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Queer and the Rural: An exploration of queerness, rurality and performance. Examining the power of queer performance, community and space within rural areas.

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Introduction

'The urban landscape was an obligatory rite of passage to ensure validity and future happiness. In the city, you are free and fabulous and comfortably surrounded by the tolerance of like-minded people; you are allowed to assimilate yourself into a world that wants you. In the countryside, you are melancholy, lonely and persecuted by people who refuse to accept you.' (White 2017). This is a common storyline amongst many LGBTQ+ identifying individuals whom have grown up within a rural area. The aspiration to *escape* overpowers an advocation for change; the queer migration storyline portrays the journey from closeted solitary confinement, to moving away to the metropolitan, to living a happier, more freeing lifestyle. This seems, as a utopian concept, the ideal situation for queer identifying individuals. The rural is consistently synonymous with backwardness, isolation and lack of education with regards to queer engagement and community. Of course, the rural has the ability to be seen from the other side as a fetishised way of life for gay and lesbian individuals within popular culture and literature, within the *gay imaginary* (Bell and Valentine 1995). Interestingly, leaving the rural to join a metropolitan lifestyle, and returning years later, has the ability to provide a catalyst for changes made to queer culture within the town of Dumfries and Galloway after the cabaret variety performance of 'Queer Haggis' provided a success story. In a similar way, a queer performance artist collective entitled 'Mothers Ruin', whom reside in Manchester yet tour around the regional area, including rural areas within north-west England, have an obscure way of queering the space, grasping an audiences attentions, and conveying a true sense of the power of queer performance.

This is an exploration of 'queer' and 'the rural': where they contradict each other, where they queer each other, and where they marry together. Throughout this exploration,

reference is made to various practitioners, theorists and academics in order to match theory with practise within ‘Queer Haggis' and ‘Mothers Ruin’. As well as this, personal experience with ‘Queer Haggis’ allowed my research to go into depth regarding the significant impact the show had on queer engagement with Dumfries and Galloway. Throughout this piece of work, a journey emerges, as each chapter represents the following research:

Chapter one: A contextualisation of rurality and queerness. What does it mean to be queer? How is queer defined? What attitudes are those within the rural considered to adopt in regards to queer identifying individuals? Whilst defining each one individually, there is a definitive link between rurality, queerness and community. A brief exploration into the idea of community disgruntlement, and the potential positives of this, is touched upon within chapter one also.

Chapter two: An exploration into the power of queer performance within both urban and rural areas. With reference to Munoz and Greer, this will be theorised and explored. This chapter will concurrently act as a performance practise study of Manchester-based queer performance collective: Mother’s Ruin.

Chapter three: With reference to Bryony White, Bell and Valentine and other theorists on ‘Queering the Rural’, this chapter is an exploration of leaving the rural to metropolitan, and returning. Within this chapter, ‘Queer Haggis’ will be the performance practise study, a performance which became the catalyst for social change in regards to queer engagement, and a continuation of queer performance being practiced within Dumfries and Galloway.

Chapter four: Within this final chapter, space will be explored in slightly more detail, with the focus being on the *aftermath* of Queer Haggis and the legacy it left behind. Using Kelly Bakers ‘Conceptualising the Rural’ the notion of space and power will be discussed in conjunction with a queer Dumfries and Galloway.

This research explores queerness, rurality, and performance, as well as questioning if queer performance does/can exist within the rural, and what the power of this is. Throughout, it becomes clear that the rural and queerness exist as two separate entities, oxymorons, which become one through their significant links to community, power and space, acknowledging that one constantly challenges the other, and vice versa.

Chapter One

Contextualising and Linking: Rurality & Queerness

Queerness within a rural area has historically, and in the modern day, became a juxtaposition of isolation and utopia due to a seeming lack of accessible queer culture and community for individuals identifying as LGBTQ+. In order to unpack an understanding of this, it becomes important to define *what* exactly is meant by the terms 'rural' and 'queer' in reference to the negative connotations, and feelings, which are evoked through the utterance of these words. Throughout this chapter, an exploration of the synonymous nature of negativity within the word 'queer'; as well as theorists definitions, contradictions and difficulties of the term; will be discussed. In conjunction with this, definitions coined by Robinson and Sullivan of the 'rural' area will mirror the idea of backwardness of rural communities, as well as the forward-thinking queer communities which are being established with a vision of LGBTQ+ visibility as part of a rural future, and how disagreements within these communities are not hostile and represent a safe space for individuals to feel welcomed. Further to this, the appeal of an urban lifestyle as a young 'queer' identifying individual in opposition to rural life will be questioned, beginning with a critical introduction to 'queer' as a term.

'Queer' is a term which, from an understanding of theorists and academics, proves to be both complex and controversial in its definition. At a very basic level, the third edition of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (SOED) defines 'queer' as 'strange, odd, peculiar or eccentric in appearance or character', 'not in normal condition; out of sorts, giddy, faint, ill', and 'bad; worthless' (Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, Kirkby 2003: 74). These negative connotations contribute to the use of 'queer' as a homophobic/transphobic slur, and marginalises those whom identify as anything which fails to conform to a heteronormative

ideal. Of course, queer has became a reclaimed sense of identity, an expression of sorts, for those consistently challenging:

> 'The concept of identity and the binaristic (self/other) thinking it encodes. It rejects the binaristic definitions of gender and sexuality that construct heteronormative descriptions of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual' (Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, Kirkby 2003: 76)

