Mud, Hay, Plywood, Pheasants: Towards a Rurally Embodied Queer Curatorial Practice

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Between Pheasants Contemporary, March 9th — April 8th, 2021 Kerns Township, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a twofold project that explores a queer and rurally-embodied curatorial methodological approach to exhibition making in rural Northeastern Ontario. The central focus is around an experimental presentation space I launched in the pheasant coop on my family farm in Kerns Township called Between Pheasants Contemporary. Secondly, this thesis also includes a critical contextualization of two artworks in the inaugural exhibition, *tethers*, featuring queer Métis artist Andrew Harding, and Luke Maddaford, a queer artist from rural Saskatchewan. *tethers*, which concerns itself with queer and anti-colonial critiques of nationalist mythologies attached to the aesthetics of circulated visual and material culture in the rural, serves as a case study to explore how Between Pheasants Contemporary is poised to readily respond to the unique cultural fabric of Kerns Township. *Mud, Hay, Plywood, Pheasants: Towards a Rurally Embodied Queer Curatorial Practice* answers the following research questions: How does rural cultural production differ from – and even oppose – urban, metronormative queer cultural production? What, then, is a rurally embodied queer curatorial methodology and exhibition making practice? Why do curatorial projects excel in non-institutional and experimental spaces in the rural North? What makes BPC's programming approach differ from regional artistic discourse, while also challenging urban queer curatorial discourse? As this thesis unfolds, I draw upon the importance of a deep reading of local communities to inform curatorial practices outside of the centre, and how a queer, anti-colonial methodological approach to exhibition making challenges both existing artistic discourse in this area of the rural North, and queer urban discourse. Using Scott Herring's notion of 'critical queer rusticity' and Mary L. Gray's concept of the 'boundary public', I identify the specific underpinnings that sustain and produce a rurally embodied queer curatorial practice.

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I also want to acknowledge how fortunate I have been to work on this project from start to finish on the farm. While the COVID-19 induced shift to online modalities has been less than desirable, it did however allow me to work from and return to the community in which I dedicated my research to. To write from the bush was not something I anticipated when I started my master's, but I profited from the opportunity to think from here. I am grateful to this land in the Robinson-Huron Treaty – past, present, and future home to the Cree, Ojibway, and Algonquin.

Finally, thank you to the OCAD University Graduate Studies department for generously funding the exhibition, *tethers*. That OCAD, as an academic institution, would find value in funding a queer exhibition in a pheasant coop on a farm in the middle of nowhere Northern Ontario speaks to why I precisely chose to enrol in the Criticism & Curatorial Practice MFA program.

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INTRODUCING THE GALLERY AT THE END OF THE DIRT ROAD

Setting the stage

Picture a dirt road: fields and forests interchange as you wind through the turns and ravines; in the summer, dust blows from your truck tires and lingers, suspended like a cloud; in the fall, leaves crowd the shoulders and the fields are bare; in the winter, you struggle to differentiate between the thick white crust of snow on the road and the expansive fields, so you use the snow drifts as wayfinders to stay your course; and in the spring, the thawing frost makes ruts and grooves in the road as you slow down through the mud. Sometimes it feels like the changing road is the only way to read the passing of time. It is from here, at the end of this dirt road – where culture might mistakenly be considered absent – where I began to rethink modes of curatorial production.

This thesis analyzes, critiques, and offers solutions to address issues and gaps that pertain to queer curatorial practice in rurality through two intimately connected projects: 1) a curatorial exhibition titled *tethers* featuring artworks by two queer artists responding to rural material and visual culture; and 2) the inception and creation of an experimental presentation space called Between Pheasants Contemporary (BPC) in a pheasant coop on a farm in Kerns Township – a small, rural agricultural community in so-called "Northeastern Ontario". Too easily, queerness and curatorial practice are respectively conceived as uniquely urban. As queer anti-urbanist counter-narratives, the exhibition *tethers* and the formation of BPC offer case studies highlighting the potentialities of rurally embodied queer curatorial practice. With the guiding intention to support and serve the communities surrounding and engaging with BPC, the following research and practice questions have figured centrally to inform this work: How does rural cultural

production differ from – and even oppose – urban, metronormative queer cultural production? What, then, is a rurally embodied queer curatorial methodology and exhibition making practice? Why do curatorial projects excel in non-institutional and experimental spaces in the rural North? What makes BPC's programming approach differ from regional artistic discourse, while also challenging urban queer curatorial discourse?

I argue that the turn to rurality in queer curatorial work emerges as a specific, nuanced methodology wherein a deep, queer reading of the rural North in exhibition making produces a specific modality of curatorial discourse. Rurally embodied queer curatorial practice disrupts queer settler colonialist place-making by not emulating neoliberal, queer urban exhibition spaces. Working with mud, hay, livestock, and local communities in favour of liminal white spaces, quiet, and institutionalized performances of spectatorship instead rethinks the role of the curator, and the whereabouts of queer cultural production. At its very core, a rurally embodied queer curatorial practice draws connections between specific regional cultural problematics and how they intimately relate to aesthetic and material culture discourse – from this point, rurally embodied queer curatorial work has the task to bring together artists and cultural producers, and local artistic and non-artistic rural community members to resolve these problematics as co-constituents in the co-production of localized culture. The methodological and ideological underpinnings at play in the exhibition *tethers* and in forming Between Pheasants Contemporary are indicative of such a rurally embodied queer curatorial practice. Below, I draw upon two central arguments in wider rural queer studies including Scott Herring's notion of 'critical queer rusticity', and Mary L. Gray's conception of the 'boundary public' as cornerstones of a rurally embodied queer curatorial methodology in exhibition making.[1]

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[1] **Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, (New York City, New York University Press, 2009) 92. & Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 28**

This thesis specifically responds to rural queer curatorial potentialities in rural Northeastern Ontario; while much of what follows can be transferred to other rural areas, it should be noted that the outlined methodological and ideological arguments are not stand-ins as definitive, universal solutions to rural queer curatorial work elsewhere. Northeastern Ontario is distinguished by legacies of French and English settler colonialism, specific agricultural and resource extraction industries, and seasonal, climate responsive recreational activities that together form a uniquely specific cultural fabric to which BPC responds, and from which it emerges. As this project is a place-based exercise and builds upon locational potential for robust curatorial dialogue, I will first provide the local social and aesthetic context surrounding BPC which deeply informs this work in the following section.

Strict — but necessary — COVID-19 precautions and public health regulations have made community-oriented projects and gathering nearly impossible — this thesis has thus pivoted towards creating a way-finder for long-term curatorial engagement with Kerns Township. *tethers* is the first of a myriad of upcoming exhibitions that further expand upon the many thematics of rurality, decoloniality, and queerness positing exhibition making as both a conceptual and activist exercise.

Queerness has a unique relationship to colonial systems of power insofar that heteronormativity, homophobia, hatred, and violence are all ardent oppressors of queerness ultimately relating back to colonial logics, yet queerness can also perpetuate and reproduce these very systems of power as queerness intersects with class, race, sex, gender identity, etc. Further, in the practice of queer place making, queerness runs the risk of perpetuating the practice of settler occupation of space continuing the colonial project of Indigenous dispossession. As issues of race and sexuality are both intimately linked to colonial power structures governing the land, this paper draws from both queer and

decolonial scholarship. In paying close attention to regional discussions, projects, exhibitions, and learning from past collaborations, I have observed and participated in intimate and powerful discourse between queer and trans self identifying community members[2], and Indigenous, Métis, Inuit, and 2spirit community members. While heavily anecdotal, these conversations, my lived experience in this region, and observations of regional discourse inform my thesis approach to work from a place of co-production with relevant communities. Using decolonial scholarship also holds queerness – and this thesis paper – accountable to not reproduce colonialist systems in the practice of place-based exhibition making. More on this in the *Research methodology: locating // un-locating queer theory* section.

Situating Between Pheasants Contemporary

The gallery operates on Windjammer Ranch in Kerns Township – a rural agricultural community outside of New Liskeard in Northeastern so-called "Ontario", along the "Québec border". BPC is located on the past, present, and future home of Cree, Ojibway, and Algonquin peoples within Robinson-Huron treaty land, and neighbours the southern end of James Bay Treaty land. This Northeastern region is a unique blend of many small communities, towns, townships, and First Nations communities all in relatively close proximity[3] – understanding how they interrelate is important, but I will focus on the main and most closely related communities for this section.

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[2] Here, community members refers to both artists and non-artists actively contributing to social and artistic activist work through dialogue and exhibitions.

