

# Rural Queers?

## The Loss of the Rural in Queer

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*L'expérience urbaine "queer" est bien comprise dans les médias et à l'université alors que dans les régions rurales elle demeure invisible et problématique. Un glissement du paternalisme vers la prise de pouvoir est nécessaire pour établir une collaboration fructueuse entre les deux sphères.*

There is a seeming oxymoron in the use of the term "rural queer." The norm for queer experience in queer culture, academia and media is the urban queer experience. Rural queer experiences are often made invisible, are problematized, and when they are seen it is as a deviation from the norm. A shift in perception of the rural queer from the patronized to the empowered is necessary for successful collaborative work between these two spheres. Rurality is a subject that is often broached only in the interest of discussing the horrific backwoods from which some urban queers flee. My own queer sensibility as a 25-year-old, white, university-educated, genderqueer woman includes an affinity for difference, resistance, and action. Nowhere in my life have these better defined my ethos than over the past years spent living in rural and small town Nova Scotia—outside of the bubble of urban queer existence. Understanding of the negative effects of the urban queer attitude towards spaces beyond city limits and a shift in perception of the

rural queer is necessary. Out of this better understanding could come collaborative work where an exchange of skills, ideas, motivators and resources are shared between different regions without elevating urban work or minimizing rural expertise.

It should be noted that the queer community is not without any work around the experiences of queer life outside of the city. Some work has been done to expand upon our understanding of the rural Canadian queer experience. An excellent example of this can be seen in the book *Out Our Way* by Michael Riordon. In his collection of stories on the rural lesbian and gay experience, Riordon provides anecdotal evidence about these communities, through a diverse collection of stories from those who choose rural living. Despite innovative work such as this, existing literature has not sufficiently theorized or conceptualized the significance of rurality as an experience for queers.

The common understanding or perception of queer space is an urban one. The urban queer space can be defined or created through action, intention, visible promotion, capitalism, or social service. There is a broad variety of urban queer space that is demarcated as such. This may be made evident by the visible presence of queers, a symbol such as a rainbow, a business that caters to the

queer community, a queer social service agency, etc. The challenge of space creation is complicated further by gender, where many queer women experience a less visible presence even in urban centres when compared to gay men. The urban definition of "queer space" often focuses around an intentional act or visibility that identifies or "outs" a space as queer. These common associations of what constitutes queer space are largely non-existent in the rural context. There may be temporary creation of public queer space, such as a local dance, private parties, or a project (such as the one I work on, which is run out of a feminist organization) but for the most part these spaces are an urban reality, dependent on population and capital for their existence. Therefore, the definition or understanding of queer space must be reconstructed and further developed or it risks exclusion of the rural queer experience. This bias towards the urban queer experience results in a categorization of queer experiences that devalues the rural and exalts the urban.

I have observed that queer space does not exist in the rural context in the same form that it does in the urban: where are the rural queers? One barrier for the understanding of rural queer spaces from the urban perspective is the urban obsession with being "out." The "out" urban

space is associated with pride. According to an urban construct of queer, "outness" is the desired queer sentiment, the position to which queers grow and develop. "Outing" is seen as a personal choice or strength. It is valued, celebrated, and revered within queer community. This discussion of "out" is not an attempt to diminish the sense of liberation felt by many when they choose to live as

context, a more likely choice may be to maintain these essential bonds rather than to risk exclusion. Similarities can be drawn between the rural community and the many communities that exist within an urban space. Urban communities, with their anonymity and population size, can be isolating for many living within these contexts. The difference that I would note would be the option to

part of the broader community and develop their own known and recognized space within it. Through this, queerness is de-emphasized as a centralized form of identity in comparison to other elements of the individual such as familial, work, and regional alliances.

When these realities of urban/rural interaction translate into praxis, this prioritizing of a definition of queer space as urban denies, diminishes, and devalues the rural forum. The rural becomes the patronized or less privileged, a perception that is further enforced by economic disparities between rural and urban contexts. Rural is the site of torture from which queers flee, and it is home to the less fortunate or disadvantaged queer. This view of rural queer then allows the urban to act as a missionary outside of the urban space. The rural area can be "colonized" by the urban. The presumed superior ideas, tactics, and strategies of the urban queer experience are to be introduced to the backwaters of queerness and implemented to save the queer from the rural. The removal of the queer from the rural can then be equated with deliverance.

