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# Is this a good place to live? A queer narrative hermeneutics of geographies, homes, and bodies

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Is this a good place to live?

A queer narrative hermeneutics of geographies, homes, and bodies

by

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A THESIS

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation asks a phenomenological question about the experiences of queer-identifying people, applying a narrative hermeneutic approach to interpret those experiences. This dissertation asks: How do queer people experience what it is like to live in Fort McMurray, Alberta in their homes and in their bodies? Through an embodied epistemology, narrative hermeneutic methodology, and queer theory, this dissertation queries into if Fort McMurray is a good place to live for queer people. Data collected from three collective interviews, and one final individual interview with three participants, provided new knowledge and understandings into how queer people in the northern Canadian urban service area of Fort McMurray learn to work and live in and across three nested systems – geography, home, and body.

**Keywords:** Queer; narrative hermeneutics; Alberta; embodied epistemology; queer theory; Fort McMurray.

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### On orientation

A queer phenomenology would involve an orientation toward queer, a way of inhabiting the world by giving ‘support’ to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 179)

When I first started conducting this research, I read *a lot*. Maybe that can be assumed, a doctoral dissertation does, after all, need the support of academic texts, scholarly findings, and theoretical musings. And while I did read those, I also obsessively read non-academic texts—in part to give my brain a break from my research, and another in the hopes that I could find glimpses of myself and what I hoped to achieve in my dissertation from them. I kept picking up books about people’s connection to a particular geography. From family connections, to love stories, to horror and curiosity, I could not stop reading about how other people were relating to the world around them. I kept picking up these books because they allowed me to dig into different perspectives on geographies, homes, and bodies.

While I was writing my research proposal and preparing for candidacy, the world began to open again as COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. More people were going out and connecting face to face and it was exciting and terrifying all at once. A lot about my own life had changed since the pandemic began. Close friendships disintegrated, I became more introverted, and I spent more time outside experiencing and being in nature than I had in a very long time. This isolation, though lonely, allowed me to read and think about the connections between geography, our homes, and our bodies – all themes that I had been reading in different types of literature. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how much each of these things were interconnected. From the long amounts of time that we all spent in our homes, to the geographic distance between our family and friends that we may have felt more intensely because travel was restricted, to the very

real fear of our bodies coming under attack from a highly spreadable virus. I spent nearly two years isolated by myself in a small apartment—until I adopted my little rescue terrier dog, El. In the pandemic years, I became acutely aware of my body in relation to my home, and to where I was geographically located. These three things, geography, home, and bodies became what I call “nested systems”. Within the nested systems, all our embodied existence intersects, overlaps, and is impacted. A system is a relational and complex bond that is part of a whole, larger community, and geography, home, and bodies are three systems which are nested within each other. These systems are vast networks of different experiences, and these experiences constitute our lives. I speculated that queer people’s lived experiences with these nested systems must be unique, and therefore important.

On a walk to my local neighbourhood bookstore with El, I wondered why I was so drawn to understand Fort McMurray through a lens of queerness. For eighteen years, Fort McMurray was my home, but I certainly never got to be queer there growing up. I lived there with my mom; my parents divorced when I was young. On school breaks I would travel to my dad’s house. Reflecting on my experience as a child, I now see that I was oriented towards a particular way of living in one place, and then thrust into a state of disorientation when I traversed to the other. In moving between the two, I experienced two very different worlds. I have extremely visceral feelings, memories, and experiences in, and with, both places that I grew up in because of this division in my life. Urban vs. rural, west vs. east, north vs. south, religious vs. not, queer vs. straight. I have always been a connector between two worlds, a little ethnographer, charting paths and examining connections between places—both the temporal and physical. It was reflecting on this experience of navigating the two places that brought me to my dissertation. I wanted to, and perhaps needed to, revisit Fort McMurray through a queer orientation and ask

queer people if they thought it was a good place to live, to attempt to understand the ways that queer people have learned to live there.

Arriving at the bookstore, my dog raced to the counter, waiting for treats from the bookseller. She tossed a treat on the ground for El, giving her a quick scratch under her fuzzy chin, and pulled out my reserved copy of *A Minor Chorus* (Belcourt, 2023) from the desk. Book in hand, I made my way back home to spend the afternoon reading, thoughts of my childhood swirling around my head. Immediately, Belcourt (2023) describes being drawn back to northern Alberta. I was elated to have found another person who was feeling similarly to me. In the first chapter, Belcourt writes about being in his PhD program. Feeling burnt out and disillusioned by academia, he decided to return to his northern home of Driftpile Cree Nation. Driftpile Cree Nation is located five-hundred and two kilometres west of Fort McMurray, which is around a five-hour drive in good weather.

“Finally!” I thought. Here was someone who, despite all our differences in identities—he a gay, Indigenous man, and I, a White, queer woman—was also being pulled to where he was born to do research. The loneliness that had become a constant backdrop in my life eased as I read his words. Belcourt (2023) writes:

It occurred to me that I wanted to examine how we live under conditions of duress, both visible and invisible...my informants would all come from the same place: the town in which I was raised, in a region heretofore unexplored in Canadian letters... I would drive into town with graffitied fists and make art that would matter. (p. 32)

His words resonated. The longing to make sense of how we, as queer people, learn how to live in northern Alberta resonated deep within me as well. He goes on, writing:



Rural Alberta was where I'd reacquaint myself with the preciousness and wildness of life.

In talking to those who came from where I came from, I also hoped light would be shed on the person I was, or the person I might become. (p. 33)

Reading his book was a validation that I did not know I needed. There was someone else (a queer person at that!) in the world who felt compelled to return to the northern community where they grew up. I wondered, sitting on my couch with El curled up beside me, sleepy from our walk, why we as queer people are drawn to the spaces and places that people have said queer people do not and cannot exist.

Considering geography through a queer orientation, I was reminded of Clare's writing and the first time that I read his book *Exile and Pride* (1999). I read it around five years ago after I was feeling brave enough to walk into a bookstore and pick up a book that so loudly screamed "this is gay!" His writing beautifully interconnected gender, disability, and queerness alongside place. As I re-read the book, noting old highlights I had made, I remembered that I had a document on my computer filled with book notes, a habit I picked up during my undergraduate degree. I opened the file, finding my notes from the first time I read his work:

How can I address the complicated politics of living and growing up in Fort McMurray? Racism, misogyny, and homophobia is so rooted in Fort McMurray, but Clare has me thinking about all the nuances of the community in which I still call home. I think of my queer friends who are oil sands workers, who show up for me in times of need, but work a job that harms the earth. I think a failing of humans is that we fail to see each other complexly. How do I proceed in research and, well life in general, recognizing the multiplicity of all of us?

Years ago, I was thinking about research in Fort McMurray, well before I ever conceptualized this dissertation. The complexity of living and having a good life as a queer person within Fort McMurray has constantly been present in my mind. These seemingly incommensurable experiences have shaped how I come to think about queer bodies and how they learn to live in different geographies and homes. Clare (1999) deals with the multiplicity of being a queer person who, like my participants, lives in an industry town where anonymity is not a given, and where heteronormativity runs rampant. His book discussed how he came to learn and reconcile how to exist as a queer person in a rural area. It was reading non-fiction works such as Belcourt (2023) and Clare (1999) that helped me understand how deeply personal the connections people have with their geographies, homes, and bodies, and how embodied our experiences are.

As an educator, I have always been interested in learning that occurs outside of the classroom. This dissertation in educational research is about how queer people living in Fort McMurray learn to live and work in and across three nested systems: geography, home, and body. How are queer people negotiating, orienting, recognizing, and reconciling their experiences and, ultimately, learning? How does queerness involve a different kind of learning? How do we learn to be in our bodies? In our homes? In our geographies? Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology* informs this dissertation, providing space to examine how we are all oriented within space in vastly different and incredibly similar ways, questioning how queer people are oriented in their geographies, bodies, and homes. I spent the last two and a half years thinking more deeply about my hometown of Fort McMurray than I ever have before, including during the eighteen years that I spent living there. The questions shared above, alongside my own

personal feelings, and experiences are what I have brought to this study of queer people in Fort McMurray.

