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Out in the Cowboy State: a Look at Gay And Lesbian Lives in Wyoming

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ABSTRACT

We know relatively little about the lives and experiences of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who live in rural areas, with early research tending to focus on the challenges of rural living. The present survey research examined the experiences and beliefs of gays and lesbians living in Wyoming. Findings highlight the interactions across personal, familial, community and societal levels. Differences based on gender and community size were found for the respondents' experiences with discrimination and their interest in the pursuit of "gay rights." Of special interest is the importance ascribed to the geographical community and the paucity of community-based resources.

ARTICLE

Our understanding of gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) lives has been shaped by studies conducted on urban populations. The earliest studies, conducted at the Kinsey Institute, were based on data collected in San Francisco during 1969-1970 (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). Similarly, urban samples were also used in the sociological studies of the 1970's and 1980's by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), Harry and DeVall (1978), Levine (1979), and Weinberg (1983). In contrast, we know relatively little about the lives and experiences

of the GLB persons who reside in rural areas or in geographically isolated communities.

Early researchers such as Moses and Buchner (1980) concluded that rural gay life is difficult and unsatisfying:

Rural areas are likely to be characterized by conservatives, traditionalism, religious fundamentalism, isolation of atypical or deviant members, resistance to change, high visibility, lack of confidentiality, and a tendency to view problems as personal rather than system based. (p.173)

D'Augelli and Hart (1987) also posited that "rural living poses distinct frustrations for people personally at ease with their sexuality" (p. 85). Other studies conducted during the 1980s, often from a clinical or social service perspective, characterized rural gay life similarly (Breeze, 1985; Gunther, 1986, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1989).

This characterization of rural life as being hostile to GLB persons has remained fairly constant over the ensuing years. Smith (1997) argues that in rural communities, more traditional values are dominant and the boundaries are often closed, allowing for less toleration of variability in ways of life. Many organizations within rural areas are closed to gays, so that they must either seclude themselves from such organizations, or spend great amounts of energy trying to "pass," or hide their sexual orientation and appear to be heterosexual. Therefore, GLB persons living in rural areas may experience extreme social isolation.

Less negative portrayals of lesbian and gay life in rural areas have also been presented in more recent literature. GLB persons living in semi-rural and rural areas have reported high levels of self-esteem, community support and solidarity (Bonfitto, 1997; Waldo, Hesson-McInnis, & D'Augelli, 1998). Cody and Welch (1997), in their examination of coping strategies of gay men to the challenges of rural life in northern New England, reported that all but one of their respondents concluded that the benefits of rural living mitigated the challenges.

The space provided by rural areas may be an important element for such coping. In *Farm Boys*, by Will Fellows (1996), a compilation of stories from gay men who grew up on Midwest farms, wooded areas and open spaces were often regarded as a sanctuary from the pressures associated with being different. The rural countryside has also provided the key component necessary for developing geographically-based lesbian communities (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Rudy, 2001; Valentine, 1997).

Research specific to gay men living in Wyoming has been presented by Boulden (2001). In his qualitative study, the gay men indicated that they enjoyed membership in a rural community, and enjoyed the people.

However, they also reported fearing the community due to the dominant role of heterosexism. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” was the over-riding rule. Boulden found that the gay community in Wyoming is loose and hard to find.

In light of these sparse and often conflicting data, the present study sought information specific to the GLB population residing in Wyoming. The “Cowboy State” presents an interesting milieu for GLB lives. With a population of 500,000 people, or 5.1 people per square mile, Wyoming is second only to Alaska in population density across the US states (US Census Bureau, 2005). Only one city, Casper, ranks as metropolitan with a population of 53,011; and only two other cities, Cheyenne and Laramie, have populations exceeding 20,000.

Until the late 1990’s, Wyoming’s GLB population was by and large invisible. This changed dramatically in 1998. Matthew Shepard, a University of Wyoming student, was brutally murdered due to his sexual orientation. The aftermath of this murder included the widely publicized convictions of Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney in 1999. Since then, Matthew Shepard has become an international symbol for hate crimes against gays, and Wyoming’s gay community has been exposed or “outed.”