I draw here from personal experiences to demonstrate this point. I have spent the past two and a half years engaged in queer activism in and around Antigonish, Nova Scotia. In this time I have attended national conferences, visited LGBT centres in many cities, and engaged in discourse with others doing similar work. Some of this has resulted in exciting collaboration and an opportunity to share ideas and resources. At the same time, a far too common result is one of insulting and patronizing advice, suggestions, and reproach coming from a place of sincere good intention. Many times I have sat, quietly listening to reasons why a particular approach is necessary and superior, knowing that we have tried it, or ruled it out for very specific reasons that relate to our rural context and the realities of the work that we do. Attempts to clarify what we do, or

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an out queer. Instead, the conflict here is the association between the degrees of outness, and a hierarchical construction of queer lives. Self-esteem and confidence are judged as running parallel to the gradations of "out." Emphasis is placed on the individual achievement of queer identity, instead of on a contextual understanding of strategies, exposure, and complex relationship priorities. This distinction can be particularly salient within a rural context. In the urban context the individual is credited with their own achievement, of which "out" is an achievement-based state. The rural context presents a different societal structure, and therefore a different environment within which queers must consider the degree to which they choose to be out. Rural life is characterized by increased community interrelatedness, where there is a greater dependence on those around you for survival. This is particularly relevant when high unemployment rates in rural areas are factored in. To be a publicly out queer in a rural setting may affect your employment, risk your exclusion from a family, religious or social group, or present a safety concern. All of these are possibilities for the urban queer as well; however, within a less individualized, collective rural

choose a different community within an urban region. In a rural region, or a small town, there is most often not a number of communities to choose from, but one within which you choose to operate or not. Communities are built based on different commonalities, be they geographic, cultural, familial or work related. Within rural regions, those who might have no connection with each other in an urban centre find themselves interdependent for survival. Rural queers find themselves integrated into a system of local interdependence and may label their queerness differently as a strategy. Whether this is read as repression in the face of homophobia or a subversive inclusion of queer within a homophobic context is largely a matter of perspective. Most commonly it appears as though the urban queer ethos would state repression, while my rural framework and queer sensibility would suggest subversion. It may not appear to be a queer take over, instead it is a queer tinge inserted throughout a community, a different form of resistance from the isolationist tendencies of some urban queer communities. The rural queer can depend on a different reality; rather than the creation of a separate queer space, the rural queer can become

why we have chosen to alter our approach from tested and true urban methods are often not heard. No, I am not from the city, but yes, I have read the literature, I have seen the reports, I understand the approach, and I have struggled to discover diverse ways in which to creatively apply this to queer work within the community where I live.

The challenges and tensions that those doing rural work feel towards urban attitudes extend from very pragmatic challenges. Urban organizations do make outreach efforts that can be seen through such programs as urban university-based rural development projects. Within the queer community specifically this can be observed through urban programs or centres that include in their mandates rural populations. Collaborative work is not impossible, but these urban organizations are often overworked within their own communities, making it impossible to invest the time necessary to make inroads in a rural setting. The type of work done in urban areas versus that done in rural areas, by necessity, differs in significant ways that can make effective activism and service provision challenging if you are not based and established within your community.

A significant rural/urban difference can be seen in organizational mandates. Urban organizations, based on population size, visibility, and voice can provide specific services to very specific populations. Rural organizations, again based on population size, depend on a generalist approach to service the communities within which they operate. Rural organizations' work must be more broadly grounded, with staff who are able to extend themselves to topics and issues that may not fall directly in their area of expertise or service provision. If they do not do it, there is often no other organization that can. For groups such as the rural queer community, it is a challenge to find appropriate services and queer positive professionals. On the other hand, a benefit of this exists in the avoid-

ance of isolating queer knowledge within our own community in that this generalist approach requires that a broader segment of non-queer professionals gain insight and information about us. As a result, the rural queer tends to be far more interconnected and interdependent with the broader non-queer community than would be necessary for the urban queer.

pared to an urban organization and are more successful if the activists or staff are living in these rural communities.