[3] Northern sensibilities of "close" might mean 100 kilometres away, but in the region's isolation, there is much intra-community relationship building.

According to the 2016 census, Kerns Township has a population of 358 persons over a land area of 90 square kilometre radius.[4] For context, a Toronto population sample over a 90 square kilometre radius includes 387,884 persons – 1 : 1,083.[5] Kerns Township falls under the wider catchment area of Temiskaming Shores, which is the amalgamation of three small and closely proximate towns: Dymond, New Liskeard, and Haileybury. The area also includes a fourth, and highly historically significant town called Cobalt, which opted not to amalgamate with the others.

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[4] **Information retrieved from: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-csd-eng.cfm?LANG=Eng&GK=CSD&GC=3554024 — last accessed on March 31st, 2021**

[5] **Toronto having a population of 2,731,571 persons as of 2016, and a land area of 630.2 square kilometres. Information retrieved from: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-cd-eng.cfm?LANG=Eng&GK=CD&GC=3520&TOPIC=1 — last accessed March 31st, 2021**

Cobalt is known for its legacy of the 1905 silver rush, where Cobalt became one of Canada's most booming towns of the time. The stolen land upon which Kerns is located hovers at the North end of the Robinson-Huron treaty, where it meets the James Bay Treaty, and falls almost squarely between Matachewan First Nation, Temagami First Nation, and Timiskaming First Nation – the later being the nearest community.

Timiskaming First Nation is home to the Saugeen Anishabeg and is on the Québec side of the colonially introduced, state sanctioned provincial border. The enforced border bisects their traditional lands (though I would argue, that this land is contemporaneously still Indigenous despite state demarcations) meaning that the Timiskaming First Nation community has been pushed out unto unceded territory and does not fall under the Robinson-Huron treaty, even if it does encompass their land on the Ontario side. Timiskaming First Nation is currently disputing land claims for the repatriation of their stolen land.

Also quite close to BPC is Temagami First Nation, home of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai: stewards of n'Daki Menan. While the Teme-Augama Anishnabai have been stewards of the lands, lakes, rivers, and watersheds for thousands of years, they were omitted from the original Robinson-Huron treaty. In 1945, the Ontario government sold Bear Island (where the Temagami First Nation community is located) to Indian Affairs for $3,000 and they were retro-actively acknowledged by the Robinson-Huron treaty.[6] Like Timiskaming First Nation, Temagami First Nation is also challenging unjust allocations of stolen land.

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[6] **Information retrieved from https://www.temagamifirstnation.ca/about-us/ — last accessed March 31st, 2021**

Unlike the neighbouring Timiskaming and Temagami First Nations, Matachewan First Nation, home to Ojibway and Algonquin peoples, falls under the James Bay Treaty, and is a part of the Wabun Tribal Council.[7] Matachewan First Nation is currently undergoing a Treaty Land Entitlement claim for the repatriation of land that has been denied to them despite the relevant treaty agreements. Matachewan First Nation is also most impacted by resource extraction, and the many mines surrounding the community continue to perpetuate harmful social, cultural, and ecological violence against the Nation's sovereign lands.

The many Treaty Land Entitlement claims in this area are significant given the vast surrounding crown land and the many provincial parks that are readily available for camping trips, and outdoor recreational activities to settlers, yet remain denied to the original inhabitants of the land. The struggle for repatriation of land to the many First Nations communities of this area – both in settling failed terms outlined in the Robinson-Huron and James Bay Treaties, and in larger decolonial praxis and reconciliation – evidences the disproportionate allotments of land in the Reserves of the Indian Act. As Bruce Erickson argues, the Canadian reservation system is deeply tethered to, and categorically emblematic of issues of race and sexuality vis-à-vis the landscape.[8] Once Nations are demarcated into small land allotments, the state actively monitors community populations by tracking births and deaths through census data, and imposed identification papers and administrative marital processes.[9] The surrounding landscape then becomes

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[7] Communities within the Wabun Tribal Council include Matachewan, Brunswick House, Chapleau Ojibway, Flying Post, Mattagami, and Beaverhouse First Nations

[8] Bruce Erickson, ""fucking close to water": Queering the Production of the Nation", in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Bruce Erickson & Catriona Sandilands (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 317

[9] Ibid., 317

inextricably linked to issues of race and sexuality that are too easily – and falsely – misconceived as urban specific issues.

The stolen land surrounding each of these communities has been occupied very specifically for two dominant reasons: to develop agricultural farmland and for resource extraction (around Timiskaming and Matachewan), and to develop an established summer tourist season in Temagami. The usage of these lands are directly critiqued in *tethers* as both Andrew Harding and Luke Maddaford work through vernacular imagery that is circulated and disseminated from these sites. *tethers* responds to the specific ties between rural aesthetics and their imbrication in the biopolitical formation of falsely totalizing mythologies of a national "Canadian" identity that specifically erases both queerness and Indigeneity in the advancement of colonial conquests for land.

Artistic context surrounding Between Pheasants Contemporary

Across Northern Ontario – a geographic area of equal scale to the state of Texas – there are only four artist-run centres dedicated to presenting exhibitions. Namely, the White Water Gallery in North Bay (which goes on hiatus frequently), 180 Projects in Sault Ste. Marie (which does not have funding and is volunteer-led), la Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario in Sudbury (dedicated to Francophone artists and curators), and Definitely Superior in Thunder Bay. An honorary mention also goes out to the Near North Mobile Media Lab in North Bay which sometimes presents exhibitions such as during the Ice Follies Biennales, but is predominately a media arts access artist-run centre for the North. To drive to all four in a roundtrip road trip would take 25 hours to cover a distance of 2,247 kilometres, whereas urban centres such as Toronto boast institutional clusters like 401 Richmond that make gallery hopping easy. For

context, Kerns Township is located 550 kilometres away from Toronto, and 670 kilometres away from Ottawa. As indicated by the 2016 census, there are 780, 140 people living across Northern Ontario, yet there are only four artist-run centres further evidencing that this region is underserved.[10] More commonly, several communities have their own municipal galleries. Kerns township, where BPC is located, is closest to the Temiskaming Art Gallery (known locally as TAG) at 33 kilometres away.[11]

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[10] Information retrieved from: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-csd-eng.cfm?LANG=Eng&GK=CSD&GC=3554024 — last accessed on March 31st, 2021

[11] TAG is nestled between the Temiskaming Shores city hall, and the local Provincial Offences courthouse, which all share a municipal building. This location, which pairs TAG with provincial and municipal punitive governmental affiliations, makes the gallery deeply connected to the state, and therefore removed from the community — especially marginalized communities. Other than TAG, the nearest gallery is the White Water Gallery in North Bay — 177 kilometres away. The remote location of BPC immediately posits it as a unique, stand-alone space without other gallery or community spaces in which partnerships can be readily built, or audiences that could be shared: BPC is starting from scratch. — make into a footnote

CURATORIAL ESSAY: *tethers*

Complete exhibition documentation available here.

The curatorial underpinning of *tethers* centres queer readings – the ability to identify, understand, and ascribe queer signifiers to signs – of heteronormative rural material culture designed to erase queerness, Indigeneity, and

otherness from the rural landscape. In this exhibition, Andrew Harding and Luke Maddaford take aesthetic and cultural signifiers of erasure as working points to self-reflexively re-frame queer and Métis masculinities against the backdrop of rurality. By re-appropriating signifiers and logics of falsely totalizing mythologies of national so-called 'Canadian' identity, the artists in *tethers* re-inscribe queer presence at the very point of erasure in these mythologies, effectively disarming their cultural purpose. When brought together, their works both point to the same heterocolonialist systems of power evidenced in landscaped-based vernacular visual and material culture. Harding and Maddaford re-position themselves to consider how these images and mythologies are tethered to their own respective identities, and how these tethers might be unfurled through visual and contextual interventions.

Andrew Harding's *Urban Hide* (2019), a re-worked 'native-gas-station-T-shirt', is suspended and re-animated as a floating sculpture taking the form of a tanned hide. These common t-shirts at once appropriate Indigenous visual and cultural epistemologies while also projecting a singular, flattened sense of Indigenous culture that exists uniquely as a souvenir, or otherwise forgotten. Marketed to summer family vacationers and tourists — industries rooted in the advancement of colonizing and entrenching settler whiteness into non-urban spaces — 'native-gas-station-T-shirts' are collectable tokens of commodification and dispossession in the form of a road trip souvenir. Harding's material intervention calls into question the plasticity of such paradoxical practices of memory-making by obfuscating authorship of the presented imagery. Harding, who has lived much of his life in Tkaronto, complicates the relationship between rural and urban cultural production; the rural is implied and conjured by the gas station relic, and the outdoor, Borealesque imagery on the t-shirt. The tanned hide form also points towards a cultural practice that would likely not happen in a city such as Toronto where harvesting a wild animal, skinning, and tanning it would seem

impossible. Ostensibly, the tourist moving through the rural who would purchase such a 'native-gas-station-t-shirt' would themselves return to the urban. *Urban Hide* cleverly complicates the spatial tension between the urban and the rural and highlights geographical discrepancies in the cultural production of both artistic and traditional cultural practices.

