymbir identifies as a Celtic Druid and unprompted she can start talking about magic without end. Having been on the receiving end of several of these conversations, they can be an overwhelming onslaught of names and connections that are nearly impossible to track for someone without background knowledge. I was curious about others' reactions, so I pressed Harrison for more. 'Like what?' I asked. 'They just start making fun of her, taunting her. Sometimes you just got to tell them to cut it out.' 'So it's usually you who tells them to cut it out?' 'Yeah, me or her family.' Kymbir's Celtic Druid

identity is intimately bound up in her understanding of her sexuality. She sees herself as an incubus, a type of sexual fey that feeds off of the sexual energy of others. She can give long detailed accounts of her romantic relationships with Hades, Jupiter, and a number of Atlantic Titans. Yet this discussion of her sexuality is what is taunted and rejected by others. She has a family, and she herself is a parent. She is in the process of transitioning from male to female, and in some ways—finding resources, clothing, getting to know more people—the family has been a great aid. But Kymbir grinds against the normative codes established and enforced by the family structure when she articulates an alternate conception of her sexuality and a different theology.

Taylor is more assertive in rejecting the family concept, whereas Kymbir is in a family. But Kymbir is up against the same forces as Taylor. Her conception of her identity does not configure neatly into the types of gender or sexuality promoted by the family. Rubin (2011) discusses the role that biological families play in enforcing normative notions of sexuality in her 1984 essay, “Thinking Sex”:

Families play a crucial role in enforcing sexual conformity. Much social pressure is brought to bear to deny erotic dissidents the comforts and resources that families provide. Popular ideology holds that families are not supposed to produce or harbor erotic nonconformity. Many families respond by trying to reform, punish, or exile sexually offending members (164).

Many of the kids in Boystown directly experience this sort of prejudice and many describe this as a driving reason they are out on the street. Like traditional families, gay families can be sources of comfort and guidance for those who embrace them. Yet the fictive-kinship arrangement in many ways replicates this same sort of pressure towards conformity. Kymbir struggles to find a way to express her Celtic Druid aspirations. She has found a few people who also share an interest in magic, such as a volunteer at the Night Ministry shelter in Old Town and a local bookstore employee. But within the Boystown community she has not found any other young adults sympathetic to her magic practices and

accompanying vision of sexuality. In cases like these, the family is ill-suited to incorporate individuals whose identities operate along different dimensions. While the family provides stability for many of those in it, that stability is predicated on its own fairly rigid sense of gender and sexuality.

Beyond the Home

Peers and family members are not the only ones to exert pressure on an individual's identity. A number of external groups, from nonprofit service providers to the police to other neighborhood occupants, create their own expectations for these individuals, informed by their own categories of social perception. Those categories directly challenge the identities that individuals form within the family, undoing much of the identity work accomplished within the family setting.

Service Providers

While Taylor refuses to join a family he is still acutely aware of the pressures that social-service providers can place on individuals who use their services. This became clear when Taylor and I were sitting in the Center on Halsted, in the communal area outside Whole Foods. We were talking about the role the center plays in the neighborhood, and I brought up the conscious community-making project of the center, pointing to the windows. On the glass in white block letters reads, "CENTER/ON/HALSTED," interspersed with words such as "LGBT" and "COMMUNITY" in red, purple, and blue. The sign is indicative of the role the center aspires to within Boystown, or at least this is what I suggested to Taylor. Taylor didn't believe their message at all. 'Just write "JUDGEMENT" or "HATRED";' he said, making a sweeping motion toward the window. 'It's a total scam.' While he was grateful that the center provided a space for young adults like himself, he was often frustrated with the way he felt the staff looked down on them, and how strictly they policed the communal spaces.

While the family polices internal norms, the social-service agencies used by individuals within those families also attempt to enforce their

own set of expectations. All my informants had been kicked out of the Center on Halsted at least once and had heated interactions with the staff. Kymbir was once kicked out for her religion. 'One of the employees said she thought I was casting a spell on her,' she explained. 'But I'm a gray witch, so she should know that gray witches only cast positive spells on themselves, that they can't cast curses.' It is notable that the employee at the center accepted Kymbir's identity as a Celtic Druid, to the extent that she found the spell threatening. In effect, the employee was signaling to Kymbir that if she were to be a Celtic Druid she had to be one on the center's terms. Derrick almost took it as a point of pride that he couldn't remember the number of times he had been kicked out, though he could say that he had received temporary bans for having sex in the bathroom. The lack of private space is one of the larger barriers that homelessness presents to sexual expression. Yet where homeless individuals found ways to engage in sexual activities we see strict policing by the Center on Halsted.