The complexity of rural-based work and the attendant expenses make it attractive to granting organizations to funnel funding through urban-based organizations. These urban organizations come to the rural sphere with good intentions and a

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A second area in which the differences between urban and rural service provision is evident is in resource needs. When operating within a diverse and often expansive region, it is impossible to expect all people to come to one central place. A successful rural project requires outreach efforts and mobility. For successful outreach, rural work demands that organizations have specific kinds of community contacts to determine what is needed in the community and to determine how, where, and through whom services will most effectively reach the population. This varies according to where you are and there is certainly no standard rural model. These challenges are particularly evident when looking at rural queer youth work. Rural youth do not have access to public transit, they may be unable to attend an after school group because of transportation needs, and there is significantly decreased anonymity for both the youth and the adults working with them. To successfully do rural queer work you need mobility, staff who are known, trusted, and respected in the community and a great deal of flexibility and creativity. Because of these aspects, rural organizations do require increased funding to do the same amount of work when com-

number of assumptions around what will work and what is needed. However, the result is often a lack of secure, relevant services for the rural sphere and frustration on the part of the urban organization when their previously successful approaches fail in some or all communities. It can be most damaging when these urban organizations attempt to fulfil their rural quota by flying through town once or twice a year, stirring up issues, and then leaving those queers who live there to deal with the fallout. The most serious outcome of this conundrum is the resulting impact on rural initiatives. If an urban organization claims your region within their mandate to secure funding, whether or not they are actually able to provide this service becomes irrelevant. Rural community-based attempts to secure funding to address the same issue will find themselves deemed as duplication. And why would these rural initiatives get funding when "on paper" the service is already being provided by another organization at a much reduced rate? This is where urban assumptions and attitudes can seriously hinder progress in a region simply by virtue of how they identify their own region of service.

Beyond a discussion of funding for

non-profit organizations, the economic differences found between urban and rural communities must be examined in relation to the privileging of urban queerness. Economic autonomy or membership in a privileged class provides increased personal freedom. The increased autonomy provided by broader urban economies creates a plane upon which class is interwoven with queer identity. Here, an urban style of queer identity itself is inherently linked to class privilege. The more economically privileged or independent you are from your immediate community, the greater your autonomy around identity. The degrees of this autonomy vary, but the options for a queer individual living in a small town with certain economic privileges, are vastly different from a chronically poor queer in that same town. With the decline of localized and family-run business, increasing numbers of non-urban residents experience unemployment, seasonal employment or minimum wage service industry jobs. Rural residents have decreased access to services such as health care, educational options, and community services, which also means that there are fewer higher paying jobs in these industries. Reduced economic autonomy results in different choices around queer identity and privilege.

In order to bring together the work and accomplishments of rural and urban queers, shifts in perceptions are necessary. This is not only on the part of urban communities who must learn to appreciate diverse lifestyle choices, but also on the part of rural queers who need to feel confidence in the presentation of our lives in broader queer forums. Rurality needs to be respected as a choice, a choice that brings with it significant challenges and hardships, but which also allows for privileges that are not experienced within the urban context. Within the broader queer community, the rural queer needs space to talk about areas of struggle, without being dismissed with the familiar

quote "why don't you just move to the city?" as though urban life is the solution to queer challenges. Queer oppression is not unique within rural communities, and removal of queers from the rural sphere is not going to remedy this social flaw for either the queers or the communities in question. The rural queer does exist beyond urban stereotypes of lesbians who grow organic produce and gay men who run bed and breakfasts. We are political, organized, informed, and present, lurking beyond your urban sprawl, changing our commu-

nities, and inserting a queer tinge in the most unlikely of places.

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#### References

Riordon, Michael. *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996.

## ALISON PRYER

### urchin

when I was a girl  
 northern summers were enchanted,  
 each pale dusk dissolving  
 into a white dawn,  
 endless days of luminosity and grace  
 stretching before me.  
 i played wild at the shore in low tide  
 rock pools, my womb  
 as pristine as a sea urchin,  
 til a man's invading hand reached inside me  
 tearing open my vulnerable core,  
 leaving,  
 only a fragile shell in its place.  
 the tide came in and  
 soon washed the husk  
 away.

*Alison Pryer has taught in Germany, Japan, Egypt, and Canada. Her work has appeared in numerous North American and international academic and literary journals.*