

I Still Hate New Year's Day

Ryan Conrad

Watching as teenage Simon masturbates to completion while hidden away in the upper branches of a large tree on his family's dairy farm in the opening scene of Quebecois filmmaker Guy Édoin's *Marécages* (2011) makes my heart race with familiarity. I reflect melancholically on this vignette I know all too well, followed by the harsh depictions of small town life: the economic precarity, unforgiving manual labor, and a burgeoning queer sexual desire with few places to go—all told in a way that only a person who lived it could. The stereotypes of rurality and queerness, best exemplified in Montréal filmmaker Xavier Dolan's reprise of *Tom à la ferme* (2013) where viewers are treated to depictions of conversely idyllic and grotesquely violent queer country life, are conspicuously absent in Édoin's film. I watched *Marécages* shortly after I moved to Montréal to begin a PhD at twenty-eight, living in a city for the first time in my life. I was depressed, questioning my life decisions, feeling suffocated between the demands of grad school and a disastrous end to a long-term relationship, as well as adapting to the callousness and anonymity of big city life. Yet what became increasingly clear over the coming years was that my desperate search for a connection to queer history and representations of queer life that reflected my own, only led me to urban enclaves and narratives that were deeply unrelatable.

I resented having to leave Maine to pursue the kind of education I wanted. I resented that all queer history inevitably led me to New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, or some other major urban center in the United States far from home. 2010's "It Gets Better" was the apotheosis of the urban-centric narratives I grew up with—just get thee to the city and everything will be better, excise your past. I had so few opportunities to learn about where I came from, local nonurban queer histories, while the mythology of Stonewall always

loomed in the background as the most significant historical referent to my own queer life. So in search of a queer past I made the pilgrimage from central Maine to New York City a few times. All I found was a decidedly unremarkable bar and a small triangle-shaped park with an equally unremarkable set of statues to mark a past I yearned to be connected to, but mostly felt alienated from.

Gay Pride, the annual celebration of the Stonewall Riots turned orgy of pink consumerism and virtue signaling opportunity for straight politicians and “allies” alike, is sometimes colloquially referred to as gay Christmas but functions more like gay New Year’s—a party with no politics marking another year passed. The ritual has been exported globally through U.S. cultural imperialism and international NGO-ification of nascent queer and trans groups outside the so-called West. Indeed, it’s baffling that hosting gay pride in the spirit of Stonewall and gay marriage legislation are now the litmus test of modernity in places where neither translate as useful tools for liberation and self-determination of sexual minorities. I am indebted to Dennis Altman’s early work outlining the globalization of the Western epistemologies and definitions inherent to gay rights discourse, but I see similar opportunities to interrogate how queer urban epistemologies envelope and render invisible the possibilities of nonurban queer life.¹ The nonurban queer is simply an urban queer-in-waiting, waiting to leave what can only be conceived of as violent, backward, and small-minded places.

You would be hard pressed to find much record of the time the Lesbian Avengers came to my hometown from New York City in 1993 to “help” with a sexual orientation-inclusive nondiscrimination referendum only to be literally locked in a room by local dykes who found their condescending urban arrogance unpalatable and damaging to the local organizing efforts. There’s no scholarship, aside from my own, on the ten sexual orientation-inclusive nondiscrimination referenda in Maine between 1992 and 2005.² No one marks the anniversary of Scott Croteau’s disappearance and gruesome suicide in 1995. No one has mapped the network of back-to-the-land lesbian homesteads in Down East Maine that have been there since at least the 1970s. No one has written about the bilingual, binational *Northern Lambda Nord* newsletter that was published regularly between 1980 and 1999, and served Acadian and indigenous queers living in northern Maine, eastern Quebec, and western New Brunswick. No one has documented the work and history of the Maine Rural Network, active between 1994 and 2002, which sought to foster community and amplify the political power of nonurban queers across the state. And still, no one defends the men who continue to be periodically arrested for indecency while cruising the truck stop off the rural highway just outside my hometown because they aren’t proper queer subjects that identify as gay, don’t necessarily have a strong interest in liberal gay

politics, or participate in urban gay cultural events like Gay Pride. Somehow the mythical history of the Stonewall riots takes precedence despite recent correctives by scholars like Mary Gray, Brian Gilley, Colin Johnson, Scott Herring, and me, among a handful of others.

I am no foolish anti-urbanist to think these locally specific events in the sparsely inhabited, racially homogenous northeast corner of the United States hold the same significance as the Stonewall riots, nor am I unaware of the structural forces driving queer and trans people to abandoned places of origin for the safety and allure of big city life. But Gay Pride is a queer Gramsci's New Year's Day.³ A compulsorily celebration "so invasive and fossilising that we sometimes catch ourselves thinking that"⁴ queer life began in New York City in 1969. "So the date becomes an obstacle, a parapet that stops us from seeing that history continues to unfold along the same fundamental unchanging line, without abrupt stops, like when at the cinema the film rips and there is an interval of dazzling light."⁵ The Stonewall Riots may have lit a fire that produced the conditions for sweeping social and legal changes in the coming decades, but those social and legal changes are uneven in their applicability across time and space. Somehow, we have coauthored such a bellicose origin story for a people in search of a history that we can no longer see the hyperlocal specificity and limitations of such a story—if we can even see the story from the corporate pride spectacles that denigrates our history and identities.

