Introduction

“A Whole Lot of Queer”

And then I finally went there, and it was all colorful and magical. Full of hope. . . . And then, I remember just the queerness of it. Like, seeing genderqueers and butches and flaming gay guys, it was just a whole lot of queer. . . . I feel like this is like my family here. Like literally, my family. I haven’t felt this close with people ever in my life [laughs]. I come here and you feel the love, you feel the energy, everyone knows everyone. . . . The only time and space in my life where I actually get to truly relax and enjoy myself and the people around me and just laugh.
—Zia, nineteen-year-old, identifies as queer, racially mixed, and Black, describing her first visit to Spectrum at fifteen years old

In September 2010, I visit The Resource, the LGBTQ center in my community, for the first time. It has quite literally just opened its doors at its new location.1 After many years occupying the second floor of a retail building a few miles away, The Resource had raised the funds to buy a new building, renovated it to meet LEED certification, and taken its rightful, visible place as a fundamental community leader in this gentrifying gayborhood.2 Part of city-sponsored main street redevelopment, the building—cube-shaped with a rooftop garden and modern architectural flourishes like charcoal-colored brick and white louvers—comes right up to the sidewalk along one of the busiest avenues in town. There is a large sign on the corner that says “The Resource,” the colors of the rainbow subtly suggesting the mission of the organization. This busy corner is a mix of residential apartments, old Victorian homes, coffee shops, business offices, tattoo parlors, thrift stores, bars, and restaurants.
The street is busy with cars, buses, bicyclists, and pedestrians twenty-four hours a day.

I arrive in the heat of the afternoon sun and wait in the parking lot in front of the building to meet my friend, Michael, who volunteers at Spectrum—The Resource’s LGBTQ youth drop-in center. I’ve asked Michael to introduce me to Spectrum with the intention of it being a field site for some exploratory research I’m doing on vulnerable youth and sexuality. Today I’ll see the space, meet some of the staff and youth, and get the chance to pitch my project to the program manager. I’m a little bit nervous, hesitating to go in by myself without Michael. I’ve never been to The Resource or Spectrum before, mainly because I’m not gay. I am relatively familiar with the organization as a community resource, but I simply never had a reason to come here before. As I wait I become aware of how, simply by being here, others are likely to think I am gay. This brief foray outside my bubble of hetero privilege gets me thinking about all of the ways we attribute sexual orientation or identity onto others, association with queer organizations being but one. It also occurs to me that, owing to the stigma attached to queer spaces, it must not be easy for a young person, in the midst of trying to figure out their sexuality, to come here for the first time. Now that I am here, the thought of entering a room full of teenagers is kind of giving me a heart attack. It feels a bit like the first day at a new school. Will the kids like me? Will I fit in? Am I wearing the right thing? Will they trust me? This anxiety about belonging, intention, and trust will inform much of my time here at Spectrum over the next few years.

I am profoundly self-conscious of my own sexual orientation as I embark on this project. I was a women’s studies major and feminist activist in college when I first began, in earnest, the lifelong process of reckoning with my privilege, a process that has made me hyper aware of my identities and how I present in various identity-based groups and that leads me to always question my actions, thoughts, and assumptions. On my college campus I organized against war, racism, homophobia, and sexism alongside LGBTQ-identified friends and colleagues. But I know enough about how privilege works to understand that no matter how conscious I am, as a person living with multiple intersecting forms of privilege I’m still likely to reproduce inequality as often as I succeed at dismantling it. I am very anxious about entering an LGBTQ space as a
person with heterosexual and cisgender privilege with the intention of conducting research, so much so that when I fill out the paperwork to become a volunteer and email it to the program manager, I mention that I had been awarded the Ally of the Year Award by the Pride center in college. To me, this award is proxy for my LGBTQ credentials.

My anticipation is not due to being unfamiliar with LGBTQ-identified people and spaces. Nor am I uncomfortable with being labeled LGBTQ. Given my somewhat butch self-presentation, my feminist activist identity, and my general disdain for traditional gender roles, I am likely often assigned that label by others regardless. Yet, much like when a lesbian friend of mine in college christened me an “honorary lesbian,” my anxiety stems from a sense of being down for the cause but not quite belonging. This old, familiar feeling stewed in me as I waited for Michael in the parking lot. As well intentioned as it was, the “honorary lesbian” title always rubbed me the wrong way because I didn’t need to be a lesbian to embrace what it means to be queer. Yet, as a ciswoman involved in a long-term intimate partnership with a man, I could in no way claim an authentic lesbian (or LGBTQ) identity.

The notion of an honorary lesbian, however, is a useful way to think about how we become sexual. In most ways, I qualified in my friend’s eyes as lesbian, yet I didn’t identify as one, and I was having sex with a man. So what were the lines I followed that led me to desire men, and how did I learn them? Is it in fact true that I do not inherently desire women, or is it more the case that the variety of ways I exist in the world, the pressures I experience, the examples I am given have led me toward my particular sexual orientations? Had I come of age at a different time, in a different place, with different options, would I still be heterosexually oriented? Exactly what characteristics would make me a real lesbian? This is the starting place for this book: Given the context of their lives, how do teenagers become sexual and gendered today? Recognizing that not all young people share the same contexts, I explore how the very particular context of the lives of the kids of Spectrum matters to their becoming.

Queer Orientations

Through my ethnographic research at Spectrum, including participant observation and life history interviews with young people, I argue that
the space and most of the people I met there are queerly oriented. I show how Spectrum is an example of queerness and explain why, in the context of twenty-first-century sexuality and gender politics, making the distinction between queer and a more mainstream understanding of LGBTQ continues to be valuable. As more and more young people are self-identifying as LGBTQ, queer, trans*, gender fluid, and a myriad of other identities related to gender and sexuality, the term “LGBTQ youth” has become commonplace; there appears to be consensus that we all know what an LGBTQ youth is. Of course, “LGBTQ” is a useful term to denote a collective, marginalized identity based on sexuality and gender (one I use liberally throughout this book), but I will push the reader to think in a more complicated way about what exactly LGBTQ means and represents. To tell the story of how one forms their sexuality is not just about sexual desire and conduct. It is also the story of becoming gendered, forming identities within a particular social, historical, and cultural context and representation and recognition within family, media, and community.

