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## EDITORIAL

*Qui est relatif à la campagne ou caractéristique de celle-ci.*

*Rural, bucolique, rustique, pastoral. Qui se distingue de la ville.*

*Relatif à celles et ceux qui vivent à la campagne : villages, fermes, agriculture.*

Le thème: rural. Ce numéro est le premier s'inscrivant dans une série annuelle portant sur la vie et la création en milieu rural. Une fois par année, nous avons décidé de consacrer un numéro aux artistes, aux écrivains et producteurs culturels qui travaillent et créent à partir de la campagne, de la ferme, du village, du non-urbain. Nous invitons également les voyageurs et les gens nomades de contester, de faire valoir, et de définir ce thème.

Each year we will have an issue dedicated to rural themes. If you are reading this and you are from or located in a remote or rural area, or have great projects ideas about rural life, write us. Like any theme, you can counter the definition of rural, challenge it, or explore it further. The theme is always as much a provocation as it is a way grouping ideas within issues.

As part of our continuing Video Curatorial spot, Matt Soar interviews Berlin-based artist and filmmaker, Florian Thalhoffer, the inventor of the Open Source Korsakow System. In a stellar interview by Soar, Thalhoffer reminisces on his early work—'Small World'—a first attempt at creating an interactive narrative.

As a general approach in this issue, the notion of rural is validated but its surrounding myths are questioned.

Rachel Torrie re-imagines the gay landscape and challenges the myth of 'the rural' as off limits to outsiders and resistant to difference in a piece addressing lesbianism and rurality in British Columbia, 1950s-1970s.

Anthea Black tackles the hardships of queer artists working in Alberta—the hotbed of conservatism in Canada—and the dilemma of staying or going... in search of more hospitable communities. This is why the *Ladies' Invitational Deadbeat Society's (LIDS)* performance, *JDH: Keepin' On, Keepin' On*, has a particular geographical and political significance.

Cindy Baker explores the Queer Crop Code. To find out if you are a "Peach" a "Lentil" or a "Chickpea", read on.

From West to East...

According to Bob Leahy, "there are many defining moments that occur when one first moves to the country". *Assimilation in the Land of Cows* takes on alternative living, fitting in, and the politics of unobtrusiveness—for a HIV-positive gay guy.

Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle MacDonald's study of sex work and sex workers in the Maritimes—"traditionally viewed as a backwater of economically marginalized and traditionalist people"—overtly challenges common assumptions about sex work from a rural purview.

Inspired by the way of life of her farming lesbian aunts in rural Nova Scotia, Rosemary MacAdam explores her urban roots and rural prejudices and proposes the possibility of being “queerly in place” anywhere.

Similarly, a few years ago, I joined M-C MacPhee (NMP curator) on her project to interview various people straddling the urban/rural divide. The project involved exploring the impact of traveling—and often returning ‘to the land’ after several years in the city—on sexual identity and self-representation. It is presented here with precious audio clips from these interviews.

M-C also interviews cover photographer, Rocky Green, a writer and visual artist who lives in the Bancroft/Maynooth area in Ontario Canada where he was born.

From East to North...

NMP’s prized Dayna McLeod spoke with Matthew Biederman and Marko Peljhan about *The Arctic Perspective*, a non-profit organization of scientists, activists, artists and organizations, working to empower peoples of the north by sharing resources, technology, education and training.

From North to South...

Mandy Van Deven interviews Mary L. Gray from a small town in California. Based on her groundbreaking research on what life is like for the young and queer in rural America, Gray discusses pride and hostility, race and risk, and the importance of the ‘local’ in coalition building.

Elisha Lim is back with another beautiful rendition in her *Illustrated Gentleman* series.

Massime Dousset est de retour à NMP avec ‘Chez les eux’, une courte histoire poétique.

Huge thank-you to M-C MacPhee, without whom NMP would vanish into thin air.

Thanks to Dayna McLeod, as always, contributing perfect pieces to NMP. Thank you to our editors and copy editors for this issue, Renuka Chaturvedi, Jenn Clamen, Tamara Shepperd, Karen Cocq, and Gabriel Chagnon.

Fabien Rose, tu nous manques et nous pensons beaucoup à toi !

Special thank-you to Momoko Allard, NMP’s assistant publisher, for her invaluable assistance getting the print issues ready and available at Lulu.com.

Other special thank you to Miriam Ginestier for offering us another NMP fundraiser. Please join us December 4th at Sala Rosa for the Meow Mix!

Merci à tous et à toutes pour vos contributions à NMP. Si vous aimeriez contribuer à NMP, s.v.p écrire un courriel à [info@nomorepotlucks.org](mailto:info@nomorepotlucks.org).

You can look forward to December’s launch of Issue 12 themed *RAGE* wrapping up NMP’s second year as an ad-free, independent, love-powered project. Stay tuned for year 3, with themes that will blow your mind and rock your soul. Any Chance that under that Veneer lurks an Animal with a Motive for... Amour?

Remember to comment a lot on the articles (contributors love that! And don’t be afraid of the skill testing question - it’s a spam filter).

Chères lectrices et lecteurs, nous nous engageons à vous livrer à chaque édition un magazine intime et serein.

*Mél Hogan*

# OPEN SOURCE COMMUNITIES OF THE NORTH, UNITE

*Arctic Perspective Initiative | Dayna McLeod*

*A non-profit organization of scientists, activists, artists and organizations, The Arctic Perspective Initiative is empowering peoples of the north by sharing resources, technology, education and training through epic hands-on projects that invigorate and stimulate their participants, collaborators and audience. NMP spoke with Matthew Biederman and Marko Peljhan about The Arctic Perspective, the group's vision, some of their projects, and how they get it all done.*

## **Dayna McLeod: What does API do? How did you get Arctic communities involved in the project?**

API: API works in collaboration with many different partners around the world, both circumpolar and southern on a number of ideas based around free and open communications systems, architectures, and technologies.

Our approach to finding collaborators is a pretty natural one – essentially by going places, meeting people, sharing ideas and seeing what comes out of those discussions. Already API's agenda has grown exponentially as we continue to work with our collaborators in the North and meeting new people and groups along the way. The project involves more than a dozen participants from partner organizations from five different countries; HMKV (Dortmund, Germany), The Arts Catalyst (London, Great Britain), Projekt Atol (Ljubljana, Slovenia), Lorna (Reykjavik, Iceland) and C-TASC (Montréal, Canada).

## **DM: How does API work as a collaborative project?**

API: API is really an idea – any organization that feels they would like to collaborate is welcome to contact us. For the last three years we have worked very tightly with the organizations above to carry out a number of our initial ideas, like the development of the architectural system and the support systems around it as well as the logistics based around bringing such a complex project to fruition, which included organizing an international architectural competition, editing a series of cahiers to reflect the project, and curating a set of exhibitions and public discussions with this same aim.

## **DM: What role does science play and what is the relationship between migration and culture within the context of API?**

API: Science and art share many similarities, among them is the constant quest for the understanding and representation of the unknown: for the materialization of immateriality. Certainly when you start dealing with technologies in particular, one needs a certain level of expertise on a practical level, but we also see what we do as having a bit of a trickle down effect as well. Namely, the technologies that we often employ are co-opted from military systems, and as such we see this as a political position as much as the best way to solve a problem. Moving technology from the hands and minds of the military into the civilian domain in

hopes of greater autonomy is an important act for us. We sometimes call it a process of “conversion”.

**DM: What is your role in relationship to the people and communities that you are working with? Do you see yourselves as mentors? Collaborators? How does this relationship function?**

API: Collaborators, always. Sometime we teach, sometimes we are taught. I like to think of the relationship we have with our friends in the North as one based upon sharing. It’s really quite simple. One idea and belief system that we have learned along the way is Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit or IQ for short. IQ could be roughly translated as Inuit traditional knowledge, but not in the way you might think, like ‘how to build an igloo’ or hunt a seal; IQ really acts as a value system. Within that value system some of the core beliefs are cooperation, family, sharing, teaching, listening and so on. There is a long list and I’m sure we don’t understand it from the same perspective as our collaborators, but I think its really important to find that middle ground where we can all share some IQ... There is a long history of exploitation that continues to this day – of well-funded southern researchers coming to the North extracting their data and leaving with it. There is a distinct awareness of this history there, but I think that because of IQ and the values that come along with it, there is always a level of respect for ideas and exchange, so embracing these core values has gotten us a long way in our relationships there, whether with elders, youth, anyone really.

Working with southerners has been a different story, but it only goes to highlight the difference between here and there on a personal level. Its sad but the same types of sharing and open exchange don’t exist very often in the South as they do in Nunavut and our openness has gotten us into trouble more often than not, but it hasn’t changed our view of IQ and its crucial role in the North.

**DM: What is the relationship between open authoring and sustainable development of culture for peoples in the North and Arctic regions?**

API: I think open-source, FLOSS ideals are closely linked to IQ as we understand it quite tightly, even without speaking of the digital divide and so on. From the perspective solely of preservation of ideas, of ways of doing things – lets just say that if those ideas and videos, sounds, recordings were tied into a digital format that wasn’t open – well, there could be a time in the future that all of those records could become inaccessible because they are stored in a proprietary format. But that’s just an example purely tied to the preservation of culture, language and so on.

In terms of an example of open-source and adaptation, there was an initiative that paid for the Microsoft Office package to be translated into Inuktitut, which at first sounds like a good idea. But when you consider that for anyone to have access to Microsoft Office, in any language, they have to pay for it, the perspective changes. If instead that money was spent translating Open Office, for example, then people would have access to some of the digital tools they need in their own language and for free.

But at its core, we believe that open source tools, both hardware and software are completely in line with IQ and the value system it sets out – so it simply makes sense to use tools that are available that are in line with what one believes.

**DM: How do you implement “open-source Information and Communications Technology (ICT)” and introduce it to Arctic communities?**

API: We’ve begun to do it through a number of channels; firstly to understand that everything we produce, such as the cahiers, are available for free electronically under a creative commons license. But on the ground





so to speak we have begun to hold workshops that range from simply how does one install Ubuntu (an open source operating system) on their machine, to authoring media works such as videos or audio with open source tools, rather than their expensive commercial counterparts.

**DM: API has published the first of four Cahiers, Arctic Perspective Cahier no. 1: Architecture, which focuses on Arctic architecture and documents the results of the international API design competition. “The challenge of this competition was to design a mobile media-based work and habitation unit, capable of functioning in extreme cold as well as in temperate climates, and incorporating the use of renewable energy, water and waste recycling systems”. The winning designs by Richard Carbonnier (Canada), Catherine Rannou (France) and Giuseppe Mecca (Italy) are currently on exhibition with photographs, videos and maps from the project at Canada House in London and Hartware MedienKunstVerein in Dortmund, Germany.**

**What is the significance of the publication and the exhibition? How does the API project function within the context of an exhibition? What has the response been like to this work?**

API: The publications and exhibitions are the public face for our activities in the North. They help us reach a larger audience than if we were just working within the Northern context. We use the publications and exhibitions to help paint a picture of the complex web of issues around the circumpolar regions that typically isn't known. For instance, our exhibition in Germany is curated around many of the positive sustainable initiatives that are happening right now in the North; these are issues that are looking beyond the ones that are stereotypical like suicide, alcohol and so on – not

that those aren't issues that need attention, but we are focused on telling the part of the story that is happening right now. For example, where hunters are working with geographers to return the traditional place names to locations on the land, or to recognize all of the political struggles of autonomy of peoples throughout the Arctic, or the role that art can play in these struggles.

There is a wealth of topics that need perspective, and in this focusing mechanism we see a role for API.

**DM: How do the “mobile, sustainable, zero-impact modular research units” get built and how do they work? How did you select the winning entries?**

API: The winning entries were selected by a jury that was hosted by LORNA in Iceland. The jury meeting was held during four days from September 15 to September 18 2009, and was composed of:

Inke Arns (Artistic Director: HMKV, Dortmund)  
 Johan Berte (Princess Elisabeth Antarctic Station Project Manager: International Polar Foundation, Brussels)  
 Matthew Biederman (Artist, Director: C-TASC, Montréal)  
 Michael Bravo (Head of History and Public Policy Research Group: Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom)  
 Francesca Ferguson (Independent Architecture Curator, Basel)  
 Andreas Müller (An Architektur, Berlin)  
 Marko Peljhan (Director: Projekt Atol, Co-Director: UC Institute for Research in the Arts, Ljubljana / Santa Barbara)  
 Nicola Triscott (Director: The Arts Catalyst, London)

The jury had to review more than 100 projects and proposals and the decisions were based on consensus. In terms of actually building and testing systems, we have completed an early prototype designed by Nejc Trost, API and Richard Carbonnier that was built and



tested by Richard and two High School students from Mittimatilik. Our plan is to work on a second design, which is modeled in the exhibition in Germany at a 1:1 scale and build a unit similar to this that will be fully functional in terms of systems and technology.

Ideally, we would then create a full set of schematics and plans that would live as a book and be checked out through local HTOs (Hunter and Trapper Organizations) to anyone that wanted to build their own unit; the idea was always that these would begin to grow and be modified virally by local people.

What's important to remember is that we see the architecture as a 'system of systems' – that is there is habitation systems, media authoring systems, communications systems, power generation systems, environmental assessment systems and so on. These systems are also adaptable to be used individually or in combination, either with the architectural unit or with one's own qamutik, snowmobile, boat or dog team. If for instance someone wanted to be out on the land and have electricity, they could check out (or build their own) portable renewable power system, one which uses a turbine or solar panels. Or they could take with them a node of a sensor network that could be used both as a safety device transmitting ones location back to the HTO as well as recording environmental conditions, ice conditions, and so forth, through their continued use we see the ability of citizens to be able to build their own database of land use, wildlife and environmental conditions.

### **DM: What is next for API?**

In the near term, we'll be holding a open-space conference in Dortmund with a really well-rounded group of artists, hunters, theoreticians, and scientists a place where we can all dream together and see what comes out of it. We'll also be publishing three more cahiers to come out shortly; next up is Geopolitics and Autonomy, edited by Michael Bravo of the Scott Polar Research Institute and Nicola Triscott of The

Arts Catalyst, followed by a Technology Issue, edited by Adam Hyde of FLOSS Manuals, and finally an issue we are calling Landscape, edited by Inke Arns, Matthew Biederman and Marko Peljhan that will be again devoted to the direct reflection of our process.

API is working towards getting these systems integrated into the community fabric and to have all of these technologies built and managed by the community in some way. We've got plans to design and build a hydroponic unit built into a storage container to be used as a community garden. This garden would provide free fresh vegetables to everyone who took part in the operation of the garden, and would be run from renewable power sources. Longer term we are investigating ways that we can spread our work out to different regions in the Arctic such as Greenland, Chuktoka among others since our goal is really to connect the entire circumpolar region. All the while we haven't forgotten the idea of connecting the two poles with their very different cultures. We have a lot of work ahead of us.

*Ikiraapik in Ikpiq from Matthew Biederman on Vimeo:*

<http://vimeo.com/12814441>

*The Arctic Perspective Initiative (API) is a non-profit, international group of individuals and organizations whose goal is to promote the creation of open authoring, communications and dissemination infrastructures for the circumpolar region. We aim to empower the North and Arctic peoples through open source technologies and applied education and training. By creating access to these technologies while promoting an open, shared network of communications and data, without a costly overhead, we can allow for further sustainable and continued development of culture, traditional knowledge, science, technology and education opportunities for peoples in the North and Arctic regions.*

<http://arcticperspective.org>







# LANGSAMKEIT: TELLING STORIES IN A SMALL WORLD

Florian Thalhofer | Matt Soar

*This interview took place (in English, via Skype) on 18 July 2010. It focuses on ‘Kleine Welt’ (or ‘Small World’), an experimental interactive narrative created by Florian Thalhofer in 1997, when he was 25, and published in modified form on CD-ROM by Mediamatic in 1999.*

*Florian Thalhofer is a Berlin-based artist and filmmaker, and he is the inventor of the Korsakow System, a free/libre, open source, software application for creating database narratives. His Korsakow films include *Forgotten Flags* (2007), *13terStock* (2005), and *7Sons* (2003). His current Korsakow project, *Planet Galata: A Bridge in Istanbul*, is being produced in association with ARTE, the European television network.*

*‘Small World’ was Thalhofer’s first attempt at creating an interactive narrative, and predates his development of the Korsakow System by several years. ‘Small World’ comprises “54 little stories on what it is like to grow up in a small town”, i.e. Schwandorf, population 28,000, in eastern Bavaria, less than 50km from the border with the Czech Republic. ‘Small World’ has been exhibited internationally, and won the *literatur.digital* award in 2002. It can still be viewed online in German or English*

*(requires Shockwave plugin), but we recommend downloading it (in German or English) for viewing on PCs or Macs (OS 9 or OS X) – in which case there is no need for Shockwave.*

**Matt Soar: In English there are two meanings to ‘Small World’: a small place, but the phrase also refers to coincidences in an increasingly connected world. Does it work that way in German?**

Florian Thalhofer: Yes, it works the very same way. What’s so funny about ‘Small World’ is that the things I found there I found later on in very many other places. Like going to New York: the same principles that are in a small town you can find any place else.

**MS: But there must be something unique about a small town experience that you don’t get in a city?**

FT: I can’t really compare it, because I grew up in a small town and I didn’t grow up in a big city so I don’t know what it is like to grow up in a big city. I mean I can imagine of course. There was this crazy thing, in

Schwandorf, and I did not realize how crazy it was when I was there: when someone came into the room and said something I could hear ‘ah, this person comes from Büchelkühn,’ a village next to Schwandorf; it has five hundred inhabitants, and I’ve never been there myself. But I could hear it, like, from one sentence, from the accent. And this density of information – I could not find that anymore. I can still hear if someone comes from Bavaria, but even there I sometimes have difficulties... to hear if the person comes from Munich, or Austria, or even the region I come from. That’s quite embarrassing, really. The space for the world in your head is always as big, whether your home is a small town or you are travelling the world. What changes is the level of detail.

**MS: To what degree, when you made it, were you talking specifically about the experience of growing up in Schwandorf and how much were you aware of, or were you proposing or arguing that this was not a unique experience?**

FT: When I made ‘Small World’ I did it for university for my bachelor’s degree. I was studying interface design, so I wrote the stories in ‘Small World’ in perhaps three evenings. So I had a couple of beers and I wrote these stories. I was not really aware of what I was doing; I didn’t have a plan. But I wanted to write about what it was like to grow up in a small town, not so much about Schwandorf. I think it’s a general experience you have when you grow up in a small place, but I think it’s also an experience you have in any place: you have certain types of people, and you find them everywhere. The knowledge about life that I had at that time was based on my experiences in Schwandorf. When I made it I’d been in Berlin for about three or four years, and I didn’t really know what to think about this place. Well actually I still don’t know.

**MS: How much of ‘Small World’ is fictionalized; how much of it is ‘true’?**

FT: [laughs] When I showed ‘Small World’ in the beginning I always said ‘All the stories in “Small World” are true, except the ones that are not true, but those could be true as well.’

**MS: So, why fictionalize?**

FT: It’s easier. We’re not that responsible for writing the truth. If I’d have said that this is the truth, then people could have blamed me and said ‘this is not true’ or ‘this is wrong’. When I wrote the stories in a couple of evenings, and I didn’t know the names of the shops anymore, I came up with some fake names. For example there’s one place in ‘Small World’ where they sell knives and weapons, and I gave it a name and later I found out that the real name of the place is ‘Killermann’ - which is spelled Killer-Man! This is unbelievable! This is so much better... so I missed out on that one. There were a couple of things that I just wrote together; I kind of made two stories into one. And for my friends these things then became true after a while. This was like our shared memory, and ten years later, we’re referring to ‘Small World,’ and I remember that this was not exactly what it was like; it was just a story, but people referred to it, friends of mine. I think even if you fictionalize something it becomes true in a way. It doesn’t really matter.

**MS: If the stereotype of country life, especially for teenagers, is that it’s boring, do you think in some ways fictionalizing was about making it more interesting?**

FT: No. I never wanted to make stories more cool than they were; I just wanted to describe the boredom of it, in a way.

**MS: Do you think it does a good job, overall, of conveying a sense of the place, of being there?**

FT: Yeah.

**MS: When was the last time you watched it?**

FT: I think two months ago.

**MS: Are there any surprises in there, any more?**

FT: I think it's cool. 'Small World' is the best piece I made, I think.

**MS: Are you serious? Ever?**

FT: Yeah. I always try to get back there. I mean, I did not make 'Small World': it was so long ago; it was not a process that I was aware of; it's not all brilliant, but some things are just cool. For me, now, it's really hard to tell a story without having in mind what I want to say with it, and in 'Small World' there are so many things that I just named, and they say so many things, even more than I actually thought of, really. And now when I write texts, I'm usually quite aware of what they should mean.

**MS: So is the problem, the change, in you, or is it that you somehow can't capture those things with Korsakow in the way you could when you built 'Small World'?**

FT: It has nothing to do with Korsakow. I think Korsakow is a great tool to get there, to be able to say things where you don't necessarily have a 'message'. I think I have more of an opinion now than I had when I was younger. The beauty in things is when someone has a really cool observation, I enjoy that; and now if someone tells me something it's very rare that I didn't have that thought before. Know what I mean?

**MS: Your brother did the narration in German and English. Why do it that way, when you often do the narration in your Korsakow films?**

FT: It was a presentation for university, and I've always thought it sounds a bit odd when the person who does the presentation is the same voice that appears in the piece. But in the end people thought it was me anyhow, because of the accent.

**MS: I detect some irony in your brother's delivery; was this intentional?**

FT: Yes, there's some irony there. But he took the recorder with him and I wasn't there when he recorded it - because he's my older brother and he didn't want me to tell him what to do [laughter]. And I wouldn't have told him anyway - because he's my big brother.

**MS: Was he distancing himself from the material or was it because he felt he was doing you a favour?**

FT: I think it's part of the text; it's distanced. But it's odd because it describes things that are quite funny and even ridiculous sometimes - like my schoolteacher who didn't like the poster I did. It's a ridiculous story but it was very serious at the time. It's in the text but it's also in my brother's narration. We did the English text much later - two years - when it was published with Mediamatic.

**MS: You've said it's your best piece, but if you had to make it again with everything you've learned, with Korsakow around now, with the technical advances we've witnessed, would you make it differently or would you reproduce it exactly?**

FT: I think I would try to reproduce it. Actually, every now and then I think about doing it again [laughs]. It could be that in the process you find that you can add stuff, or there is more to say, but I'm not sure.

**MS: What about the interface, or the feedback sound when you click on things?**



FT: Oh yes – I'd change the sound loop that's in the background. I would work more with music. And the screen resolution: they were quite disappointed when they set it up for this installation ('Provinz' in Lindau, Bavaria, Aug 2010); you know, it's 680x460 pixels. That was standard at that time – not for the web, but for computer monitors.

