

Division Within: Staging Internecine Conflicts in Gay Subcultures

Numerous writers have referred to the need for a political presence on the stage to promote the fight for equality for gay (and queer) persons. John Clum refers to this political aspect of gay theatre as something felt as characters move from “domination by an oppressive voice to liberation through the finding of their own gay voice” (Clum xiii). Persons use such theatre to “fight to maintain the toe-hold (they) have gained in American and British society” (xiv). Don Shewey reflects this notion in a different way, stating that “gay plays serve the primitive function of... acting as a corrective to neglect or abuse by a culture at large” (Shewey xi). Alan Sinfield echoes these ideas, claiming “the task is... to build on the diverse strengths of our constituency, to enlarge it, and to politicize it (Sinfield 347). All the aforementioned ideas reflect the standpoint of an oppressed minority battling for acceptance and rights amidst a hostile majority. Yet in contemporary Canada, a country where we now have same-sex marriage, child-custody rights, and legal equality on most (but not all) fronts, many of the political battles formerly explored on our stages have now been won. Thus a question arises: in this current climate, what causes does (or should) our contemporary queer theatre now bring us?

This paper considers a direction for such theatre. By looking to three recently mounted gay plays, *Small Axe* by Andrew Kushnir, *Tom at the Farm* by Michel Marc Bouchard, and *PIG* by Tim Luscombe, this work examines how these plays look to our “equal” gay subculture(s) and finds nuance, conflict and divisions therein. The work explores how some factions within gay subculture face marginalisation and contend for expression and recognition amongst each other. By looking at divides rooted in national origin, sexual practice, and the geography of rural-urban location, this paper brings to light new political arenas wherein certain kinds of gayness or queerness are seen as contending for visibility and presence among more centric identities. The

explorations made in these plays fight against and reveal problems in such centric identities' predominance and ultimately refute them as homonormative characterisations for the contemporary gay community.

Andrew Kushnir's *Small Axe* opened at the Theatre Centre in Toronto in January 2015. As a work of verbatim theatre, the play sets out to probe homophobia felt by Jamaican-Canadians by recounting experiences of members of that community. It opens with Kushnir – a gay Ukrainian-Canadian – playing himself on a bare stage in front of a scrim. He recalls a dressing-room conversation where he and a Jamaican-Canadian actor discussed their experiences with homophobia. Kushnir states that “we have the same story”, but his fellow actor strongly disagrees (*Small Axe*). The scene thus presents an interrogative premise for the play as a whole, as Kushnir attempts to explore how and what these differences could be. Kushnir then tears down the scrim and reveals five actors standing atop risers of scaffolding, facing upstage. The scaffolding surrounds and centres on a chair downstage in which Kushnir then takes a seat, facing the audience. Each actor then, in turn, rotates to face the audience, and playing various Jamaican-Canadians recount their experiences with homophobia in Canada – their words drawn from interviews conducted for the project.

The scene's design reflects ideas that Kushnir's investigation ultimately exposes. The staging mimics the idea that the characters' experiences exist, but are mostly invisible to the audience until privileged attention, that is, a white person's concern, reveals them. Furthermore the set design makes these experiences seem remote or distanced from the audience. The audience, in a way, becomes an accomplice to production's framing of the Jamaican-Canadians' experience as marginalised. We seemingly represent the mainstream and the placing of the actors atop scaffolding makes them seem as display cases, or like museum exhibits to us; objects that

can be reflected upon as separate, isolated narratives, rather than as the experiences of a part of Canadian society as a whole. Kushnir's place in a chair nearer to us and his conducting of the proceedings allies him with the audience. Of interest is that Kushnir's initial discussion and presentation of his own homosexuality becomes de-emphasised as he positions himself as the investigator into his subjects' sexuality. Kushnir's distance from their narratives is further emphasised as their characters only turn to speak, to Kushnir and the audience, after he reassures them of their anonymity. While this seems an appropriate protocol for gathering verbatim material (in order to protect the play's sources), when combined with the proxemics between Kushnir, the audience, and his subjects, the power dynamics of a kind of subject-clinician relationship emerges, and this further highlights the gap between Kushnir's perspective and the experiences of his subjects. Thus the distance and, moreover, disconnection between Kushnir's mainstream, and the experiences and history of gay and lesbian Jamaicans-Canadians is made plain. Kushnir is a good sport in this regard, and sets up his stage portrayal of himself to seem as almost willfully blinkered at worst, and insensitive at best, to underscore his point.

