

## Collecting Older Lesbians' and Gay Men's Stories of Rural Life in South West England and Wales: "We Were Obviously Gay Girls ... (So) He Removed His Cow From Our Field"

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**Abstract:** The emerging recollections, perceptions and storied biographies of older lesbians and gay men and their experiences in rural Britain are presented in the article, alongside consideration of the multiple qualitative methodologies used in a unique multi-method participatory action research project. The project aimed to empower older lesbians and gay men in rural areas through a collaborative design and meaningful participation in the research process itself. Methods included the core Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (JONES, 2001, 2004; WENGRAF, 2001) with its interpretation of data by panels of citizens. In addition, visual ethnographic site visits, a focus group and two days of theatrical improvisation of interview data to explore action within the texts were used. The project embraced the principles of a performative social science (GERGEN & JONES, 2008; JONES, 2006, 2012) in its dissemination plan.

Four of the collected stories are elaborated on here. These and other stories, reports and observations contributed to the creation of the main output of the project—a short professionally made film (*Rufus Stone*). The film is used to encourage community dialogue and inform service providers, opening up new possibilities of connectivity, communication and common ground at both macro and micro levels.

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## 1. Introduction

This article presents a discussion of a research project that took place as part of the *New Dynamics of Ageing Programme* (NDA, a unique collaboration between five UK Research Councils—ESRC, EPSRC, BBSRC, MRC and AHRC<sup>1</sup>) on ageing in 21st Century Britain. The project was entitled, "Gay and Pleasant Land?—A Study About Positioning, Ageing and Gay Life in Rural South West England and Wales" (GPL). Through an exploration of the recollections, perceptions and storied biographies of older lesbians and gay men and their rural experiences, the project focused on connectivity and the intersections between place, space, age

1 Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC); Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC); Medical Research Council (MRC); Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

and identity. Connectivity and identity are central concepts within the project, developing an understanding of how sense of belonging may be negotiated within a rural context. Connectivity can be understood as the ways in which individuals identify and connect themselves with others and the ways in which this may be filtered by aspects of their age and sexuality. Identity and the ways in which older lesbians and gay men choose to disclose their sexuality as part of their identity exert an influence on the ways in which individuals make connections within the wider community. [1]

A sense of belonging may be "multilayered and partial in nature" (GORMAN-MURRAY, WAITT & GIBSON, 2008, p.173), involving interrelated levels of belonging including social locations, personalised experiences and emotional attachments and, finally, the "politics of belonging" (YUVAL-DAVIS, 2006, p.203). This may include which types of people and behaviours are accepted or not within rural communities or, as CRESSWELL (2004, pp.102-103) suggests, what renders people as "in-place" or "out-of-place". Therefore, questions about belonging and marginalised identities within rural landscapes are closely intertwined with notions of rurality and how individuals and groups may become "othered" as their socio-cultural identities "fail to conform with the assumptions and beliefs about the nature of rural society" (LITTLE, 1999, p.439). [2]

The project's focus on identity and connectivity was informed by earlier research which highlighted the importance of "coming out" narratives as a way of negotiating identity over the life course. The *Gay and Grey* project took place between 2003-2006 in south west England (GAY AND GREY, 2006; FENGE, 2010). In this earlier research, the participants' "coming out" stories seemed to be a device employed in negotiating social inclusion, this occurring at different points across the life course. Although some people realised they were gay when they were young, "in many cases it was something they felt unable to disclose to others until later in life" (GAY AND GREY, 2006, p.58). The *Gay and Grey* project highlighted the need to learn more about connectivity and identity issues across the lesbian or gay life course, particularly in rural areas where this may be complicated by the intersection of sexuality, age and geographical space. A key aim of the *Gay and Pleasant Land?* project (2009-2012) was to explore how older gay and lesbian citizens may (or may not) use their "coming out" stories to support identity, issues with belonging and the connections they make with others in rural communities. At all stages of the investigation, concepts of historical and cohort changes were kept in mind (MILLER, 2000). The main characters of these stories grew up when homosexuality was illegal in Britain and imprisonment was common. Many lived with the terror of being discovered, or the stigma of being labelled mentally ill by mental health services (KNOCKER, 2012). They saw these laws change, often in early adulthood, and were young adults during the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the UK. The *Gay and Pleasant Land?* project used a participatory methodology to access the perspectives and experiences of older lesbians and gays in rural areas which have been previously ignored or overlooked in research and policy (BEARD & HISSAM, 2002; BOULDEN, 2001; McCARTHY, 2000). [3]

First, the article introduces the concept of an "idyllic" rurality as it interfaces with the realities of sexuality and ageing. We then outline the multiple methods which were employed in the *Gay and Pleasant Land?* project to uncover older gay and lesbian citizens' experiences of rural Britain. Findings from the biographic narrative component of the research are then presented through the device of four interpreted life stories, two male and two female. Conclusions are finally drawn from these narratives, which contribute to knowledge about the life experiences of being gay or lesbian and growing older in the British countryside. Our summation remains purposefully open-ended, however, in order that the reader might draw their own conclusions and, in this way, contribute to an on-going dialogue and connectivity with the participant-narrators. [4]