**MS: How have your ideas about database narrative changed since you made Small World?**

FT: It was the first time I made a narrative piece. I was very blank, I had no idea how to properly write a story. I used a computer to organize the material, because I liked computers and because I thought it was adequate for the way these memories are in my brain. I still think it makes sense to tell stories that way, more and more so. Actually I started to question if the linear way of storytelling makes any sense at all [laughs].

**MS: If you had to choose one word, in English or German, to sum up rural life, what would it be?**

[Laughs] In Bavaria? 'Beer' [Long pause.] 'Langsamkeit'. It means 'slowness'.

<http://www.kleinewelt.com/>

*Matt Soar is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University. As the principal investigator for CINER-G, he is co-directing the redevelopment of the Korsakow System. CINER-G will be hosting a symposium and gallery show called Database≤Narrative≥Archive in Montreal in May 2011. <http://www.mattsoar.org>*

*Florian Thalhofer was born in Bavaria. He lives and works in Berlin. Florian is the inventor of the [korsakow system], a software to create database narratives. He studied at the University of the Arts in Berlin (MA and Meisterschüler) and at UCLA in Los Angeles. <http://www.thalhofer.com>*

# CHEZ LES EUX

Massime Dousset

Non, je te l'ai déjà dit, il pleut pas vraiment ici. C'est pas ce qu'on s'imagine d'une goutte normale ce qui tombe, pas du tout. C'est plus comme des billes rondes avec une peau. Ça tombe en étages, c'est fin fin fin, et rendu au sol, ça se casse sans faire de bruit. Ça mouille pas trop. Et là, je te parle juste de celles qui touchent le sol. Y en a ben une coupe qui doivent remonter, celles avec trop de peau genre, les pas assez mouillées. Pis en plus de ça, Steve et Caroline sont encore assis dans les marches dehors. Ils seraient retournés dans leur 2 1/2 s'il pleuvait vraiment! Tu penses pas? C'est pas une autre preuve, ça? Tu veux que je te les passe pour qu'ils te le disent eux-mêmes? Non non, Caroline n'est pas encore partie travailler. Bof, elle a l'air de dessiner quelque chose. Je la vois vider des feutres sur des grandes feuilles depuis ce matin. J'me demande à quoi ça sert. Elle ferait mieux de passer à temps plein au Dunkin, elle sauverait des arbres et me gâcherait la vue moins souvent. Mais bon, c'pas grave, de toute façon, j'ai pas tout à fait fini ma surprise pour Steve. Quoi? Ben non! Je les espionne pas! Je te l'ai déjà dit, mon fauteuil est devant la tv, la tv est devant la fenêtre, la fenêtre donne sur leur escalier d'en avant et leurs culs sont collés dessus à longueur de journée. C'pas de ma faute s'ils sont dans mon champ de vision, j'vais pas me boucher les yeux à cause d'eux,

m'a rater mes programmes! Et de toute façon l'amour, ça peut prendre toutes sortes de formes et c'est jamais mal, okay? Pis à Québec, il pleut-tu?

- Caro, je sens plus mon cul. Yé quelle heure?

- Yé presque 5 h, faut que j'y aille.

- Coudonc, c'tu moi ou les marches sont plus dures en fin de journée? La tienne, est-tu plus dure que tantôt?

- Hey! Qu'est-ce que tu dirais qu'on parte d'icitte après mon shift, pour la fin de semaine, hein? C'est ma fête, je mérite ben ça, non? Amène-moi donc sous un pommier en région. Tsé, on serait tranquille, sans personne alentour, on pourrait se faire un week-end thématique *Adam & Eve en revival two thousand and ten!* Mais... sans l'histoire avec le serpent, parce que j'aime pas ça les serpents, c'est gluant.

- pfff...

- pfff... quoi? T'as pas l'goût d'partir, petits mamelons?

- Arrête de m'appeler petits mamelons, et non.

- Non, quoi?

- Non, j'ai pas des petits mamelons, sont normaux. Et qu'est-ce que ça changerait s'ils étaient plus petits que la moyenne? Ça sert à rien de toute façon des mamelons quand t'as du poil dans face et que t'en as une en bas. Sont là sous le chandail, en stand-by, j'pourrais les couper... who cares? Personne en ferait un cas. À la limite, sont de trop. Je peux pas jouer de la guitare en bédaine, je les accroche tout le temps, c'est fatigant. D'ailleurs, c'pour ça que je ne pratique plus.

- En tout cas, moi, j'pourrais surtout pas couper les miens, j'en ai vraiment trop d'besoin. Avec ma face *butchée*... ô môman merci pour tes gênes de bulldog!... et mes bras de boucher... *ô papa thank you so much! thank you!*... qui va croire que je suis une femme si j'en ai pas deux bien ronds. Esti... chu tannée d'avoir un corps.

- On irait où exactement?

- Sans corps... ben moi, j'irais pas au travail, ça c'est sûr. Comment je ferais pas d'mains pour squeezer d'la crème dans les beignes, hein? Esti... tant de glaçage dans ma vie et pas un seul maudit vernissage... la vie, c'est poche.

- Tsé, j'ai encore les couteaux que ma mère nous a offerts contre une cenne à Noël, hein. Sont dans leur boîte d'origine, chacun dans son étui qui aiguise tout seul, sont ben propres, ils sentent encore l'usine d'où c'est fait en Chine. J'peux te soulager de ta misère quand tu veux, ça prendra juste le temps de les déballer.

- Ouan, vraiment très drôle. Mais sans joke, j'oserais jamais. D'un coup que mon esprit restait jammé dans la viande morte? Je voudrais pas pourrir dans mes restants, on aurait fait ça pour rien. Anyway, on y va ou pas?

Vous avez du brouillard sur la 20? Tsé, dans le fond, c'est de la mini-pluie pas pressée de tomber, le brouillard. Donc, à Montréal comme à Québec, on est un peu dans

la même situation. Quoique, as-tu un voisin qui caresse le genou de sa blonde? Parce que moi, j'en ai un.

- On peut pas ma chérie. Fin du mois, pu d'gaz dans le char pis j'aurai pas mon BS avant le premier. C'est pas moi qui a inventé le système. Faudrait pousser pour rouler et mendier pour manger. Pas possible.

- Bah... on a pas besoin de beaucoup d'argent, moi je veux juste un truc simple, qu'on puisse dormir collés près d'un lac genre. Tsé, un lac avec la lune qui se sauce dedans, toute ronde, comme un jaune d'œuf, mais blanc. Tsé, comme le *sunny side up* géant que tu veux tout le temps faire...

- Ouain... quel échec dans ma vie, ça. Quelle idée que t'as eue d'abord de me montrer ton livre des records? La page de l'omelette géante... Woah! J'en reviens pas encore... ça se pouvait pas. J'ai tout de suite imaginé un *sunny side* imprimé à côté, en moins gros, c'est sûr, mais avec mon nom en-dessous et l'inscription « Premier record ». Mais mon problème pour le réaliser, c'est qu'un œuf extra-gros, c'est jamais assez gros pour faire géant, faudrait carrément un œuf d'éléphant, s'ils pouvaient se mettre à pondre des œufs les éléphants. Et si j'en mets plusieurs extra-gros, l'effet du gros jaune uniforme est perdu dans le nombre, ça marche pas trop. Et si je le fais quand même en acceptant qu'il y aura plein de ti-jaines à la place du gros, je finis toujours par en crever un ou à manquer de l'œuf supplémentaire qui ferait du *sunny side* un VRAI géant. Et pourquoi? Parce que cet œuf manquant est toujours celui emprunté par...

- Le voisin qui habite en face!

- Ouain, le voisin, j'ai jamais osé lui refuser. Avec ses joues creuses et sa peau plissée, je crois toujours que ce sera son dernier repas.

- Il est juste vieux.

- Et les soirs où ça me prend de réessayer, soit le réparateur est fermé ou il a juste des œufs trop vert pourri

en-dedans à vendre, les bruns comme les blancs.

- Le vieux d'en face!

- Ouan, j'peux peut-être lui demander de nous prêter une coupe de piasses pour toutes les fois qu'il nous a quêté un œuf.

- Vas-y.

- Ouain, je sais pas. D'un coup que je le dérange dans une création, j'pense que c'est un artiste, y'a toujours les doigts sales.

- Allez! Après ça, on pourra négocier notre vie en direct avec la nature, pas de remplissage de papiers pour respirer, y'aura que des feuilles dans les arbres, toi, pis moi.

- Ouain, en deux jours, je sais pas si ça va faire une différence sur les papiers...

- Il a sûrement les artères engorgées avec tous ces œufs. On aura peut-être même pas besoin de lui remettre l'argent.

- Ouain, j'avais pas pensé à ça. Sauf qu'il mange peut-être juste les blancs...

22 - Hey! Les as-tu revus, toi, tous ces œufs qu'il nous a pris?!? T'aurais pu le faire cent fois ton biggest sunny side ever, juste avec ces œufs-là.

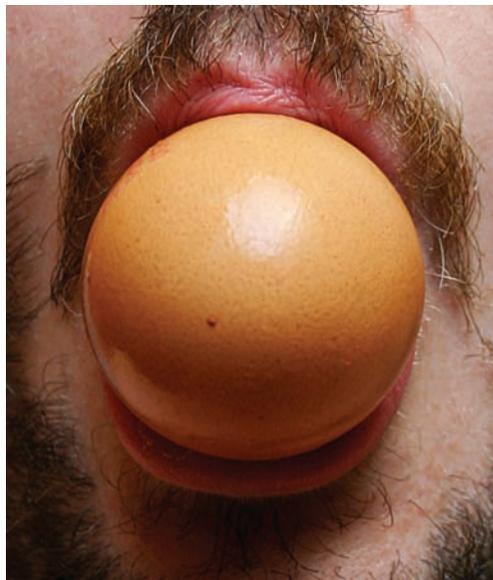
NMP

- Tellement! J'y serais tellement arrivé!

Oui oui, je comprends, avec les gouttières qui débordent de feuilles mortes et tous les ch'veux que tu perds entortillés dans le drain, y a plus un tuyau qui marche chez vous.

TOC! TOC! TOC!

Écoute, faut que je te laisse là, y'a Steve à la porte. Il vient sûrement me réclamer un de ses œufs, quoi d'autre? Ben non, je peux pas lui en donner, je viens de finir de vider et peindre le dernier. Oui, j'ai mis des ti-cœurs dessus, sont pareils comme ceux de Clodine dans son émission, dans le panier en osier pis toute. Ah mon Dieu! Il va sûrement me frencher! Mais oui, chu sûr, je te l'ai déjà dit, les yeux qu'il me fait quand je passe chercher un œuf, ça ment pas.



*Massime Dousset écrit à temps perdu des nouvelles et de la poésie. Il prône avant tout la dislocation de banalités en objets étranges et ludiques. La plupart de son travail s'envole sous forme de courriels à une amie ou en commentaires sur Facebook. Le reste dort en boule dans les drafts de son G-mail pour ne s'épanouir que très rarement au sein d'une publication. Ses plus récents projets publiés sont le livre d'artiste et recueil Quatre fables : Une + Une + Une + Une (autoédition, 2002), une suite e-épistolaire orangeuse en six courriels sans réponse, « Matte furoncle », « Ribs de velours », « Yuri le vitreux », « Mini bean », « Lèche-tes-tiches » et « Memouache », dans le fanzine Feelings (autoédition, 2006), ainsi que la nouvelle « Du bon goût », parue ici-même, dans le no 7 de No More Potlucks.*



# MOONSHINE AND RAINBOWS: QUEER, YOUNG, AND RURAL... AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY L. GRAY

Mary L. Gray | Mandy Van Deven

*Living in cities like New York and San Francisco has become a modern day marker of queer authenticity, and media representations do little to disabuse us of the notion that small town America is inherently hostile to people whose intimate desires fail to conform to the heterosexual standard. But those of us who have lived queerly in both rural and urban places know this ubiquitous portrayal only shows part of the picture.*

*A queer-identified woman from a small town in California, Mary Gray's experience as a LGBTQ activist prompted her groundbreaking research on what life is like for the young and queer in rural America. The resulting book, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, discusses the myriad ways in which the national gay rights movement fails to be fully inclusive of its bucolic brethren and instead provides strategies for including the complex needs of rural LGBTQ youth in the national queer agenda.*

**Mandy Van Deven: The advice given to queer and questioning youth by gay rights icon Harvey Milk was simple: move to the nearest city. Why is this statement a disservice to queer rural youth?**

Mary L. Gray: This sentiment effectively tells rural LGBTQ-identifying youth they can't be happily queer right where they are and should expect—perhaps deserve—hostility if they do stay in their communities. Many of the youth I met struggled with reconciling the deep connection or pride they feel for their hometowns with the popular representation of their communities as backward, ignorant, and unlivable—not just for queer folks, but for anyone with taste or class. They feel they're not supposed to see their communities as viable options, and are being told they need to choose between being queerly out of place in the country and moving to a big city to find legitimate visibility.

If we think of *Brokeback Mountain*, even though Jack can imagine a ranch and cattle operation to share with his lover Ennis, Ennis can only see tragedy—and it is Ennis' horrific vision the audience is asked to assume

is more realistic. But it's Jack's vision that made more sense to rural LGBTQ youth because many knew people who did just that. Most of the stories we hear about rural LGBTQ life come from those who had the means or desire to leave it behind.

There are far more queer folks, particularly those under 18, who don't have the ability or desire to leave their small towns. The majority of folks I met hadn't actively chosen to stay in the country; they didn't have the economic or social means to leave and take root in an urban area. But all queer youth can't all move to the nearest city—and they shouldn't have to.

**MVD: Decreased economic opportunity increases in rural spaces, how does class affect the lives of LGBTQ folks in these areas?**

MLG: Working class and poor rural communities require citizen solidarity to weather the neglect and marginalization from the nation-state. In this environment, LGBTQ people must be seen primarily as “locals” and risk too much advocating for their concerns as queer folks because familiarity, not difference, ensures one's access to basic necessities. Beyond churches, there are few resources available in rural communities to cover these basics should one's family be unable or unwilling to provide them. The fact that rural queer youth feel they have to choose speaks to the assumption that queerness not only resides in urban settings, but also only comes with social and economic mobility.

**MVD: According to the 2000 Census, rural America is 82 percent white. How do queer people of color navigate their personal and political alliances in a space of overlapping marginalization?**

MLG: Queer youth of color are doubly estranged and, if they openly identify as queer, have more to risk. While parallels drawn by white peers or allies between the civil rights and LGBTQ rights movements

might help young people of color feel more connected to LGBTQ activism, this uncritical argument also creates dissonance. As one young African American man named Brandon noted, he could see the connections between the two movements, but ultimately felt a greater responsibility to be a leader among students of color because that's where his community was.

For Brandon, the Internet introduced another layer to racial divisions. He went online to find other bi- or gay-identifying men in his region and found almost exclusively white men, some of which spoke about their desire in ways that struck Brandon as incredibly racist. While Brandon still felt the Internet was an important part of allowing him to feel that his desire for other men was normal, it also demonstrated how hard it would be for him to synthesize his racial and sexual identities.

**MVD: You write about Kentucky state representative Lonnie Napier telling two gay young men that “there aren't any gays living in Berea,” which brings to mind Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's similar statement about there being no gays in Iran. What comparisons can be made of queer youth in the rural US and queer youth abroad?**

MLG: The globalization of LGBTQ activism has had a profound impact on how we talk about, and recognize, what it means to be a queerly gendered or desiring person in and beyond the U.S. Rural American youth, like queer youth abroad (particularly outside the industrialized West), are seen as victims of intolerant surroundings trapped in cultural closets. This does two things: it ignores the complicated ways in which people experience gender and sexuality beyond a visible identity, and ignores how queerness symbolically operates as a mark of modernity. What struck me when I began this research was how often I heard people patronizingly say that rural youth need “outreach,” the same term used in development literature

about the Global South's relationship to the West. I bet queer youth abroad find that as frustrating as rural youth in the U.S. because it's insulting to assume someone is "less than" because of where they live.

**MVD: How is the Internet used by rural queer youth to shape or reinforce their own queer identification?**

MLG: The assumption that rural queer and questioning youth use new media to escape the country is common. We should not assume that the Internet on its own effectively addresses any rural queer young person's need for recognition and community belonging. Internet access isn't even readily available to most of these kids. Far from using the internet to get away from their surroundings, all the youth I worked with did the same thing the first time they had an opportunity to use the internet: they looked for someone who identified as queer in their area.

The value of the Internet to rural queer youth identification can't be understated, but its impact cuts both ways. The Internet offers an opportunity to explore queer identifications and search for other youth in the area, but it also make things more difficult by homogenizing what LGBTQ life and people are like, and by erasing the rural from the picture of queer life. The Internet also gives ideas for organizing politically that have no viability in rural communities. A door-to-door voter registration drive for LGBTQ issues won't work in a place where people don't see LGBTQ issues as a local concern.

**MVD: What should national organizations do to re-center rural queer youth needs in larger gay rights movement?**

MLG: We need to re-examine our assumption that rural places are endemically hostile to queer folks. The frequency of hate crimes in cities should signal to us that rural and urban spaces are differently—not more or less—violent to queer people. Without rural com-

munities and their LGBTQ constituents, national and statewide advocacy groups will be unable to advance basic civil rights issues on a national scale. Assuming LGBTQ life necessarily improves through securing the right to marry without equally valuing—and in rural communities I would argue prioritizing—accessible LGBTQ-specific healthcare and job protections, will do very little to change the lives of working class and poor rural LGBTQ youth. Anyone who thinks rural queer kids are just a wedding ring away from full citizenship and equality hasn't spent time looking for healthcare or a living wage in rural Appalachia. Until LGBTQ people and our advocates understand working class needs and find points of solidarity, it is unlikely rural communities will ever see LGBTQ rights relevant.

**MVD: Your research was rooted in uncovering best practices for rural queer youth organizing. What strategies did you find?**

MLG: The importance of coalitional politics in rural communities and the need to prioritize the "localness" of an issue is crucial. In some cases Gay-Straight Alliances will work, but Human Dignity student clubs that address homophobia alongside other discrimination may work better to build community support. The argument that non-LGBTQ folks should care about LGBTQ issues like marriage equality because it's "the right thing to do" misses the complicated meaning of marriage and families to people who depend on those institutions for material—not just symbolic—support.

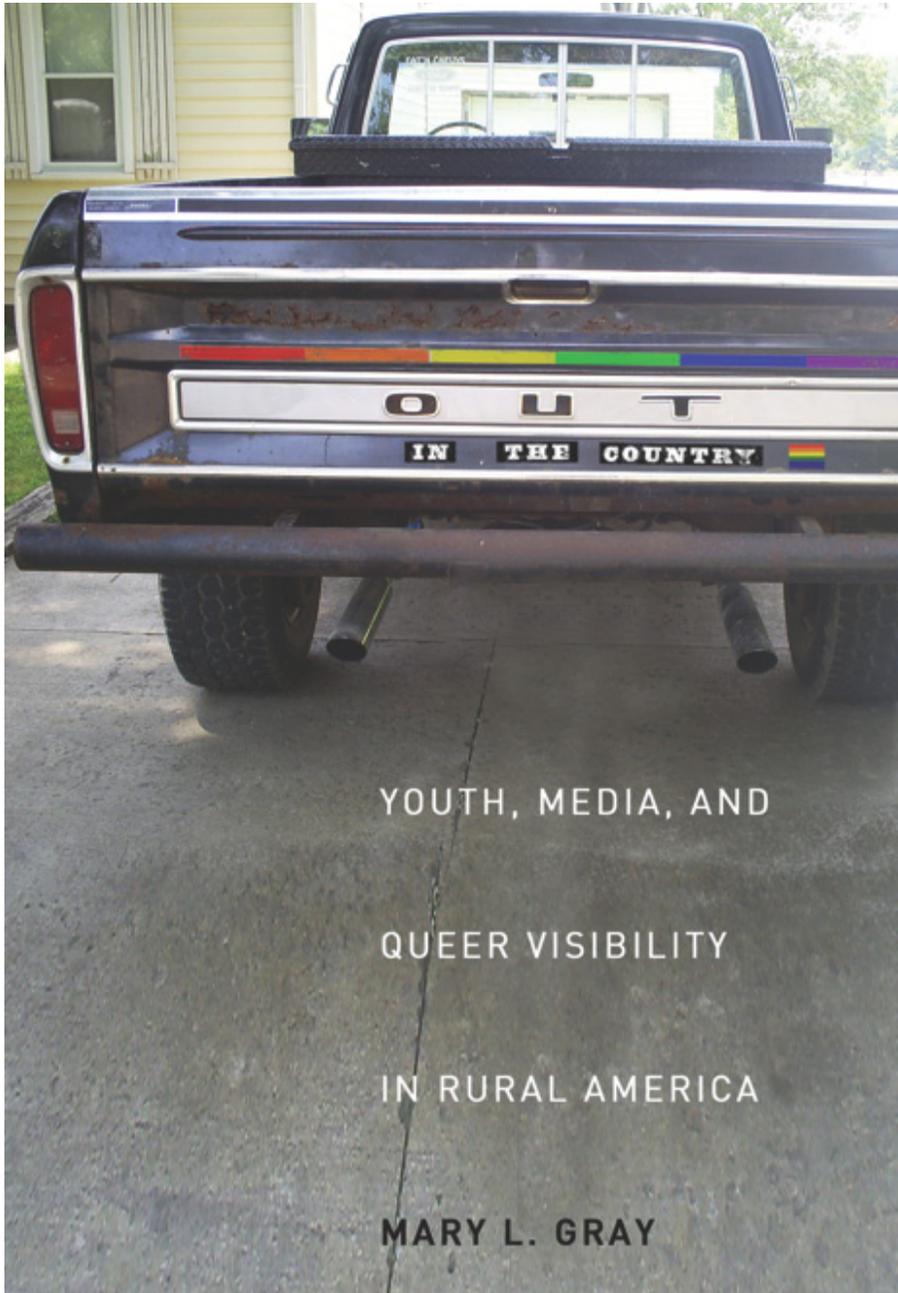
The most obvious common ground is the campaign for universal healthcare. Healthcare facilities, not to mention insurance coverage, are very hard to come by in rural communities, and fighting for universal healthcare in the United States materially addresses the needs of rural LGBTQ youth while also meeting the needs of their rural communities. Rural queers will never have the numbers or capital (social and economic) to fight separately from their non-LGBTQ

neighbors, so our strategies must work with the logic of familiarity rather than anonymity and building critical mass.