My doctorate was lonelier than I ever could have expected, not just because most of it was spent alone in my living room in Calgary, Alberta in a global pandemic (though that *was* a major factor). I was lonely because I had a deep unsettling feeling that I needed to think and write about Fort McMurray, a place that I loved and continue to love, but that I never found really loved me back. Fort McMurray rattled around in my brain, and consumed most of my thoughts, and I knew I had to do my research there. I knew that I had to research queerness in Fort McMurray, half for me, a queer person who never really felt comfortable being myself while living there, and half because no one else had. There is not one academic article, or historical record in or about Fort McMurray that mentions queerness or focuses on queer people. When I realized that (sitting in my living room with a stack of books on one side of me and my dog on the other) the pang of loneliness reverberated through my chest. I knew that I had the opportunity of time, resources, and many wonderful people to provide me with knowledge and feedback; this was maybe the only time I would have in my life to do such kind of work. I felt like this research could be something I could do to both ease the loneliness and, more importantly, spend time thinking and writing about queerness in Fort McMurray so that my participants and I could provide people more complex insights into the place so many people deeply love and call home. Although I cannot ever capture the complexity of being queer in *any* place, this was not my goal to begin with. Some of the loneliness that I have experienced as a queer researcher has been eased by the task of interpreting and understanding queerness within the three nested systems partly because, just as the three nested systems are not isolated or fixed

and are always a part of each other, I too, am not isolated or static. The nested systems will never be studied in their entirety, nor will they be understood in a finite way.

It is through narrative hermeneutics that I enter my quiet investigation into the lives of four people and our interpretations and experiences in a geographical location that many people have heard of, but not a lot of people have witnessed. This dissertation follows my journey of thinking and feeling through many years of doctoral work, personal growth, and even a revisiting of a childhood as a queer adult. Sumara (1994) writes:

This text is not a location in itself. It merely *announces* a location—a commonplace in which writer, reader, and text are *gathered up* into something we call reading. And if these events of reading are to be at all successful, there must be generated some *understanding* that did not exist before the reading. (p. 7)

My research question came from the curiosity surrounding the question, “is this a good place to live” which opened possibilities of different kinds of understandings. My research question remains open to my participants' interpretation of the questions I ask and, in each step, my participants are the people primarily guiding the conversations, allowing for possibility. I did not set out to ask questions to find conclusive or definite answers, which are not possible within narrative hermeneutics but, rather, I strived to engage in a conversation and keep the conversation going (Moules et al., 2015). Bruner (1987) writes, “life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (p. 31). Green (2021) observes:

I don’t believe we have a choice to whether we endow the world with meaning... we will build meaning wherever we go, with whatever we come across. But to me, while making meaning isn’t a choice, the kind of meaning can be. (p. 221)

I hope that in reading this dissertation, we can come to an understanding of “is this a good place to live?” that leaves us more curious and engaged and less lonely than before.

I have organized this dissertation differently than traditional paper formats. It may feel disorienting to read, navigating where the crucial information relevant to my research is contained. However, to understand the nested systems we must first become disoriented. Queer, as McCallum and Bradway (2019) write,

Marks an opportunity for reinterpretation. In this sense, queer is not an identity, a thing, or an entity but an *activity*... insofar as queer is a mode of thinking, it is a mode of thinking sideways, of turning around a question in unexpected ways. (p. 3)

In reading this dissertation, I am asking you to read queerly in order to become a queer reader, engaging with the words as an activity. As an activity, reading queerly requires questioning the well-trodden path that we are socialized to walk upon (Ahmed, 2006) to understand the process of learning how to live in a particular geography as a queer person. To read queerly is to be oriented towards queerness as a way of supporting and understanding those “whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 179).

In this section, I have provided my personal history that led me to my research question and how various authors, who have written in an embodied way about their geographies and homes, helped me understand how I was oriented between two places in my childhood. In the next section, I move into a discussion of narrative hermeneutics, my dissertation methodology, and how this approach guided me throughout the entirety of the research process.

### **On narrative hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics originated in biblical analysis and was a theoretical framework developed to govern and direct religious practice. In the mid 1700s, it shifted beyond religion to develop into a more expansive theoretical approach that would provide the basis for interpretive practices. Hermeneutics became seen as a practice that related discourse and understanding to each other. In the 1800s, it was understood as a way of better understanding our surroundings. In the twentieth century, scholars such as Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Heidegger emerged as some of the leading philosophers building on the traditions of hermeneutics. Within this section, I discuss hermeneutics through Heidegger and Gadamer, and expand on narrative hermeneutics through the writing of Meretoja.

Kinsella (2006) notes on Gadamer's approach that he believed that the task of hermeneutics is not to have a set procedure of understanding but, rather, to clarify "the interpretive conditions in which understanding takes place" (p. 3). I came to understand that there would be no 'rulebook' or a set list of steps for me to follow while conducting this research. My hermeneutic inquiry would be open-ended, focusing on the question, rather than coming to any definite conclusions. When I developed my research question, I designed it to be intentionally open-ended, following Gadamer's philosophies on hermeneutics, placing emphasis on the importance of the research and narrative process. A hermeneutic inquiry begins with an urgent experience that the researcher finds important and worthy of attention. While my research question may not seem 'urgent' outright, upon reflection, it is a culmination of my entire life that leads up to this question. It is in fact, urgent, because it is important. It is important not only to me, but to queer people, queer history, and to broaden and expand queer theory and narrative hermeneutics.

As this is a dissertation that enquires into how queer people have learned to live in and across the three nested systems, I knew that in entering this hermeneutic inquiry, much of the focus would be on previous lived experiences. What stood out initially, as I developed my dissertation, was the importance of valuing these lived experiences of my participants and myself, which I knew could potentially date back from childhood (and even earlier) up to the very minute of the present. In Gadamer's (1960) *Truth and Method*, he explains the way in which our current reality and our present consciousness is affected by our historical past. All our understanding about who we are, how we come to know and understand all the tiny and large moments in our lives, occurs through our histories. For Gadamer, this means that all the traditions of the past, all the events that are larger than we are as individuals, pre-conditions and affects our present consciousness. In the simplest of phrases: we are always situated in history.

Heidegger (1966) noted that human existence is structured and oriented by "pre-structures". Gadamer (1960) expands on this, describing pre-structures as prejudices, because they concern more than the individual situations in our lives and are shaped by the larger context of historically inherited meanings. These historically inherited meanings will always impact how we come to understand something new. Gadamer (1960) maintains that these "pre-structures" or prejudices have implications on our interpretations, because it is impossible to become completely self-aware of how the prejudices operate in our attempts at new understandings. It is in being aware that these external and internal prejudices exist, though, that we must engage with hermeneutics. Hermeneutics emphasizes this historical contextualization, because our histories are filters, "pre-structures", through which we are oriented in the world. The core of understanding in hermeneutic inquiry is through the mediation of past and present events. The sharing of these events is where new forms of understanding can emerge. Gadamer also (1997)

noted that to understand the meaning of something that another shares, we must not attach our own meanings but, rather, remain open to the meanings that are held by the other person. By this, he asserts that we do not abandon our own interpretations or pre-judgements, as noted above, but rather that they are important in the process of interpretation and cannot be disposed of. I have come to understand that, as a researcher, it is essential to be aware of my own orientations alongside those of the participants. Our histories and our experiences shape our orientations but, through sharing them to and with one another, new understandings can emerge.

Moving forward, I discuss the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is a concept that encourages us to understand what we are reading, and how during this reading, are interpreting the text through social and historical contexts. The hermeneutic circle was conceptualized by Heidegger and refers to the idea that our understandings of an entire text are reliant on understanding each individual part—and how that part refers to the whole. For Heidegger, the circle captures the interaction between an interpreter and a text. The circle explains that people interpret things by going from specific to general and back again. As a reader of the dissertation, you are part of engaging in a new hermeneutic circle, where you will first read through the dissertation, forming an initial understanding of my writing and interpretations. As you keep reading through, getting deeper into my interpretations, and being provided with new information, you will re-evaluate your initial understanding. Maybe this will happen on one of your dog walks, like so many re-evaluations and new understandings of mine occurred. With this new knowledge, new understandings will emerge, changing your beliefs, prejudgements, and expectations about the text. In turn, the new context will inform how you interpret the text.