Luke Maddaford's *I Haunt the Prairies, and They Haunt Me Back* (2017), brings together a careful selection of objects and xerox images to form a nebulous installation where cowboy novels, hankies, rope, and photos of farmland abound. Each intimately points towards Maddaford's upbringing in the rural Saskatchewan township of Frenchman's Butte and troubles tensions between queerness, and the rural 'Canadian' imaginary. Notably, a xerox-printed photograph of an empty prairie field bears Maddaford's handwritten inscription "*still your fag*". 'fag', here, resiliently operates as Maddaford's tether to rurality, rather than a driving force away from rurality.

These two specific artworks emerged from the artists' respective interests in collecting ephemera. As Ann Cvetkovich observes, queers take it upon themselves to collect precious and marginal materials and ephemera in producing personal archives given that queers are not otherwise included in official histories.[12] Queer ephemera collectors, like Harding and Maddaford, find value in otherwise discounted and trivial materials precisely from their abilities to find and retain important social value.[13] This inherent recognition of value is distinctly a queer reading of vernacular ephemera. A queer reading, as Cvetkovich argues, finds meaning in the affective charge in the material that

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[12] **Ann Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice", in *Feeling Photography,* ed. Elspeth H. Brown & Thy Phu. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014), 275**

[13] **Ibid., 275**

overrides the material's intrinsic self-referentiality.[14] Misrecognition – here, not the failure to correctly read the sign, but to rather discount the signified – finds queer potentiality in revealing otherwise overlooked social meanings.[15] My curatorial reading of both Harding and Maddaford's material interventions contextualizes these artworks as specifically forming counterarchives. According to Cvetkovich, a photographic or artistic counterarchive critiques and remains suspicious of the implicit power structures embedded in traditional archival processes and distinctions of value.[16] Importantly, counterarchives, as I argue by mounting *tethers*, also address archival gaps; corny western novels and gas station t-shirts are not standard material fixations, but rather offer a queer reading to a counterarchival critique. Here, erasure is multifold: rural queerness holds very little space in most archives, vernacular rural material culture (like the western ephemera and gas station t-shirts) is also largely missing, and the aforementioned vernacular imagery also works towards erasing the respective queer and Métis subject positions of the artists. *tethers*, as a small counterarchive of queer interventions, destabilizes the systems of value that dictate the circulation of these otherwise unconsidered materials. This destabilization also calls into question the plasticity of materials with ostensibly fixed meanings through artistic and curatorial queer interventions, and illustrates how meaning making in the rural is in fact porous and filled with potential.

Both artists' works are made from materials found in circulation (in libraries, gas stations, fall fairs, etc.) that, when encountered, may initially be off-putting or even offensive: a t-shirt bearing stereotypical imagery, toxically masculine

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[14] **Ibid., 275**

[15] **Ibid., 275**

[16] **Ibid., 276**

cowboy novels, guns, etc. Though, these harmful imageries become transformative sites of reclamation as both Harding and Maddaford re-appropriate aesthetic mythologies that relate deeply to building a national 'Canadian' identity that is neither queer, nor Indigenous, but a hetero-colonialist characterization. In *"fucking close to water": Queering the Production of the Nation* (2010), Bruce Erickson thinks through queerness as a failure to uphold the production of national identity according to Homi Bhabba's theorization that nationalism is constructed upon narrations of a promulgated national identity despite the actualities of the national citizens.[17] As such, national citizens are tasked with the labour of upholding and reproducing a national narrative through cultural practices which ultimately serve to both control and normalize bodies, and other the bodies which fail to uphold performances of the prescribed national identity.[18] Queerness, as it exists and moves about the world, is an inherent radical embodied failure to uphold national identity. This radical embodied practice of failure, as presented by Harding and Maddaford, critiques dominant systems of disciplinary power and underscores the margins of error in totalizing national mythologies.[19] Harding and Maddaford work both with and against issues of representation tethered to these mythologies. Stuart Hall notes that in thinking through representation, it is important to acknowledge that individuated representation is idiosyncratic and in no way universal.[20] In practices of representation, it is also necessary to understand that identity is not in fact finalized, rather, it is always in the process of becoming, meaning cultural

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[17] **Erickson, *"fucking close to water": Queering the Production of the* Nation, 312**

[18] **Ibid., 312**

[19] **Jack Halberstram, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), 88**

[20] **Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 222**

identities do not exist as much as cultural identities are in production.[21] The self can exist individually within the fold of many others – equally, selves can exist in their own respective capacities – which can together account for frames of reference in forming cultural identities as decided by historical divisions.[22] Each artist works towards a tactic of misrepresentation and disidentification to critically re-orient viewers to the vernacular material at hand offering new, queered and Indigenized readings. Together, they uncoil and demystify the tethers that place queerness and Indigeneity at odds with national mythologies.

The Canadian rural masculine identity is one that readily links the male body to labour and the land as evidenced in the exploitation of land for industrial agricultural ventures. The farmer – both in practice and as a metaphorical figure – re-inscribes settler masculinity as distinctly tethered to the land, continuing the project of dispossession. Between Pheasants Contemporary is located on a farm, surrounded by other farms on stolen land, which is past, present, and future home of Cree, Ojibway, and Algonquin peoples within Robinson-Huron treaty land. As the inaugural exhibition for Between Pheasants Contemporary, *tethers* applies a critical reading of the regional cultural fabric in Kerns township, and the myriad other agricultural townships of the area. Reverberations of the aforementioned foundational, biopolitical formation of 'Canadian' masculinity and sexuality are still deeply felt in the rural North, and are the basis upon which colonialist metrics are used to pathologize queer and non-settler sexualities. While all the materials in the exhibition were found in the artists' respective communities, they are all also readily available in this area.

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[21] **Ibid., 222**

[22] **Ibid., 222**

Rural cultural theorist Kathleen Stewart argues that isolated, rural communities like Kerns are steeped in proliferated metacultural markers and signs that, in their textured density, naturalize themselves as the very culture of the community.[23] These signs, Stewart continues, are just as centrally written upon the landscape.[24] As *tethers* grapples with and introduces such signs into an exhibition context, the artists find themselves in what Stewart refers to as "a space of a doubled, haunting epistemology" (34) wherein the visual signs Harding and Maddaford re-contextualize become objects of narration, yet Maddaford and Harding remain the subjects of these very narratives.[25] Employing their respective epistemological interpretations of cultural space, the artists take images that are ostensibly pulled from low cultural spheres (farms, gas stations) to produce high cultural readings that destabilize relations to these signs making room for queerness and Indigeneity within the rural.[26] Curatorially, paying close attention to the naturalization of signs and implementing artworks that destabilize them in moves towards the space of a doubled, haunting epistemology provides a narrative slippage indicating that signs are perhaps not all that they seem.[27] The heavily naturalized signs of the rural – fields, forests, trucks, beer, fishing, hunting, and tractors – are also part of the mythologized national Canadian identity, yet rural communities remain left out of national narratives.[28] Abandoned

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[23] **Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 21**

[24] **Ibid., 17**

[25] **Ibid., 34**

[26] **Ibid., 34**

[27] **Ibid., 4**

[28] **Ibid., 4**

houses, closed silver mines, fields that haven't seen crops in years, and old farming equipment left to rot pile up in the landscape as they hauntingly point towards capitalist modernizations that consume, then dispose of the rural, rendering it as a site of antimodernist sensibilities.[29] In the distance between national and regional schemas, margins and centres, culture emerges precisely through difference that is bound to the space of the margin.[30] This in-between space is dialectic, textured, practical, imaginary, and dialogical and is the precise site of queer artistic and curatorial potentiality.[31]

When paired together in *tethers, Urban Hide* and *I Haunt the Prairies, and They Haunt Me Back* question difficult vernacular imagery and how it might be destabilized to make place for anti-colonial and non-metronormative queer and Métis narratives in rurality – narratives that find queerness and Indigeneity not at odds, but rather as part of a rural cultural fabric. Harding's cutting, stitching, upside-down mirroring, and installation approach of the t-shirt material is made to replicate a tanning hide and asserts cultural practice through form, re-claiming an agentic position vis-à-vis the material: what emerges, most dominantly, is the form and silhouette of the work. Similarly, Maddaford's assembly of various images including buttons, a wheat decorated plate, and an axe head are paired with queer and homoerotic imagery such as a flamboyant and sexually suggestive belt buckle (insofar that it is removed of the presumed pants it is meant to hold-up), rope, and the inscription 'fag' to extrapolate and reinforce the homosocial underpinnings of rural masculinity thus effectively locating an innate sense of queerness therein. Locating queerness in the rural, then, moves

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[29] **Ibid., 4**

[30] **Ibid., 4**

[31] **Ibid., 4**

not towards homonormative assimilation, but to the undoing of nationalist mythologies and to a re-positioning of how visual artists are re-imagining and actively working towards a queer, anti-colonial rural culture.

