

Drawn Together Artist Essay - Easton Dunne (2021)

The Project Gallery, Queensland College of Art, Meanjin/Brisbane

In a predominantly heteronormative culture, queer people are often left to make sense of our lives and to ascribe meaning and value to our experiences by collaging together fragments from whatever cultural narratives and sources we can read ourselves into. Constructing this exhibition has provided an opportunity to pause and reflect upon what it means to be a visibly and openly (to varying degrees depending on the situation) queer person from a rural and regional area, on unceded First Nations lands, within the specific context of my own life. The process of researching and making the work in *Drawn Together* has allowed me to carve out time and space to examine interconnecting threads of place, experience and identity, and to *draw together* these strands in order to make sense of them and myself by forming a more complete picture of my life's narrative in visual terms.

Discovering the existence of Rural Queer Studies as a subset of Queer Theory while researching this exhibition has equipped me with a language to finally comprehend and articulate my experiences of feeling simultaneously inside and outside both metropolitan queer communities, and the rural and regional communities that I belong to. The exhibition is a celebration of learning to find a place that feels like home within oneself, and in relation to others and communities. It also reflects on my experiences of how queer identity work and practices, and the politics of visibility/legibility, are negotiated differently in regional and rural areas in contrast to urban areas.

The discipline of Rural Queer Studies aims to “challenge the idea that same-sex sexual desire in rural spaces is rare, invisible, dangerous or isolated; posit that the goals and strategies of rural LGBTQ people differ dramatically from those of urban LGBTQ people; and critique the narrative that pairs closeted, violent and homophobic with the rural and liberated with the city” (Thomsen 2016, p. 246). The term used by scholars in the field to describe the aforementioned assumptions is *metronormativity*. Thomsen suggests that “dominant cultural

narrative[s] cloaked in metronormativity persist, in part, because alternate modes of inhabiting and articulating LGBTQ identities and experiences – including those emerging from the rural or existing outside of the ‘out, loud and proud’ – are not recognized as legitimate modes of LGBTQness” (2016, p. 246).

In response, the work in *Drawn Together* seeks to complicate the underlying binary that imagines the urban as the liberal and progressive emancipatory space for the oppressive rural and regional closet. It attempts to untangle my experiences of life as a visibly queer and gender non-conforming person in a rural and regional area from the frame of metronormative assumptions. The exhibition explores possibilities for articulating experiences of queerness in rural and regional spaces that might look, sound, dress, declare, present and act differently to queerness in urban contexts, without necessarily indicating an oppressed subject awaiting liberation. It aims to create a space for reflection, conversation and exchange allowing exploration of new possibilities for articulating queer presence and practices that exist beyond the known, the metropolitan, and the stereotypical.

While representations of queerness are increasingly visible in mainstream culture and have begun to be addressed by the museum and gallery sector in Australia, there is still a long road left to travel before these representations truly reflect diversity and multiplicity, which includes portraying queerness in rural and regional settings in a manner that breaks with problematic metronormative tropes. Evidence of this gap is provided by Andrew W. Gorman-Murray’s 2008 paper, “So, Where is Queer? A critical geography of queer exhibitions in Australia”, which demonstrates “an uneven geographical distribution of exhibitions, how geography also frames the themes of queer exhibitions, and an imbalanced geography, in which regional histories are few, national and state scale histories are prevalent, and minimal exhibitions occur outside metropolitan areas. This is problematic because queer identities, communities and histories vary across scales and between places” (pp. 67-80). It would seem that most representations of queerness, whether specifically in the arts or more broadly in popular culture, remain urban-centric. Queerness is rarely situated in rural and regional contexts other than to repeat the tired metronormative trope of the great gay migration, where queer survival is contingent on escape from those places.

In addition, the majority of representations of queerness within Australian galleries and museums to date seem to have favoured curatorial and artistic perspectives of those who identify as male, marginalising representations of lesbians and queer women, and trans and gender diverse people – especially so in rural and regional contexts. This sentiment is reinforced (albeit in an American context) by Feminist and Queer Curator, Maura Reilly, who suggests that “curators of queer exhibitions would... do well to strive for greater inclusivity... [as] the majority of these exhibitions suffer from a demonstrable lack of women artists, artists of color, and non-Western artists. Sexism, racism, ethno-centrism, and even lesbo- and transphobia continue to taint curatorial practices within the LGBTQ art community itself” (2018).

The extent to which this uneven representation is problematic is highlighted by the answer to the titular question of Gorman-Murray’s paper, “So, Where is Queer?” which Australian census data from 2006 suggest is: everywhere.

“While high concentrations [of same-sex couples] are found in inner-cities, there are also significant suburban and regional concentrations, thus contesting assumptions about same-sex couples’ inner city residential choices... since same-sex couples were found in most Statistical Divisions, those areas below the national average cannot be considered devoid of these families...” (Gorman- Murray, Brennan-Horley, McLean, Waitt, & Gibson, 2010).

Despite suggesting the ubiquitous presence of queerness around Australia, the census data cast a narrow and potentially homonormative net that does not include queer people who are uncoupled, or people who may not identify as queer but who live queerly. The latter category hints at a fundamental difference in how the politics of visibility are negotiated in rural and regional areas, often leading to uneven perceptibility or legibility of queerness from positions beyond the “local” in these areas.