As the author of this dissertation, I engaged in the hermeneutic circle through first asking a question, “is this a good place to live?” I knew this question would not have a concrete final answer but, rather, would give space for new understandings to emerge. I set out, through various research methods that I will explain in more detail further on in this dissertation, to ask other people about my question to understand how they have learned to live in and across the nested systems. Provided with new information from my participants, I sat down and reread the new knowledge, going back and forth between reading, gaining new understandings, interpreting the narratives shared with me, and returning to the scholars and texts that are cited throughout this dissertation. This iterative, circular, interpretive process, allowed for new understandings to emerge, and ultimately guided me to new knowledge that is shared within these pages. The hermeneutic circle began from the first moment I began thinking and working on this dissertation. Throughout the entirety of this research, I would engage in the circle in a variety of ways. As only one example, while working on this dissertation, I would write a paragraph or two on a particular interpretation of a moment or moments that stood out to me from the interviews that I conducted. I would then return to the literature, my previous writing, and even take a walk with my dog to reflect before moving on to the next paragraph or section. Each element of this dissertation, because of the hermeneutic circle, allowed for new understandings to emerge, grow, and develop.

What does it mean to engage with the hermeneutic circle within narrative hermeneutics? How does interpretation and knowledge generation come to be? It was during the time that I was reading through Gadamer’s philosophies that I also read Meretoja’s (2017) writing on narrative hermeneutics as a research methodology. For Meretoja (2017), narrative is a culturally mediated practice of sense-making that involves interpreting and presenting someone’s specific

experiences to someone else as part of a meaningful, connected account. This account is dialogical and productive and is relevant for understanding past, present, and/or future human possibilities. The narratives shared within this dissertation provide us with, as Meretoja (2017) writes, “new perspectives on our own world and on how we orient ourselves to our present and future possibilities” (p. 8).

The interpretations that occur in the practice of sense-making occur primarily through narrative, and interpretation is constantly ongoing. We are oriented in different ways in the world through our various life histories, perceptions, memories, attachments, fantasies, and actions. We are also oriented alongside the historical, cultural, political, geographical, and social (Sumara et al., 2022). Together, these orientations are the beginning of how we interpret and understand the world. The narrative hermeneutic process requires paying attention to the ways stories are influenced by history and culture, which includes the lived situations of the people doing the interpretation. My starting point for this hermeneutic approach was my orientation to Fort McMurray, and my previous experience in queer educational research.

Meretoja (2017) notes that we do not only interpret our narratives, but that the narratives themselves are interpretations. As people who share our experiences with others, we do not just report what happened, rather, we provide an interpretation of how the events were experienced. I came to understand that we engage in narrative interpretation when we narrativize our experiences to others, and when we engage with the narratives that are surrounding us. The process of interpretation, Meretoja (2017) discusses, is a process of “(re)orientation to the world, a mode of sense-making, engagement, and attachment, in which the cognitive and the affective are irreducibly intertwined” (p. 4). In other words, hermeneutic interpretation of narratives helps us understand the world around us in more complex, embodied ways, and can provide new

perspectives “on our own world and on how we orient ourselves to our present and future possibilities” (Meretoja, 2017, p. 8). Meretoja’s (2017) emphasis that interpretation characterizes our whole being in the world is incredibly important. She writes that it is the “basic structure of experience, narrative, and memory” (p. 3). In hindsight, engaging with narrative hermeneutics for my research was important because this study could not have possibly encompassed a singular truth about queer lives in Fort McMurray. Rather, this study was possible because of the personal orientations my participants brought to the study, a deep investigation into the interpretations that they brought towards the stories they shared, followed by my own interpretations. As Meretoja (2017) notes, our lives are narratively mediated. We do not follow the plot of one story. Instead, we are messy, intertwined, complex people. Narrative hermeneutics allows us to engage in an endless and open-ended process as we continuously reinterpret and renarrate our past experiences. This dissertation connects the parts (the stories shared by my participants) to the whole (understanding how queer people have learned to live in and across the nested systems).

In this section, I outlined narrative hermeneutics as my research methodology, beginning with the history of hermeneutics, moved into a discussion of Heidegger and Gadamer’s (1997) writings on hermeneutics, and finished with an outline of narrative hermeneutics as informed by Meretoja (2017). In the next section, I will discuss how I came to understand and employ hermeneutic interpretations within the dissertation process through what I have called ‘hermeneutic holds’, inspired by my hobby of rock climbing.

### **On hermeneutic holds**

I am a novice rock climber, something that I was introduced to by living in Calgary, as there were not many opportunities to climb in Fort McMurray. Rock climbing, alongside dog

walking, became highly important to me during this writing and researching process by connecting my mind and body, allowing me to think in a more embodied way. So much was going on in my head, and these activities were a chance to feel my body move and allow my mind another avenue to rest and explore. When rock climbing, climbers search for what are called holds. Finding these holds are the difference between falling off the wall or sending (completing) the route. A hold is something you look for to grab on and grasp for in your journey up the wall. They can be tiny cracks that barely fit a finger, or large platforms where your feet can carefully rest. Each route up a wall becomes more difficult or less difficult depending on the holds that are available.

After a climbing session one day, I noted the similarities between rock climbing and narrative hermeneutic interpretations. When a climber is looking for a hold while rock climbing, they are engaging in a process of searching and learning. Much like the hermeneutic interpretive process, both tasks involve taking a risk, reaching into the unknown, and attempting to follow an unknown route to gain more knowledge or deeper understanding. I imagine holds as the interpretations that I have made following the hermeneutic interpretation process. These holds are small or large spaces in which new knowledge has the capacity to be generated, interpreted, understood, and expanded upon. I imagine these hermeneutic holds as the tiny spaces on the rock face, small openings for my fingers or toes to grasp for or cling on to. These hermeneutic holds are adapted and influenced from what Sumara (1994) calls hermeneutic windows. He describes these windows as images that help us understand and see what we have not previously been able to see, or not willing to see (p. 76). The hermeneutic windows are sites for new understandings. Much like a rock-climbing route, hermeneutic windows (Sumara, 1994) require us to see

moments that may not be obvious, that might be more or less important depending on our bodies and orientations, requiring different types of interpretation.

Discovering and understanding the holds was done through two different ways. The first, which was shared with me by my supervisor, is from Robson (2020). She discusses the process of remembering, recognizing, revising, and representing as part of queer re-storying. From this writing I understood that, in narrative hermeneutic interpretation, I needed to look more deeply into the narratives to uncover what I had previously overlooked—how people remember, recognize, revise, and represent their stories within the interview transcriptions. I needed to not only see the surface of the interviews with my participants, but understand the process of *how* people tell stories, and how that influences the narratives that we are told. Another approach, following Chambers' (1989) hermeneutic interpretation process, was identifying sub-themes within each of the holds. Chambers (1989) writes that “themes are powerful when they enable researchers to disclose the essential elements of the conversation between themselves and the text.” Chambers (1989), citing van Manen (1984), warns that themes do not fully capture what has been disclosed within the interviews, but rather “only serves to point at, to allude to, or to hint at” (p. 59) some aspects within the texts. Within each hold, I write on a variety of sub-themes, discussing the interpretations in closer detail. Together, through hermeneutic interpretation, I found the various holds, which consist of the findings within this research.

There are five hermeneutic holds in this dissertation, which are titled: on where my dad works, on outcasts in the outcast, on hiding in plain sight, on when the worst thing is also the best thing, and on being as queer as possible under the circumstances. These hermeneutic holds provide insights into how queer people in Fort McMurray have learned to work and live in and

across three nested systems—five footholds or finger crimps of knowledge from which I have learned.

Moving forward into the next section, I discuss the process of embodied learning, and how an embodied epistemology is connected to both narrative hermeneutics and the hermeneutic holds.

### **On embodied learning**

Through the different books I read throughout the time I spent researching and writing this dissertation, I realized just how embodied so many of the narratives were. The authors whose works I was reading were continuously and uniquely connecting their experiences to their bodies and to the land. While within this section I discuss what an embodied epistemology entails, I first need to note that the previous section, the hermeneutic holds, was a demonstration how an embodied epistemology became central in my own life during the process. Dog walking and rock climbing connected my mind and my body in an unexpected way, which made this dissertation possible.

Embodied epistemology stems from the notions and studies of embodied knowledge and/or embodied ways of knowing and is frequently cited as being derived from the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, some scholars have pushed against this claim, citing Indigenous embodied knowledges that far predate Merleau-Ponty's theories (Arbon, 2007; Grim, 2009). Tanaka (2011), writing on Merleau-Ponty's philosophies, states that embodied knowledge is "knowledge in the hands" (p. 149) where we first understand the world through the body. For example, we can talk, eat, and walk, because our bodies just know how to act or respond to our environments. This knowledge is embodied.