TOWARDS A RURALLY EMBODIED QUEER CURATORIAL METHODOLOGY

Research methodology: locating // un-locating queer theory

My research methodology for *tethers* // Between Pheasants Contemporary has foremostly centred place-based epistemologies and place-based notions of queerness as a way to navigate this undertaking. In so doing, I have also remained critical of canonical urban queer theory and its outward dissemination towards rurality – insofar that such queer theory functions as default landmarks for this field, and the omission of rurality of these texts presupposes inherent transferability, coupled with popular queer media emerging from urban centres – as reproductions of metronormative and colonial understandings of queerness. Western texts on queer theory had to be very carefully considered in their application to my work. Distance and geopolitics are highly important – and overlooked – considerations when resolving queerness outside of Western frameworks as queerness travels and yet does not *arrive* the same way throughout the world, as queer Cherokee scholar Joseph Pierce argues.[32] Rather, default queer theoretical frameworks can be flattening and forego the important contributions towards understandings of queerness in non-Western communities. The arrival of a default understanding of queerness further perpetuates and instills colonial rhetorics of the West as a navigational landmark.[33] Often, queerness is mistakingly used as a universal theoretical and ideological framework within a global context however this only further perpetuates colonial

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[32] **Zachary Small, *Joseph Pierce on Why Academics Must Decolonize Queerness* (Hyperallergic, 2019), podcast**

[33] **Ibid.**

reproductions of queerness from American and European traditions: Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and many others.[34] As such, queerness often needs to be stripped down and understood through a regional lens whereby understandings of queerness are unhinged from popular discourse and informed by region specific lived-experiences and epistemologies: localized queer becomings. This critical lens equally applies to queerness in the rural and becomes especially important in resolving queer problematics outside of the urban centre. In the move to work from a regional "queer theory", I follow the guiding principles offered by Pierce in an interview with Zachary Small, *On Why Academics Must Decolonize Queerness*, in thinking about relationships between queer theory and place, and how too easily queer academia and regional work are highly colonial in practice.[35]

Queer theory has long been critical of heteronormative consolidations of power through which Other ways of building community/ies, loving, and collective epistemologies have been systemically rejected and disenfranchised.[36] As these power structures also imbricate race and intersections of race with gender, sex, gender expression, sexuality, and other subject positions, queer theory can offer supporting frameworks to decolonization.[37] Although, queerness must first contend with a critical, self-reflexive evaluation of its rapport and history with colonialism. In *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010), Scott Herring defines the notion of 'critical queer rusticity' as artistic and cultural

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[34] Ibid. & Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York City: Routledge, 1989). & Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Volumes 1-4), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976)

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

production outside of the centre, which is informed by a rurally embodied queerness.[38] Critical queer rusticity ideologically and methodologically pushes back upon the dissemination of urban queer cultural production as definitive, universal understandings of queerness.[39] As such, I believe critical queer rusticity must uphold the importance of decolonizing queerness as it continues to challenge such forms of queer colonialism.

When writing about and from the North, the personal becomes an invaluable resource. In considering the production of knowledge in a Western academic sphere, it is also important to be critical of parameters which validate knowledge and contributions. Following Pierce's prompt, I also look to Tania Willard, artist and curator from Secwepemc Nation, working in site-specific, often rural modes of curatorial production. Willard often cites the natural world as knowledge sources in her works cited. This centring of Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge of and offered by the land – the trees, the lakes, the rivers, the sounds of waterfalls, fungi, lichen, etc. – delineates the rigidity of traditional markers of indexing knowledge in the task of critical scholarship. If queerness is multiple and undefinable, queerness must thus be written about in every way possible: all accounts of lived experience of queerness offer the opportunity to further develop the theoretical frameworks of queerness not only as intellectualized, but actually lived.

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[38] **Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, (New York City: New York University Press, 2010), 28**

[39] **Ibid., 28**

Literature review: "Reading is what? Fundamental!"

Across all my extensive research and reading, I have not come across a single text that specifically addresses queer rural curatorial or artistic work. There is a relatively small selection of texts and literature on queerness in the rural, and equally little writing around artistic discourse in the rural. This project pulls from these two separate and relatively small knowledge pools to form inter-textual readings that address the large gap around rural queer curatorial and artistic discourse. While I am specifically thinking from the North, my critical undertakings exist somewhere within the wider constellation of queer rural studies: somewhere between electric dirt, queer Appalachia, the queer deep South, the queer midwest, yet, somewhere so entirely removed from these areas. My methodological approach to reviewing textual references considers the asymmetries of adhering value to the circulation and transmission of epistemologies between marginal (here, respectively: queer, trans, rural, Indigenous, Métis, 2spirit, non-binary, racialized, and Northern) communities and the rubrics of validating knowledge within academia. Similar to the methodology, the literature review needs to contend with adjacent pools of knowledge (i.e. transmission of oral histories, experience lived in the relevant communities, relationships formed in working with the artists, and the farmers' – myself included – knowledge of caring for the livestock around BPC, etc).

One of the key texts for this project includes Scott Herring's *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, and his notion of 'critical rusticity' as rurally embodied and rurally informed, anti-urban queer existence.[40] I also spent much time with Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson's co-edited anthology, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature,*

[40] **Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, 28**

Politics, Desire that thinks through the interrelations of queerness and natural spaces as issues explored throughout much of BPC's programming. Additionally, Mary L. Gray is one of the foremost scholars on rural queerness and her texts *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, and *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies* – which she co-edited with Brian J Gilley and Colin Johnson – have greatly informed my thinking. Later below in this text, I draw upon Gray's notion of the 'boundary public' in theorizing navigations between dominant and marginal identities that come into contact at a site of possible disjuncture.[41] Though transferable, none of these texts are concerned with artistic and curatorial praxis. Otherwise, I have also turned to an anthology titled *The Rural* published by a rural contemporary artistic collective called MyVillages (Kathrin Böhm & Wapke Feenstra) based in the UK. Their text, however, is predominantly collected summaries of various projects taking place in rural, European locations and leaves much to be desired. Most importantly, their introductory essay in the anthology point-towards asymmetries between urban and rural arts ecologies, and to reconcile their cultural mutual exclusivity by creating intra-rural-urban arts networks, which I draw upon later in this text.

Though, Kerns Township is much more isolated vis-à-vis the urban than the rural case studies in *The Rural*. This geographic isolation further entrenches a Northern rural and Southern urban divide within Ontario, hence the key pivot away from audiences, moving instead towards communities surrounding BPC. While in-person activities remain heavily restricted, I dream of one day offering a variety of workshops at BPC on such practices as photography, gardening, canning, curating, etc. The interweaving of regional epistemologies with artistic projects embodies Herring's notion of critical rusticity, and posits curatorial practice as a pedagogical undertaking. This skill sharing model

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[41] **Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, (New York City: New York University Press), 92**

also seeks to address the knowledge gap in rural queer curatorial practice; while these speculative gatherings from a safer future would not necessarily contribute to an academic pool, they would however address a knowledge gap through a collective, co-producing praxis. To this end, the rich, gooey, yet missing textual in-betweens of the aforementioned texts are best in-filled with embodied practice. In the essay *Needing to Know (:) Theory / Afterwards*, from the anthology, *Theory Aside*, Ian Balfour tells us theory is always at work regardless of our conscious or unconscious embodiment of ideologies.[42] He offers, "It is thus not a question of whether or not to do theory, whether to take sides for or against it, but only a question of *how* one does it: how intensively, how self-consciously, how explicitly, how usefully, how well".[43] In the anthology's introduction, the editors, Jason Potts and Daniel Stout, call for a theoretical sidestep and to think through theory not in terms of high, low, or even medium theory, nor even a question of methodology, but theory as a question of pleasure.[44] Balfour retains his position that more importantly than deciding to commit to theory, we should centre the question of how to do theory.[45] As I work on the farm (here, work is both academic undertakings, and farmwork and chores), I have been reflecting on the question of how to do theory and the question of sidestepping to a 'theory aside', and have found that an aside-theory has long been present in epistemologies outside of the centre and here on this farm. A theory aside, is a theory that moves slowly, without the