DATA AND METHODS

With the exception of the qualitative study by Boulden (2001), there are no systematic studies of a gay and lesbian population in a frontier area within the United States. Therefore, data for this study were exploratory. A survey was developed and was distributed throughout Wyoming in early 1999. The survey instrument was four pages and concentrated on collecting quantitative data in the five general areas. The initial section of the survey requested descriptive, demographic information, including age, gender, sexual orientation, educational background, and county of residence within Wyoming. We chose not to ask the respondents’ race, income, employment status or size of home community, even though these are typical and meaningful variables. Confidentiality was of major concern for many respondents, and, with the low population of Wyoming, the collection of additional demographic data could have allowed the researchers to discern the respondent’s identity, leading to decreased participation in the survey.

The second section of the survey focused on the participants’ ties to their communities. This section included questions asked about their opportunities to interact within their residential community, and their perceptions of attitudes regarding lesbian and gay individuals in their home

region. The next section focused on the participants' degree of disclosure of sexual orientation. This section included questions about their perceptions of attitudes regarding lesbian and gay individuals in their residential community, and if the respondent was "out" to family, friends and co-workers and the perceived attitudes in response to the disclosure. The last two sections focused on the importance of equal rights to the respondents and their experiences with discrimination. Equal rights examined included the right to marry, adopt children, bring forth discrimination claims at work, hospital visitation of an ill partner, equal and adequate health care, custody of/or visitation of children, and non-discriminatory housing policies. Experiences with discrimination explored these same areas.

The survey was distributed in a variety of ways. Considering the overall population of Wyoming, its geographic size, and the lack of openly gay venues within the state, a purposive sampling technique presented the best method for gathering sufficient data. The three most successful means for sample distribution included: in-person distribution to friends and acquaintances, especially those in campus groups such as the University of Wyoming's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Association (LGBT-A); through the newsletter of the United Gays and Lesbians of Wyoming (UGLW); and in-person distribution at a gay-friendly event in the state capitol, Equality Begins at Home. It must be recognized that the sampling method used and self-selection of respondents significantly limits the generalizability of these results.

RESULTS

Surveys from outside of Wyoming as well as those from individuals not self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender were discarded. Summaries of demographic data are presented in Table 1. Data from 47 women (39 self-identified as lesbian and eight as bisexual) and 40 men (36 gay and four bisexual) were analyzed. The respondents resided in 11 of Wyoming's 23 counties. The responses were divided into three geographic designations: the "University County" which is home to the only four year university in the state and has a total population of 32,000; the "High Population Counties" consisting of the two counties with the highest population densities and two most populated cities (population densities are 12.5 and 30.4 persons per square mile); and the "Low Population Counties" comprised of the remaining eight counties (mean population density 4.0). The respondents ranged in age from 19 to 70 years, with an overall mean age of 36.0 years. There was a significant difference in respondent age across the three county designations, $F(2, 83) = 4.69, p < .05$, with the University County having younger respondents and the High Population Counties having slightly older respondents (see Table 1). No other statistically significant differences

were found for these demographic data.

“Out” as gay/lesbian. Respondents were asked whether they were “out” (i.e. their orientation is known) to family, friends, and co-workers. The majority of respondents were “out” or “somewhat out” in most areas of their lives. Table 2 indicates the respondents’ perceptions of the attitudes of their parents, friends and co-workers to their disclosure of their sexual orientation. Interestingly, every respondent who was out at work reported that his or her coworkers’ attitudes were either mixed or positive; no respondents indicated that coworkers held negative attitudes towards them due to sexual orientation. The same was true for being out to friends, and the friends’ responses. In contrast, 16.9% of the respondents indicated that their parents’ response was negative, and only 33.8% reported that their parents responded in a positive manner to their sexual orientation.

The respondents were asked to provide comments related to their coming out experiences, and five comments dealt specifically with family relationships. These comments conveyed the idea of the mixed responses they had received. For instance, a 29 year old gay man wrote, “Came out to my parents in a fight. Things have worked out but was tough (sic) to go there for a while.” A 23 year old lesbian wrote,

For 2.5 years, my mother said it was a phase. Then she *took* to calling me “trash” and “junk”; she accused me of being a child molester; and she made it clear that I was welcome at “home” only because my father said I was. (My dad made me a wood carving of flowers when I first came out). My mother has been better since Matt Shepard was killed.

