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Placing Gender: Exploring Queerness, Rurality, and Non-Normative Gender Experiences

What does it mean to be oneself? To some extent, it involves a personal sense of identity, but humans do not exist in a vacuum; being oneself is often tied up in being one of many, in distinguishing oneself while still being part of a group, and in the places one calls home. Being oneself is a very human concern, but it is also subject to external ideas of what it means to be, how it should be done, where, and with whom, and thus it is worth interrogating these external ideas and the influence they have over one's conception of themselves, their environment, and their community. Drawing on queer, rural queer, and other scholarship, the tangled web of queer gender experiences as they intersect with places and power unravels into interwoven threads of rural, urban, queer, and non-queer normativities and ontologies, all of which shape what it means to be and live out one's gender in a recognizable, happy, willful, queer way, in the city and in the country, to oneself and to others, and inside and beyond normative definitions of being.

Before delving into how genders exist in spaces, it seems prudent to explore how those spaces are constructed as rural or urban, with all the baggage those labels entail. There is no perfect urban-rural dichotomy, as "any 'urban/rural' distinction is as much context–specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and... standardizing as it is geographically verifiable," but these are still two ideas worth, if not delineating, then at least characterizing (Herring, qtd. in Thomsen xxvi). Gray Muldoon prefers to use "non-urban," as they view "rural" as a misnomer, "a displaced English motif of the countryside, mismatched to the geography, ecology, and occupations of many non-urban places," but it will be used here, while recognizing the important

point that non-urban places, people, and experiences are uncountably varied, and careless use of "rural" risks homogenizing them (79-80). Rurality and urbanity might be best illustrated by the "parallel binaries" complexly interwoven with them, of which Lucas Crawford highlights many: "rural/urban, rustic/modern, and normative/queer," backwards/forward, dependent/independent, and derivative/creative are but a few (906, 908-910). Aside from these, Muldoon observes queer Northerners being "made to feel ugly" compared to their "glossy, trendy, mannered, and together" urban counterparts (74). Meanwhile, Carly Thomsen states that "the rural has been produced as flat, homogenous… the type of conservative, anachronistic place where LGBTQ people necessarily suffer," and theorizes another binary underlying urban-rural constructions: unbecoming/becoming, both in the sense of being and transforming, and in the colloquial sense of "unattractive, unseemly, improper, inappropriate" (viii, xiv). These culminate in a picture of rurality as crude and frozen in time, reliant on the sleek innovations of the urban. The urban is thus constructed as more valuable, filled with more possibilities, not because of the urban monopoly over and thus rural dearth of material resources, knowledge production, and political power, but because metronormative narratives produce the rural as simply hostile, backwards, and inferior; not only left behind, but deservingly so (Muldoon 74, 79; Duckett 3).

As has been made clear, rural and urban spaces, insofar as they can be distinguished, are constructed as places in distinctly different ways, but they are also material places inhabited by people, whose individual gender experiences and performances are coloured by local customs, norms, and values. Although "gender variation exists everywhere," Muldoon also says that "each location has its own specialness in making gender," but these special makings still have general patterns along relative urban-rural lines (79). The archetypal, hegemonic urban queer is many

things: impression-oriented, with “their inner lives guarded, [declaring] their political affiliations and gender in their outer appearance;” visible, having come out to be properly “out, loud, and proud;” and supported, part of a community defined as those with a “shared identity” with whom they can be authentically themselves, safe from “the life (and death) of the (community-less) closet” (Muldoon 74; Thomsen x; Muldoon 81; Thomsen xvii). The rural differs, though there are as many localized rural experiences “as there are towns that don’t make the map,” with localized, adaptive traits that get obscured by urban dominance (Crawford 906). They too live their gender experience, though they may “not dress like the people with similar gender or politics in bigger cities, or use the same labels, or have the same social activities or hobbies,” instead making their own “John Wayne” masculinities in the bush, intimate familial femininities, and two-spirit or other “non-binary” identities braided with personal roles as healers, researchers, artists, outdoorspeople, all producing diverse gender experiences and identities unrecognizable to the urban framework (Muldoon 72-80). They are multifarious, prioritizing other facets of their identity, “parent, child, hockey coach, rape crisis counsellor, Catholic, Native,” depending on the circumstance, instead of a narrow focus on doing queer exclusively, intensely, and normatively (Muldoon 80). Most of all, they, too, are supported, because for many queerly gendered rural people, who live beside other close-knit, interdependent rural people with whom they have “interesting, fulfilling relations,” “community is made up of people who support you, rather than people who are like you” (Muldoon 79; Thomsen xvii).