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[42] Ian Balfour, "Needing to Know (:) Theory / Afterwards", *Theory* Aside, ed. Jason Potts & Daniel Stout. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 280

[43] Ibid., 280

[44] Jason Potts & Daniel Stout, "INTRODUCTION — On the Side: Allocations of Attention in the Theoretical Moment", *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts & Daniel Stout. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 6

[45] Ibid., 284

drive to produce and publish and is rather a theory that manifests in taking walks through the woods, in starting fires and chopping wood, in shovelling snow and pouring salt over ice, in tending to the chickens, the pheasants, and the horses, planting the garden in the spring and harvesting in the fall, knowing which crops to interchange from year-to-year to best enrich the soil, etc. Ostensibly pragmatic, these tasks are underpinned by an ideological position of taking care: of our homes, ourselves, our families. These quotidian tasks, when anchored with intention, can often be embodied positions of anti-capitalism, anti-hegemony, and counter-metronormative frameworks. Perhaps the prompt for a theory aside is highly phenomenological in practice insofar as it means to turn away from the writing desk or the computer and to instead turn towards anything not otherwise intrinsically necessary in the reproduction and maintenance of canonical theoretical discourse. To this end, a rural queer curatorial practice is itself heavily embodied by the distinct corporeal placement in the rural and subsequent responsibilities of living here. Putting theory aside and instead embodying rurality delineates queer metronormativity in favour of sensibilities that deeply relate queerness to localized culture. These guiding principles are the ideological underpinnings that both lead to, and sustain Between Pheasants Contemporary: a gallery aside showing artists aside.

Re-orienting queer curatorial practice to the rural

A rurally embodied queer curatorial methodology is phenomenological in practice as it necessitates specific re-orientations: the rural queer curator must turn away from institutions (here, 'institutions' is understood as both gallery and museological white cube spaces, and institutionalized academic queer theoretical discourse) to move instead

towards interstitial, community specific spaces and regional epistemologies; to turn away from curatorial exhibitions as presentation platforms and instead move towards curatorial exhibitions as community oriented pedagogies; to move away from colonialist queer assimilation into the rural, and to rather work towards non-hierarchical co-productions in cultural projects. Foregoing markers of institutionalized gallery spaces – white walls, quiet, behavioural expectations, and so forth – and instead prioritizing the mud, hay, plywood, and livestock of the farm exemplifies critical queer rusticity. As a methodical approach to forming a presentation space on a farm, critical queer rusticity moves beyond simply identifying queerness in the rural, but using queerness as an ideological wayfinder to dismantle the systems of power that govern hegemonic ways of thinking about, and engaging with rural land. In curatorial practice, critical queer rusticity is a strategic tool to create exhibitions that emerge from place-based epistemologies effectively delineating neoliberal, professionalized reproductions of commercially driven exhibitions in urban centres: white cubes, demure and poised exhibition viewership, artists with commercial representation, arts spaces in gentrified neighbourhoods, etc. The curatorial approach to forming BPC is unique insofar that it is not a new, liminal physical space carved out of a community, regulated, and painted white, but rather a continued praxis of the existing cultural fabric of Kerns township and the surrounding area. This approach allows BPC to better ground itself, relate to local audiences, and serve the local communities. For the inaugural exhibition, it was important that BPC present works that were deeply connected to local communities and the regional social ontology. While neither artist may be from Kerns Township specifically, their respective works hold much transferrable values and aesthetic praxis: Maddaford's collected imagery and objects could be pulled straight from the local fall fair, where Harding's t-shirt could have just as easily been purchased.

Integrating curatorial practice into rural communities

It is of the utmost importance that exhibitions and curatorial and artistic projects in the rural North understand the complex and specific cultural realities therein so as to not alienate local audiences, and contribute projects that are meaningful to this area rather than simply reproducing neoliberal, professionalized artistic discourse. By leaning into the existing rural cultural fabric, and integrating BPC into an operating farm, exhibitions emerge from within the community, rather than appear as an outside force. Such site-specific and site-responsive programming generates exhibitions that are intimately connected to the communities in which access BPC.

In public facing art infrastructures and systems – which have predominantly emerged from, and cater to the urban – rurality remains nearly entirely invisible.[46] As Kathrin Böhm & Wapke Feenstra observe, curatorial practice in the rural has the extraordinary challenge of rethinking the structures of exhibition practices.[47] The cultural undertaking of queer curatorial work in the North best emerges from unusual interstitial spaces as there are no dedicated queer spaces here. Queerness has a resilient history of gathering and building communities in areas deemed to have lesser capital value, and finding a queer potentiality in the ordinances at hand. So too, then, does a queer curatorial modality in the rural first need to understand interstitial cultural in-betweens through deep readings of cultural space to find potential queer openings.

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[46] MyVillages (Kathrin Böhm & Wapke Feenstra), "Introduction//Rural Art is…", *The Rural*, ed. MyVillages (Kathrin Böhm & Wapke Feenstra). (Cambridge & London: Whitechapel Gallery & The MIT Press), 14

[47] Ibid., 14

Cultural workers such as artists and curators in rural areas often undertake invisible work given that such rural practices are usually in remote areas with small audiences, as Böhm and Feenstra argue.[48] Further, intra-urban-rural art infrastructures are underdeveloped and therefore projects often have a hard time reaching beyond their physical local (of course, online – often shallower – engagements via documentation are an accessible alternative).[49] As such, Böhm & Feenstra argue that rural cultural undertakings should be less concerned with developing wide audiences or capacity building, but rather focus on the integration of artistic projects as they overlap with the existing quotidian cultural sphere of the rural leading to social and political spaces that are co-producers of culture.[50] Such an approach diffuses the question of an audience, and repositions art as a community oriented modality (not to separate audiences from community, but to put artistic projects in motion as communal undertakings rather than a show-and-tell type model). Further, Böhm & Feenstra motion that a community integration as co-production model in critical contemporary rural projects can unhinge hierarchical, dichotomized cultural modalities: low vs high culture, rurality vs urbanity, and audience vs community.[51]

Again, Böhm & Feenstra usher towards a culture of commoning – a collaborative community model wherein individuals pool their resources and efforts together towards both collective and environmental well-being – which

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[48] **MyVillages, *Introduction//Rural Art is…*, 18**

[49] **Ibid., 18**

[50] **Ibid., 18**

[51] **Ibid., 18**

necessitates a collaborative, non-hierarchical, and non-exploitative network between the rural and the urban.[52] In doing so, both the urban and the rural will have to recognize their mutual interdependence – and not their mutual exclusivity – to build and reposition relations and practices therein.[53] An intra-urban-rural paradigm shift would be, as Böhm & Feenstra argue, a queering of several binaries opening-up a pluralism of ecologies.[54] Here, art is both a tool and a modality through which communities, artists, projects, curators, and others connect and reach beyond their respective localities towards trans-localities and internationalisms decentralizing neoliberal systems of power; the marginal, the underserved, and the outsiders of art working together towards arts models that meet the needs of their respective localities while equally contributing to wider dialogues.[55]

In bringing together artists working from across the North, other provinces, and international artists, and actively reaching both local audiences (rural community members and Northern arts community members alike), and urban audiences via online interfaces, BPC is uniquely able to at once, maintain a firm anchoring in its regional community, and weave together trans-local cultural exchanges. BPC aims to lead by example to inspire other communities in rural Northern Ontario and elsewhere to similarly establish community oriented spaces leading to the dissolution of the mutually exclusive rural-urban binary. The biggest challenge in doing so remains accessing funding to equitably compensate artists, curators, writers, administrators, and preparators for their labour. Unlike larger urban cities, small

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[52] **Ibid., 19**

[53] **Ibid., 19**

[54] **Ibid., 19**

[55] **Ibid., 19**

rural towns do not have access to local funding pools or established local municipal arts councils – some municipalities in this area have closed bridges, roads, and other services due to their inability to cover repair costs so arts funding is understandably not seen as an immediate priority. Funding, then, remains heavily competitive in rural and Northern communities forced to compete provincially and nationally through project grants offered by the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Ontario Arts Council.[56] Meeting eligibility requirements to attain operating funding relies on longterm volunteer labour to realize programming. Following sociocultural and ideological shifts towards inclusive and decentralized translocal arts ecologies, the financial challenges remain the most difficult obstacle to surmount.