In honoring local specificity, and my transition to a different geopolitical reality north of the forty-fifth parallel nearly a decade ago, I have been concentrating on an entirely different fiftieth anniversary this year. The 1969 Criminal Code reform passed by the current prime minister's father, Pierre Trudeau, decriminalized certain homosexual acts under certain circumstances—only between two adults, both over the age of 21, and performed in private. This anniversary of a very limited set of legal reforms has already been embraced by Pride Toronto and Capital Pride who have made "50 years of decriminalization of homosexuality" their annual pride theme, obscuring a much messier and less-worth-celebrating history of continued discrimination, pathologization, incarceration, violence, and death. For those of us living within the Canadian state, the mythology of the 1969 Criminal Code reform and its celebratory uptake by liberal gays is more pernicious than the mythology of Stonewall. The celebrations in the works for queers in Canada this year mislead us from the realities of the 1969 Criminal Code reform, after which the prosecutions for queer sex actually increased as my colleagues Tom Hooper, Gary Kinsman, and Karen Pearlston have pointed out.⁶ Indeed, Canada's so-called "Stonewall" takes place twelve years later during the Operation Soap bathhouse raids in Toronto where more than 300 gay men were arrested in a single night.⁷ The efforts to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary

of the 1969 Criminal Code reform includes things like a sixty-minute documentary film and travelling ten-city exhibition funded by the Canadian Government and created by Egale (Canada's equivalent of the HRC) entitled "Legalizing Love: The Road to June 27, 1969," as well as a hideously designed Mel Odom-knockoff commemorative \$1 and \$10 collector coins produced and circulated by the Canadian Mint.

Pierre Trudeau's Criminal Code reform is being glorified by the current Liberal Party government, lead by Justin Trudeau, Pierre's son. Although Americans fawn over Justin Trudeau's looks and comparatively liberal policies, I see a rich kid following in his father's footsteps, actively creating a legacy out of his father's so-called Just Society, particularly in light of the younger Trudeau's current omnibus Criminal Code reform bill (C-75) that is winding its way through the senate in early 2019. C-75's reforms, like that of the 1969 reform, were quite meager in its original form. The initial version of C-75 merely repealed prohibitions on anal intercourse, but was later amended to be more expansive after unrelenting pressure from activists, particularly a gay and lesbian historians group.⁸ This group, and the organizers of the subsequent "Anti-69: Against the Mythologies of the 1969 Criminal Code Reform" symposium at Carleton University in Ottawa in March 2019, have been leading the effort to demystify the misrepresentation of historical facts by both the federal government and the LGBTQ NGO sector. In this case we can see that the vociferous demand for a complex historical understanding of the queer past can be an opportunity to ameliorate historic injustices rather than obscure them.

Although the efforts of the Canadian government to commemorate and mythologize the 1969 Criminal Code reform are an obvious example of pink-washing and bizarre state multiculturalism amplified through corporate LGBTQ NGOs, the mythologies of Stonewall are less obviously troubling—especially to the city queer. The questions remain: How do we honor our shared histories in all their uneven, complex, and messy facets, especially when they are unsympathetic or contradictory? How do we fight for regional specificity and against universalizing narratives of linear progress and supposedly shared victories? How do we celebrate our (s)heros without beatifying them? Of course there are many people (including myself) and collective projects working through these challenging questions, but so often such work is lost in the totalizing shuffle of grand narratives and annual celebratory mandates. Perhaps it's time to abandon queer New Year's and annual pride pilgrimages in search of other, more local histories to celebrate, grieve, and commemorate on our own terms.

NOTES

1. Dennis Altman, "Global Gaze/Global Gays," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 417–36.
2. Ryan Conrad, "Reinvigorating the Queer Political Imagination: Affect, Archives, and Anti-Normativity" (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2017).
3. Antonio Gramsci, "I Hate New Year's Day," *Avanti!* Turin edition, January 1, 1916, trans. Alberto Toscano, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/01/01/i-hate-new-years-day/>.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Tom Hooper, Gary Kinsman, and Karen Pearlston, "Anti-69 FAQ," *Anti69 (Anti-69 Against the Mythologies of the 1969 Criminal Code Reform*, February 14, 2019), <https://anti-69.ca/faq/#3>.
7. For more on Operation Soap, see Tom Hooper, "'Enough Is Enough': The Right to Privacy Committee and Bathhouse Raids in Toronto, 1978–83" (PhD diss., York University, 2016).
8. Patrizia Genile, Tom Hooper, Gary Kinsman, and Steven Maynard, "Another Limited Bill: Gay and Lesbian Historians on C-75," Brief submitted to House of Commons, June 11, 2018, <http://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/JUST/Brief/BR10002313/br-external/HooperTom-e.pdf>.

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