I am reminded of Whitehead's (2022) *Making Love with the Land*, where he writes of his hometown:

Tonight, when I think of Gimli, here at 3 a.m. in my bed, thinking of the pub where nîcimos and I went on that day I took him there, the Ship and Plough with its rainbow flag tacked squarely into a corner. We sat, both a sweaty mess, and ordered a round of beer and raised our glasses in a silent but loving way. Beside us sat a group of men... discussing transgender peoples and mocking Caitlyn Jenner. Funny how quickly a reprieve can be stolen right out from under you. But we knew how to perform the pageant of passing, knew how to move our bodies, how to cough correctly, how to fold the arms, how to breathe, how to inflect the voice and laugh, how to look at one another. We spoke like telepaths, both knowing the other's body could betray itself in a small gesture and inform on the other – body like a code, knuckles wrapping taps. (p. 18)

This paragraph of writing demonstrates so much that is relevant to this dissertation. The memories of home, the threat to queerness, the comradery and protectiveness of queer people, and the way in which we feel in our bodies our different experiences. Most importantly, this paragraph highlights how queer people have learned to live—how our bodies fill and/or contrast in spaces. How spaces can at one moment be joyful and happy, and in the other, unsafe. How embodied the experiences we have as queer people are, down to the very way we breathe. An embodied epistemology emphasizes these very visceral experiences and are crucial for understanding queer experiences within the nested systems. Whitehead shares in a podcast interview that when he is writing how he feels, “the body becomes kind of the central focus all the time... because bodies are a story too, really” (Weird Era, 2023, n. p.). He (Whitehead, 2022) writes:

When I speak of bodies, I open this noun's meaning into its playgrounds, the language of poetics, through which we may also say stories, all existing within and upon the noun's flayed innards: our bodies, bodies of land, water, literature, community. (p. 88)

Whitehead's writing moves us beyond Merleau-Ponty's scholarship. Similarly, scholars have engaged in a field of study surrounding embodied queer epistemologies (Barbour, 2018; Browne & Nash, 2016; Haber, 2016; Sodhi & Cohen, 2012). This epistemological perspective challenges hegemony and heteronormativity and views the body as a point of departure—a platform from where to speak. The body is not only a body, but a political statement, a way of being. Further, an embodied queer epistemology considers how I, as a researcher, come to know and learn about queerness, and how I evaluate and process this information in relation to myself. Central to embodied queer epistemology is challenging that there is a neutral, 'normal' way of understanding the world. This understanding has privileged the understandings and voices of primarily white, cisgender, straight men. Scholars Sodhi and Cohen (2012) argue that “these primarily Western viewpoints, trivialize gender knowledge by valuing the rational, male perspective and marginalizing the ‘feeling’ side of knowing, generally associated with women.” (p. 121). The trivialization of embodied queer epistemologies has been consistent throughout history, where the knower is separated from contexts such as emotions and culture (Sodhi & Cohen, 2012). An embodied queer epistemology is therefore important because it recognizes different knowledges as valid and connects people with all forms of knowledge that are contained in and through their bodies.

Sumara (2020) writes that “the stories that are told by those who identify with/in the queer body are not only narrated differently; they are also remembered and forgotten differently” (p. 3). Through narrative hermeneutics and embodied epistemology, queer stories can be heard,



interpreted, and processed. In my research, these everyday stories of queer people are part of the radical practice of narrative hermeneutics, are part of the radical practices of embodied queer epistemologies and do add significance to educational research at large.

Within this section, I discussed embodied epistemologies, focusing on embodied queer epistemology, as a way of emphasizing the importance of recognizing all types of knowledge that comes from the body. Within this narrative hermeneutic dissertation, embodied knowledge is part and parcel of the interpretation that occurs while sharing stories. Moving forward, I will spend time on the ethical considerations with which I engaged during the entire research process.

### **On ethical considerations**

Within this section, I grapple with the ethical considerations that are present throughout this research. My experience of Fort McMurray, like many other people, comes with a slew of juxtaposing and often contradictory emotions, thoughts, and stories. This section is a reflection on the seemingly incommensurable experiences of conducting research in Fort McMurray.

I think about an unusually warm Calgary winter day. I put on my headphones and geared my dog up for a walk, listening to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard read aloud their book, *Rehearsals for Living* (2022). Their book is about climate change, colonialism, racism, gender-based violence, and homophobia in Canada and beyond; the two scholars share their worries about how to move forward in the world. The sun beamed down on me as I walked, and I was already too warm in my winter coat. I removed a layer, tying my jacket around my waist, listening intently.

I rounded the corner, coming to where the cement meets the dirt floor of the small urban forest near my house when Maynard begins to read the first letter. Maynard writes to Betasamosake Simpson while virtually walking downtown Toronto (her letter written at the

height of COVID-19 restrictions), zooming through Google Maps on street view, looking at the buildings of corporations. She reads:

Canada plays an important role in the massive carbon unloading, and the ecological and human devastation wrought by extractive industries. These industries produce over 50 percent of the world's carbon emissions, not to mention the cataclysmic environmental devastation of the tar sands pipelines that run through more than 350 Indigenous nations in so-called Canada alone. (p. 16)

“Shit,” I say aloud, startling some birds who are resting on a small leafless shrub. “I have to write about the oil sands,” I think to myself.

I did not want to write about the oil sands. Most of the articles and studies about Fort McMurray are connected to them. I wanted to conduct this research about queer people because of the utter lack of research *not* affiliated with the oil sands. But now I understand why, and within the interpretation process of this work, that it is difficult though necessary, to talk about the place while situating it within its current and historical context, which, much to my chagrin, is the oil sands. I suppose that it is inevitable when writing and thinking about Fort McMurray to think about the oil sands. After all, as I write this, the largest toxic tailings spill in the history of Alberta is happening, destroying land and lives (Paradis, 2023). I wish I could write this dissertation about the place without referencing the economy and the extraction, but it is impossible. Stories of place and space, especially within narrative hermeneutics, need to include their contexts. This section, placed carefully at the beginning of my dissertation, is needed to provide the social, political, and historical context to understand Fort McMurray and to discuss the complexity of my hometown, which is at the heart of much of so much violence that Betasamosake Simpson and Maynard (2022) write about.

Ethical issues and considerations are present in all research methodologies (Orb et al., 2000). In qualitative research, ethical problems are subtle and highly contextual, with each study requiring examination and thought. Given the fact that I am deeply embedded within this research, and know my research participants personally, more layers of ethical considerations were considered. Completing the Tri-Council ethics, as well as the University of Calgary Institutional Review board, were important pieces of the research process, but ethical considerations did not begin and end with institutional reviews—they continued to be a part of the hermeneutic process.

Returning to my walk, I think about Maynard's virtual examination of downtown Toronto's buildings that house major corporations. Here in Calgary, where I wrote much of this dissertation, are the homes and offices of millionaires and oil executives who are not only contributors, but the main drivers of climate change and dispossession and extraction on stolen lands. I have walked along the downtown roads, seeing the brown and grey buildings where executives and CEOs make decisions that continue to harm the most vulnerable communities globally, though, as she writes, you would not be able to see it because "like the Canadian society it encapsulates, [it] keeps the violence on which it relies firmly out of view, a perfectly modern society that tidily keeps its atrocities out of plain sight" (p. 19). An apt phrase, I think, as I recall the new, shiny, modern glass buildings that have been erected in the near decade that I have lived here.

I worked as a barista at a coffee shop in one of the downtown Calgary towers, filled with investment bankers and oil sands companies. While walking and listening to the book, memories of the many conversations overheard come to the front of my mind. Particularly, those of men

who came to buy coffee and who would talk loudly about how they would never go to Fort McMurray.

“Too dirty of a place” one man with a heavy metal and black visa card said, as I processed the payment for his americano (he never added a tip).

“Heard there’s good hookers there though” another says jokingly, pushing the arm of another.

They ignore me, continuing with their conversation about the place that has brought them fortune, the place that they would never visit. Sex, dirt, and money are what people think of when they think of my hometown. It is not reflective of the place I grew up in, where I remember looking at the aurora borealis after my skating lessons, and where my mom and I would sit on our couch reading together on Sunday mornings.

“Isn’t that where you’re from?” a co-worker of mine asks quietly.

I nod half-heartedly, moving on to the next customer.

