**Not Going To the Mainland: Queer Women’s Narratives of Place in Tasmania, Australia.**

Ruby Grant
*School of Social Sciences, University of Tasmania*@notoriousrfg. ORCiD: 0000-0003-3007-0168.

School of Social Sciences, University of Tasmania, Private Bag 22, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia. Email: rfgrant@utas.edu.au

Ruby Grant is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Tasmania. Her research interests broadly include gender equity and diversity in education and healthcare, with a specific focus on sexuality studies, queer theory, and LGBTQ health politics.

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**Abstract**

The role that place plays in shaping identity and community for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people is well documented in both urban sociology and queer geography. However, despite Bell and Valentine’s (1995) germinal invitation to “queer the countryside,” empirical studies of queer identity and place largely focus on urban spaces in the Global North. Within Australian geographies of sexuality in particular, most work centres the urban areas of Sydney, New South Wales, while less is known about queer life in regional and rural Australia. In contrast, this article explores how lesbian, bisexual and queer young women understand and experience identity and place in Tasmania. Using a queer theoretical framework and a qualitative feminist methodology, in this article I examine how narratives of place shape queer Tasmanians’ understandings of identity, belonging, and home. Participant narratives of leaving, arriving, and returning to Tasmania reflect dominant rural youth migration patterns, while also providing new insights into how queer young people position Tasmanian space and identities in broader Australian culture. Therefore, this article draws on recent work in geographies of sexuality to show how Tasmania produces unique sexual identity cultures that influence queer young women’s sense of time and place.

**Keywords:** Australia, gender, queer geography, queer futurity, rural, sexuality

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**Introduction**

The role that geographical place plays in shaping identity and community for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people is well documented in both urban sociology and queer geography. Despite Bell and Valentine’s (1995) germinal invitation to queer the countryside, most empirical studies of queer identity and place focus on urban spaces in the Global North. This “metronormativity” in studies of queer place can be explained by the popular western meta-narrative of the ‘oppressed rural gay,’ who escapes the ignorance and homophobia of the rural small town by moving to the city - a place of freedom and possibility in which to come out and live as LGBTQ (Halberstam 2005, 36-37; see also Herring 2007). While geographies of gay urban space often centre white, gay, cisgender men, there is now substantial scholarship of lesbian, bisexual and queer women’s experiences and narratives of urban place (Brown-Saracino 2015; Gieseking 2015; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2015; Podmore 2006; Rothenberg 1995). In this article, I examine how lesbian, bisexual and queer young women understand and experience identity and place in rural Australia. Specifically, I question how experiences in rural spaces shape queer women’s expressions of identity and community. While there is a large body of interdisciplinary literature examining rural LGBTQ lives in the US and UK, fewer studies have focused on the Australian context. Within Australian geographies of sexuality, a significant portion of work focuses on the two largest cities, Sydney, New South Wales and Melbourne, Victoria (Costello and Hodge 1999; Drysdale 2016; Gorman-Murray 2006; Jennings 2009; Reynolds 2009). In contrast, this article will engage with queer migration studies and Jose Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) queer futurity to examine how lesbian, bisexual and queer young women in the rural island state of Tasmania establish narratives of place.

Tasmania’s unique geographical and socio-political location makes it a compelling site to study the effects of place on contemporary queer identity politics. Located off the southeast coast of the Australian mainland, Tasmania is a largely rural island with a population of approximately 500,000 people. Hobart is the capital city and most populous (pop. 200,000), located to the south. Tasmania’s settler-colonial past, including the genocide of Tasmanian Aboriginal people (Cameron 2016; Clements 2014), has produced a specific ethno-cultural milieu. The vast majority of the Tasmanian population are white Australians with Anglo-Celtic ancestry, with just 12% of the population being born overseas and 4% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders (Australian Bureau of Statistics [[ABS] 2017](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs%40.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/7F1A862B6F8B6BA0CA258148000A41AC?OpenDocument)). Like many rural and regional areas, Tasmania exhibits some of the nation’s lowest average incomes, poorest educational levels, highest unemployment and welfare dependency, and reduced health outcomes (ABS 2012; 2014). Although Tasmania has recently experienced a rise in interstate and international tourism ([Booth et al. 2017](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10645578.2017.1297121)), urban regeneration ([Hawthorne 2013](https://theconversation.com/hail-mona-but-what-about-the-rest-of-tasmanian-art-18857)), and a boom in the housing market ([Hayes 2019](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-01/hobart-prices-still-increasing-core-logic-report-shows/10960434)), the state continues to exhibit high youth unemployment ([Cooper 2019](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-04/youth-unemployment-in-hobart-driven-by-lack-of-entry-level-jobs/10868420)), causing many young Tasmanians to migrate interstate for education and employment opportunities (Easthope and Gabriel 2008).

