
Queer Nation?

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Queer Nation?¹

My title is first an ironic reference to the American organization of that name. According to Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, Queer Nation was founded at an ACT UP New York meeting in April 1990. It rapidly became a part of the gay and lesbian zeitgeist, in many directions. It is worth noting that it began as a product of AIDS activism. While the demonstrations at Stonewall in 1968 are usually cited as the beginning of gay and lesbian liberation, it is generally agreed that it was the recognition of AIDS as a central and omnipresent problem which led to the greatest development of organization in the gay community.

AIDS is one of many issues given short shrift in this overview. This essay is a subjective version of who we are and of what the past tells us about who we are. Thus AIDS is but one element of contemporary gay and lesbian life which deserves more consideration than I can offer. But one of the reasons purported for the original creation of Queer Nation does affect my decision. Some felt that AIDS action was limited in two ways: first, it is an attack on a symptom, the disease, rather than the cause, homophobia; second, it is an emphasis on the negative, the disease, rather than the positive, the power of difference shared by homosexuals.

Just as the cause for the birth of the organization was complex, so is the name. The “queer” part might seem the most complicated but in essence it is just a reversal, in which a minority pridefully adopts a word which the majority has used pejoratively. However, it has become more troubled since Queer Nation first shouted: “We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!” Many gays and lesbians find the oppositional energy of

¹I must begin with a thank you to all who helped me in my work at the Robarts Centre. First, Daniel Drache, the director, Carole Carpenter, the acting director during my year as Robarts Chair, and Krystyna Tarkowski, the administrative assistant. Second, Michelle Power, the graduate assistant whose incredible ingenuity and persistence are responsible for the images here and for many others which could not be included. And third, Tamara Stieber, a graduate assistant who wasn’t very involved with this lecture but whose exemplary research on other projects allowed me the time to write this.

the term off-putting. As well, it has been adopted by many people who are neither gay nor lesbian, who wish to embrace the antiestablishment possibilities of whatever their sexual practice might be. For most, however, “queer” remains just a collective term for gays and lesbians, albeit one which tends to be used by and applied to the younger part of the population.

On the other hand, the “nation” of Queer Nation has two rather opposed interpretations. One is a belief in a community which supersedes the traditional view of the nation state. In this the nation is a greater tie between two homosexuals than between a heterosexual and a homosexual of the same state. The other interpretation is what might be called “a life of irony.” This is the one explored by Berlant and Freeman, who consider the camp way that gay and lesbian activists in the United States use symbols of patriotism such as the flag. The traditional American patriot stands in front of the Stars and Stripes, his hair cut to marine length, holding a gun. The queer nationalist is in the same pose, with the same haircut, but has traded the gun for a dildo, and is quite likely a she. This is not so much a greater nation as the old one turned upside down.

Thus irony is enshrined in the name of the American Queer Nation but the irony revolves once again in Canada. This is the base reason for the title of this essay. I do not mean to suggest that gay and lesbian culture in Canada constitutes a “queer nation.” If anything, we are more disparate than the American homosexual community. But Canada in general is a strange nation,² as so many have pointed out, or “queer,” which at one time was the more common usage. And this queerness of Canada in some ways enables the queers of Canada to function in a quite different way from that enshrined by Queer Nation in the United States.

²On being asked to explain this, I felt a moment of shock. My first response is, “You either get it or you don’t.” But how about a joke: Speakers from various nationalities were asked to provide a title for an essay on the elephant. The Englishman said, “The Elephant and the Empire.” The Kenyan said, “The Elephant and Ecology.” The Indian said, “The Elephant as Spiritual Presence.” The American said, “The Elephant: Symbol of the Grand Old Party.” The Canadian said, “The Elephant: A Provincial or a Federal Responsibility?”

As in almost any examination of “Canada” this discussion is caught by the inclusion or exclusion of Quebec. My decision in favour of exclusion is based on what I see as an essential difference from the trajectory I am exploring. I make no comment on sovereignty as a movement when I say Quebec culture is a vital and important one but it is not my culture. Michel Tremblay’s *Hosanna* is an excellent example, in that it represents a gay culture and a sense of nationalism which are both quite alien to those experienced in the rest of Canada. Thus, when John Greyson makes *Lilies*, his film adaptation of Michel Marc Bouchard’s play *Les Feluettes*, both director and writer are gay Canadians, but I still see it as a cross-cultural creation. So the following is not of Quebec but of “English Canada,” of “The Rest of Canada,” or whatever misshapen and inappropriate euphemism one wishes to use.