## 2. Rurality, Sexuality and Ageing

Idealised views of rural life which include perceptions of the countryside as offering safe and neighbourly communities offer a "well established meta-narrative of the rural" (NEAL & WALTERS, 2008, p.279). Images of picturesque landscapes, green rolling meadows and "village England" (BELL, 1997, p.95) help to communicate an understanding of the countryside as a benign and welcoming place, and rural life as taking place within close knit, inclusive and supportive communities. However, it has been suggested that there is a paradox of rural life in old age (MANTHORPE, MALIN & STUBBS, 2004), in that the attractiveness of such communities as safe, sociable environments may also give rise to problems for older people in terms of limited access to health and social care support, poor transport links and isolation (WENGER, 2001). This may be complicated for marginalised groups of older people, and the connections that individuals have with their rural communities involve not only nuances regarding individual identity, but also a critique of the "rural idyll" (NEWBY, 1980). [5]

The "rural idyll" can be described as a consequence of a normalising concept that defines who belongs and who is seen as different within rural communities (WATKINS & JACOBY, 2007). GIDDENS (1994, p.126) proposes that such traditional communities exert a "compelling pressure towards conformism" towards anyone who is seen as different, and this will exert an influence on the identity of marginal groups within rural life. Sociological research suggests that rather than presenting idyllic havens, rural communities have complex dynamics making them cautious and conservative spaces in which incomers or those viewed as different are often treated with distrust or suspicion (CLOKE & LITTLE, 1997). For individuals who may be seen as "different", the impact of the rural idyll is that it can contribute to stigma and stress. Although research suggests that older lesbians and gay men may have learnt to manage stigma and developed skills of self-reliance at an earlier age (FRIEND, 1980; KEHOE, 1988), the impact of geography and place may undermine these earlier positive experiences, exerting an influence on the way they manage their sexual identities within a rural context (KNOCKER, 2012). [6]

Sexual identities may express themselves in different ways within different landscapes, and the relationship between sexual identity and rural geography has

been explored in a number of texts (BELL & VALENTINE, 1995; DUNCAN, 1996; VALENTINE, 1993). Although this work has focused on identity issues for non-heterosexual groups within the countryside, little is known about the formation of identity for older sexual minority people living in rural communities, or what factors may lead to a sense of social inclusion or exclusion for them within rural life. The relationship between rurality and men's sexuality has been relatively unexplored within the literature (KENNEDY, 2010), and there has been a bias towards urban samples within research on older lesbians and gay men (ADDIS, DAVIES, GREENE, MacBRIDE-STEWART & SHEPHERD, 2009). Of the limited research that has been undertaken, it appears that the isolation experienced by older individuals from sexual minorities may be compounded by the lack of local gay resources within rural communities (COMERFORD, HENSON-STROUD, SIONAINN & WHEELER, 2004; GAY AND GREY, 2006; McCARTHY, 2000). Weaker levels of social connectedness and feelings of being part of a community have been identified for older gay men and women in rural communities in the Netherlands (FOKKEMA & KUYPER, 2009), and it has been suggested that, alongside minority stress, this results in individuals concealing part of their real personality due to fear of discrimination. [7]

Notions of idyllic rural life tend to mask and conceal marginalised groups within rural populations and can also write them out of the script altogether (CLOKE, MILBOURNE & THOMAS, 1997, p.227). Minority groups of older people may be marginalised both within and outside their rural communities. To offer a counterbalance to this it has been suggested that studies concerning rurality should become more open to neglected voices and otherness within the countryside (PHILO, 1992, 1993). The *Gay and Pleasant Land?* project aimed to elicit the views and experiences of marginalised groups of older people by using multi-methods to explore connections between place, space and identity, including visual ethnography, a focus group and interviews using the *Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method* (BNIM). Four stories are presented here, weaving the emergent recollections of the participants with the interpretations of their stories by the BNIM panels as outlined below. [8]

### 3. Methodology

The *Gay and Pleasant Land?* project began with a desire to uncover the stories that older gay and lesbian individuals might tell about their rural lives and how their identity has been influenced by experiences associated with age and place over their life course. A range of qualitative methodologies was employed within an overarching multi-method participatory action research design to meaningfully engage neglected voices (PHILO, 1992, 1993) within the geographical remit of the NDA projects. These methods included BNIM (JONES, 2001, 2004; WENGRAF, 2001), visual ethnographic site visits, a focus group and two days of theatrical improvisation of interview data to explore action within the texts, led by a professional theatre director. Results from these varied methods informed the development of a film script consisting of "composite characters" (SANDELOWSKI, TRIMBLE, WOODWARD & BARROSO, 2006) based upon the

interview and focus group findings (further discussion of the methodology has been published elsewhere, see FENGE, JONES & READ, 2010). [9]