In addition, Tasmania has a fraught history of sexual politics, being the last Australian state to decriminalise homosexuality in 1997 (see Baird 2006); prior to which, Tasmania was known for having some of Australia’s harshest anti-gay laws (Morris 1995). Efforts to repeal laws that criminalised homosexuality began in the 1970s, but came to a head in the late 1980s with the founding of the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group (TGLRG). With a view to raising awareness and dispelling myths about homosexuality, the TGLRG held a market stall in Hobart’s popular Salamanca Market to collect signatures supporting decriminalisation. In 1988, the Hobart City Council banned the group from the market - in what has been referred to as the largest act of queer civil disobedience in Australian history - the TGLRG defied the ban and continued to operate the stall ([Medhora 2018](https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/how-tasmania-turned-itself-around-on-lgbti-rights-same-sex-marr/10502304)). Over a series of weekends, 130 arrests were made. During this time, Tasmanian society was extremely hostile to LGBTQ people, with anti-gay groups, For A Caring Tasmania (FACT) and Concerned Residents Against Moral Pollution (CRAMP), hosting large rallies with attendees chanting “kill them!” Police would regularly monitor and record the licence plates of those attending gay and lesbian rights meetings (Croome 2013). Politicians and local council members called for LGBTQ Tasmanians to be shot, whipped, and even deported. In 1988, the State Premier, Robin Gray, explicitly claimed that homosexuals were “not welcome in Tasmania” (Morris 1995, 25). This inspired the popular activist slogan and assertion of Tasmanian queer identity: “We’re here, we’re queer, and we’re not going to the mainland” (Morris 1995, 25).

Despite its troubling past, over the last two decades, Tasmania has led the way in Australian LGBTQ law reform, becoming the first Australian state to officially recognise same-sex relationships and overseas marriages, to legalise same-sex parent adoption, and to introduce marriage equality legislation to parliament (Baird 2006). In 2008, the Hobart City Council apologised for its 1988 actions and acknowledged the prejudice it fostered against the LGBTQ community. In 2017, the State Government expunged the criminal records of gay men and trans people arrested and charged for acts of “indecency” prior to 1997. Despite Tasmanians’ support for decriminalisation being well below national average in 1988 ([Marks 2013](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/bigots-island-becomes-gay-rights-central-tasmania-is-undergoing-a-remarkable-cultural-conversion-8650749.html)), contemporary polls consistently indicate support for LGBTQ rights is now higher in Tasmania than nationally (see Croome 2013, 32). For example, in the 2017 marriage equality postal survey (which saw Australians vote in favour of legalising marriage between same-sex couples), 63 per cent of Tasmanian respondents voted in support of marriage equality, compared with the national average of 61 per cent (ABS 2017). Most recently, in April 2019 the Tasmanian parliament became the first in Australia to pass landmark reforms supporting transgender people, voting to remove gender from birth certificates ([Delaney 2019](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/08/how-tasmania-is-going-from-worst-to-best-on-transgender-human-rights)).

There is limited qualitative scholarship examining LGBTQ Tasmanians’ lived experiences (for exceptions, see Grant and Nash 2019a). Of this work, most focuses on access to inclusive healthcare (Grant, Nash, and Hansen 2019; Grant and Nash 2018a) and education (Grant and Nash 2019b; Grant, Beasy, Emery, and Coleman 2018). Conversely, while geographical studies of Tasmanian place, community and culture exist ([Verdich 2010](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00049180903535642)), to my knowledge no previous scholarly work engages specifically with sexualities and queer geography in Tasmania. Therefore, this article seeks to make new contributions to Australian geographies of sexuality and rural space by exploring lesbian, bisexual and queer young women’s experiences of identity and place in contemporary Tasmania.

**The Only Gay in the Village: Queer Geographies and Narratives of Place**

The politics of queer space have been studied widely over the last three decades. For emerging queer geographers, examining LGBTQ experiences in certain locations reveals the power dynamics shaping how place is gendered and sexualised, while also offering radical alternatives to heterosexual space (Oswin 2008, 90). Particular attention has been paid to gay and lesbian communities’ relationships with urban spaces. In much of this work the western metropolis is represented as a beacon of individual freedom, sexual anonymity, and self-actualisation for sexual dissidents (Weston 1995). Much work examines the urban sexual subcultures in these major cities, from the Castro in San Francisco (D’Emilio 1989), Greenwich Village and Chelsea in New York (Chauncey 1994), Soho in London (Cant 1997), and more recently Oxford Street and Newtown in Sydney (Drysdale 2016; Reynolds 2009). In her study of Toronto’s “gay village,” Nash (2006, 2) aptly demonstrates how these queer urban spaces become “battlegrounds” for competing meanings of queer identity, with “assimilationists” disapproving of the “gay ghettoisation” symbolised by gay bars, while “liberationists” criticise the increasing depoliticisation and commercialisation of queer space (see also Brown-Saracino 2011; [Gorman-Murray and Nash 2016](https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.utas.edu.au/doi/full/10.1177/0042098016674893)). Indeed, more recent literature examines the disappearance or “de-gaying” of traditionally gay neighbourhoods and venues, resulting from urban gentrification and reduced clientele (Nash 2013; Holt 2011). As Lea, de Wit and Reynolds (2015) argue, increasing normalisation of homosexuality in the West, coupled with the rise of social media, has gradually reduced the need for dedicated gay and lesbian venues while also increasing the presence of heterosexual clients in remaining gay venues (Casey 2004; Ghaziani 2015; Pritchard, Morgan and Sedgley 2002). However, Nash and Gorman-Murray (2014) problematise the static and binary nature of gay villages and de-gaying, deploying a new mobilities approach to show how urban queer place-making is dynamic, transient and mobile. Here, rather than understanding place as a “fixed geographical container,” Gorman-Murray and Nash (2016, 177) argue that place is “constituted relationally through uneven networks of people, goods and ideas perpetually ‘on the move.’”