In one of my interviews, Audrey, a participant, laughs when recalling perceptions of Fort McMurray:

*That's the image in their mind, that like we're the shanty town around an open mine.*

We are used to people talking badly about the place we have all called home. Throughout the holds, my participants and I discuss the complexities of having pride and love for a place that is often ridiculed or seen as an outcast. Here though, I first think about the destruction that happens that Betasamosake Simpson and Maynard write about—how deeply the capitalist heteropatriarchy has and continues to hurt Black and Indigenous communities and individuals.

My thesis question began by asking ‘is this a good place to live?’, evolving to inquire into how queer people in Fort McMurray learn to live in and across three nested systems. However, as my participants and I are not Indigenous people to the area, this section is necessary to discuss positionality as well as the socio-historical and political context to give background to the various holds that will be discussed throughout this dissertation. It is necessary because we talk in nearly every interview about the land and our relationship to it. Our positionalities within Fort McMurray inevitably and invariably shape and influence our conversations in and across the nested systems. This, of course, brings up complexities. All of us in the interviews agree—and I do not know if this is a spoiler or, rather, a statement that needs to be written to predicate the holds—that Fort McMurray is a good place to live. This statement does not exist in a binary, and we all, throughout the interviews, recognize that the answer to the question is more complicated than a simple yes or no.

I think of relational ethics too, as I walk along the Bow River, the water rushing under a thin layer of ice. Relational ethics “calls us to live, calls us to take action with ourselves and with participants” (p. 10). Connected to an embodied queer epistemology, Clandinin et al. (2018) remind me that “ethical relations are always lived embodiments, that is, they are always composed within our bodies, carrying the knowledge shaped by experiences lived in multiple places, over time and relationships” (p. 199). In this research, relational ethics extend from between my participants and me to others.

My good friend and I were born and raised in Fort McMurray, attending the same high school. After we graduated and throughout our more than eight years of higher education together, we have often reflected together on where we came from and how we ended up where we are. While they study queer Indigenous resurgence and governance, and I focus on queer

theory and education, we both have had roundabout journeys of ending up back at our home in Fort McMurray. Both of us returned to the place where we were born to conduct our research, and I do not think it is coincidental that we both returned to our homes to study deeply personal questions. While my friend is studying missing and murdered Indigenous women in the oil sands “man-camps” (Morin, 2020), we are both trying to understand the place we grew up in more deeply and investigate the complexities of loving a place that has caused harm. We constantly have conversations about our childhoods there, and our experiences as queer people who lived in a place that caused us both to hide who we really were for so many years.

My friend (Dionne, 2019) writes in an essay:

The dispossession of land in relation to Indigenous women is part of the larger project of colonial sexual violence. This establishes the ideology that Indigenous women and girls’ bodies are inherently violable and by extension, that Indigenous lands are available for taking.” (n.p.)

How is Fort McMurray a good place to live if it continues the perpetuation of land-based violence that harms Indigenous women and girls? How are we oriented in Fort McMurray within the nested systems as queer people in relation to the oil sands economy and the dispossession of land?

Maynard (2022), in my ears, reads:

The massive destruction, gendered and murderous, of (Indigenous) human life and land dispossession the commodification, exploitation and fungibility of (Black) human life and the relentless expropriation and destruction of non-human nature are inextricably linked: a disregard for all living things except for their value as property to be accumulated. (p. 26)

As I continue walking, listening to more of Maynard and Betasamosake Simpson (2022) read, I think of Moccasin Flats. It was a predominantly Métis settlement along the southern bank of the Snye river at its confluence with the Athabasca River. For generations and generations, people would come to hunt, fish and be with their community. I think of how from 1975 to 1981 the city of Fort McMurray collaborated with Northward Developments Ltd., the housing arm of Syncrude, one of the original oil companies in the area, to evict the Métis families at Moccasin Flats to build the Syncrude Towers housing complex and a proposed marina (which was never built). They labeled Moccasin Flats residents “squatters” and the City used property law to justify their eviction and ignored their Indigenous identity, history, and rights (Joly et al., 2018). These evictions fragmented the Moccasin Flats community and disrupted people’s relationships to the land, leaving massive cultural and socio-economic impacts; it has been a source of intergenerational trauma.

I think of how I used to drive to my figure skating lessons every night for fourteen years past Moccasin Flats and never knew the true history. I think of how, in this very research project, my participants and I must drive by Moccasin Flats to get to our meeting room. I think, is Fort McMurray a good place to live for the families whose lives were impacted? Can *I* call it a good place to live for myself, if it is not good for everyone? What does it say about myself as a person if a place I love has a long and ongoing history of very intentionally hurting people? What does it mean when I listen to *Rehearsals for Living* (2022) to acknowledge the impact that the oil sands have on Black and Indigenous people, the world, and the land? Detamore (2016) writes of queer ethics and its ability to “destabilize our assumptions about the ethical in research, disrupt the researcher/researched relationship and cultivate the intimacies necessary to shape new types of alliances and strategies for alternative social worlds” (p. 170). Through narrative hermeneutics,

my participants and I discussed how we, as queer people, should live in community and how we wanted to see Fort McMurray progress and grow, change, and evolve. The ethics of discussing Fort McMurray is complicated. It is a complicated, misunderstood, violent, tender, loving, destructive place, and many ethical considerations are woven throughout this dissertation.

Within this section, I outlined the various ethical considerations and complexities that I have contended with in engaging in my dissertation research. Moving forward, the next section dives into my research methodology and methods, and the process of conducting this research with three participants in Fort McMurray.

### **On laying down a path while walking as method**

Within Calgary, I would drive to the climbing gym after a morning of work, shaking the stiffness out of my body as I attempted new routes and tackled old projects. Afterwards, I would go home and take my dog out for a long walk around my neighbourhood, often guilty that she could not come with me to the climbing gym. This all occurred within the urban environment. I followed a routine day after day with my dog walking route generally the same, the driving route to the gym memorized, and the concrete constantly underneath me. I love living in a city most days, but the days where I climbed outside or walked my dog in the mountains were extremely different experiences. Within the urban environment, I followed the same paths, walking predetermined and intentionally created routes. Ahmed (2006) describes this as walking along a “path well trodden” (p. 16). The path well trodden is created out of hundreds of feet passing through the same area repeatedly. The path then becomes a line that directs us, often in a performative, repetitious way. I walk on the path because others have walked there. If there is not path though, possibilities can arise. Outside of the well trodden path, one can break away from what is expected, reorienting to something different.



When my dog and I would enter a new, open space outside of Calgary, our path changed from walking along a well trodden path, to a path laid while walking. Never planned out, we would go wherever my dog's nose led us, something not necessarily possible within the confines of a busy city. The concept of a path laid while walking describes the process of hermeneutic interpretation and, subsequently, how this dissertation has been written. It could, and did, only happen as I moved, sometimes doubling back, sometimes going to the side, but never sticking to a grid or a linear route. I imagine Ahmed's (2006) description of existing on an axis, where our bodies, through heteronormative acts of repetition, become straight. Existing on an axis, we follow the vertical, stuck in a certain alignment (p. 92). This is what walking on the well trodden path looks like; there is no possibility for creativity or interpretation. A path laid walking, however, describes what happens when we push against the axis, orienting ourselves differently to then see the world differently.

When I first entered the interpretive process, I never could have imagined where I ended up. Through narrative hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle, I understood that I was on an extended meandering walk that resulted in knowledge generation. During the writing process, I would find a hold, write about it, and then return to it later, after finding a different path that was not clear to me at the beginning. Walking with my dog informed much of my thinking around my research methodology and methods, not only because it provided me time to think and breathe outside of the confines of my laptop that sits on my living room desk, but also because it made me aware of how hermeneutics can only be done while walking, and never on a well trodden path.

Along the path laid while walking, was my research method. My primary data collection occurred through interviews that took place both in person and over Zoom. The research

interviews were essential for understanding the unique complexities of my participants' experiences of living in Fort McMurray as queer people and allowed me to dig in more deeply to my research question with each person, both individually and collectively. Belcourt (2023) writes:

I believe every person is a repository of a community's memories...a town speaks when its people do. I want to capture that voice...even when we aren't alert to the force of history bearing down upon us, it's there all the same. Everyone from northern Alberta was a historian of it. (p. 59)

In Belcourt's own research, he interviews people in his hometown to "summon an honest emotional voice" (p. 59), and through the interview process, he wonders what people would say "if they were empowered to theorize about their happiness and misery? If the sociological imagination was available to all of us, what kinds of truth would surface?" (p. 59). The interviews I conducted in my dissertation were also aimed at this goal—to expand and open conversations that perhaps would not have been had if the space was not there.