How To Be Canadian

There are many similarities between the gay and lesbian cultures of different nations, but there are also many differences, which tend to reflect the overall characters of the nations. Canadians are at once less flamboyant and yet more respectful of variety than their American neighbours. The Canadian gay comic Scott Thompson is an interesting figure for this discussion. On the television program “Kids in the Hall,” he often had the opportunity to do complicated and subtle commentary on gay culture, something he gave up to be the gay fixture in the corner of an American sitcom. Before he left, he often voiced a complaint typical of the Canadian artist: that local gay culture failed to show him appropriate respect. This led to *Xtra*, Toronto’s gay newspaper, having a little game in which they put a photo of Thompson in every issue and asked the readers to pick him out in a variation on *Where’s Waldo*.

One of Thompson’s characters on “Kids in the Hall” was Buddy, the flaming queen who tended a gay bar. In one episode he took time to demonstrate what it means to be a Canadian by blowing his nose on a handkerchief which resembled a Canadian flag. He said, “Now you can’t do that in the States.” It would be difficult to reach all the layers of that one, based on the implication that not only is Canadian

nationalism ironic, its anti-nationalism is ironic. And both are ironic comments on American nationalism.

A few years ago, in Guelph, at a conference of women playwrights, an organizer was giving the usual housekeeping announcements when a woman stood up in the audience and said, “I resent having this name tag which labels me as coming from the United States. I am proud to be a member of the lesbian nation. My tag should say ‘lesbian.’ And your name tag should say the same.” The organizer replied, “But I’m a Canadian.” This anecdote and Thompson’s skit not only refuse to acknowledge homosexual difference from mainstream Canada but they also present an ambivalent respect for certain Canadian values, particularly tolerance.

However, other Canadian values have caused homosexual Canadians great trauma. In Canada, as in all other countries, sexuality is a physical fact which is organized in social terms. This is one of the reasons I refer here to gays and lesbians and not to other sexual possibilities, most notably bisexuals and the transgendered. My explanation — or excuse — is that my topic is not really sexual possibilities but rather the organization of same-sex relations. The majority of people whose lives provide the focus of this paper have had some activity which could be called heterosexual and are in that sense bisexual. Many have parts of their identity somewhere on the transgendered axis. But they are discussed here because of the part which could be called, which has been called, homosexual.

The Regulation of Desire

This social organization through this basic division between heterosexuals and homosexuals provides the title of the best book on the subject in Canada, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*, by Gary Kinsman. Much of that regulation comes from elsewhere. Canada has its peculiarities as a remnant of British imperialism which is now part of the American economic empire. Canada’s laws began with British statutes against sodomy. As Jonathan Goldberg points out in *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities*, such laws were not simply proscriptions against same-sex

practices but also attempts to control sexualities which were seen as endangering the state. As Canada became a nation and developed its own regulations, primarily shaped by changes in both British and American laws, the apparent religious impetus of anti-homosexual ordinances was also always part of a vision of the state.

This “Queer Nation?” — and the question mark seems to me essential — I am describing is a product of many factors. Thus, while there is nothing remotely close to a unified history, a tradition of homosexuality passed on from generation to generation, our contemporary society has at least a family resemblance with moments of homosexuality in Canada’s history. The variations between these examples suggest the gaps and connections of today’s community. Scott Thompson’s *Buddy* is a figure sewn from a cloth with more than a few threads.

First Nations

The first European arrivals in Canada encountered extremely different orderings of same-sex sexualities, those of the First Nations. The usual response, as recorded in various missionary narratives, was revulsion at the apparent eruption of what they invariably saw as “sodomy,” for all the reasons suggested above. Of course, in those early years there was no specific Canada but rather the Americas, under various versions of colonization. The best source for research on homosexuality in the First Nations in general is found in the writings of Will Roscoe, an American. He has published several studies of specific cultural manifestations, but his broad analysis in “Was We’wha a Homosexual: Native American Survivance and the Two-Spirit Tradition” provides an excellent consideration of various ethnographic concerns. As Roscoe demonstrates, terms associated with Native homosexuality such as “berdache” simply reflect the assumptions of the first Europeans who contacted them. “Berdache” itself came from a Persian term for a slave youth but by the Renaissance had come to mean a kept boy in a homosexual relationship. This has no resemblance to any Native traditions of same-sex relationships.