In addition to its urban focus, a common refrain in geography of sexualities literature is that of rural-urban migration. Puar, Rushbrook and Schein (2003, 386) argue that “non-normative sexuality is often tantamount to spatial displacement.” LGBTQ people are frequently represented as being “out of place” in small town spaces, creating what Gorman-Murray (2009) refers to as a “culture of migration” in dominant narratives of queer identity and place. As a result of mass rural-urban migration during the 19th century industrialisation of North America and Europe, queer consciousness is spatialised, with cities naturalised as spaces of tolerance and gay community (Gorman-Murray 2007, 107). However, as Puar (2002) argues, these migration narratives of a cosmopolitan, mobile, gay consumer are profoundly racialised, gendered, and classed. Some scholars have also taken issue with the uni-directional focus of queer migration literature, suggesting this reifies urban-rural dichotomies, normalises a teleological understanding of sexual self-actualisation, and disregards possibilities of successful urban-to-rural queer migration (Gorman-Murray 2007, 109-110).

The social isolation and homophobia experienced by LGBTQ people in rural North America, Europe and Australia is well documented. For example, rural youth are less likely to report positive coming out experiences and have poorer mental health compared to their heterosexual peers (see Robinson et al., 2014). In addition, rural LGBTQ people report reduced access to inclusive health and community services and decreased connectedness with LGBTQ community groups (Grant and Nash 2019). As with queer geographies scholarship more broadly, studies of rural LGBTQ life focus largely on gay men’s experiences (Boulden 2001; Cody & Welch 1997; Silva 2017). Barefoot et al. (2015, 22) argue that “rural culture is often associated with traditional gender roles, conservatism, patriarchy, fundamental religiosity, heteronormative family structures, and conformity.” Kazyak (2012, 830) observes that rural gender norms emphasise male “toughness” and “hard work,” mirrored by female domesticity. Given this context, stereotypical associations of gay men as effeminate place them at odds with rural hegemonic masculinities (Kazyak 2011). However there is some scope for resistance - for example, Scott Herring’s (2007) account of “queer anti-urbanism” explores the emergence of rural gay men’s rejections of white middle-class consumer elitism and urban homonormativity in US gay ghetto culture during the 1980s-1990s. For Herring (2007), rural spaces offer gay men alternatives to stereotypes of metronormative gay lifestyles, and foster opportunities for solidarity with rural lesbians and queer people of colour.

Some US studies suggest that rural and regional small towns are more attractive to lesbians, though there is little analysis as to why (Brown-Saracino 2011; Kazyak 2012). Rural areas have historically offered a space for lesbian, bisexual and queer women to reject traditional notions of heterosexual femininity, as illustrated by feminist separatism and lesbian land movements (Sandilands 2002). In her study of lesbians in the US Midwest, Kazyak (2012) found that lesbians gained acceptance in their rural communities by performing masculinity. Kazyak’s (2012) findings compellingly demonstrate how performances and embodiment of gender and sexuality vary by geographical context. Similarly, Brown-Saracino’s (2015) study of lesbian, bisexual and queer women’s communities in four US small towns found that understandings of gender identity and sexuality varied significantly from place to place. Brown-Saracino (2015, 2) suggests that city or town ecologies promote distinct “sexual identity cultures.” While the majority of Australian studies of sexuality and place focus on urban areas, Gorman-Murray and Waitt’s (2009) comparative study of social cohesion in inner-city Newtown, New South Wales, and Daylesford in regional Victoria provide similar insights into specific sexual identity cultures in regional and rural spaces (see also Brickell, Gorman-Murray, and de Jong 2018). However, further research is needed to examine queer narratives of identity and place in rural Australia.

**Theoretical Framework: Queer Futurity**

In this article I aim to explore lesbian, bisexual and queer young women’s experiences of queer identity and place using queer futurity as a framework to consider how the sexual self is understood over time and across space. Queer theoretical approaches are critical of the notion of an essential or innate gendered, sexual self (Jagose 1996, see also De Lauretis 1990; Epstein 1998; Fuss 1991; Seidman 1997). Instead, queer theorists draw from constructionist traditions to argue that gender, sexuality, and identity are created and reproduced through social interaction and performance (see Butler 1990; Weeks 2003). Queer theory actively critiques the assimilationist politics embraced by gay and lesbian studies, aiming to challenge heterosexual definitions of “normalcy.” Such debates are particularly salient as homosexuality becomes increasingly accepted and with it the growing normalisation of gay and lesbian lives. Duggan (2002, 179) describes this shift as the “new homonormativity,” a paradigm where privileged “mainstream” (white, urban, middle-class, cisgender, monogamous) gay men and lesbians are positioned as “ordinary, normal citizens” who “do not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but uphold them while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.” Thus homonormativity has been used to describe “the emergence of a central power dynamic among ‘queers’ whereby neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and racism worked to empower some queer subjects and further marginalise others in the assimilation process” (Podmore 2013, 264).