An Advisory Committee was central in establishing a participatory research design across multiple layers of the project. There was a commitment to the active participation of key stakeholders, including "those whose lives are affected by the problem under study" (NELSON, OCHOCKA, GRIFFIN & LORD, 1998, p.885). The project's Advisory Committee, therefore, was made up of a mix of older gay people and service providers/advisers who contributed specialised skills, knowledge, and/or resources to the project (McINTYRE, CHATZOPOULOS, POLITI & ROZ, 2007). They were central in providing useful contacts/organisational links to recruit participants to take part in the various stages of the research. Snowball sample method was used to identify individuals to take part in the biographic interviews (n=7), the focus group (n=12) and visual ethnographic site visits, filming and interviews (n=3). The sampling was also purposive by means of inclusion/exclusion criteria to reflect age (55+), and geographical residence (south west England and Wales) (LUTZ, GOUJON & DOBLHAMMER-REITER, 1998). [10]

The project began by listening to the life stories that older gay and lesbian individuals told to make sense of their position in rural society over the life course using BNIM (JONES, 2001, 2004; WENGRAF, 2001). This method employs an interview technique in the form of a single, initial narrative-inducing question to illicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration. This initial question, for example, "Tell me the story of your life", is followed by questions which are only based on what the interviewee has said using her/his words and phrases in the same order, thus maintaining the narrator's *gestalt*. [11]

The interpretation of BNIM interview data is collaborative through the participation of reflective panels as part of the data interpretation process. The reflective panels were comprised of older people, research students and academic staff who expressed an interest in becoming involved in this aspect of the research. Such a participatory approach introduces multiple voices or perspectives into the interpretive process, unsettling and creating a mix of meaning and encouraging communication and collective means of deliberation and understanding (GERGEN, 2000, p. 100). In total ten reflective panel sessions took place, each session taking three hours to complete. Each session comprised five or six participants, and different panels took place for either the "Lived Life" or the "Told Story" components of each interview: The "Lived Life" reveals the chronological chain of life events as reported, which have been constructed chronologically in order for them to be analysed in sequence. The "Told Story" makes known the life story in the order narrated by the interviewee, which is interpreted by the panel piece by piece. Through hypothesising how the "Lived Life" informs the "Told Story", the case history is then constructed by the research team from the interpretations provided by these two separate panels (see JONES, 2001, 2004; WENGRAF, 2001 for further elaboration on the BNIM). [12]

Following the BNIM interviews, a focus group comprised of new older gay and lesbian volunteers was assembled so that the researchers could explore further questions which had arisen during the biographic interviews, bringing fresh perspectives and additional information to the study. Criteria for participating in the focus group were expanded to include those who had experience of living in the British countryside during one or more periods of their lives. It had become apparent during the BNIM interviews that individuals did not necessarily have a history of continuous rural residency *in situ*, with mobility across the life course in terms of place/location being apparent for the majority of participants. Discussion in the focus group was facilitated by a number of key questions which included a specific focus on sexual identity and rural living. These included:

1. How do you/did you cope with being gay and living in a small community?
2. How open are you/were you about being gay to neighbours and other people in the village?
3. Do people treat you differently because you are gay or when they suspect that you are different?
4. What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you because you are gay? What is the best thing?
5. How has growing older made a difference in the place that you live? Or how has the place that you live made a difference in growing older? [13]

Because the main output of the project would eventually be the short award-winning professional film, *Rufus Stone*, a visual ethnographic study was carried out as one component of the multi-method approach in order to explore aspects of experience which are often unspoken and embodied (GRIMSHAW, 2005). Indeed, in the subsequent film itself the first ten of the 30 minutes is without dialogue. The researcher made site visits to three volunteers, staying with them for several days each. She conducted informal interviews, some of which were filmed along with shooting the locale and setting of the participant's world. Participants were particularly asked to reflect upon how they felt about their relative visibility or invisibility as lesbian women or gay men living a rural life. The process also included the exploration with the investigator of five to ten images selected by the participants which characterised aspects of their experience of living in (or having lived) in a rural area. In-depth discussions were held with the investigator around these images. [14]

#### **4. Four Interpreted Stories**

Findings resulting from narrative investigations work best in cases when the narrators are allowed to "speak for themselves". Indeed, progressive, post-modern qualitative work does not "analyse", but interprets. Interpretation through the arts offers a broader platform on which to engage audiences in the interpretive process itself. The subsequent writing up of our projects remains *reportage* within arts-based research practice—these texts are never meant to be the main output or a final interpretation. Far more illuminating as scholarship are the scripts themselves, the notes or the diagrammatic evidence that our arts-

based research projects leave behind as a kind of trail, trace or map. When we do publish, these sorts of records certainly hold more relevance in terms of contributions to knowledge and moving practice forward. Any academic written texts reporting our efforts should be supporting supplementary documents to our productions, not the other way round and certainly not the final results or *raison d'être*s of our investigative efforts (see JONES, 2012). [15]

BNIM champions two innovative and key principles: 1. We learn more about a person by listening to his/her life story than by asking questions. 2. Interpretation of such rich material is best served when multiple viewpoints (and the lived experiences of a wide variety of others) interconnect with the material through reflection, producing multiple viewpoints. [16]