As more narratives are spoken the underlying roots of homophobia in the community are revealed as increasingly more complex. They also become further alien to Kushnir's initially proposed supposed "same story" as his (*Small Axe*). Slavery, racism, colonialism, class exploitation, fundamentalist Christian televangelism, and dance-hall music misogyny all frame the particular experiences of the "subjects", and offer partial histories to the particular antigay enmity felt by the characters. A broad intersectionality between these facets of Jamaica's history and their relation to contemporary homophobia reveals other power relations at play. As the character Anthony states: "there is hardly any context in which I as a black man am free to stand up, either theatrical(ly) or publicly and" express condemnation about the various injustices

amidst the African diaspora (*Small Axe*). He refers to his diminished ability to fight such injustices due to his position and lack of agency as a Black man. After this revelation, he and the other actors then begin to break from the containment of their platforms, descend the scaffolding, and move about the stage, eventually entering into and joining the audience. These actions serve to disconnect Kushnir from his position of control, and moreover from his centrality in the inquiry. His representation of the audience as the mainstream is smashed as the other actors, playing Jamaican-Canadian characters, become a constituent of it. Kushnir finally then appears to become aware of his failure to take into account his own positionality or privilege. He runs about and attempts to tear down the scaffolding, seemingly cancelling the play's project. He calls into question the ownership of the play's undertaking and his subjectivity changes as *he* then becomes the focus, alone on stage, for both us and the Jamaican-Canadian 'subjects' of his inquiry.

Kushnir's portrayal of himself in the play embodies the privilege that not only separates him from and obscures the experiences of Black Jamaican-Canadians, it shifts him from a position of marginality as a gay man to one of centrality. As Kushnir the character finally realises this, the "project" of the play fails; however, at this point different understandings emerge. While the initial premise of the play had him believing the burden of homophobia that he bears was somehow comparable to that of his Jamaican friend, it is his difficulty in comprehending that he can be *both* a victim of homophobia and be in a position of entitlement, that makes up his journey. This exposes and lays bare the privilege of his position as a white, entitled, gay man.

While the word is never spoken, it is Kushnir's expectation of a homonormative privilege in his friend that sets off his initial inquiry. He opens the play as a thirty-ish, white, cis-gendered,

out, theatre creator. It seems (and this is likely the character of Kushnir exaggerated for effect, rather than the playwright himself) that he may honestly not expect his fellow gay Canadians to live much differently than him. Yet his subjects seem from all walks of life; in terms of income, their age, outness, gender – all vary other than they are all Black Jamaican-Canadians. As the legacies of colonialism, racism, and slavery are discussed throughout, we find Kushnir’s initial presumption of a similar experience between himself and his fellow actor to seem ridiculous by the play’s end.

We are finally left with the play’s failed project and Kushnir’s realisation, as he says, to “work on his own shit first”, before digging into other’s (*Small Axe*). One could argue that this presents a problem dramaturgically. The play sets out to look at Jamaican-Canadians’ experiences of homophobia. However when the play instead becomes more an illustration of Kushnir’s homonormative expectations, it allows for an interesting primer on this idea. Nevertheless it remains a play where numerous Jamaicans shared their experiences with the playwright, likely with an expectation that these be used in some way to tell their stories – perhaps allowing worthy insights into their own lot. The play further includes five African-Canadian actors. From outward appearances one might expect that the work might move towards some insight or understandings of the homophobia that *these* Canadians endure. However one wonders whether these ideas can both be effectively explored in the same venue. The play may not be able to tackle both ideas as thoroughly as some audience members would want. When it closes, both issues may be considered somewhat under-resolved.

The Urban Dictionary defines the term pig play as: “...commonly used in the gay male community to describe the act of having dirty sex. A man engaging in pig play may perform acts

of watersports, urine colonics, defecation, tag-team sex, bareback, breeding, fisting, and cum swapping” (“pig play”). On September 13, 2013, Buddies in Bad Times theatre opened a play called simply *PIG*. As one might surmise from the play’s title, its subject matter differs from more mainstream gay themed works. *PIG* explores a world of pig play which further to the above includes bdsm, corporal punishment, bug chasing, P&P/addiction, and snuff fantasy. However, while the work’s themes of sexual play are perhaps the most polemical ideas in *PIG*, it is the presentation and exploration of its characters’ lifestyles that reveals a troubling disaffection with a centric, homonormative model of contemporary gay living.

