

Performing Quebec, Performing Queer Insularity

I attempt in the following pages to link several events that might help imagine a queer constellation of terms—queer, Quebec, and performance—in new relation. My assemblage brings into focus notions of insularity (the sense of feeling islanded experienced both as isolation and a kind of archipelagic interconnectedness) and belonging articulated through new media (in the form of webseries). I choose the latter in a conference largely about theatre for two reasons: first, at my own school of performance training, several of the students now develop projects in this medium because the financial barriers to entry are relatively low and the form potentially offers a democratic space in the sense of requiring neither agents nor established producers. Second, the most recent US spectacle of homophobic violence has left me wondering about the political possibilities of queer performance. Here I find myself dwelling on the renewed import given to quotidian activities from clubbing to texting as well as the sort of affective and, in some cases, material support offered in the forms of “We Are Orlando” hashtags and facebook profile backgrounds, the recording of “What the World Needs Now is Love” and other displays of affiliation.¹ As a caveat, I do not mean to equate the webseries discussed later in my paper with the contemporary events with which I begin. Instead, I hope the latter might facilitate thinking differently about the former.

In the wake of (yet again) a number of fatal shootings in the US, I find myself returning to Elspeth Probyn’s exploration of belonging.² Written from the perspective of a lesbian feminist scholar then situated in Montreal, she writes of the “transversal connections between individuals” as quotidian experience.³ This idea of

transversal emphasizes shallow connections and parallel desires articulated across space. For this reason, I think it might be an interesting model to track the networked expressions of affect that have followed the Pulse homicides. Probyn's book, *Outside Belongings*, works through "the desire that individuals have to belong, a tenacious and fragile desire that is . . . increasingly performed . . . with the fear that the stability of belonging and the sanctity of belonging are forever past."⁴ She provides a cognitive and material mapping of the "outside," which moves understandings of social relations to considerations of surface and proximity.⁵ I am struck by these ideas now partly because Probyn wrote at a moment when "queer" named an emergent discourse, one that signaled both possibility and disappointment. In the former register, Probyn argues, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, that queer animates the potential of new forms of spatial relationships: how space means, how space divides and how space joins.⁶

As we bear witness to the queer assemblage of bodies following the multiple murders at Pulse, the now notorious nightclub in Orlando, such provocations seem all the more pressing. Nightlife venues have long been associated with social dynamics in process; indeed, José Muñoz's and Celeste Delgado's *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, reveals how cruising and dancing have rendered possible self-fashioning and collective movements (physical, political, etc.). The locations that facilitate these activities produce intimacy, what Lauren Berlant calls "mobile processes of attachment."⁷ Part of the club's allure is the ways it brings people seeking hook ups, one-night stands, and relationships of different sorts into proximity. But, in obscuring divisions between private and public, it also

generates waves of anxiety about these sorts of togetherness that frequently cross class and racial lines. In inviting and constructing intimacy, nightlife venues elicit not only pleasure and excitement, but also fear and outrage. Queer communities have long been subject to policing in regard to the latter but forms of individually initiated rather than state-sanctioned violence also feature prominently in this history. The shootings at Pulse recall this lineage.

Tracing this line also conjures some of the difficulties in thinking about queer now. I have tended to use queer in my own work as a term to mark the anti/normative with the potential to disrupt modes of belonging and identification. This sort of orientation pushes alongside but also sometimes against gay cultural production and critique. For me, “gay” places greater faith in producing difference *within* existing power structures and media forms rather than attempting to fold them on themselves or expose the incoherence (contradictory elements) of a system of representation.⁸ However, norms obtain in particular times and places, and technology compels a reconsideration of the normative in a virtual world—not because our on-line networks do not reproduce normative inscriptions of social life (because they certainly do) but because the vast accessibility of on-line cultural production means that any number of individuals or groups unversed in particular cultural codes access content, often out of any controllable context.