We now turn to individual reports on four of the life stories that were told to us<sup>2</sup>, interlaced with the BNIM's reflective citizen panels' interpretations. Participants in the biographic interviews remain anonymous in regard to specific names, which have been changed. Although an effort has been made to anonymise particular places, identifying life events, etc. reported in the interviews, others familiar with the interviewee might very well recognise his or her life trajectory. Participants in the biographic interviews, site visits and focus group became involved with an expectation that their stories were making a contribution to an important project. For this reason, they participated with a willingness for their stories and experiences to be shared more openly, including as part of the eventual film. In order to report these narrations, some geographic details remain unchanged. It is believed that this more accurately represents the migratory experiences typical of many lesbians and gay men of this generation. [17]

These stories, along with other rich data from the focus group and the visual ethnographic study, were foundational in creating the film. The research team and advisory panel used this material to inform the development of the film's composite characters, treatment and script, creating the "fictive" reality that resulted in the story and characterisations for the film, *Rufus Stone*. Fictive reality is conceived as the ability to engage in imaginative and creative invention while remaining true to the remembered realities as told through the narrations of others. Several, in fact, may recount a similar incident. When these reports are combined into one person's story, a "fiction" is born. [18]

The long process of investigation and discovery described here began with listening to stories, and so we end here with some of them. Rather than present overly speculative "analyses" of these contributions (although we do draw our own conclusions at the end), we leave a space for readers to engage as well with reflections of their own. We are just as keenly interested in stimulation of the individual reading a journal article and creating space for her/him to engage in a final interpretation. In this way our contract (indeed, bond) with the narrator to remain a conduit is honoured. [19]

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2 The BNIM interviews were carried out by Delia DUNA, Research Assistant and Kip JONES, Project Lead.

## Sid Harper

Sid was born in 1937 in Dulwich, south east London—what was then a green, working-class suburb. It seems difficult to imagine today that this London area was a village with a wood, but it was back then. [20]

Sid was an only child whom his parents had late in life. He lived with them until their deaths. As a child, his parents moved to Hendon to work at the airport, situated in what was then still very much the countryside. At 15, Sid got a job working with *BOAC*<sup>3</sup> at the airport. At the age of 27, he moved with his parents to a maisonette in Harlington near the airport, where they lived until 1976. [21]

In 1976 at the age of 39, Sid moved with his parents to Devon to live in a bungalow with views over farmland. His parents' health began to deteriorate, so Sid and his parents made another move, this time to the West Country. He felt an affinity with the locale because he remembered a holiday there as a child. Telling us this, he recalls that his father never accompanied them on their holidays. [22]

In 1980, when Sid was 43, his father died. At the time, Sid was working 70 hours a week in a pub near their home. Eight years later, his mother was admitted to a home because Sid was no longer able to care for her. She died 18 months later. [23]

For the first time in his life, Sid was now alone. He found it difficult to come home to an empty house and became depressed. In 1991, he made a seven-month visit to relatives in New Zealand in an attempt to overcome his depression. [24]

At this juncture, Sid's life had consisted of more than 50 years of living with his parents. Although much of the geography of their early homes might be mistaken for urban today, in actuality, the panel correctly saw that Sid and his parents had spent a lifetime moving "from green to green". [25]

Since that time, Sid has taken on jobs caring for people in their homes and later took on a job working in the very nursing home in which his mother had resided up until her death. [26]

Attachment to rurality and particularly memories of childhood holidays in the country play an important role in Sid's decision-making and internalisation of a personal definition and affinity for "rural space":

"There (is) so much countryside if you look around ... my village every street you look up you can see hills and trees and that I love, but that's what I mean by affinity; it was from early journeys we used to make." [27]

Sid told a story of sexual encounters in his childhood which seemed to solidify his sexual development around memories of the nude male body and his own sexual passivity. This, coupled with his years of caring for his parents, has limited his

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3 British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC).



sexual history and any development of mature relationships to ones of mostly "brief encounters" at best. [28]

Sid recalls his earliest sexual experience as a child, which took place in the countryside:

"I was standing by a field and he took me into a field and sat me down. There was no force and I don't even remember questioning it or trying to pull away or anything. That was the first time I was probably drawn to a male physique if I can put it that way. ...I can remember that very clearly, very clearly indeed." [29]

His early sexual liaisons with men (frequently in rural settings) and their imprinting upon his memory reinforce the particularly visual nature of male sexual arousal. The panel commented on the fact that there was no fear and that Sid recounted this in a manner that was "matter of fact". Sid went on to explain:

"What happened to me when I was in my younger years, from eleven onwards, I would like to recall that I have never ever regretted it. I was forced not at all and I found it, the feelings I had were body contact, affection and love erm ... not primarily sexual, sex did occur but all I recall most of all is the love and affection of a kind man." [30]

Sid finally has made a few gay friends in the countryside and through these friendships, discovered the Internet. He even found love late in his life with a man he met on *Gaydar*<sup>4</sup> that lasted a few years, but ended because of complications. He has located nudist beaches in his area on the Internet that he frequents and has been able to contact other naturists with similar interests. Sid regrets that he did not come out in his rural area earlier.