In an interview with Ernie, a twenty-one-year-old Chicanx who identifies as queer, he tells me that, when he speaks of gay and queer, “It’s, like, two different things.” I press him for more and he goes on:

The gay, what I call the “gay crowd” or the “gay movement” is um, gay people that are trying to like become mainstream and . . . how could we be, look as normal as possible? When we as queer people are . . . gender is fluid, sexual orientation is fluid . . . we don’t have to be as normal or like date one person or date this person because of their gender expressions, like we’re more fluid about things. And yeah, and I think that’s a big difference, where the gay movement tries to be like more mainstream.

He describes the LGBTQ movement as a gay movement, pointing to the fact that it is represented by gay, white males. He also emphasizes that he finds the gay rights movement to be exclusive, one that does not concern itself with the rights of women, people of color, and trans-identified people: “And I think the . . . the queer movement . . . does come together with other movements, whereas the gay movement kind of doesn’t, it’s like, they stick to themselves more.” I asked if he thought Spectrum was
more of a gay space or a queer space, which led to this explanation of how Spectrum differs from The Resource:

The Resource is gay. . . . It’s very like, “How normal can we be? How like, heteronormative can we be?” But once you go down them stairs and open that Spectrum door, it gets as queer as fuck. Like . . . it’s really queer. And like, it’s just something amazing where you . . . just see like, people trying on different shit and just exploring everything and, yeah it’s just really, I think as a, how do you say, organization? It’s really split between everything like, age, and everything. Like the age difference? You can tell the difference. Like, upstairs it’s like very, very gay and downstairs it’s like, really queer and I’m like, I hope I don’t become gay like them [laughs].

Spectrum, quite obviously, is a queer space because of its recognition and validation of non-heteronormative sexualities and genders. But also critical to my argument here (and Ernie’s) is that Spectrum’s queerness also has to do with how the youth exist in opposition to mainstream conceptions of normal beyond sexuality and gender. The youth of Spectrum, contrary to popular media depictions of LGBTQ youth, are not like the television cast of Glee!, a group of pitch-perfect, attractive, happy theater geeks. The youth are more likely to refer to themselves as “Little Monsters,” a term of endearment coined by the mega pop star Lady Gaga to refer to her queer fans. One’s access to “normal” depends on race, class, ability, citizenship, language, geography, education, skills, and more. Among the queer people of Spectrum are youth of color; the poor and working-class; undocumented migrants; those involved in the criminal legal system; people living with physical, cognitive, and intellectual disabilities; high school dropouts; kids experiencing homelessness; and socially awkward nerds obsessed with Japanese anime and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Very few Spectrum youth are white, middle-class kids with access to resources. And while the youth all gather here under the banner of LGBTQ, same-sex sexual desire and/or trans* experience is not necessarily something they all have in common. Queer is what they have in common.

Throughout this book, I use the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed’s concept of “queer orientation” to make my argument that this is not a uni-
universal story about LGBTQ youth but, rather, one about queer youth specifically. Following Ahmed, I use “queer” both to describe a way of being in the world that opposes normal (sometimes intentionally, sometimes not), as well as to describe sexual conduct and behavior. Therefore, not all heterosexual sexualities are normal and not all LGBTQ-identified people are queer. One can be queerly oriented because they resist the straightening effects of the dominant culture or because one's queerness results in being disallowed access to straightness. A queer orientation explains how people and bodies can be made queer by society—“Some of us more than others, look wonky”—or people can choose queer by self-determination. To have a queer orientation is both how some are seen by others as different, strange, out of the ordinary, and then labeled as such, and how deviating from straight culture means forging different paths and therefore seeing or orienting toward different things. Of course, one's experience might be some combination of both.

Queer orientation is a useful tool to understand sexualities and genders for several reasons. First, it moves away from the bioessentialist/social constructionist debate, where sexuality and gender are either something one is born with or something one learns, making room for a more nuanced understanding of both. Second, it encourages a conversation about a diversity of experience among those with marginalized and stigmatized sexualities and genders rather than universalizing varied experiences. Third, it works to distinguish sexual behavior from sexual identities. In an effort to explain sexual orientation outside of a bioessentialist framework, Ahmed argues, “In the case of sexual orientation, it is not simply that we have it. . . . Certain objects are available to us because of lines that we have already taken: our life courses follow a certain sequence, which is also a matter of following a direction or being directed in a certain way. . . . The concept of orientations allows us to expose how life gets directed through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us.” Put another way, sexual desire may feel innate to the individual experiencing it, but the possibilities of straightness and queerness are products of our social world, not equally available to all. How one expresses their sexual desire and how others interpret that expression are influenced by gender and other identity categories like race, class, and ability; cultural conditions such as family,
religion, and geographical location; and social institutions like media, education, and law.

The work here fills a niche in the area of youth sexualities by exploring, in particular, how young people become sexual, whereas much of the existing research takes for granted the a priori existence of sexual orientation and identity. This book expands on sociological theories of sexuality and gender as social constructions using queer theory to demonstrate the significance of queer orientation. This is important because, if the move away from bioessentialist understandings of sexuality and toward an acceptance of sexual and gender fluidity is a lasting trend, there are significant sociological implications in the areas of sex and gender, sexualities, and social movements.

Beyond Risk or Resilience

As I began volunteering at Spectrum in the fall of 2010, the sex advice columnist and gay activist Dan Savage kicked off the now famous “It Gets Better” campaign in response to a rash of suicides among LGBTQ youth that was gaining national attention at the time. The media response to Savage’s social media campaign placed a national spotlight on LGBTQ youth, and Spectrum was abuzz with discussion about these events. While Sid, Spectrum’s program manager, and César, the then program coordinator, were on the one hand supportive of the youths’ excitement about campaigns like “It Gets Better,” on the other they were skeptical of the media’s focus on the precarity of LGBTQ youth. Too often the media paint a dreary picture of the plight of LGBTQ youth, which both adds to the already depressing climate these young people face and erases the constructive, positive contributions they make to society.

