

69 PORTER TÉMOIGNAGE OUR VANISHING POSITIONS

I. A DISTURBANCE

Without stories of progress, the world has become a terrifying place. The ruin glares at us with the horror of its abandonment. It's not easy to know how to make a life, much less avert planetary destruction. Luckily there is still company, human and not human. We can still explore the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes - the edges of capitalist discipline, scalability and abandoned resource plantations. We can still catch the scent of the latent commons - and the elusive autumn aroma.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing

The printed portents flip softly on the wooden table and the fourth hand on the inner ring of the clock indicates high tide and the rain starts to blur my view of the bay through the window.

Together, let us invite those in who would accept this invitation: join us in the half-light by the band-stand Paul, Gilda, the nameless many.

We look out over a precarious land. The stable jobs of the middle class have given way to the Californian gig economy and the saddle of debt. Hovering on the razor's edge of extinction, the woodland caribou is nearly extirpated. Carbon dioxide reaches 414.8ppm, just shy of the 450ppm of catastrophic, irreversible increase. The yearly floods and fires, vicissitudes of a climate undone, are no longer an exception to the rule. Precarity is the condition of our queer time and place.

Will I be the chronicler of progressive social tolerance in the last 29 years before the predicted collapse of all sea life? Will I tell the story triumphant — of some human beings' winning their social inclusion as the great extinction rages around us?

Looking around and through rather than straight ahead is how I will propose we address our subject. You and I must create a hole through which to view the piece of theatre that I have prepared. I approach this torn hole closer and closer yet until it nearly rests on my face like a mask with a single eye-hole. This will be my time-travel drag. I paint mine mostly dark blue with iridescence and red radial lines around my eyes.

Feel free to pause now and to close your eyes. I will too.

As I help you with your mask and you help me with mine, I would like speak my intention. We will see the world world made, unmade and remade again and again, and I would have us do what will make us stay with this trouble. We may soon see something to completion if we accord more care to our listening than to our speaking.

II. A BAD SUBJECT

Desire, like the tendrils of hyphae that snake invisible throughout the underground and underwater worlds, inside plants and sometimes animals, might never make itself known until the precise conditions suit the emergence of its fruiting body.

In our base-ten culture with our solar year, 50 years is meaningful - halfway to one hundred. The quirk comes from our human bodies: we use 10 fingers to count with, right in front of our faces. The 9 Arabic numerals we use begin again at 10 with the convention of base-10 columns. Despite the colonial spread of our enumeration, many peoples count with base 5 systems (the fingers of one hand), with base 20 systems (fingers and toes). Their milestones are different. Of course, anniversaries are quite arbitrary things.

Yet here we are, five of us with all our fingers spread out on a table in séance pose, in a nation whose government technically decriminalized some anal sex two generations ago, in 1969.

These were the years of riots and revolutions. The Place à l'orgasme action saw agit prop poets interrupt a ceremony

at the Basilique Notre-Dame in 1968 in the name of sexual liberation, screaming their invocation of lust at the tops of their lungs. The École de beaux arts in Montreal was occupied by students inspired by the actions of Paris '68 that same year. In New York, the queens of the Stonewall Uprising fighting the police in the street in 1969 issued empowering shockwaves that emboldened queer people around the world. These were days and nights of progress, of optimism and hubris.

These years also saw the unbridled expansion of natural resource exploitation in Canada, and much of our current ecological predicament can be traced to the period. In Canada, the last blue walleye, once common in Lake Ontario and Lake Erie was caught in 1965, overfished to death.¹ In 1968, the Atlantic cod fishery peaked and began to collapse in the resource extraction event among the most devastating in world history. Jessica Meeuwig, director of the Centre for Marine Futures writes that “we only started industrializing the oceans in the 1960s, whereas we've been industrializing terrestrial environments for thousands of years. So we're just catching up, and that means that we're going to begin seeing extinction rates in the ocean that are unparalleled.”² Some scientists accord saltwater fish 29 years until total collapse.³ Great disasters stimulate great sexual appetites. Will our era be known for the last, the greatest, erotic banquet Earth has ever seen?

The 1969 Omnibus Criminal Code update dealt with anal sex as a criminal and psychiatric nuisance to manage and at all costs, clean from public space. It granted an exception to two people engaging in buggery. If they played in groups of two and they played at home, they could avoid a dangerous sexual offender designations and indefinite imprisonment. For the first time the door to a homo-norm was opened - the option of assimilation was offered in exchange for disappearance. Since 1969 there have been good gays and there have been perverts. And after Bill C-150, they really started to really go after the perverts.