Our digital age, then, differs significantly from earlier moments in terms of the performance of intimate encounters and their audiences. Disturbing footage of survivors of the attack on Pulse patrons huddled with the dead and dying in a bathroom stall is only one of the ways in which new technology has reconfigured

spatial proximity. The perpetrator's Facebook page has become a tool of criminal profiling justifying a swell of Islamophobic comments. The networks of the victims have brought Puerto Rico into focus to suggest that this massacre requires an intersectional analysis—one based specifically on race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Such a concatenation of issues and events exposes the complexity of any structure of belonging, demonstrating links that might otherwise remain invisible.

Following these virtual pathways leads me to think about queer performance inside and outside of the digital realm. In this regard, although the Pulse shooting may seem like an odd starting point for a reflection on queer Quebec, I want to suggest that more is at work here than my own obsession and mourning. First, the incident reminds me of the stakes of queer belonging in general. How do queer performances facilitate community formation? What sorts of sociality does queer performance facilitate? What material collectivities take shape under this rubric? What limits affiliation? Given that Canadian discourse has long been concerned with media saturation (Marshall McLuhan), it is no surprise that there are direct links between the Quebec and Florida contexts. These connections include live events such as vigils following the violence.⁹ But other aftereffects continue to ripple precisely because of the networked world in which we live; for example, Arc-en-Ciel d'Afrique (a group concerned with LGBT Afro Caribbean rights and wellness issues) just received a financial boost “after racially-charged hate speech spiked on social media following the shooting at the Pulse nightclub.”¹⁰ What parallels might exist between communities that speak literally or figuratively from the space of North American islands?

Continuing this line of thought, I wonder how in the case of Quebec in general and Montreal in particular, might Probyn's "outside belongings" be usefully extended for our current historical moment (twenty years after she originally published these ideas)? In terms of the Quebecois, this theorization might usefully overlap with the concept of insularity. As I have written elsewhere, the Francophone capital of North America understands itself as the cultural heart of Canada; this position rests in part on the paradox of Quebec seeing itself islanded from the nation-state to which it formally belongs, notwithstanding the Acadians in New Brunswick and other French-speaking populations scattered throughout the country.¹¹ The debates around Francophone particularity have swelled at various moments in discussions about the literal island of Montreal, such as the planning policy (2000-2006) designated by the slogan "une île, une ville," that effectively incorporated Anglophone neighborhoods into the larger metropolis. Critical insularity pivots between seemingly bounded geographic and cultural distinctiveness and expansive interconnectivity.¹² These cultural debates also take more unusual form within the frame of *les îles quebécoises* as, for example, in the controversies surrounding Anticosti Island's use for modern industrial purposes (fracking) and its maintenance as a hunting ground. In short, insularity reminds us of how certain traditions affirm the context of belonging and the forces that vex those who feel such attachments. The attendant political stakes register differently at various scales of analysis and in terms of belonging's constitutive outside.

This context sets up my specific discussion of how certain forms of gay and/or queer performance might function in *La Ville au Cent Clochers*, or how the

city itself perhaps queers certain mediated performances.¹³ The writer Chris Gudgeon has described the Montreal as “the sexiest city in North America.”¹⁴ His commentary follows his speedo-attired excursions on the “island” at Club Crème, on Boulevard Saint-Laurent around the old Red Light District. If one accepts Gudgeon’s assessment, then one might expect Montreal, if not Quebec as a whole, to lead the country in terms of its production of queer pleasure (and perhaps pain,). Certainly Bad Boy Club Montreal, with its signature Black and Blue Party, signals one trajectory of gay performance, one drenched in foam and laden with dollar signs. This iteration seems like a departure from the distinctive Quebecois sensibility that drives earlier but perhaps no less theatrical productions. But it can be rather difficult to create meaningful correspondence between the worlds inhabited by Michel Tremblay’s *Duchesse* or *Hosanna* and the soirées that currently occur in the city.