The dominant discourse about LGBTQ youth is that they occupy a state of crisis. In a virulently homophobic society, their sexual and gender minority status results in endless incidents of bullying and discrimination by others and an insidious internalized homophobia that manifests itself in high rates of self-harm. Yet Sid and César were quick to point out that just because LGBTQ youth suicide was currently getting a lot of attention in the media did not mean it was a new phenom-
enon. Their point was that LGBTQ youth have been struggling and surviving for a long time. Therefore the program managers aimed to broadcast a different ideology about these young people. Their emphasis was on empowering the youth community to care for itself, rather than depending on outsiders to “save” it. Sid emphasized the following point frequently to the youths of Spectrum: “We don't need anyone to come save us; we need people to follow our lead and support us.” She explained that the queer community is fierce and not just composed of victims who get bullied and kill themselves.

In his article, “Young, Gay, and Suicidal,” sociologist Tom Waidzunas explains that too often, master narratives about LGBTQ youth are either stories of precarity or resiliency. On the matter of suicide rates among LGBTQ youth, he argues, “While efforts to address the issue of gay youth suicide from both risk and resilience perspectives clearly reflect immense concern about gay teens, both approaches have often given way to coarse generalization due to the need for strong claims in public policy disputes. . . . As long as researchers adhere to broad brush claims, the subtleties, complexities, and nuances of LGBTQ youth experiences will remain obfuscated by sweeping generalizations.” In response to this critique, *Growing Up Queer* attempts to dispel universal assumptions about the LGBTQ youth subject by telling a more particular story about queer-oriented young people and queer spaces.

The developmental psychologist Ritch Savin-Williams, one of the most prolific researchers on LGBTQ youth, makes a convincing argument in his 2007 book, *The New Gay Teenager*, that teenagers today are not preoccupied with sexual orientation in the same way that older generations have been. He suggests we are experiencing “the integration and normalization of homoeroticism, resulting in the near disappearance of the gay adolescent and the emergence of sexually diverse young people.” Like Waidzunas, he argues that many of the discourses of precarity that surround LGBTQ youth result in a misrepresentation of all gay youths’ experiences. Savin-Williams points out that much of what we know about this youth population is based on research done with people who are frequenting largely urban LGBTQ centers with youth programs (like Spectrum) or youth who were in one way or another state supervised. Therefore the subject population under study is not representative of the LGBTQ youth population at large, meaning the re-
search does not likely include those youth who—because of intersecting forms of privilege, disposition, and circumstance—are not congregating in youth centers. In other words, Savin-Williams's work suggests that the runaway, suicidal, self-harming LGBTQ youth is over-represented in the study samples, while the gay kid who is crowned prom king and off to an Ivy League college is underrepresented.

The sociologist C. J. Pascoe has a related finding in her ethnographic study of high school kids, *Dude, You're a Fag*, published around the same time as the *New Gay Teenager*. Pascoe shows how the fag discourse is used by adolescent boys as a tool to police masculinity. While the boys in her study constantly call each other out for “acting gay,” they know it is mean to tease boys who actually identify as gay. Gay boys and men are largely accepted, as long as they act manly enough. It is different for Ricky, the *queer* kid in the school who is actually bullied for his gender and sexuality—not just teased or policed by his buddies. Pascoe explains, “While boys at River High engaged in continual repudiatory rituals around fag identity, Ricky embodied the fag because of his homosexuality and his less normative gender identification and self-presentation.” Ricky, who had suffered a lifetime of homophobic bullying by students, teachers, and administrators while attending various schools, dropped out of River High by the time Pascoe left her field site. His sexuality and gender were not normal enough. My work continues in a similar vein to Savin-Williams's and Pascoe's in that it aims to complicate the LGBTQ youth subject; Savin-Williams's argument, that homoeroticism is normalized among youth today, and Pascoe's argument, that queer sexualities and genders continue to be policed, are simultaneously accurate. I argue that treating all so-called LGBTQ youth as one collapsible category results in over-simplifying the normalization of homoeroticism and obscuring the nuanced difference between homo-normative and queer LGBTQ-identified kids.

Sexuality Research in Queer Spaces

Our understanding of sexuality from a research standpoint is incomplete without a complex exploration of child and youth sexualities. Yet owing to the pervasiveness of sex-negative cultural frameworks in the United States, it is very difficult for sexualities researchers to gain access
to minors. Entrenched conservative ideologies about childhood sexual innocence, abstinence-only-until-marriage pseudo-sex education curricula, and homophobic, misogynist, heterosexist assumptions about sexuality have kept accurate information about sexuality out of schools and away from young people and prevent various institutions from allowing—much less encouraging—research on youth sexualities.  

Given this cultural climate, it is no wonder that the research that is centered on youth sexualities overemphasizes so-called risk behaviors among marginalized populations like girls, LGBTQ-identified youth, and youth of color. Individuals who occupy these various identities and their intersections are sexually suspect in a heteropatriarchal society in which the only form of acceptable sexuality is heterosexual, reproductive, and driven by male desire. Therefore, in addition to the need for a better understanding of sexual subjectivity, there is also a need for a sociology of the center, where dominant sexualities come under scrutiny in the same ways that marginalized sexualities have.  

Yet there is an interesting paradox at work here. The sexualities of those who are most marginalized, whose behaviors, identities, and desires are seen as the most atypical, are often most visible and accessible to researchers. For example, the fact that our culture holds girls and women (and gay men) largely responsible for sexual health, including pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection prevention, means that sexual health resources like reproductive health clinics are gendered female. And, unlike access to a school classroom—where a researcher might gain access to an array of sexualities, including those most privileged in society—access to a health clinic often results in a gender-biased account of the story.  