We can locate the tension in the primacy given to "homeless youth," as an identifying category, by service providers. Clearly there are multiple salient identities in play: class, gender, sexuality, age, and race all crop up in different contexts. We can see this in my own research project. At the onset of this project, I set out to study homelessness in youth LGBT population. How do I justify identifying these individuals as homeless? In some ways, I initially labeled these individuals as homeless because that is the way that the service organizations label them. The Night Ministry runs a youth homeless shelter and provides medical care to homeless individuals. According to their website, "The Night Ministry provides a continuum of age-appropriate services for homeless youth. Staff help youth identify their own strengths, advocate for themselves, and create solutions to their own problems."¹¹ The Center on Halsted and the Broadway Youth Center also discuss homelessness in their mission statements. This is largely driven by the way the city, state, and federal government frame nonprofit funding. For example, in August

11. "Youth Services." 2006. The Night Ministry. Retrieved in 2012 (http://www.thenightministry.org/001_programs/040_youth_services).

2012 Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced a plan to ramp up programs and funding that specifically target youth homelessness: “This investment includes \$2 million to address youth homelessness; \$1 million to serve 1,000 homeless youth annually through new or expanded support centers on Chicago’s north, south, and west sides; \$1 million to serve an estimated 400 homeless youth annually with 100 year-round shelter beds.”¹² With funding framed in terms of homeless youth, this marks the users of these services in a specific way. “Homeless youth services” in Boystown, attract “homeless youth” to Boystown.

On one level, this distinction has practical purchase. The programs are intended to help those in unstable living conditions, and the way to locate those individuals is by defining them in terms of living conditions. Yet this label also has a clear set of negative connotations. Harrison explained how he feels he is perceived when he is in the Center on Halsted: “It seems like they don’t want us, the youth, here sometimes. It’s starting to get to the point where it’s like, we get looks that we shouldn’t be here, like ‘you guys already have a place to be.’ If we had a way to get our own building... we already have a lot of services, but I think we just need our own building. Everyone here is like, ‘oh they’re youth, they’re homeless, they’re this, they’re that.’” Regardless of how Harrison views himself, others in the neighborhood have overriding views based on the fact that he is young and uses youth homeless services. Because they utilize the services provided by the Center on Halsted, the Broadway Youth Center, and the Crib, Taylor, Harrison, and other kids are viewed as homeless youth: as individuals who hold a lesser right to the neighborhood.

Friendly Neighbors

Other neighborhood residents also hold negative perceptions of “homeless youth.” The *Windy City Times* ran a series in October and November

12. “Mayor Emanuel Expands Homeless Services in Chicago.” 2012. City of Chicago. Retrieved in 2012 (http://www.cityofchicago.org/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2012/august_2012/mayor_emanuel_expand_shomelesservicesinchicagoatnoadditionalcost.html).

2012 called “Generation Halsted,” which sought to portray the lives of youth living on the street. The introduction to the series read:

Chicago’s queer homeless youth have come to Boystown—designated by city officials as the world’s first official gay neighborhood in 1998—for everything from a hot meal to the promise of a life without homophobia... The result is a community of queer youth sleeping on streets that, for many, symbolize the growing prosperity of Chicago’s LGBT community. In August, *Windy City Times* sent a team of reporters into these streets to document the lives and thoughts of these young people... In this week’s *Windy City Times*, we begin an 8-week series on LGBT youth in the city, especially those most at risk, more in need of support, and gravitating to Halsted, the location of many of the community’s bars, businesses and the Center on Halsted.¹³

The series included many photographs and journalistic depictions, explicitly through an at-risk and in-need lens. Some, such as Taylor, felt frustrated and wronged by the article’s patronizing tone. When the reporters approached him Taylor refused to be interviewed and asked not to be photographed. To his chagrin, he appeared in the paper the next week: “They just take it and put it in the paper with the headline “Starving Child,” or something. I looked like a dope fiend.”¹⁴

These sorts of media portrayals frame the way that both those within and outside the different communities of Boystown view these “queer homeless youth.” The *Windy City Times* series intended to correct negative perceptions of street youth that have been festering in the neighborhood. However, the approach they took reveals and reifies some of those same

13. Sosin, Kate. 2012. “Generation Halsted: An Overview.” *Windy City Times*. Retrieved in 2012 (<http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/lgbt/Generation-Halsted-An-Overview/40371.html>).

14. When I first met Taylor it was after this series had run. He told me that he was at first reluctant to talk to me, for fear that I would create another Generation Halsted-type report.

stereotypes. At this point, distinguishing demographic factors begin to override potential similarities with other residents. In some ways, as LGBT people, they belong. But at the same time, as young blacks or Latinos from the South or West Sides, and homeless—they don't.

The *Windy City Times* series fit into an ongoing debate in the neighborhood that began in the summer of 2011. Following a stabbing in the neighborhood that received a high amount of media coverage a group of residents felt moved to act in response to the perceived crime wave. They formed Take Back Boystown, which sought to heighten community awareness of crime and engage in preventative action. The group organized around Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy¹⁵ meetings (the July 6, 2011, meeting drew upwards of eight hundred people), held "positive loitering" events, and used Facebook to share photographs and videos of people in the neighborhood they perceived as "thugs" or "criminals."¹⁶ Much of the discussion focused on the Center on Halsted and the young

15. CAPS is a community policing strategy developed by the Chicago Police Department in the 1990s. Meetings present a forum for neighborhood residents to talk to the police about what they perceive as problems in the neighborhood. Typically they are held once a month. "How CAPS Works." No date. Chicago Police. Retrieved in 2012 (<https://portal.chicagopolice.org/portal/page/portal/ClearPath/Get+Involved/How+CAPS+works>).