Over the span of my dissertation research, I guided three one-hour collective interviews with my three participants. I use the term participants to describe them, noting the power dynamic that such a word can invoke. They are my friends, but calling them that felt too informal, or as if I was doing a disservice to the complexity of thought and time they brought to this study. Collaborator also did not feel like the right term to use, as within a narrative hermeneutic methodology, they did not collaborate with me throughout the interpretation, writing, revising, and revisiting process that occurred. I settled on using participant, as they 'took part' in my research through each of the interviews.

Going into each interview, I had a general theme for each one: geography, home, and body—the three nested systems. From there I asked questions that related to the theme, but generally allowed the conversation to flow naturally, giving space for my participants to guide the conversation as much as possible. Engaging in a narrative hermeneutic interview is a cooperative approach to research that allows for co-generation and sharing of knowledge between those having the conversation (Carson, 1986). These conversations are what Agrey (2014) describes as a “process of give and take between self and the other, and it is always oriented to something that requires understanding” (p. 397). Conversations allow opportunities for self-understanding as well as sharing and, in asking someone to participate in this kind of research, I asked them to be integral to my research. The questions I posited followed a hermeneutic methodology, something that I learned along this journey, where they were intentionally open-ended, and had no definite answer that could be reached. Instead, the questions I asked were meant to invite more questions.

The participants could have theoretically come from far and wide, as the path of narrative hermeneutics is laid while walking with no predetermined routes. Narrative hermeneutic practices allow for flexibility in decision-making when it comes to who, what, where, why, or when participants are recruited. There were only two criteria that I had in my mind that my potential participants needed to meet. The first is that they must identify as queer. Queer is an undefinable term (Browne & Nash, 2016) that is highly personal to each individual. However, these individuals identify outside of being cisgender and/or heterosexual. It was not required that these individuals be “out” in their lives or in the community, just that they identify themselves as queer. The second requirement for participants was that they have lived in Fort McMurray for longer than two years. There are a couple of reasons behind this decision. Because I was a

participant and would be sharing my experiences alongside others, I knew that delimiting my research to people born and raised in Fort McMurray was perhaps too specific and narrow. After all, I believe that part of the uniqueness of Fort McMurray is that most people have moved there from elsewhere. I chose two years as the minimum because I wanted to hear about the experiences of people who are not transient to the community. Fort McMurray consists of many people who fly in and fly out of the oil sands for work; however, they do not actually live in Fort McMurray. There is a misconception that Fort McMurray and the oil sands are one and the same; however, the closest oil sands camp is around forty-five minutes away. I wanted to hear from people who are living or who have lived within the city for more than a short-term contract, and not exclusively out at an oil sands camp.

With these delimitations in mind, the people who I first thought to interview were my friends. I wanted to connect with people who understood the unique complexities of Fort McMurray, and whom I could talk to in a more than superficial way. I began by writing out a list of potential friends who would meet my criteria, and who would perhaps have availability and interest in meeting with me and generously giving their time to my study. I then began the recruitment for my dissertation through personal invitations via email to each of them, providing them with an overview of the study and my expectations for them should they choose to participate. I knew that having existing connections with my participants would be crucial because we have already established trust, respect, and understanding between each other. These are all elements that are important when conducting highly personal research about queer lives. I chose three as a number for potential participants to keep the group small so conversations could flow and, as I wrote above, to dig in more deeply to my research question. After my initial email, I invited my participants to a one-on-one Zoom meeting prior to signing my informed consent

forms to have a conversation about the study and answer any questions they might have before they decided if they wanted to participate.

Once they had agreed to be a part of my research and signed the informed consent forms, we set up three collective interview dates, with at least one week in between each interview to give space for reflection before our next meeting. As I discussed above, these interviews were guided and informed by narrative hermeneutics, and were around an hour in length, each of them focusing on a specific nested system. I audio-recorded each of the interviews to allow me to be present in the conversation without worrying about capturing each sentence.

Two of the collective interviews took place in December 2023 at the Wood Buffalo Regional Library in Fort McMurray in a private meeting room. I chose this location as a neutral space that would allow for accessibility as well as privacy. There are not many free, accessible, and private spaces in Fort McMurray that are not home spaces, and the library seemed like the perfect fit to hold them. In hindsight, these collective interviews were crucial because it allowed my participants and I to have honest and open conversations about our lives in Fort McMurray as queer people. The comfort provided from pre-existing relationships with each other allowed for a space in which we could bounce off ideas and thoughts, and share our experiences together. The final collective interview, which occurred in January 2023, was also due to be in person, but ended up being held over Zoom. The highway to Fort McMurray is particularly treacherous at that time of year, and my fear of winter driving prevented me from making it there. My participants agreed to hold the final collective interview over Zoom to accommodate my dissertation timeline, since I would not be able to afford to return until the spring.

After the collective interview process was complete, I read through each of the collective interview transcripts in preparation for the final individual interviews. I made notes on important

moments that stood out to me in our collective interviews and requested each of my participants to also reflect on their experience participating in the research. I asked them if they could bring a few questions that came up for them during the entirety of the research, and I would do the same. The final individual interview I conducted was part of the hermeneutic research process, which begins and ends in questions. I sat down over Zoom with each person, and back and forth we shared our questions that had emerged over the time of the research, discussing each question at length. These final individual interviews were important because they allowed us to dig into specific questions or ideas that had emerged throughout the research as well as share examples or experiences that participants may not have been comfortable sharing in a group setting, or that they may have felt would have not fit in the flow of the collective interviews.

The individual interviews gave me a chance to ask them if they thought living in their geography, home, and body was a good place to live, and allowed for space and time to examine the complexity of these questions. Fleming, Gaidys and Robb (2002) write on Gadamerian traditions, where they note that participants and the researcher must work together to reach a shared understanding. The participants and I closed the research on questions, just as we had begun with questions because narrative hermeneutics aims to understand shared meanings. The goal of phenomenological research is to uncover and understand lived experiences as it is recounted by the participants. What a participant shared in both the collective and individual interviews were not meant to be definitive and conclusive, rather, the truth of that time and place. These final interviews were crucial in giving space for each person to reflect on their experiences participating in my research and allowed me to learn about the insights and interpretations that they had made throughout. I did not return to participants for member checking or transcript revision because these final interviews were the setting in which my participants and I debriefed

the research process *through* questions that had emerged. For Heidegger, as McConnell et al. (2011) write, “every time an experience is re-visited, the meaning may alter, depending on the disposition, or mood of the researcher or participant” (p. 29). Narrative hermeneutics therefore recognizes the multiple natures of truth and its contexts and the interpretations shared within this dissertation come from the narratives shared in specific settings and times.

It is important to note before moving into the five hermeneutic holds, that I intentionally will not spend time discussing the participants and their lives in specific detail. It is important to note however, that this research would most likely look and feel differently if my participants and I were people of colour, or had different socio-economic statuses, or disabilities. Queer experiences of geographies, homes, and bodies look differently for each individual person. As Moules (2013) discusses, the participants within a narrative hermeneutic study are not the topic or the focus. Narrative hermeneutics does not seek to represent the person or people involved. This is not a dissertation about the three people I interviewed – it is about learning about how queer people live in and across nested systems *through* the interview interpretations with my participants. Within the hermeneutic holds, where the participants are not easily identifiable, I share quotes with an assigned pseudonym. These pseudonyms are Kate, Audrey, and Jaime. In other places, where participants reveal more personal and potentially revealing information, I cluster quotes and do not note who said what, to help keep these people as anonymized as possible. Again, the focus is not on their identities but their experiences within the nested systems.

To answer and understand my research question, my supervisor and I concluded that my participants and I needed a collective reading experience alongside the collective interviews. In choosing a book, my participants and I would have a common place to begin our reflection on

Fort McMurray, contextualize ourselves within history, and perhaps orient ourselves around the book and its contents. I selected the book, *The Place We Call Home* by Irwin Huberman (2001). It is a large green book with a photo of the boreal forest on the front, an aerial photo of Fort McMurray, likely from the 1980s, imposed over it. I had seen it in no other bookstore except for the small gift shop at Fort McMurray Heritage Village, which is a small cluster of old buildings gathered in a circle to form our city's historical museum. It is situated right beside the Hangingstone River which is a river prone to flooding. I find it perhaps of relevance that our history is so close to danger, to being lost, each spring. The book contains tiny snippets of the past, primarily through the personal stories of individuals who have made Fort McMurray home. Page by page, the book goes through the history of Fort McMurray. One of my participants described it reading like a Facebook feed, the various updates on people's lives haphazard, bizarre, wild, and mundane. I asked that they give the book a look over, not assigning chapters or pages, just giving some encouragement to look through the book on their own time, in their own ways.