Similarly, because LGBTQ-identified people have had to seek support and resources outside of dominant cultural institutions—like schools—LGBTQ resource centers, which operate on the periphery and have had to be at the forefront of sexual health crises like HIV/AIDS, have become some of the most progressive sources of sexual information in U.S. culture. Further, I found that the adult staff members of Spectrum were not afraid to talk frankly with young people about their sexuality, and both The Resource and Spectrum were welcoming to researchers because they supported the need for strong, evidence-based data related to LGBTQ issues. While I understand the importance of a sociology of
the center when it comes to better understanding sexuality, because of
the constraints described here, an LGBTQ-youth resource center—as
opposed to a public school, for example—was the most ideal location
for me to explore sexual subjectivity with young people. I argue that the
LGBTQ community occupies the leading edge of the development and
dissemination of sexual health practices, many of which are eventually
adopted by the mainstream, making sexuality healthier, happier, and
more fun for everyone. Rather than see my focus on marginalized sexual
alities as a weakness, I hope to show the promise and possibility of queer
youth culture and its potential to influence sexuality and gender broadly.

Sociology of Sexualities and Queer Theory

My research and analysis is largely informed by a combination of the
sociology of sexualities and queer theory. Sociologists and queer the-
orists have provided ample evidence that gender and sexuality are
constructed categories, but the larger public discourse on homosexuality continues to be one based on essentialism.\textsuperscript{13} Within the LGBTQ
rights movement, strategic essentialism—organizing around the idea
that one is born gay—has been a powerful framework within which a
civil rights battle has been fought and is largely being won.\textsuperscript{14} Yet sociolo-
gists of sexuality and queer theorists have long been arguing that sexual
identities and the meanings attached to homosexuality, heterosexuality,
and bisexuality are socially and historically contingent.\textsuperscript{15} Social con-
structionism and queer theory applied to LGBTQ identity has resulted
in a conundrum of sorts. If sexuality (and, equally important, gender)
is a social and historical—not biological—fact, sexual orientation and
identity become slippery social positions to occupy and organize. Queer
activism and theory have provided a counter to the essentialist discourse
both within the LGBTQ rights movement and academia. Queer theory
questions the logic of an essentialist discourse and argues for a disman-
tling of sex and gender binaries. As the evidence provided throughout
this book shows, the ideas and challenges to bioessentialism that have
been articulated by the queer movement are successfully disrupting normative ideas about sexuality and gender among the youth of Spectrum.

My analysis is informed by queer theorists like Gayle Rubin, Adri-
enne Rich, and Michael Warner, whose explorations of heterosexual
dominance in society have led to what is becoming a more and more widely understood concept: heteronormativity. I use “heteronormativity” throughout to refer to the various ways that the naturalization of heterosexuality as normal results in both the marginalization of all non-heterosexual forms of sexuality and desire and essentialized understandings of binary masculinity and femininity. Further, my work also relies on the concept of heteropatriarchy, which acknowledges how both heterosexual and male supremacist ideologies work hand in hand to maintain capitalist, colonialist systems of oppression in society. In particular, I rely on the sociologist Roderick Ferguson’s interpretation of the “queer-of-color analysis,” informed by women of color feminism and queer and poststructuralist theories, that “interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices.” Therefore, beyond simply challenging heteronormative concepts of sexuality and gender, the queer-of-color analysis exposes how these characteristics function within racialized and classed systems of power. Sexuality has been used as a tool to justify the dehumanization of the racialized other in a patriarchal, white supremacist U.S. culture. Therefore any exploration of adolescent sexualities or marginalized sexualities must take race, class, nationality, and other social categories into account because of the various ways sexuality is interpreted through the lens of power.

Reflecting on My Own Identities

Although it is common and accepted behavior to share your gender identity—via pronouns—with the Spectrum community almost as soon as you arrive in the space, it is a bit taboo to ask or announce one’s sexual identity until more personal, intimate relationships develop. Because of this, people in the space are likely to know that I use female gender pronouns but are not always aware that I identify as straight. The staff and many of the youth who are around a lot are more likely to know more about my sexual identity largely because of the way small details about one’s personal life trickle out in day-to-day conversation. But otherwise, I could never be sure how people at Spectrum perceived my sexual identity.
All of us at Spectrum, socialized in a heteronormative culture, make assumptions about people's sexual identity based on the language we use to talk about ourselves—for instance, my use of the word “partner” to describe my intimate companion. I use this term on purpose as a way to resist the patriarchal, gendered implications of words like “boyfriend” or “husband” and “girlfriend” or “wife,” and among some company, it may signal a same-sex or queer relationship. We also make assumptions about people’s sexual identity by observing the various ways one performs their gender. Does my short hair and boyish style of dress get me read as lesbian? But these assumptions—which are based largely on gender stereotypes—are often unreliable. For example, Michael, who has identified as a gay man since he was an adolescent, has an unambiguously masculine gender expression. He makes no effort to present as a man—he has little interest in his clothing choices beyond comfort and sensibility and is not concerned with maintaining a hypermasculine physique—yet his voice is masculine sounding and he has no feminine secondary/tertiary characteristics that are often associated with gayness among men. I learned both from talking to him and from my own interactions with youth that it is common for youths to assume Michael is straight based on how he looks and acts. He doesn’t act gay. In this way Michael stands out compared to the other adult gay men in the space, all of whom look or act “more gay” than he does.

Along these lines, two occasions when my sexuality was called into question by youth stand out to me. I was talking about the upcoming queer prom with Matthew, one of the youths I interviewed and knew quite well. I said my partner, Robert, was coming with me to the dance, and when I said my partner’s name, Matthew sort of stopped and said, “Wait, so are you straight?” This information was clearly something he had to process, and I could tell as we sat there that it was causing him to retool his image of me.

The other occasion was with Alex. I had just completed an interview with him, turned off the tape recorder, and was wrapping up. I always end by asking interviewees if they have any questions for me. He said he wanted to ask me something. He hesitated for quite some time, reassuring me that my answer “[didn’t] really matter” but that he was just really curious and wanted to know something. Finally he asked, “Are you gay?” Alex’s reluctance to ask me about my sexual identity is a good example
of how within Spectrum it was not considered “polite” to ask people about their sexual identity. As he struggled with wanting so badly to know this information about me, he simultaneously struggled with his insistence that it does not really matter. Yet it does matter.