Building on this concept, many queer scholars have considered the ways in which time, particularly the drive towards progress and a stable future, underpins hereronormativity and homonormativity (Oswin 2012, 1626). Like queer (re)interpretations of place, common queer critiques of time expose the ways in which understandings of time as linear, generational, and progressive centre heterosexuality (e.g. school, career, marriage, parenthood, death). In his germinal text, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman (2004) challenges the logic of “reproductive futurism,” or the dominant ideology of the social that represents futurity in the image of the innocent child. Using Lacanian analysis, Edelman interrogates how the figure of the child is used literally and metaphorically to symbolise the reproduction of society into the future. Edelman suggests that within heteronormative systems predicated on notions of reproductive futurism, LGBTQ people (particularly gay men) have long been framed as having “no future.” Writing in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis, where gay men became directly associated with death and disease, it is perhaps unsurprising that Edelman engages in this almost ‘end of days’ queer narrative. Here, following queer theory’s oppositional nature, Edelman offers a radical critique of heteronormative temporal models, suggesting the need for a queer rejection of the (heteronormative) future.

In contrast, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and Now of Queer Futurity*, Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009) critiques Edelman’s antisocial proposition, arguing instead for a utopian queer future. For Muñoz (2009, 94), Edelman’s negative framing of queer temporality is not a political option because the ability to reject the future is predicated on a white, privileged, individualism situated in the here and now. Further, as Andrea Smith (2010, 48) argues, a rejection of the future is not a radical stance for indigenous people and other people of colour in settler-colonial nation states that were founded on the attempted elimination of their people (see also Walker 2019, 145). Smith (2010, 48-49) also notes the whiteness of queer narratives in which individuals can separate themselves unproblematically from their past, without the bonds of culture, tradition, and family, in favour of modern individualism. For both Muñoz (2009) and Smith (2010), the future can have radical potential for queer people of colour as it reflects the hopes of a collective and seeks to envision alternative ways of living. However, like Edelman, Muñoz’s (2009) notion of queer futurity is based on common critiques of the hetero/homonormativity of time, arguing that LGBTQ communities must “insist on an ordering of life that is not dictated by the spatial/temporal coordinates of straight time” (31). Both Edelman (2004) and Muñoz’s (2009) discussions of queer temporality are largely grounded in the experiences of cisgender, gay men in urban centres of the Global North, raising pertinent questions as to how queer women’s experiences of queer space and time may differ.

A common way theories of queer time intersect with queer narratives of place is through notions of the public/private divide, queer kinship, and domesticity. For example, queer critiques of same-sex marriage position it as succumbing to homornormativity and the temporal assumptions of ‘straight time’ or life course (see Halberstam 2005). Queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Michael Warner frame same-sex marriage as a ‘failure of the future,’ where, by ‘buying in’ to the institution of marriage, same-sex couples sustain hetero-patriarchal and capitalist systems (Boellstorf 2007). In theorising homonormativity, Duggan (2002) specifically critiques same-sex couples’ domesticity as evidence of problematic depoliticisation of queer lives. However, Gorman-Murray (2017) takes issue with critiques of gay domesticity, which he argues unfairly negate many LGBTQ people’s important links to home (see also Brown 2009). Similarly, Kentlyn ([2008](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00049180802270523?casa_token=5MOQRiaCWW0AAAAA:d1jS7iWQzK0NJMjDugvP1JDCAnIYZ4kNtb08P2d8d6GOLBc-IL1IcodS9M7RID-Tl72nkoBPpKTfYhs)) argues that the queer home is a political site given its constant scrutiny from family, religion, and the State and its radical potential as a safe space for performing non-normative genders and sexualities. Thus the queer home can be read as a site of queer utopian potential, demonstrating the intersections of sexual geographies and queer temporality.

**Methods**

This article draws on data from a broader qualitative study investigating the experiences of gender, sexuality and sexual health in a sample of 15 lesbian, bisexual and queer young women in Tasmania, Australia from 2015-2016 (see Grant and Nash 2019a; 2019b; 2018). Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods (Babbie 2014, 200-201). This process involved placing advertisements inviting potential participants to contact the researchers in public places (university campus, health clinics, local organisations), targeted social media advertising in LGBTQ social groups, and in-person recruitment at social events hosted by a local LGBTQ advocacy organisation. Given the focus of the broader study on lesbian, bisexual and queer women’s sexuality and sexual health, inclusion criteria were self-identified LGBTQ women aged between 18-30 years with experience accessing sexual healthcare in Tasmania.

