

A Portable Frontier: Two Gender-Divergent Navigations of Western Canada

Julian Gunn

I.

There would be a map here
 Fold-line at Vancouver
 And when the pages met
 Whitehorse would kiss California
 —Julian Gunn

Rae Spoon and Ivan Coyote are Canadian gender-retired and gender-divergent queer artists and performers and collaborators on the stage show and book *Gender Failure*. They are profoundly engaged with the landscapes, human communities, and perspectives of Western Canada—for Coyote the Yukon as a psychic home and for Spoon the prairies as a problematic origin. Both also experience Vancouver as a location of queer identity and community (also often problematic). As touring artists, both have spent a great deal of time traversing the landscape of Western Canada. As of this writing, both artists have adopted “they” as the singular pronoun they wish people to use for them. Trans* and gender-divergent people are often prohibited by social and even grammatical rules from “coming to rest” in collective space and in language. These artists have responded by repurposing and reinterpreting Western Canadian spaces, and especially the process of traversing these spaces, to express gender-divergent embodiments and narratives. In particular,

they delineate the separation of bodily and social being enforced by the gendered prohibitions built into collective spaces, and the struggle to reconcile, or even to express, this division.

What is a frontier? It is not quite a border, but the territory alongside. It has an edge that can be crossed, but no precise dimensions. Structurally, a frontier is a mutually defining—yet unequally defined and enforced—boundary zone between two political entities. It is a zone of dispute and conflict. In Western Canada, *frontier* also has an inevitable colonial valence. It is the leading edge of an expansionist colonial enterprise. Rae Spoon’s 2008 song “Come on Forest Fire, Burn the Disco Down” evokes this violent remapping: “ask the colonial ghosts what they took / and they’ll tell you that / you’re dancing on it.” A strength of Spoon’s work is its willingness to investigate ways they have inhabited not only abject or defiant positions in the frontier, but also complicit or oppressive ones. Though set out less explicitly than in this song, their consciousness of multiple, conflicting mappings carries over into their accounts of trans* experience. The works of Spoon and Coyote regularly engage a whole series of mutually defining boundaries: Canadian/American, rural/urban, small town/big city, country singer/indie singer, and woman/man.

Coyote was born in the Yukon, Spoon in Calgary. Me, I come from the Interior. I like this double entendre. First, there is the image of the Central Interior, a region in the

middle of British Columbia that is neither north nor south, not cold enough to be impressive or warm enough to be pleasant. Second, there is the idea of the inner world of psychological and somatic experience. I like being from the interior as opposed to being from the exterior. As a trans* person, I like thinking about the difference between what I can feel and what others can see. Interior/exterior: a mutually defining boundary unequally enforced.

I began this study with a conceit: I hoped to write a *geography* the way I might write a *genealogy*, to use the Foucauldian framing devices of lineage and emergence to examine the records made of an embodied subjectivity. These records amount to, simply, a memoir or a series of memoir-driven works of art. How does a given gender-divergent queer subject navigate the real and collectively imagined space and time called Western Canada? Could I apply the approach Michel Foucault advocates for the study of historical events to the study of geographical experiences? I wanted to use this examination “to diagnose the illnesses of the body, its conditions of weakness and strength, its breakdown and resistances” (145).

What I ended up with is a more modest psychogeographical study, after Guy Debord, of two queer and gender-divergent artists’ records—in print, in song, on film—of traversing Western Canada. In “Psychogeography and Feminist Methodology,” Alexander John Bridger describes a Situationist *dérive* as “a particular way of walking for the purpose of exploring the impact of urbanization” (286). More broadly, a *dérive* might consider the impact of a space on the individual, and the impact of the individual’s use or repurposing of that space. When a visibly gender-divergent person tries to use a gendered space—and as Bridger, with many others, has pointed out, all public spaces are gendered (289)—isn’t it always an involuntary, vulnerable, often dangerous

dérive? A gender-divergent subject has a particular way of using public space. It may not be as obviously divergent as, for example, queer men’s sexual trade in bathrooms, but it is also bodily, somatic, and emotional. A particular embodiment engages a particular model of space—a spatialization—projected onto a physical reality that may or may not serve that embodiment well and that may or may not accord closely with that spatialization.

Readers of Ivan Coyote’s *Xtra! West* columns over the years have witnessed how Coyote is continually forced into the role of what Bridger calls a “mobile ethnographer” (290). Coyote has effectively recorded a series of case studies: reactions in bathrooms, doctor’s offices, gas stations, bars, and other public spaces. Probably the most continually recurrent trope in Coyote’s writing over more than a decade is the experience of being misread or insufficiently accounted for in terms of gender in public spaces. In *Gender Failure*, the 2014 collaboration between Coyote and Spoon, Coyote says “I could write an entire book about bathroom incidents I have experienced. It would be a long and boring book where nearly every chapter ends the same, so I won’t” (206).