Although all of the full-time staff identify as gay, lesbian, or queer, there are straight student interns and peer staff, as well as a small number of straight youth who use the space, so being straight at Spectrum was not wildly unusual. But there is no mechanism at Spectrum for individuals to publicly identify their sexual identity. While Michael was misread as straight because he does not fit a gay male stereotype, I was misread as LGBTQ by Matthew, who appeared surprised to learn I was straight. Reflecting on the various cues we all use—absent full disclosure—to guess at someone’s sexual identity, both Matthew’s and Alex’s interest in my sexuality reveals a process of boundary making that occurs within the walls of Spectrum. This process is an example of becoming sexual that has little to do with sexual behavior and conduct and much to do with forming meaning around identity and desire. In most social interactions outside spaces like Spectrum, though, the tables are turned, where the scrutiny is on the person with a queer sexuality, not a straight one.

Straightness is not constructed in the same manner as gayness. There is no parallel experience of sexual self-realization for heterosexual-oriented persons to that of those who identify otherwise. For it is not same-sex desire or same-sex behavior that makes one gay any more than it is the absence of same-sex desire or behavior that makes one straight. Rather, the maintenance of a binary sexual order is a co-constitutive process in which a rejection of heteronormativity requires an explanation, while maintaining straightness does not. Persons whose sexual desires are largely in line with heterosexuality do not have to account for their desires and behaviors—heterosexual or homosexual—the way those whose desires are not. Further, self-understanding only goes so far, since others will ascribe or attribute a sexual identity to you based on your gendered behavior and expression, regardless of whether it accurately describes your sexuality. And in my attempts to describe the youth of Spectrum and confound this system of creating difference, I rely on the very markers that I hope will work to convey to the reader
some sense of what I see, hear, and notice about these young people. It’s a complicated business, to be sure.

The point is to show how unreliable the categories we use to understand each other can be. Take again my status as a straight person. While within Spectrum we can all adopt and disclose sexual identities, one’s identity is not a stand-in for desires and behaviors. My straight identity—which is driven largely by being in a long-term, monogamous relationship with a man—does not mean I don’t experience homosexual desire or have never engaged in homosexual behavior. Similarly, my interpretations of the youths of Spectrum and their sexualities and genders is limited to what they willingly shared about their identities, desires, and behaviors, along with my attributions and interpretations of them based on what I observed. For many of them, their sexual identities seem to be based more on their gender expression and gendered desires than on actual sexual behavior, which I discuss in chapter 2. Therefore, by looking at adolescent sexualities—which are newly forming, compared to adults—we can ask provocative questions about how sexuality is informed by orientation, desire, behavior, and identity. What is it exactly that counts as sexuality?

Because disclosure of one’s specific sexual identity is not expected in LGBTQ spaces, straight allies are not always clearly separated from LGBTQ members of the group. Disclosure requires that group members actively assert their right to membership. Among adolescents, many of whom are not sexually active, figuring out how to claim membership in an LGBTQ community is quite different compared to older people who have engaged in homosexuality, are in same-sex intimate relationships, and are more established in their identities. There were members of the Spectrum community who, for example, identified as bisexual or pansexual, yet had only had heterosexual sex or been in other-sex intimate relationships. In other words, one does not have to have engaged in homosexual behavior to self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or any other non-heterosexual identity. Similarly, having had experiences with homosexuality does not foreclose on a straight identity. Gender works much the same way. While there are many trans*-identified young people at Spectrum who are transitioning to a gender other than that aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth, there are also many
who are simply genderqueer. And some who have transitioned from one
gender to another are largely unrecognizable to others as a gender that
“matches” the sex they were assigned at birth.

My own identities and the ways I am perceived by people at Spectrum
are part of the story I tell here. My generally dominant or “normal” so-
cial status is often destabilized within the boundaries of the Spectrum
community, where what is considered high status differs from the world
outside of those boundaries. As the outsider—one who is straight, cis-
gender, white, of high socioeconomic status, and perhaps most impor-
tant, an adult—I struggled to communicate effectively in this world of
mostly queer teenagers. This is not to suggest, of course, that my power
is somehow usurped by the youth of Spectrum, but the work here might
illuminate the instability of power. While the social power I possess in
the space is significant, it is a mistake to deny the youth of Spectrum
their power, too. The dominant and the marginalized are co-constituted.

And it is here that I can begin to destabilize my own claims to norma-
tive or dominant status based on the characteristics I used to describe
myself above. Although I am all of those things—straight, cis, white,
adult, high social status—my personal lived experience within each of
those categories is also a queered one. For example, although my partner
is a man, being child free and having never married, our family unit is
queer within the context of heteronormative relationships; being forty-
something adults with no children is decidedly queer.19 In addition, al-
though I am never mistaken for anything other than an adult among the
youth of Spectrum, my rejection of mainstream adult norms when it
comes to dress, attitude, and behavior marked me as a different kind of
adult within the space. Youth often expressed great surprise when they
learned my actual age. I was able to adopt a “least-adult” role because
as a researcher I could sidestep much of the disciplinary roles that other
adults in the space had to perform.20 Rather than supervise while the
youth of Spectrum played Lip Sync for Your Life, an impromptu live
performance competition popular on the TV show RuPaul’s Drag Race,
or the video game Guitar Hero, I participated. While these are just two
examples—my queer heterosexuality and adulthood—I hope to remind
the reader that, depending on the context, dominant social categories
can be queered and queer social categories can be dominant.
Methodological Approach

Spectrum, founded in 1998, is open to young people between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two who identify as LGBTQ and their allies. In addition to being a safe drop-in space, Spectrum has developed daily programming that ranges from art and poetry workshops to sex education and community organizing sessions to a monthly drag show. Spectrum provides snacks, music, access to computers and the internet, health services, counseling and referral, and other resources for youth. Spectrum employs a youth-adult partnership model of service delivery in which youth leaders are trained in peer-based support, safe sex education, and HIV prevention. In an effort to disrupt the power adults have over youths at Spectrum, the youth-adult partnership model helps to ensure that youths hold leadership roles in the space and are actively engaged in some aspects of decision-making processes. During my time there, two full-time adult staff, part-time undergraduate and graduate student interns from the fields of social work and human services, adult volunteers, and peer staff/volunteers ran Spectrum. As previously mentioned, Spectrum operates under the supervision of The Resource, an umbrella organization that provides a wide variety of services to adults in the LGBTQ community.