From this, it becomes clear that 'queer' is a useful way to reject the concept of identity from its societal norms, which commonly deal with the clear separation between gender and sexuality alike. In a way, the term 'queer' attempts to blur the lines between heteronormativity and everything/one whom rejects and challenges that identity, beyond a historically natural way of life regarding gender and sexuality. Of course, David Halperin, in Nicki Sullivan's 'Introduction to Queer Theory', suggests that: 'Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing particular to which it necessarily refers*' (Halperin in Sullivan 2003: 43). Here, Halperin suggests that in order to understand the definition of 'queer', we must look beyond the parameters of gender and sexuality, as the term represents *anything* which challenges a heteronormative lifestyle (*the normal, the dominant*) to be deemed as 'queer'. Critiquing this, is 'queer' - as an identity - something which stretches beyond homosexuality as a way of looking at everything outside of the normative under an umbrella statement? Beyond Halperin's definition, other theorists would argue this as a true concept. During the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, there was a shift in how theorists portrayed the term 'queer', as new research showed that 'sexual behaviour is far more complex and far less normative than heterosexist discourse allowed. […] There are heterosexual men who have

sex with other men, but do not consider themselves gay' (Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, Kirkby 2003: 77). This rejection of a homosexual identity from a heterosexual whom engages in sexual acts with one of the same sex can inherently, in itself, be seen as queer as it engages with sexuality beyond the previously mentioned *heteronormative description* of 'heterosexual/homosexual'. In concurrence with this theory, Halperin continues, stating that:

> 'Since queer is a positionality rather than an identity in the humanist sense, it is not restricted to gays and lesbians, but can be taken up by anyone who feels marginalised as a result of their sexual practices' (Halperin in Sullivan 2003: 44)

From analysis, this rejection of heteronormative standards, in *any* sense, can potentially be identified as queer from its very basic definition. Perhaps we could say that 'queer' represents strange and unusual, which stretches beyond the spectrum of sexuality and gender, yet has become synonymous (through the use of negative connotations) with gay and lesbian identities. This would make sense, as LGBT identities have traditionally been labelled as 'strange' and 'abnormal', so therefore the term 'queer' became an offensive slur which is now being reclaimed by LGBT individuals and communities as not conforming to the normative and embracing difference.

However, as suggested by Halperin, queer stretches beyond a LGBT identity, which becomes controversial in its complexity. The notion of identity deconstruction that queer seems to suggest is deemed by some as 'destructive' (Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, Kirkby 2003: 77) to communities of LGBT identifying individuals. This becomes an issue when dealing with 'queer' as a term, as it somewhat becomes 'a kind of fashionable non-

identity, which is an identity' (Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, Kirkby 2003: 78) which reflects the idea that a heterosexual male who has sexual interactions with another male (irregardless of their sexuality) potentially does not *define* themselves as homosexual, and therefore 'queer', as a term, stretches over to them for not conforming to heteronormative standards. There is a disconnect here, between sexual identity differing from sexual practice, which becomes dangerous in collectively representing all genders, all sexualities and stretching beyond this in an attempt to define 'queer' as an *umbrella term.* Of course, the simplistic nature of using 'queer' as an overarching statement is welcomed by some theorists, such as Gabriel Rotello, who claims that:

> 'When you're trying to describe the community, and you have to list gays, lesbians, bisexuals, drag queens, transsexuals (post-op and pre), it gets unwieldy. Queer says it all.' (Duggan in Sullivan 2003: 44)

This suggests an easy way to refer to an oppressed group as a collective, and in a way ignore the significant differences within the 'community' as Rotello puts it. With this being said, Gloria Anazaldúa (1991) counters this argument, stating that 'queer is a false unifying umbrella which all 'queers' of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under' and 'even when we seek shelter under it we most not forget that it homogenises, erases our differences' (Anzaldúa in Sullivan 2003: 44). Therefore, should all walks of life that defy the normative be considered 'queer'? Is the use of 'queer' as an umbrella statement truly effective? The umbrella statement seems to contradict 'queer' in the sense that, by eliminating the differences between *all* LGBT identifying individuals whom are oppressed by a heterosexist culture, we lose the identity of each wonderfully unique individual who considers themselves LGBTQ+ within society. Therefore, queer as an identity - at its very core - resides within those who challenge the normative and dominant culture and, despite

the controversy and contradiction it causes within and out-with LGBT communities, it proves an important and powerful term in the way it has been reinstated with positive connotations of difference and uniqueness from the norm. This leads directly into an exploration of rural, what is meant by the term 'rural' and the importance/prominence of communities within the rural, as well as introducing the link between the rural and queerness.

In order to fully understand the 'rural', it is important to address the concept of *space* as 'socially produced' (Robinson 2016). This is reiterated through Jo Robinson's research into theatre and the rural, exclaiming that it is what is *done* within the rural - through aspects such as community, attitudes, and personal conceptions - rather than exactly *where* a rural area resides in terms of location. Robinson argues that:

> 'place is no longer seen as simply an area marked by coordinates on a map. […] Instead it should be understood through what is done in that place and, I would add, through what is said, written and performed about and within that place' (Robinson, 2016: 13)

Within this, it becomes clear that the social aspect of community within a specifically rural space produces ideologies which influence the representation of rural culture, as well as sub-communities within this. This influence is somewhat legitimate as, from a personal viewpoint, the rural lifestyle represents something quite contrasting from the metropolitan city life. Growing up, the rural area of Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland, was commonly viewed as 'home', whilst having the goal of 'escape' due to its narrow-minded nature. Whereas, I would view the metropolitan city of London as being extremely diverse and

forward thinking, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality. Something about city life made it easier to feel *apart* of some form of community. Further to this, in juxtaposition of a large, busy and densely populated city space, the rural is seen to be an area of 'peace, innocence and simple virtue' as well as 'backwardness, ignorance and limitation' (Williams in Robinson, 2016: 3). For individuals, particularly young people who identify as LGBTQ+, growing up within a rural area, it can commonly feel isolating, as if there is nobody around who fully understands the adversity of issues such as coming out, discovering oneself or social issues (such as bullying within a primary or secondary school setting). This could be due to the 'backwardness' and 'ignorance' mentioned by Williams, which in turn evokes a sense of discomfort and fear in queer identifying individuals living within these rural areas. Moreover, a sense of LGBTQ+ community within rural areas is there, yet not necessarily readily available, particularly welcoming or significantly visible to those young people attempting to find a sense of togetherness and unity with people of a similar identity. Yet, this poses the question, what is community? And why is a sense of community so important when referring to queer in the rural?