Some of the first significant scientific studies of homosexuality, published in the middle of the nineteenth century, viewed it as a third sex. In most cases this was a male homosexual but some arguments suggested that the male and female homosexual should be grouped as the same. This was often based on assumptions of polarities, males at one end and females at the other. Gays and lesbians provided the middle. The third sex might fit some Native contexts, in which there were rules for males, rules for females, and rules for the berdaches. In some nations, males could not sleep with males, nor females with females, nor berdaches with berdaches, but any one of the three could marry any one of the other two. From my own limited research, this system was primarily organized with only one sex taking the role of the middle gender. Thus, in one culture there would be male berdaches, and in another, female.

In contemporary Native cultures the common term is “two-spirited,” which implies having characteristics of both male and female. This captures the essence of most Native traditions which seem to work more in terms of cross-gendered behaviour than of same-sex desire. Roscoe notes the difficulty of being certain about historical sexual practices, but he believes that most male berdaches had sexual relations with males. However, contemporary sociological and biological views of the homosexual tend to see rather profound differences between most transgendered persons and the homosexual, at least in general. The homosexual, whether male or female, is not “deviant” in gender assignment but is rather “deviant” in the gender of desire.

Whether or not this distinction would have fitted pre-contact Native cultures, it seems to provide at least some distinction between contemporary Native homosexual communities and what might be called the hegemonic gay and lesbian cultures. The latter tend to play with cross gendered behaviour but reject it as a deep meaning within their culture. Native gays and lesbians usually embrace the transgendered and have little attraction to the anti-drag queen “straight-acting” gay culture so evident elsewhere. This is reflected in the portrait, from *Xtra*, of Billy Merasty, the Native actor and writer. He hardly appears to be governed by church teachings or anybody’s laws in that Marilyn Monroe-like image. But this vitality which seems to fly in

the face of the Canadian norm could be a contemporary manifestation of the berdaches who so frightened the first arrivals.

Still, contemporary Native cultures in general are just as homophobic as the mainstream. Regardless of their traditions of the berdaches, missionaries, government, and the general pressure of history have changed their social organization in many ways. For Native homosexuals, their two-spirited community has become a refuge much like Toronto's Church and Wellesley district for the rest of the gay and lesbian population. Although only one of the various gay areas in Canadian cities, Toronto is often used as the generic Canadian sacred site, like the Stonewall-Christopher area of New York.

MollyWood North

The present representation is admittedly Toronto-centric. First, greater documentation exists for Toronto than for other places. And most of the analysis has been done in Toronto on Toronto. But also, the tradition for gays and lesbians throughout the Western world has been to gravitate to the metropolis, partly to escape pressures of conservative homes and partly to seek others like themselves who made the journey before. Far more than for other Canadians, the gay Canadian has treated Toronto as a mecca of opportunity.

Alexander Wood, who has left his name on two streets in the Church and Wellesley area, is the first figure in Canadian history who is generally acknowledged to be homosexual. Arriving as a young man in 1793 from his native Scotland, he became a successful merchant and magistrate. In the latter position, however, he used the law to get himself in trouble with the law. He claimed that a young woman had accused various young men of rape and had said that she had scratched her assailants' genitals. In search of evidence, he examined the private parts of all of the suspects. Not surprisingly, in the small community of York this held him up to ridicule and he returned to Scotland. But two years later, in 1812, he was back and once more succeeded, again becoming a magistrate. His support of the Family Compact and particularly of Bishop Strachan maintained his position but his past continued to follow him, and a former friend, Judge Powell, made him

object of an attack by a pamphlet. Yet the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* records: “At his death the *British Colonist* called him one of Toronto’s ‘most respected inhabitants.’”

Wood’s prominence in our past partly reflects the system of history: those who were best known are now best remembered. But it is particularly interesting that he should have been such a combination of the sexually proscribed and the courtier of the powerful. This seems to be a common position for the homosexual male throughout history. Much like Buddy in the bar, the gay man seems to have recognized the various versions of guise needed to survive in a homophobic world. Given my little knowledge of Wood, I hesitate to make unfair comparisons, but his story is just a bit too close to Roy Cohn for comfort.

This again fits the broader definition of sodomy. In Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, the Roy Cohn character denies that he is homosexual because as an assistant to Senator Joe McCarthy and associate of President Nixon he was too much a part of state power to be such a deviant, regardless of his sexual practices. It seems likely that Wood was a somewhat similar figure, a sodomite redeemed by his governmental conformity. Of course this is not a view of Wood which Canadian gay culture especially wants. A play about his life, *MollyWood*, by John Wimbs and Christopher Richards, was produced in 1994, as the general Canadian nationalist interest in recovering a forgotten past extends to our gay ancestors.