Prior to interviews, participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the aims of the research, as well as consent forms to consider. After obtaining participants’ informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted for up to two hours in mutually convenient public locations (university campuses, cafes, libraries). All interviews were conducted using an interview guide, including a range of open-ended questions about gender, sexuality, sexual health, and healthcare experiences. Demographic information was collected in a voluntary questionnaire. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with consent. This project was approved by the University of X Human Research Ethics Committee as complying with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. In line with the committee’s recommendations, participant protection strategies were prioritised at all stages of the design, conduct, and reporting of the project. Data have been de-identified, and pseudonyms chosen by the participants are used in all reporting of the data.

Participants were women between the ages of 19 and 26, with a mean age of 20 years. The majority of participants lived in Hobart, Tasmania, with a smaller proportion living in rural and regional areas in Northern Tasmania. Most participants described themselves as white, middle-class, tertiary-educated or currently studying. Eleven women identified as bisexual or pansexual, and three identified as queer and one identified as asexual. A common criticism of self-selection and snowballing recruitment techniques in social research is that they draw non-representative, often homogenous samples (Babbie 2014, 200-201). In particular, in sexualities research, such recruitment techniques result in an overrepresentation of white, middle-class, and tertiary-educated participants (Kitzinger 1987, 88). The placement of recruitment materials is a critical factor here, as posting research advertisements in (physical and virtual) LGBTQ spaces is more likely to reach an audience of potential participants who are “out” and active in queer “scenes” that are often characterised by whiteness (Cohen 1997).

I thematically analysed interviews using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase guide. To become immersed in the data, I surface read transcripts several times, highlighting any key points or phrases to begin to develop inductive ‘codes’ (Corbin and Strauss 2015). I then scanned the data for recurring themes across the interviews that related back to the initial research questions. Once I identified common themes, I reanalysed these themes to identify implications they highlighted for both the present study and the broader body of literature. For the purpose of this article, data were re-analysed deductively to examine whether and how participants discussed a relationship between identity and place. I initially coded any data relating to Tasmania and Tasmanian LGBTQ community spaces to one deductive parent code and then re-analysed this data again, allowing inductive themes to emerge. Following this analysis, I identified three common narratives about Tasmania in the data: 1) leaving, 2) arriving, 3) returning. In the following section I discuss each of these key themes and explore how these narratives of place shaped participants’ sense of self and belonging.

**Findings**

*Leaving Tasmania*

In line with Tasmanian youth migration research (Easthope and Gabriel 2008), participants who were born in Tasmania regularly discussed intentions to leave the state for greater professional and educational opportunities in major Australian cities. However, unlike previous research, participants in this study indicated additional reasons for intending to migrate both intra- and interstate that are specific to queer identity. Participants living in regional and rural northern Tasmania expressed a common desire to move to the state capital of Hobart in the south:

I really want to move to Hobart!! (laughs) Because it’s just… I can walk around in Hobart with my shirt tucked in and being really loudly gay and it’s fine, cause no one really gives a shit… Yeah, like obviously, there’s still trouble, but it’s sort of more… accepted… Like, I can walk around holding hands with my girlfriend and there’s no problem. It just feels like a safer environment… Whereas here… because I know people here and we’re such gossips because it’s a small town, and there are churches everywhere… There’s just this small town mindset… Because there’s that… I guess rural influence… But because Hobart’s like the capital city and, like, it’s all cultural and there’s [the Museum of Old and New Art]… and there’s all this cool stuff, there’s better services, it’s sort of quietly OK to be queer in Hobart. So that’s where all the poor queer kids go… the ones who can’t move to Melbourne… (laughs) (Francesca, 20, pansexual, northern Tasmania).

In the extract above, Francesca describes the difficulties she faced as queer young woman in northern Tasmania, citing these as a reason she would like to move to Hobart. Recent scholarship highlights the regeneration (or gentrification) of Hobart following the 2011 opening of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). This has been referred to as the “MONA effect” (see Booth et al. 2017), describing how MONA shaped Hobart into a cultural capital, attracting international tourism, urban renewal, and the development of an active arts, culture and food scene. Here, Francesca explicitly uses MONA as an example of how Hobart has become a progressive, queer-friendly city, where she feels safe to express her identity through her dress (“shirt tucked in”) and use of public space, including public displays of same-sex affection. In doing so, Francesca echoes dominant narratives of queer rural-urban migration, situating the capital city of Hobart as queer utopian space, where she envisions an ability to freely express her identity and be her authentic self.

Another participant from northern Tasmania shared a similar account:

Launceston has totally gotten better since when I was growing up. But there’s still this um… small town vibe. A lot of religion. There’s just no education [about LGBTQ issues] up here. Literally everyone I know who isn’t in my immediate friend group, I’ve had to explain my identity to. It’s exhausting. And there’s like no queer friendly services. You can’t really medically transition here, you’d have to drive to Hobart. I feel like if I did go down that track I might as well move to Melbourne, which is kinda sad because I love Tassie, really. But yeah, there’s not a lot of work in my field here either, so… Sometimes I just feel like there’s no future either way. (Harley, 19, panromantic-asexual, Launceston).