*An edited version of this interview was originally published by WireTap Magazine, September 2, 2009*

*Mary L. Gray is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication and Culture at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her research looks at how everyday uses of media shape people's understandings and expressions of their social identities. She is the author of In Your Face: Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth (1999). Her most recent book, Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America (NYU Press) examines how young people in rural parts of the United States fashion queer senses of gender and sexual identity and the role that media—particularly the internet—play in their lives and political work.*

*Mandy Van Deven is a progressive activist, social worker, and independent writer. She is the Deputy Director of RightRides, the founding editor of Elevate Difference, and the Associate Editor of GirlFuture. Mandy co-authored the forthcoming Hey, Shorty!: A Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools and on the Streets. Her writing has been published in various online and print media—including AlterNet, Bitch, Change.org, ColorLines, Curve, Herizons, Marie Claire, RH Reality Check, and The Women's International Perspective. Mandy has a Master's in Social Work from Hunter College with a concentration in Nonprofit Administration and Community Organizing. She has worked for over a decade with grassroots nonprofits in Brooklyn, Atlanta, and Kolkata, including Girls for Gender Equity, Red Hook Initiative, YouthPride, and Blank Noise.*



YOUTH, MEDIA, AND

QUEER VISIBILITY

IN RURAL AMERICA

MARY L. GRAY

# QUEER IN A HAYSTACK: QUEERING RURAL SPACE

*Rosemary McAdam*

A few years ago I became fascinated by the question of how, exactly, my lesbian aunts live where they do – on a farm in rural Nova Scotia. Growing up in downtown Toronto, I equated queer community with city streets and gay meccas like Church Street. In contrast, the country was a somewhat scary place where queer and trans people got killed. What queer hasn't seen *Boys Don't Cry* or *The Laramie Project*? Why would any queer person intentionally move to the country and how could they, well, love it? Queer theorists have begun to look at the metrocentric assumptions of the predominately urban queer culture. Not only is the country posited as 'backward,' it has been mapped onto the 'coming-out' narrative of many queer identified people – the country is the closet in which they escape upon relocating to the 'liberated' cityscape. While it is the experience of some, this dominant narrative erases the experience of queers who have chosen to live in the country. My aunts are very at home in the country – they have a strong network of rural lesbian friends and are accepted into their immediate rural community as well. For myself, in contrast to many coming out stories centered around the migration from rural-to-urban, I came out after I left my home in downtown Toronto and moved to the rural

campus residence of Trent University in Peterborough Ontario. During my five years living in Peterborough, I became even more interested in the queer culture of small towns and the country. I wanted to move to the country but my urban upbringing left lingering questions like: Could I be accepted as a queer woman in the country? What are the experiences of queer people who grew up in rural areas and those who have chosen to live in the country?

Since I was going to university at the time, I sought to answer these questions through the avenue I had at present, academia. I wrote my undergraduate thesis using qualitative interviews to highlight the experiences of gay and lesbian people living in rural areas, as well as queer youth who have grown up in rural areas. Their experiences challenge the dominant assumptions that rural areas are uniformly hostile to queer people. This research also emerges from my experiences as a white, middle-class, urban-raised, queer-identified woman. The following is an excerpt from my thesis, titled *Queerly in Place: Rural Belonging and Queer Presence*.

## Choosing to Live in Rural Space

In “Queer Country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives,” Bell & Valentine (1995) point to two groups of gay rural dwellers: those born and raised in rural areas, and those who choose to move from an urban to a rural location (p.117). They determine that the first group often follows the stereotypical life-narrative, which includes a necessary relocation from the “oppression of country life” to a larger urban centre. The latter group is drawn to the rural as an idyllic space or “fantasy home” where alternative lifestyles can flourish (ibid, p.118-9; Baker, 2009).

However, as Wilson and other theorists have maintained, this simplistic division reinforces the urban/rural hierarchy and fails to interrogate the assumption that rural life is only either hostile or idyllic (Wilson, 1999). This dominant narrative of queer people ‘fleeing’ from small towns as the ‘stereotypical life narrative’ of rural born queers is acknowledged by one of my participants. Jessy Grass, a self-identified (gender) queer in their 20s, writes,

I think it is important to talk about queerness in terms of rural space because, more often than not, queer and gender-variant identities are theoretically situated in larger urban settings. I also think that, more often than not, it is assumed that everyone who grew up in “small towns” or rural areas hated it, and merely existed within these spaces until they were old enough to get away. I think that, in my case, this is partially true, but way too simplified.

For Jessy, though this assumption “that everybody who grew up in ‘small towns’ or rural areas hated it,” and were waiting “until they were old enough to get away” was “partially true,” it was also “way too simplified.” Jessy challenges the rural-to-urban migration narrative by stating that it is “way too simplified” and erases the complexity of LGBTQ lives. As well, Jessy notes how queer and gender-variant identities are “theoretically situated in large urban settings,”

acknowledging how queer and gender-variant identities are often theorized as inherently urban. A few of the participants I interviewed had spent the majority of their lives in rural areas or small towns, and their lives did not conform to the dominant rural-to-urban narrative.

Doug Andrews, a gay-identified farmer, artist and gardener in his 50s, spent only two years outside of the Kawartha Lakes region, going to school in Toronto. Otherwise, he says, “I’m about as rural as you get.” For Doug, his family’s settler history in the region made the farm he lives on ‘home,’

I grew up just four miles down the road between here and Norwood. It’s home. My great, great grandfather’s land grant is here, my dad owned a chunk of it until 7 years ago. Between here and Norwood. My family has been here since 1867.

Doug explains that his familiarity with the community may be an important factor in being accepted by the local community:

That may make it easier for us or may have made it easier in the beginning. Because people knew who I was, my connections and that sort of thing, it may have made it easier for us. There certainly has been no negativity.

Doug notes how growing up in the community and his family connections in the area “may have made it easier” for Doug and John to move to a farm and be immediately accepted into the community. Theorists have pointed out that familial rejection has prompted many rural-to-urban relocations, and has resulted in a trend of what Weston calls “chosen families” (Weston, 1998; Wilson, 2000). However, many gay and lesbian people, rural and urban alike, are embraced by their biological family and may choose to live close to where family resides, including rural areas. Baker’s research found that for the majority of participants, the most common reason for moving

to, or staying in, rural Nova Scotia was family (Baker, 2009, p. 21). Doug and John noted that both of their parents live in the area.

Gray points out in her research in rural Kentucky that family is important currency for queer belonging in rural space. She maintains that, “family is the primary category through which rural community members assert their right to be respected...one’s credentials as “just another local” are pivotal to the broader politics of rural recognition and representation” (Gray, 2009, p.37). Being connected to place through family, as Gray puts it, “purchases something valued in rural communities; the sense of familiarity and belonging so central to structures of rural life” (ibid, p.38).

Who feels a sense of belonging and what kinds of familiarity are extended are also highly classed, raced and gendered. Both Doug and John sit on numerous municipal committees and Doug is a prominent artist and master landscape gardener. Their material and economic privilege garners them status in the community, as does their whiteness. For Doug, his family’s prominence and lineage as white settlers engenders a sense of belonging that may not be afforded to those without the privilege and ‘connections’ that made it easy for himself and his partner to be accepted by the community.

A sense of familiarity with rural life may also exist translocally, as another participant illustrates. Sherry Patterson, a dyke-identified farmer in her late 40s, discusses the feeling of belonging in the rural area where she farms:

The people here are very familiar to me because I grew up in the country, so there is a likeness. They’re like my family, the people of my extended family. I feel like I know them when I hear them speak, like, oh that’s just like my aunt, that’s like my uncle, that’s like my mom, so I kind of speak the same language. That’s useful. And they also respect my history. My family are farmers. It gives me a little head start, not too green.

Sherry notes how growing up in the country made returning to the country “very familiar” in that she “speaks the same language.” She connects the familiarity she feels with her rural neighbours directly to her own family, noting how “there is a likeness.” She also notes how her neighbours respect her because she comes from a rural farming family herself. Sherry illustrates that familiarity with rural culture and farming, not only a specific local family connection, is an important currency for a ‘sense of familiarity and belonging central to rural life.’

For rural-born queers moving back to the country, a significant factor in returning to rural space involved a sense of feeling ‘at home’ and ‘familiar,’ especially in relation in childhood. Jan Morrell, a lesbian farmer in her 60s, explains that her rural childhood influenced her decision to return to farming:

I had wonderful childhood memories of being on my grandparents’ farms in Ontario and New Brunswick – along with memories of fresh vegetables, fruit, dairy products and meat “to die for.”

For the three participants who grew up in cities, their childhood connection to rural areas and wilderness also shaped their decision to live in the country. Gisele Roy, a lesbian who recently moved from Toronto to Kawartha Lakes to farm, explains her attachment to non-urban areas of one of ‘belonging,’ which she has felt since childhood,

I belong in the country even though I was born in Ottawa, which is a small town, in a way. I always knew I belonged in the country, in some form or another, since being a child. It’s peaceful, there is no light pollution, there is no sound pollution, there’s no air pollution. I have choices; with urban centers I don’t have choices.

Gisele explains that she always knew she belonged in the country and touches on an interesting topic of ‘choices’ in regards to urban and rural space. Ching and Creed (1997) discuss how rural identified people

resist the espoused socio-spatial superiority of the urban by asserting the value of rural place. They write, “When rustics [rural identified people] denounce city life they may be deploying an identity politics that challenges this urban hegemony and asserts their own value” (Ching & Creed, 1997, p.18). Though cities are regarded as spaces imbued with ‘choices’ and rural areas are seen as ‘limited,’ Gisele asserts the value of rural space. Rural-based identities resist the hegemonic ‘urban(e)’ by positing the rural as a legitimate space, containing ‘choices’ significant to rural identified people. For Gisele, the peaceful setting, lack of light, sound, and air pollution are not choices available in urban centers.

For five of my participants, wanting to farm was a direct reason for moving to a rural area. For Doug and John, Doug’s roots in the country, along with his passion for gardening and farming was a huge factor in moving to a farm. John explains that it became evident that they needed to move to the country,

Doug just really wasn’t meant to live in the city... we lived in Peterborough right after we met and were there a couple of years. We lived in the Avenues on Gilmour Street. Doug had completely landscaped the front yard and dug up the backyard and put in a goldfish pond...put in a vegetable garden behind the garage and there was virtually no grass left and he was eyeing up the garage, because he thought, he kept dairy goats for 15 years, and he wondered if he could put some goats in the garage...it was clear I had to get him back to the country.

This wonderful story illustrates how, contrary to dominant assumptions that gay people are ‘out of place’ in the country, Doug’s sense of place is deeply rooted in the country and he feels at home in the country. Doug’s passion for farming, including animal husbandry and vegetable crops, translated into his everyday life, even in the city, to the point where “he wondered if he could put some goats in the garage.” Wilson points out that for many queers, the benefits

of small-town living may be as important as, and even override, the benefits of urban sexual collectivity (Wilson, 2000, p.214). This is equally true for rural living as the benefits of rural farm space overruled anything the city could offer and Doug feels decidedly in place in the country. The country is further accessible to Doug because of his family’s prominence and white settler status.

For participants who have chosen to live in small towns and rural areas, family and familiarity are central facets to ‘feeling at home’ in rural areas. Contrary to dominant constructions of queer people as inherently ‘out of place’ in rural space, these participants demonstrate that many queer people feel a deep sense of belonging and place in rural areas. When asked how being lesbian connects with her sense of place, Jan states, “Just in the sense that I feel that both are integral to who I am.”

Expressing one’s preference for rural life and choosing to live in rural areas are integral for rural identified people and do not necessarily override expressing one’s sexual identity. As Wilson states, “Some identities intertwine the ‘sexual’ and the ‘rural’” (Wilson, 2000, p. 205). This intertwining is manifested in how participants negotiate and incorporate their sexual orientation identity into their material space. This may include subversive acts and symbolism readable only by the individuals themselves. When Anne and Jan moved to their farm they purchased a truck that they have converted to run on vegetable oil, which resonated with their environmental politics. In terms of their new license plate they note,

There is a specific rural dyke identity, as a subset of lesbian rather than farmer identity. Women talk about “back to the land dykes” and “rural lesbians.” We always get a laugh when we say the DFW on our truck license plate stands for “dyke farm women.”

Anne and Jan highlight how there is a specific identity term, which does in fact intertwine the sexual and

the rural, such as “rural dyke identity.” They playfully claim this identity through symbolic means by appropriating their truck license plate to signify their own sexual and place self-identity as “dyke farm women.” Anne and Jan also claim a visible queer rural identity through displaying the rainbow flag on their mailbox at the end of their lane. Jan describes, “During an Acadian celebration we decorated the mailbox with an Acadian flag, a Nova Scotia flag and a rainbow flag. A welcome for everyone down this laneway!” Through displaying symbols such as flags, Anne and Jan are able to intertwine their rural Nova Scotian and lesbian identity. As well, they displayed the Acadian flag to symbolize their ally status to Acadians who were attending a festival to mark the 250th anniversary of the Acadian expulsion.

Claiming a visible queer identity in rural space may also be strategic and consciously mediated. Gray highlights how queer youth use rainbow stickers in public places to assert their queer identity. However, these ‘politic of visibility,’ as Gray describes the contemporary expectation within the LGBTQ community that everyone must be ‘out and proud,’ are carefully negotiated in rural areas. Gray recounts how one of her main participants, Shaun, and his friends prominently display a static-cling rainbow sticker in the rear window of Shaun’s car, “generating gay visibility while riding around in the country” (Gray, 2009, p. 166). However, when driving through what they term “hostile territory” due to some past experience or rumour, they peel off the sticker and store it in the glove compartment until they feel it was safe enough to display again. When Gray asked Shaun how he feels about having to temporarily hide his gay identity, “he laughed and said, ‘Well, it’s not like I stop liking guys when I take the sticker off! And I sure don’t need to prove I’m gay by getting beat up driving through a town I know don’t like gay people. You got to pick your battles.’” (ibid). Rural queer youth strategically fly their rainbow flag sticker to enact social change for LGBTQ acceptance while valuing and recognizing “everyday struggles of resistance and the pragmatic need

to blend in as familiar rather than stand out as queer” (ibid). In this case intertwining the rural and the sexual is negotiated through the politics of visibility and the specificities of rural local contexts.

### Queering the Rural

Though rural areas may stress social conformity, queer youth may also see the potential space for subversion and gender play in small towns. Mary Gray illustrates how gay youth in rural Kentucky utilize the most accessible local venue available to do drag – the local Wal-Mart Superstore. When Gray connected to a local queer youth group in Berea, Kentucky (population 3000) she was surprised to hear that their favourite pastime was driving to the Springhaven (population 10 000) Wal-Mart Superstore to do drag in the aisles. Gray writes that within months of the Superstore’s grand opening, the Berea youth group had “re-appropriated Wal-Mart – turning it into a regular gathering spot for their post-meeting social activities” (Gray, 2009, p. 88). When Gray asked what local queer youth do for fun, one youth casually responded, “most people all haul up together in big carloads, put on some drag, runway walk the Super Wal-Mart in Springhaven and walk around for about five hours with people almost having heart attacks and conniption fits cause we’re running around” (ibid, p.97). Performing drag at Wal-Mart is also a rite of passage for those entering the local gay youth scene. When Gray expressed her surprise at a Wal-Mart store being used as a venue for drag, one youth responded, “Why wouldn’t we go there?! It’s the best place to find stuff to do drag. They’ve got all the wigs and makeup and tight clothes and stuff” (ibid, p.98). Because they were still ‘readable’ as consumer citizens and Wal-Mart has a policy which treats customers as ‘guests’, the “logic of capital cannot bar them from their queer twist on the public square” (ibid).

This use of Wal-Mart as an ideal drag venue illustrates the use of local space by rural queers to do identity work and have fun. As Crawford notes, rural space

might be an ideal space for gender bending and where “redneck trannies might roam, work and play.” Gray quotes that “the image that rural space is inhospitable to public displays of queer difference is nearly monolithic” (ibid, p.89), yet participants in this study equally challenge this monolithic image. When I asked Erin Ladd, a genderqueer identified woman in her 20s, if being visible as queer and genderqueer in Chatham is important, she answered,

I like it, I like going there and gender fucking them. [Laughing] Yeah I feel like I got something to say, I feel strongly about coming out there, cause I feel like I could be a little voice there.

Though Erin described earlier that even if she does appear queer, “they’ll still ask heterosexual questions,” she notes that this does not negate the pleasure she derives from “going there and gender-fucking them.” She explains that her main form of subversion is through a non-normative gender appearance and performance. This display of non-normative gender is not without risk of being marked and ostracized. The last time Erin returned home, she was in town for no more than ten minutes when two adolescent boys on the street remarked, “oh he’s a fag.” After Erin replied that she is female, they insisted on repeatedly calling her “a fag.” This instance illustrates how the downtown space of Chatham is gender policed, however, Erin maintains that this bigotry is further reason to assert her identity as genderqueer by wearing androgynous clothing. This form of subversion is particularly important for this participant, and her hometown is a necessary and fertile space for such transgression.

Lucas Crawford, a trans-identified theorist, aims to ‘unsettle’ and “question how style of affect and movement may become ‘trans’ in ways that cast doubt upon our current valorization of cities in representations of queer space” (Crawford, 2008, p. 129). Crawford notes how orientation to place may be just as salient as orientation to gender or the body. Though Crawford notes that many transgender or transsexual

people are undoubtedly attracted to urban places and crave the emotional and medical resources seemingly unavailable in rural places, “the current model of the trans subject demands medical, subcultural, and financial resources often unavailable to (or undesired by) some rural gender-fuckers” (ibid). Crawford argues that trans space “may not be the random gay bars and drag shows to which one roves in a strange city, but instead, quite literally ‘a field,’ the kind where rural queers might have their first kisses or redneck trannies might roam, work and play” (ibid, p.136).

Brett, a queer-identified man in his 20s, describes working through his resistance to effeminacy in his own identity by reclaiming his childhood gender expressions. Brett remembers, “[Laughing] When I was 10 years old I used to dress up as Mrs. Doubtfire and run around the neighbourhood.” Brett described his neighbourhood earlier in the interview,

Our house is ten miles north of town so it’s a rural area, it’s farming mixed with residential. It’s not subdivisions but farm fields that have been turned over to large lot homes so we live surrounded by farmers. Growing up it was much more a rural experience. I didn’t spend too much time in town except for going to school and spent most of the time hanging out with kids from the neighbours and playing in fields and riding bikes.

In his redefinition of gender-bending, Crawford highlights the significance of ‘a field’ as a space for rural queer expression. Brett’s gender transgression as a child dressing in drag and running around his neighbourhood, which are predominantly fields, destabilizes the concept of rural space as ‘straight.’ Brett’s gender expression in the rural space of ‘a field’ further subverts the metrocentric assumption that gender-variation is ‘out of place’ in rural space.

Visible expressions of queerness and subversive plays on queer identity are not solely reserved for queer youth. Adult participants described using symbols like the rainbow flag in public events to communicate self-

identity. Jan describes how participating in their local parade in Windsor (population 3,700) is a chance to 'have some fun with visibility':

Visibility is important enough for us (and for others who may be out there) that we don't hide our relationship and we have a bit of fun with it. For instance, when we took the horse and wagon in the local parade, usually held near the anniversary of Stonewall, we joked about how it was the Pride Parade for our community and braided rainbow ribbons in the horse's mane and decorated his wagon with rainbow colours. It was colourful for everyone and particularly meaningful for a few.

Jan highlights how rural queer people may use rural events such as a parade to express their queer identity. Just as queer youth in Kentucky re-appropriate the local Wal-Mart as an ideal venue for drag shows and 'catwalking down the aisles,' Jan and Anne re-appropriate a local parade as their own 'Pride Parade.' They do this by braiding rainbow ribbons in their horse's mane and decorating their wagon with rainbow colours. Though Barney, their one-tonne Belgian draft horse, unfortunately passed away last year, their presence in local parades was "always cheered by the crowd because they are usually the only horse and buggy in the line" (MacAdam, 2005). Barney was well known in the area because, on Christmas day, Anne saddled him up, attached red felt antlers to his head and rode around the local community handing out candy canes (ibid). Not only do Anne and Jan re-appropriate the local space of a parade and celebrate themselves as lesbians within it, they also fuse a well-loved presence, Barney, and well-respected 'traditional' local symbol, the horse and buggy, to queer the local. This may be the kind of 're-imagining' of queer space that Marple insists is crucial to include rural queer experience – the temporary overlay of queerness onto rural topography. Hubbard emphasizes, "it has been recognized that the appropriation and transgression of heterosexual spaces may be a potent means for lesbians, gays and bisexuals to destabilize

and undermine processes of homophobic oppression, adopting a variety of tactics in order to challenge the dominant production of space as 'straight'" (Hubbard, 2000, p. 194). To build on this statement, not only do rural queers transgress heterosexual spaces as Hubbard describes, they also do so in resistance to the dominant metro-normative and urban queer production of rural space as 'straight.'

As Wilson contends, "Rural queerness is as multiple and varied as there are rural queers, yet prevailing images of rural queer lives distort and discount lived experiences by focusing almost exclusively on oppressive, graphic violence perpetuated against rural queers" (ibid, p. 104). This research works to broaden these prevailing perceptions of queer sexuality and rural space, to explore the significance of rural culture and place for queer people living and growing up in the country. By bringing participants' experiences of place and identity to the fore; we can in fact place queer people conceptually within the limits of rural space, queerly in place.

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# THE HISTORY OF THE QUEER CROP CODE: SYMBOLY IN THE SETTLEMENT ERA

*Cindy Baker*

Documentation of queerness has existed from the very beginning of written history. The ancient Greeks were notorious homos, the bible talks about gay sex ad nauseam, and written and pictorial histories from Asian countries illustrate explicit examples of queer sex over hundreds, if not thousands, of years. We know about queer artists like Oscar Wilde and Gertrude Stein and even about gay American president James Buchanan. We know about the role of the two-spirit people in traditional First Nations cultures and about the evolution of urban queer culture. Urban life, through history, has been the locus of gayness in just about every culture that has had a developed “urban” setting. Even in the middle ages, royal households (the closest thing in any kingdom to an urban centre) were said to be “hotbeds of homosexual activity.”[1] As David Higgs writes in his introduction to *Queer Sites*, “Dynasties rise and fall, but homosexual activities are a more permanent feature of city life.”[2]

Not all queer history is rooted in the urban, however. Referring to a man who is acting promiscuously for a period before planning to settle down and start a family, the colourfully rural phrase “sowing their wild oats” is actually a derogatory slur against gay men; as

wild oats are weeds which can take over and destroy crops, to literally sow wild oats would mean wasting one’s time and energy and destroying the agricultural potential of a plot of land. So to say that someone was sowing their wild oats was originally meant to imply that they were having their fill of gay sex (and wasting their fertile potential) before getting married and settling down with a woman to sow, ostensibly, more fruitful crops. A saying which is centuries old, this idea survived homophobic histories to come into modern use from the ancient Greek whose agrarian culture and cultural acceptance of homosexual sex spawned the phrase. (The wild oat plant was originally documented by Theophrastus around 300 BC.)[3]

The Western (European) world, and the religion of Christianity in particular, vilified and pathologized gayness; before this influence, most other cultures had a healthy relationship with their queer peoples and practices. Even those countries’ ancient histories have now been sanitized, references to queerness minimized and relegated to the realm of the unhealthy. So it’s not surprising that North America’s queer culture would not only be erased before it was ever written, but it was outlawed, suppressed, concealed as it hap-

pened, making it invisible and unspoken even to the people who were living it.