The lifestyles presented in *PIG* appear to range from that of homonormative privilege to situations where drugged prostitutes are violently gang-raped with the intention of sero-conversion. We encounter these ways of living through three actors who play a number of related characters. In the conceit of the play’s construction, these characters appear to straddle a continuum of reality, or realities. This continuum is comprised of somewhat normative, perhaps ‘real’ characters, and their related, perhaps fantasy selves which include: seemingly autobiographical characters from their literary works (each actor plays a writer at some point on the continuum), their online avatars in the sex trade, and role play characters they use in their sexual recreation. All their lives form multiple narratives that relate to each other as various fantasy threads work in and out of their own and other supposed realities. Someone is a memory of someone else, who just may be character in a story himself, that’s being told by yet another. The structure can be slightly confusing although the audience is helped in performance by the actors’ various class-identified accents.

Luscombe’s narrative structure and its meta-theatricality are aligned to the premise and protocols of the role-play that takes place in sexual fantasy play. Thus heard throughout the play

at all levels is the repeated inquiry of “for real?” as various characters reaffirm the parameters of their fantasy realm of the moment (Luscombe 4, 7, 16, 26, 29, 30, 45, 56, 59, 64, 65, 66, 68, 69). This query reflects the permissions and safe-word codes that often accompany fantasy/role play. Such words indicate limits within which one may maintain illusion as effectively as possible while still creating a safe arena for sexual play. The dramatic tactic of emulating these protocols also has a profound affect on the audience. It allows us to move through the narratives with the same tentative investment that its characters must follow. We presume to be in the moment of the scene until a theatrical ‘safe-word’ – so-to-speak – of narrative moves us from that particular world. Or doesn’t. It is the not knowing whether our partner in the mimesis happening on stage is going to give us that word, and move us to the next reality that keeps us paying attention, and playing the game. And while *PIG* moves easily throughout these worlds, it is when its characters move away from fantasy that trouble occurs.

PIG features, in their least radical representations, three writers. There is mid-twenties Joe, who used to be with, or at least have sex with the much older Harry. Now, however Joe is settling down with middle-aged Stevie. They plan to marry and dispense with various elements from their earlier lives that they may have lived through, or role played, or perhaps have brought to life through semi-autobiographical writings through which they gain renown. These elements include among them drug addiction, prostitution, and hard-core bdsm. They now plan to embrace a homonormative model. They intend to be sober, successful, and presumably monogamous. Stevie says “No more baths. Or clubs or toilets or tricks or trade. We’re gonna help each other stay clean. We’re creating a clean world” (Luscombe 21).

His declaration is somewhat troubling. It equates cleanliness with the homonormative arrangement they intend, both in the idea of being free of drugs, but also eschewing some kinds

of non-monogamous, and traditionally gay, sexual behaviour. Stevie's statement thus conflates their previous sexual lifestyle and associations with the unclean. His declaration as such recalls and re-inhabits various AIDS metaphors of the 1980s where the places, frequency, and the kinds of persons one had sex with, rather than actual sexual practices, were marked as dangerous. Joe and Stevie will now opt for a 'cleanliness' that emulates traditional, monogamous, heterosexual marriage, dispensing with their previous ways of meeting and engaging with sexual partners. The idea makes clear that a homonormative marriage refuses their previous, non-monogamous, sexual behaviours while, more importantly also glossing – through its 'cleanliness' jargon – that it somehow is AIDS adverse. This notion is underscored by Stevie's assertion about their new lifestyle: "at least it's safe" he claims (21). However there is no discussion about considering safer sex, or accommodating changes in their actual sexual *behaviors* in regard to their marriage bed. Their "clean" model is made even more problematic when one considers that Stevie, at least in some of the realities that circulate around him, is portrayed as HIV positive while Joe is negative. Thus their terms conflate their expected homonormative life with a notion of being protected from infection, when unmentioned and un-discussed safer sex practices are necessary for Joe to remain sero-negative. These set of understandings, as a reflection of heteronormative marriage, make for poor health strategies. They create impressions where locations and participants are associated as the nexus of disease and addiction rather than actual personal and sexual practices. Simultaneously it presumes homonormative living to be disassociated from those same perils, regardless of the habits of those involved. In this presentation, Stevie and Joe's embrace of the homonormative comes across as problematised from its onset.