Describing this conflict over visibility in public space is one way to talk about the gender-divergent and queer experience of such spaces. However, this discussion focuses on the exterior, the moment of being observed and evaluated as incoherent by a spectator. This focus is important, but is not the totality of queer or gender-divergent experiences of public spaces, or of (our experiences in/of) a collectively imagined regional geography. We have interiors, in the sense that we have somatic experiences of relating to space; conversely, we make use of space to externalize, symbolize, and live out our own psychological processes. It seems worth investigating, this interior to the

geographical-spatial experience. It is unobservable from the exterior; it is the part of embodied experience that can only ever be self-reported. These artists have used Western Canadian geographical space to extend and reconfigure the boundaries imposed by gendered subjectivity on somatic and emotional experience. In doing so, they have illuminated particular processes in a gender-divergent use of that space. It is a mobile rather than a static use.

Bridger calls for two key ideas to make psychogeography useful in feminist methodology: the embodied subject and heteronormativity (287). In “The Facilities,” a chapter of *Gender Failure*, Coyote writes, “I can hold my pee for hours” (205), reporting the painful invisible body modifications imposed by gendered spaces. Heteronormativity—because Coyote experiences flirting from all sides—is also often on show, alternately amusing, uncomfortable, and dangerous. In Spoon’s *First Spring Grass Fire* (2012), heteronormativity is an agonizing trap. Yet gender normativity also blocks their inclusion even in queer communities: a late chapter of *Gender Failure* is entitled “How to Be Gay When the Gays Won’t Have You.” As Coyote points out, there is a way in which public spaces are never possessed by gender-deviant people, no matter how familiar they are: “yesterday in the women’s change room at the gym where I have been going for decades, I was referred to as a ‘freak of nature’” (204). Given this prohibition against belonging to a given space, a prohibition cisgendered people feel empowered to enforce verbally, physically, and legally, it is unsurprising that these gender-divergent psychogeographies engage movement and its sensations as much as or more than a static sense of location. Remaining stationary is a problematic condition.

The accumulated works of Coyote and Spoon provide detailed public multimedia records of two queer gender-divergent psychogeographies of Western Canada.

These writings and performances are deeply engaged with the idea of place. They invite geographical reading, citing Western Canadian locations as expressive of principles of identity. Both signal strong relationships—positive and negative—to specific regions of Western Canada. Coyote’s loyalty to the people and the landscapes of the Yukon appears consistently throughout their stories. Compare Rae Spoon’s estimate, in the autobiographical 2013 film *My Prairie Home*, that they have crossed Canada fifteen times. This constant motion becomes a key to reading these geographies: they are not always so attached to the specifics of a given landscape as even the texts themselves profess. For example, these stories repeat the familiar queer geographical trope of leaving the confining small town for the liberating big city. However, read within both artists’ body of work, this is only one instance among many of an embodiment expressed as motion or relocation, rather than location.

Coyote: Yukon/Vancouver/California

In Ivan Coyote’s 2002 collection *One Man’s Trash*, there is a strongly marked regional divide between two kinds of stories. The Yukon is the site of childhood, Vancouver of adulthood. The Yukon stories often have to do with vivid bodily experience. This experience isn’t idyllic: embodiment is often defined through painful or risky activities. In “It Doesn’t Hurt,” Coyote writes about “comb ball,” an invented sport that results in an escalating series of injuries: welts, “carpet burn, bruised elbows and knees,” a sprained wrist, and eventually a broken thumb (22-23).

In Vancouver, bodily experience is replaced by domestic experience, specifically the domestic pleasures of furnishing a home. Conventionally feminine-gendered, urban, and middle-class activities are experienced as pleasurable by the bemused working-class rural butch. Household

objects become the focus of detailed attention: a vacuum (*One Man's Trash* 55), new drinking glasses (51), or a freezer (*The Slow Fix* 61). Further, when relating adult experiences, Coyote is more likely to write about external manifestations of gender rather than the experience of embodiment, pain, or pleasure. There could be many reasons for this change of focus, of course: privacy, discretion, audience awareness, ambivalence. However, the effect in terms of story is to situate *bodily* experience in childhood, the past, and the Yukon, and a *socially* gendered subjectivity in another region entirely, Vancouver.