Throughout the written histories of this continent, there have been stories of cross-dressing adventurer women, from pirates to cowboys, such as Annie Oakley, and rugged gay men. But what about the vast majority of those people who settled the land? The homesteaders of the “lawless west”? Where are our Farmer Faggots? Our Buckwheat Bulldykes?

Women who were more attracted to an adventurer’s way of life – in other words, who were drawn to the cowboy (or pirate or bank robber) lifestyle – were more likely to become entrenched in those histories, as they may or may not have been known to be women at the time; though their realities would have been discovered upon their deaths, and their high-profile lives made excellent fodder for storytelling and, later, the history books. Many of the “women” travelers who lived their lives completely disguised as men would have been what we know today as (transgendered) men, some queer and some straight. Others simply relied on the protection such disguises offered a single woman traveling alone.

Less romantic but far more common were the lesbians who lived as women, disguised in plain sight in their rural communities as farm wives, widows and lone ‘spinster’ farmers, whose same-sex desires would have ostracized and endangered them in their communities.

The queer men and women who settled the West had many of the same motivations as their straight counterparts; to be compelled to break the land and populate the new provinces (and states) implied a strong desire to procreate, something that is less easy and convenient (even now as it was then) for queer peoples, but not necessarily any less urgent than for their straight counterparts. These queer people would have formed couples and married, sometimes with each other (lesbians marrying gay men) but more

often with straight partners who did not know their sexual orientation.

Far more fortunate were those couples that knew their sexual leanings and found others like themselves, a difficult thing indeed in those times. The crop code came in very handy not only for men and women seeking sexual partners, but seeking opposite-sex companions to complete the illusion of straightness (or partners with whom to bear and raise children.) Queer couples such as these were unlikely to live, even at home, as “out” – so even their children were not necessarily aware of their parents’ orientation. This fact more than most others is what really obscures the history of queer rural life and makes it so impossible to trace the people who lived it.

More visible to contemporary historians are the lesbians who lived together as spinsters and sisters. Men had fewer options for pairing up, and in fact were quite often “matched” by well-meaning folk with young women with whom they could raise a family, even if they did not desire to do so themselves. Other queer rural men and women with less desire to raise a family joined the church and tried to suppress their desires.

Of course, once a queer farmer found true love or otherwise removed themselves from the market, they were free to plant whatever crops they chose. Many elected to plant crops flagging their farm as queer friendly to any queer travelers in need of a safe resting place.

The crop code, not entirely unlike the original “hanky code” was a secret “oral history” meant to be invisible to anyone outside of the queer culture. Because it was shrouded in secrecy and because it was never formally documented, this code was lost not only in the history of farm life, but in our queer history as well.

This code has been pieced together primarily through research compiled while cross-referencing church or

census records with the seasonal records of customers at grain and feed stores, and later, grain elevators. Pairs of “sisters”, spinsters, widows, widowers and single male farmers with short- or long-term farmhands (or widowers with adult “sons” that moved into a new area when the son had already grown and where no one knew the family’s earlier history), when studied as a group in any given geographic area or climate region, show patterns of crop cultivation that would be considered quite unusual as a snapshot of any average farming region. For example, even in areas where corn was the primary crop and where male farmers primarily grew corn, a statistically negligible number of the single women or paired women farmers (including widows, spinsters and sisters) grew corn even over the course of several years. Conversely, in areas where peas/lentils were the most lucrative crop, almost no single male farmers with or without sons or farmhands grew peas or lentils.

This type of research obviously cannot be conclusive, but can certainly paint a convincing picture of early North American queer farm life for a historical period when there is no other existing information about the lives of the queer people who we know made up a generous percentage of the population.

Electrophilia – then a new but incredibly popular “fad” fetish which lasted a relatively long time in settlement-era North America, perhaps due to the availability of large batteries and generators alongside the privacy afforded by a farm – bears special note, of all the fetishes in the traditional crop code. It emerged as a fetish for the erotic stimulation of various erogenous areas as well as for the novelty provided by newly invented electric machines in vogue between 1880 and 1917.[4] These machines were invented to invigorate every area of the body in the treatment of a vast number of real and imagined maladies. Not the least of these maladies (and in fact one of the most widely diagnosed “female disease”) was “hysteria.” In fact, doctors having been overwhelmed by the demand for their anti-hysterical electrical pelvic

massage, the original “personal massage” vibrators (despite the modest nature of historical advertisements) were invented so that women might simulate the same therapeutic effect – orgasm – at home.[5] Electrophilia obviously has its roots here, though true electrophiliacs, even back then, were rarely satisfied with simple electrically-generated vibratory stimulation. From crude homemade metal devices attached to large glass batteries to the sophisticated futuristic-looking violet wand, so-called for the purple glow emanating from the gas-filled glass electrode, real sparks must be administered to satisfy the true fetishist.[6] (The unusual purple glow of the violet wand is possibly the reason the electrophile’s crop code symbol is flax, whose flowers are a soft purple.) Electrophilia endured through the decades as a popular fetish in rural areas despite lagging interest in the practice in metropolitan areas, which tended to be more fickle, always searching for the newest titillating trend. In fact, contemporary electrophiles have rural queer farmers to thank for not only keeping the tradition alive, but for literally saving scores of ancient electrical devices from the junk-heap, using and lovingly maintaining these machines such that many are still in use today!

It must be said that any practical crop code application would be tempered by the agricultural needs of a specific geographic area. Thus, the queer farmer crop code varied greatly in its application from region to region. Crop codes outlined within this article were in use at one time in the rural areas of North America, though at what particular time and in what specific region is not always entirely clear:[7,8]

For these reasons, the Crop Code crops would have been selected not only for their vague references and resemblances to sexual tendencies and activities but also for their relative popularity. In other words, a high-demand crop grown easily across the country such as wheat was paired with the more common sexual reference; a queer farmer’s wheat crop signified simply that she or he was seeking a dominant or

# TRADITIONAL CROP CODE

## *The Agrarian Cipher*

*FOLLOWING THE CROP CODE, a plot of land devoted to any of these crops—alone or in combination—means the farmer is interested in or looking for:*

WHEAT & SINGLE STOCK GRAINS  
*top (dominant)*

SUNFLOWER  
*groups or couple looking for a third*

POTATOES  
*bottom (submissive)*

HAY  
*casual sex or one night stand*

CORN  
*male (gay male)*

CUCUMBER OR SQUASH  
*long term partner*

LEGUMES  
*female (lesbian)*

ALFALFA  
*bestiality, zoophilia or faunoiphilia*

CANOLA  
*rough sex*

FLAX  
*electrophilia*

“top” partner. Wheat (and other single-stalk grains) and potatoes being the most common settlement-era crops, there was obviously some cheeky symbology employed in assigning “top” to wheat, which bears its fruit at the top of its stem, and “bottom” to potatoes, which grow underground. The other crops on the farm would allow other queers in the area to determine whether the farmer was looking for a long-term or short-term partner, and what sort of sexual interests she or he had.

This code was in fact quite useful, telling other queer farmers and traveling farmhands not only what kind of sex they were into, but what ‘benefits’ they could offer to a queer farmhand looking for a job or announcing what sort of services they were looking for.

Flower gardens further told the story of the queer farmer of the house, if only to denote the gender (and the sexual preference) of the person inside. Having a much broader range of expression than a field of crops might allow, the queer floriograph (the queer version of the secret language of flowers developed in the Victorian era; sort of a faggoty hanky code) contained dozens of varieties of flowers and their sexual counterpart. Thus, any farmer’s very innocent-looking flower gardens could have reflected a much more detailed set of sexual desires than the crops could have.

The main difference between Victorian floriography[9] and queer floriography[10] is that in straight/Victorian flower code, bouquets of significant flowers were arranged and given, like encoded love letters, to their beloved. Queer floriography was employed in much the same way as the hanky code; originally worn on the left or right lapel, the kind or colour of flower worn would tell others versed in the language what kind of sexual kink the wearer was into. Adopted later by the queer farmer, his or her whole garden could tell a very colourful story of the farmer’s sexual proclivities.

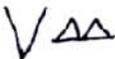
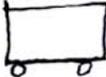
Crop rotation has always been an important part of farming. Crop rotation means changing what is planted in a given field from season to season to ensure a healthy balance of nutrients in the soil and to capitalize on the nutrients left in the soil by previous crops by planting crops that need more of those nutrients. Queer farmers, instead of changing the meanings of their code season to season, took advantage of the crop rotation to tell a more detailed story of their lives and their desires. An important thing to remember about queer farmers’ lives is that relationships developed and grew very slowly, learning about their queer brethren over a period of seasons or years. The crop code is much less about the sexual whims of an evening out or the kinky desires of a person and more about fulfilling needs and long-term goals (looking for a partner, wanting to raise children.) Of course, more specific sexual proclivities were always a part of it as well, and even the traditional crop code, as short as it was, contained some sexual interests that would still be considered peripheral or “kinky” today.

Upon the advent of the grain elevator in the mid-1800s, the grain elevator man became in some ways a gatekeeper to the world of queer rural desire; he knew what everyone was growing, what they’d grown in previous seasons, and what they were planning to grow next season. The job of the elevator man was an ideal one for more effeminate rural queers or less physical men. It put them right in the thick of things. For straight wheat elevator operators, this world would be completely invisible, even though they were often unwitting matchmakers as they innocently discussed the season’s crops with the farmers in the area. For queer ones, this job was the queer equivalent of the early telephone operator, who knew everyone’s secrets.

Small towns would brag about the number of elevators in the area in pamphlets designed to promote settlement to the area. Queer elevator operators with influence over these pamphlets could place subtle coded messages in these pamphlets about the



Gay American couple from the late 1800s; tintype (photographer unknown).[11]

 2 Women here. Tell a good story.	 Danger! Brutal man	 Get Carfare Here	 A crime has been done here	 Danger	 Woman living alone
 A Fence lives here	 Dog in the Garden	 if May Sleep in the Hayloft	 May get Money here	 Nothing Doing Here	 OK here. Good Chance for food.
 Poor People	 May Sleep Here	 Policewoman lives here.			

availability of local queers in an attempt to lure more queer settlers, through the language they used as well as through tiny markings that would have been read by most people as simple embellishments but in fact were a complicated visual code. This code survived into the 1950s in “physique” magazines which purported to promote a healthy lifestyle but instead equivocated early porno mags, telling the stories of the beefcakes inside through “a bizarre section of runic symbols, used as a psycho-sexual rebus for each model, marking the precursors of today’s personal ad.”[12]

Of course, the introduction of the elevator came alongside the locomotive, followed quickly by automobiles, cities and industrialization. This development created new opportunities for queer relationships, community, and sexual encounters. Older queer farmers had either settled down or found it easier to find love in town (or in other towns) than in painstaking and inconvenient crop planning. Rural queers of

subsequent generations flocked to the cities to find community and love, and to create a queer revolution, decimating the base of queer farmers to such an extent that the crop code was no longer feasible.

Queers have always used coded language to seek each other out and to remain safe in any non-queer specific environments; even using the crop code, one had to be very careful about how they approached a farmer who appeared to be flagging his sexual proclivities - otherwise, roaming farmhands might have gotten into a fair heap of trouble mistaking an innocent widower’s crops for something more significant!

Coming in handy as shorthand for communication between gay migrant farmhands (secret even from the queer farmers) was a queered version of the hobo code.[13] An early precursor of the beefcake mag code, the hobo code was a set of symbols which transient wanderers would mark homes with (written in

the dirt, in chalk on fences, scratched into wood etc) to alert fellow hobos to the potential kindness or danger of stopping there.

Queer travelers developed their own nuanced version of this code, which would act as a supplement to the crop code planted by the farmers themselves. These symbols were an important part of the queer agrarian language, as it would be impossible to know from the crops alone whether the homesteader was, for example, kind, generous, cold or abusive.

People often assume that we're much more sexually liberated now than back then, but that's not at all the case. It would make sense that in North America, the land of the free/open skies and endless possibilities, with people flocking here for the freedom from oppression, some sentiment of sexual liberation would have come along for the ride. Puritanical views and religious missions would surely have obscured a lot of that activity, but we shouldn't pretend it wasn't happening, especially as brothels are such a central part of the popular culture of the time. If straight guys and girls were getting their rocks off, surely some of the rest of us were too. In fact, the history of the hanky code acknowledges its roots in the early part of the settlement of the west:

The wearing of various colored bandanas around the neck was common in the mid- and late-nineteenth century among cowboys, steam railroad engineers, and miners in the Western United States. It is thought that the wearing of bandanas by gay men originated in San Francisco after the Gold Rush, when... men dancing with each other in square dances developed a code wherein the man wearing the blue bandana took the male part in the square dance, and the man wearing the red bandana took the female part (these bandanas were usually worn around the arm or hanging from the belt or in the back pocket of one's jeans).[14]

The hanky code as employed by the queer leather/fetish community primarily in the 1960s and 1970s,



*Blank Hanky, Bottom Right is a performative body work by Vincent Chevalier (Montreal, 2010) that references the hanky code. The tattoo is meant to be filled in with markers of various colours, to suit the mood of the artist (or perhaps somebody else).[15]*

much like the traditional crop code, had only a handful of easy to remember, very common categories. Today's hanky code, widely known throughout and outside of queer and fetish communities, is used more as a list of accessories signifying membership in a subculture (if it is used seriously at all.) The contemporary incarnation of the hanky code (which varies from source to source) contains well over a hundred fetishes, and as many of half of those are not associated with a handkerchief at all, but include such odd accessories as kewpie dolls, handywipes, rosaries and vacuum bags.[16]

Dress as a signifier of subculture is second nature to the contemporary world, but that wasn't always the case. Clothing has pretty much always been a signifier of class wealth, gender, occupation, ethnic and religious affiliation as well as marital status, but within each class setting there weren't always ways to distinguish membership in certain groups. That's why the flower code developed in urban settings, to act as secret signifiers to those in the know that they were amongst friends. Of course, military uniforms have for hundreds if not thousands of years used very complex sets of pattern, dress, and embellishment to signify not only whose side one was on, but within their ranks who had authority, what battles one had fought in, what specialized training one had, and so on.

but not in the contemporary sense of the word; it implied a twisted/deviant nature. While the lady in the black corset might have been willing to tie you up and whip you, the girl in green britches would most likely be the one to acquiesce to your most bizarre fantasies involving hot water bottles, a loaf of bread, a bucket of mud and a farm implement or two.

Women who slept with men for a living were the least likely to be suspected of queerness, and that afforded these women the opportunity to live with and love other women. For these reasons, the brothel contained much knowledge of the crop code, and adopted its own dress code to let potential clients know what they were "good at." These signifiers made sexual encounters far more satisfying for both parties, helping the women earn more money and (for the lesbian prostitutes) maintaining the appearance of straightness.

The "cathouse panty code" was far more nuanced than a list of colours and their meanings, however. Though historical studies of cross-dressing have tended to focus on cross-gender, in early modern London (1500-1800) archival evidence reveals cross-class dressing as a popular erotic practice; in this history we find the kernel of the brothel's dress code:

London citizens could use luxurious clothing to invent alternate identities for themselves or their partners in a single relationship, to create class parity between unequal partners, to satisfy fantasies of class ascendancy or of altered power relationships, or to imagine access to otherwise inappropriate or inaccessible sexual partners.[17]

The settlement-era brothel wardrobe was full of cross-class costuming. Outside of the brothel, there remained a strong conceptual association between female cross-class dressing and whoredom. While the evolution of fashion and culture has obfuscated most of the traces of the brothel's dress code in contemporary clothing, the association still exists in contempo-

44 NMP  
 Long before the existence of most contemporary subcultures, the brothel dress code helped the clientele of brothels determine what kind of sexual proclivities and experience each prostitute could bring to the table, so to speak. As repositories of sexual diversity and open sexuality in general, brothels attracted queer women looking for work and community. Prostitutes wearing pink could be expected to fulfill the role of a stereotypically feminine woman; sweet, demure, passive. The colour green was used to signify queerness (Oscar Wilde's iconic green carnation being the most memorable example), making the crop code potently symbolic, as most crops are green for a great portion of their lives. Green in the brothel signified queerness

rary western culture that a woman dressing outside of her own socio-economic class is sexually loose.

Though there is no statistical or empirical data to support this claim, anecdotal evidence along with casual observation leads us to believe claims that there is a new contemporary crop code in current use, based loosely on the old crop code as well as on other queer codes such as the hanky code.

This new crop code, like the contemporary incarnation of the hanky code, is less likely used to subtly signal other closeted farmers about their search for sexual partners, and more so as an act of pride and solidarity among gay farmers, a sort of “crop flag,” if you will. There are too many fetish varieties in this new code for any one farmer to be expected to memorize it; however, an online database along with

printed reference sheets (circulated discreetly among queer farm circles for those areas outside internet service areas) might act as a handy guide when selecting the next season’s “crop story”.

There are still many gay farmers in North America. These rural queers have it just as hard as their earlier counterparts, as support services and queer networks in rural areas are scarce, and rural North America can still be as dangerous to queer men and women as it was when the land was first settled.

Farmers today, however, benefit from globalism and connection to the rest of the world as was absolutely unheard of a century ago, exposing them (and us all) to new ideas, desires and activities to pique our curiosity and arouse our desires. The New Crop Code not only includes new fetishes, specialized rural eroti-



*Four people in costumes including Hector Cyr dressed as a woman at Souris Valley, Sask. August 2, 1934. Saskatchewan Archives Board — Photograph R-A1951[18]*

cism and more urban-centric desires, but it reflects the changing world of agriculture. New crops previously grown only in Asian countries, hybrid crops and engineered foreign seeds that withstand North American climates and pests, as well as crops brought in to satisfy the demands of a culturally wide-ranging population have led to a greater diversity in agricultural life that mirrors the growth and diversity of people and of desire across North America.

## NEW CROP CODE:

When any significant patch of land is devoted to any of these crops, alone or in combination, they mean the farmer is interested in or looking for:

### Major Canadian Crops:

Wheat = top  
 Potatoes = bottom  
 Corn = male (gay male)  
 Legumes = female (lesbian)  
 Peas = polyamorous lesbian(s)  
 Lentil = all-natural lesbian  
 Bean = baby dyke  
 Chickpea = lipstick lesbian  
 Buckwheat = butch  
 Canola (rapeseed) = biastophilia/raptophilia  
 Sunflower = group sex (i.e. looking for a third)  
 Hay = casual sex/looking for one-night stand  
 Zucchini/squash = long-term partner  
 Alfalfa = bestiality or zoophilia or faunoiphilia  
 Flax = trichophilia  
 Barley = sleeping/passed out fetish  
 Oats = faunoiphilia  
 Rye = xenophilia  
 Canary seed = knismolagnia  
 Quinoa = gold fetish  
 Amaranth = robot fetish  
 Rice = gerontophilia

### Oilseeds

Soybean = galactophilia  
 Mustard seed = Hung 8''+ or seeking hung  
 Safflower = Piercing fetish

### Miscellaneous

Tobacco = capnolagnia  
 Sugar beet = chubby chaser  
 Sod = aretifism/bare foot fetish  
 Hemp = kinbaku

### Vegetables:

Tomato = mammalagnia+inflataphilia = breast expansion fetish  
 Cucumber = transmen - andromimetophilia  
 Carrot = nasophilia  
 Lettuce = transwomen - gynemimetophilia  
 Cabbage = renifleurism  
 Bell Pepper = sneeze fetish  
 Broccoli = teratophilia  
 Rutabaga = fisting  
 Turnip = morphophilia  
 Celery = formicophilia  
 Asparagus = masochism  
 Beet = spanking fetish  
 Pumpkin = spectrophilia  
 (or, in Ontario, chubby chaser)  
 Brussels sprouts = microphilia/vorarephilia  
 Cauliflower = troilism/cuckoldism  
 Parsnip = hybristophilia  
 Spinach = sthenolagnia  
 Yam = apotemnophilia  
 Onion = dacryphilia

### Herbs:

caraway = phalloorchoalgotagnia/CBT  
 coriander = mechanophilia  
 cilantro = frotteurism  
 chickory = mysophilia  
 dill = asphyxofilia/breathplay  
 peppermint = exhibitionism  
 spearmint = autagonistophilia/passive exhibitionism  
 hyssop = haematolagnia  
 garlic = eproctophilia  
 fennel = narratophilia  
 sage = gerontophilia  
 savory = teratophilia  
 chives = olfactophilia/osmolagnia/osphreslagnia/ozolagnia

Fruit and nuts:

Fruit trees (somewhat like the floriograph of times past) have become the contemporary crop code shorthand signature of the person/people who live on the farm (especially in interior British Columbia and Ontario where fruit crops are common and plentiful). This might range from an orchard full of trees, shrubs or vines announcing the presence of the queer residents to one or two lone trees in the yard.

Apple = dominant woman

Grape = dominant man

Raspberry = submissive woman

Plum = submissive man

Peach = male-identified genderqueer

Cherry = female-identified genderqueer

Apricot = fatty/two tons of fun/BBW/BBM

Hazelnut (filbert) = tamakeri

Florals: The very few flower crops grown in Canada are all in Southern Ontario. Please refer to the Floriograph[19] for fetishes related to flower gardens.

Many of the plants used in the contemporary crop code seem to have been selected quite randomly (or perhaps they were the favorite plants of the queer farmers who originated their use in the code.) Others, however, have a history with at least some small aspect of the fetish they represent.[20,21,22]

Quinoa, for example, was held as sacred to the Incans; the Incan emperor would traditionally sow the first seeds of the season using golden farming implements.[23] The fetish connected with quinoa in the crop code is the fetish for gold.

Another example is amaranth, crop code for robot fetish, which has been referred to since the 1970s as the “crop of the future” for its diverse potential.[24]

Hyssop, on the other hand, appears in the bible: in Exodus 12:22 the Jews in Egypt are instructed to “Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin

and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe.” Hyssop is the crop code for bloodplay.

Hazelnut (filbert) is the only nut crop in Canada, and it’s primarily grown in Ontario. A hazelnut tree in the yard of an Ontarian farmer would act as more of a warning than a beacon to other queers; it signals its owner’s predilection for the Japanese fetish of tamakeri (ball-kicking)!