Harry, critical of their change in lifestyle, finds other issues to oppose. He calls their plans "regressing to old testament conformity" (Luscombe 21). Furthermore he asserts that the

sexual extremes he and the nuptial couple used to prefer are rooted in declaring and enacting sexual agency. He claims it is his denied legality, denied equal rights, and denied ability to adopt with which, as a kind of re-directed oppression, he used to allow himself sexual licence (21). “I got good at absorbing the oppression. Nurtured it, redirected it, and bestowed on myself the right to fuck limitlessly about” (21). Harry extends this idea further, presenting his sexual licence as almost a kind of threat to the mainstream that so denied him rights: “Isn't that the point of being queer? In the face of hetero rage, you make it your life's mission to inseminate, without constraint or concern – ”(21). The unspoken continuation of the sentence might be that one inseminates threat or disease as an attack to counter that same hetero rage.

The play illustrates other moments that critique homonormative living. Harry feels that the ways of living that gay inclusion has brought with it have become far too similar to a heteronormative malaise, and that these problems go unquestioned. At Stevie and Joe's wedding he laments:

Because we didn't do battle through the 60s, 70s, and 80s – against ignorance, hatred and violence – in order now to ape everything that's unworkable in breederland. One in three unions ends in divorce. Lawyers and accountants clean up. What part of that do we want? (Luscombe 31)

He has further complaints about how homonormativity has killed gay inspiration. He finds that living in the light of an accepting society dulls the difference that he used to use as an impetus to create art. “(Q)ueer culture is dead – The queers are free of the ghetto – gone mainstream – so gay novels are redundant. It's called irony, little one” (52). The fear that queer culture is dead presumes that it has been replaced by the homonormativity that Joe and Stevie are about to embrace.

Balancing the play's complaints about the homonormative, *PIG* offers the extremes of pig-culture in ways that are no more appealing. As the play progresses the characters seek further experiences and seem to desperately need progressively more real-ness. Snuff fantasies appear to be planned as no longer fantasies. Bandages and hospital visits are called for as the limits of extreme physical engagement are shifted to make the sex play increasingly more real, or realise fewer safe words. And like the critique of homonormativity that the play offers, the other end of the continuum, deep pig-culture, is also seen as lacking in an authenticity that their participants appear to ache for, as they progressively call for more of the "real". This lack of authenticity appears founded in the norms that socially determine these ways of being. At both ends of the spectrum there appear to be controlling rules as to how to be the gay men they want to be. The lack of choice and control at both poles appears to leave the characters consistently unsatisfied. Their dissatisfaction, in turn, makes their position in each place always seem tentative. And this, in turn, reflects the play's structure as they continually shift out of realities. Their dissatisfaction is revealing. What they appear to need is the ability to control and declare their own wants and their own identities. In Act Two the character 'Knife', who seems to be in an autobiographical play written by Stevie, states that his embrace of risky sex and drugs gives him such a semblance of control. His personal control over his encounters with drugs, sex, and death frees him and 'Pig' from an expected normalness – a place where they have no control. He says by not fearing, but by embracing sex, drugs, and death they are freed. He claims life as a prostitute gives him freedom from the roles he is expected to take on as a gay man, a freedom to define himself:

There's no rules for us. We can be anything we want. We don't have to be the fucked-up, self-hating queens our fathers and grandfathers were. Stay with me – we'll discover who we really are. (Luscombe 64)

He further explains that the fear of death and the way it limits them is too confining. His perspective explains his immersion in pig-culture.

... I say we're gonna fuck death. We ain't gonna let it make the choices. *We're* making them. We'll choose where we die and we'll choose when we die and we choose who with. And I choose here and I choose now and I choose you. Stay here forever and die with me. Luscombe (65)

This nihilist statement sums up one of the play's prominent points. The play advocates moving outside the conformity of the various identities that have been seemingly foisted on the gay population, hand in hand, as it gained rights and emerged from the shadows. As conformity looms the characters seem desperate to define themselves against it.