Nicki Sullivan, through research in *'A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory',* critiques the idea of community, particularly from a queer perspective. In this work, she exclaims that 'what seems to characterise community is a sense of commonality: of a common identity, a common purpose, or a shared set of beliefs' (Sullivan, 2003: 136). This illustrates that the idea of 'community' comes down to a *common* purpose and/or belief. For example, a group of people within Dumfries and Galloway whom identify as LGBTQ+ are deemed as a 'community' of people who share this difference to those of a heteronormative lifestyle. The issue with the term 'community', however, lies within the prospect of one not accepting their community or, more commonly, the community not accepting the individual. Zygmunt Bauman argues that 'community is imagined […], as a "warm" place, a cosy and

comfortable place. It is like roof under which we shelter' (Bauman in Sullivan 2003: 137). Indeed, community represents a utopia for change in the perception of LGBTQ+ in rural areas, and perhaps acts as a 'safe space' for those identifying as this minority to meet up, discuss, and feel as though they *belong.* As an example, in January of 2018, the winter festival event 'Big Burns Supper' conjured a queer inclusive show 'Queer Haggis' (which will be explored in further detail during later chapters) which displayed queer performance talent from across country (most acts arriving from a city setting), and invited LGBTQ+ individuals from all backgrounds and age ranges in and around Dumfries and Galloway to come together, laugh, have fun, and build a sense of *community.* When the hostess, Virgin Extravaganzah, was informed that Dumfries had *no* gay bars, and a lack of sub-cultural queer spaces, she articulated her feelings on stage. This provided a catalyst for queer individuals to advocate for a change in the way in which the LGBTQ+ community functioned in terms of visibility within the town. A company entitled '*Lavender Menace'* was created, whose mission statement is to 'build intergenerational queer community in Dumfries, Scotland' (Menace 2018). Their goal is to provide and maintain this 'safe [or sub cultural] space' for every generation of LGBTQ+ in Dumfries, providing support across the spectrum. This is a clear step forward in introducing these queer inclusive spaces within the rural, by providing a clear *group* of people whom gain a sense of togetherness through the creation of a *community-based* group. In relation, and quite importantly, disagreements within a community are not hostile or violent, as opposed to the verbal and physical violence young LGBTQ+ individuals experience growing up in a place with highly heterosexist attitudes. Sullivan exclaims that:

> 'Disagreements, far from being dangerous or destructive, enable the community to develop and improve itself. Community to represented

> as a source of strength, a safe space you share with others like you, a 'home'' (Sullivan 2003: 137)

In a community, particularly a *queer* community, particularly within a *rural* area, it is important to be able to have this space in order to share concerns, advocate change and, as Sullivan state, have a 'home' where an individual feels safe to discuss without fear of ridicule from outsiders (Sullivan 2003). It is relevant to state that the development of a LGBTQ+ community is extremely important, and something which has only made progress and prominence in the modern day, when referring to the rural area. In comparison with city life, the general lack of diversity, and ignorance towards minorities, displayed within the rural makes it harder for a unity to happen due to a potential fear of un-acceptance or rejection from their community. In reference to Dumfries, I believe that it is the ever-changing development of queer 'safe spaces' and creation / re-building of LGBTQ+ communities which is making a significant change in the perception of queer identifying individuals. This development will be discussed further within chapter three of my exploration.

As an overarching theme, rurality and queerness have a significant link to discussions surrounding space, community and communal values, which is important in the continuation of my exploration into queer *performance* in rural areas. A rural area is generally seen to be somewhere significantly smaller in population density, and to have a more compact sense of community, where views on certain social issues may be met with ignorance due to a lack of diversity in the area. This somewhat results in a *need* for queer representation within the rural and, in order to achieve this, the existence of queer performance becomes *extremely* important.

Chapter 2

Queer Performance and The Rural

Within this next chapter, there will be an exploration in to the potential definitions of Queer *Performance*, its importance from both a subjective and objective point of view, and where/ if it exists within the rural. As explored previously, 'queer' (as a complex statement, and notion of identity), seems to represent anything that defies the normative, which links directly to LGBT+, as this identity in itself (in any form) defies a heteronormative ideal. Queer works to 'challenge the mechanism of identity as a regulatory force' (Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, Kirkby 2003: 75), which begins to view queer's identity as non-conforming to the rules of gender and sexuality. Throughout this chapter, we will question where performance leads queer, as well as beginning to touch upon the power of bringing queer performance to abstract spaces within rural areas in order to challenge perceptions and develop rural queer communities. The Manchester-based queer performance theatre company 'Mother's Ruin' will be discussed as a way of regional touring in north-west England and injecting queer culture upon small and intimate performance venues as an outreach to those queer individuals who lack sufficient access to queer performance on a regular basis.

Online platforms, such as 'Queer Queeries', offer their explanation of queer performance, stating that it is 'an important and effective mode of intentionally presenting an identity or perspective' (Queer Queeries 2013). As a vague statement, this begins to introduce the idea of queer *performance* being a presence of *queer* identity within a performance space, which goes beyond the conventional theatre or intimate bar setting, and stretches forward to everyday life, how we inhabit space and how this is unapologetically exaggerated under the lights. So then, why is queer performance needed? What is its purpose upon the face