Herb crops, though small and therefore not necessarily obvious to see, can be extremely aromatic, attracting gay men and women by nose to the farm where they could see the other crops that the queer farmer was cultivating. Despite the relative levity with which the Crop Codes are employed on the contemporary queer farm, they can be nonetheless very competitive considering the relative scarcity of “fresh blood” available in the queer farm community demographic.

The crop code is an important aspect of queer history, but not just because it helped gay farmers find love, or because it allowed them sexual liberty in an otherwise oppressive time. The crop code is significant because it demonstrates our place in the evolution of this continent. It reveals the powerfully symbolic truth that queer desire literally changed the face of North America: what the countryside looks like, what we grow, and what we eat.

AFTERWORD:

Written as a perversion of the hanky code employed in the 1960s through the 1980s (and still used in some subcultures), this essay chronicles the evolution of an underground sexual language from its origin as a set of secret signals for a small group of marginalized people through its current incarnation as an easily recognized counter-culture badge of pride, having grown during that time from an easy-to-remember but limited handful of symbols to a comprehensive and ridiculous-

ly exhaustive catalogue attempting to chronicle of the breadth of queer desire.

The work uses real historical research and photos to imagine the stories of people who do not have recorded histories, to raise awareness of the contemporary people whose voices and histories are going unheard and unrecorded.

Because there are no queer rural communities, there are no queer rural histories. There are indeed isolated instances of queer lives documented by those who did not want their stories to go unrecorded, but those are few and far between, and they capture a very narrow view of queer rural history (primarily Southern US and post 1900.) We will need to start paying attention to real queer farmers now if we want to hold on to their histories. Luckily, there are some support networks for queer farmers, but these networks cover broad areas and offer little opportunity for real connection with peers. Because these farmers are basically all closeted, there is no way to collect real information about the lives and histories of these men and women.

This is not to say that this account is not real; just because I made it up does not mean that it did not happen, or that it WILL not happen. It is a fact that there were queer people in homestead-era North America, and it is probably also true that almost all of these people were closeted their whole lives. Whether because they were closeted or because their experiences did not fit within the establishment's view of that history, we have virtually no historical accounts of their existence. An imagined history serves to assert our right to freedom not only now, but then as well. Queer revisionism dares mainstream society to claim that we never existed, making conspicuous our absence from those records and making space for queer history.

A work such as this one can also create new histories in more direct ways; rumours become real when writ-

ten down; assertions become truths. I cite the Jelly Bracelet Sex Scare[25] of the early 2000s as proof: "jelly bracelets" (thin, rubbery plastic bracelets produced in a variety of colours, popularized in the 1980s by pop stars such as Madonna and Cyndi Lauper) were nothing more than cheap, innocent baubles worn by every schoolgirl (and many boys.) One day, someone started a rumour, or someone said "what if?" What if someone owed sex to a person who managed to snap one of these bracelets off another's wrist? Jelly bracelets were hardly the first "sex token" artifacts to circulate among North American youth; over the last half a century, rumours have circulated on the schoolyard about pop can tabs and beer bottle labels, when removed correctly, obligated the person to whom it is given to have sex with the giver. Of course it's ridiculous to imagine that anyone would perform any sort of sexual act against their will simply because a random person claims they must. Still, schools sent letters home to parents warning them about the jelly bracelet sex game and made announcements banning them from the school altogether. Once the alarm had been sounded, all that was needed was the legitimization of the media reporting on the story, both making it "real" and helping to distribute the idea broadly within and outside the community of origin - and suddenly it WAS real. People knew it, bought into it, and even (in some corners of the community) started playing the game. <http://www.snopes.com> refers to this phenomenon as - "wishful thinking codified into belief." At least now there is some truth to the rumour the next time it surfaces, though it will still be just as unlikely that anyone besides sexually active consenting adults would ever play the game.[26]

At least as much of it became real after its invention by the media and popular culture rumour mill as arose organically. So who are we to say what is real history and what is not? By writing it, in so many ways, it becomes real.

Other rural areas are re-inventing their histories, not so much to make space for those left out by the of-

ficial history books, but to make their past as vivid, as glorious and as interesting as that of their counterparts in large cities. No place's history is less valid than another, but just as with queer revisionism, when a place's people feel less validated within its cultural milieu than others, it imagines a history for itself that will help keep it on the map. The city of Moose Jaw in Saskatchewan is a perfect example. People around the world believe it to be true that Al Capone came to hide out in Moose Jaw, and lived in the underground tunnels there. You can find all sorts of "histories" coming out of Moose Jaw about what Al Capone did and how he lived while there. The City's own promotional material uses carefully crafted language to avoid outright claiming Capone ever visited Moose Jaw, but careful reading reveals the truth – that a small city in the middle of nowhere wanted to boost flagging tourist numbers and hired a promotions company to develop a 'history' of their town that would attract visitors from across the country and beyond.[27] Not only did Al Capone most likely not come to Moose Jaw, but the tunnels themselves have been exaggerated; only a handful have ever been "discovered" of the network of tunnels thought to have once existed throughout downtown Moose Jaw, and those that do exist have been renovated and expanded to accommodate the "historical" tours. They took a tall tale circulated amongst the citizenry and spun it into pure gold, boosting the local economy and reaffirming their claim for a place in the history books.[28]

The Crop Code's reading of rural queerness in the homestead era paints a picture of Western gay life, but does not address race or colonialism. It addresses one specific lifestyle of the era – that of the farmer – and accepts as self-evident that the word "farmer" is neither gendered nor racialized. While the "settlers" (i.e. colonizing culture) were indeed racially homogenous, this does not imply that the farm was solely the realm of the white European settler. By its nature, however, this modern interpretation of rural queer reality displaces Native people and further distances them from the sexual freedom and equality that was

sought by their queer contemporaries. By presenting a history of Western settlement that rejects and repaints the history projected by the establishment, I acknowledge the homonationalistic[29] nature of contemporary readings of that history, affirming our need as queer peoples to be accountable to the Native struggles for decolonization, and commit to forwarding an activist strategy rather than abstaining from it in the name of fighting the oppression of colonialism's victims.[30,31,32]

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Taft, Michael, "Folk drama on the Great Plains. The Mock wedding in Canada and the United States." *North Dakota History* 1989: 17 -23.

Barbara Nemitz, et al., *Pink: The Exposed Color in Contemporary Art and Culture*, (Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Verlag: 2006)

Resources:

Gay farmers have very unique needs and experiences. There are a handful of online queer farmer support services. Gay farmers are encouraged to visit these links to seek support and to find others with similar concerns.

<http://www.gayfarmer.co.uk/>

<http://groups.google.com/group/rainbow-chard-alliance>

Queer farmer blogs:

<http://queerfarmer.blogspot.com/>

<http://pastureraisedqueer.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2010-04-20T11%...>

<http://farmfag.wordpress.com/>

Queer rural books and stories:

<http://www.nationalpost.com/life/farmers+club+cultivates+understanding/3...>

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[13] (artist unknown), Hobo signs, (date unknown), Fran DeLorenzo collection, 1 August 2010. <http://www.worldpath.net/~minstrel/hobosign.htm>

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[16] The most complete hanky code compilation I've found:

Steven C. Sampson, *The Complete Hanky Code*, (Paris, copyright 2010 Steven C. Sampson and Butchmann's) web chart, 1 August, 2010. [http://www.amourshard.com/textes/hanky\\_code.htm](http://www.amourshard.com/textes/hanky_code.htm)

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There are only 5 kinds of sexual desire agreed-upon by the medical community to be considered “normal” or non-aberant – note that this list does NOT reference either homosexual or heterosexual desire:

Androphilia: Sexual interest in men

Analloerotic: Lacking in sexual interests towards others (but not lacking in sexual drive)

Ephophobia: Sexual preference for individuals in mid-to-late adolescence, typically ages 15–19.

Gynephilia: Sexual interest in women

Teliophilia: Sexual interest in adults (as opposed to pedophilia, etc.)

Anil Aggrawal, (2009). *Forensic and Medico-legal Aspects of Sexual Crimes and Unusual Sexual Practices*. (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2009) 369–82.

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***Interdisciplinary and performance artist Cindy Baker is passionate about gender culture, queer theory, fat activism and art theory. Baker considers context her primary medium, working with whatever materials are needed to allow her to concentrate on the theoretical, conceptual and ephemeral aspects of her work. She believes that her art exists in its experience, and not in its objects. Some of Baker’s biggest interests are skewing context and (re)examining societal standards, especially as they relate to language and dissemination of information, and she perceives a need for intervention and collaboration, both within the art world and in the community at large. With a background of working, volunteering, and sitting on the board for several artist-run centres in Western Canada, Cindy has a particular professional interest in the function of artist-run centres as a breeding ground of deviation. She is based out of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. <http://www.lovecindybaker.com>. Email: [cindeb@populust.ca](mailto:cindeb@populust.ca)***

# FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SEX WORKERS

*Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle MacDonald*

Some years ago we decided to embark on a study of sex work and sex workers in the Maritimes. Leslie had been working on sex work research in Thailand (where sex workers were challenging the way the work and the women are viewed through colonial lenses) and Gayle had been researching gender and legal issues in Canada. We realized that many of the things we had learned about resistance by marginalized peoples applied just as much to the Maritimes – traditionally viewed as a backwater of economically marginalized and traditionalist people – as to those in the global south or other marginalized groups. It was time to “bring our studies home”. The result of our collaboration was “Sex Workers in the Maritimes Talk Back” published by UBC press in 2006. The material below is drawn from that book.

The Maritimes project was about asking sex workers themselves what they felt the important issues were and what they wanted to say and have other people hear, rather than assuming that “we” knew what was important to know about sex work. We didn’t want to focus on why women, or men, enter the trade – which assumes that there is something problematic or wrong about the work – but to hear sex workers “talk

back” to those who assume they know what sex work is about. And talk back they did. We spoke with over 50 sex workers in the trade in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The men and women we spoke with were generous, interesting, insightful and funny. We learned important and interesting things not just about sex work, but about ourselves as a society, about the world we live in and about money, politics, law, gender, sexuality, the media, health care, parenting and a whole host of other issues. Most of the workers we spoke with were working on the street, so they over-represent street-based workers, who a small minority – estimated to be around 10-20% - of sex workers in Canada, but even here, or perhaps especially here, we found the “spirit of a fighter” that characterizes sex workers around the world. Sex workers in the Maritimes challenged not only the way sex work and sex workers were viewed but how “straight” society views itself. But here at least is a sampling of some of the important things we learned from and about sex workers, particularly those who live on the margins, which challenge the stigmatising lens through which they are traditionally viewed ...

## Five Things You need to Know about Sex Workers

### 1. Sex workers are financial wizards and clear-eyed economic analysts.

“You work your butt off for minimum wage.... you know what I mean? That’s crazy.” (Kendra, Saint John).

One of the great joys of talking with sex workers was the way in which they often laid out the craziness of how the world works with dazzling clarity and simplicity and often in ways that challenged prevailing notions of what is “normal” and “acceptable”. Concepts that we as academics often struggle to explain in theoretical terms, such as “exploitation of the working class” were laid bare by our interviewees. Sweating it out at a job you may hate for a pittance of a wage is crazy and it’s a craziness that is forced upon a lot of people. A number of the street-based sex workers we spoke with had experienced that minimum wage world of service work and part-time, dead-end jobs and found sex work – with its often better income and flexibility of hours that so many of us hope for but often can’t find in our work – a preferable option. (Others had worked at “middle-class” jobs and still found sex work a better option for a variety of reasons, including flexibility.)

In addition, because many of our interviewees were street-based workers and therefore overrepresented those who were economically marginalized, a number had also experienced the trials and tribulations of social assistance. For those on or potentially on social assistance, sex work was a better option than the “system” which was not only “never enough” but often also demeaning and controlling. But none of our respondents took the demeaning attitudes that social

assistance often brings with it, sitting down. When Social Assistance finally accepted one woman, she refused their offer of \$415 a month. “Who’s gonna live off that? My cat wouldn’t live off that.” (Alexis, Moncton). Their stories of refusal and fighting back the system are hilarious and heartening – the woman who argued for weeks with the government over covering the health costs for her son by laying out for them in painful detail the mad illogic of their demands; the woman who threatened to bring in news cameras if a slum landlord continued to insist on rents far out of whack with what assistance could cover, the woman who told a food bank to keep their “little bag”: “Dear you keep that for somebody else ‘cause they’re gonna need it. I don’t need one can of tomato soup from whatever you got, no thank you.... I’ll take my chances on fish and chips. Fuck that. Lord.”

If you want to know how the system works (or doesn’t) – ask a street-based sex worker.

### 2. Sex workers are brave.

“We put our lives on the line the moment we step out the door.” (Kelly, Halifax)

Sex workers know a lot about the underbelly of life and can teach us a lot about male behaviour, sexuality and violence. If money and flexibility were the upsides of sex work, for those on the street, violence and the threat of violence were definitely the downsides. As many pointed out however, there are plenty of good clients, men who paid up front, respected the terms of the transaction, clients who became friends. Workers talked about the sometimes weird and wonderful relationships with clients: the client who just wanted home-baked pies; the client who needed help arranging a funeral; the “older gentlemen” who “just wanted to cuddle”; clients who actually just wanted



someone there while they did drugs. There was often empathy and caring particularly for the regular clients that workers saw. But many sex workers admitted that because of the way the law has turned them into “non-citizens” and social attitudes have, in the words of John Lowman, turned them into “disposable people”, they live every day not only with the threat of violence but the knowledge that little or nothing will be done to protect or defend them. Many would have preferred to work in the much safer world of indoor sex work, but because the illicit nature of that work allows for unscrupulous bosses to demand large chunks of a workers’ income -- even if they fail to provide the workplace benefits that legal work would require -- a number of our interviewees continued to brave the much more dangerous streets with its greater flexibility and freedom. Many had a harrowing story (or several) of near escapes and violent run-ins with clients. Again, many did not think this was a result of the violent nature of clients rather that a small minority could get away with violence because of the commonly adopted social attitudes towards sex workers. But sex workers also refused to accept this violence as just a “job hazard” nor did they accept the continuing denial of justice to sex workers who were victims of violence. And they fought back. One worker took her attacker to court and lost, but noted he’d had to shell out for his defence to the tune of thousands. With devastating wit, she loudly observed as they were leaving court “that’s one \$10,000 blow job you didn’t get buddy. Next time just pay the forty bucks.” (Dana, Halifax) Sex workers always get their own back.

### **3. Sex workers aren’t afraid to “talk back”.**

Sex workers do not appreciate being talked down to or being silenced. They want their voices heard – but often find it very difficult to be heard, since people’s preconceived notions and their condescending attitudes often get in the way of their ability to truly listen to sex workers. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the media portrayal of sex worker and sex

workers. Sex workers pointed squarely at media representations of sex workers as deserving of violence, as “risk takers” and “addicts” who courted their own demise, as contributing to the violence they face. As one long-time worker aptly pointed out “the reason I feel that [clients have become more violent] is because the media portrays us as non-people...They’ve made [the sex-worker] a disposable person and the more that the media continues to do that, the more the tricks feel that they are allowed to be violent.” (Dana, Halifax)

Sex workers face stigma daily in other quarters, but rather than “internalizing self-hatred” as some analyses would have us believe, they talked back, refusing the negative imagery of “whores” “junkies” and “victims”. “I’m just saying that you should put yourself in my shoes. Do not talk to me about something you don’t know nothing about.” (Katrina, Halifax). They wondered in exasperation at the people who find the time and make the effort to harass workers on the street. “Why do you do that? I don’t understand that? [I’d think] I’ve got more better things to do than borrow Mom’s car and go down every weekend and...like hello. I don’t understand them.” (Kisha, Halifax). The workers we talked with made short shrift of those who would look down their noses at sex workers, turning the tables on those who think sex workers are “behaving badly.”

The absence of sex worker voices in the media is a huge loss, not only because they could counter the public stigma that makes their lives so difficult but because they could teach us so much about the way they world really works. One young former worker angrily stated “If I had a chance to tell the media so that they...so the world would hear what I had to say, something I’d tell them [is,] ‘Don’t speak. You want to know about a whore, you get to know a whore and you’ll see that’ she’s just like you.” (Alexis, Halifax)

Sex workers are talking, but are we listening?

#### **4. Sex workers don't take the law lying down.**

In the face of myriad attempts to control, discipline and punish sex workers, they continue to flaunt the law and “talk back” to the powers that be. “We are citizens too. You know, give us a little bit more respect and dignity, you know.” (Valerie, 135) Maritime sex workers delighted in teasing police officers and giving them a hard time, even as the workers admitted they felt some sympathy for police who were “just trying to do their job.” “I think it was the first, no second, time I got arrested. The cop says to me... ‘Listen, you’re so young, so pretty. Why don’t you get real job, like work in Tim Hortons or something?’ I turned to him and said, ‘Listen, you work in Tim Hortons... the way I look at it, we’re not hurting anybody... why don’t you guys go after the killers and shit like that and leave us girls alone?’” (Alison, Halifax)

The sex workers we spoke with pilloried police who overstepped their bounds; they ridiculed the laws that made them both victims and perpetrators and boxed them into impossible situations – like “boundaries” and “conditions” of bail that put services and outreach organizations out of bounds for them. Faced with threats of sometimes extreme violence, and yet unprotected by the law, workers laid bare the reality of who the “brave men and women” of the streets really are: “You never see a cop out there without a gun and a billy [club] and driving in cars. Can you imagine them being on the street? I mean, where we are with nothing, I don’t think they would have the nerve like that. So it does take a certain amount of courage.” (Valerie, Halifax).

#### **5. Sex workers make great policy-makers.**

Canadian policy-makers have consistently failed to make policy that works in governing sex work. The current system makes sex work next to impossible to carry out legally even though the actual selling of sex is not itself illegal – just all the activities surrounding it. Sex workers, academics, activists and parliament’s

own inquiries have proven over and over that the current law makes sex work dangerous and difficult. Sex workers have to hide from the law, even as their lives and livelihood are threatened. Safe working conditions are difficult to create when “owning, keeping” or “being found in” a bawdy house are outlawed. The biggest flaw in Canadian policy-making so far is that sex-workers are rarely at the table, and if they are at the table they are allowed there only as “witnesses” not active participants in formulating the law. But the workers we talked to had lots to say about how the law could and should work and how it’s not working now for anyone: workers, residents, police, and government. They all wanted a “warm, safe place to work” but they also recognized that policy-making would mean taking into account a variety of interests. As residents themselves they discussed ways to make the street trade less of a “nuisance,” as parents they were concerned over keeping the business out of sight of the kids, as workers they laid out the parameters of better working conditions, as activists they argued for ways to better support sex worker organizations – all of these suggestions hinged on moving sex work out of the criminal zone to which it has been confined. But Canadian politicians have been notoriously reluctant to take this important step. [Indeed just this summer the government by-passed Parliament and quietly put through a change to the Criminal Code upping the punishment for owning a sex-work establishment (where sex workers feel the safest) by making it a “serious” crime.] Sex workers in BC however have forged ahead in designing a co-op brothel that works to empower sex workers and in both BC and Ontario they are challenging the retrograde prostitution laws in the courts. Time for all of us to join in and follow the leaders.

Sex workers have proven themselves brave, forward thinking, economically realistic and politically savvy – now if only the rest of us could do that too.

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Gayle MacDonald is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Dean of Research at St. Thomas University, Fredericton. She is the editor of *Social Context and Social Location in the Sociology of Law* and co-editor of *Feminism, Law, Inclusion: Intersectionality in Action*; and of *Victim No More: Women's Resistance to Law, Culture and Power*.

Both Gayle and Leslie are proud members of FIRST – an organization dedicated to lobbying for decriminalization of sex work in Canada.

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# LANDLOCKED AND LONESOME: LIDS, QUEER FEMINISM AND ARTIST RUN-CULTURE IN BOOMIN' CALGARY

*Anthea Black*

The title of the Ladies' Invitational Deadbeat Society's (LIDS) performance, *JDH: Keepin' On, Keepin' On*, has a particular geographical and political significance. After living and working in Alberta for my entire life, I had observed that artists and artist-run activities had survived in spite of our surroundings. For queer artists, this was painfully more acute. And yet, we survived where others—many of whom are artists of colour and aboriginal artists—were marginalized to the point of obscurity, or felt forced to leave in search of more hospitable communities. For every artist who left, those of us who remained felt more and more lonesome, and yet resolved to stay and fight the good fight. It was a point of pride and strength to remain, and we identified passionately with a narrative of survival and persistence.

After all, Alberta has decades of uninterrupted conservative landslide majorities at the provincial and federal government levels, with a corresponding relationship with the arts and queerness that has encompassed (and still swings between) flagrant neglect and all-out confrontation. Ours is the government that refused to accept the Supreme Court of Canada's ruling that sexual orientation be included in Human Rights legislation for over ten years, the government that has ig-

nored arts funding advocacy for a couple of decades and the one that has recently de-listed health coverage for transgender surgeries. These are painful daily realities for some, and issues that local activists have spent their entire lives fighting. And perhaps most pertinent for those who live outside of the bizarre microclimate of Alberta, including our ex-pats, to never forget: this is the place that groomed Canada's current Prime Minister and many in his cabinet. Gradually, the Podunk place we call home—that remains a place to escape from or a backwoods blind spot for many outside of the province—has become very dangerous far beyond its borders.

Even the entrepreneurial spirit of “the West,” with all of its loaded connotations, means that artists and activists are constantly hatching new ideas and initiatives to combat these forces. We respond with direct-action protests, posters, performances, exhibitions and themed programming initiatives, art criticism, workshops, coalitions, letter writing and traditional lobbying of our local and provincial governments (when they're not refusing to meet with us). And yet, the largely separate activist, queer and arts communities in Calgary can be deeply conservative working environments, full of

fear and self-censorship, where overlaps are not always welcome.

The pressure on our communities intensified from 2005 to 2008 when oil boom-time hit corporate and working class Calgary once again, and massive, neighbourhood-ripping developments displaced artists, arts spaces and the economically vulnerable alike. City council was dismissive of the idea of live-work spaces for artists and the creation of more general low income housing as being an obvious solution to ease these strains. Then a high-profile “Art Matters” panel discussion, led by Governor General Michaëlle Jean and Jean-Daniel Lafond with Calgary’s so-called arts leaders, focused more on cultural boosterism than real solutions to artist poverty, rapid gentrification and loss of affordable arts spaces, not to mention corporatization and professionalization of arts groups who were struggling just to keep up.