I didn’t set out to do ethnography about an LGBTQ youth center. Spectrum was just one of three field sites where I was doing exploratory fieldwork in preparation for a qualitative study of vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation. Therefore my research was in pursuit of men and boys who were involved in selling or trading sex, and Spectrum was but one location where I hoped to encounter them. As incongruous as these two topics may seem, connecting my early pursuit—men and boys who sell and trade sex—with the subject of this book—queer youth—is my interest in how sexuality and marginalization interact. I was interested in learning more about how one’s race, gender, sexuality, and other socially constructed identities result in marginalization that leads to vulnerability. In the end, the book turned out to be not much about vulnerability and a lot about queerness as a form of marginalization.

After several months of exploratory fieldwork at a homeless youth outreach organization and an intravenous drug user day shelter, along
with Spectrum, I had made only three contacts with boys who had experience selling or trading sex; it became obvious that I had to retool my research project. Although all three organizations were rich sites of sociological inquiry, without question the place I most loved to be was Spectrum. I felt more like a member of the Spectrum community than I did the other two communities. Being at Spectrum was putting me in touch with some long-ago forgotten feelings and experiences of my own youth as a queer kid who struggled to find a place for myself in the middle school and high school milieus.

After many years of debilitating depression, my father committed suicide when I was twelve years old. He had exceeded his insurance coverage maximums and that, combined with his inability to work, left my family in financial trouble. My mother, sisters, and I moved out of the neighborhood where I had grown up in to a rental house across town. I was bullied by my best girlfriends Mean Girls–style in middle school and arrived in high school with a huge chip on my shoulder about popularity. Although I didn't hang out on the “gay wall” (as described by a Spectrum youth, Fiona, later in the book), my friends were the Freaks. We all smoked cigarettes and pot. The boys had long hair and played guitars instead of sports or wore makeup and solo danced at goth clubs. The girls pierced their ears and noses with needles, cut themselves, and had sex with men much older than we were. I was not outwardly as rebellious as my friends, but my rebellion was formed by my disgust with the mainstream. I didn't want to go off to college to spend another four years with these people who drove me crazy in high school. I didn't want to be a mom. And I definitely did not want to be someone's wife. Many years out of high school, I still feel out of place much of the time. Whereas it's easy to start to feel bad about that, being at Spectrum reminds me of all that is good about being different.

Michael introduced me to Spectrum's program director in the fall of 2010. Subsequently, my role at Spectrum began as an adult volunteer myself. In January 2012, after volunteering for about eighteen months, I began ethnographic fieldwork at Spectrum involving participant observation in the space and conducting life history interviews with the youths who frequented Spectrum. I was in my field site doing participant observation and interviews two to three nights a week for eight months starting in January 2012 and then continued to have a regular presence at
Spectrum through the fall of 2013. This work generated thirty-three life history interviews with young people, ranging in length from forty-five minutes to two-and-a-half hours (see the appendix, “Profile of Research Participants”), one group interview with two participants, and hundreds of hours of participant observation.

Qualitative research is a messy process fraught with ethical challenges. These challenges are magnified when one’s research involves marginalized groups, like LGBTQ-identified people, who are also minors, a vulnerable population by human subjects research standards. My research was further complicated by my lack of experience doing qualitative research involving human subjects, meaning that some of the weaknesses in my methodology only became visible long after I stepped out of the field. Therefore I aim to lend some transparency here to my methodological process, in particular when it comes to informed minor assent and informed consent.

Although I was not seeking out minors exclusively, I did expect to encounter minors in my research and therefore wrote a human subjects research protocol that anticipated this possibility. Human research with children requires additional protections by human subjects research standards, requiring researchers to take particular care in their methodological approach to protect this population. With the help of my university’s institutional review board (IRB), I wrote a protocol that protected the privacy and confidentiality of participants in the following ways. First, in the case of all interviewees, consent (for adults) and assent (for minors) was to be verbal and not written. It was argued that written consent/assent would create a paper trail between myself and the participants, making them vulnerable to backlash for their participation in the study. Second, parental permission for participation was waived for minor participants because it could force minor participants to disclose information about themselves to their parents that would make them vulnerable—for example, that they identify as gay—and because of the transitory nature of my field sites, where a youth might be there one day but not return for several days, weeks, or months, if ever, making it very difficult to secure parental permission. Third, my recruitment script, which I used daily in my field sites, was intentionally vague in its language so as not to publicly implicate participants, and it required that I not disclose publicly who had or had not participated in an interview.
Finally, because there was no written consent/assent or parental permission, the protocol did not allow me to collect contact information or do follow-up interviews with any participants in the research study.

Interview participation was voluntary for Spectrum attendees, and the IRB restricted me to minors fifteen years and older. I offered participants a fifteen-dollar gift card to a grocery store as an incentive. I recruited interview participants in two ways: by directly approaching individuals with whom I had built rapport over time, and by making open announcements during check-in (a daily practice in which everyone present in the space would come together and introduce themselves).

Interviews began with questions about Spectrum, including how the youths found it, how long they had been coming, and what they did and did not like about it. I would then ask them to tell me about their lives growing up: who raised them, what their family structure was like, where they lived, if their parents or guardians worked, stayed home, practiced religion, and more. Finally, we discussed their experience with sex, including their most significant intimate and sexual relationships, the things that most influenced their sexuality, their access to sex education, and their safer sex practices. Even though the nature of my interview questions were quite personal and intimate, I found that participants were generally comfortable speaking with me and disclosed many personal details about their private lives. In some cases, the youths expressed surprise at the ease with which they could talk with me about things like their sexual desires and behaviors. I of course have no way of knowing what the participants held back, but common to our conversations were stories of childhood sexual experiences, specific sexual desires, preferred sexual conduct and partners, experiences with abuse, and anxieties and fears about sex.