of the earth? Indeed, we can establish that there is a fighting urge for *more* queer culture (particularly through the rise and fall of queer performance spaces in an urban setting) as a general statement among queer individuals. It is undeniable that the powerful nature of a drag queen/king taking to the stage and (through performance) commenting on the current climate of our heteronormative society, whilst in a room full of queer identifying individuals is sub-cultural and wonderful. Something which is prominent within the urban, and lacking in the rural. This need fore more is mirrored in 'Cruising Utopia' as Munoz suggests that: 'Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing' (Munoz 2009: 1). This begins to suggest not only *why* queer performance exists, but the *need* for it to exist as means of queering heteronormative space, creating space to reside in, pushing gendered limits, and giving the oppressed queer communities a voice through unapologetic performance. Of course, Munoz further states that: 'Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and towards the future' (Munoz 2009: 1). Here, Munoz is suggesting that queerness, in any sense of the term, is performative as queer individuals hold the blueprint for a more queer inclusive society. In form of protest, expression, advocation and presentation, queer individuals reject heteronormativity daily, and this (as Munoz suggests) is a significant part of shaping a queer utopian future, and all these things we are *doing* contribute to this future. Indeed, Queer Queeries offers a definition of what it means to be performative, which directly mirrors Munoz's statements, exclaiming that performative represents: 'the manner in which you are perceived as fitting with or not conforming to the societal norm' (Queer Queeries 2013). It becomes true, from this, that queer performance is a social expression of non-conformity within society, challenging what performance can be beyond a heteronormative storyline upon a proscenium arch stage, by residing in underground performance areas, bars, clubs, and nightlife venues.

Stephen Greer, within his research into ‘Contemporary Queer Performance’, touches upon the power and virtuosity of queer performance, stating that:

> ’Queer performance is sometimes notable for its very existence: the act of giving a voice to previously marginal subjects and experience is remarkable because of the absence of representation which precedes it’ (Greer 2012: 100)

This proves true. As a queer artist, to build a voice for yourself and your creative work, or to be given one, is a powerful tool for the visibility of queer communities. It becomes much more powerful when a community of queer individuals is built and/or becomes visible within a rural area off the back of exposure to queer performance. As we have learnt, queer performance is social expression of non-conformity, which does not necessarily limit itself to on-stage performance, and can exist through expression, protest and other forms of ‘performance’. However, Munoz finds a danger within constantly looking for the “positive image’ of queer culture as far as academia is concerned, stating that:

> ‘Gay and Lesbian studies is often too concerned with finding the exemplary homosexual protagonist. This investment in the “positive image”, in proper upstanding sodomites, is a mistake that is all too common in many discourses on and by “the other”. The time has come to return to failed visionaries, oddballs, and freaks who remind queers that indeed they always live out of step with straight time (Munoz 2009: 149).

It seems that Munoz is suggesting that gay and lesbian studies are becoming less queer, and conforming to the common heteronormative storylines, which (despite having good

intentions with not negatively portraying homosexual people) does not truly capture a sense of what queer performance represents. As Cherry Smith states, in Sullivan: ‘Queer means to fuck with gender’ (Smith in Sullivan 2003: 44). This is what queer performance looks to represent. Blurring the lines of gender. Between masculinity and femininity. Rejecting heteronormativity. Not conforming. Therefore, Munoz makes a valid point: returning to the ‘freaks’ and ‘oddballs’ who push the boundaries of gender in order to make a statement. This notion of pushing boundaries with queer performance leads well into an exploration of ‘Mothers Ruin’:

‘Mothers Ruin’, a Manchester-based queer performance platform (Hardiman 2017), who’s mission statement remains to: ‘facilitate radical and robust queer performance platforms in regional spaces to increase LGBTQ participation and engagement with wider audiences’ (Mothers Ruin 2009). This focus on north-west England’s regional areas means that they, as a company, have the opportunity to engage with queer communities in both urban and rural areas. The company was founded in 2009 by Tim Redfern, and since then it has become a home for up and coming regional queer performance artists. They state that their aim is to:

> “Foster abiding relationships with venues to cultivate a thriving, cohesive network of creative support for regional LGBTQ artists and wider audiences – particularly for marginalised communities and areas of cultural isolation.” (Mothers Ruin 2009)

This ‘family value’ networking that happens within this company is, actually, very important. As previously mentioned in chapter one of my exploration, community is an *immensely* important aspect of queer culture and engagement. Building a community means creating

a space where individuals can come together, celebrate their differences and become a voice for the queer communities within Manchester, and out-with in more rural areas. In 2014, Mother's Ruin presented a variety piece entitled 'Roadhouse Return', which was commended by critics for its significantly diverse cast of queer performers. Critic Ben Turner comments that: 'From screamo interpretations of Jessie J to deformed drag queens, the night felt almost like an underground Weimar kabarett on the black Roadhouse stage.' (Turner 2014). The entire event was an alternative take on cabaret, which allowed the notion of queer performance to be queered (within itself) within *how far* it was willing to go to surprise an audience and become completely absurd in its delivery. As an example, the penultimate act within this variety show consisted of:

> 'Drag queen Grace Oni Smith and her drag daughter Violet Blonde swapped their usual exaggerated glamour for extreme exaggerated ugliness in the penultimate act. With tumours bulging from their heads, deformed limbs misshapen and bodies cinched but uneven, they layered a peculiarly quasi-choreographed conceptual lip-sync routine to Lady Gaga's 'Born This Way'.' (Turner 2014)

This *already* queer performance practise of glamour drag, which has been queered even further to an alternative form of their usual style, becomes obscure and really captures an essence of absurd queer performance. From this, it becomes clear that queer performance represents queer culture in general, as it takes an initial normative idea and puts an obscure twist on it (in order to be politically mindful, comment on the current climate, or simply mess with peoples perceptions), which mirrors what queer represents at its core: a difference from the norm. With regards to Mothers Ruin representing queer performers throughout the entire regional area of north-west England, performing within a city setting

in Manchester, and touring through rural and urban areas in the north-west, the company have the opportunity to *queer* rural spaces, and challenge their synonymous backwardness through presenting and representing those who feel isolation within these areas. Jo Robinson, on 'Theatre and the Rural', states that:

> 'Williams identifies a sense of the rural as intimately connected to looking back to a pictorial and perhaps static past: 'the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future' (Williams in Robinson , 2016: 17)