Like Francesca, Harley described the delegitimising and “exhausting” mental labour resulting from a lack of awareness around diverse queer identities in her regional hometown of Launceston, Tasmania’s second largest city. Highlighting the dearth of LGBTQ-inclusive health and human services in northern Tasmania (see also Grant, Nash, and Hansen 2019), Harley reflects a sense of being “out of place” in her present environment, with both insufficient professional opportunities and little LGBTQ-inclusion signalling “no future.” These findings are in stark contrast to [Verdich’s (2010)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00049180903535642) study of belonging in Launceston, which represent the regional city as an attractive location for middle-class professionals and young families to migrate to for improved quality of life. Instead, both northern participants’ inability to conceive a queer futurity in rural and regional Tasmania shows how the structural and symbolic exclusion of LGBTQ people in small town spaces can have a significant impact on their sense of belonging and home.

Notably, Francesca observed that rural-urban queer migration trajectories are shaped by socio-economic factors, stating that Hobart is “where all the poor queer kids go,” with Melbourne being a more privileged option. These narratives are also reflected in Hobart-based participants’ corresponding views of Melbourne and Sydney as urban queer utopias. For example:

I’m actually thinking about leaving Hobart pretty soon. I just keep seeing so many friends in like Melbourne and Sydney posting stuff about like, ‘oh, I’m just off to a queer event here’ or ‘I’m going to the Gender Centre and they’ve got all these really great LGBT services’ and like… ‘they understand non-binary people.’ I don’t think I can stay for too much longer before I move to the mainland. (Max, 21, bisexual, Hobart).

Yeah, I think I’ll eventually move to the mainland, probably for uni, but also because it’s a bit more, um, diverse there and, like, there’s more LGBTQ stuff, like bars and groups and stuff like that. (Middy, 19, fluid, southern Tasmania).

Here, participants’ accounts of future plans to move interstate reflect Muñoz’s (2009, 49) “anticipatory illumination of a queer world,” with urban queer life on the “mainland” being envisioned as idyllic, well-resourced, and connected. Like Harley, these participants cited LGBTQ-inclusive health services and vibrant social scenes as factors shaping their perceptions of cities like Melbourne and Sydney as preferable places to Hobart. Unlike northern participants who envisioned Hobart as a regional queer utopia, these accounts demonstrate site-specific perceptions of queer futurity, as Hobart-based queer women did not experience the city as positively as Francesca described. Notably, despite Francesca’s earlier descriptions of MONA’s impact on Hobart as a queer-friendly city, Booth et al. (2017) argue that the museum continues to attract a white, upper-middle-class, highly-educated clientele that does little to challenge the dominant social structure and cultural milieu of Hobart. Therefore, outsider perceptions of queer space can radically differ from the lived experiences of individuals within those spaces. The narratives of leaving Tasmania discussed in this section suggest that visions of queer futurity are shaped by an imagined sense of place, with Tasmanian queer young women’s perceptions of belonging and site-specific future selves being influenced by presence and absence of LGBTQ community, inclusive services, and broader community awareness of LGBTQ issues.

*Arriving in Tasmania*

Tasmania’s recent tourism and real estate boom coupled with State Government initiatives to increase population to 650,000 by 2050 ([Department of State Growth 2015](https://www.stategrowth.tas.gov.au/policies_and_strategies/populationstrategy)), have seen more people choosing to relocate from major Australian cities to Tasmania (see [Denny, Picken and Osbaldiston 2018](https://theconversation.com/meet-the-new-seachangers-now-its-younger-australians-moving-out-of-the-big-cities-103762); [Morgan 2018](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-08/sydneysiders-encouraged-to-move-to-tasmania/9310794)). In addition, according to Croome (2013), following the 1997 decriminalisation of homosexuality, a demographic shift saw increased numbers of LGBTQ people moving away from inner-city “gay ghettos” on the mainland to suburban and regional Tasmania. Several participants in this study shared similar narratives of coming to Tasmania, for example:

I have a huge family and that’s really important to me. It’s a really big part of my identity. But that’s a whole part of myself I really don’t have here in Tassie. I moved down in February with the idea of being in a place where there were more trees and a sort of slower pace, close-knit community, which I have found. But being in Tassie, I’ve felt cut off from a lot of the conversations that I love being part of… back in the queer scene in Melbourne. (Frankie, 25, bisexual, Hobart).

I grew up in Melbourne and the school I went to was super progressive and like LGBTQ issues were just totally normal and accepted and yeah. To be honest I got a bit of a shock coming to Tasmania and seeing that… these issues or these conversations [about sexuality] are much less accepted. I shouldn’t say ‘backward,’ but there seems to be a bit less education or something. (Isabelle, 21, bisexual, Hobart).