Consent/assent for participant observation was another challenge I faced in my field site. Technically speaking, I was required by my university’s IRB to get permission from human subjects whom I would be observing during the process of my data collection. Given the transitory nature of Spectrum visitors, asking for consent/assent from every person who entered to site would make the data collection nearly impossible. Therefore, I asked the IRB to waive consent/assent for participant observation during unstructured activities in the space, arguing that these kinds of activities during drop-in hours constituted public behavior. The
public setup and structure of Spectrum is one in which folks are congre-gating together in one large room, most conversations are held in public, and activities are highly visible to youth and adults alike.

Alternately, for more structured activities like workshops or education programs, I created a process for obtaining verbal consent/assent. At the beginning of each session I would read the participant informed consent/assent guidelines to the group, make clear my intentions to observe the group, explain confidentiality, and explain that something they say or do may be quoted or described anonymously in my research. After I shared this information I would step away, and a staff member would circulate a sign-in sheet in which youth had the option to state if they would not like to be observed during the activity. If even one person objected, the staff member would let me know quietly and I would leave the group activity. In order to prevent coercion, the sign-in sheets were anonymous, the youth used a unique identifier that only they knew, and the paperwork was managed by the staff at Spectrum. Over the course of my research at Spectrum, it was relatively rare that anyone objected to my presence in structured activities. Although this is based simply on anecdotal evidence, it seems like the more I was known by the group’s members, the more likely they were to consent/assent to me being there. The time I spent in the space hanging out with Spectrum youth was critical to the success of my research.

The details I have shared here should give the reader a sense of how complicated and difficult it can be to do sexualities-based social science research with minors, which helps to explain why there is so little of it. Although I did not realize it at the time, it was rather remarkable that I was able to get a research protocol of this kind passed through a university IRB. I was lucky to be working with an IRB that understood the importance of the research while not inflating the potential risk of harm to participants, which too often is the case. Also, the IRB was likely more comfortable approving my research protocol because of the written letters of support I had from the organizations I was working with. I might have had a much more difficult time getting permission to do this research in a public school setting, for example, where I would have access to a broader swath of young people but where the anxieties about minors and sexuality are heightened. The perceived risk of harm to minor participants in sexualities-based research means that too much of the
research is done in settings like Spectrum, where staff and researchers are likely to have shared interests, which arguably limits the findings.

A Note on Language

I use “LGBTQ” as an umbrella term throughout the book, recognizing that it is impossibly inadequate to describe the youth I did research with but that for the sake of shared understanding it is the most widely recognized term to describe people who are not straight-identified or cis-identified. The word “transgender” is “an umbrella term for describing a range of gender-variant identities and communities.”25 In line with a particular trend among transgender people, scholars, and activists, I generally substitute “trans*” for transgender. The asterisk is a concise way to account for all of the different ways the term “trans-” can be deployed in referring to gender-related matters. When necessary to make a particular point, I use the term “genderqueer” to distinguish people whose gender expression or identity is genderqueer or gender non-binary from transbinary people.

As previously stated, I use “queer” both to describe a way of being in the world that opposes normal (sometimes intentionally, sometimes not) and to describe sexual conduct and behavior. For the purpose of the discussion within, I avoid the increasingly popular use of “queer” as an umbrella term to describe any and all LGBTQ-identified people on the grounds that it obfuscates the argument I try to make throughout: that not all people who are LGBTQ-identified are queer, nor is homosexuality a necessary component of queerness.

I refer distinctly to three different modes of understanding sexuality: desire, identity, and conduct or behavior. I use “desire” to refer to one’s sexual orientations, fantasies, and attractions. “Identity” refers to the socially constructed names and labels individuals adopt to describe themselves and/or their sexuality—which may or may not be related to the gender of the persons they are attracted to—such as “straight,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “pansexual,” and “queer.” “Conduct” and “behavior” are used to describe actual sexual and intimate acts that individuals engage in. While I understand these terms intersect with one another, I also see them as distinct and mutually exclusive.
The set of terms used to refer to people’s sexualities and sexual and gender identities evolved while I was doing my research and continue to evolve as I write this manuscript. By way of example, in 2014, Facebook expanded its options for “gender”—a category considered in its user profiles to be “basic info” along with one’s name, birthday, the gender of persons they are “interested in,” and religious and political affiliations—from two (male/female) to fifty-one. Users can also create custom categories if they do not find a gender identity that appropriately describes them among the prepopulated choices. The point is that, at this very moment, language used to describe gender and sexuality is changing rapidly in U.S. society. Therefore, I use the language that is most likely to convey a mutual understanding between myself and the reader while trying to be most respectful toward the people whom I describe throughout.

Embracing Ambivalence

The dominant life-course narrative in U.S. culture is one in which becoming an adult means finding your self. This discourse is also prevalent in narratives about LGBTQ people becoming their “true” selves once they disclose their sexual and/or gender identities to others. Yet if we push back against the idea of adolescence being a hormone-crazed stopover between childhood and adulthood and instead embrace the notion that the process of becoming is as important as who we become, we can learn something from the youth of Spectrum. Young people’s often ambiguous sense of themselves as sexual, gendered persons is not a result of them not yet knowing who they are; it is who they are. Because young people today are exposed more to queer, homoerotic ways of being in the world, they are developing new ways to talk about themselves within the dominant sex/gender order, such as coining new terms like “pansexual” and “heteroflexible” to describe sexual attractions and orientations or by expanding gender pronouns beyond the binary. As this process develops, they expose the human propensity toward sexual and gender fluidity. Adolescent sexuality, in its queerness, requires language and identity formation that acknowledges the unfixed nature of our gender and sexuality.
There is a justifiable fear that if we let go of a bioessentialist understanding of sexual orientation—and increasingly gender identity, too—the rights-based gains that have been made to protect LGBTQ people will be overturned by the argument that one chooses to be gay and/or trans* and therefore does not deserve protection under constitutional law. It is not my intent to show that people choose to be gay in opposition to being straight; rather, I intend to show that all sexual and gender identities are sociohistorical formations. I hope to demonstrate this through my interpretation and analysis of my experiences getting to know the youth of Spectrum.