It was *after* Bill C-150's passage that Canada honed its surveillance and criminalization machine that targeted those who were alone together, in parks, bathhouses, clubs, bathrooms, theatres, truck stops, gazebos, dunes and citadels began to be hunted. Contrary to the notion of 1969 as liberation even for gay men, the conviction of people assigned male at birth for playing with our anuses for pleasure peaked in the late 70s and early 80s with the infamous bar and bath raids, until anal sex was finally decriminalized between adults as late as 1988, with the removal of buggery (anal sex) from the criminal code.⁴

With the 1968 premiere of *Boys in the Band* and *Boys in the Sand* (1971) in New York, which opened the Golden Age of Porn, gay male stories and sexualities had unquestionably entered the mainstream. However, while the identity could then be spoken in public, the private individual faggot was sent like a naughty child to his bedroom. As I poured through personal collections of queer people in the archives, again and again, I was confronted with the fact that queer Canadians' collections so often involved importation and travel. Youth spent in London and Paris, summer vacations in California, radicalization during a trip to New York. European, US American and international publications and films fill Canadian queer bookshelves now as before and despite the state's emphasis on art and music of Canadian origin - I want to draw our attention away from the nation and towards the queer porosity of our borders by including artifacts and authors who did not identify as Canadian, queens not subject of the Crown. Since the first homophile marches on Ottawa a few years after my period of investigation, gay exclusion from immigration schemes has always been emphasized in gay political demands. In 1962, immigration was revolutionized by the government, as with country of origin no longer stressed in determining admissibility,⁵ but gay migrants were all denied citizenship until 1977.⁶

Hazel Meyer's monumental banner *Where Once Stood a Bandstand for Cruising and Shelter* makes legible and memorializes the everyday architecture of cruising, the

infrastructure of pleasure and erotic place-making so rarely archived. The elegiac text continues from the title: touching mounds & caressing holes, whole lives spent looking for the architecture / who knew landscaping could be so ferocious, so targeted, so intentional. A banner by Montreal activist textile artist **David Widjington**, created for the contemporary cruising defence committee Cruise Control joins it, to be marched in the ongoing struggle against homophobic policing in Montreal. The banners reflect the straight hand the gay liberation and homophile banners and placards of the 1960s and well into the 1970s are inscribed with. A voice in Canada is firm and hesitant, appealing to reason. Nothing like the psychedelic curve of the avant-garde. I imagine those trembling hands, unable to write playfully; the discomfort of daylight, the staring.

In a similar vein, the halting, giggling voices of **Roberta Kalargirou's** subjects in the 1971 Metro Media episode entitled *Transsexual Lifestyles* is discomfiting to watch. The two women are interviewed after having been attacked working the Vancouver stroll, given a rare opportunity to advocate for their normalcy, their humanity. They are spoken over and explained by a gay man, they are asked about their surgeries. The violence still faced by trans people in our society should be enough to halt any celebration of freedom gained by subsections of our queer communities. The rights and freedoms we thought we have won for ourselves are vulnerable again to our new tyrants. The process wherein some of us were brought in out of the cold, finally included, rendered visible, must be cast against this backdrop along with everything else. It feels inappropriate to celebrate.

As **Rita Moreira** and **Norma Pontes** make clear in *Lesbian Mothers* (1972), women were struggling against acute homophobia that often separated families. The sex exemptions did nothing to protect the mothers who were fighting for maternal rights. It is important to frame the fact that the struggle for lesbian mothers in Canada is not over, or for indigenous mothers who see their bodies terrorized, sterilized and children apprehended at appalling levels or for lesbian mothers who in Ontario were still not recognized in 2006 as parents under vital statistics legislation.⁷ The Brazilian filmmakers directed this powerful documentary in North America seeking refuge from their country in the throes of dictatorship.

Nous rêvions à des colères magnifiques (we dreamt of magnificent angers) reads the banner created by **Projet Hybris** in 2018 for their play *Youngnesse*. This line from a poem by **Huguette Gaulin**, who committed suicide by self-immolation in Old Montreal in 1972 to protest the loss of beauty in the world, is unfurled with puppet hands, neon lights and crashing drums towards the awe-struck audience. Her distress is critical to my understanding of the revolutions of these years. Somehow, she seems uniquely, keenly aware of the trouble, long before the rest of us.

In 1969, the Cuyahoga River, which flows north through in Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Territory into Lake Erie, caught fire and burned acrid black smoke for weeks, stunning the world. A movement to curb industrial pollution and endless extraction had begun. As plastics overtook aluminum as ur-material in the late 1960s, the modern environmental emerged as a response to mainstream society. The psychedelic anti-system writing of queer contributors to Montreal's **MainMise** magazine (1970-1978) provide refreshing counter-perspectives. Sophistication, prudishness, monogamy and rationality itself were all on the chopping block, as writers published do-it-yourself guides to growing their own food and drugs and moving to a commune. The queer writers of the magazine, an important minority within the editorial board, did not demand inclusion on Parliament Hill, just as they united with like-minded others. Their commitment to the counterculture surpassed sexual identity politics. They dropped out of the system that had made their survival precarious, publishing a guide for others to follow.