A group of faculty, staff and students at the Alberta College of Art and Design launched an anti-racist/anti-homophobia alliance in 2000 that had made gains with a review of the college’s ancient discrimination and harassment policies, a lecture series by artists of colour and anti-racist workshops for faculty and new students. At that time, there were less than 10 self-identified aboriginal students out of almost 1,000 and no aboriginal faculty. Despite the desperate need for change, the initiatives were cancelled without explanation. Axing this project left a dearth of support for culturally diverse and queer students that would not be filled until the college launched the Diversity Advisory Committee in 2006, and a queer student’s union group and the independent Feminist Book Club were started from scratch in late 2008.

Yet to put these developments in context, during this same period, neo-Nazis marched unhindered in downtown Calgary along a similar route that Pride Parade organizers require a permit to use. Members of the Fairy Tales International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (as it was called until 2010) programming commit-

tee made the case for an evening of films focused on trans-experiences, but the idea was dismissed by the Board President as being potentially controversial and alienating for the festival’s largely affluent white male audience. One queer culture-starved LIDS member identified with General Idea and AA Bronson’s practices as lifelines of strength in queer artmaking, until she later heard Bronson speak at the Banff Centre for the Arts where he said he wasn’t interested in art made by women; no one at this lecture questioned him. When The New Gallery programmed lesbian artist Toni Latour’s “Queers on the Move” performance for the Calgary Stampede Parade, the application was approved by officials and then quickly revoked again, days before the performance was to take place; other arts organizations hadn’t even programmed a culturally diverse or queer artist in years, with boards who were unwilling to consider proactive change. Edie Fake’s public window installation for TRUCK: Contemporary Art in Calgary, filled with bright, gender-ambiguous cartoon figures, was the subject of controversy and censorship at the hands of another arts organization and its management: the Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts. That issue exploded as front-page news at The Calgary Herald, drew comments about the appropriateness of public art from City Hall and once the dust had cleared, was the subject of a detailed piece by Diana Sherlock for FUSE Magazine.

The historical background to these events includes the controversy and censorship of Much Sense: Erotics and Life exhibition at the Banff Centre’s Walter Phillips Gallery in 1992. A period of intense public and political dialogue, violent threats to gallery staff, and government bills to cut arts funding to any organization that programmed queer art followed this exhibition. These events are documented in the book, *Arousing Sensation: A Case Study of Controversy Surrounding Art and the Erotic*. Unfortunately for a younger generation of feminist and queer artists, of which LIDS is part, this battle left many cultural workers in our community so exhausted and demoralized, it’s hard to gain information and hear first-person accounts of the time.



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Looking back to the more recent past, I offer the following collection of anecdotes as a fairly personal record of my (and LIDS members') direct involvement in various events and organizations. It's certainly not exhaustive, nor is there room to document each in great detail, but they provide a window to some of the experiences that have marked Calgary's artist-run community.

The Ladies' Invitational Deadbeat Society was a humourous name for a group of women who were working hard to build community at home and mediate our loneliness and isolation from larger artistic centres. There was no choice but to make friends among our artist-run colleagues, to get through the tough times together, and to use collaboration as a tool for creative survival but also for social and political dialogue.

At the time, the performance of *JDH: Keepin' On, Keepin' On* wasn't envisioned to be overtly political, but it was certainly informed by the climate we were living in. The artist-run ethos was deep within all of us, as was our willingness to stay in Alberta and fight, and yet, these very same activities had burnt us out to the point of abandoning our arts admin positions to refocus on our artistic practices. As a tribute to our artist/arts admin peers and as a nod to TRUCK's 25 years of history, we wanted to pay homage to those who worked behind the scenes. To embody this, we emulated TRUCK Programming Coordinator and denim-clad Prairie boy, Jason de Haan.

By collectively dragging in the uniform of our white male colleague and performing work tasks around TRUCK, we weren't taking aim at inequalities, we were literally "trying on" what we perceived as a kind of untroubled, apolitical nonchalance. To highlight the often unacknowledged blood, sweat and tears (not to mention long hours) of artist-run staff and what we ourselves had invested, one staff member multiplied and became three. We became the tough Prairie butches to match our usually (mostly) femme-identified selves. Rather than moving away and leaving our arts col-

leagues and fellow queers behind to carry on in an even smaller pool of cultural labour and dates, we proliferated and repopulated.

And now I say, so long, Alberta. You instilled in me the strength to keep on keepin' on; now I must be movin' on.

*Anthea Black is a Canadian artist and cultural worker. Her projects in printmaking, collaborative performance, writing and curating take various forms, but most often feel at home as part of artist-run culture. In 2007, she launched looking for love in all the wrong places, an artist-curatorial project that commissions, produces and distros posters and editions by queer artists for public spaces in Alberta and beyond. The project has since included collaborations with Daryl Vocat (Toronto), Karen Campos (Edmonton), Megan Morman and Cindy Baker (Saskatoon), Carol Maxwell (Texas) and Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan (Winnipeg). Anthea has recently exhibited as part of Gestures of Resistance at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, GENDER ALARM! Nouveaux féminismes en art actuel at La Centrale in Montreal and SURRENDER NO SURRENDER at the Society of Northern Alberta Print-Artists in Edmonton.*

*The Ladies' Invitational Deadbeat Society (LIDS) was founded in 2006 as a closely-knit affiliation of then-unemployed cultural workers, not working, but still bustin' ass within Alberta artist-run culture. LIDS realized a number of performative n' craft projects including: RCMP Radical Cooch Maximum Pussy, the Easy-Town Super Hoz, the LIDS BDSM and Leather Crafts Chapter and JDH: Keepin' On, Keepin' On as part of a series of three works for TRUCK Contemporary Art in Calgary's 25th Anniversary Celebrations. LIDS core members have held positions as board and staff of several Alberta artist-run organizations, exhibited their own work, published and lectured throughout Canada and the world, but future endeavors include bummin', and nothing too serious. LIDS is: Anthea Black, Nicole Burisch and Wednesday Lupypciw. "Landlocked and Lonesome" is Anthea Black's farewell letter of all the things she never said to the strange place that the LIDS ladies call home.*



# THE ILLUSTRATED GENTLEMAN

*Elisha Lim*

Elisha's previous NMP comic strip 100 Butches has been bought by Alyson Books New York, who publish seminal work like Heather Has Two Mommies and a lot of gay smut. 100 Butches Volume 1 will come out in April 2010, and she's thrilled to bits to be touring with Michelle Tea on her annual American reading tour Sister Spit.

Her new strip, The Illustrated Gentleman, is an illustrated series of dandies, butches, fags and any queers obsessed with men's clothes. It is a work in progress and she would love to hear new suggestions for the subtitles or layout.

*Elisha came out late. When she was 26 she broke up with her fiance and moved to Berlin, which started a sharp learning curve of lesbian squat houses, queer trailer parks, transgender pride parades and an Ethical Slut reading group. She came to terms with her butch identity and draws a comic tribute to a lifetime of butchness from Singapore to Toronto. it has been featured in magazines in Australia, England, Austria and the U.S. and will be published as a graphic novel in April 2010. You can check out more of her beautiful comics here: [www.newhearteveryday.blogspot.com](http://www.newhearteveryday.blogspot.com)*



# The Illustrated Gentleman



In the changeroom

"I had a thing for equestrian costumes last year," said Cynthia. "I was playing a lot of bike polo, and then it occurred to me. I can dress up everyday. That's when I got into the idea of suits."

Cynthia and I went to Tom's Place, a prestigious suit shop in Toronto. As soon as we walked in they told us to find the women's clothes on the left. They tried to dissuade us from climbing the stairs to the men's section.

Upstairs we were largely ignored. I loudly asked a clerk if there were any jackets that might fit me, because I didn't want to subject Cynthia to the embarrassment. He looked at us. "Fit who?" he asked, until we repeated ourselves. "You want a women's jacket," he said. "No," we said, "we want a men's jacket."

"Well," he said, "if I had to give you a jacket what would I do with the pants? Men's pants would be too small for your hips."

"Yes," I agreed. "Could you find me a pair that would fit me?"

"What?" he cried. "And destroy a suit? If I separate a fitted jacket and pant set that would destroy a suit! I'm not going to destroy a suit."

Afterwards Cynthia didn't know what else to do but laugh. "He was beside himself," she said. "He must have said 'destroy' three times".



## The Equestrian Dandy

Beau Brummel was the original dandy and Britain's first fashion celebrity. His followers imitated his every style choice, and this is how he dictated the modern suit.

He was obsessed with straight lines and equestrian costumes. He made a trend out of riding outfits, and straightened them as much as possible. He fit stirrups onto his pantaloons in order to stretch out the line of his leg, and covered up his ankles with Hessian riding boots. He also attempted to straighten and elongate equestrian breeches with the crucial invention of suspenders.

"If I could wear equestrian costumes every day, said Cynthia approvingly, "I would."

"What? I cried, "and destroy a costume? I can't let you destroy a costume!"

She sniffled.

# “WE SHOW UP”: LESBIANS IN RURAL BRITISH COLUMBIA, 1950s-1970s

Rachel Torrie

*Author’s Note: This work is adapted from my M.A. thesis - “Making Space for Rural Lesbians: Homosexuality and Rurality in British Columbia, 1950-1970s,” (Simon Fraser University, 2007). The thesis includes a more in-depth look at the literature on rurality and queerness and a more fulsome discussion of the lives of the individual narrators. It is available to download.[1]*

I said to my mother one time, “You know, you told me that Miss Harding got ill and Miss Dawson, who was a friend of hers, came home with her and looked after her and because they’re such good friends. Miss Harding lived an awful long time. We used to see them walking around in the evening, arm-in-arm as ladies did. I’d see them down on the beach. Did you ever think, Mom, maybe they were lesbians?” She said, ““Oh yes dear, I was quite sure they were . . . Because, you remember, after Miss Harding died”—and heck, as far as I know it took her about thirty years—“she took up with so-and-so who was the head teller in the bank and then when she died, Miss Dawson moved on with so-and-so, and then there was Sarah, Margaret, and...” And mom went through this list of ladies in town of whom I had never thought except as members of the church ladies

auxiliary. She said, “There’s a whole bunch of them over there in Shediac.” .... I think they must have known each other and had a social network and group.[2]

The mythology of North American non-urban spaces has constructed the rural as a horror; dangerous to anyone considered different, and a hostile space from which queers must escape.[3] But the above description of Shediac, New Brunswick in the 1940s hints at another possibility: the existence of queer communities outside of the city. In fact, as demonstrated by the findings of the oral history project I undertook on lesbians living in rural British Columbia during the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, lesbians have successfully carved out space for their existence in this country’s small towns, coastal islands, and other rural communities.[4]

The urban focus of the majority of queer activism, history and other cultural products heightens the significance of documenting rural queerness. This focus has been interpreted by many as evidence of the inherently urban nature of queer positioning. As Lesley Marple explains, the rural is seen as “the site of torture from which queers flee, and...[as the] home to the less fortunate or disadvantaged queer.”[5] When this urban/

rural binary is applied to the historical context of the decades following World War II, the rich histories of the gay communities developed in cities across North America can be misconstrued as evidence that the only narrative of that era is that of a great, one-way gay migration from the rural to the urban, from repression and isolation to community and gay liberation. Complicating this narrative are the histories of gay men and women whose lives did not follow the rural-to-urban trajectory, and who eked out queer existence in a plethora of non-urban spaces. A small and growing body of work documenting these lives is emerging from the United States, focussing on gay men who lived either in the Southern or Midwestern states with rural lesbian histories making up a smaller part of the field.[6] But the geography of Canadian queer histories is also expanding, with smaller cities like Kingston, Ontario, and St. John's, Newfoundland being added to the histories of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver.[7]

Instead of documenting a grand exodus from the countryside to the city, historians of rural homosexuality have argued that many queer people actually occupy all types of space, often moving back and forth between rural and urban locations, as well as circulating between rural communities.[8] Although women have often faced mobility restrictions, due to lower income and restricted personal freedom, for example, the migration patterns of the women I interviewed support using the concept of circulation to understand better how queer people have moved through space.

The narrators - Mearnie (b.1927), Jane Rule (b.1931), Robbie (b. 1937), Anne (b.1938), Robin (b. 1939), Janet (b.1941), Brook (b.1952), Nym (b. 1952), and Yvette (1953) - were a highly mobile group of women who, although racially homogenous from white backgrounds, had divergent class statuses, residential histories and perspectives on sexual identity.[9] They lived in multiple places, including big cities, small towns and coastal islands, as well as in more ambiguous spaces, such as suburbs, though all of them lived rurally for a period

of time. These women's lives do not follow the pattern of fleeing the desolate hinterlands to find sexual freedom in the city. They relocated for many reasons, only some of which were directly related to their sexuality, and they were not deterred by any perceptions of rural spaces as hostile and isolating when choosing where to build their lives.

Because so little has been written about gay men or lesbians who lived in rural BC in the postwar era, assertions like that of Tom Warner—that homosexuals living in rural areas and small towns in BC, like those across the country, “felt isolated and vulnerable, with no real sense of belonging to a community”—have stood unchallenged as representative depictions.[10] Although these assertions may reflect some queer people's experiences, they are directly contradicted by those of the nine women interviewed for this oral history project, all of which had rich and diverse connections to their rural communities – including connections to other lesbians.

The lesbian networks that these women either established or those to which they were connected in their rural communities demonstrate the range of possibilities for non-urban lesbian existence. participated in three types of rural lesbian communities: women who had a general awareness of and casual connection to other lesbians in their region; women whose private friendship networks were consciously, if not publicly, constructed as lesbian spaces; and the public and political lesbian communities constructed in the spirit of lesbian feminism.[11]

### **“Country Sisters”: Unstructured Lesbian Networks**

Robin, Brook, and Jane were all part of networks of lesbians who were aware of one another, but whose primary social networks were not defined by sexual identity. These three women found it limiting to base their socializing solely around a shared sexual identity. However, they also recognized times when such rela-

tionships were of great value to them. The balance of these two perspectives helps to explain their more tangential relationship to local lesbians: they neither unilaterally prioritized nor entirely rebuffed lesbian connections, resulting in informal ties to other gay women.

Robin recalled knowing and socializing with other lesbians living on Salt Spring Island when she moved there in 1972. She found out about lesbians on the Island through her Vancouver connections, but also found out about events in the city through her Island contacts. She found herself plugged into a network of lesbians throughout the Gulf Island and Lower Mainland who were aware of one another. Her first partner on Salt Spring was a woman who, initially, simply showed up at her door:

She knew I was living in that house. She had a cottage [down the way from me]. And she came and knocked on my door one night and said, "Hi, I'm Carol and you're Robin and I knew that you were living here."

Robin also befriended heterosexual couples on the island, but she "was always left out of their real social lives," making her lesbian friendships all the more important as they allowed her to "make relationships with other people without feeling like you're going to be dropped when the serious - the real part of living comes along."

Brook understood lesbian community on a larger, global scale: "If you're a dyke, you've got a friend no matter where you go. You might not always like each other and you might be like, 'Oh, we're really different.' But you've got this bottom line, you're in the same camp." However, this connection did not drive her to seek out an exclusively lesbian community when she first moved to Salt Spring Island in 1978: "[There] were some dykes who were very exclusive, only wanted to be with other women, hang out with other women, [my partner] and I weren't like that." Still, after the move Brook felt that "we didn't have

enough of the country sisters...who really enriched each other." Despite this paucity of "country sisters," Brook and her partner did make lesbian connections on the island, including befriending a young dyke who was just coming out: "She hung out with us...She already knew some other dykes, just sort of peripherally and a little bit, but we were her main—we welcomed her all the time." These peripheral connections further demonstrate the existence of the casual network of lesbians on Salt Spring in the 1970s in which Brook was active: she can remember a time when she "knew the name of every lesbian who lived on Salt Spring Island. I might not have known them, but I knew the name of every one of them." [12]

Informal connections to other lesbians, similar to those of Robin and Brook, existed throughout BC in the 1970s. As Yvette encountered in her travels throughout the province with the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW)'s Lesbian Caucus, lesbians were quite often known to one another, even when hidden from the public. Yvette recalled how, even though it was "too threatening" for lesbians to attend the workshops, "we always knew there were lesbians in these towns. Always knew." To connect with these women, Yvette's policy of always disclosing her sexuality was invaluable: "People could find me...I would just put myself in public places and people would find me." Although some of these lesbians' only other gay contacts were their partners, others were tied into lesbian networks and introduced the Caucus to other gay women in the region.

Jane Rule was disinterested in locating a lesbian community or even making specifically lesbian connections. She explained,

I have always felt a bit claustrophobic in any group that is homogenous...I think common cause is about the worst way to get together with people...I've never really been interested in groups of women who are exclusive...I'm not uninterested in my sexuality, but it's

certainly only part of who I am. And, I don't assume that I will have much in common with another lesbian.

Despite not seeking out gay contacts in her life, Jane found her group of friends comprised of more gay and lesbian friends than ever before after moving from Vancouver to Galiano Island in 1976: "I didn't live in a gay-defined culture – ever. More here than anywhere. And it certainly is not just gay here, but I have many more friends who are gay here than I did in the city." This is due, at least in part, to her status as a lesbian public figure, which led many gay women to seek her out. Jane was adamant that her gay friends were not part of an exclusive homosexual community, but instead were part of her larger community of friendships based on shared interests. She emphasized that her friendships with other lesbians existed "because we're interested in the same kind of literature, and politics, and painting—and children and old people." Though not the result of seeking an exclusive lesbian community, Jane was part of a lesbian network.

### **"Everybody There Was of Like Thinking": Private Lesbian Communities**

Other lesbians, like Mearnie and Robbie, built and participated in specifically lesbian private friendship networks. In 1950 when Mearnie first moved to Indian Arm, a community north of Vancouver that was only accessible by boat, there were very few other people living there at all, let alone other lesbians. However, during her more than forty years in the community her gay friends slowly relocated there. This migration led to the establishment of a gay community, albeit a private one: "You were accepted by your own and the others, if that was your neighbour. But, it was always, still, never discussed." By the time that she moved to Salt Spring in 1996 she had built up an extensive network of gay and lesbian contacts in Indian Arm:

It was just that you knew who around were living together...I had a regatta every year at my place...We had dancing at the end of the day. Their friends would

bring their friends that were gay or lesbian, you know? Because we knew they would be able to relax.

The practice of not acknowledging or discussing homosexuality made this community less visible, but no less important. Like the middle-class lesbian communities that have been documented in urban centres, Mearnie's Indian Arm community was facilitated by a financial status that allowed for private house parties. Despite the status-based nature of the Indian Arm network, it is still a significant example of a rural lesbian community.

Part of this same group of women, Robbie socialized with other lesbians in Indian Arm while she lived there between 1970 and 1978. She attended the house parties that were held on a regular basis. She remembered, "The women that would come there were usually—even if they weren't speaking out loud about it—they were usually lesbian women. Professional lesbian women: teachers, nurses, things like that. And we used to have a good time." The women in Indian Arm, according to Robbie,

Were just groups of women who got together and had a good time. If they came together, they came together. If they left together, they left together. If they lived together, they lived together. It was not a topic of discussion. People didn't openly discuss their lesbianism as happens nowadays...Even if you knew everybody there was of like thinking, you didn't talk much about it.

The reasons for this discretion may have been a consequence of both class and generation. Many of these women had grown up during a time when they did not have language to describe their sexuality. Also, their professional status meant that they might have felt they had a lot to lose—security, money, status—if their sexual identities were made public.

Although their lesbianism was never discussed, Mearnie, Robbie, and their friends in Indian Arm surely constituted a gay and lesbian community. The women

in Indian Arm did not come together to strategize how to fight heterosexism. In fact, their attachment to privacy reflects a desire not to challenge the status quo in overt ways, but rather to privately create space to live their lives. The private nature of the network made it easier for women to control who knew about their sexual identity, but it also would have made it more difficult for women not already socially connected to the group to connect with them. For the women who were involved, however, the community provided them with a safe and supportive environment in which to be social with their partners.

### **Creating Groups That Would Bring Lesbians Together: Public Lesbian Communities**

Deeply involved with the lesbian feminism of the 1970s, Nym participated in building lesbian community on much more public terms. Her political activism and much of her time were devoted to the lesbian-feminist community in Vancouver and to travelling throughout the province, working to build ties between various communities. In the late 1970s, Nym, her partner and a friend bought ten acres of land just outside of Mission, BC in the Fraser Valley and turned it into a lesbian feminist gathering space known as Amazon Acres.[13] The land “became well-known in the lesbian community in Vancouver and we would have work parties where dozens and dozens of women would come up from Vancouver and help us with the garden and put up fences.”

During later years Nym lived at Amazon Acres alone, her Vancouver contacts dwindled, and she began to connect with the local gay women. Unlike her lesbian community in Vancouver, she encountered a much more scattered group of gay women in the Fraser Valley and had to work to build a local lesbian community:

I needed friends in my own geographic community, so I did actively seek out—well, it wasn’t so much “seek out” because it wasn’t like it existed and I had to go and

find it. What I did...was to try to create community, create groups that would bring lesbians together. Create events that would bring lesbians together...If there was a community there, I didn’t know how to connect with it. I knew a lot of women. I mean, I must have known twenty, thirty women—lesbians—who lived around that area. But there wasn’t a bar. There wasn’t an organization. There wasn’t anything.

The events that Nym helped to organize included putting together a local softball team to play in a lesbian softball tournament in Vancouver and inviting a women’s theatre group from Vancouver to give performances.

Regardless of the nature of the lesbian community to which they were connected, none of the narrators expressed any difficulty finding lesbians to befriend or women to date in their rural communities. When asked about this issue, Anne observed, “There’s a lot more of us in the country than people realize.” Yvette echoed Anne’s sentiments: “If I come from St. Lazare, somebody comes from Terrace. 369 people, French Catholic—we show up. We’re kind of home grown.” Similarly, Brook explained, “By and large, lesbians find each other because they want to. It’s that simple... I haven’t met the greatest love of my life because I walked into a gay bar or because I went to the Gay Games.” The implication of these assertions is that public lesbian communities may have been useful and important to many people, but they were not necessary: rural lesbians found a way a way to connect if they wanted.

### **“Too Close to Be Separate”: Relating to Rural Populations**

Rural spaces have also been mythologized as rife with homophobic violence without queer communities to buffer – if not insulate – lesbians and gay men from homophobic violence.[14] Without discrediting the experiences of homophobia and violence that many gay men and women have experienced outside of cit-

ies, the women interviewed for this project reported feeling safe in rural areas and having experienced the majority of homophobic violence and threats when in cities.