The title itself suggests the flavour. As a pun on Hollywood, it implies the contrast between gay Tinseltown and the muddy York in which Wood found himself. The term “Molly” was used from the seventeenth century as a pejorative much as “faggot” is today, but it also was generic. Homosexuals congregated at what were called “Mollyhouses.” In this sense, “MollyWood” is depicted in the play as a place, the equivalent of park sex for gay men today: an unsafe spot, potentially open to the world but avoided by the world in the hopes that the world might not see the anonymous acts of men hiding their sexuality. Thus Wood, whom the *DCB* records as a henchman of the oligarchy which hanged William Lyon Mackenzie’s rebels of 1837, a group seeking their own liberation from an oppressive government,

becomes in the play a gentle victim of a homophobic society. My only reply is: Why should gay culture not be allowed, like any other, to produce the historical narratives which it needs?

Canada and the Age of Wilde

The late nineteenth century marks the beginning of a figure which European society called the homosexual. The definitions were provided by Germany and the famous identities by Britain. Oscar Wilde is so profound a symbol, both in his age and today, that he was a focus for discussion of “that sort” on his brief trip to Canada. As in the other colonies, there was a sense that such behaviour had to be imported; it could not be a part of the hardy pure colonial life. Wilde’s own story offers a typically Canadian modification of that view. In *De Profundis*, Wilde states that his Canadian friend and former lover, Robert Ross, was the only person to acknowledge him publicly as he was taken away to prison. What a profoundly Canadian footnote to a famous story: At a time when a flamboyant Englishman became a world-wide icon of British state oppression of homosexuality, a Canadian homosexual overcame fears of revelations of association and instead embraced ethics to represent the possibility of a continued civility. Of course it is also very Canadian that it may be an act *De Profundis* but it remains a footnote.

Through much of Canadian history, as my reference to Wilde suggests and as Kinsman describes, the Canadian experience was at times a part of, and usually at least similar to, the American and British ones. There are various figures, more or less closeted, such as Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, the Toronto sculptors known as “The Girls.” A clearer picture is provided by a general excursion through legal records, as in Stephen Maynard’s work, *Of Toronto the Gay: Homosexuality, Policing and the Dialectics of Discovery, Urban Toronto 1890-1930* (to be published by University of Chicago Press). Of course most of this deals with male-male sexuality, as Canada, like the rest of the English-speaking world, had a very clearly gendered version of closeted homosexuality. The generalization about same-sex relationships between women is that the “spinster” was in a coupled

relationship known as a “Boston marriage,” assumed to be just two women sharing. On the other hand, the “confirmed bachelor” lived alone and found his sex where he could, thus being constant prey to the legal system.

The Gay Fifties?

In 1972 when I was travelling in England I met and stayed with a couple in Sussex. At age seventeen, the Canadian half of the pair had left Calgary for the war and had never returned. He is typical of one homosexual response to the Canada of mid-century: leave. While the metropolis of Toronto might provide some space, it seemed limited in comparison to what could be found in the more accommodating life of the expatriate in Europe. The alternatives are explored in two films. One is *Jim Loves Jack*. Jim Egan began his activism with anti-homophobic letters and articles in 1949. He was often a lone voice, an apparent crank who continued to confront Canadian heterosexism, usually in ways which the general populace ignored. In 1995 he became national news as he and his long-term partner, Jack Nesbitt, reached the Supreme Court with an attempt to gain the shared pension benefits available to heterosexual couples. While their claim was denied, the majority of the court agreed the situation was discriminatory.

The film *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Love*, by Aerlyn Weissman and Lynn Fernie, follows the lesbian side of the story. The substance of the film is interviews with women who participated in lesbian life in the forties and fifties, using a number of striking clips and still photos. The documentation is very important but I wish to point to the image on the poster, which represents almost all parts of this possibly queer nation. The illustration imitates those on the covers of the lesbian pulp fiction of the war and just after. I use the term “lesbian” although that is the subject rather than the audience. There is a scene in a Woody Allen film where someone sententiously says, “There are many types of love: a man for a woman, a father for a child, a priest for his god....” and the Woody Allen character replies, “Don’t forget my favourite: two girls!” Thus this lesbian fiction was rather for heterosexual men seeking a look at the wild side of women.

But as the film shows, women seeking stories of same-sex desire snuck into the drugstores and bus terminals and bought these books. Of course they were even harder to find in Canada but some of the money-hungry publishers penetrated the hinterland and a woman might discover one on a Sudbury newsstand. *Forbidden Love* presents an interview with a woman who recalls that these books convinced her that all the lesbians lived in Greenwich Village and so one weekend she and her partner dressed in their best butch-femme gear and went to New York. This might be just the same as the proverbial journey from Kansas to sin city but it seems a particularly Canadian paradigm. The deviant from the Canadian norm reads an American story of deviance and goes to the United States to find the other deviants.