Critical queer rusticity as curatorial practice

In practice, critical queer rusticity negotiates the co-existence of queerness and rustic elements that define rurality. For example, in Luke Maddaford's original installation of *I Haunt the Prairies, and They Haunt Me Back*, xerox printed images with the inscription "*still your fag*" were placed atop a plinth, but for tethers, I proposed using a straw bale in lieu. Much like a plinth is in orbit of a regular gallery space and kept somewhere nearby in storage, the straw bale was already in the space and, unlike introducing a white plinth, would not alter the rusticity of the coop. The straw bales are more than just functional objects, they are necessary and important parts of the space's ecosystem. The bale

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[56] I have met with an Ontario Arts Council Officer for guidance in acquiring funding and will be applying to a new OAC project grant called Artists-Presenters Collaboration Projects, which seems like a very promising fit. This project grant was assembled using unused funds from the necessarily suspended Touring Projects OAC grant as a result of COVID-19 precautions. This grant has the potential to establish an operating infrastructure for BPC including admin fees, photo documentation and installation labour to outsource folks when I am not around, and artists, writers, and curators' fees.

used to present Luke's work will eventually also be used in the roosts for the chickens. And soon after, another bale will replace it. The straw bales were assembled following this year's crop. Much like the coop, the bales – and sometimes they may be hay bales, which are also harvested on the farm – are first and foremost part of the farm's ecosystem, and secondly, part of the gallery space's presentation strategy. Here, the quotidian of the coop and bales, are meshed into cultural production in a holistic approach. In future exhibitions, straw and hay bales will be used as plinths provided that artists and curators are in agreement and that the bales would not otherwise alter the reading of the works.

Critical queer rusticity is not a queerness outside of the urban in contempt of homonormativity or homonationalism, but a queerness that excels in the rural while maintaining a critical, self-reflexive stance on how queerness itself maintains and reproduces settler colonialist power structures in the urban or in the rural. BPC embodies the notion of critical queer rusticity as it demonstrates queerness' lived ability to thrive in the rural, and by not centring marginalization to eclipse queerness' responsibilities of adhering to anti-colonial practices. At BPC, critically rustic queer programming (in *tethers* and other upcoming exhibitions) leads to the formation what Mary L. Gray calls a 'boundary public'.

Between Pheasants Contemporary as a boundary public

Showing *Urban Hide* and *I Haunt the Prairies, and They Haunt Me Back* at Between Pheasants Contemporary demonstrates a porous utilization of rural space for queerness to identify and challenge the heterocolonialist systems of power reflected in mythologies of the rural. Seemingly at odds, it is the friction between queerness and rurality – erasure, (in)visibility, lack of queer community spaces, marginalization – that offers opportunity for nuanced exhibition

readings that disprove mutual exclusivity between queerness and the rural. Following a study of queer youth in rural Kentucky, Mary L. Gray put forth her notion of 'boundary publics' after observing the importance of certain key spaces that figured centrally in the production of identity.[57] For Gray, boundary publics are as much places as they are moments in which groups negotiate the complex overlapping of normative and marginalized identities.[58] For example, Gray documents a recurring event amongst the queer youth she surveyed where, collectively, they would gather at the local Wal-Mart (from personal experience, this is a central social space in small, rural communities including my own in the Northeast) to put-on spontaneous drag shows. Together, the queer youth would try on clothes, apply make-up samples, and sashay down the Wal-Mart aisles runways. Wal-Mart, here, is a boundary public that otherwise delineates queerness in favour of a capitalist cache of heteronormativity; the youth are policed by shoppers and onlookers, and eventually chased out as the boundary of heteronormativity is enforced and maintained. But, for brief, glorious moments, the youth are able to find, produce, and perform queerness on their own terms by negotiating the boundaries and limitations of heteronormative public spaces. Gray draws on Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner's writings on counterpublics, but quickly highlights the shortcomings of positing these queer youth drag performances in a rural Wal-Mart as counterpublics: the queer youth simply are not in large enough numbers to perform publics, their group actions remain highly ephemeral, and their access to public spaces remains tenuous (many are unable to drive or get rides to meet-up, and many are too timid to venture queerly into public spaces).[59] The asymmetries of

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[57] **Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, 92**

[58] **Ibid., 92-3**

[59] **Ibid., 94-5**

power between counterpublics and queer youth coming together connotes that these moments are, as Gray argues, distinctly boundary publics.[60] The spatiotemporal formation of boundary publics importantly points towards an inherently necessary rationing and negotiation of the delineating boundaries i.e. when it is no longer safe to turn a look down the aisles, and when it is time to sashay away. Gray adds that the Wal-Mart (just as it might also be a public library youth area, a Church, a friend's basement, or other such spaces) provides enough elasticity to be queered, yet ardently rigid enough to maintain a boundary of normalcy.[61] Much like the queer youth Wal-Mart drag troupe, Harding and Maddaford equally engage in negotiations between dominant and marginalized identities at their specific points of intersection. Between Pheasants Contemporary similarly offers such slippages at the point of contact between queer exhibitions and a hyper-heteronormative milieu.

I would argue that boundary publics extend beyond Gray's formulation of queer potentialities to other marginalized identities. In *tethers*, Andrew Harding's piece *Urban Hide* equally delineates the boundary public by making Métis space. Presenting *Urban Hide*, a 'native-gas-station-t-shirt' queered into a powerful sculptural work Indigenizes the pheasant coop gallery. BPC uses critical queer rusticity as a strategy to create a porous boundary public wherein heteronormativity – the abled bodied, white, settler, cisgender, and heterosexual norm – is repeatedly destabilized in an isolated cultural milieu where perhaps it is most omnipresent.

Queer decolonial scholar Scott Lauria Morgensen insists that queer critiques of locations and temporalities fall

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[60] **Ibid., 94-5**

[61] **Ibid., 94-5**

short in that they aim to naturalize queerness in such critiqued spatiotemporal settings.[62] In these moves towards homonationalist naturalizations – complimentary LGBTQ2S+ self-associations to nationalist ideologies – queer critiques disregard their rapport to settler colonialism.[63] Queer settler colonialism's inherent imbrications in dominant, settler systems of power are too readily overlooked in resolving issues around queerness in the rural.[64] Queer theoretical, artistic, and especially curatorial praxis therefore have the paramount responsibility to centralize decoloniality and anti-colonial projects wherein settler queerness must work towards undoing its position of power.[65] In *tethers*, Maddaford and Harding hold colonialist projects of land theft accountable with collected images deeply tethered to inscribing nationalism to the landscape through interventions that destabilize the metacultural signs of the rural. *I Haunt the Prairies, and They Haunt Me Back* not only identifies queerness in the homosocial material manifestations of nationalism, it also directly points towards the lexicon of violence in settler occupation of land – gun dotting cowboys and farmers. To Maddaford, the central problematic has never been heteronormativity, it has always been about the power structures that govern rural land.

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[62] Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 26

[63] Ibid., 26

[64] Ibid., 26

[65] Ibid., 26

EXHIBITION AND CURATORIAL PRECEDENTS

An Upstream Flow in a Downstream Current

Forming Between Pheasants Contemporary and choosing to produce exhibitions in unusual spaces like a pheasant coop in rural Northeastern Ontario comes after the success of past curatorial projects in this area realized in alternative spaces given the lack of pre-existing presentation spaces in this region. In 2018, I independently curated *An Upstream Flow in a Downstream Current*, a survey exhibition of 15 artists from across so-called "Ontario" that looked at issues of identity and the landscape. Central themes included structural violence against Indigenous women and girls, queer temporalities and queer geographies, and the harmful impact of local resource extraction industries towards femme, queer, and Indigenous bodies. This exhibition took place along a popular local hiking trail called Pete's Dam Park – about 20 minutes away from BPC – between Gay Pride and National Indigenous Peoples' Day.[66] This exhibition was realized in a public space as a pragmatic solution to the lack of access to programming spaces in this area, but it also carried with it an ideological underpinning and praxis of alternative curatorial strategies, and intimately linked the exhibition to a space in which the artworks were responding to. The exhibition, which could only be open for one day in accordance with the city of Temiskaming Shores' Parks and Recreation department, had an incredible attendance of nearly 140 people (in a very small and isolated area). Many drove from other Northern communities including Sault Ste. Marie, Kirkland Lake, Timmins, North Bay, and beyond to be in attendance. As some of the themes and mediums

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[66] Commemorating the 1969 Stonewall Riots, Gay Pride is celebrated throughout the month of June. In Canada, National Indigenous People's Day is recognized and celebrated on June 21st every year.

were unfamiliar topics for some audience members in this area, I lead a two hour curatorial tour, which was advertised locally, and quickly spread to other Northeastern communities through word of mouth and social media. I lead attendees through the winding trails, stopping to talk about each work and facilitate a question and answer period with the artists that were present, all with the guiding intention to best serve the local audiences, and further anchor the exhibition in its geographical and sociocultural context. Many local attendees expressed that it was their first time attending an art exhibition, and that the novelty of the outdoor installations was intriguing and inviting. While anecdotal, these conversations from *An Upstream Flow in a Downstream Current* became a launch point to rethink the relationship between exhibitions spaces, and their local audiences, and that a curatorial framework in this area needs to be tailored to the communities here. As a curator in the North, one of the fundamental differences of working remotely is to invite local communities to talk about the work, rather than create audiences to look at the work; meeting viewers halfway, inviting them into dialogue, and making them feel part of the meaning-making of the artworks to ensure works and concepts are not inaccessible or alienating.