Safety in their rural communities was not a major concern for any of the women interviewed. According to Robin, “It’s never been an issue here [on Salt Spring Island]. Nobody has ever said a word to me about being gay.” Nym remembered being scared of losing her job when she was living on Amazon Acres, but she “always felt very safe on the land, at the farm.” During her travels throughout the province with the BCFW Yvette sometimes received threats or had difficulty finding lodging. Brook described the overt homophobia she experienced on Salt Spring Island as “really, really minimal.” Indeed, their most threatening experiences were linked to the city: fear of police raids at gay bars, seeing friends jailed or institutionalized for being gay, and being beaten up after being thrown out of a bar for kissing another woman. Certainly, urban safety would have been the experience of many gay women in BC, and those women who suffered the most homophobia in their lives might be less inclined to share their histories.[15] However, the cities held their share of threats, and some women found safety in the rural parts of the province.

Many of these women’s urban experiences of homophobia involved various forms of governmental powers such as the police and psychiatric hospitals, but the homophobia they experienced rurally typically came in the form of individual attempts at social control by other community members. This interpersonal, individual nature of rural homophobia helps to explain why they had very few instances of homophobia to report: overwhelmingly these women described their relationships to the rural communities in which they lived as positive and integrated. In fact, many of them attributed their acceptance in their communities to the interdependence and forced interaction of a rural community. These connections to the general populations of their rural communities provided

many narrators with rich and rewarding relationships. While the narrators may have had divergent feelings about the need for specifically lesbian communities, almost all of them expressed finding value and actively participating in their local communities.

Jane’s pragmatic assessment of the community on Galiano Island reveals that although initially she had little interest in making new contacts, she quickly became enmeshed in the community:

We all have to live in the same space. We all agree that we have to put out forest fires. ...If there’s a power failure, everybody in the neighbourhood is trying to help everybody else. It doesn’t really matter who you’re sleeping with...When you’re in a circumstance like that...you have to help each other because there’s no place else to turn. I think that’s a very good thing... I don’t idealize the community, but I like the requirements of it.

This forced interaction of a diverse range of people is one of the things Jane came to appreciate most about Galiano Island.

A similar sense of interdependence also shaped Brook’s interaction with the Salt Spring Island population. She observed, “I’m hugely accepted in this community because that’s the way this community is. Everybody knows that some day down the road, somebody’s going to maybe be saving your life, or need your help, or be on a committee. You’re too close to be separate.” Additionally, because Brook owned a second-hand bookstore for many years, she had “a huge amount of contact with people on the Island, and often on a very intimate level. There were people who would come in there that just absolutely detested me, but they loved the store so they had to come in for the store. The barriers break down after a while.”

In Indian Arm during the 1970s Robbie was also highly accepted by and integrated into her local community.

She and her partner socialized easily with heterosexual couples:

When there were get-togethers, we were included. It didn't feel odd or weird or whatever...In a community like that, people are not so judgemental. There were a few of us—period. There were just a few people there. We united to have company and for our mutual needs and social appreciation.

This level of acceptance may have been related to the people who made up Indian Arm's population at the time. Referencing interracial couples, American war-resisters, and other "outsiders," Robbie explained that "It didn't matter if you were different, because everybody was different anyway, in some way or other...People in glass houses don't throw stones. So...we didn't get any side-glances or anything." Yvette affirmed this loose alliance, explaining that rural lesbians' worlds "couldn't be that tight because you couldn't survive. They had to be a little bigger, so there was some interesting mixes of people: artistic communities, love communities, off the land, people opting out, war resisters coming in from the States."

This is not to deny the ostracism and discomfort that some lesbians faced while living rurally, however, homophobia did not preclude the integration of lesbians into a rural community. As Yvette characterized the population of the small, rural community she lived in part-time in Ontario: "They may shoot homosexuals, but we're actually their queers." Homophobic beliefs may have not been eradicated from local thinking, but the interdependent nature of rural spaces facilitated the integration of lesbians into the community, and pushed people to accept lesbians on, at the very least, an individual level.

### Reimagining the Gay Landscape

Many of the women interviewed did not base their social networks explicitly on a shared sexual identity. Instead, they formed social connections with a

variety people in their rural communities. However, living rurally did not prevent these women from also finding or forming local lesbian communities. Rural areas were not inherently desolate, lonely places for all lesbians, but instead could be filled with a diversity of fulfilling and supportive relationships. These women's histories push us to continue to diversify the spaces in which we consider queerness. Comparing the gay community to a nation that must lay claim to its own mythology in order to become real, Robin Metcalfe writes, "Until we have imagined ourselves into our landscape, we do not really live there." [16] These women's lives show that "lesbians are everywhere" is not an empty slogan, but instead the starting point of a rich and complex history. By telling rural lesbian histories, we are reimagining the gay landscape to make real the lives of those who have lived "out there."

### References

[1] In addition to recognizing the contributions of all those acknowledged in my thesis, I would like to reiterate my gratitude to Dr. Elise Chenier who supervised the project and to the nine women whom I interviewed, without whom this project would have been impossible. I would also like to thank Robin Folvik and Beth O'Reilly for their assistance wrangling my thesis into the bite-sized portion that appears here.

[2] Robin, interview by author, digital recording, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 4 June 2006.

[3] On the opposite side of the binary, to a lesser extent, rural spaces have also been constructed as romanticized idylls—empty spaces void of people where queer individuals can reconnect with nature and find their "true" selves. This mythology informed the discourse on lesbian separatism back to the land movements in the 1970s and 80s.

[4] Over a period of twelve months (June 2006 through May 2007) I conducted oral history interviews with nine different women. While pseudonyms were offered to all of the women to alleviate any privacy or safety concerns, none of them chose to utilize the option and all consented to having their real first names used.

[5] Lesley Marple, "Rural Queers? The Loss of the Rural in Queer," *Canadian Woman Studies* 24, no. 2&3 (Winter/Spring 2005): 72.

[6] See: John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, ed. *Out in the South* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); John Howard, ed. *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997); James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997); Daneel Buring, "Gay Activism Behind the Magnolia Curtain: The Memphis Gay Coalition, 1979-1991," *Journal of Homosexuality* 32, no. 1 (1996): 113-135; Michael Moon, "Whose History? The Case of Oklahoma" *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 24-34.

[7] Marney McDiarmid, "From Mouth to Mouth: An Oral History of Lesbians and Gays in Kingston from World War II to 1980," (master's thesis, Queen's University, 1999) and Sharon Dale Stone and the Women's Survey Group, "Lesbian Life in a Small Centre: The Case of St John's," *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), 94-105. Though more sociological than historical, Michael Riordan's *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996) is the most comprehensive consideration of queer rural Canadian life. The urban body of literature includes: Elise Chenier, "Tough Ladies and Trouble Makers: Toronto's Public Lesbian Community, 1955-1965," (master's thesis, Queen's University, 1995); Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-75," *Re-Thinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, ed. Victoria Strong-Boag and Anita C. Fellman (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1997), 402-23; and *Forbidden Love: The Unshamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, VHS, directed by Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1992).

[8] This concept was used highly effectively by historian John Howard in his work on queer men in Mississippi from 1945 to 1985, *Men Like That*. Circulation was also deployed by Peter Boag in his book, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*, to document the ease with which gay men in the Pacific Northwest at the turn of the twentieth century moved among rural sites, and between rural and urban spaces (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003).

[9] Jane Rule was a well-known author of several novels, most famously *Desert of the Heart*, which is today considered to be a lesbian classic. Given that the public nature of most of Jane's life directly affected her experiences, especially those related to notions of community, it was necessary, with her consent, to provide Jane's full name.

[10] Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 167.

[11] Two other experiences of lesbian community were represented by the narrators: those women who were uninterested in lesbian community and those unable to connect to one despite desiring to do so. Anne had no interest in basing her social network around common sexual identity and, although she enjoyed women's dances and occasional house parties, she "was not the least bit community-minded in any easily recognizable fashion...Just because a woman says that she's a lesbian and a feminist is no reason for me to even suspect that we have anything in common, or that I'm going to be able to put up with her." Janet, though she desperately wanted a local lesbian community on Vancouver Island, did not know how to connect with one. Recently single and without any lesbian friends, she recalled thinking: "What am I going to do now? I really wish I could find community and there has to be—there was community in Calgary. There has to be community, if not in this area, at least in Nanaimo, or Victoria. And I didn't know where to go. I didn't know who to talk to. I felt alone."

[12] Brook's lesbian connections when she was a teenager in Hope from 1967 to 1969 reflect a similar existence of a loose network of lesbians who were aware of one another, but not publicly or formally organized: she was befriended by a local butch-femme couple and also connected with some local lesbians through the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK), the Vancouver homophile organization she had participated in when living in the city.

[13] Amazon Acres was not the only women's land space established in British Columbia during the 1970s. Although it has yet to be historically documented, a lesbian commune in Coombs on Vancouver Island, called Rubyfruit Ranch (seemingly named after Rubyfruit Jungle, Rita Mae Brown's 1973 lesbian bildungsroman), was mentioned by several of the narrators. Robin, Brook, Nym, and Janet, though not directly involved with Rubyfruit, were all aware of its existence

[14] See: Shane Phelan, *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 87; Wayne Myslik, "Renegotiating the Social/Sexual Identities of Places: Gay Communities as Safe Havens or Sites of Resistance?" *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Duncan (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 157, 166; and Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Space: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 32-45.

[15] This was the case with one of the women who opted not to participate in this project because she wanted to put her negative experiences behind her.

74 [16] Robin Metcalfe, "Halifax, Nova Scotia," *Hometowns: Gay Men Write About Where They Belong*, ed. John Preston (Cutton: Penguin Books, 1991), 314.

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# ASSIMILATION IN THE LAND OF COWS

*Bob Leahy*

There are many defining moments that occur when one first moves to the country. The first and perhaps most defining is when the empty moving van pulls out of your gravel rural driveway. It has just deposited all your worldly possessions into what smells, looks and feels like a distant outpost in another world. It is a moment of second-guessing (was this idea really so smart?), self doubt and above all, finality.

The second defining moment comes the next day when you realize that your new community of choice doesn't just smell, feel and look like another world, it is another world.



The third defining moment comes only hours later. You decide to go into town--in my case a village of 700 people. It's a farming community situated two hours east of Toronto. You check out the local diner--it looks friendly enough and the "famous home-cooked meals" sign above the door is inviting. But you step through that door and all heads swivel, turning to face you simultaneously. You flashback to the scene from "American Werewolf in London" where the two American tourists enter the pub on the hell-like English moors. It's eerily similar. So that third defining moment comes with the question: "Will I ever, ever

fit in here? And if I do, how will I do it, because these people don't even look like me."



That third defining moment and the question it raises becomes all the more pertinent when one is an out – and outspoken - HIV-positive gay guy. Because the folks in the diner, and on the streets and at the post office look very, very straight. I'm guessing they've never used the letters HIV in that order in their lives.

Now the idea of queers moving to the countryside really hasn't been a radical one for a couple of decades. HIV-positive queers? It's something that's received less attention, but I'm certainly not the first. Rural living represents, after all, a healthy alternative for urban poz folks seeking fresh air, a less stressful way to live, and an environment that's relatively germ free - where, in other words, your immune system isn't continually under siege. Balanced against all this, the country is also deemed to be hostile. The popular notion is that the stigma surrounding HIV that presents itself in cities is magnified tenfold outside of them. Perhaps as a result, and the fact that rural poz folks often keep quiet about their status, migration of poz gays from cities to the country is not something that's made its mark. Nor particularly has the notion of rural gays, and rural poz guys in particular, being thought of as agents of change.

I wanted to change that. Just as Middle America is perhaps the last frontier of social justice issues to our south, rural Canada is where the rubber hits the road north of the 49th parallel.

There are two distinct models, I suppose, for changing the world and advancing a gay/poz rights agenda. In a nutshell, one is by exposing one's differences and celebrating them – loudly and with the pizzazz that queers are, let's face it, particularly good at it. The other is by trying to fit in, to be unobtrusive, to make the point: "Look, we are just like you, we won't hurt you or molest your children, accept us as your equals." It's essentially the assimilation vs. exceptionality debate that had its heyday back in the 90s with people like American writer Andrew Sullivan annoying the heck out of "the sluts" who championed more visible, louder and - yes - more flamboyant ways of making their presence felt. That debate died a death, having gone largely, I think, in favour of the sluts. Meanwhile,



the assimilationist camp was viewed about as warmly as Log Cabin Republicans by the ultra-left. But, even today the same debate erupts after each Pride Parade; those on one side deride the spectacle of too much leather, too much flesh and too much acknowledgment that gay men actually are sexual beings. Those are the assimilationists speaking, of course, and they would rather we ditch the nudity, behave ourselves



and just try to fit in. Which, incidentally is the view, I imagine, of many heterosexuals, but that's beside the point.

I mention the assimilation thing here because every gay man who moves to the country has to consider whether to go that route, consciously or not. Every poz gay man has to consider it all the more. And for every poz gay man who considers himself an activist, like myself, it becomes not only a crucial decision, but also a strategic one.



Forgive me if things take a turn for the biographical here, but it's necessary to leave the politics of oppression aside for a moment to paint a real life picture. So, here's my story. Closeted poz gay guy working in

the most ivory of ivory towers gets diagnosed HIV positive, out of the blue, in 1993. He panics, but keeps quiet about it--sees "Philadelphia", does a Tom Hanks turnaround thing, comes out screaming "I'm gay and I'm poz", and immediately bails out of the system. He goes on long-term disability, exchanges pin-striped suit for black t-shirt, jeans and Doc Martens, joins the AIDS Committee of Toronto. Activist career es-



calates sharply. Two years later, showing early signs of dying, he wants to live healthier, less stressed-out and moves to the country. He adopts two dogs, later to become three, takes up art, later photography. He learns to make pies. His health improves dramatically.

Thirteen years after giving up downtown Toronto living for the land of cows, here's how it's all panned out.



I eat at the diner, the one where all the heads turned our way, almost daily. I go to church suppers regularly too, even though there's not an ounce of religion in my body, because I like the people there. I'm at almost every community event going, in fact. I'm on the executive of the local business association. I say hi to everybody on the street: I know their names and they know mine. I even dress a lot like them. I'm the village photographer. I sell art cards in local stores featuring my three errant dogs in cute poses. People like them, and I'm thinking they like me too. In short, I have, in fact, assimilated nicely.



But here's the thing. Everybody knows I'm an HIV positive gay man. They ask how I'm doing, seem concerned if my colour's off, or I'm limping through the nerve damage in my feet (it's called peripheral neuropathy and it's a drag)--that's a side effects of the HIV meds that I take. They applaud when I speak about HIV in their schools, in their service clubs and to their volunteer groups. They've read my story in the paper, too, seen me on the TV news on occasion, and know about my activism work across Canada, about my involvement in prevention work, about the provincial campaigns I've worked on, and been a spokesperson for, appearing as one of the faces of HIV in rural Canada. Some of them read my blogs too, where I share everything. I harass my (conservative) member of parliament about inadequate AIDS funding. I send angry letters to the local press. None of this seems to phase my neighbours. I get lots of hugs. More on that later.



The notion that rural Canada is unwelcoming of minorities may in fact be true in some places. It certainly prevents some (very) queer rural folks from proclaiming they're gay. It certainly inhibits HIV positive folks from disclosing their status more often than not.

When I first moved to the country, I met another guy who was out as a gay man, but not ready to announce his positive status to the world: "People will burn your house down if you tell them that," he warned me, as if that had ever happened. I brushed him off, of course. It's common for HIV positive folks to fear the worst if they disclose – society, and the stigma it nurtures for HIV and AIDS, conditions us to do that that, without challenge. So we're tempted to keep quiet, and act as if everything is normal, as if living a lie is a healthy way to live, as if our physical and mental health won't suffer from leading a double life. But - and here's the rub - often this deception is unnecessary, because in



truth, rural Canada, like anywhere else, isn't always as hostile as it might first appear. Underneath the locals' curiosity about strangers, which might perhaps be mistaken for something darker, more often than not lurks the inherent decency and mutual caring for each other that exists in farming communities everywhere, and has done for centuries.

And then there's the hugging phenomenon. When I talk to groups about HIV, I often touch on the history of the epidemic – how people were shunned like lepers, how nurses wouldn't touch them and how food was shoved at them in hospitals. "Trays pushed under the door", we are told, as if that were possible, but you get the picture. There was a lot of fear then which showed itself in unhelpful ways, we know that. And



they are making a statement. And believe me: it's so damn good to see an audience of strangers do something with such undeniably political overtones as this. I always come out smiling.



If all this sounds more cozy than most activists are used to, and I'd wager it is, know that I'm no stranger to pushing the envelope. AIDS fundraisers, for instance, are a regular fixture of the little diner I was once scared to go in to. My photography – I'm perhaps most well known for images of cute puppies, because those kind of photographs sell best – has an edgier side to it too. My solo shows have featured same-sex loving, for instance - one show was devoted entirely to photos of my HIV treatment - the draw-



then along came Lady Di, photographed hugging patients at an AIDS hospice, because a) it was perfectly safe to do so, and b) because she had more public relations smarts, combined with more humanity, than all of the royal family put together. The act of hugging poz folks became OK for the enlightened after that, in fact it became de rigueur. Nowadays, the groups that I talk to often come up to the front after I've finished and hug me, one by one. Doesn't matter if it's because they were moved by the Lady Di story I told them. The important thing for me – and for them, I think - is

ing of blood, the clinic visits, the minutiae of hospital stays, et al. I'm not sure what people thought about those.

My persona in all of this, though, has always been one of a normal, fully functioning person, rather than a damaged one. I hate being thought of as damaged. Too bad if those concerned with HIV prevention would rather I paint HIV as a dread, crippling disease. True it can be, but that's not a mantle I can wear comfortably, or even healthily. In the context of HIV, in fact, I like to stress my normalcy rather than what sets me apart. Besides, I cannot stop new infections: how to do that is a moot point indeed, but I'd suggest the "scared straight" approach never works. And even if it did, I'll pass on being Exhibit A, there to warn people not to become someone like me.

In any event, I guess all this really is about going the assimilation route through necessity— fitting in, if you like, rather than standing apart, to make a point. But I honestly don't feel like I've let down hard-core activ-

ists who blanch at the A-word. "Fitting in" at least in the rural context, never ever precludes pushing an activist agenda. In fact, assimilation provides one with a unique opportunity to do so. Whether this strategy works as well in big cities is doubtful, and strategically it would be opposed by many there, but in the rural backwaters of this great land of ours, it seems to be more than a good fit. Which is, ultimately, why I wear rubber boots now...

...rather than Doc Martens.

All photographs copyright Bob Leahy

*Bob Leahy is a banker turned HIV-positive AIDS activist. But wait; there's more. A lover of sherbet lemons and all things sweet (also likes grilled cheese sandwiches and all things unhealthy.) A one-time collector of Mr. Peanut memorabilia. Partnered for twenty-nine years. Bad at sports, even worse at Scrabble. A survivor, practicing the art of growing old gracefully. And a patient who says ahhhh when asked, and takes his pills like a trooper, but doesn't let a little thing like a seventeen-year relationship with HIV define his life.*



# SOUND BITES OF RURAL NOVA SCOTIA

*M-C MacPhee & Mél Hogan*

*This paper was written for a conference presentation in 2007 in Vermillion, Alberta. It is republished in its original form below.*

Rural life and sexuality are two areas of study that—on their own—give much fodder to the discussion of identity politics. Combined, they offer an exciting lens through which to explore the ways that location and identity are always already inextricably linked, as well as the ways in which sexuality both defines and is defined by its context, and informed by communities which are neither strictly geographical nor imagined.

The purpose of this project is two-fold: to explore the choices of living location—urban, rural or transient—made by lesbian/bi/queer women in Nova Scotia, specifically in and around the Wolfville and Halifax areas. And to examine how, in turn, urban or rural locations impact how these women understand their sexual orientation and identity. This project functions as a means of recording and sharing oral histories, as well as offering a sample from which to critically engage with this generally overlooked subject.

Existing literature on GLBT and queer communities in rural Canada focuses primarily on the trajectory of individuals who move from rural areas to urban settings in order to ‘come out’ and immerse themselves in queer spaces and pre-existing, visible, communities.

As a result, the diverse and distinct realities faced by lesbian and queer women (as distinct from gay men) are often ignored, which is the common occurrence of lesbians and queer women who choose to live in rural areas.

There are two ways in which this paper should be read: as the pilot or pre-cursor to a larger oral history project, or as the basis of a pre-production document for a sound-based narrative piece for radio play.

## **Methodology**

In February 2007, we (Mél Hogan and m-c MacPhee) conducted 11 individual and group interviews with 17 lesbian, bi or queer-identified women or in the Wolfville and Halifax regions of Nova Scotia[1]. Our sample population consisted primarily of women whom we contacted through our personal social networks, but who were not, for the most part, women we knew on a personal level. It might be worth noting, however, that the nature of this research i.e. within the lesbian/queer communities[2] does bring with it a certain amount of “connectivity”. Many of the women we interviewed referred to one another in interviews, despite our commitment to maintaining confidentiality throughout the project.

A quick overview of our participant demographics points to a diversity in age range, from 25 to 58 years

old (with only one woman in the 40-49 bracket). All participants were Anglophone, white, and had some degree of university or college-level education, and all were living above the poverty line. The majority of participants were of Catholic upbringing, though most had long left the Church because of what they defined as the limitations of organized religion. However, in recent years, some of the participants have returned to the Church on a casual basis, drawn-in by the progressive politics, and acceptance of gays and lesbians, (by the United Church) while others have focused more on spirituality—a spirituality informed by politics (feminist and environmental in particular).

The sample that we built for this study reflected the more outgoing and outspoken segment of the overall lesbian/queer women's population in and around Wolfville and Halifax. Some of the women we interviewed, for example, are current rural community organizers of social events, while others are well-known city activists. A larger study would necessarily look at various other levels of what it means to live “rurally”, which was not possible for the scope of this project. As such, our project begins a conversation about these issues. As a result, our project is very much about the discursive formations of the divide, an investigation into the ways the two terms—urban and rural—play off one another, and less about particular people who inhabit these locations.

The interviews were open-ended and in-depth, lasting on average between 1 and 2 hours. We conducted most of the interviews in the participants' houses, usually greeted by a dog or cat, and the smell of fresh-baked muffins. Two interviews were conducted in public spaces (in a restaurant and in the cafeteria of a grocery-store) for reasons of convenience and happenstance. Half our interviews were conducted in the city; half rurally, including Wolfville: a “University town” with a population of approximately 8000 residents and students. It is a ‘hybrid’ town in that unlike other rural towns in Nova Scotia, it offers much in the way of access to art, culture, and media, yet it

remains relatively small, especially in comparison to Halifax, which is commonly known as the city. It is worth noting, however, that even though Halifax is the largest and most accessible city in Nova Scotia and the Atlantic Provinces it is considered by many people from larger cities to be ‘rural’—even if half-jokingly. This fact points to the always-relative nature of these locations, and of this distinction in terms. Both Wolfville and Halifax are known to have significant lesbian/queer populations, and diversity of sexual orientation is perceived to be widely accepted in both locations by almost every participant we interviewed.