In reference to this, Mothers Ruin (as a company) attempt to queer the notion the 'image of the past' within rural areas, by taking their extremely diverse variety cabaret performances (such as 'Mother Bloomers', 'Mother Lovin'' and 'Roadhouse Rehab') and providing an inspirational voice for queer individuals whom feel underrepresented within their area. Further to this, as an established success story of queer performance, Mothers Ruin run performance workshops for queer artists within a wide scope of venues: from Manchesters Royal Exchange Theatre, to the Oldham Coliseum Theatre; from Arc Stockton, to King's Arms Salford. This gives aspiring queer artists a platform to display their talent and potentially 'be picked up by regional theatres for wider programming and touring opportunities' (Mothers Ruin 2009). The opportunities, and outreach, displayed by Mothers Ruin proves how powerful queer performance has the potential to be as an art form advocating for social change, creating and maintaining queer voices, and (quite significantly) reaching out to the rural where those oppressed individuals can get a taste of queer performance art in an accessible manner (and perhaps provide a catalyst for those queer individuals to develop queer engagement within their town/village - this will be further discussed in the following chapter).

Chapter 3

Leaving and Returning: From Rural to Metropolitan & Back

As a young LGBTQ+ identifying individual - whilst spending the majority of adolescent life within the metaphorical closet - leaving the rural and envisioning a future within an urban, diverse and cosmopolitan area was something which became a personal goal. As mentioned in previous chapters, the rural is synonymous with backwardness and natural living (Williams in Robinson, 2016: 3), which becomes challenging for those queer identifying individuals to overcome due to a potential lack of queer engagement. On the other hand, the *gay imaginary,* a term coined by Bell and Valentine (1995), builds a utopia through fiction, literature and advertising which, in turn, paints a positive image for those queer individuals looking to escape to the countryside. Throughout this chapter, the impact of leaving the rural to explore the urban, and returning will be explored through an exploration of multiple theorists perspectives of 'queering the rural'. Moreover, a cabaret production of 'Queer Haggis' - including multiple examples of queer performance - which took place in the rural area of Dumfries & Galloway will be explored and critiqued in terms of its importance as a catalyst for change, as well as providing a safe and sub-cultural space for those marginalised LGBTQ+ individuals. Further to this, a discussion surrounding how Dumfries and Galloway is developing its queer performance platform since the cabaret in January of 2018 will be discussed through reference to various theatre companies and queers organisations.

In order to begin this exploration, it is necessary to first focus on the differing mentalities between groups of LGBTQ+ individuals/couples/communities. As Bell and Valentine claim, there are *two different groups* of '*gay rural dwellers':*

> ‘First, there are those gay men and lesbians born and raised in rural areas; and second, there are those who choose to move to a country location’ (Bell and Valentine 1995)

These are two *very* different types of individuals, as they come from different forms of oppression based on the understanding of their culture within a rural area, versus within a metropolitan area. There is a mentioning of stereotypes among a couple of theorists, whom comment on the ‘stereotyped life-path’ (Bell and Valentine: 1995; White 2017). This is inclusive of: feelings of personal oppression from the burden of not feeling accepted by a heteronormative rural environment, forward thinking to a utopia of a cosmopolitan queer lifestyle within a city setting, and eventually coming out, moving to the city, and maintaining a lifestyle there. The metropolitan city, with London as an example, consistently advertises itself as queer inclusive with safe spaces, a nightlife scene, queer artist collectives, community support, a celebration of queer culture through Pride Festivals, and knowledgable services for LGBTQ+ friendly sexual health. As Bell and Valentine state, this stereotypical lifestyle includes ‘relocation away from the oppression of country life in one of the larger regional urban population centres.’ (Bell and Valentine 1995). This begins to give an understanding as to *why* this stereotypical migration from rural to urban has such as appeal for queer identifying individuals. It is a utopia which a lifetime of rural oppression has built up to. However, there is a second group of LGBTQ+ people whom make a *choice* to move to a country location. Why is this the case? What could be so appealing about a life within a country setting, particularly as an LGBTQ+ identifying individual? Bell and Valentine, in 1995, coined the term the ‘gay imaginary’, which refers to the way in which popular culture and literature *fetishises* a gay lifestyle within rural settings. Bell and Valentine go on to explain that:

> ’The rural has become an intensely fetishised locale in gay culture - one popular gay bar in the West End of London calls itself Village Soho, its adverts in the gay press showing two London boys before an unmistakably Batsford-esque rural landscape’ (Bell and Valentine 1995).

Therefore, it seems here that an *imaginary and deeply fetishised* lifestyle being advertised to those living in the city as the ‘perfect lifestyle’ for LGBTQ+ individuals whom aspire to reside in a more peaceful setting within the countryside, than endure the busy nature of a city. This fetishisation of a rural environment could provide an explanation as to *why* residing in the rural seems idyllic beyond personal preference, of course. Further to this, Bell and Valentine give an example of the sexualisation of rural lesbian and gay individuals moving to the city, explaining that: ‘the 'innocence' as well as the enthusiasm of country boys is clearly fetishised in the Terrence Higgins Trust safer sex leaflet Hick From The Sticks’ (Bell and Valentine 1995). It seems, through the *gay imaginary,* that both groups of individuals - mentioned previously by Bell and Valentine - have a utopia of switching from rural to urban (and vice versa) due to the idyllic sense of escape, as well as the representation of urban versus rural within popular culture, literature and advertisements. This is interesting, as it conveys a sense of leaving from a perspective of both sides of the rural-urban lifestyle juxtapositions.