Yet there is a return to embodied physicality in Coyote's writings. In "Many Moons," a chapter of *Gender Failure*, Coyote goes swimming six weeks post chest surgery. They describe this moment: "[I] felt one thousand remembered swims flood back into my body. A twelve-year-old body. An eight-year-old body. My five-year-old, flat-chested frame . . . all these swims in my before body" (185). The scene is moving—not so much because of the surgery, since there is no absolute identity being confirmed here—but because bodily experience has returned into the realm of the expressible. Yet this moment does not come about through a literal physical return to the Yukon. The swimming scene takes place on an unnamed campus in California, among a group of memoir writers. So Coyote goes north by going south and finds the Yukon in California.

Spoon vs. Calgary: Out in the Cold

II.

There would be a map here
A digital crystal of snow
Spinning over Calgary
A page that can't load

Secret feature: tap the edge
And the map flips over
The underside red

As the raw country under skin
The legend says: hellfire
—Julian Gunn

This psychogeographical mapping onto landscape is even more marked in Rae Spoon's 2012 memoir *First Spring Grass Fire*. Despite signalling a prairie identity, Spoon ultimately takes refuge in the figurative landscape of a glacier. For Spoon, there is no equivalent of Coyote's Yukon. In *First Spring Grass Fire*, despite the title, the primary physical sensations of Calgary are cold, numbness, disembodiment, and weightlessness. Spoon affectingly describes the experience of panic attacks as a loss of bodily presence (90-91). In both *First Spring Grass Fire* and *Gender Failure*, anorexia is a mode of bodily control and resistance, but also a manifestation of a sense of disappearance in the face of the combined annihilating forces of a violent father and a homophobic, misogynist church (*Gender Failure* 116; *First Spring* 91). A memory of abuse triggers a vivid and traumatic somatic response, but it also prompts a ferocious determination: they are "willing to do anything to get [their] body back" (*First Spring* 94-95).

In *First Spring Grass Fire*, psychological responses are often spatialized and given both inertia and momentum. The defensive response of Spoon's narrator to situations of harassment and threat is either abrupt physical flight or, when this is not possible, a spatialized internal retreat, for example "ducking low" to evade accusations of gender deviance on the playground (23), as though the words were physical objects with trajectories that could be evaded. Bodily experience in Spoon's writing is strongly spatialized, but notably *ungeographical*—dislocated, free-floating, abstracted.

There is no uplifting aquatic restoration of embodiment in Spoon's narratives. There is no safe storage place in geographical memory for bodily sensations, as Coyote has in the Yukon of childhood. Admitting

that they speak more often of the mountains than the prairies when describing where they come from, at the end of both *First Spring Grass Fire* and *My Prairie Home* Spoon proposes, as an alternate site of home, the Athabasca glacier, writing that “I was born in Calgary, but my heart lives in the blue glow under a frozen lake of water on top of a mountain in Alberta” (*First Spring* 137). If “home” is anything, it is the *sensation* conjured by that imagined interior space. This may indeed be true for many people, but these narrators are barred from the assumption that a given place itself will invariably yield the sensation. Home must be portable, because the gender-divergent person is prohibited—in both abstract and concrete ways—from fully inhabiting shared landscapes.

Coyote vs. Spoon: The Drumheller-Calgary Corridor

Clearly, western Canadian cities and landmarks have psychological weight in these narratives. Yet the physical character of these places is not as important as their capacity to store compartmentalized experiences, often separated into bodily vs. social being, and the ability of the narrators to move away from or towards these experiences, traverse them, escape from them or return to them. A case in point is the two artists’ contrasting treatment of the Drumheller-Calgary corridor. The route between Drumheller and Calgary features in Spoon’s autobiographical work—both *My Prairie Home* and *Gender Failure*—and in Coyote’s 2006 novel, *Bow Grip*. In both cases, the journey serves as a psychological—and, in the case of *Bow Grip*, physical—liberation for the protagonist, but the journeys are inverse mirrors of one another.

Although Joey, the cismale protagonist of *Bow Grip*, is heterosexual, I would argue that the novel follows a queer geographical trajectory. Joey travels from a smaller community, Drumheller, to

a larger one, Calgary, and finds sexual fulfillment, a chosen family, and a reconnection to his body. His restlessness reads like a transposition of queer restlessness, the small-town-to-big-city trajectory of so many queer memoirs. In Spoon’s work, however, Calgary is a prison, “expansive and cold” (*First Spring* 93). Spaciousness is not liberation but an untraversable desolation. The tension between frozen stillness and desperate convulsive movement characterizes Spoon’s narratives. Even after years away, visiting the suburbs where the narrator grew up evokes a protective bodily response: they become “sleepy” (*Bow Grip* 136). Conversely, while the small town is stifling for Joey, a brief trip to Drumheller is revelatory for the six-year-old narrator of “1988,” the third chapter-essay of *First Spring Grass Fire*. After seeing the enormous skeletons of dinosaurs, the narrator becomes obsessed with finding fossils in the family’s garden (17). The dinosaur, symbol of evolutionary theory, represents a covert rebellion against their parents’ fervent evangelical Christianity and the family concealments and denials. If uncovered, it would also be the solid physical evidence of their dishonesty, but the narrator never finds any bones. They experience a similar struggle in trying to understand and express the injustice embedded in their family. In *Bow Grip*, dislocation and disorientation are necessary steps on the way to renewal and self-revelation. In *First Spring Grass Fire*, the sense of alienation is so overwhelmingly painful that it cannot be made useful. Physical flight—to a grandmother’s house and then to Vancouver—is the only fruitful response. The narrator (like Spoon) goes on to pursue a career as a touring musician—a life of constant motion.