Rather than take for granted that the youth of Spectrum are LGBTQ youth, Growing Up Queer is about how they have become sexual and gendered persons. My analysis shows how sexual orientation and gender identity are not simply something one has but are influenced by the various social contexts we occupy. Although we are living in a historical moment in which homoeroticism is more normalized than it has been for several generations, that doesn’t mean that people are not still excluded, bullied, and segregated for being queer, so it is important to pay careful attention to what and who is queered in a contemporary context.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 places Spectrum into geographical, social, and political context for the reader. I explain where Spectrum is located, what it looks and feels like, and its role in relationship to contemporary LGBTQ youth centers and gay-straight alliances. I describe the differences in the U.S. political climate in which I did my fieldwork to the political climate in 2017–2018, as this book started its publication process; a lot has changed between 2010 and 2018. LGBTQ youth activism and spaces are a relatively new phenomenon that, I suggest, are influencing how young people across the sexual and gender spectrum understand themselves in society. In this chapter I challenge some of society’s assumptions about risk and resilience among LGBTQ youth and help the reader to better understand Spectrum as a living, breathing, evolving space.

In chapter 2, I show how some young people become sexual by highlighting how gender non-conforming behavior and characteristics are used to explain how people know that they are gay. Heteronormativ-
ity acts as a straightening device, meaning that it’s not enough to be heterosexually oriented; one must also be appropriately masculine and feminine to be straight. Further, heteronormativity is so entrenched in society that young people may interpret their violations of heterosexual scripts as necessary evidence that they are not straight. In these cases young people have adopted the binary sexual order in which they assume that, if they are teased for being too femme or too butch, or if they experience same-sex sexual fantasies and desires, then they must be gay, which tightens the restriction of binary gender and sexuality. Beyond genderqueerness and homoerotic desires, Spectrum youth have formed their queer identities based on their experiences with class, race, ability, nationality, and more, exposing the ways that heteronormative culture is not just straight but also white and middle class. Therefore, finding a place like Spectrum, which serves as a release valve from the pressures of heteronormativity, is often the first time these young people start to have a sense of belonging in society. Spectrum, then, is a place of socialization where young people experiencing a queer subjectivity learn the language and the culture of queer.

Chapter 3 examines how the youth of Spectrum are forming gender identities in the context of transgender phenomena, a paradigm shift in the way gender is represented, understood, and explained. By being a space where genderqueerness is accepted and embraced, Spectrum is a kind of queer utopia. At Spectrum young people are allowed to feel ambivalence about their gender and can play with pronouns, gender expression, and identity. For those queer young people whose gender expression and identity is ambiguous—meaning that what they look like challenges mainstream society’s notions of what a boy or a girl is—Spectrum may be the first place they feel the liberation of not having to be one or the other. Spectrum youth are learning to complicate gender, be aware of the role gender attribution plays in our interactions with each other, and forge resistance to the entrenched gender binary.

Chapter 4 shows how important alternative media is to the formation of queer cultural scenarios that speak to the sexual subjectivities of the youth of Spectrum. While acknowledging that there are now far more representations of queerness in mainstream media, I challenge the assumption that mainstream media has handily embraced homoeroticism and genderqueerness. I show how queer media, like erotic fan fiction
and *anime*, has an established history of providing alternatives to the heteronormative mainstream, alternatives that, thanks to the internet, are more and more accessible to young people from all walks of life. The youth of Spectrum, who were among the first generation of kids in the United States to be exposed to *anime* like *Sailor Moon* on network television, grew up on representations of queer sexualities and genders that were previously censored out of mainstream television. In this way, queer media that resist heteronormativity have the power to influence the sexual subjectivity and gender identity formation of young people. Therefore it’s not that mainstream media are becoming less homophobic and shifting cultural norms in the United States. Rather, young people have access to so much more media outside the mainstream—including self-produced media like fan fiction—that influences their understanding of themselves and the world they live in. More than ever, diverse media, more so than family, school, and religion, are shaping how young people become sexual, gendered persons.

Acknowledging that the youth of Spectrum tend to disclose their sexual and gender identities to parents at a relatively young age, chapter 5 explores the role of family in the formation of these youths’ sexualities and genders. It was often the case with Spectrum youth that, rather than rejection, they encountered loving support about their sexuality from their parents. But because the narrative of negative coming-out experiences with parents and family is so prevalent, even those youth who didn’t have bad experiences considered themselves lucky or unusual. The youth of Spectrum are of a generation of kids who are the first to grow up in a society in which same-sex couples and genderqueer parents rearing children have become significantly socially acceptable. In addition to having queer parents, the youth of Spectrum were raised by queer siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and other influential family members. I speculate that young people are sharing their queer sexual and gender identities with their parents at a younger age because of gender non-conformity that leads parents to make assumptions about their child’s sexuality, because they are more frequently exposed to LGBTQ family members and loved ones, and because these particular parents do not conform to the white, middle-class, heteropatriarchal regime of the Standard North American Family. Queer family
formation has broad implications not just for same-sex couples but for the way U.S. society understands and recognizes family in general.

Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the importance of broad-based coalitional organizing that moves beyond oversimplified identity politics. As society evolves away from binary understandings of sexuality and gender, identities that essentialize those binaries will become less and less useful. Further, by acknowledging that as LGBTQ becomes more normal the boundaries between normal and queer get redrawn, those of us who are concerned about the well-being of young people would be wise to pay close attention to how bodies are queered beyond simply sexuality and gender. I point to the Black Lives Matter and transgender movements as examples of twenty-first-century social justice movements that are responding to the ways that identity-based movements of the late twentieth century often failed to protect their most marginalized members.