While *PIG*'s themes of pig culture are rarely seen in contemporary gay theatre, the play makes clear a want for ways of living that are that are not controlled or defined by expectations of socially determined hegemonies. The trouble that characters have with both homonormative and pig culture come out as needing a "real"-ness that neither subculture appears to be able to provide. As such *PIG* offers dystopic views of both the new gay centric, and of a rarely seen gay marginal. However one might ask why this marginal is so rarely staged. Gay life appears to have always intersected with the pursuits that *PIG* offers, whether they have been openly celebrated or not. Any trip through the shops of Church Street in Toronto today will underscore this notion.

Tom at the Farm, by Michel Marc Bouchard, opened in its English translation at Buddies in Bad Times on April 11, 2015. The play deals with Tom, a young, urban, gay man who works in the advertising industry in Montreal. The play begins as Tom arrives for his partner's funeral –

located at the family's farm in eastern Ontario (in the play's English translation) – where Tom learns that his partner never told his mother that he was gay, nor of the existence of Tom at all. What Tom also encounters at the farm is a familial culture that so completely closets homosexuality that it initially appears to be like travelling back in time. However, as Tom stays longer at the farm he finds life there rife with homo-eroticism, a place where heteronormative understandings of masculinity are exaggerated into primal cartoons of violence. As he adapts to this strange, rural environment, he takes on new aspects of masculinity through violent engagement with his departed partner's brother Francis (the partner is never named in the play, and is hereafter referred to as departed). Through-out the play, and especially as he becomes progressively more injured by Francis, a central query emerges; why does Tom stay at the farm after the funeral? While the answer is never explicitly given, the play appears to offer that there is something about the life at the farm: the kind of masculinity he takes on, the violence and nature of his homoerotic engagement with Francis, and perhaps even the heavy policing against overt, contemporary, normalised expressions of homosexuality, that he likes. His immersion into the farm's retrogressive culture presents a portrait of rural queerness that, while exaggerated and distorted by the play's dreamlike construct, reflects ways of living in contemporary Canada that exist outside of the homonormative.

The play offers the audience the sense that as Tom travels further from Montreal he also appears to be travelling back in time. The play codes this sensation in several ways. When Tom first arrives at the farm, his place in the moment seems unclear. He tries to imagine another time and place, and in the opening monologue he utters "Imagine when you were little", asking that his consciousness regress to an earlier time (Bouchard 1). Other aspects of the play build on this idea. Tom's GPS in his car fails, saying "Recalculating! Recalculating!" as if his location is not a

part of the temporal now where such technology can function (1). Tom's dialogue further adds to this illusion. His speech appears often as mere train of thought, ideas of his own thinking and not necessarily meant for others to hear. Most often his words go unheard by those around him, or at least unacknowledged. And while Bouchard's design in this regard also allows for Tom's assertion of his out-ness to seem silent and unheard and thus closeting him, it also creates a strange positionality for Tom within each scene. Rather than seeming in the moment, there is an aspect of reminiscence to his role in each scene – as if he is reliving each moment from memory and not really able to affect the here and now. This notion is supported by Bouchard's naming of sections of the play not as scenes, but rather as tableau. While this term recalls the word painting in French, it is its use as a theatrical form popular in the 19th century, where actors pose still in order to create a living but motionless narrative, that add to this sense of recollection. Naming them tableau further helps to frame the moments of the play – at least to a reader of the script – as unchanging flashes recalled from memory, rather than active, moving narratives of the present.

As Tom becomes immersed into the life on the farm, he becomes aware of how alien he is to his surroundings. Tom is initially presented as a successful, sophisticated man in the advertising business. However, various aspects of this identity are seen and identified as strange, and unseemly. Moreover these appear to be coded as effeminate, or neutered. Early after his arrival, while trying to comprehend his surroundings, he asserts he is “too delicate” to deal with the protocols of death at his age (2). Later he recalls how his departed partner described Tom to a salesperson: “His scent is Absence, absence of testosterone”, suggesting he lacks in some hormonally induced aspects of maleness (9). Francis later claims that he knew some homosexual connection to his brother, one associated with art and poetry, would “show up someday” -