TABLE 1. Demographic data for respondents, based on county of residence.

	<u>University Co.</u>	<u>High Population Co.</u>	<u>Low Population Co.</u>
<u>Gender/Orientation</u>			
Lesbian	23	10	5
Bisexual Women	5	3	0
Gay Man	14	14	8
Bisexual Men	0	2	2
<u>Mean Age ± SD</u>	32.2 ± 14.0	41.2 ± 11.0	36.5 ± 7.5
<u>Education Level % (n)</u>			
High School or Less	21.4% (9)	0% (0)	6.7% (1)
Some College	21.4% (9)	34.5% (10)	26.7% (4)
Bachelors Degree	33.3% (14)	34.5% (10)	46.7% (7)
Masters Degree	19.0% (8)	27.6% (8)	13.3% (2)
Doctoral/Professional	4.8% (2)	3.4% (1)	6.7% (1)

Presumably, this woman was referring to the idea that Matthew Shepard's death was instrumental in helping her mother understand the difficulties of being gay or lesbian, and promoting acceptance of gays and lesbians (*Advocate*, 2002).

Community Ties. We were interested in the respondents' perceptions of their community ties and social networks. The majority of respondents (86.0%) reported that they have at least some ties with GLB people within their home communities, and this did not differ across county designations (see Table 3). The respondents were asked to indicate if opportunities for connections existed within the following areas: social events, community programs or services, and the workplace. As expected, social functions provide the greatest opportunities for forming such ties, with 64% of the respondents indicating they have at least some opportunities here. There were no differences in this aspect across

TABLE 2. Percent of respondents who are "out" to others, and perceptions of their responses.

	"Out" or	Response of Others, if "Out"		
	"Somewhat Out"	Negative	Mixed	Positive
Friends	98.8% n = 85	0%	19.3%	80.7%
Parents	89.6% n = 77	16.9%	49.2%	33.8%
Siblings	81.8% n = 77	3.0%	31.8%	65.1%
Work	78.1% n = 73	0%	43.6%	56.4%

the various county designations. In contrast, few opportunities were reported in the workplace (20.2% of the respondents) and in community services and programs (23.6%) across all three county designations. This lack of opportunities was especially noticeable for the services/programs designation in the Low Population Counties and even the University County, $X^2(2, N = 86) = 19.8, p < .01$. In the workplace, the trend was similar for the Low Population Counties, but this difference failed to reach significance.

Importance of Legal Rights. Respondents were asked to use a 4 point scale to rate the importance of attaining rights in seven areas (1 = not important; 4 = high level of importance). Overall, respondents expressed a high desire for rights in all seven areas, with mean scores ranging from 3.29 for adoption rights to 3.93 for the right to visit partner in the hospital. A multivariate analysis of the responses on these statements was performed, using respondents' gender and county designation as main variables and age as a covariate. No differences were found in any of these statements based on gender, and these factors were not correlated with age.

Experiences of Discrimination. Respondents were asked to indicate if they believed they had experienced discrimination due to their sexual orientation. Twelve different areas were included in this section. Overall, as shown in Table 4, low levels of discrimination were reported,

TABLE 3. Percent of respondents indicating they have opportunities for interacting with other GLB persons within their community.

	County Designation		
	University Co	High Population Co.	Low Population Co.
Opportunities to Form Ties			
Any Community Ties	78.6% (33/42)	89.7% (26/29)	46.7% (7/15)
Social Functions	61.9% (26/42)	75.9% (22/29)	46.7% (7/15)
Services/Programs*	11.9% (5/42)	51.7% (15/29)	20.7% (6/29)
Work Place	26.2% (11/42)	20.7% (6/29)	0.0% (0/15)

* Significant difference across county designations, $\chi^2(2) = 19.8, p < .01$.

with no category having a mean response greater than 2.5, where 1 = no discrimination and 4 = high level of discrimination. The only category in which a majority of respondents indicated that they had experienced discrimination was harassment and/ or victimization.