Even when turning to representational media, I remain uncertain of what today answers Tremblay’s depictions of self-destructive communities, but certainly some of the aesthetic devices he deployed in his more famous works—direct address and extended monologues in the Quebecois vernacular of *joual*—have become fixtures of queer screen performance. Xavier Dolan’s films seems to have earned him a certain notoriety, and certainly their not infrequent narcissistic quality suggests a self-indulgent (or self-reflexive?) insularity even as he seems to speak to a generation far beyond Quebec’s borders. This same sort of insular gaze informs several of his contemporaries making distinctively local work distributed via the internet. I have in mind several webseries: like Mathieu Blanchard’s *Coming Out*

(2013-), Olivier Labonté Le Moyne's *Montreal Boy: Some Strings Attached* (2014-), and Chloé Robichaud's *Féminin/Féminin* (2014-).

Each webseries consists of episodes ranging from approximately four and a half to twelve and a half minutes. Although the style of each differs, they cohere in their relatively brief duration, their emphases on quotidian relationships in Montreal, their use of popular music, and their tendency to feature actors in their twenties and thirties. The trio also displays an investment in realism, not uncommon to the genre but one that is also consistent with an earlier moment of gay cultural production. The format of this mode of production offers a private viewing experience (me and my laptop) but also the possibilities for fan, interpersonal, and even industrial connections through comments pages, on-line interviews, and crowdsourcing campaigns.¹⁵ These webseries, therefore, play with insularity in terms of isolation and interactivity.

Mathieu Blanchard has stated that the lack of portrayals “du milieu gai” motivated him to create *Coming Out*.¹⁶ However, he has acknowledged two televised antecedents: the previous sitcom *Cover-Girl* (2005), a show that focused on drag queens who owned a Montreal club, and the American version of *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), about the tribulations of a queer circle shot in Toronto, which substituted for an imagined Pittsburgh. Nevertheless, Blanchard suggests that no dramatic series had provided a multifaceted view of la vie gai au Quebec through the lens of a gay protagonist (in this case, played by Blanchard himself; here we can see the narcissistic parallel to Dolan). *Coming Out* takes place primarily in French and centers around a somewhat promiscuous photographer named (what else but) Mat,

in the process of figuring out his relationship with his ex (Ian) and Mat's group of friends and acquaintances. A number of subplots supplement the primary narrative arc: a young addict and gay prostitute who has AIDS, a lesbian couple who lose a baby and work to rebuild their relationship, a young man who steals his coworker's husband but who eventually attempts to forge a non-traditional extended family. The series highlights white Francophone Montrealers caught up in the drama of everyday life.

The shot and narrative construction are perhaps the most normative of the three webseries I consider. Although the last sequence of the first episode cross-cuts between a gay bashing and a sex scene, the webseries does not innovate at the formal level. The storylines highlight contemporary issues, but followers of similar material, including the aforementioned *Queer as Folk*, will recognize several plot devices and spectacles: scenes of seduction at the bar and office, exposed flesh of same sex lovers in bedrooms and showers, earnest conversations about relationships. Overall, the topics covered in the online serial drama and its aesthetics seem mundane, even if they aim to titillate. Rather than a critique, I suggest that such prosaic concerns are the point. The series renders gay banal.

Can banality yield a progressive political position? Here I am struck by the meaning of series like this one in light of the shootings in Orlando. Certainly, for many marginalized people, conventional desires and quotidian activities can elicit risk and, obviously, can become life threatening under certain conditions. In these circumstances, communities might queer their affiliations. At its most poignant, perhaps, this is what *Coming Out* demonstrates. Everyday exposure to structural

and more targeted forms of violence produce anxiety, terror, and material loss but also creativity, resilience, and improvisatory acts of compassion.

As an illustration, Blanchard offers the story arc of Téo. Ejected from his home after having the courage, as he states, to out himself to his parents, Téo becomes a prostitute, who contracts HIV from one of his clients. The lesbian social worker (with no professional boundaries) drops Téo at her friend Mat's to spend the night in safety. The pair of men eventually encounters one another at the threshold of Mat's bathroom, where Téo inadvertently pricks his finger and refuses his temporary host's assistance as he announces, "J'ai SIDA." The shot reverse shot contrasts the two bodies in the tight space squeezed between the entry and the bathroom door—one half naked, with only a few clothes as possessions; the other comparatively privileged with an expression of fear and discomfort. Mat and Téo never again occupy the same frame, although the series later constructs parallels between the former's rejection by his parents and the latter's. Where Blanchard perhaps most succeeds is showing how structures of power, like the nuclear heterosexual family, maintain norms and facilitate oppression even as individual action and imagination might circumvent or otherwise undo such domination, if only for fleeting moments. Mat's sudden rejection of his HIV positive houseguest and the ways in which this encounter later haunt him with guilt reveal the need to invent new ways of belonging; their connection is, we might say after Probyn, transversal following a somewhat parallel path within the same urban space. At once critical and hopeful, the shared journey of Mat and Téo, who dies by the end of the first season (a couple hours of screen time), insists that potentially