creating a connection between Tom's sexuality and aesthetic pursuits (14). Tom is further seen to be associated with qualities of submission and weakness even within his relationship to his departed. When recalling their lovemaking, he uses metaphors of being restrained and kept captive: "...arms that held me prisoner... then sentenced me again and again..." (19). Even Tom's choice of clothing is seen as fragile. His "fancy-boy clothes" can't be functioned in, as they are like "tissue paper" (22, 30). These associations all recall the Wildean model of homosexuals; it replays where the publicity surrounding Oscar Wilde's trial created an identity construction of the "homosexual" marked by Wilde's physical and social traits. These included effeminess, effeminacy, idleness and weakness, opulent clothing, and an obsession with aesthetics, among others (Sinfield 32). Such associations are likely familiar to most audiences, as they were still commonplace in the late 20th century. However, to many in contemporary Canada, they may now seem out of place, or anachronistic.

While Tom initially appears effeminate, he changes at the farm. Early in the play, Tom is assumed to help contribute to farm work (Bouchard 21). In the process, Francis teaches him to milk cows after dressing him in the departed's oversized, old work clothes. Tom finds the clothes awkward, yet seems to find intrigue in the synthesis of their rural utility and his own aesthetics. He comments that the clothes are "Too recent to be vintage, too old to be Paul Smith", and while adding a rope for a belt, comments that he may "start a new trend" (22). He muses that "I went to the best schools and I have shit on... my boots" (22). At this point there appears a synthesis of his urbane aesthetics and a utilitarian function. This begins a process for Tom where he appears to be "masculinised" through not only farm work but also through absurd displays of violence and endurance. In Tom's first moment with Francis, the latter strangles him and threatens Tom's life if he reveals to anyone the nature of his relationship with the departed. He is to pretend he is

a straight co-worker of the departed (10). Terrified, Tom does as Francis demands. However as the play progresses, Tom slowly stands up to Francis and expresses his own agency. He declares “You’re not going to hit me” shortly after the funeral (13). However, Francis’s brute strength leads to a litany of injuries for Tom. He is prevented from driving by wounds to his wrists attained after being dragged by a rope, hog tied, through the fields (33). However, rather than seeing the experience as a series of assaults, the incidents become framed as a masculine form of play. And Tom further responds in kind. After he kicks Francis in the ribs, stage directions indicate Francis considers the blow as “*painful, but pleasant*” indicating he likes the engagement (33). When Francis’s mother, Agatha, catches them fighting she doesn’t chide them for their brutality, but rather orders “(n)ot in the kitchen!” as if their behaviour is normal and expected horseplay (33).

As time passes, Tom further embraces farm life, and revels in the experiences. Tableau Six shows him with his clothes now altered to fit, and with few traces left of his previous urbane manner. A certain absurd expression of masculinity is presented as he appears covered in blood from delivering a calf – an experience he describes as “Ecstasy! Pure ecstasy!” (42). Hand in hand with Tom’s integration into farm life, is the escalation of his violent interactions with Francis. Strangulation, injuries, and a bizarre kind of bondage – where Tom is strung up, upside down, and swung over a pit of animal carcasses – all come into play. What also becomes apparent, as their violence increases, is a homoerotic undercurrent running between them. Early in the play, this is expressed through vague comments such as when Francis says “Just as I was starting to get attached to you” (26). However, as their violent interactions increase, the comments become more pointed; “There, caught my man” and “Look how handsome he is when he is mad” (32). Their attraction progresses to various intimate acts: Francis washing blood off

Tom's naked torso, the two of them ballroom dance together in the barn, and the two of them kissing. However after they kiss Francis is compelled to strangle Tom once again (47).

Strangling is "*calm and pleasureable*" for Francis, and he creates limits for Tom like those found in *PIG* (47). "You tell me when to stop. You decide. Give me a signal and I'll stop. It's up to you man. More? You're tough man, you're tough" (47).