With a focus on the rural LGBTQ+ individuals who aspire to leave the rural and reside within a city environment, and the personal power of returning, PhD student Bryony White outlines her journey as a young queer individual within her essay ‘Queering the Rural’. She begins by mentioning that ‘Growing up in a small town in Dorset, London was the place that I made responsible for my future happiness. I spent my time at Sixth Form pouring everything I could into this future vision.’ (White 2017). This begins to explore the idea of a

battle between the rural and the urban, keeping these two areas separate in the mind of a young queer individual, with one representing the negative aspect of growing up queer, and the other representing the direct opposite. In regards to the future vision of *leaving* the rural, Kelly Baker's journal regarding the conceptualisation of rural queerness includes theory from Halberstam, stating that:

> 'Gayness is configured through a symbolic opposition between the urban and the rural, whereby the latter is positioned as a closet from which an authentic, metropolitan sexuality must emerge' (Halberstam in Baker 2011).

Here, Halberstam is suggesting, through a metaphorical rural closet, that two significantly different experiences are realised through the life of a young gay individual. The two are unable to live within the same sphere, they are directly opposed to each other: whilst in the rural gayness remains in the metaphorical closet, whilst a migration to the city will capture an *authentic* sexuality. Does this suggest then, that a queer sexual orientation is *not* authentic within the rural, and can *only* exist within the metropolitan? Halberstam goes on to mention that:

> 'The image of the escape from the countryside into the anonymity and diversity of urban space was embedded within the gay subject from the start' (Halberstam in Baker 2011)

This could be deemed true, and give a context to his previous statement. Here, it is proposed that the utopian vision of a metropolitan future is not only desirable within young gay individuals, but is inserted within their mindset from the moment they come to terms with their sexuality. Indeed, with the isolation a rural environment subdues a young queer person to - feelings of lacked support, lack of community - it is no wonder that the vision of a future within a city setting is so desirable. White goes on to express this within her exploration, stating that: 'London was where I was going to escape the insularity and

single-mindedness of living in a small town in a rural county on the coast.' (White 2017). This general consensus of 'escape' portrays the rural as some form of solitary confinement for queer identifying individuals, which is powerful in White's delivery of her exploration of her personal ambition to leave the small town. Of course, it remains true that the representation of rural areas is a 'setting for traditional (not especially enlightened) moral (including sexual) standards' (Bell and Valentine 1995). From Bell and Valentine's exploration in 1995, to Bryony Whites exploration of coming out and moving away in 2017, it remains very interesting that within a gap of twenty three years, not much has changed within the mentality of rural living, particularly with regards to queer individuals whom feel trapped within a space where traditional, heteronormative, moral standards remain. White goes on to make statements such as: 'London was where I was safe and respectable' and 'In London, it was easier to move smoothly in the world, and without friction: home was resistant to me.' (White 2017). Moving to London (a metropolitan environment) for White, and similarly on a personal level, seems to convey a new beginning for an exploration of ones personal exploration of themselves, whilst being surrounded by communities of people whom come from similar situations. Therefore, it becomes clear than an aspiration to migrate from rural to urban is a pivotal point of discussion whilst exploring the idea of rural queer performance, as it begins to touch upon the importance of having queer performance platforms within the rural in the development of a support system for young queer individuals.

Bryony White, within her exploration of migrating to an urban environment, makes a decision to return to the rural, and comments on the stereotypical rural to urban relocation among queer individuals, concluding that:

> 'Establishing that the rural and the urban are somehow mutually exclusive, or that to find one, you might need to escape the other, it becomes abundantly clear that these seemingly paradoxical positions, which bolster the

conventional queer migration narrative, might themselves, need queering.' (White 2017)

It becomes clear, within this understanding of rural and urban living environments, that one cannot exist within the other, and vice versa. The mutual exclusivity mentioned suggests that (as we have explored at the beginning of this chapter) the rural lifestyle rejects the urban, and the urban lifestyle (in a similar way) offers something *more* to a queer individual. They are two completely separate environments, which (as it seems) cannot marry into each other. With this being said, White comments on the need to 'queer' the 'queer migration narrative' (White 2017), which could include marrying rural and urban lifestyles together, and allowing the two to exist as one by way of queering the heteronormative environment which already exists within a rural area. Developing and maintaining queer inclusive, sub-cultural, spaces is key to queer community engagement within the rural, and the existence of queer performance within the rural (as we have explored) can be a powerful starting point to the conjoining of urban queer culture with rural culture. We recognise queer performance, and queer performance artists, as those practises which reside within a metropolitan city setting, with a range of bars, clubs, theatres and intimate spaces celebrating LGBTQ+ culture in many forms: from drag performance to boylesque, performing campness to political performance. Queer performance predominantly resides within this urban space. However, what happens when queer performance practises are taken to rural areas with a lack of this engagement which the urban thrives in? Does queer performance have the potential to exist within the rural? Can its power within the urban marry into the rural and advocate change within a backwards society? Queer Haggis becomes a catalyst for this.

Annually, Dumfries and Galloway, a rural area in south west Scotland, hosts a nine-day winter fringe festival entitled 'Big Burns Supper', which acts as a cultural landmark for performance and the arts in southern Scotland. Modes of performances which are

displayed within this festival include local bands, theatre, national and international artists, and comedians. In 2012, a cabaret/burlesque variety show was introduced entitled ‘Le Haggis’, which was described by critiques as ‘proudly a doonhamer of a show with plenty of local talent’ (ThisIsCabaret 2017), an undeniably entertaining show which takes pride in its rural Scottish roots. This show, in itself, is a celebration of being Scottish. Therefore, the idea of a ‘queer’ version of this show, which would celebrate *rural queerness* (an oxymoron which has created a future vision for the rural LGBTQ+), provided something out of the ordinary, and exciting, for Dumfries. In 2017, an invitation was sent out to the local LGBT+ service within the town, in order to reach out to their members and accumulate an audience full of queer identifying individuals and their allies. This, in turn, would create a *space* which provided a safe and enjoyable environment to spectate, dance, sing along and reinforce the very important aspect of queer community within Dumfries. Emphasising space is important within this context, as the idea of *queering* a space within the rural links to space in relation to power, as Kelly Baker states that ‘the instability of heteronormative space allows queer individuals to restructure it; they can produce their own spaces’ (Baker 2011). Indeed, the act of creating a show such as ‘Queer Haggis’, as a prospect, creates an inevitable shift in heteronormative space, particularly within the building that it first resided in, which was commonly used for more 'traditional’ events. This gave the queer community a sense of reclaimed *power* within the space they resided in during ‘Queer Haggis’. The show, which proved positively forward thinking, allowed queer individuals to come together and celebrate being unapologetically queer, engage with the performances, and created an annual event within Dumfries which became a first for queer voices within a modern day Dumfries and Galloway. However, upon reflection between 2017 and 2018, the performance was critiqued for its lack of organisation within the choice of performers (of which most identified as heterosexual performing ‘queer’, with a lack of authentic queer representation), and lack of significant outreach to those queer individuals who continue to

