

Queerly Canadian: Introduction

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Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something 'between' and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing.

—Rancière 27

How will we go about dismantling our desire to read the alien?
How will we disrupt our desire to be seduced by that which does not seek to seduce in the first place?

—Goto 268

In June 2009 the University of British Columbia's interdisciplinary program "Critical Studies in Sexuality" celebrated the life and work of writer Jane Rule with a conference entitled "Queerly Canadian: Changing Narratives." We might say that Jane Rule exemplifies, in her singularity, those precise tensions and complexities of identification that come together in our organizing idea: *Queerly Canadian*. Jane Rule chose Canada (see Shilling). Born in New Jersey, she moved to British Columbia in 1956 and made Canada her home. Eight years later, *Desert of the Heart* was published, a novel that made visible same-sex desire with a surprise ending of happiness rather than the more genre-normative motifs of death or punishment. The positive representation of same-sex desire was unprecedented in Canadian fiction. Indeed, the distinctiveness of the novel was so conspicuous, that, for a time, Rule felt the media portrayed her as "the only lesbian in Canada" ("Jane Rule: B.C. Novelist"). Rule's extensive body of creative work

(11 volumes) continues to impress, offend, and astound readers both nationally and internationally. As *The London Times* reported in her obituary, “her novels remain an incisive quietly outlandish view of postwar Canada.” Exploring the boundaries of sexuality and the limits of desire and human relationships, Rule contributed significantly to a Canadian nationalist framework—a contribution recognized by her induction into the Order of Canada in 2007. A fierce advocate for gay rights and community acceptance, Rule was very much a public intellectual who tackled some of the most significant issues related to the academic treatment and public discussion of sexuality, marriage, censorship, insisting that Canadians consider their public obligations to multiple and diverse communities. In a long and arduous fight with Canada Customs, Rule fought passionately against censorship and for the rights of Canadians to be able to choose what they read. At the same time Rule, in an article for *BC Bookworld*, equally fiercely opposed gay marriage stating, “to be forced back into heterosexual cage of couple-dom is not a step forward but a step back into state-imposed definitions of relationship.”

The “Queerly Canadian” conference foregrounded an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that critically rethinks modernist discourses located at the nexus of Canadian nationalism and critical considerations of sexualities and genders in their multiple configurations. The papers featured in this special issue further offer a deeper and fuller understanding of the relationships amongst language, thought, and actions in the construction and contestation of the amorphous and plural, and historically and geographically disjunctive categories at issue here, including sex and nation. Rather than framing arguments that stop thinking and promote notions of coherent cooperation, these post-identitarian queer theorists question the rhetorics of pigeonholed identity and initiate an engagement with complexity and intersectionality.

Two landmark works that were particularly influential to the conference organizing committee in thinking about key themes and their various intersections were Terry Goldie’s *Pink Snow* (2003), and Richard Cavell and Peter Dickinson’s *Sexing the Maple* (2006). Goldie’s *Pink Snow* entices the reader to engage with canonical Canadian texts from a queer perspective as Goldie rethinks Canadian classics at the borders of national discourses in order to redefine perceptions of Canadian culture. Playing with the trope of snow as a major international identifier of Canada, Goldie challenges this iconic image with a playful merging with queerness: “snow is very important, especially when it is pink” (2). *Sexing the Maple* likewise provides a reconsideration of the Canadian literary landscape that insists that sexuality matters. Cavell and

Dickinson explore national ideology at the varied intersections of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity (and other key axes of difference) across an extraordinary range of Canadian literary, theoretical, and historical texts. The essays in this issue further complicate notions of sexuality, gender, place, and space in relation to national discourses that engage critically with the multiple meanings of *Canadian*.

Whereas it would not be possible in this brief introduction to provide an exhaustive overview of our key terms—queer and Canadian—suffice to say that in its adjectival and adverbial forms, *Queerly* in conjunction with *Canadian* produces a provocative and recombinant referent that is characterized by what could appear *ad initio* to be a fundamentally contradictory and politically ambivalent assemblage. *Queerly Canadian* oscillates around signifiers both of uniqueness and of seriality held in an inexorable, inextricable, and productive tension that has been the scholarly focus for virtually all of the academic work conducted within the rubric of “queer theory.”

One could say that a key point of reasoning in queer theory, in Foucault’s work in particular, is an emphatic insistence on an intellectually sophisticated and careful consideration of the particularity of relationality and related historical and geopolitical disjunctures. As Pollman argues, “The experience of self-sameness is thus never unmediated . . . ; it operates through a system of signs and recognitions that intrudes alterity into the heart of identity.” Pollman notes further, concerning national identification, that “the passport proves uniqueness by reference to a series.” In other words, “identification is the detour through the other that defines a self.” And so we might conclude then, that “in theory” scholars have articulated *Queerly Canadian* in terms of particular documentary (and other systemic) modes and practices of legibility, visibility, and recognition that as an assemblage, constitute the mechanisms by means of which identification is simultaneously emancipatory and assimilationist.