The nature of the relationship is fascinating. It is well studied that rural environments in contemporary Canada tend to be more difficult to express alternative sexualities, especially for youth (Poon). It seems that while Francis is strongly attracted to Tom, his rural culture is so self-policing against overt expressions of homosexuality, that when their attraction becomes physicalised, it must be also be masculinised through ludicrous expressions of violence. While the violence between them originated in Francis forcing Tom to closet his and the departed's relationship, the violence appears to become part of their daily routine. What their behaviours create is an absurd rendition of a rural, queer relationship. One that, while it is strongly guarded from any Wildean aspects of queer expression, also celebrates exaggerated flourishes of extreme masculinity. Of interest is the semblance it bears to rural, gay experiences in contemporary Canada. Of more interest is how Tom takes it on. While he is clearly charmed by the farm animals – he is gentle with them and pets them – there is obviously a stronger attraction that keeps him at the farm, even when he becomes "*so battered*" by Francis's violence that his appearance raises alarm (22, 60). It appears that he at least partially enjoys the appropriated masculinity that comes with rural life. He obviously is drawn to Francis as well. Francis is, we are told, "identical" physically to his departed brother, after all (57). However, Francis's country ways with their overt expressions of masculinity, mark him as differing from the departed's urbane and aesthetic concerns. Furthermore, we learn that the departed was consistently

unfaithful to Tom, while Francis seems to care only for his mother, the farm, and at times, Tom (66). Somehow, these aspects of life at the farm become more appealing to Tom, than did his seeming homonormative life in Montreal.

Duality is a strong theme that runs through the play. Tom is referred to as “Mr. Synonym” at work for his ability to conjure ideas that operate as “the thing that is like the thing but not really the thing” (15). Tom can be considered as a synonym for the departed as on the farm he picks up the latter’s work roles (and clothes), and his violent horseplay with Francis. He even calls Agatha “Mum” by the play’s end (61). To Tom, Francis likewise is a synonym for the departed, appearing identical to him except with an exaggerated masculinity and a rural bluntness. Not until the presence of a young female, Sara arrives, does Francis actually appear to even have heterosexual tendencies. Even Agatha, Francis’s mother can be thought of as a synonym for a rural Christian matriarch – one free of urbane or liberal notions of homosexuality. She almost appears as this, but as we discover knows much more than she pretends. Such dualities help build the overarching duality of Bouchard’s rural setting. One where queerness appears as entirely invisible, like things supposedly were in a time gone by; but in actuality is a place where queer relations are available, extreme, and contorted.

Tom at the Farm might be considered a critique of the homonormative life that we presume Tom and the departed to have enjoyed in Montreal, if only for the fact that Tom seems to find something there that keeps him at the farm, long after he ought have left. However, it might equally be seen to comment on queer life in rural Canada. Tom’s reminiscence style of dialogue, complimented in its Buddies production by a spartan, but effective set, gives the play a sense of nostalgia, or perhaps an anti-nostalgia. It presents as a counter to metropolitan, homonormative living the simplicity of a perhaps longed-for, pastoral, un-aesthetic existence

from a simpler time, a place where masculinities are pronounced, and physical labour celebrated. However Bouchard presents this image as only a dream, a reminiscence, one where the realities underneath – such as a discomfort with non-heteronormative sexualities – bubble up in distorted and violent ways.

DISCUSSION

All three of these plays rely on the difference between the experiences of gay men across a range of circumstances for their dramatic substance. While Jamaican-Canadians and perhaps those involved in pig-play can be considered subcultures of a queer mosaic, Bouchard's depictions of rural queer life in eastern Canada may not be, as rural and urban distinctions are harder to quantify. Nevertheless, all these plays find dramatic fodder in how they explore persons in reaction to the centrality of the homonormative. While the word homonormative is a fairly recent coinage, its ideas have been expressed for a number of years by various terms. Bernstein Sycamore has long written of how a culture of commodification and a tentative acceptance of queerness has led to an assimilation of queer culture within a dominant, white, male hegemony. This "assimilation robs queer identity of anything meaningful, relevant, or challenging..." and instead "presents a sanitized, straight friendly version of gay identity" (Bernstein Sycamore 3). He believes that assimilation carries with it the "violence of cultural erasure" (5). He believes contemporary queer culture, in its embracing of same-sex marriage and other rites, engenders queers to behave in a way that is patterned after the hetero-normative, consumer family; although this ideal is usually only available to queer, white, males of means. He further claims that assimilation into a white, hetero-normative 'queer' ideal is violence against those living outside "...a ravenous gay mainstream" which "seeks control, of not only our bodies and minds but... the very ways we represent our own identities" (Bernstein Sycamore 5).