I chose this book for a multitude of reasons, which I will share below, but what struck me first was the title. As my own research question asks, "is this a good place to live?" *The Place We Call Home* (Huberman, 2001) as a title was intriguing. Who was calling this place home? What did people think of their home? Why was the book so thick, so full of names that I recognized, and histories that I didn't? I wanted to see how my participants felt about it, about how they related or not to the histories shared inside. As Ahmed (2006) writes, "the starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the 'here' of the body and the 'where' of its dwelling. Orientations, then, are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places" (p. 8). The place that I am studying, the place that people call home, is the starting point



from which my participants and I are orienting ourselves. The book is an example of someone trying to figure out the intimacies of the place, much like I am trying to understand. The difference is that my research is explicitly queer in nature.

Before moving forward, within the nested systems, I found that geography and body were generally straightforward to define and explain what I meant by them to my participants. However, ‘home’ brought a pause in one of the collective interviews, because of the multiple definitions and meanings the word ‘home’ carries. My participants and I ended up discussing whether we should actually use the word ‘residence’, referring to the physical brick and mortar apartment or house that we lived in. Something did not feel right about that word though, resulting in an important discussion about the emotional and social aspects of home. One participant expressed:

*I'm having a really hard time with the word residence... It doesn't resonate with me... it feels very much like the personal is taken out.*

The complexity of the word home was unexpected. When I first conceptualized the nested systems of geographies, homes, and bodies, I assumed that these layers would be self-explanatory. In conversation however, we found that ‘home’ was more complicated because it could encompass a feeling, a person, a place, a building, or an emotion – to name a few. Huberman’s book provided a jumping off point to discuss the multiplicities of what ‘home’ even means and entails, and still is a word that remains undefinable, up to the interpretation of whoever engages with it.

Huberman’s (2001) book is also a published historical book. This was not an article or a blog, but something that is marketed and sold as part of the history of Fort McMurray, which is important to note. This book has been given a certain validity, a certain lasting power that many

memoirs and historical texts are given. The words within the book are granted a type of power once they have become published. As my own research centralizes around queer people, upon reading through this history book, I was not surprised that no mention of queerness was within these pages. So, what does this text say about the author, and about the historical society that chose to publish it? Or, what does it say about Fort McMurray's residents? It cannot be a completely accurate historical representation of the people of Fort McMurray if the queer ones were excluded. Or can it? The collective text was chosen to give space for questioning and for disorienting and re-orienting where queer bodies fit within the geography.

Within this section, I outlined the research method that was primarily informed by the concept of a path laid walking, sharing the details of participant selection and the interview process. These participants' own voices are shared within the hermeneutic holds within this dissertation. As part of highlighting what my participants shared with me during our interviews, I have chosen to italicize their perspectives, separating and highlighting their stories so that they do not fade into the background of the dissertation. In the next section, I discuss queer theory, situating ourselves historically in the development of the theory, outlining what queer theory is, as well as its critiques, and examining queer theory in relation to educational research.

### **On queer theory**

Butler (1993) writes, "if the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (p. 19). In other words, queer will never be pinned down to a specific and immutable definition. Butler's description of queer "is contingent on the word's constant queering - we see here,

already, the proposition that *queer* can never be *queer enough*” (Amin, 2006, p. 176). Queering is the verb form of queer, referring to the act of taking something and troubling it. Both queer and queering are ever changing terms that rely on the fact that they will never settle. They change and adapt through history and through political usage. Freed of its historical debt “to same-sex sexuality, *queer* is defined as *that which flies wherever the demands of political urgency might call it*” (Amin, 2016, p. 175). Queer was, and continues to be a politically connected term, and was explicitly mobilized to challenge heteronormativity.

It is important to note that queer is also tied to a variety of identities. In more recent years, there has been an increase of the use of the word queer explicitly as an identity marker (Cossman, 2019). The participants in my study were selected due to their identities, as all of my participants identify as queer. How people choose to identify is important and ultimately shapes how people maneuver and orient themselves in the world. For a study based on three nested systems of place, how one sees themselves, how one identifies themselves, and how one wants to be perceived is incredibly important. Therefore, queer is used throughout this dissertation in both the theoretical sense but also as an identity. As Mayo and Blackburn (2020) write, queer is not only a theoretical approach, “but a fleshed reality and lived experience” (p. 52).

Di Felicianantonio and Gadelha (2017) remind me that queering is an ongoing process within *any* research methodology. While I am applying queer theory to narrative hermeneutics, it is important to note that methodologies still should be critiqued and examined as being a part of the heteronormative, neo-liberal status quo (Diversi & Moreira, 2013). The authors state that it is “essential to understand how heteronormativity is still implicit in many of our methodological principles, although many of them may appear as ‘queer’” (Di Felicianantonio & Gadelha, 2017, p. 279). Despite my goals of understanding the lived experiences of queer people in Fort

McMurray, the authors rightfully highlight the contradictory nature of the task which, to me, is one of the biggest challenges of conducting narrative research. It is impossible to fully account for and represent “emotional, affective, and embodied personal trajectories” because we are still “reproducing a form of knowledge [an academic paper] aimed at representing and somehow fixing those forms of experience” (Di Felicianantonio & Gadelha, 2017, p. 276). Queer is not only an identity. Queer theory emerged as a *critique* of identity and categories and, moving forward, I discuss the history of queer theory, key scholars, critiques, and its connection to various other theories with which I engaged for my doctoral research. Moving forward, I discuss queer theory as it evolved historically, and its connections to education and educational research.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1976) by Foucault, he argues that our categories of belonging have become dependent and attached to meanings surrounding sexual behaviour. These sexual behaviours are deemed good or bad, moral, or immoral, legal, or illegal and, through these binary understandings, have produced specific concepts of sexual identity. Sexual identity was created as homosexual versus heterosexual. Both the biological and psychological theories around what bodies and behaviours are ‘normal’ for people was codified through the nineteenth century in Western/European scholarship and created normative sexualities (heterosexual) and non-normative sexualities (homosexuality) (Boyd, 2008). In other words, homosexuality was intentionally and carefully positioned and created as sexual, deviant, and outside of the norm. In the early 1950s and 1960s, prior to the emergence of queer theory, the dominant perspectives and discussions around homosexuality were connected to conceptions of homosexuality as deviance or disease (Tierney, 1998). However, scholars and activists over time began to conceptualize and work through what we now know as queer theory, and the recognition of queerness as more complex than homosexuality versus heterosexuality and deviance versus normativity.

As time passed, conceptions and ideas around identity shifted and evolved. As only one example, in the 1960s, North American lesbians were divided between two activist movements. The first was the women's movement, with its often-pervasive homophobia. The second was the gay liberation movement, with its more or less overt sexism (de Lauretis, 1991). Lesbians were torn in their identities and there was tension between activist movements. As Seidman (1994) writes, "the early gay liberation days evolved into full-blown separatism...a gay subculture was created largely by and for men...moreover, many lesbians identified with women's movement or with the lesbian separatist project" (p.116). At the same time, transgender activists were resisting heteronormativity and gender binaries through protests such as the Compton Cafeteria riots, where trans women and drag queens collectively fought against police harassment. Much of the activism surrounding gay rights in the 1960s was owed to the influences of the Black power movement, second-wave feminists, and protests against the Vietnam war (Mattson, 2019).

By the early 1980s, the assumptions around queerness continued to shift, where people thought that the experience of "same-sex sexuality articulates a social and historical, not a natural and universal, logic" (Nicholson et al., 1995, p. 116). There was a growing realization and development of the idea that "...not only gender but also the very categories of sex themselves at all levels - physical, social, psychological - are constructed by a totalitarian regime of heterosexuality" (Crowder, 2007, p. 491). Scholars (Garretson, 2018; Nicholson et al., 1995) state that the turning point in queer theory was in response to the AIDS crisis. During this time, academics became social change makers. Their influence in various institutions carried social influence (Nicholson et al., 1995). During the 1990s queer theorists began to articulate the complexities of queerness and built upon the earlier queer scholars who were questioning earlier held assumptions of gender and sexuality. While it would be a mistake to dismiss queer theory as

solely academic, as its roots are directly connected to the direct-action, confrontational activism that occurred from the gay liberation movement to the AIDS crisis onwards (Nicholson et al., 1995), many key points within queer theory are due to the conversations and discussions within the academy.