While the “slower pace” of regional and rural life in Tasmania was attractive to Frankie, Isabelle reluctantly situated Tasmania as “backward” compared to the “progressive” community she was involved in in inner-city Melbourne. These participants’ situating of Tasmanian life as “slow” and “backward” reflects broader narratives about rural life internationally (Kazyak 2012), while also aligning with the socio-historical framing of Tasmania in Australian culture (see Croome 2013; [West 2013](https://theconversation.com/obstacles-to-progress-whats-wrong-with-tasmania-really-11330)). Here, positioning rural and regional spaces as if they are “back” in time highlights the temporal positioning of urban queer spaces as “progressive” or “ahead,” hence their representation as future utopian spaces. However, as Brown-Saracino observes (2015), regional areas and small towns can be attractive for queer women wishing to challenge the spatial/temporal coordinates of homonormative urban life (Muñoz 2009, 31). For these white, middle-class, urban, queer young women the lack of LGBTQ awareness, visibility, and acceptance in regional and rural Tasmania came as a “shock.” It is notable that the narratives of time and place represented by participants position the past as categorically bad for queer people, while the future is something to move towards. Smith (2010) suggests that such narratives of queer time and place arguably prioritise a white settler-colonial subject for whom it is convenient to forget the past and “move on.” Therefore, as white queer women in Tasmania, participants’ sense of (dis)connectedness to place and visions of future are arguably shaped by intersecting factors of race, class, and geographical location.

In these newcomer experiences Tasmanian space is coded as “ambiently heterosexual” (Bell and Valentine 1995, 18), with little queer visibility generally and an apolitical or homonormative LGBTQ community that are not engaged with the critical identity politics of urban spaces on the mainland. Thus, the limited visibility of a queer scene and its associated politics in Tasmania shapes some queer young women’s perceptions of identity and connectedness with community. One participant provided an alternative perspective:

Yeah, I mean 90 per cent of my friends here are gay. Coming to Tasmania has actually been… probably nicer because it’s such a small community, because everybody knows everybody, so, I mean, even if you’re on the outside, you aren’t for long. Somebody will sort of pick you up and grab you and be like “oh hey! Come, come meet all of my gay friends!” (laughs) (Jayden, 20, pansexual, southern Tasmania).

Echoing Frankie’s comment about the “close knit” nature of the Tasmanian LGBTQ community, Jayden situates Tasmania as preferable to Melbourne because of the heightened sense of familiarity and belonging she experienced. Large cities are represented as spaces of anonymity and individuality, whereas collectivity, family ties and tradition often define rural life (Barefoot et al. 2015). In contrast to narratives reflected in geographical literature, Jayden highlights positive aspects of rural queer life in southern Tasmania, including a sense of shared identity, belonging, and community (see also Verdich 2010). Here, Jayden could be seen as incorporating what Herring (2007, 359-360) refers to as “critical rusticity,” a conscious rejection of urban metronormativity in favour of rural community life. While rural Tasmania has traditionally been represented as a hostile and isolating space for LGBTQ people, Jayden’s account demonstrates how a “close-knit” subculture within a small community can offer a greater sense of belonging and inclusion. Although previous work suggests LGBTQ young people emphasise individuality over shared sexual identities in order to gain acceptance in homonormative rural cultures (Grant and Nash 2019; Kazyak 2012), Jayden demonstrates the possibilities of rural queer subcultures and the positive impact these can have on individuals’ sense of place.

*Returning to Tasmania*

While Australian youth migration literature largely focuses on rural-urban migration, or young Tasmanians moving interstate (see Easthope and Gabriel 2008; Gorman-Murray 2007), few studies provide insights into experiences of returning to rural and regional hometowns after a period away. Gabriel ([200](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676260500523622)6) observes that Tasmanian youth who move interstate for work or study experience shifts in their identity and cultural capital, impacting on their relationships with their hometown and the people in it. Similarly, queer narratives of place largely represent the rural-urban migration as uni-directional, with little examination of experiences of rural queer homecoming. In contrast to rural queer meta-narratives, some participants in this study uniquely shared experiences of returning to Tasmania after living interstate:

So, yeah, I grew up in Tasmania… In Hobart. And um, I moved to the Mainland to study and yeah, I lived in Sydney for five years and now I’ve moved back! Um… I definitely came back gayer than I left! (laughs) But… um.. I think that Sydney really did open my mind to uh the possibilities… It presented me with a lot more possibilities for engaging in the gender diverse community. But, yeah, I was pleasantly surprised by how much better things are here now compared to when I was growing up. (Evie, 25, bisexual, Hobart)

Wow, I mean, moving back to Tassie… I feel like… Change is happening very very slowly, but I feel like it is happening. I think now I see a lot more queer couples in like pubs or restaurants… just touching each other. I don’t mean that to sound pervy or gross, I just mean… When I was growing up in Tasmania in the 80s and 90s I never saw that. When I was in Melbourne, I noticed it more, and that was helpful for me, um, coming to terms with my sexuality, I guess. So, it’s really comforting now to come back and see gay couples touching in public (Stella, 26, bisexual, southern Tasmania).