The interplay between the assimilationist and/or cultural identity tendencies of an evolving gay culture can be troubling. While many celebrate the fact that we can regularly have gay theatre across Canada, attained with similar funding, and theatrical practices as other mainstream and alternative works, is the acceptance within mainstream theatrical practice something that may bring with it its own problems or perils? Might the success, or no-longer-in-the-shadows aspect of contemporary gay theatre in Canada be helping, or at least ignoring cultural erasure of other gay and queer culture? When one looks to *Small Axe* this may seem especially poignant. It is hard enough to see theatre about the Jamaican-Canadian experience (aside perhaps from one exceptional solo artist), without imagining where one might find theatre about gay Jamaican-Canadians. *Small Axe* begins to share some of these experiences, but eventually folds back to the problem of its own premise. In 2016, its creator had three pieces mounted in three different theatres in a span of less than 18 months. One might presume that he brought his considerable cultural capital to the project and this assisted in its getting produced. However it ultimately turns out to be a story about his character's hubris in trying to tell someone else's story. The fact that a number of others' stories were told, and an audience was given insight into their lives is important. However, one wonders if the project were led by a Jamaican-Canadian if we'd have been able to see it.

Lisa Duggan, in her book *The Twilight of Equality?* was one of the first to use the expression homonormativity. She says "it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (50). Other, more contemporary definitions offer a more generalised understanding: usually as a practice in which heteronormative ideals and

constructs are embraced by gay culture and assimilated into individual identity, often at the expense of particular or marginal aspects of cultural identity construction. The characters in *PIG* seem at times torn between the homonormative marriage they see as a kind of haven, and the marginalised sexual desires, practices, and culture that they like. These appear as the poles they have to exist between. Is the culture they like imperiled by the one they feel safe in?

As gay inclusion expands across the globe, one might consider whether *all* aspects of gay culture, and gay sexual culture, be considered for inclusion, or exclusion. Surely some of our subcultural sexual practices evolved out of the repressive heteronormative policing that formerly surrounded gay men – ie cottaging, etc. But does their provenance in a repressive environment make them any less legitimate as gay culture? Does gay inclusion, slowly happening now in a number of non-western societies mean that Duggan's kind of heteronormativity is the endpoint of equality for gays there? And at what cost might this be to these subcultures, and their ways of being as they exist now? A question needs to be asked by what rubric, or whose terms do aspects of gay culture become acceptable, or come under the totality of homonormativity? Are the aspects of what is, or becomes homonormative determined by its looming hegemon – heteronormativity, as Duggan seems to suggest? If so, are half of successful, white, male, monogamous, married gay couples really anymore than another form of female impersonation? In that this is the kind, and degree, and limits of sexual/gender drift that our society, and its governing ideals of homonormativity will allow and will celebrate in terms of its sense of inclusion, while BDSM, or even tea-room trading is still rigourously policed against? And when *Buddies* shows a play full of pig-culture, or cottaging, or any behaviours outside of the homonormative, is this an act of defiance, of inclusion, or perhaps of chastisement?

So what then should we see on our stages? Are homonormative narratives already too symptomatic of, and assimilated into an elite system that is part and parcel of a neo-liberal hegemony? Must queer or gay theatre always show the marginalised? Will it make a difference how assimilated, gender appropriate, and mainstream the characters we watch are? Or, to quote an oft-heard refrain when asking about any particular theatre's season, can't we just have good plays? Must they be framed by an agenda of content, or politic, or audience, or relation to our queer moment? Could we not enjoy a good play if its characters were involved in human struggles, regardless of the degree of their ascension into the mainstream?

Such questions cannot be answered easily or glibly. For anyone who is aware of Canadian queer theatre over the last thirty years will notice massive differences in the visibility, and accordingly, grant monies disbursed to say, lesbian theatre as opposed to gay men's theatre. An even wider chasm of opportunity and availability arises when one looks theatre about trans persons. Marginalisation within queer communities is a fact and a failure to analyse or at least recognise the meanings created by our theatre, and how it may mean to them, could easily leave our theatre as dominated by stories about white, cis-gendered, English-speaking, married folks, as it was in the 1960s. It would just have gay married people as well.

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