Despite the incredible diversity of queer gender experiences between urban and rural places, or between places within one category, urban dominance over the rural is echoed in how these local experiences are judged: namely, urban values, appearances, and activities are cast as

the default to which the rural should aspire. Dominant strictures defining queer gender are "native to the cosmopolitan," and reflect urban lifestyles to the exclusion of other, places with their "own struggles and genders" (Muldoon 72). Muldoon's participants describe feeling insufficiently queer, beautiful, or knowledgeable, that they are "expected to know things or want things [they do] not" in trans spaces where urban norms are mapped to trans norms, and where "customs the urban dweller has had ample opportunity to explore are treated as basic to trans identity and experience" (Muldoon 73-75). Urban queer gender expressions act as universalized models, becoming "tastemakers for the rest;" proper performance is done only by following urban footsteps (White, qtd. in Crawford 909). Additionally, the rural is framed as hostile and undesirable compared to urban safety and tolerance. Urban queer values like high visibility, being "out, loud, and proud," are framed as "uncontested social [goods]… which everyone *everywhere* desires;" they are required for one to be "authentic" as well as exclusive to the city (Thomsen viii). As Cassidy Duckett says, "the story that all LGBTQ+ folks must leave rural communities to fully develop their identities and live freely rests on the idea that these communities 'operate… as America's perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet' to be escaped" (4). Notions of the rural as backwards queer purgatory are naturalized by metronormative narratives, which not only cast rural queerness as an oxymoron, but also "[normalize] the metropolitan as the space for gays to the extent that the ethos of the urban functions as unremarkable," and "[make] it difficult to understand why LGBTQ people stay in or move to rural places" (Thomsen xvi). No matter what queer gender means to a rural individual in their own life and community, if "the city is where queers do queerness, and the country is where

things are done to queers," then doing queer means doing queer urbanely; all other options are expunged (Crawford 917).

Turning to theoretical lenses, Sara Ahmed's work maps well onto the rural-urban queer dynamic, illuminating implicit assumptions undergirding these discourses. Ahmed iterates that happiness is prescribed as residing within certain actions and life courses, as "what will happen if you live your life in the right way" (2-3). While many such happiness scripts exist, rural queer people may feel torn between rural promises for happiness and "queer" ones, because, according to metronormative narratives, the only road to queer happiness leads to the city (Duckett 8). Just as the urban is constructed as a source of happiness, the rural is "to-be-feared;" rural places and people are cast as naturally isolating and intolerant, anathema to urban scripts where happiness means living loudly and freely with a large queer community (Ahmed 3). As Thomsen observes, "if the rural is understood as unsafe or homophobic, gays cannot plausibly exist there happily" (121). While rural material struggles are not just fiction, it is worth acknowledging that many people make satisfying lives combining rurality and queerness. As Muldoon states, "we may actually like living here" (79). Rural queer life is not necessarily miserable any more than urban queer life is necessarily happy and problem-free:

> While urban spaces may appear inviting for rural LGBTQ+ folks because of visibility and solidarity, these neighbourhoods are often fitting for only one kind of LGBTQ+ individual: the white and wealthy… marginalization based on class and race occurs despite 'attempted assimilation,' resulting in many rural exodus narratives without happy endings. (Duckett 7; see also Crawford 911-12)

Ahmed also notes that expectations of happiness as a common good can cause unhappy persons to feel or become alienated as saboteurs of others' happiness (4-6). Staking out rural queer happiness or admitting to urban unhappiness both trouble the metronormative view. Because of its dominance over discourses around queer rights and happiness, one is compelled to embody urban norms to be recognizably happy, lest they be seen as an obstacle to the common queer good:

> One is assumed to be unknowable, thwarted in their realization of who one 'is,' and, perhaps worst of all, an inhibitor of social progress… ostensibly lacking an authentic gay identity or impeding the gaining of rights (which come to stand in for progress) marks a type of social illegibility akin to social death. (Thomsen 42)

If a bond arises from "[placing] our hopes for happiness in the same things," then it is no wonder that such tension exists between urban and rural queerness, particularly when the latter is naturalized as an eternal source of oppression and misery (Ahmed 4). The unhappy rural queer might be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Another relevant theory is interpellation, applied to various circumstances which are all built on identity, category, and ideology. Coined by Louis Althusser, interpellation is how ideology, the inescapable "system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group" and affect our understanding of the world, considers and constitutes people (107). For Althusser, ideology perpetuates itself by hailing, or interpellating, people as its ideological subjects, prescribing them expectations, roles, and futures which they identify with and follow, as they recognize and agree that "they really do occupy the place it designates for