These narratives of returning to Tasmania trouble both queer narratives of place and Tasmanian migration narratives by representing Tasmania as a site of progress, acceptance, and belonging. Stella and Evie both describe their interstate moves as a Tasmanian rite-of-passage, through which their identities as bisexual women were galvanised. For example, Evie “came back gayer than [she] left” and queer visibility in Melbourne helped Stella “come to terms with [her] sexuality.” These accounts reflect the dominant narratives of urban queer identity formation, situating urban space as a site of individual self-discovery and sexual expression.

However, unlike these dominant narratives, participants in this study reflected on both their identities and Tasmanian queer space upon their return. In contrast to participants’ location of Tasmania as “backward” in the previous section, Evie and Stella believed that LGBTQ acceptance had noticeably improved, and with it the possibility of public queer lives. In particular, Stella highlights how this is reflected through the increased use of public space by same-sex couples. This notion of progress aligns with Baird’s (2006) account of the “new Tasmania,” a socio-political shift towards more liberal politics and LGBTQ-acceptance that occurred following the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Notably, participants juxtapose the conservative, homophobic Tasmania of their 1980s and 1990s youth with the progressive and accepting Tasmania of the present. Unlike some participants’ perceptions of there being “no future” for LGBTQ young people in Tasmania, these positive homecoming narratives indicate a new kind of Tasmanian queer futurity.

**Conclusion**

According to Muñoz (2009, 96) “queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and in time.” In this article I have examined Tasmanian queer women’s narratives of being in both the world and in time and in doing so have shown how site-specific sexual identity cultures produce particular understandings of queer identity politics, space, and futurity. Considering the intersecting “cultures of migration” among both young Tasmanians and LGBTQ people (Gorman-Murray 2009), this study is the first of its kind to explore how Tasmanian lesbian, bisexual and queer young women’s identities are located in place. In line with Puar’s (2002) “circuits of mobility,” I identified three common narratives of leaving, coming, and returning, all of which indicate that Tasmanian queer migration patterns are more nuanced and multi-directional than the broader rural-urban meta-narratives presented in popular culture and geographical research.

For Creswell (2006), the stories we tell about our mobilities are socially constructed and specific to the people and landscapes marked by such movements (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014, 178). For instance, while most participants shared their intentions to leave their Tasmanian hometowns, perceptions of queer utopian spaces varied according to location. Participants in the rural north situated Hobart as a queer-friendly city replete with inclusive services and a vibrant queer social scene. Contrastingly, Hobart-based participants and those who had migrated from interstate both characterised Hobart and Tasmania as a whole as “ambiently heterosexual” compared with queer spaces on the mainland (Bell and Valentine 1995, 18). These site-specific representations of the possibilities of queer identities, visibility, and community-involvement demonstrate how queer futurity can be influenced by place. In particular, in Tasmanian-born participants’ accounts there is a tension between lived experience and imaginary where hope for future queer spaces produces tangible realities in the present. Muñoz (2009, 9) similarly refers to queer utopia as a “blueprint of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema.” The Australian “mainland” similarly operates as a queer utopia for the Tasmanian queer young women in this study, and in doing so, shapes their lived experiences of Tasmanian place and identity.

The dominant discursive representation of Tasmania as ‘backward’ and a place with ‘no future’ for young people takes on additional meaning when applied to young queer women. In particular, the fact that the dearth of LGBTQ-inclusive health and human services is a critical factor shaping young people’s intentions to leave the state is a critical finding of this study. However, as Brickell et al. (2018, 168) observe, “queer mobilities have long been bound up with political and social marginality and the desire to explore new identities, practices, relationships, ways of being and communities through movement, displacement, replacement and even placelessness.” Just as Pritchard et al. (1998) argue that queer migration disrupts public space, the accounts of queer young women returning to Tasmania discussed in this article disrupt the broader public narratives of Australian queer identities in place. If rural spaces are positioned as being “backwards” in time compared to the urban utopias of the mainland, do these participants’ accounts of homecoming constitute a kind of queer time travel? By sharing stories of progress and queer visibility in Tasmanian public spaces, I argue that participants in my study embody Muñoz’s (2009) notion of queer futurity and radical hope in sites that have previously been coded as hostile to queer people.

This article makes unique theoretical and empirical contributions to Australian geographies of sexuality, urban sociology and sexuality studies. In particular, few previous studies have examined how LGBTQ young people experience site-specific sexual identity cultures in rural and regional Australia. Moreover, despite this study’s small sample size, it provides a necessary new account of Australian queer migration narratives specific to Tasmania. While the aim of this study was to examine how Tasmanian queer young women understand identity and place, additional research is required to gain a broader understanding of these experiences. In particular, I welcome comparative studies of LGBTQ communities in Tasmania and major Australian cities or other rural and regional areas. Building on the findings of this study, further research is also required on LGBTQ communities in rural and remote Tasmania specifically. In addition, drawing on a key limitation of this study, greater focus on the intersections of sexuality with race/ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, and class is required in future Australian geographies of sexuality.

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