Portable Frontiers and Linguistic Space

In *First Spring Grass Fire*, Spoon writes “It was in movement that I could feel myself in my body. Biking, rollerblading, running,

climbing trees, and building forts were what my body felt good for" (115). In these queer and gender-divergent geographies, trajectory, the sensation of movement, and a mobile sensation of "home" are more important than absolute location or direction. New maps are laid over old ground as psychological processes require. This is a queer use, a *dérive*, of public spaces and of public spatializations. Maps. Geographies.

There are also provisional trans* and queer geographies of the western Canadian landscape, as when Coyote arranges for a queer youth from the north to attend "gay camp" in Edmonton (*Missed Her* 35). Or the young Spoon, protecting even younger siblings from a violent father, instead of running, declares, "I will be a wall," creating a safe territory for the younger children out of their own physical immobility—and, in the song of the same name, through music:

Hide the children. Hide the children. A
storm is coming.
I will be a wall. I will be a wall.

There are beautiful places that we can hide
Between the notes and the rhymes.
I sang for my sister on the darkest nights
and I sang for my brothers too.

(Spoon, "I Will Be a Wall")

Here, Spoon bodily becomes both boundary and frontier, the defining location between the violent exterior dominated by the father and an interior of respite and even beauty.

Though they are collaborators, Coyote and Spoon create very different psycho-geographical records. What they share is a subjectivity in motion, in traversal, in the overlay of places and times, the divergent use of collectively imagined space. In the film *My Prairie Home* (2014), Spoon describes a bus journey: "you can't be where you're going yet and you can't be where you've left, so you're kind of in this in-between space." After trying first to live as a woman and then as a trans* man,

Spoon declared gender retirement. Refusing finally to reconstruct a personal history in order to fit an adopted category, Spoon marks a moment of emergence, an identity with lineage but without a definitive history. Refusing to allow a category to be determined for them, Coyote answers a silent public question quietly and firmly: "do I still call myself a butch?" reads a chapter heading. The chapter, in its entirety, reads: "yes, of course I still do" (*Gender Failure* 195).

As I discussed these ideas with friends and colleagues, I was surprised to find that the singular "they" used by Coyote and Spoon is still an active challenge for many. Far from comfortably accepting this relocation/repurposing of the pronoun, many people, including many queer and trans* people, resist the singular "they" on grammatical grounds. I should not have been surprised; I should have remembered that, despite being trans myself, I stumbled over "they" when friends of mine first adopted it. Indeed, my own "mistakes" amounted to resistance against their staking out a gendered territory different from my own, even though I supported them in principle. Spoon writes about their own struggle with the usage and its implications: "here I was again learning pronouns even though I was trans, and had been trans for a long time, and thought I knew so much about trans people. It was humbling" (*Gender Failure* 200-201).

In English, the singular "they" breaches the mutually defining frontier between "she" and "he"; it also changes the space of reference. If we refuse to use it, we refuse gender-divergent people who do not identify as "she" or "he" a place in language. If we use it, and expand its use to refer to any subject whose gender we do not wish or need to specify (and, as Coyote points out, such usage in English goes back at least to Chaucer [*Gender Failure* 221]), we change the linguistic map. Coyote writes:

“I like not gendering my friends when I talk about them . . . it . . . lets their gender become a background detail, and allows other, more personal and relevant details about them shine through . . . [it] skirt[s] around preconceived ideas of who they might be and what they might be capable of” (221-22).

A great many changes would be required to create a collectively imagined spatialization and a physical space that would be genuinely available for trans*, gender-divergent, and gender-retired people to inhabit. The singular “they” is a small linguistic change that brings these divergent experiences closer to the realm of the expressible and comprehensible within common English usage. Rae Spoon and Ivan Coyote have worked for years to make the unobservable perceptible to observers who have been by turns friendly, uncomprehending, skeptical, and hostile to these parallel projects. I come from the Interior, but I have more space out here in the exterior because of the work they have done. My thanks go to them.

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