Minor Hockey Curatorial

Alongside my frequent collaborator, Robin Alex McDonald, I have also co-curated exhibitions under the moniker Minor Hockey Curatorial in alternative places such as atop frozen Lake Nipissing on behalf of the Near North Mobile Media Lab for the 2020 Ice Follies Biennale in North Bay, and in the re-construction site of a burnt down former hunting and fishing goods store also in North Bay. These three exhibitions shared in their inception a deep reading

and understanding of local social contexts, and all shared the premise of hosting an exhibition and engaging with the respective communities in attendance. While the pairing of exhibitions with these locations deepens the connection between the artworks and place, the novelty of exhibitions in such places also intrigue non-art audiences, and makes their attendance more accessible by working in familiar, non-institutional spaces. The rurally embodied queer curatorial praxis at BPC is the natural progression of *An Upstream Flow in a Downstream Current* and the Minor Hockey Curatorial exhibitions (though, the latter were not rural so much as they were Northern given the population of North Bay). BPC has thus emerged in working towards a longterm and sustained engagement with a rurally embodied queer curatorial methodology.

In the short time that BPC was open prior to reinstated lockdowns, I had similar conversations with visitors who expressed that the novelty of a pheasant coop (pheasants are themselves an extremely unusual livestock in this area) was charming and drew them to the space. That the gallery is located on a farm is key; visitors arrive in their farm clothes, and are noticeably at ease navigating the site of the farm. No Carol Duncan-esque ritual or performative viewing engagement is required or expected here – rather, visitors are welcomed to collect fresh eggs when they stop-in.

Counterpoint: *Group of Seven in Temiskaming: Reflections After 100 Years*

The Temiskaming Art Gallery (TAG), the only other presentation space in the area, has yet to show an exhibition relating to, or by a queer, trans, and/or 2spirit identified artist. One of the most recent exhibitions at TAG, *Group of*

Seven in Temiskaming: Reflections After 100 Years was a two part exhibition that included, of course, several works by the Group of Seven, and 20 works by local artists that responded to the following prompt, which was disseminated in a call for submissions:

In celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Group of Seven's first exhibition, the Temiskaming Art Gallery invited artists of Northern Ontario (as defined by the NOAA) and NorthWestern Quebec to submit their own interpretations of Canadian identity. The Group of Seven was highly successful in presenting a unified image of Canadian identity rooted in the motif of the untamed North. TAG acknowledges that this identity was rooted within a singular viewpoint, and we feel that now it is time to diversify our conception of what it means to be Canadian, especially in the north.[67]

As a counterpoint, *Group of Seven in Temiskaming* contextualizes how both the exhibition *tethers* and the presentation space, Between Pheasants Contemporary, offer an alternative – even opposing – view of the only other presentation space in this area. The exhibition, which ran from September 28th – November 6th of 2020, featured works by Northern artists that were, in many cases, emulations of the Group of Seven and featured, almost resoundingly, empty, painted landscapes. The continued aesthetic praxis between the Group of Seven's original works, and the presented works by Northern Artists maintain that a 'Northern Canadian identity' is one that is deeply tethered to the local landscape, and re-instilled settler occupation of this land as a cornerstone of what the local identity is understood to be here, and how settler occupation is deeply rooted in aesthetic practice. The canonical and deeply established legacy of the Group of Seven thus becomes a navigational landmark many artists in this area evidently aim to emulate. While TAG stated that they acknowledge the Group of Seven's work emerging from a singular viewpoint,

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[67] **Retrieved from the Temiskaming Art Gallery's website: https://www.temiskamingartgallery.ca/**

the presented exhibition is congruous with this viewpoint and reproduces and maintains a visual lexicon of settler practices of dispossession. Given the hegemonic inseparability of artistic practice, rural landscapes in the North, and the canonical legacy of landscape painting from this region, it became clear that the inaugural exhibition should critically address these aesthetics and their cultural histories vis-à-vis locational identity while still providing programming that is relevant to local communities.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION, A LAUNCH POINT

Future programming

While BPC prioritizes underrepresented artists and curators in this region, not all forthcoming exhibitions are exclusively by queer artists. The upcoming exhibitions all offer either: 1) unique and specific readings of Northern and rural culture by artists living in – or from – the North, or; 2) include artists from elsewhere filling-in gaps around socially engaged art and topics that hold relevance here, but are not otherwise currently explored by artists working in the rural North.

Currently showing at BPC (as of April 10th) is a solo exhibition by North Bay-based painter Colin W Davis (documentation available here), which draws from his experience of moving from Toronto, where he was born and raised, to the North nearly four years ago. This transitional period is explored in Davis' paintings by addressing issues of race, vernacular Northern culture, and motifs of camouflage that simultaneously conceal otherness and defaults as an enacting norm.

BPC also looks forward to a curatorial project by current first year Criticism & Curatorial Practice graduate student, lea rose sebastianis. This exhibition features a video piece by Michel Gervais, a Francophone drag performer based in Sturgeon Falls known as Jenna Seppa (which is a very clever pun where the French phrase "Je ne sais pas" translates to 'I don't know'). In the video, Jenna – in full drag – humorously vlogs her way through the COVID-19 induced apocalypse as she attempts to survive in the Northern Ontario bush, the last place we might expect to find a

drag queen. Also in the show is Ashley Guenette, a Francophone artist equally from Sturgeon Falls whose practice explores the feminist new materialist predilections of failed intergenerational transference of craftswomanship. Guenette's sculptural pieces often include failed knitting and sewing projects as a self-reflexive modality of inquiry. Here, two artists from Sturgeon Falls both apply humour to navigate failed applications of craftswomanship: Guenette, through asymmetries of cultural value between domesticity and contemporary artistic practice, and Jenna Seppa's transgressive use of sewing and stitching to create costumes for a drag queen who ultimately fails to survive in the bush of her own hometown.

Afterwards, Mar Marriott, a queer gender-nonconforming artist and writer from Engleheart (about 30 minutes away from BPC) who grew up in Kerns will be showing a series of oil paintings that offer haunting, ambiguous glimpses at queerness in this area, and in Toronto, where they are currently finishing their painting BFA at OCAD. The works offer distinct insight to queerness, but the whereabouts remain indiscernible. Mar's exhibition will be an off-site presentation installed in an abandoned house in Kerns, on a derelict dirt road no longer maintained known locally as "New Toronto". During the economic recession of the Depression, many Torontonians left the city to try their hand in agriculture. Farms were established, and almost just as quickly, abandoned. In the mid-2000's, the final house on Highland Road in the New Toronto area was abandoned when the occupying family left for Toronto. The decaying house embodies the tensions that both Mar and I experience going back and forth between Kerns and Toronto, and is an ideal space to think through a queer hauntological framework in the North.

In August, Sault Ste. Marie-based Francophone artist, Isabelle Michaud, will have a solo exhibition in the chicken side of the coop. Michaud, whose husband and daughter research avian psychology and migratory patterns, will

explore the coop in a way that incorporate's her family's research, but also maintains her material interest in domesticity. Her installation will question asymmetries of value between scientific research, and domestic artistic production paralleling the domestic role of the hens as daily egg-laying food producers. Michaud's work offers a unique contribution to the intermingling of artistic projects on a working farm, and the self-reflexive capacity to produce artworks therein.