feel isolated within a rural environment. For this reason, Queer Haggis' future was revamped with a new vision of the urban returning to the rural.

In 2018, Queer Haggis introduced acts locally, nationally and internationally, with queer performers from across the country reclaiming the space, queering it, and creating a sense of unity in Dumfries' queer community. Devine Tension, my own drag personality, returned from London after leaving Dumfries three years prior with a nervous ambition to strengthen the community. After years of isolation within an area which personally represented a sense of backwardness and lack of queer visibility, I became massively skeptical in the smooth running of the show. On the other hand, challenging this heteronormative space came with a sense of importance. Important to those rural folk who lack a voice and visibility. Important to the structure of a strong queer community within the town. A show displaying urban and rural queer culture alike was *only* going to strengthen this importance. When moving to London, a new sense of freedom and expression was realised within my queerness, which was never possible for my personal development within Dumfries. Bryony White mirrors this very feeling of development, stating that:

> 'Moving to London had allowed me to exist within environments that validate queer lives, where I was offered an opportunity to move as part of a community and find spaces that explicitly celebrated identities that were never modelled for me as an adolescent growing up in a rural environment.' (White 2017)

Therefore, allowing a rural audience - with Queer Haggis - to experience these environments of validation the urban submerged me within every day, was both a poignant and political statement from both the creators and performers perspective. Graham Main, artistic director of the Big Burns Supper festival declaring that:

> ‘Queer Haggis bloomed as a result of “reaching out to the audience” in Dumfries, with the “blueprint” for Queer Haggis springing from the support and “powerful energy” of the southern Scottish region’ (Woods 2018)

Within Queer Haggis, performers from across the country performed. Virgin Extravaganzah (A London-based drag performer) hosted the night, frequently commenting on the juxtaposition between rural and urban lifestyles in relation to being a queer individual. Tom Harlow (a Glasgow-based boylesque performer) brought something to the space which entertained and unapologetically challenged the very existence of queer sexualisation. Devine Tension, representing the leaving and returning drag performer, conveyed a sense of pride within a home town setting, despite that home town rejecting my queerness for years prior to moving. Importantly, those performers whom reside within an urban setting seemed to transfer an queer energy from urban to rural which was an undeniable contribution to the shows success. White comments on this energy transfer, stating that: ‘Queerness means deploying energy. It is never enough to just show up. Instead it is necessary to consistently forge spaces for yourself.’ (White 2017). This represents queer performance, such as Queer Haggis, existing within a rural space. It is that energy which resonates with an audience, creates a safe space for those queer individuals to explore, come together, and advocates change. Queer Haggis, as a performance, energy, and experience, acted as a catalyst for the development and maintenance of an effective queer community within Dumfries and Galloway. A social media platform entitled ‘Queers of the South’ began to see this development take place, as well as the rise of ‘Lavender Menace’. Lavender Menace advocates for a queer Dumfries and Galloway, and is beginning to re-introduce new queer platforms to the town, such as queer social nights, a queer magazine, and continuing to introduce queer performance to Dumfries, with a vision of a bolder, community-based, Queer Haggis 2019 already in development. Over the part four months since Queer Haggis, a plethora of queer

engagement has taken place within Dumfries-based theatre collective ‘The Stove’, whom host all socials and nights

It is interesting to experience the impact of queer performance first hand, from its deployment of queer energy within a space, to a community coming together to queer those rural spaces. Through Queer Haggis, the ultimate catalyst for further queer engagement in Dumfries and Galloway, Dumfries has seen a significant development of queer visibility, as well as building community. This is not solely about bringing the urban to the rural, or following the migration narrative and returning from a journey of self discovery. Indeed, introducing the rural to the colourful nature of the urban queer scene queered the rural space in order for change to begin. However, as White would suggest: ‘Making yourself comfortable is socially necessary—in metropolitan centres and outside of them’ (White 2017). At its core, the rural queer community that the urban has the ability to interject on is strengthened due to their comfort within the space, as a community. When referring to queer and the rural, community and space can arguably (as we have witnessed) be two of the most prevalent factors. Queer performance, likewise, is an important factor in the development of the rural queer, which *does* and *can* exist in a rural space, and has an undeniable impact on the future of queer existence within the rural.

Chapter Four

Beyond Queer Haggis: Intimate Performance Space

Beyond Queer Haggis, the development of a queer Dumfries and Galloway began to flourish, with the queer community engagement soaring within the first week of the show being performed. This conveyed a strong sense of conviction with the message Queer Haggis was attempting to portray, which resonated with the audience and local community. This chapter will go on to convey the legacy of which Queer Haggis left behind, as well as further explaining the importance of space and power within queer performance, particularly within the rural.