These twelve discrimination statements were reduced to three factors using an unweighted least squares factor analysis with varimax rotation (Stevens, 1992). The factors which emerged accounted for 64.4% of the variance (Table 5). The first factor, "Societal-level Discrimination," included discrimination in taxation, in securing insurance, and marriage. The second factor, "Institutional-level Discrimination," included discrimination in housing, hospital visitation, and credit/banking. The final factor, "Personal or Community-level Discrimination," included discrimination in employment opportunities and termination, membership in community groups and harassment/ victimization. Scores for these three factors were calculated for each of the respondents by summing their scores on the included items and converting to the original 4-point scale.

Overall, low levels of discrimination were reported for each of the factors. Multivariate analysis was used to determine differences in discrimination scores across county designations and based on gender, using age as a covariate. There were patterns of differences for both county designation and gender. For Personal/Community Level discrimination, there was a significant interaction effect between the

TABLE 4. Mean scores* \pm SD and percentage supplying each response for experiences of perceived discrimination.

	Overall Mean	Percentage Responses			
		None	Low	Mod	High
Harassment/Victimization	2.43 \pm 1.14	27.6	26.4	20.7	24.1
Marriage	2.09 \pm .85	56.3	4.6	9.2	27.6
Insurance Coverage	2.00 \pm 1.26	56.3	8.0	12.6	21.8
Employment Benefits	1.90 \pm 1.20	57.5	9.2	12.6	17.2
Employment Opportunities	1.90 \pm 1.16	55.2	13.8	13.8	14.9
Entry into Community Groups	1.76 \pm .97	55.2	17.2	20.7	5.7
Termination of Employment	1.66 \pm 1.08	66.7	11.5	6.9	12.6
Tax Benefits	1.65 \pm 1.05	66.7	6.9	13.8	9.2
Housing Access	1.56 \pm .92	66.7	13.8	12.6	4.6
Hospital Visitation	1.47 \pm .97	75.9	5.7	5.7	9.2
Credit and Banking Decisions	1.46 \pm .89	72.4	10.3	9.2	5.7
Adoption Rights	1.37 \pm .85	78.2	9.2	3.4	6.9

* Scores anchored as follows: 1 = None; 2 = Low level; 3 = Moderate level; 4 = High level.

county designation and gender, $F(2, 79) = 3.49, p = .04$. As seen in Table 6, the women's scores were similar regardless of their home county, while the men in the University County reported lower levels of discrimination than do the men in the other county designations.

Five respondents' written comments regarding their coming out experiences addressed this level of discrimination. A 35 year old gay man, from a low population county wrote, "Coming out is scary, every time. The community as a whole does not accept it, so there's no *enclave*—Everything is 'in secret'." Another gay man, 42 years old, wrote, "When I came out, I was living in a town of 250 and those who knew me well were OK with it, those who didn't totally shunned me."

TABLE 5. Factor statements and factor loadings for the experiences of perceived discrimination.

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Factor Loadings</u>
Societal-level Discrimination (Eigenvalue = 2.5; 20.7% of variance)	
Insurance	.80
Taxes	.73
Marriage	.70
Employee Benefits	.68
Personal/Community-level Discrimination (Eigenvalue = 2.3; 19.2% of variance)	
Employment Hiring	.93
Employment Termination	.69
Membership in Community Groups	.54
Harassment/Victimization	.49
Institutional-level Discrimination (Eigenvalue = 1.8; 15.2 % of variance)	
Hospital Visitation	.85
Housing	.64
Credit/Banking	.45

There was also a significant interaction between gender and County designation for Institutional Level discrimination scores, $F(2, 79) = 3.46, p = .04$, which was primarily accounted for by the difference in the men's and women's scores living in the Low Population Counties. As seen in Table 6, men's scores were fairly even regardless of county of residence, while those women living in the Low Population Counties

TABLE 6. Mean scores on each of the discrimination factors, for men and women, across county designations.

<u>Discrimination Level</u>	<u>County Designation</u>		
	<u>University</u>	<u>High Population</u>	<u>Low Population</u>
<u>Personal/Community</u> ¹			
Women	1.82	1.86	2.25
Men	1.32	2.41	2.15
<u>Institutional</u> ²			
Women	1.50	1.54	2.53
Men	1.14	1.53	1.30
<u>Societal</u> ³			
Women	1.92	2.25	2.65
Men	1.34	1.95	1.83

¹ County Designation by Gender Interaction, $p = .04$

² County Designation by Gender Interaction, $p = .04$

³ Gender, $p = .03$

reported higher levels of institutional discrimination than men or women in any other combination.