According to Rural Queer Studies scholar Mary L. Gray, “the politics of visibility [that] have come to define authentic LGBT identity... are tailor-made for and from the population densities; capital; and systems of gender, sexual, class and racial

privilege that converge in cities.” (2009, p.31). The notion that rural subjectivities are inherently incompatible with visibility claims is reinforced by scholar Kelly Baker, who suggests that “family connections, familiarity and belonging are central to the structures of rural life. While much urban LGBT visibility politics... centre on the different-but-equal paradigm, rural LGBT visibility politics involve a delicate balance of nonheterosexuality and localness, putting forth a logic of different-but-similar” (2016, p. 42).

Gray posits that queer-identity work done in rural and regional areas produces “differently – not less – mediated or declarative queer pronouncements than urban LGBT communities”, arguing that “the recognition of those pronouncements depends deeply on one’s surroundings” (2009, p. 31). Gray suggests that metronormative mythologies “privilege ideologies of visibility and produce isolation irrespective of where one lives, universally marginalizing queer lives beyond metropolises in the process” (2009, p. 29).

While we might not always be visible to others beyond or even within our areas – sometimes we’re camouflaging, selectively out, or hiding in plain sight – these responses to specific, local socio-geographies do not necessarily indicate an oppressed queer subject awaiting liberation from a rural closet, in need of escape to the emancipatory urban space. Gray suggests that it is a challenge for rural and regional young people who identify as queer to “address the same cultural and political demands for visibility [as placed on urban kids] while balancing the logistical needs to fit in and conform to the familiarity that structures rural life. They walk this fine line amid cultural representations that heighten their sense of feeling out of place and a politics of visibility that fails to see them or their needs for different strategies of recognition” (2009, p. 168). Gray continues on to say that “perhaps even more challenging to rural youth’s queer-identity work is that the politics of LGBT visibility narrate rural communities as the last place LGBT-identifying young people should be” (2009, 168).

For many queer people living in rural and regional areas, a sense of place is fundamentally important to their sense of self, yet this connection to place is not

without complication and contradiction. Gray, Johnson & Gilley articulate this concept – one I have grappled with over time as a queer person living in rural and regional areas – very succinctly here:

“...many rural queers struggle with reconciling their deep connection to or pride in their hometowns with the popular representations of their communities as backwards, ignorant and unlivable... They feel they are not supposed to see their communities as viable places to live, and told that they need to choose between being queerly out of place in the country or moving to a big city to find legitimate visibility... The sentiment of urban enlightened and sexually free subjects creates an impasse that effectively tells rural LGBTQ-identifying people that they cannot be happily queer right where they are and should expect hostility – and in fact deserve it – if they do stay in their communities” (2016, pp. 14-15).

The pressing need for more inclusive representations that challenge metronormative assumptions is demonstrated by the fact that “‘escaping’ to someplace else is a matter inextricably bound to issues of class, education, family relations and obligations, age, and other factors... the sense of isolation and feeling trapped can only be compounded by the implication that there must be something wrong with the gay person who does not migrate to the city, further alienating those who are already othered by heteronormativity” (Hain 2016, pp. 164-165).

We need more stories affirming that where people are, queerness is, even and especially in rural and regional areas, even if it’s not always visible/legible from afar, to unsettle the assumption that rural and regional areas are uniformly inhospitable to queerness and difference – which, in my experience, is a vast and inaccurate oversimplification of a complex and nuanced situation dependent on the intersection of the factors described by Hain in the previous paragraph. Rurally and regionally located queer people of all ages and backgrounds are entitled to have access to stories that paint our lives as filled with possibilities for hope, optimism, fulfillment, and flourishing, regardless of whether and how we negotiate the politics of visibility.

Drawn Together encapsulates the story that I would like to go back and tell myself as a young person: that it gets infinitely better, and you don't have to choose between family and place, or being your whole self and finding love, in order for that to happen. This exhibition is dedicated to all queer people and people who live queerly in rural and regional Central Queensland – especially to those in my family – who have paved the way for us with courage, grace and flair.

Reference List

Baker, K. (2016). *Out Back Home: An Exploration of LGBT Identities and Community in Rural Nova Scotia, Canada*, in Gray, M.L., Johnson, C.R. & Gilley, B.J., (ed.), *Queering the countryside: new frontiers in rural queer studies*. New York, New York University Press.

Gorman-Murray, Andrew W.; Brennan-Horley, Christopher R.; McLean, Kirsten; Waitt, Gordon R.; and Gibson, Christopher R (2010). *Mapping same-sex couple family households in Australia*, pp. 382-392. Available from <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/scipapers/622>>. Accessed November 2021.

Gray, M.L., 2009. *Out In the Country: youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America*. New York, New York University Press.

Hain, M. (2016). "We Are Here for You": *The it gets better project, queering rural space, and cultivating queer media literacy*, in Gray, M.L., Johnson, C.R. & Gilley, B.J., (ed.), *Queering the countryside: new frontiers in rural queer studies*. New York, New York University Press.

Reilly, M. (2018). *Challenging Hetero-centrism and Lesbo-/Homo-phobia: A History of LGBTQ exhibitions in the U.S.*, in *On Curating*, Issue 37, May 2018.

Thomsen, C. (2016). *In Plain(s) Sight: Rural LGBTQ Women and the Politics of Visibility*, in Gray, M.L., Johnson, C.R. & Gilley, B.J., (ed.), *Queering the countryside: new frontiers in rural queer studies*. New York, New York University Press.