them as theirs in the world… a worker, a boss or a soldier," that "everything will be all right… on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly," that "*it really is me*" (115-24). Ann DuCille invokes this in her exploration of Barbie, as Barbie's playmates are encouraged to embody the same ideologies she does, and DuCille observes the restrictive, deterministic, "potentially damaging" function of interpellation: "when little girls fantasize themselves into… Barbie's world, it is rarely, if ever, 'in their own image that they dream'… for a modest price, I can dream myself into Barbie's perfect world, so long as I dream myself in her image… there is still no place for me as *me* in it" (50, 65). Anyone who identifies and wants to be recognized as a queerly gendered subject must dream themselves in the metronormative image: come out, join the city, and finally become yourself. There is no place for you as the rural *you* in the world of the "perfect" queer. Opposite the subject is the abject, the "zones of social life… populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject," which are defined against and thus define the subject (Butler, qtd. in Thomsen xxi). It is through the rural abject's undesirability that the urban subject is produced as desirable; one must dream of being a "real," recognizable subject, because the abject is made into a nightmare. As Thomsen observes, "that the rural is imagined… as 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' for LGBTQ people, to use Butler's formulation, renders rural queers incomprehensible and in the very same moment marks nonrural LGTBQ people as necessarily liberated" (xxi). This results in vicious cycles of rural outmigration, urban supremacy, unequal distribution of resources and peoples, and increased demarcation between urban and rural, ultimately producing the very evidence used to justify metronormative hegemony and naturalize the belief that the urban is the natural place for queer people and the rural is a queerless "lost cause" (Duckett 8; see also Muldoon 81, Duckett 8-15).

It is possible to reject these interpellated identities, and eke out an alternative, willful life, which, while not free from ideologies and metronormativity, nonetheless skews and queers them into something new, "[reciting] that very same discourse" we are made in and by "to another purpose" (Butler, qtd. in Thomsen 40). Kathryn Perkins' exploration of willful living as enacted through trans and lesbian feminisms, while not directly citing interpellation, also focuses on the prophetic role of naturalized ideologies in assigning and regulating identities and lives, what Perkins calls "gender fatalism," or "an abnegation of the power to envision and construct new gender realities in favor of the reproduction of cisheteronormative gender based on its perceived inevitability" (194-95). This notion unfolds nicely into the urban-rural queer dynamic; as established, urban queer gender norms and perceptions are seen as the inevitable default, a status quo which, in its reproduction and dominance, eschews the potential for other lives, activities, and experiences. Indeed, if, "as Wittig argues… when the political category of woman is bound up in the political regime of heterogender… lesbians are not women," then perhaps when the category of queer gender is entangled with metronormative regimes, rural queer people are defined out of queerness (Perkins 196). While the internalization and self-regulation of these assigned fates is both prolific and intended, rejecting their internal and external stranglehold involves embracing possibility and living "willful lives" guidanned not by surrendering agency, but by enthusiastically rejecting conformity and cherishing diversity and autonomy (Perkins 196-97). The rural is off to a promising start, as it already "occupies a queer location in the cultural imaginary," existing "in opposition to the normative and assimilationist" (Thomsen xxv). Rural queer people are not condemned to be urban; many stay, by necessity or choice, come back, or even come to the rural anew, and develop unique, rural queer existences that emphasize

"closeness to family, strength of local communities, connection to the land, and a preference for a rural way of life," and though they may involve "fewer public displays of affection, a greater feeling of rootedness, less pride in outness, more of a sense of safety," they are no less queer or rural for it (Duckett 6-7; Howard, qtd. in Thomsen xii). The first step to dismantling fatalistic, oppressive ideologies that foreclose the possibility of queer rural lives is to recognize that they are neither immutable nor immortal, but simply paths in life that we can choose to follow and maintain, paths that are no better nor more real than the trails we cut for ourselves.

An interesting yet unfortunate aspect of ideological hegemony over definitions of reality is the way that misfitting experiences, places, and people are not only dominated or overlooked, but elided from reality itself, cast into a void of incomprehensibility and impossibility that, in its quintessential absence and non-being, gives hegemonically accepted things substance, value, and power. As discussed, the intersection of metronormativity and queerly gendered ways of being produces a hierarchy of queerness which, despite its proclaimed progressiveness, results in a facsimile of the power structures which oppress queer, rural, and many other peoples, and make urban queerness an overseer not of new possibilities, but new normativity. The theoretical revelations and personal observations of the authors discussed illustrate the tribulations and achievements of rural and urban queer people alike, whose identities evade normative, constrained definitions, and instead populate the map with complex experiences of joy and frustration, parades and potlucks, community and solitude, and other, uncountably diverse possibilities. Rather than discarding the rural as an anachronism to be left behind, rural lives, happinesses, and identities should be considered fertile ground for alternative, adaptable, and even desirable ways of living, being, and doing one's gender that challenge normativities and

reflect the vastness of rural potential out beyond and beside the cities, in the “multiple centres” that do not make the map (Muldoon 72).

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