### Oral History

As noted by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, oral histories offer a unique—if not subjective and idiosyncratic—medium for narrativization. The use of narratives as a research strategy is about process and product, simultaneously recording and producing stories. As researchers, we are very aware of our role in producing particular narratives. For example, it occurred to us only at the transcribing phase that we had not once addressed the issue of sex in our interviews, nor did participants ever mention it. Having avoided this topic, we created a disconnect between lesbian identity and sex. This is just one of the more obvious ways in which social etiquette (among other factors) comes into play in the collection of oral histories, namely by dictating the kinds of topics which are socially acceptable, and comfortable. On the other hand, the fact that we are, as researchers, also positioned within the lesbian community, we were privy to more personal information that is at times painful and emotional and it was rightfully assumed that we could relate on the basis of a shared sexual orientation. Needless to say that there are many and varied factors which come to form identity and community, but the willingness of these women to partake in our study suggests that there is something about being a lesbian/queer woman which makes the basis of this research possible, and meaningful.

Oral histories are important because of their complexities; as process and product, they tend to leave a unique kind of historical trace behind. In the groundbreaking work done by Kennedy and Davis, they show that documents created by lesbians/queer women are difficult to find and rarely enter the public realm: “to address this situation, we and other lesbian and gay history projects have turned to oral history, an invaluable method for documenting the experience of the invisible; it allows the narrators to speak in their own voices of their lives, loves and struggles.”[4]

### Literature Review

There has been a recent and rapid growth in studies that examine how sexuality factors in to questions of space and place. However, it was not until the mid-1990s, that gays and lesbians, in the context of sexual geographies, entered the realm of rural studies. Despite this addition to the field, much of the current literature that deals with issues of rural and urban location and sexuality approach the subject matter unilaterally, juxtaposing the urban with the rural, wherein rural signifies an (idyllic or utopian) escape from the city - a place from which we eventually leave to become ourselves as “queer subjects”[5].

In their book *Queer Country: Rural and Gay Lives*, David Bell and Gill Valentine suggest that sexual identity is formed through the urban experience, namely within (the formation of) the gay and lesbian community, which offer at once opportunities for negotiating one’s sexual identity, as well as anonymity. In rural areas, isolation and invisibility, in addition to the lack of resources and structural services, are often deemed responsible for the need of gays and lesbians to move to the city. Larry Knopp, explains that many gays and lesbians consider their move to urban centers and discovery of such communities, to be a ‘homecoming’ of sorts[6].

Despite the range of articles exploring issues of sexuality and space in the last decade, very few authors

have examined the lives of gays and lesbians that chose to move to, or remain in, rural locations. Again, Binnie and Valentine, explain that the process of lesbians living in (and moving to) the country is actually “a significant rural phenomenon”[8]; and one that has a long history and is still popular among a vast number of lesbians today. Despite this, it remains a subject that has not been critically examined or explored. In fact, apart from a few significant articles, the only text that gives credence to this pattern is the book *Out Our Way* by Canadian author Michael Riordon. While this book - based on oral histories - documents some of the lived experiences of lesbians and gay men in the country, the stories are brief and the book lacks any critical analysis as to why and how lesbians are drawn to rural living.

The significant lack of documentation and analysis about this on-going phenomenon is what drew us to this subject, and encouraged us conduct interviews and compile the case study that is documented below. What you’re about to listen to are snippets of interviews which, for the sake of this presentation, are limited in both the subject matter we are able to cover and the context from which the stories emanate. In other words, of the 25 hours of interviews we recorded, what we offer you today are mere fragments of the bigger conversation that we were privileged to be part of.

### Case Study

Based on 17 interviews, we were looking at three themes in particular: the first was the rural/urban divide, or more specifically, the ways in which our interviewees conceived of each of these locations, and how they described their relationship to one and/or the other. The second part looked at the formation of community (how it is defined, constructed, and in what way people feel they belong - or not - to any particular community). Part three examines pride and homophobia, which we left open for interpretation by the interviewees.

Navigating through the rural or urban landscape is an experience that both shapes and is shaped by a number of factors (including gender, race, ethnicity, education, class, age, and more). Identity is necessarily more complex than one's relationship to a particular location, though it is informed by it. The negotiation of rural and urban living means in large part a negotiation of one's ability to make sense of themselves in a given context, through language, modes of representation, access to community and a reconnaissance of one's ties (roots of origins) to a particular place, imagined or lived. 'Home' is a term that applied across the board to the decision of living rurally, while action, activism and media were central to city living.

On my worst days I think I've sort of sold out and I'm not the person I used to be, I could probably be a more vibrant person if I lived in the city. And on my better days I think I've just found a way to make it work for myself. Who knows when I'll feel 100% clear that I know that answer for sure. But the truth is probably some combination of both. We do give up parts of ourselves to live out here in the country; on the other hand, there are things that I yearn for in the city, because I left it up to keep coming back to the country. Who knows, maybe I'm a woman complex enough that city or country it could never be either or, it's kind of a both. So living closer to the city, or to a small little progressive town, that gives me some of what I miss about the city.

For some participants the decision to live either rurally or in the city was an easy one to make. For others, either work, education and/or relationships demanded that the question of rural and urban location be negotiated, or they felt an affinity for both, though generally not satisfied by committing to one or the other in any permanent way. Choice of location allows for different modes of living; the city is often associated with a transient potential, anonymity activism and culture. Rural living, on the other hand, is often connected to a commitment to a certain understanding of the world, a slower, gentler and quieter pace, and a safety that only 'home' can offer. Because rural

and urban landscapes offer drastically different opportunities, the transition from one to the other can often be difficult.

The differences that I've noticed and subtle ways in which I feel myself changing the ways in which I present myself. I'm used to a community of people that are like minded in several ways. [...] Just recently I plucked my chin hair and cleaned up my eyebrows; I'm growing my hair. And stuff I haven't done in 6 or 7 years so I'm thinking that maybe it will just be fun. But I just plucked a bunch of my facial hair the other day and the change, the 180-degree change in the way that people interacted with me that I didn't even realize was going on. [...] And realizing that there is a big difference in how people treat me since those changes. I'm just like, suddenly I'm like "am I doing these things because I feel uncomfortable?" Which came first. Normally, doing these like, typically unfeminine things, I get pleasure out of it, it's fun, or a way of introducing myself, or it's like a way of being visible, or things that are tied into identity on more than one level. And then, it feels like there is something about being here that makes it not fun anymore, and I think that maybe I'll tone it down for the sake of easiness, and that makes me sad. And then I think it's only fun to be confrontational in a situation where it's inconsequential, and now in a context where it's of more consequence, I don't really want to do it anymore.

Questions of identity and gender display, conformity or subversion of feminine ideals, queer and/or feminist politics were all significant factors in the way our interviewees conceived of their identity in relation to their sexual orientation. Categories of 'queer', 'lesbian', 'bi', and 'trans', all figure very differently within rural and urban locations, though notably, also within specific communities within each of these locations. Identity politics and activism, which are often tied to struggles by the broader GLBT community, is something that many participants connected to location, and also to age and lifestyle choice, but more than anything else, a common language by which to under-

stand themselves and communicate notions of identity. As these two examples that we're about to listen to demonstrate, language is necessary not only for making sense of oneself, but also to define, redefine and enrich the ways in which we can, or want to, be understood.

I think it's the language and I think I've never been in a position where I've had to explain it before, so I've never developed the language [...] I had no way of explaining it. I've gotten more fluent, but I had never had to explain it before so, coming into a smaller place where it's not as exposed to such a diverse group of people on such a large scale it just become a little more difficult to explain these things.

It's changing [the way I identify], so what I answer now might not have been what I would have answered a year ago. For the longest time, I just didn't tell people, like who cares, it's none of their business what I do with my sexuality, this is what they see and this is what they assume, well, I don't really care. And then I kind of realized that I had this group of friends who was totally clueless about this pretty huge part of me, and I completely gracelessly came out to all of them, and they thought 'really???' Because they had just known me [...] where for all intents and purposes I looked really straight.

86 NMP The question of “coming out” is one that is often associated with the (privilege of the) city—the urban landscape allowing not only for anonymity, but for diversity (in language and representation) for people to make sense of themselves, in ways that rural living has not. But our findings suggest that rather than the utopian city and narrow-minded rural area, coming out is always both a blessing and a struggle. The differences were not so much a matter of location, but rather a matter of being understood or being visible. Because of the diversity of representation and sometimes fluid identity visibility always sort of implies making yourself visible or, in simpler terms, outing yourself.

I believe that you can never stop coming out. I assume that you guys are out out out? [...] but no matter how outoutout you are, you can never stop coming out really, because you have the chance to come out all the time, which I think people should do. Because it reminds you, like, I'm very contemptuous of closet cases, it's like, what are you afraid of any more? People died and worked their arses off so that you don't have to live in the closet and here you are thinking your so darn special or whatever.

**As the last clip suggests, there is a notion that queer history is shared, and that “the way” has been paved by the activism of the early GLBT community. However, one of the most contentious concepts that arose in our interviews was “community” and the role it plays in both the imagined and geographical realities of lesbian and queer women living rurally.**

It's interesting. It comes and goes. Some of the closest people we hang out with are not lesbians. I've always wondered what it means to have a lesbian community. What I have in common with people doesn't have anything to do with whether or not they're lesbians. It's who I connect with not because they're lesbian. If they're lesbian, it doesn't mean I'm going to hang out with them. My workmates aren't I feel close with them. It's like you're expected to connected to a lesbian community, but I've never really felt connected.

Others believe in the importance of a rural lesbian community, and playing an active role in creating it. In particular, the founders of the group Lavender Follies, functioning on the basis of email lists to connect women in rural Nova Scotia, deem lesbian community to be of utmost importance, especially in isolated rural setting:

Yes! It's huge. It surprised us. [...] I spent my whole life in the heterosexual community and I really needed to be connected to our family. So we inquired around and found out that there were monthly dances in Nictaux! Which is a suburb of Middletown. And they were

monthly, and they were combined men and women. Who would have imagined that we could go out once a month. [...] And then we started to meet women. Because women are hard to find, women are tucked away more, they stay home more. But that's the story about the lavender follies. [...] We hand delivered 40 invitations to lesbians for a BBQ at our house and only 12 or even 5 or 6 came out. Everybody stays at home. They don't come out. [...] Initially, we just knew, and we took a risk and hand delivered invitations. They're all out in the country. Some were very glad that we had, but some were...that's nice, but. Some are closeted. [...] Some lesbians prefer to blend in to their community more and not be singled out. But the ones that are on our list like to do both. [...] So we let it drop for a year, and then we thought we really want to connect with all the lesbians around, we got to get together, we are a family. We can go to the dances, but it was men and women, so we were hanging out with the men. And we wanted to have our own dances once in a while and connect as women. [...] started collecting emails. It just grew and grew and grew. I have 108 on my email list. Most of them are couples.

## Conclusion

As explained in the introduction of this presentation, one of the main goals of this project was to examine how urban or rural locations impact how lesbians, bisexual and queer women come to understand themselves and each other both within and outside of geographic and imagined "community".

Another goal was to record and share oral histories. We did not intend to use our research to discover any conclusive answers or results, and it is clear from our findings that such a goal would have been impossible. Not only did our interviewees have incredibly different responses to many of the same questions, but they also frequently came to their own paradoxical conclusions.

Upon following up with many of our participants, we have learned that already, so much has changed. B and E have recently resigned as organizers of the Lavender Follies - leaving 108 members from across rural Nova Scotia floundering without a lesbian social network. H contacted us to let us know that our project inspired her to finally use her music to take a step towards fighting for GLBT and queer rights. In a recent email conversation with C, we learned that she was incredibly grateful for being involved in our project, and that by talking with us, she was able to make sense of a lot of personal struggles and questions that have come to the surface since her move to Halifax, and she is now feeling more secure in all of the complex ways that her identity is changing in a new rural location.

## References

[1] In the context of these interviews, both gender and sexuality were equally important in shaping identity, but our participants resorted to "queer" rather than "trans" as categories of self-identification. This may be, in part, a result of presenting our research as being about "lesbians", despite situating ourselves as researchers within a broader GLBT and queer communities, or may simply be the identity category that best fits. This is obviously part of a much bigger discussion around identity politics, but worth noting here, if only to highlight the fact that gender was equally important to sexuality in many of the participants' stories about how they navigate their locations, and form community.

[2] Kennedy, Elizabeth L. and Madeline Davis. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. USA: 1994.

[3] As explained in their article: Binnie, Jon and Gill Valentine. *Geographies of Sexuality – A Review in Progress*. *Progress in Humam Geography*. June 1999, vol. 23 no. 2, 175-187.

[4] Bell, David, and Gill Valentine. *Queer Country: Rural and Gay Lives*. *Journal of Rural Studies*, Volume 11, Issue 2, April 1995, Pages 113-122.

[5] Bell, David, and Gill Valentine. *Queer Country: Rural and Gay Lives*. *Journal of Rural Studies*, Volume 11, Issue 2, April 1995, Pages 113-122.

# MEMORY HOARDING: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROCKY GREEN

Rocky Green | M-C MacPhee

**M-C MacPhee: Who or what have been some of your most important artistic influences over the years?**

Rocky Green: The Canadian painter David Milne for sure. I odd jobbed for his widow when I was a kid and got to spend time looking at his still lives. That gave me the sense that art - not just souvenir making - can come from where you're living rurally. And I always was lucky and had friends, my ex, painting buddies, students, who prioritized creativity- romanticized it, but prioritized it too.

**M-C: What inspired you to begin taking photographs and do you have a specific photographic process?**

RG: Memory hoarding and documentation. I started taking pictures as painting sources, but I shoot more pictures than I paint of course, and I work from life as well. I run the photos in a slide show in the corner so they all stay in my head, trigger things for me, show my blind spots and my subconscious subject matter. I allow myself a camera-full, 15 shots in about two weeks. But they pile up.

I paint colour from memory so I dicker in software a long time, in black and white, months of random adjustments. So the photos are in flux, like my paintings. They don't save time really.

**M-C: Do you (still) use film or were you happy to embrace digital technology?**

RG: Film was expensive for me so I embraced digital full bore. I like controlling the whole process and the digital one is nicely private, portable. A camera the size of a cigarette pack. It's anonymous, understood, publicly acceptable, everybody's a photographer, a new insect eye. Everybody here has evolved unquestioningly.

**M-C: You are a multi-disciplined artist with a beautiful collection of drawings, writings, photographs, and paintings, and you are also a very skilled musician. What led you to develop so many diverse artistic skills?**

RG: Intellectual restlessness, or a learning disability. I like to be good at things technically and I'm competitive in a self amusing way. The painting is where cash

and reputation figure so it comes with baggage. The writing extrapolates on paintings.

Music is genetic and for pleasure, keeps my hands loose. My families were large and churchy and wild too. They all sang, the poetry of our class and then some. A hillbilly vice. My brother and his son both write songs.

**M-C: You currently live in the small town where you were born, and from what I gather, you have lived there - or have at least returned there - for most of your life. What kept you coming back and what finally pulled you to stay?**

RG: I like the bickering and the unending pettiness of a small town. God-fearing scrutinizing life, the teasing, the cross generational narratives. People as we were and as we are now, if at all. I enjoy my Proust. Family, community, and my place in a community before it was couched in buzzwords. Whether I fit in or not. I lived with a writer for years and he wrote about nothing but the artist in rural Ontario family and society. His dad was a cattle farmer so breeding was always considered. He translated my own hometown to me so I could love it more than nostalgically or bitterly. I translate too. Still, my life is like being trapped in a post-modern southern Gothic chick flick sometimes...

**M-C: You have said that you “cling to my memories of my birth town, see the main street as layers of ghost buildings, come and gone.” Are there specific memories that you cling to? What is your most vivid memory of that town?**

RG: My little dirt road dead end of town looks just like it ever did, but most of the town looks like any strip of family bargain value box stores, a plug ugly supply depot for cottage country gentrification. You need a car to get a can of turpentine at the hardware store out on the highway. Bald-faced short sighted pragma-

tism aluminum clad. They're starting to tack on the gingerbread and hanging baskets and talk about heritage now. There isn't a building left unmodernized to an Oshawa-strip-mall standard.

I remember walking to kindergarten on the back streets alone and spending the day without a helmet alone in the woods, and the day I decided to walk home main street, take in the shops and the girl at the drugstore phoned my mother and told on me. That kind of safety.

**M-C: Was the decision to settle down in a small town a complicated one for you? More specifically, as a gay man and an artist, what are some of the biggest challenges that you have faced living in a rural area?**

RG: I'm kind of a cyclical prodigal. You never leave, you're never at home. What you miss in commitment you gain in detachment.

I've always been rather boneheaded brave and imperious to public opinion, though very aware of it, and I never fit any better or worse into the gay community than I did into the straight world.

I've lived and seen the violence and the tragedies and just the banal petty bigotry, but wherever I was I'd find a few painters and writers, love maybe, and that was enough. Anyway there was no gay community here when I came out. Now there is. There has been a hard won, precarious and dubious change. And a lot of rethinking.

I do fit in better now, maybe I'm better socialized. Maybe growing up here made me very suspicious of groups of like minded individuals. It's possible to be very political and activist one on one, and solitary too. You don't have to go to all the meetings.

I'm pretty shallow, juvenile. Yesterday I went with some friends I knew in high school out to a pioneer





























cemetery and we lolled around on the stones telling stories. Last night I sat at the internet cafe across from the Chinese restaurant and theater of my teenage years and waited for my boyfriend to get off work. Arrested development. Takes a village to raise an idiot.

**M-C: What is your relationship to urban centers? Has that changed over time?**

RG: I see the city as a four seasons playground for red-necks. I can hear the wild things howl all night, run a little, get some air. The rare bearded cougar. Organic food is cheaper and easier to find. People seem more in touch with nature, their sensuality, their haircuts. They flirt in cafes. Anonymity is nice. A cousin of mine told me his main memory of growing up in our hometown was his sense of always being watched, parsed. Blue rinse Jesus checking out your library books. It made performers out of us. It kills something in others. I'm watchful. In the city I watch for galleries but I mostly just watch the traffic. The river. I have wilderness adventures. I walk and walk. I cross the great divide.

**M-C: I realize that the town where you live is quite large as compared to the surrounding towns and villages and is probably considered an "urban center". Yet I am referring to it as a "rural area". Isn't it funny how one's ideas of rural and urban can change depending on they're standing? Can you speak to your experiences with this?**

RG: I live in a time capsule, an old dead end residential street at the wrong end of town. Dead end, trails off into a graveyard, symbolic. No Tim Horton's. It's still pretty quiet but up at the other end of town things are so wild you can buy cigarettes after midnight. I go north a bit to my dad's home town to escape the minimal noise here. It's silence I look for, just the occasional distant car. You see maybe an occasional PC tower rotting by the trail for some reason, a four wheeler. Hardly wilderness.

This isn't old growth forest, that canopy is long gone, and the city isn't unnatural, it just has more human nature. It's a balancing act.

**M-C: Is the rural landscape surrounding your town a strong influence for your work?**

RG: It's the context, the weather. There are only a few people you'll walk with through it.

**M-C: There is often a romantic and glorified appeal to life in rural areas. Many people assume a certain "authenticity" to rural identities and experiences. Do you think there is any truth to this idea? Can you speak to it a bit?**

RG: I don't think there's any greater authenticity, no. You can't parse interior life in Canadian antiques road-show terms. Where I'm from there's a certain teasing Irish lilt and a tendency to hyperbole but its best not to mistake accent for authenticity. I ham up the red-neck thing a lot.

I don't know what authenticity is but I'm tempted to say it comes from a life considered as honestly as possible... but would an authentic rural life maybe be that of a pre-colonial native, in terms of living in the bush without a dj? The best man in the bush I know here is Jamaican. If you come here looking for authenticity you immediately set up the locals as characters in a heritage moment or a miniseries and they'll ham it up out of manners or meanness. You bring your own authenticity. There's woods smarts, there's street smarts. You try to have both.

**M-C: How does nostalgia factor into your experiences of living in a small town and also into your work? Are your feelings of nostalgia based in a longing for something that existed or for an idea of what could have been?**

RG: I don't think about what could have been, hardly ever, in my arrogance. Cheap sentiment, roots music. The tendency to be trite. It's hard not to strike those cliché notes, Edward Hopper, Walker Evans, the last picture show, in photographs, especially when it's right there in front of you and you're lonely and the place feels empty. You buy into the generic romance, you cast your love life in a country and western music paradigm.

My paintings are more recognizably my own handwriting. A friend of mine runs a gallery up here and she talks about the redone main streets with their galleries and such, and then the unchanged back streets, against the fields and the bush, how those back streets are where the locals - the old stock - live. She calls that the bleedline. That's where my interest lies. It's a skeptical place. That can be lonely whether you're disenfranchised or just not buying in on moral or luxury grounds.

**M-C: When you depict yourself in photos and paintings, what are you setting out to do? How do you use and see yourself as a subject in your own work? Do you have a preferred subject or theme or is this constantly changing?**

RG: I tend to photograph myself in crisis times. You redefine yourself now and then, take a look at yourself from outside, check your stance, aging. But everything's very propped and contrived in my portraits. Self indulgence, vanity, the presence of the camera... I really think my preferred theme is always art making itself, just the pointlessness and the persistence of it. How you let it run your life.

I think my theme in writing is self deception and the deception, or not, of others. Artifice. I have as opening text on my blog a quote from Sartre: "We resign ourselves to seeing ourselves through the other's eyes."

**M-C: Can you tell me about the projects that you are currently working on?**

RG: I've been very self indulgent, painting the unselectable for the last year or so, portraits in a recession. I have a friend and model who now and then sends me a careful portrait of himself, an avatar. He's not wordy but he's visually hyper-literate. I paint from pictures he sends me. My other model is more subject to my formal consideration in the flesh, but I'm starting to use his photos of me in a new self portrait. That's where my interest runs.

I'm going to finish a commissioned show this winter and find some place to hang it. Paintings of dirt road childhood.

**M-C: Do you have plans for any future exhibits? Where can we see your work?**

RG: I have a blog at <http://rockygreen.wordpress.com/> where people can keep track of me. There's more than anybody needs to know really. For the last few years my writing there has been a journal, self explanatory, now I'm writing some fiction.

*Rocky Green, sometimes known as redneckarts, is a writer and visual artist who lives in the Bancroft/Maynooth area in Ontario, Canada, where he was born. He says on his blog "I suppose I'm a redneck with notions about art. I choose rather traditional subject matter - figures, landscapes, still lives and try to just concentrate on my handwriting. I'm rather captivated by the notion of creating numinous objects and luxury items at one and the same time." You can see his work at <http://rockygreen.wordpress.com> and work by his studio mates at <http://redneckarts.wordpress.com/>*