commonplace and relatively superficial encounters have significance and merit attention.

Olivier Labonté LeMoynes' *Montreal Boy: Some Strings Attached* takes this thematic thread and indulges in what I would term an aesthetic of the quaint. Having recently broken up with his boyfriend of two years, the protagonist, Stephane (Francis Ducharme), invites a New Yorker named Hugh, with whom he had been chatting on-line, to Montreal. The six episodes totaling about thirty minutes track their weekend together. Like Mat of *Coming Out*, Stephane also seems in recovery from a recent break up (also with a man named Matt). The first season ends with the transferring of Stephane's house key from one love interest to another. Here again, the camera caresses white young men, with or without shirts.

However, in this case, Montreal is as much the star as the leading men. After the initial graphics, the opening helicopter shot shows a dramatic cityscape over le parc du Mont-Royal. St. Catherine's Street, and an array of well-known venues from le village and across the metro area also appear. In this manner, the film functions as a kind of travelogue, capturing a number of romantic spots for the gay local or, perhaps, the tourist. Indeed, the conversations occur, for the most part, in English, albeit often with a Francophone accent. The pace of urban life also seems accelerated here as the sheer number of edits lends a dynamic character to the city and its inhabitants. Dialogue spans across scenes without always matching speaker to the image. The soundtrack thus facilitates spectators who might want to project themselves into various scenes.

This series connects two insular metropolises—Montreal and Manhattan—with a narrative in which very little out of the ordinary happens. Men meet, eat, drink, dance, have sex and take bike rides; *Montreal Boy* is perhaps remarkable only for being resolutely unremarkable. Nevertheless, the show also suggests something about the loneliness one might feel on a metropolitan island notwithstanding the relatively high concentration of people, and gay men in particular, in each place. The bonds forged across insular space mitigate these feelings in this web drama.

Féminin/Féminin offers the most formal innovations of the three webseries. The work includes structured interviews interspersed with dramatic vignettes that focus on a group of primarily young lesbians in Montreal. Eventually, Robichaud herself appears as the voice behind the camera. The series works to combine an homage to *Go Fish* and the *L-Word* with a self-reflexive record of local lesbian life in Montreal. Occasionally, when characters provide information about themselves, the moving image breaks into a series of stills that provides a photographic compendium of a life. The conversations here flow readily between French and English, with people often code switching. The interviews include both characters and (apparently) young women whom the director has found around the city. Fiction and reality blur.

Each of the eight episodes tends to focus on one of six couples in a group of friends. Each pair also foregrounds a particular issue from rural small town life to coming out. The director has expanded the demographics of the cast in comparison to the other webseries; she includes a significant role for a person of color (“Sam” in a breast cancer narrative), and she also features a principle role for someone over

forty (“Céline” in a cross-generational romance). The locations for each pair vary, but they tend to emphasize interiors. Although a local celebrity (Catherine Renaud) makes a brief cameo, the focus again falls on quotidian experience, both in the narratives and the documentary section. The image that culminates the series’ first and only season thus far is twelve women assembled in a half circle around the recent grave of one of the character’s cats.

Although the medium of the webseries would potentially enable one to discuss almost anything, it would seem to have fostered a niche for artists to portray nothing more than the ordinary. The Quebec versions join a number of US productions in this project. Webseries portray specific communities who perhaps have not had wide exposure in mainstream media (gay couples on the east side of LA, bears, Asia American lesbians). The Quebecois gay and lesbian niche in this growing list, perhaps even more than its counterparts across North America, insists on the mundane as meaningful. The issues encountered here reflect the particularity of the island as much as they suggest similarities with other locales. They emphasize chance encounters and serendipitous community formations.