The film itself extends this process in many ways. One of the most attractive elements of the film is the narrative represented by this image. Between the interviews and documentary footage runs a sentimental lesbian romance, in which these pulp fiction covers dissolve into live action. The process seems to suggest that at the same time as the interviewees were struggling to live and love as lesbians in a homophobic Canada, there were images, in books but even more in their minds, which suggested the vision which could be. The basic source for these was male oriented fiction which was very soft core but had what might be called a pornographic intent: it meant to be obscene. And it was just one small part of the continued dumping of American trash on the Canadian market.

Forbidden Love was produced by Studio D of the National Film Board. Canadians are often less impressed with the NFB than they should be but in some American film schools there are complete courses devoted to the NFB as the quintessential producer of the documentary film, and in many ways it has been the vehicle, much more than books or magazines, more than television, perhaps even more than radio, for telling Canadians who we are. The segment known as Studio D was set up as a reaction to the obvious absence of women behind the cameras. The larger impetus of Studio D was thus feminist, but it also had a significant part which was lesbian. So this film is an example of lesbians, in a sense, taking over the producer of the national image for their own purposes. A queering of the nation, perhaps.

But this specific image represents American trash, arguably American trash of a particularly bad sort, in which the perceived exoticism of a minority culture is reproduced in a stereotyped form for the majority. The equivalent of war bonnets and tomahawks in Banff. In this case, sophisticated cultural theorists, theorists who have declared feminist, lesbian, and nationalist agendas, have produced a film which makes this image of far greater value than it has ever had before. And have made it an intelligent part of Canadian lesbian history. Many have asserted that Canadian history is not a line but a series of tangents: national events influenced more by world politics than by national events which preceded them. This claim is made still more emphatically in minority histories. Thus an African-Canadian is told to look to the Harlem Renaissance rather than Africville. But here, *Forbidden Love* has not only recorded Canadian lesbian history in the interviews, it has provided yet another reworking of American trash as a vehicle for Canadian sophistication and it has done it by creating a line not through the trash, but through an earlier viable Canadian use of the trash.

The Homophobic Nation

I am attempting to build a positive portrait of gay and lesbian moments rather than to document the negative, but there can be no question the social position of gays and lesbians in this period — and much later — was negative. There were many persecutions. An extreme case was that of Everett George Klippert, declared a dangerous sexual offender in 1966. Many elements came together in this conviction, some quite specifically Canadian. Klippert was first arrested in the Northwest Territories. He thus represents many of the difficulties associated with what still could be called Canada's hinterlands. He lived in a region where extreme homosociality and extreme homophobia were uncomfortable bedfellows. All social contact tended to be intense and revealing because of the limited population. Social coercion on some problems, such as alcohol consumption, was lax, on others, such as sexual deviance, severe. The law was conservative and the mechanics of legal process tended to be unsophisticated.

To this can be added class in that Klippert was a mechanic's helper. What might have happened to Alexander Wood had he been a mechanic's helper? Klippert lacked the skills or the finances to protect himself from the law. As well he represented the class which bourgeois Canada believed to be the rude and brutal who must be controlled if society is to be protected.³ Still, there seemed no question to many parts of society, even including the editorial writers of *The Toronto Star*, that sentencing Klippert as a dangerous offender represented extreme homophobia. This crystallized various energies which were already developing. The Association for Social Knowledge, one more example of Canada's attraction to provocative acronyms, began in Vancouver in 1964. Similar but usually less well-organized groups existed elsewhere, such as the Canadian Council on Religion and the Homosexual, but it was ASK which coalesced the most useful gay resources, including publicizing Klippert.

As Canada moved towards the law reform of 1969, which removed the most general proscriptions against homosexuality, Prime Minister Trudeau made the very quotable assertion, "The State has no business in the bedrooms of the nation." This is a particularly interesting phrase in light of the tradition of sodomy laws. Renaissance European governments believed that the state was dependent on certain conformity in these bedrooms. But Trudeau was attempting to move Canada *as a nation* away from state control of such individual freedoms as are found in sexuality. Sexual morality was no longer to be a microcosm of governmentality.

After Stonewall?