16. There are similar movements in other gay neighborhoods, such as the Christopher Street Patrol in Greenwich Village. Hanhardt (2008) discusses the irony of these movements, which contrast to the antiviolence movements of the 1970s where queer activists attempted to organize against hate crimes in their neighborhoods: "The connection between neighborhood transformation and antiviolence ideologies is not only conceptual but, in fact, organizational... These patrols took urban policies such as street cleanups and heightened policing... and cast them as the very insurance of lesbian and gay visibility. Gay vulnerability was, in effect, understood as the vulnerability of the crime victim" (64). She offers this link as the primary reason why these sorts of intolerant campaigns are tolerated by many gays.

adults who use the center. For example, a *Huffington Post* editorial from the executive editor of the Windy City Media Group received the following anonymous comment:

Everybody is ignoring that this ONLY happen with bunches of youngish kids over there—whether from the Center or not. It IS like gangs, how they act. Gang against gang. Well, now they're taking it to Gay against Gay. Cause that is THE ELEMENT that we are talking about. They could not fit into their neighborhoods as gays but they still want to participate as the top of the bottom—the same mentality. They see the gay neighborhood as a subset, somewhere they can take over as opposed to never getting any way to do that where they live. Why do they want to take over? Because it's the same mentality from where they live. They are not living in Lakeview.¹⁷

The commentator draws a straight line from homeless youth services to gang members. This becomes entangled not only with issues of age and class, but also race. And they conclude by denying that the people they are talking about could have a legitimate claim to the neighborhood. One Friday morning I met Vincent's daughter, Rainbow, and asked her if I could talk to her about the neighborhood. Immediately, she pointed across the street, saying if I wanted to understand the neighborhood I had to understand that 'they don't like black people.' A few evenings previous, she said, white neighborhood residents had been yelling racial epithets at her. While she and other migrants are able to find acceptance in one Boystown community, they are rejected by another.

17. In Baim, Tracy. 2011. "Boystown Violence: Déjà Vu All Over Again." *Huffington Post*. Retrieved in 2012 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tracy-baim/boystown-violence-deja-vu_b_892319.html).

Conclusion

Gay families among homeless youth in Boystown are both a means for individuals to make ends meet and for individuals to make meaning of their lives. On the one hand, this occurs by circulating goods and knowledge about resources among family members. On a broader level, the family is a means of constructing and enforcing what it means to live as a gay or transgender person. These conclusions apply specifically to the limited period young adults spend in gay families in Boystown, leaving many unanswered questions about how this set of relationships might fit into an individual's larger life trajectory. Valuable research remains to be done about where individuals come from before they join a family, and where they go after they've left a family, which could provide a deeper understanding about the intersection of poverty with nonnormative expressions of gender and sexuality.

This fictive-kinship arrangement also shows how kids living on the streets of Boystown are actively constructing a sense of self in a situation of relative material deprivation. Individuals use their family members to generate and legitimate their own understandings of gender and sexuality. At the same time, any sense of self-empowerment or fulfillment an individual gains through the family is quite delicate. These individuals exist at the crossroads of many other marginal identities of race, class, and age. The space and social setting can dictate which identity takes precedent. Where individuals within the family may emphasize similarities based on gender or sexuality, other residents of the neighborhood may focus upon differentiating lines of race and class, while social-service workers may see the same individual in terms of housing and economic status.

This conflict cuts to the core of a much broader set of questions. For the ostensible Boystown community, who decides what it means to be LGBT or queer? Who has the privilege to occupy spaces designated for LGBT people? In these debates we see race, class, and age invoked as much as sexuality and gender. They are framed by a multitude of understandings surrounding what Boystown is, as a "gayborhood" or otherwise. Indeed, as LGBT communities continue to secure wider legal and social

acceptance through gay marriage and health-care plans that cover transition surgery and official gayborhood designations, it is worth considering how those gains are distributed unequally. Along these same lines, I want to point out that as notions of family continue to expand to include same-sex parenting, family continues to be a disputed territory.

For the individuals in my study, disputes over LGBT identities are closely tied to the role homeless service providers play in shaping perceptions of those who use their services. In viewing these individuals as “homeless,” there is a clear missed opportunity to provide them with important resources and forms of support. There are many important services carried out by the Center on Halsted, the Broadway Youth Center, the Crib, and others: health care, shelter, education, temporary housing. Yet where the ultimate goal is upward mobility and integration into broader society, these services have the inadvertent effect of socially isolating their users from others outside of the “homeless youth” community. If economic security and standing were the only concern, perhaps this could be overcome. Yet this isolation threatens the very reason queer homeless youth come to the neighborhood in the first place. ○

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