Time and again, I wondered about the space accorded to those late-1960s struggles for freedom and sovereignty under those movements' own banners; I remember the queer people who contributed to Black Power and Red Power coalitions

who were not welcomed into the activist gay archives. The Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) communities at Akwesasne have resisted the colonial projects in their homeland since invasion and settlement. We can join Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell in that community with his 1969 short documentary *You Are on Indian Land* during a confrontation with the police for an insight into their struggle for freedom and thriving that one of the far too rare documentaries produced by an indigenous person in that era, a year after the founding of the American Indian Movement. His documentary was produced by the National Film Board the year indigenous people were granted the right to vote in Quebec.⁸

We could also follow Alanis Obomsawin, who visited the residential school attended by Omaskeko Cree children in her film *Christmas at Moose Factory* in 1971, reporting from the frontlines of Canadian genocidal family separation. As she told CBC's Rosanna Deerchild in 2019, she visited the community again recently, and as she greeted some of the people included in the film as children, a woman broke out in song - it was one that the young filmmaker had taught her 50 years previously, committed perfectly to memory this whole time. The focus on resistance to the Canadian state violence from a queer perspective had begun to feel like a bad subject, when residential schools held children until 1996.

When I was invited to curate a queer exhibition on the 1969 criminal code reform, I was aware my activist archival task was to counter the government's opportunistic narrative that would dominate the conversation, to propose more appropriate subjects of commemoration from the heady period of the late '60s. And I can happily correct the government's celebration. Surely, though, adopting a position corrective of the government's Pride anniversary only serves to reify or underscore their call for commemoration, it is still their mode of commemoration that we are borrowing. Listen up everyone, nothing to see here!

It is well and good to evidence our ongoing suffering and our refusals — our continued thriving and collective declarations of ungovernability too. But through the spectre of exuberance in the face of ongoing oppression, something feels amiss.

I awaken with a start. My mask has become a little worn and has come untied. I have been caught up in the panoply of sights and sounds in a world that was not yet so obviously coming undone then — the end of a party that was never meant to end. I'm ready to go home now. There is so much work to be done.

III. AN OCCASION

The body never believed in progress. Its religion is not the future but the today.

Octavio Paz

In a great flourish, the Canadian scatological eschatological papesse spreads wide the end times chasm and darkness pours out. And for the spirits and spectres to appear, we need it dark. As Mark Alice Durant reminds us that in the absence of light, our guests are free to fly through the air like spit-up milk.⁹ I bid you welcome. Please stay. We need your help now.

To borrow from Guy Hocquenghem's 1973 *Trois milliards de pervers* (republished from *Screwball Asses*): “As we rebel against our planet, our only option is to brand it with our filthy footprint, our moral calamity and our human pollution. Perhaps we will finally decide to derail the planet and desire it completely, its history and geography, its insects and hippopotamuses, its young and old, its males and females.”¹⁰ It will be with the stories of interdependence and enmeshing with the greater-than-human societies that we might one day pick out of the half-light the promise of queer liberation.

Till then, it does not get better. There is so much work to be done.

¹ “The 10 most recent animal extinctions in Canada,” *Macleans*, Dec 12, 2012. <https://www.macleans.ca/society/life/the-10-most-recent-animal-extinctions-in-canada/> ² Bradley, James. *The end of the oceans*. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/august/1533045600/james-bradley/end-oceans> ³ “Salt-Water Fish Extinction Seen By 2048,” *CBS News*, Nov 2, 2006. ⁴ Cain, Patrick. “6,000 Canadians would be covered by gay pardon decision,” *Global News*, February 29, 2016. <https://globalnews.ca/news/2547609/6000-canadians-would-be-covered-by-gay-pardon-decision/> ⁵ St. John Jones, L. W. “Canadian Immigration: Policy and Trends in the 1960s,” *International Migration*, Volume 11, Issue 4, October 1973. ⁶ Finkel, Alfred and Margaret Conrad. “History of the Canadian Peoples, 1867–Present,” 1998. ⁷ “Same-Sex Families in some Canadian Provinces still Face Discrimination Challenges” June 8, 2016. <https://www.lawnow.org/sex-families-canadian-provinces-still-face-discrimination-challenges/> ⁸ Moss, Wendy and Elaine Gardner-O'Toole. “Aboriginal People: History of Discriminatory Laws.” *Law and Government Division*, November 1987. ⁹ Durant, Mark Alice. “The Blur of the Otherworldly: Contemporary Art, Technology and the Paranormal,” *Art Journal*, vol. 62, no. 3, Fall 2003. ¹⁰ Hocquenghem, Guy. “The Screwball Asses,” *Semiotext(e)*, 2010, trans. Nor Wedell, originally published 1973 in *Trois milliards de pervers: grande encyclopédie des homosexualités*.