In my reading, this shift in policy provides the tone for Canada's sexual coming of age. This limited sexual freedom was not a product of

³The recent scandal at Maple Leaf Gardens seems one more example. The two men who were charged were working-class men with semi-skilled jobs. Society's general response has been phrased as obvious revulsion at the pedophilia but whenever such people are accused of actions which might be seen to represent the eruption of primitive id-laden forces, bourgeois Canada quakes in its bankers' brogues.

opposition and liberation demonstrations but instead a moving of the Canadian tradition of tolerance into statute. Groups such as ASK had made important statements but the pressures for change were arguably less from without than from within government. Yet again the Canadian nation had adapted. But at the same time the Stonewall riots, a particularly American manifestation, were happening in New York. What seems like a coincidence, or at most a similar response to the zeitgeist of the sixties, once again led to an American event becoming the dominant metaphor in Canada. Thus the period of gay liberation throughout North America is “after Stonewall.”

As someone who still feels very strongly the Canadian nationalism of the early seventies, I hesitate to accept an event so clearly American as a watershed in my culture, even my minority culture. I still don't want to accept that “the lesbians are in Greenwich Village.” This period, the late sixties, was a time of massive disruption throughout the world, from the quiet revolution in Quebec, through the Paris riots, through the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia, through the release of *Sergeant Pepper's*. The times they were a-changing. In its usual fashion, American culture seemed able to put its stamp on all of it.

Perhaps Canadian developments were linked to Stonewall but it is certainly possible to find many Canadian events which offered sufficient definition, and in particularly Canadian ways. As Douglas Sanders has pointed out, the 1969 criminal code reform emphasized not the need to erase the perceptions of the deviance of same-sex desire nor the rights of those who identified as homosexual, but rather the freedom of any Canadian to live as he or she wishes in the privacy of the home. Arguably, this liberty needed to be established within a society which believed in “good government.” This was very different from the United States where the freedom of the individual has always been assumed and rather extravagant claims about the evil of sexual expression had to be made to justify infringement of such freedom.

Censorship and Feminism

There are a number of pivotal moments in the early seventies, as with demonstrations, but the most important stems from a magazine. From

1971, *The Body Politic* developed a reputation for radical but also thoughtful analysis of gay culture. Many of its writers were new arrivals from the United States, some deserters and draft dodgers, but some just escapees from the American system. This American presence is one reason why, regardless of its obvious low-production values and limited distribution, *The Body Politic* had a continental and even wider influence. The magazine had various problems with censorship but its most disastrous encounter was a result of Gerald Hannon's article on "man-boy love" in 1977. As Becki Ross records in her book on lesbian activism in Toronto in the seventies, *The House that Jill Built*, this was a particularly bad moment for the uneasy coalition between gays and lesbians.

The alliance of bourgeois homosexuals of both genders had existed at least since the late nineteenth century, but rather than some "natural" bonding it was primarily a mutual support network in the face of homophobia. As *Forbidden Love* shows, this was limited but important in Toronto. The rise of feminism in the sixties, however, raised questions about the validity of this association. While older lesbians felt more in common with other homosexuals than with the mass of women, the younger felt quite differently. Ross quotes Gilleen Chase from 1974:

I do not identify with the issue of homosexuality, I identify with the issue of gender. Gay women know instinctively, even if not yet politically, that they are being oppressed, and that they are oppressed by their so-called homosexual brothers. (36)

The percentage of writers for *The Body Politic* who were women was small and apparently the proportion of female readers was still smaller but there were prominent exceptions. One, Jane Rule, defined her contributions as opposition to homophobia and censorship. She records this in her aptly named collection, *A Hot-Eyed Moderate*:

By writing for *The Body Politic*, I refuse to be a token, one of those who doesn't really seem like a lesbian at all. If the

newspaper is found to be obscene, I am part of that obscenity. And proud to be, for, though my priorities and the paper's aren't always the same, I have been better and more thoughtfully informed about what it is to be homosexual in this culture by *The Body Politic* than by any other paper.(64)

This is a period remembered by many but documented by few and analysed by still fewer. Still, Ross's portrait of radicalism and purity among lesbians in the seventies seems accurate. I was with a lesbian friend at a folk festival in Toronto in 1976 and a few of her friends came up to her. She introduced me but they refused to acknowledge me or even to look at me, apparently simply because I was male. In that moment, and in my friend's long apologies afterwards, I was seeing the crisis recorded by Ross.

This is by no means a specifically Canadian issue but it is sufficiently important that it is worth emphasizing here. The necessities of feminism led to assumptions and confusions enshrined in Ti-Grace Atkinson's famous dictum: "feminism is the theory and lesbianism is the practice."(Ross, 27) Many lesbian feminists thus sought an unadulterated life, first in as much separation from men as possible, but then in rejection of anything which might interfere with absolute woman-identification, including feminine clothing, Marxism, straight jobs, etc., etc. Heterosexual feminists felt at once inadequate because they still associated with men and on the other hand afraid that their coalition with lesbians would interfere with that association. So the very efforts of creating bonds with all women were also dividing them.