Written comments also were provided which relate to this level of discrimination. A 32 year old lesbian from a Low Population County wrote, "I taught high school . . . for four years and have a lot of experience and stories of being a closeted teacher and witnessing school homophobia." Another ex-teacher wrote, "I am very concerned about the lack of a support system in our high schools and junior highs." The lack of support within the schools was also referred to by a 27 year old year old gayman who recalled, ". . . being a young high school student who did not have positive role model to look to for help." This problem carried over to the community college setting, as well. A lesbian wrote, "I do the Safe Zone training at . . . A faculty member is proposing an 'anti-Safe Zone' program to make our campus safer for heterosexuals."

For Societal Level Discrimination, there was no difference across the county designations, but there was a significant gender difference, $F(1, 79) = 5.27, p = .03$, with women expressing higher levels of perceived discrimination than men (see Table 6).

Written comments were often specific to the state of Wyoming. A 30 year old gay man in a Low Population County wrote, "In Wyoming we are geographically isolated. There need to be central places to talk and get support for gays and lesbians, not just in Cheyenne." Another indicated that, "In Wy [*sic*] I am very discreet—people may have bias—I never say anything." Two men referred to the state's failure to pass a hate crime bill. A 49 year old gay man wrote,

I am extremely upset and disturbed that the 'anti hate crime bill' did not pass in this the so called 'equality state'. My plans are to move to Oregon, where I lived before—where state laws protect me as a gay citizen.

The impact of such isolation and oppression was also touched on. A 36 year old male from the University County wrote, "Many of us, myself included, come from conservative backgrounds. In order to be 'gay' we have to amputate a measurable part of ourselves." Subtle forms of oppression were also indicated. A gay man in a High Population County indicated that, "We cannot openly show our affection in public and I believe this is the greatest form of discrimination I have experienced."

Several respondents provided positive comments, although not directly related to Wyoming. A gay male living in the University County indicated that, "The more comfortable I am with myself (inc. being out), the more acceptance I receive from others," While another wrote:

I was outed after attending a vigil for Mathew (*sic*) Shepard by a newspaper reporter, who quoted me. Now I am out at work and socially in almost 100% my life. It was a difficult transition but ultimately I would never want to go back to where I was. It has been liberating and so good and right.

DISCUSSION

This study reports on several characteristics, experiences and perceptions held by gay men and women of Wyoming. It is important to realize that the experiences of the lesbian and gay persons of this study include the interactions of familial, personal, community and societal levels.

Each of these areas will be discussed as it relates to the present data. Oswald (2002) explores the idea of intentionality in managing disclosure of sexual orientation. By being deliberate about disclosure, lesbians and gays can determine which family members can provide support versus those who, if sexual orientation were known, would result in additional distancing or antagonism. Such intentionality is supported by the respondents' careful disclosure at their place of employment. Those who have chosen to be out at work have not been responded to negatively. Likewise, this is true for those who are out to their friends.

The same degree of selectivity does not appear to carry over to the parental relationship, in that the majority of the respondents are out to their parents, even though only about a third reported that they received a positive response. This exemption from intentionality may be accounted for the importance of familial relationships. Laird (1993) has theorized that support from family members is a critical component for gays and lesbians, due to the primacy of familial relationships throughout life. However, as D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) have discussed, disclosure of sexual orientation to family members is a complex and challenging step for lesbians and gays to undertake.

Further results from our study can help us understand the place of gays and lesbians within Wyoming communities. There are several concepts regarding "community" that are relevant to our discussion. The more traditional view of community is that of a geographically based and/or function-based grouping of people that provides for social activities, work, education, family activities and shared values (Reiss, 1959; Warren, 1978). Within this context, it is apparent that gays and lesbians have both support and challenges within their home communities.