It is commonplace today to encounter interdisciplinary discussions of the mediated, mobile, and hybrid subject framed by discourses of cosmopolitanism. For the sake of an economy of argument, we might simply say here that, as Jean-François Lyotard so aptly argued, it is in an anti-mythologising manner in the modality of pedagogical object lesson: “we must work through the loss of the modern we” (319). Discourses of nationalism work by means of the instantiation of seemingly stable attributes and characteristics that can function as essentializing, and therefore as limiting, modes of positionality. Relative to discourses of nationality, Benedict Anderson problematizes the

logics of “bounded seriality” that have organized modernist discourses of national identifications both in official practices and artifacts of governmentality and their quotidian counterparts. The by-now classic Molson’s beer advertisement, “I am Canadian” works by making reference to a set of familiar images (e.g., the beaver, the maple leaf) that permit the narrator’s legitimation and recognition as properly belonging to a population bound together by visible tokens of nationalist iconography. It is, then, as a purpose-built grammatical agent of disruption that the conjunction of *Queerly + Canadian* is here invoked so as to disrupt such essentialist or bounded notions of what it might mean to invoke the identification of either a modality of sexuality (queer) or of nationality (Canadian).

Nancy Kang’s article “Ecstasies of the (Un)Loved” provides a fabulously complex reading of Hiromi Goto’s *The Kappa Child*. Kang’s work charts the multiple lines of confabulation in Goto’s work that articulate a queerly Canadian *mise en scène* that engages multiple identificatory narrative tropes including desexualized Asian identities and violence in immigrant family narratives. Kang charts Goto’s novel mapping of immigrant experiences to reconsider sexual frontiers and the ways these discourses function trans-nationally. Adroitly, Kang insists upon the reader’s reexamination of national tropes to allow for the ways in which Goto’s characters challenge stereotypical readings of Asian Canadian identities in hopes of allowing “new places and spaces for negotiating twenty-first century Canadian identity.”

Susan Billingham’s “Écriture au Trans-féminine: Trish Salah’s *Wanting in Arabic*” engages critically with existing theoretical boundaries to make legible a space for trans women’s voices and bodies. Billingham’s provocative article challenges readers to take up and participate in “liberatory gendered discourse” and to explore the complicated underpinnings of the normalizing discourse of “woman.” In her innovative reading of Salah’s poetry, Billingham is able to reconsider identification as neither essential nor eternal but fluid and changing.

Marni Stanley, in “Drawn Out: Identity Politics and the Queer Comics of Leanne Franson and Ariel Schrag,” explores the complexity of female queer identity formation in the “highly heteronormative and male-biased” genre of comics. Stanley examines the characters in the comics to comment on the ways that identity offers characters place and space while highlighting the normative injunctions that inflect their own alienation. By pointing to the challenges of normalizing pressures in queer subcultures, Stanley pushes the reading of these comics to demonstrate the multiple and non-self-identical

layers and potential of sexuality and human desire. Stanley, like Franson and Schrag, questions rigid and deterministic social and sexual hierarchies in favour of a celebration of difference.

L. Chris Fox's "The Paradise Alms House: Siting Literary Thirdspace in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*" explores literary thirdspace with an aim to articulate the impossibility of cultural, ethical, and sexual homogenizations. Fox provides a reading of Bhabha, Derrida, and Fanon that reconsiders the limits of a celebrated hybridity to yield a more nuanced reconsideration of relational hybridity. Through an integration of past and present, agency and subjectivity, Fox argues that Mootoo's characters are able to "live with and through difference in community." Fox insists upon a recognition of the singularity of identifications and the acceptance of the incommensurability of those differences by means of which community is forged in the Paradise Alms House. It is through such a reading that an interstitial future emerges.

Linda Morra's "'Vexed by the Crassness of Commerce': Jane Rule's Struggle for Literary Integrity and Freedom of Expression" brings insight to the relationships that Rule had with her publishers. Morra captures Rule's desire to "resist censorship in daily practice." By tracing her relationships with publishers and publishing houses through letters and contracts, Morra reveals the battles that Rule fought for literary integrity and freedom of expression. As an author publishing in a Canadian context, Rule discovered her "literary freedom was circumscribed by both overt and implicit expectations about who could make claims to be an author" as well as the limits of expression in political contexts.

Marilyn Schuster traces the correspondence between Jane Rule and Rick Bébout in "Jane Rule & Rick Bébout, Private Letters/Public Lives: A Queer Love Story." By reconsidering the perverse and the normal, Schuster cleverly investigates the space of what she terms the new "genre of life narrative" to rethink the boundaries of memory, memoir, essay, and diary. An examination of private documents allows for an opportunity to experience a "sense of the community in the flesh." By offering us the Canadian "community of flesh" that life writing offers as a way into the complicated relationship between Rule and Bébout, we are presented with a way into the self through a glimpse of the other in a moment of queer identifications.

For the authors of the articles featured in the *Queerly Canadian* special issue there is an important relationship between the potential for democratization in cosmopolitanism to the extent that the very acts of national

identification are themselves complicated by hybridity and singularity, or Anderson's "unbounded seriality." And so it is critical here then, to emphasize that this project of complexification is precisely the useful work that is done at the conjunction that we have here demarcated as *Queerly Canadian*.

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