"It was something that wasn't talked about. I lived in a bungalow with glorious views over the farm land and hills and I had been there twenty four years before I found out the farmer opposite was a gay man." [31]

Sid sums up his life by mentioning the gay farmer again:

"In my village well there is a gay farmer... well I understand I don't know and I certainly don't intend to enquire or find out but there are another half a dozen gay men and women in my village but whereas I felt if anybody found out about me in 1977 and onwards that I would have been the talk of the village until somebody else comes along and does something dreadful and that bit of scandal gets put aside the new bit of scandal ... it's gossip, that doesn't bother me now it probably used to in the early days when I moved down here. So I suppose in a way I have lead a sheltered life but that's fair enough ... I often regret that I didn't do lots of other things as a gay man." [32]

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4 Gaydar: worldwide, profile-based dating website for gay and bisexual men, women and couples over the age of 18.

## Sarah Tompkins

Sarah was born in suburban London (Barnet) in 1952 into an upper middle class family. Sarah remained in London until the age of 35. As is the case in many of the biographies in this study, childhood memories of the countryside play an important role in later life geographic decision-making. So is the case with Sarah Tompkins. At the time of the interview Sarah had been living for 13 years in the rural area where she had spent holidays at her grandparents' home as a child.

"Yeah and where I live is actually kind of on the edge of Bath so I get partly what I want which is to be able to walk along the river quite often because it is in walking distance of my home, walk along the canal, walk through fields, umm ... I find myself really spiritually nourished by wide open spaces, green fields, green trees, winter landscapes umm ... but I don't find myself spiritually nourished by the sort of people who live in those spaces." [33]

Sarah's mother, who grew up in the countryside outside of Bath, came from a working class Catholic family of seven children. Sarah's mother married "above her station", moving to London at a time when the class system was still in force and very much a major part of British life and culture. It may be the case that this negative "emotional capital" was passed on from her mother to Sarah. Her conflict between her discomfort with her upper middle class background and her love for her working class grandparents' rural lifestyle resonates throughout her story. [34]

As a child, Sarah stayed with her grandparents during the holidays. As is the case with many uninterrupted biographic interviews, the interviewee will establish the *gestalt* or shape of their life story early on in the telling. Almost at the outset Sarah said: "Okay, right well I was born in London but I spent a lot of time in this area around Bath because I had umm grandparents who lived here."

"I was brought up in London in a very, very upper middle class family even actually, umm and, but I used to come to Bath as a child in the holidays and my grandparents were, and stay with my grandparents, and my grandparents were actually working class people and they had seven children who variously kind of stayed very working class, or didn't, but I felt I had a real sort of split upbringing in a way in that I am very, very middle class, and I have been brought up as middle class, and yet I can see, I can't be around white middle class people because I begin to feel like I am going screaming mad because they feel like they don't know, because it feels to me like they don't know what the hell life is like for other people." [35]

Sarah's initial momentary discomfort ("umm") before revealing that it is her grandparents that are the reason for her choice of locale (i.e., *not* her parents) is then quickly overcome and reinforced by the use of the word "grandparents" three times in quick succession in the following sentence. In opposition, she then follows this by emphasising "middle class", also three times in close succession. Sarah is telling us that the world of her grandparents is the one that she values; the middle class world of her parents, the one that she hates. These two

diametrically opposed forces in her life—the working class of her grandparents and the middle class of her parents made her feel like she was "going screaming mad ... ." Sarah rebelled against middle class conventions as a teenager, refusing to take her A-levels, stating that she wanted to learn at the "university of life". [36]

By the 1970s she was in a marriage with a man who was the son of Austrian Jewish immigrants, bringing up two children. A few years later, she had another child with a Caribbean father. Around this time, she was involved in anti-nuclear protests and met an American woman with whom she formed a relationship and lived for six years. Through their common interest in magic, they met other lesbians and began to attend pagan festivals<sup>5</sup>. [37]

Sarah then moved from London to a rural area outside of Cardiff. In the middle class valley of Marshfield, few neighbours were friendly to her and her three children. Her children had different family names: the first two had a Jewish-Austrian family name and the last one had a French-Caribbean name. The local parish council stated that all these names had to be erased from the parish guild. [38]

Sarah faced down the typical rural objection to "in-comers" such as herself:

"When I moved to Marshfield someone knocked on my door to give me the Parish magazine newsletter and said, 'The people who live in our village can't afford to buy these houses', and I said 'Oh piss off, you know I can't afford to live where I was brought up either!' " [39]

There were good memories in Marshfield, too. Sarah remembers having regular visits from her lesbian friends and second partner. They enjoyed the green landscape, had long walks through the fields and had garden parties. [40]

In 1992, when she was about to reach her forties, Sarah decided to go back to London University and to do a degree in literary studies. During that time she threw out all her books by men and kept a kind of very pure "women's library". [41]

Seventeen years ago at the age of 46 Sarah met her present partner, a Nigerian woman. Together, they work as foster carers in the local community. Since they met they have lived on the green outskirts of Bath. Sarah bookends her story by returning to her opening *gestalt*—telling us that she feels that she belongs in Bath, where her grandparents are buried. [42]

In a further summation, speaking of past rural landscapes, Sarah said,

"I loved rural life, I loved myself and trees and walking the dog in the/across the hills and the fields, and hearing owls hoot and all that, but what I couldn't bear was the community I was living in, and they found me really difficult too'." [43]

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5 Pagan is a term that refers to "country dweller" or "rustic". Festivals celebrate pre-Christian, usually poly-theistic religions.