The importance of the geographic community to the GLB respondents is evident, in that almost 80% report that they are active within their community. The majority of respondents indicated that they are able to form ties with other GLB persons. Opportunities for these ties are most apparent at the personal/community level, within social settings. While this is encouraging and apparent even in the Low Population Communities, the same respondents indicate fewer opportunities within the organizational context of the community, including the workplace and with community services and programs. The school setting was mentioned as an institution particularly prone to homophobia. The lack of services and the level of personal/community discrimination are especially apparent for those living in the Low Population Counties.

It is important to note that Wyoming has no gay bars or bookstores, nor any regular places for gays and lesbians to meet and socialize

(Berry, 1995). Woolwine (2000) discusses the gay community in terms of local organizations, in which those individuals who identify as members of the community support the various local gay organizations because of a sense of connection and duty. A relative lack of such a community within Wyoming and a corresponding paucity of supportive local service organizations, especially within the least populated counties, are reported here.

Another recently developed concept of community is that of loosely connected networks Wood & Judikis, 2002). Woolwine (2000) discusses this specifically in relation to GLB population, referring to it as the imagined community. This level of community may yet play an important role for Wyoming GLB persons. Recently, increased access to virtual GLB communities via internet use and electronic mail has allowed greater interactions with other GLB persons and increased access to GLB information (Haag&Chang, 1997). Also there is an active state organization, now known as Wyoming Equality, which has publishes a newsletter and maintains an internet site. Therefore, some level of interaction with other GLB persons is currently possible, even for those in the most rural and remote areas of Wyoming. These indirect forms of interactions may facilitate the Wyoming respondents' connection to Woolwine's imagined community.

Gender is also a factor which must be considered. In the present study, gay men living in the University County can experience a degree of safety that is not available in the other areas of the state. This was true even in the face of the beating death of Matt Shepard. However, it is the lesbians who perceive that their lives are impacted by discrimination at the societal level. Also institutional level discrimination is high for those lesbians living in Low Population Counties. According to a report on the *Status of Women in the States* prepared for the Institute for Women's Policy Research (Caiazza & Shaw, 2004), Wyoming women experience high rates of suicide, low earnings, low levels of health insurance, and underrepresented among business owners. Thus, the current reports by lesbians regarding discrimination felt at the institutional and societal level is consistent with the status of women, regardless of sexual orientation, within Wyoming.

The experiences of the GLB persons in this current study are not homogeneous, in that variations were seen across county designations. Although the state of Wyoming as a whole is considered rural, there are variations population distributions which are important to consider. The most densely populated Low Population County barely exceeds the criteria for classification as frontier, with 7.0 persons per square mile (Ricketts, Johnson-Webb, & Taylor, 1998). It is those residents in these counties which report the highest levels of discrimination at both the

community/personal level and at the institutional level. Further, these respondents report the fewest opportunities for services and programs for GLB persons.

Implications for practice: These findings emphasize the importance of developing programs to build upon the strengths of rural communities for GLB persons. As outlined in Smith and Mancoske's 1997 handbook for social service practitioners, the addition of such services can greatly enhance the well being of gay and lesbian residents, allowing them to enjoy the benefits of rural living without risking discrimination, oppression and isolation. Because it is unrealistic to expect that agencies within rural communities would establish programs specifically for GLB persons, it is thus even more important for human service providers in such areas to be aware of the unique needs of these populations. Administrators and service providers must work to limit their own heterosexism and homophobia and advocate for culturally competent services and programming.

Limitations: While this study presents interesting data regarding the lives of GLB persons in Wyoming, there are a number of limitations. It must be recognized that the sampling method used and self-selection of respondents significantly limits the generalizability of these results. Additionally, there were areas within the state which were not represented and areas, such as the University County, which were over-represented. Further, our desire to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of respondents restricted the collection of demographic data which may have added a meaningful level of analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

The unique setting, history and culture of Wyoming must also be factored in. Wyoming's official motto is "Equal Rights," and it prides itself on its rugged individualism and "live and let live" attitude. In spite of this, Wyoming is often equated with homophobia. The murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 has left an enduring mark on this state. Both the rugged individualism and the homophobia of Wyoming are poignantly brought together in the award-winning movie *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), based on the short story written by Annie Proulx (1997). Our study, completed within this unique geographical and cultural setting, emphasizes both the strengths and challenges of life for rural lesbians and gays.

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