And dividing them from gay men, even from gay men's understanding as this extremely important controversy at the nexus between lesbian and woman had no counterpart for the gay male. Male bonding at the level of the boardroom, the shop floor, or the hockey team had long been a fact of life for all men. Few wanted anything more from such associations and many gay men did not want anything more except sex, although there were always those such as Jim and Jack who sought a specific "long-term companion." Thus, it was not difficult for gay men to agree on homophobia and closeting as the issues. While the lesbians tended to see a profound difference between activists and

“bar-women,” often phrased in terms of feminism, the gays just saw this as a distinction between those who would work for the cause and those who wouldn’t.

This creates an interesting comment on Gerald Hannon’s most recent problems. Subsequent to *The Body Politic* scandal, he became well respected as a journalist on gay issues, including a number of pieces for *The Globe and Mail*, and he became a part-time journalism instructor at Ryerson University. In 1996, an old story resurfaced when claims were made that he had supported the National Association for Man-Boy Love in class. Soon after, *The Sun*, maintaining its tradition of homophobic journalism, revealed that Hannon was a part-time prostitute, which led to the loss of his position. At this point, however, lesbians and gays were to a great extent united in their opposition to this discrimination and to anything which censured or censored gay and lesbian culture. The traditional belief has been that men are much more interested in objectifying sexuality and thus the pornography industry has been directed to a male market, whether straight or gay. Recently, however, an avant-garde of the lesbian community has been creating its own images for itself. The title of the Kiss and Tell collective seems especially innovative and also revealing in its inversion of female stereotypes. The first major anti-censorship academic study of the Butler decision on obscenity is by four women.

This does not of course mean that lesbians support pedophilia, nor does it mean that lesbians have abandoned feminist issues. For one thing, on issues such as spousal rights and adoption, lesbianism and feminism are once more enjoined. But today, for many, perhaps most, activist females in Canada, of any race or sexual orientation, feminism of a certain order is a given. Thus for a lesbian activist to choose to emphasize discrimination on issues of sexual orientation, regardless of gender, is not surprising. Coalitions with activist gay men seem inevitable and often even comfortable. The connection is as it has not been since the early sixties, and in comparison with those days it is more considered and more substantive. And the boys in the bars? They’re still in the bars.

Today: Out of the Many Closets and into the Arts

Although no one person could suggest the varieties of gay and lesbian cultures in Canada today, Svend Robinson is possibly their most significant symbol. An activist in mainstream politics, he represents his minority culture in both senses that Marx uses: he is there to take care of and also there in the place of. This is very different from the gay liberation demonstrations on Parliament Hill in the early seventies. And yet neither Robinson nor other gay and lesbian parliamentarians have been able to produce more than quite modest successes on adoption rights and human rights legislation. Still, the future might be quite different. The anti-same-sex marriage bills going through the various legislatures in the U.S. seem to be modified or even rejected in the face of even one or two gay or lesbian legislators.⁴

The arts have long been a place for gays and lesbians but it depends on the category. A director or actor whose sexual orientation need not confront the audience is much less problematic than overt gay and lesbian material in writing, art, or music. Many important elements of Canadian theatre, such as the plays of Brad Fraser or the various productions at Buddies in Bad Times, have a prominent gay and lesbian component but they could be seen to be out of the mainstream. Thus I wonder if it was safer that the first out lesbian in American popular music was a Canadian, kd lang, who presumably could be excused as really a foreigner anyway.

As suggested by the comments on Robinson above, inclusion and exclusion are central questions for gay and lesbian cultures in Canada. A gay Native writer, Daniel David Moses, said that the mainstream “is pretty wide but it’s spiritually shallow.”(xiv) To extend the metaphor, however, the tributaries can offer some spiritual sustenance. Buddies is certainly not as “mainstream” as say the Canadian Stage production of *Angels in America* but it is a constant figure in Toronto culture and provides the closest thing in the Canadian arts to a permanent gay and

⁴A detailed analysis of both the Canadian and American contexts can be found in David Morton Rayside’s *On the Fringe*.

lesbian presence. The shift in artistic director, in 1997, from Sky Gilbert to Sarah Stanley, shows that it is both a gay and lesbian theatre.