Queer Haggis 2018 left a significant legacy behind in Dumfries and Galloway. As mentioned, the rise of Lavender Menace, and the safe space within 'The Stove', as well the launch of the social media platform 'Queers of the South', have all contributed to strengthening Dumfries' queer engagement, and bringing the community together to advocate for change and more queer friendly spaces. A project which emerged from Queer Haggis' was the reintroduction of Dumfries' first ever LGBTQ+ magazine entitled 'The Queerier'. In regards to the creation of this, Amanda Kennedy states that:

> 'Discussing the inspiration, Lucy said: "We are creating a queer magazine to help unite our fantastic LGBT+ community in Dumfries and Galloway. This is one of the largest regions in Scotland and has a huge queer population, but despite this rural isolation can fragment the many queer voices throughout Dumfries and Galloway"' (Kennedy 2018)

This conveys a step forward within this queer rural community, as it presents a physical mode of visibility for the community, and this visibility has the ability to change perception through its prominent presence through the town. Of course, this is Queer Haggis' legacy, and the power of queer performance in the rural has the potential to advocate social change if the community allows it. Furthermore, the 'magazine launch party', which involved a set list made up entirely of queer performers from Dumfries and Galloway, was hosted at 'The Stove'. Within a rural area with a limited number of safe spaces for sub-cultural work, this proved a trusted location. This illustrates further the importance of space in regards to hosting queer performance nights within the rural, as it becomes about building around the facilities provided to you, and the rest comes with the atmosphere. As Cresswell states: 'places are constructed by people doing things and in this sense are never "finished" but are constantly being performed' (Cresswell in Robinson, 2016: 13). This is true, as within the 'launch party', the event taking place was of queer performance, celebration and inclusivity. Without the *community* within the space, it would aesthetically and atmospherically amount to four walls and silence. It is the *people* whom *construct* the place, to reiterate Cresswell's statement. This, heightening the importance of space, proves that space without community (within a performance/celebration setting) would amount to nothing, and thus proves the importance queer performance in both providing the catalyst via Queer Haggis, and inspiring the community and creating a queer inclusive space.

Elaborating of Baker's research within the previous chapter, in regards to the importance of space, as she further exclaims that:

> 'The production and experience of everyday space serves to reinforce heterosexual hegemony in that educational, religious, legal, and medical

> discourses work to degrade and constrain the public presence of queerness' (Berlant and Warner in Baker 2011)

This proves true. Particularly within rural areas. Perhaps this is where the fear of ridicule stems from, as there is a constant overruling of heterosexual over queer, which in turn results in a heteronormative society whom view anything out-with this 'heterosexual hegemony' as wrong. The prominence of this within rural areas is evident, as those backwards mentalities condition young people to grow up with heteronormative ideals. For example, heterosexual individuals never have to 'come out' as heterosexual, because they are heterosexual and that is the normative, however homosexuals are pressured to come out with a fear of ridicule. Greer states that: 'It is easy to pass as heterosexual because heterosexuality is assumed. In other words, what is made visible is the unmarked nature of heterosexual identities' (Greer 2012: 22). Its clear, linking this back to space, how we inhabit space differently as queer individuals from the normative. The sheer fact that queer communities must release a magazine, wave the pride flag, protest, come out or hide their identity, shows a level of privilege that a heteronormative space consumes. Taking this idea further, even the need to 'queer' the space by inhabiting it as queer individuals shows that lack of privilege within the space. This translates into the 'launch party' for the 'Queerier' magazine, as space is such an important aspect of being visibly queer as a community. Everyday space is reinforced as heterosexual (Baker 2011), yet in the same way this construction can be subverted (Baker 2011) in to the queering of a space. This is done through the production of queer performance, being visibly queer, and engaging as a queer community. Dumfries and Galloway, since Queer Haggis 2018 launched, as seen a significant shift in the way 'queer' operates, from the way we talk about it, to the way we walk with it, and present ourselves as queer individuals unapologetically.

Conclusion

’From those born on the farm to those moving to the commune, and from those out for a hike to those out for a fuck, the lives and lifestyles of lesbians and gay men in rural locations embody a range of responses to the rural from Edenic and utopian to dysfunctional and oppressive.’ (Bell and Valentine 1995). From Bell and Valentines exploration on rural queer lives in 1995, to Bryony Whites essay regarding queering the rural in 2017, there continues to be a general consensus regarding the backward mentality of those living in rural areas. There remains an isolation felt by young queer individuals, which continues to spark the queer migration storyline which so many young queer individuals adhere to, and move from rural to urban. It is clear that the negative connotations surrounding a rural queer life do not sound promising nor desirable within any context. This is off putting to a place we call(ed) home. Personally, I was lucky in the sense that I had the opportunity to bring Devine Tension back to a town which is culturally thriving, yet still in the dark regarding queerness. There was an energy of pure joy displayed by the crowd by the time the show was over, something I had never captured in Dumfries before. With this being said, the way in which the queer community engaged with each other and came together to create more events, amongst other things, regarding queer performance and social events which cater to LGBTQ+, really displayed the power of performance, as well as the power of space and (of more importance) queering the space. Through this exploration, and from research, it has become apparent that queer performance does and *can* exist within the rural. With Queer Haggis becoming the catalyst for change within Dumfries and Galloway, it becomes interesting to think about the power of community, and coming together to advocate for change. Therefore, despite a lack of difference between twenty two years of research papers with the connotations of the rural, change is happening. As mentioned towards the end of chapter three, the success of

Queer Haggis introducing Dumfries to urban queer artists was *not* the determining factor for advocating change within queer engagement, it was the spirit of the community who found comfort within the space that made the event a catalyst for everything that followed. In regards to research on 'Mother's Ruin', the workshops conducted within regional areas of north-west England provides a sense of how powerful queer performance has the ability to be, and how they are engaging with the local queer communities in both an urban and rural setting. To conclude, rural queer performance is an entity which is continuing to grow, but not yet fully realised. Indeed, queer performance has the ability to exist within rural areas, however with regards to the importance and power of space, it needs a community in order to exist. Therefore, space, community and queer performance are three elements of queering the rural which marry into each other in different ways, each being as important as the other, allowing for stronger community engagement, and visibility within rural areas.

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