## **Brian Bennett**

Brian was born in a seaside town on the north west coast of England in 1937. Because of Brian's asthma and at the advice of their doctor, the family moved south when he was six. He lived with his parents and his sister on the outskirts of Bristol until he was 21. Tension between his parents and outbursts from his father caused Brian to avoid conflict throughout his adult life. [44]

From his early days, Brian recalls his enjoyment and affinity with the countryside, where he would take his younger sister for walks as a child. This was his "thinking time" to go over things he couldn't talk about openly. The panel saw him as someone who needed "his own space" and to be on his own. [45]

Brian had an early sexual experience with a man at a rail signal box. Brian's grandfather, a policeman, had the man investigated and Brian was forbidden to go to the signal box again. Brian remembers the details of this time:

"So it was a sort of semi-rural existence that we, we had and I used to go walking into the fields and I remember once I fell into a stream, and came out with lots of green sludge over me, um going picking mushrooms that would be, um and this was of course where as where round the sig/signal box was and all the rest of it." [46]

Brian more or less accepted that he was interested in other males around the age of 19, but thought it was probably "just a phase". [47]

In his late teens he formed a platonic relationship with his best friend in a youth hostelling group who was a few years younger than him:

"(We) stayed at youth hostels at weekends, had parties, listened to concert music, classical concerts (clears throat) um, (5)<sup>6</sup> and um (2) basically uh we went on holiday with his parents um, but nothing of any undue intimacy uh took place between us um but uh, we just were very fond and affectionate and er that's more or less where it stayed." [48]

Unfamiliar with their growing emotional connection and pawns in a heterosexual social system, the plot thickened:

"Then he got a girlfriend and I got a bit upset about it and I think his parents cottoned on or my parents, my mother cottoned on too. (Clears throat) So there were all sorts of questions being asked and as the older one um, and the younger chap's parents um and he was then about nineteen, twenty, um threatened to contact the Police. Um so it all dissolved up in some sort of um, and then apparently he'd been visiting the girlfriend I had, that was another thing so it all got terribly, terribly, terribly messy." [49]

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6 Numbers in brackets refer to pauses in seconds.

The friendship was brought to an end by his parents who threatened to bring in the police. The panel perceived this interaction as Brian's first emotional experience that was denied him, let off with a caution: "It's illegal". [50]

Brian had hoped to go to University but was unable to do so for financial reasons. He started working in the city council and worked his way up the ladder over the next few years, ending up working in London. During his time in London, he frequented gay pubs, but found the experience "odd" and he remained unsure about his sexuality. At the same time, he attempted to have committed relationships with women, but these never lasted.

"I wasn't exactly um, swung off my feet, it didn't exactly reach the sixth heaven, um and because I knew about this other element of my sexuality I didn't feel it right ... and I still regard myself actually as not totally gay um to regard myself as somewhat bisexual." [51]

In 1967, around the time of the change in the laws on homosexuality, Brian decided to consult two psychiatrists in London regarding his attraction to men. The panel saw this as his attempt at "getting fixed" and representing a desperation not to be gay, at a time when it would seem that being gay would finally be somewhat more acceptable. This new cultural openness appeared to the panel to be more of a threat to Brian's secret life than a welcomed change. [52]

Over his lifetime, Brian eventually went on to have four long-term male partners, two of whom died. He has worked and lived in both rural and urban locations, including living in rural Wales for a time: "During that time for nearly two years I lived on a farm up in the hills. Good old farmhouse, er good farm er produce and er, those were the days when the front door was always open (laughs)." [53]

At one time he and his partner in London bought a thatched cottage in Dorset together. Even when he lived in London, having a *pied-à-terre* somewhere in the countryside was a priority for Brian. [54]

He retired in 1987 and moved to the seaside in Dorset where he ran a small hotel. He then joined the Metropolitan Community Church that tolerates issues of sexuality and has "gay friendly" congregations all over the world. Brian eventually left Metropolitan to join another similar church, eventually becoming a Bishop in that organisation. [55]

Brian at the time of the interview was living in Dorset and had been in a relationship with a younger partner for 18 years who challenges him from time to time on whether Brian fully accepts of his sexuality. Brian's response: "Well, you know that's where I came from and who I am!" [56]

The panel saw Brian's Northern routes as something that he perceived as necessary to give up in order to be completely gay.