In the fall of 2021, Justine Woods will mount an exhibition of her OCAD MDes graduate thesis work of beaded garments and accompanying photographs as she wears her garments in situ. These pieces critically centre her familial Aabitaawizininiwag history through, as Woods names it, a praxis of decolonial love: a methodology of conceptually and physically re-stitching alternative worlds together. Grounded in her identity as a Penetanguishene Aabitaawikwe designer, Woods uses the subversive phenomenological potentialities of beadwork as a vehicle towards decolonizing design. Created in rural Penetanguishene, Woods' series uniquely emerges by side-stepping and situating the body in rural land, and harmoniously merging the quotidian tasks of living in rurality with Aabitaawizininiwag cultural designs as she is seen chopping kindling, ice fishing, and filleting a fish while wearing her garments in the accompanying photographs.

Following Wood's exhibition, QT artist Adrienne Crossman will mount a solo exhibition that explores the ostensibly mutually exclusive material qualities of vernacular objects that overlap with queer BDSM practices.

In January of 2022, Q2S Métis artist Sheri Osden Nault will present a solo exhibition at BPC. The details of their current work-in-progress series are still being fleshed out, but their overall practice uses the framework of queer ecologies as a working point towards decolonizing ecological spaces threatened by settler colonialism.

The exhibitions have all been scheduled for times when I can guarantee I will be able to install and document the works. Some exhibitions will be installed in advance, documented, and immediately de-installed so as to have documentation ready for online audiences. Once these exhibitions are scheduled to open physically (provided doing so is allowed by regulating public health authorities), precise installation instructions will be left for my parents, the farm owners, to install the exhibitions as they open alongside the online publishing of documentation.

At the time of writing this thesis, I am currently forming a partnership and regularly meeting with 180 Projects – an artist-run centre in Bawating (so-called "Sault Ste Marie, Ontario") – and Debajehmujig – a First Nations arts organizations in unceded Wiikwemkoong territory of Manitowaning (so-called "Manitoulin Island") as we work towards an application for the upcoming Ontario Arts Council "Artist-Presenter Collaboration Projects" grant. 180 Projects, Debajehmujig, and Between Pheasants Contemporary all share an interest in championing visual arts in the North and the importance of understanding and presenting exhibitions and projects that critically think through relations to place. Together, we are proposing a decentralized, translocal Biennale of site specific visual arts exhibitions to take place in our respective communities. We are proposing this as a pilot project to create the foundation in working towards a larger Biennale in which the second iteration would include several exhibitions presented by artist-run centres, ad hoc collectives, and independent curators from across the North. Long term, we (180 Projects, Debajehmujig, and BPC) see this Biennale working towards a decentralized, translocal festival of site-specific visual arts exhibitions taking place amongst international communities operating outside of major urban centres. But for now, we're starting small. Complete details are still being fleshed out, but we have been collectively meeting weekly, and

have had several productive meetings with OAC officers to best align our project with the mandate of this new (and, subsequently very open-ended) grant.

Closing thoughts

While these exhibitions, artists, and curators all operate autonomously, their continued presentations through BPC offer a sustained engagement with a local community otherwise deprived from presentations of contemporary art. The exhibition themes weave a tapestry that continuously place BPC, rural publics, artists, curators, community members, and audiences as co-producers in contemporary artistic discourse that is unique to Kerns township. Ultimately, a queer rural curatorial practice is perhaps highly phenomenological insofar that it requires a re-orientation away from the liminality of the white cube gallery space, and pivoting towards interstitial rustic spaces. These moves destabilize both queerness' and artists' and curators' relationships to institutional spaces in favour of community integrated models. The white cube, as both a site and concept designed to remove context or background, fails in the rural North precisely because of the omission of background. For example, unlike walking around in an urban centre with shallow depths of field where buildings and concrete obstruct sightlines, the rural offers large vistas and seemingly endless backdrops extending through the fields' horizons, and the big blue Northern sky. Background, here, provides necessary familiarity to engage rural communities, where culture takes place outside.

BPC embodies Scott Herring's notion of 'critical queer rusticity' as it intersects with Mary L. Gray's concept of the 'boundary public' to situate a rurally embodied queer curatorial exhibition making practice. Critical queer rusticity

emerges through co-inhabitation of the geographic, the corporeal, and the aesthetic for non-normative sexualities in rurality without dependence to the urban.[68] And, boundary publics are malleable sites where queerness and marginal identities are able to negotiate with and even blur the enacting, dominant norm.[69] A rurally embodied queer curatorial practice in Northeastern Ontario then must understand the regional social and aesthetic context to employ critical queer rusticity in the formation of boundary publics. As such, BPC distinctly emerges as a critically queer rustic boundary public: while it will never be large enough to create a queer counter-public, it destabilizes the queer-hetero dynamic of Kerns Township by finding queer geographic, corporeal, and aesthetic inhabitance in a pheasant coop. The turn to rurality in queer curatorial work then becomes a specific, nuanced methodology wherein a deep, queer reading of the rural North in exhibition making produces a specific modality of curatorial discourse. Rurally embodied queer curatorial practice disrupts queer settler colonialist place-making specifically by not emulating neoliberal, queer urban exhibition spaces. Working with mud, hay, livestock, and local communities rather than liminal white spaces, quiet, and institutionalized performances of spectatorship, rurally embodied queer curatorial practice instead rethinks the role of the curator, and the whereabouts of queer cultural production.

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[68] **Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti*-Urbanism, 68**

[69] **Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, 92**

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Installation // concept design of *tethers*

It smells like hay and the golden hour reaches for the corner of coop. Here, the exhibition layout and design first had to consider the working limitations of the space. The pheasant coop, which was not designed to be an art gallery, measures 8'x8'x8', with an 8'x6'x6" chickenwire fence running parallel to the majority of the south wall, a 2"x4" roost bar 4'10" above ground which runs the entire length of the north wall, a small window along the west wall, and a small flip hatch on the ground in the northwest corner for the pheasants to access their outdoor run. Unlike the chickens, the pheasants are not home-bodies and would roam endlessly should they be let out – the fly-risk fence is to ensure they do not escape when we feed or visit them. All walls are finished with plywood, and there is no power access on the pheasant side (but the chicken side has power access for their winter heat lamps).

Andrew Harding's work, *Urban Hide*, was designed to be suspended from an anchor point along the ceiling, and has six flanking anchor points to keep the work taut as it floats off the wall. The artist's installation design is not only pragmatic, it also replicates the form, anchor points, and approach of tanning a stretched hide. Given the scale of the work, it was necessarily installed along the east wall which is not obstructed by elements like the roost bar, window, fly-risk fence, or the opening door to the gallery.

As Luke Maddaford's installation includes many different pieces, we decided in conversation that I would install the works in a way that was both visually intuitive, took advantage of strange spaces like the roost bar and window sill, and created pairings within the work so as to spark both visual and conceptual dialogues within and around the many

individual pieces. Once installed, I would send him photographs to which he would respond with his desired adjustments. Luke was very open to my suggestions including to flip an image cut-out to its reverse side, revealing the subtitle "The Boundless Bush" with the no. 5 in hunter orange, and to place this textual marker behind the hunter orange hankie.

In future exhibitions, the most pressing variable in deciding layout and programming scheduling is whether or not the pheasants are in the coop. The pheasants arrive as day old chicks in mid-June, and we raise them into mature adults to be butchered in the fall, sometime around mid-October. The pheasants are very tidy, timid, and calm, whereas the chickens are messy, chaotic, sassy, and very social. Artists wishing to show with BPC are given the choice to show during the pheasant off-season in the vacant space, or if they prefer to show their works in the space with live animals (either pheasants or chickens).

Appendix B: Artist biographies

Andrew Harding is a Métis artist based in Toronto/Tkaronto (and at the time of writing, an MFA candidate at York University). Combining objects, images, texts and symbols of iconography, he creates hybridized sculptures and installations. Andrew is a project based artist with a material approach to visualizing fictional and metaphorical narratives. With an interest in the interaction and intersections of creating works from found and fabricated objects he crystallizes their form to make curious their presentation.

Luke Maddaford is an interdisciplinary Canadian artist, writer, curator, and community organizer. Drawing from his own experiences, he is interested in exploring identity, placemaking, and queer histories and futures. Much of his current practice investigates and participates in queer space and culture outside of major metropolitan cities. His work increasingly explores community building and the potential for cross-regional queer networks. He has exhibited throughout Canada, and participated in residencies in Fort McMurray, AB, Windsor, ON, and Northern Ontario. Luke holds a Diploma in Visual Art and Design from Keyano College, a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Drawing from the Alberta College of Art + Design, and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Art from the University of Windsor. He currently lives in Windsor, ON, where he founded LEFT Contemporary, a grassroots studio and exhibition space, and co-edits Off Centre, an online publication.

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