To create an artistic or political movement, or even a statement, out of these sorts of contingent attachments seems neither the point of any of these works nor necessarily desirable. Yet I am struck that an awareness of the everyday is precisely the sort of reaction engendered by the murders at Pulse nightclub. This event, of course, took place at the beginning of a season of Pride celebrations. The responses have included images of same-sex couples kissing posted on the web, folks going out to dance as a commemoration of those killed who were in the process of doing the

same thing. Rather than lambast these signs of affiliation for being ethically irresponsible or politically inappropriate, perhaps what we learn by thinking about insular performances is precisely that they speak to as yet unidentified collectivities, whose energies perhaps cannot be harnessed to a unified political position but in which we might nevertheless find some flicker of hope for connection in the fleeting moments outside of established modes and structures of belonging.

¹ The recording can be streamed on-line and is available on [broadway records.com](http://broadwayrecords.com) to support the GLBT Community Center of Central Florida.

https://www.buzzfeed.com/alivelez/broadway-for-orlando-love-sweet-love?utm_term=.tl3AjE8YkE#.kc2VBrJ3pr accessed June 21, 2016

² I refer to the shooting at UCLA on June 1, 2016 and at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL on June 12, 2016.

³ Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings*. New York: Routledge, 1996: 6.

⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid*, 11. Probyn explicitly offers an elaboration of Michel Foucault's writings on heterotopias.

⁶ This line of thinking might be traced through a diverse body of work situated within queer studies—José Esteban Muñoz and Sara Ahmed's respective works—as well as intersecting that field—Giuliano Bruno's recent work and my own.

⁷ Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue" *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (1998): 284

⁸ Here I follow Gregory Bredbeck.

⁹ See Olivier Jean's photo on the website of LaPresse: *Vigile à Montréal, après la Tuerie d'Orlando* <http://www.lapresse.ca/photos/201606/12/12-16885-vigile-a-Montreal-apres-la-tuerie-dorlando.php/1210969-photo-olivier-jean-la-presse-Montreal-rassemblements-a-Montreal-pour-rendre> accessed June 20, 2016

¹⁰ Lindsay Richardson, "Montreal group gets \$25,000 to fight bullying in the LGBTQ community" <http://Montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/countering-bullying-in-the-gay-community> accessed June 20, 2016

¹¹ See Sean Metzger, "Le Rugissement du Lion: Mapping and Memory in Montreal's Chinese/Canadian Street Theatre." *Asian Canadian Theatre* Ed. Nina Lee Aquino and Ric Knowles. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 86-97.

¹² For an elaboration, see Sean Metzger, Francisco-J. Hernández Adrián, and Michaeline Crichlow, "Introduction: Islands, Images, Imaginaries" *Third Text* 28.4-5 (2014): 333-343.

¹³ There has, of course, been a good deal of theater historiography on gay theater in Quebec, specifically in the period of the 1970s through the early 1990s. See Jane Moss, "Dramatizing Sexual Difference: Gay and Lesbian Theater in Quebec." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 22.4 (Winter 1992): 489-498 and Alan-Michel Rocheleau and Luke Sandford, "Gay Theater in Quebec: The Search for an Identity" *Yale French Studies* 90 (1996): 115-136. More recent work appears in *Québec Studies* 60 (Fall/Winter 2015). Although a project that updates this history from the 90s through today might be useful, that is not my aim here.

¹⁴ Chris Gudgeon, *The Naked Truth: The Untold Story of Sex in Canada*. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2003: 2.

¹⁵ See <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/coming-out-saison-3-la-finale#/> Accessed June 23, 2016

¹⁶ The information on Blanchard's thoughts about the series comes from his interview with Pierre Goudreau, "Coming Out de Mathieu Blanchard" March 24, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12ZjUUDhJc> Accessed June 21, 2016.