"I was born in um (2) ... in ah Lancashire (2) ah very much a North Country family and very much a North Country person in spite of all my travels. ... So um, I think that's the (2) the bi er bisexuality issue [my partner is] right, I'm not entirely comfortable about the gay side of me but, um because I don't consider myself entirely gay, and I think I will take that sort of, situation to the grave with me. (My partner) thinks I'm not at peace with myself." [57]

Brian Bennett died shortly before Christmas 2012. [58]

### **June Porter**

June was born in London in 1931 and adopted by her parents, a soldier, who worked in the carpet industry after retiring from the army and her mother, who had been in the Women's Voluntary Service in World War I. June grew up in a Worcestershire village. She described her mother as not very "efficient", who wanted a "girlie girl" as a daughter. June thought that she disappointed her mother because she was a tomboy. She believed that she and her mother had a problematic and unhappy relationship. She felt that she was not only neglectful of her, but also that her mother put on airs and graces and aspired to be upper class. June described her adopted father as quiet, and felt that he had probably been traumatised by the experience of the Somme in the First World War. She had a better relationship with her father than her mother. [59]

June joined the Women's Royal Naval Service (The "Wrens") at age 20 and served for eight years. She spent much of this time in Malta working as a code breaker; she also did some instruction of other officers. At the time, she visited Libya in North Africa (where, she mentioned, she had been involved in competitive race driving). In the Navy she wasn't "out" as "you weren't allowed to be", but she had lots of affairs with other women. She also got engaged to a couple of men, without any intention of marrying them, more to keep other men at bay. In 1953-1954 she had her first serious relationship with a woman. This was in Ireland when she was still serving with the Navy. Both of them then went together to Malta. [60]

Just before she left the Navy, she began a relationship with Pam, which lasted for nine years. After June left the Navy she had various jobs, eventually moving on to train as a teacher. When Pam moved to Devon, June joined her and got a job as head of geography in a local school. The relationship with Pam broke down, partly because Pam was an alcoholic. [61]

June began another relationship with Marie, who also worked as a teacher in the same school. This was to be June's key relationship for the rest of her life—they were together for more than 30 years, until Marie's death. June said that everyone in the school where they worked knew and understood that Marie and June were in a relationship, but it was never discussed or acknowledged.

"Marie was very interested in politics, she went into politics in a big way, Liberals and all that sort of thing, and she literally used to lie and used to refer to me as her sister

and then I was accepted in the Liberal association as her sister, and anybody can imagine we were so different she was about 5' 2" and I am 5' 9"! I mean we are so different, we were obviously a couple and not sisters, but as long as the word sister was used, it was okay." [62]

In 1971 they moved to Devon where they rented a house overlooking the estuary. In 1977 they bought a tiny house in Cornwall and renovated it with the help of two male friends. They ran a small holding there where they kept a cow and grew vegetables. Marie did some part-time teaching. She spent much of this time renovating the farmhouse and the surrounding land. This is the period of her life she discusses in the interview as a very happy period in her life. June recalls a time on the refurbished tractor that they named "Dolly":

"I remember this very hot summer and obviously that was a normal working week, but this very hot summer we were in our summer frocks open necks and so on and I remember I had this bright red frock and I was tanking round I'd been delivering spuds to somebody and all these people were coming out and taking photographs of this mad woman in a red frock on this tractor and I was singing 'I've got a brand new combine harvester, you give me the key'." [63]

When they sold the small holding three years later they made a profit of £20K, which was a great deal of money then. June was enthusiastic about renovating houses, and they acquired part, if not all their income from buying property cheap, doing it up, and then selling it for a profit. Still, country living for a committed lesbian couple was not easy:

"We turned the village on its ears because we were a gay group, you know, and we happened to have a lot of men friends who were also gay, no women, they were not interested you know, we were lonely, two women, so all our friends were gay men, and um, ... you, you can imagine the impact this had on a little village, and the, I ah, remember the woman next door she wouldn't let her son out, a boy about six years old. I said, 'I am as unlikely to touch your dog as I am your cows, or your boy, your dog'. Anyway, I mean we two women were completely isolated and we really depended on the friendship of our gay men friends, and I mean, they were good friends, good friends'." [64]

The couple then moved to Downton where they remained until a few years before Marie's death at 78. After Marie's death, June was left with a lot of debt. In 2007 at the age of 76, June moved to east Devon. She bought a house with her new partner, with whom she now lives, but not happily. The problem for June is that they are not very compatible, and she experiences this woman as spiteful and jealous. [65]

June is involved in lots of social activities locally, some of which are specifically for gay/lesbian people, some of which are not (art classes, swimming)—she particularly enjoys swimming. In spite of her lifetime of adventures, deep friendships and alternative living, when questioned about gay life in the countryside, June sums it up thusly: "It was lonely, yes. Yes. That's it, yes." [66]

June elaborates on life for a lesbian in the countryside:

"What is rural? I lived in really rural where you've got a henhouse it can't get much more rural, but I mean I still call where I live rural, but in my nearest town their living more conventional; you cannot imagine all these old ex-majors in their blazers and cottage pies and their wives with their blue rinses and pearls and they, I um, I mean I go through quite a lot of things with these people pubs and art groups and the like and um I mean the word 'lesbian' I think, I think I'd be thrown out of the door.