The positioning of sexual orientation in the arts is arguably more successful and yet also more subtle in Canada than in some other cultures. One of Canada's best-known and best-loved authors, Timothy Findley, has long been known to be gay, his companion always prominent in his life. Some twenty years ago, he was to be profiled in a feature titled "A Day in the Life" in the Saturday newspaper supplement, *Weekend*, but the need to include his partner prevented this very good publicity opportunity. Still, the tenor of his fiction and his general demeanour seem to have deflected much of the homophobia felt by artists who are more overtly homoerotic, such as the photographer Evergon and the painter Attila Lukacs. Evergon's reworking of homoerotic anthropomorphic images of the classics and Lukacs's paintings of nude skinheads in imitation of Caravaggio have been deemed too explicit for many. And yet they have also sold very well to mainstream buyers. Ashley MacIsaac presents a similar case. Recently the popular fiddler has been very open about his sexual practices and it apparently caused him to be removed from the *Maclean's* list of honoured Canadians. However, he was still named Male Artist of the Year in 1996 at the East Coast Music Awards. This might be the triumph of the regional over the national but perhaps it also comments on importance. As kd lang said, it seems as though once you achieve a certain status, coming out doesn't hurt you but actually can make you still more prominent. MacIsaac still seems popular nationally but it remains to be seen whether his revelations will destroy the usual Canadian acceptance of idiosyncracies which remain assuredly safe.

Multiculturally Queer?

The House that Jill Built refers so often to "largely white, middleclass," it almost becomes a litany. But of course this description applied to almost all social activism in Canada in the seventies. In recent history, there have been many struggles for change. Performance poets De Poonani Posse, like the academic Wesley Crichlow and, perhaps most important, the writer and filmmaker Dionne Brand and the writer and

anthologist Makeda Silvera, situate themselves not just racially but also ethnically. They blend sexual orientation with their African and Caribbean ancestry. De Poonani Posse refers to the racism of Canadian society, including gay and lesbian society, and the homophobia of both the immigrant community and the homes of their roots. To this Crichlow adds the observation that Canada has its own black gay culture which must make itself known, something beyond the small space given to be black and gay in North America which has been defined by Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill, the America of James Baldwin. And just as black gay and lesbian Canadians are waging these battles for identity, so too are Asian Canadians and South Asian Canadians and every other facet of Canada's many ethnicities. For the multicultural nation is also a queer nation.

Many more names deserve mention but I can't avoid the most famous Native playwright, Tomson Highway, and someone who has won awards for both plays and her novel, Ann-Marie MacDonald. But I must also turn to Daphne Marlatt, who represents a connection which is of particular interest given my opening comments. In her work with Nicole Brossard, published in the latter's *À tout regard*, Marlatt has not only made a significant contribution to feminism, she has provided one of the few major blendings between English-Canadian culture and Quebec. Greyson's *Lilies* and translations of Michel Tremblay are of interest but they are not crossings, not hybrids. Marlatt and Brossard have offered a lesbian vision, a communication which blends feminism, female sexuality, and language theory as developed in both French and English, which literally embraces the "two nations."

Is it too much to see this strange nation as a queer nation?⁵ When I was in England in the early seventies, I was surprised to find the term there was not inevitably pejorative but was generic among older homosexuals: "Do you think that young man is queer?" "I have found England a good place to be queer," etc. It was a possible state of being, different from but not necessarily in opposition to. This might seem very different from the group who called themselves Queer Nation.

⁵ A specifically literary answer to this question is found in Peter Dickinson's *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada*.

And yet the work of the word “queer” recently has created still more confusion. Just a few short years ago it seemed a term which was at once strident and inclusive. All gays and lesbians who wished to think of themselves in oppositional terms could be queer. This was easily expanded to include the transgendered and bisexual. But the term “queer” seems ever more elastic, now extending to an array of possibilities. Such as the Lesbian, Gay, and Straight Teachers Network in the United States, or that delightful T-shirt, “Straight But Not Narrow.” Or the PFLAG organization. You might guess that it is lesbians and gays who have dominated all gay activism but there have been many instances where Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays have been the leaders in anti-discrimination actions.

Some years ago I wrote a piece in which I suggested that Native sovereignty in Canada is an impossibility which is a necessity. I wonder if this queer nation is the same thing. We are a queer nation, whether because of Quebec or because of many other things. I must repeat the words spoken by another Robarts Chair a few years ago. Linda Hutcheon recalled a competition for the Canadian equivalent to “As American as motherhood and apple pie.” The winner was “As Canadian as possible under the circumstances.” If any nation is queer enough to accept a queer nation, it must be this one. But as implied in Hutcheon’s line, we should probably keep the question mark.

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