I really do I don't think that they could cope at all, I mean I'm at fault, I have to be the conventional ex-teacher, it's okay if I'm an ex-teacher, anything different you know and, you know. I said something one day ... and they assumed that I was a widow and they wouldn't accept the fact that you can be in such a long relationship with somebody the same sex, but of course you can." [67]

This kind of prejudice based in ignorance has existed throughout a lifetime of rural dwelling for June:

"My most rural experience was at a smallholding in a little tiny hamlet in Cornwall. Cornwall, they've never heard of gay people, you know, not the locals, you know, and I remember my next door neighbour came up to us the day I moved in, well the day my friend and I moved in, bought this derelict farm, to tart it up and he took one look at us and fainted dead away, because we were particular friends with two gay boys, who were very obviously gay boys and we were obviously gay girls, and he just fainted dead away and removed his cow from our field." [68]

## 5. Conclusions

The retrospective longitudinal nature of this biographic study has revealed that its participants have moved in and out of rural settings over the lifecourse and do not typically remain in only one type of location (city, town or village) over their life times. This may be important in relation to other studies that look only at current residency status in relation to rurality. Further investigation is needed to determine whether, in fact, the general population of those currently residing in rural localities have lived in their present location for their lifetimes or if they have also migrated over the lifecourse. Has the majority population also moved over time—from village to village, to towns and even to cities, similar to the patterns of migration told to us by older gay and lesbian citizens? It would be helpful to ascertain whether those who complain of "incomers" to their rural community are themselves simply members of an earlier incoming population to the same rural areas. [69]

The study's biographies also show that the concept of "rural" often relates to childhood memories of what rural means, and that places that might be considered not strictly the countryside (towns, even cities) can have meaningful "rural" memories and emotional links for some (YUVAL-DAVIS, 2006). Physical changes in localities over time (rural areas becoming heavily built up, e.g., Heathrow, Hendon, etc.), and the changing nature of geographical space have an



impact on how the older generation's memories of rural spaces are also historically and socially constructed, and may not relate to contemporary concepts of these places as urban, rather than rural. What rural life means today to the participants in this study was very often constructed by childhood memories of walks in the country, holidays in the countryside or visits with relatives in rural areas, and their sense of belonging can be seen as multilayered (GORMAN-MURRAY et al., 2008), traversing across both time and place. Attachment to these key memories of place often can be seen as the source of adult choices in relocation and lifestyle and an "affinity" (a word mentioned by several participants) with the countryside, constructed by these very memories. [70]

Being gay or lesbian for this older generation of British adults is typically spoken about in terms of relationships for lesbians and in terms of sexual experiences for gay men. The fact that most of the men in our study came of age during a period when homosexuality was still illegal in Britain is key to understanding their life trajectories and sexual histories. Due to the biographic nature of this study, it is possible to establish how early relationships and sexual experiences provided clues to the development of later relationships and even conflict in terms of acceptance of their own sexuality, even in later life. [71]

The project's main findings were that although the laws changed regarding the illegality of homosexuality in 1967, men whose sexual identity developed before that change were profoundly marked by growing up during the period when homosexuality was illegal and punishable by imprisonment. Prejudice was reported against gay and lesbian citizens, particularly in small rural communities. A secondary danger was uncovered in an attitude of "We don't like to mention it" regarding the sexuality of others amongst rural dwellers—a rural version of a "don't ask, don't tell" mentality. We found that many older gay and lesbian citizens needed to negotiate "acceptance" in rural areas by being extremely cautious about to whom and when they "came out", if at all. Negotiation with service providers also was often either fraught with difficulties or non-existent in many of the reported cases. Finally, stories of suicide amongst older gay men were prevalent in several of the accounts that participants gave us. The given reasons for these tragedies ranged from a profound inability to accept one's sexuality, being "outed" or fear of being outed in the local community or becoming overwhelmed by family pressures. [72]

Ageing in the countryside is not necessarily itself a stand-alone issue. Coping mechanisms and expectations, which were developed early on in the participants' lives, come into play again at this stage of their lives. Problems of isolation, mobility, friendship and support networks, along with issues of lack of service provision, are all discussed amongst older gay men and lesbians, much in the same way that they are concerns for the larger heterosexual ageing population. Living amongst an unfriendly or even hostile population of contemporaries, however, has resulted in a cohort of rural dwelling gay and lesbian citizens who have developed particular coping skills to deal with their environment and its social resources. This includes managing stigma and discrimination from an early age (FRIEND, 1980; KEHOE, 1988). [73]

Whether real or imagined, class is also a major component in all of the reports. Class and perceptions of class are issues that came up over and over again in the life stories of participants. In fact, class prejudice is often more easily accepted than homophobia as the "excuse" for what others might very well perceive as hostility towards gay people in the countryside. Further investigation of the impact of class as an exclusionary factor alongside homophobia, heterosexism and age is needed to understand better the complexities of rural identity for older lesbian and gay citizens. [74]

We end by returning to an interchange from the focus group:

Male Participant: "When I was living exclusively in the county, I found that ah, um, the divide, if there was a divide was between the classes, living in a true rural area. There were people who lived in the council houses who you just didn't really talk to and there were other people who quite clearly not part of the overall social structure for one reason or another, but basically if you moved around, you might call in socio-economic terms, the middle of nowhere of the edges of the area, nobody cared as long as you didn't actually ... ."

Female Participant: "... Frighten the horses." [75]

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