In the 1980s and 1990s key scholars and founders of queer studies, such as Butler, Sedgwick, and de Lauretis were putting forward ideas of more expansive understandings of gender and sexuality. At the time, queer theory, Amin (2016) writes:

Was in part a bid to bring some of the energy, in-your-face defiance, political urgency, and transgressiveness of on-the-ground queer activism into the academy, its early appeal was inseparable from its affective connection to a range of events outside of the academy. (p. 177)

Queer theory thus, as Turner (2000) notes:

Coalesced out of the going sense among some feminists and sexual minorities that their access to equal rights and treatment would depend not on working out the glitches in an otherwise workable system but on rethinking from the ground up categories of persons and the distributions of power among them. (p. 15)

This reworking and re-understanding of queerness led to both deconstruction and critical analysis of power, systems, and structures in relation to gender and sexuality.

Within this dissertation, the socio-historical importance of queer theory and its origins are important to contextualize the discussions around place, space, and queer identity in Fort McMurray. Without understanding the history of the theoretical framework and the activist movements that these frameworks evolved and grew from, we cannot fully understand how my

queer participants have come to learn to live in their geographies, homes, and bodies, because we would lack the long history that continues to impact and affect each of us.

Queer theory at its core, "challenges the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as 'natural' and homosexuality as its deviant and abhorrent 'other'" (Browne & Nash, p. 5). Queer theory is less concerned about explaining the repression of queer people, rather, it focuses on "an analysis of the hetero/homo figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations - in a word, the constitution of the self and society" (Nicholson et al., 1995, p. 128). In other words, queer theory critiques our social order. Through critique, it celebrates queer as an "almost infinitely mobile and mutable theoretical term that, unlike *gay* and *lesbian* or *feminist*, need not remain bound to any particular identity, historical context, politics, or object of study" (Amin, 2016, p. 175). Rather than assuming that our conceptualization of identity is grounded in rationality, "queer theorists wish to ask how we produce such identities" (Turner, 2000, p. 5). The malleability and flexibility of queer theory allows for ongoing questioning and critiquing of normativity, categories, binaries, and power - how we come to know ourselves, know others, and how we are oriented in the world (Ahmed, 2006).

Queer theory is oppositional and allows for scholarship to engage in acts of counter-normativity, critiquing of systems and normativity over time. Villarejo (2005) states, "the terror of the normative: in its most benign form it appears as a bullying insistence toward obedience to social law and hierarchy, and in its most lethal form it carries the punishment of death for resistance to them" (p. 69). Queer theory's impact does not remain in the theoretical spaces of the academe, but rather carries immense impact for shifting how people come to understand

systems, structures, and power and how it punishes some and privileges others. Beyond this though, queer theory also challenges gay and lesbian identities and politics, as seen throughout history. The emergence of queer theory “put into permanent crisis the identity-based theory and discourses that have served as the unquestioned foundation of lesbian and gay life” (Nicholson et al., 1995, p. 118). Here, we can see how the theoretical framework of queer theory, while applied within my dissertation, challenges the systems and structures that exist within the geography of Fort McMurray.

Queer theory was arrived at to transgress, transcend, and trouble the way we think about our world and our identities and categories within them. It allows us to disrupt the supposed stability of gender and sexuality and imagine or work towards a world in which cisheteronormativity is not assumed, where colonial values are not normative, and where hegemony is questioned. It was arrived at in the effort to not adhere to certain terms or language, to not assume a stagnant ideology, but instead to both transgress and transcend them - or at the very least problematize them” (de Lauretis, 1991, p. v). I think of the text that I chose for my participants (Huberman, 2001), which is an exemplification of what kind of people are assumed neutral and normal in Fort McMurray. There are no queer people mentioned within the book, even though marriages and relationships were often discussed. It was my goal with the text to give my participants an opportunity to dissect and critique a published historical document on the place they call home. Through queer theory, this dissertation allows for the critique and unpacking of the normative systems around my participants, and how they have learned to operate outside or within them. It is my hope to disrupt ‘normality’ and imagine a queerer orientation.



However, queer theorists have been criticized for the lack of inclusion of intersectionality of queer identities, focusing solely on gender and sexuality without considering racism, sexism, classism, ableism, or ongoing colonialism. Within educational research, it is important to look first at the ways in which Canada was created as a nation to understand the ongoing effects it has on contemporary educational understandings. Within this dissertation, it is also important to contextualize the nested systems within the colonial heteropatriarchal context that we live in. I want to spend time unpacking the colonial history of Canada to understand how inequitable structures that have been carefully created by the settler colonial nation state have proliferated a certain kind of knowledge system that is devoid of queerness. While this study does not focus on educational institutions themselves, it is important to understand the societal context in which my participants have grown up, and how they have *learned* how to make their geographies, homes, and bodies “good” places to live, despite the social and historical implications of colonialism and heteropatriarchy.

Morgensen (2010) reminds us that the colonial heteropatriarchy enabled violence against queer bodies, specifically targeting Indigenous systems of gender and sexuality that conflicted with European colonial ideologies. Gender violence was a primary tool of systematic violence towards Indigenous peoples both throughout colonization, and in the present. It targets those who do not fit within the binary of the perceived ‘normal’ or assumed categories of what gender and/or sexuality are. This gender violence then erases the historied existence of and value of gender diversity within Indigenous communities (Morgensen, 2010). Morgensen (2010), referencing Schneider, writes that “Indian hating and queer hating form a powerful pair of pistons in the history of white colonization of the Americas” (p. 108).

In North America at large, “education” was used by the church in its colonization efforts through the implementation of residential schools. These schools were an “unremitting and near-lethal attempt at decimating First Nations and community” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 95). The legacy of residential schools continues to impact survivors intergenerationally. The history is generally made invisible in the context educational institutions, and the colonial dominance in education is often “hidden from educational conversations in the Canadian context, behind a benevolent multicultural façade that ignores the history and current reality of settler violence and the ongoing occupation of Indigenous territories” (Kerr, 2014, p. 102). Within the created settler colonial system of education and knowledge dissemination, the legacy of queer erasure and violence continues.

Until the mid-1970s, literature about queer people, particularly gay men, and their relationship to the field of education was framed “in one of two ways: either by absence, or by defining the topic as deviant” (Tierney, 1998, p. 41). Very few scholars studied the topic unless they were sociologists or psychologists who were interested in deviancy (Tierney, 1998). Tierney (1998) gives the example of Waller’s book *The Sociology of Teaching* (1932) which touts ‘evidence’ about the danger of gay men (then referred to as homosexuals), and the subsequent consequences on children if they were allowed to teach. As homosexuality was seen as a disease, Waller believed that homosexual teachers would contaminate and spread the illness. Tierney (1998) highlights that Waller’s writing was seen as a landmark for connecting homosexuality and education, despite it being completely devoid of any fact or empirical evidence. Queer educators’ fears of being accused of child molestation and recruiting to a ‘gay lifestyle’ have been consistently expressed in research (Endo et al., 2010; Gray, 2014; Singer, 1997), stemming from these long held homophobic beliefs.

While Waller's beliefs about gay men in education may seem part of a distant past, the fear of queerness in education continues. In 1999 the *Research Institute* conducted a 'family rights campaign' in which "parents were asked to sign a declaration stating that their children were not allowed to be involved in any school program that portrayed the 'lifestyles of gays, lesbians, and/or transgendered individuals as one which is normal, acceptable or must be tolerated" (p. 90). This campaign ran from the ideology that queer people are deviant and harmful. In 2018, a 'concerned' group of mothers wrote, "curricula are social engineering propaganda tools that target children...[and] expose children to the politics and acceptability of sexual activity such as homosexual and gender identity" (Real Women Canada, 2018). Queer educational researcher, Filax (2006), writes, "for some people, any hint of homosexuality in schools constitutes recruitment and endorsement of a 'lifestyle'" (p. 92). It is because gay men have been criminalized throughout history, and their identities conflated with pedophilia (Gray et al., 2016; Gray, 2014), that parents and other groups in the contemporary setting have mobilized this harmful stereotype. To this day, queer teachers are still assumed to be deviant, sexual, or predatory (Gray et al., 2016). In 2023, the year that this dissertation is being written, drag queens are being targeted by gun-toting, hate-spewing, far-right groups who continue to hold the belief that gay people, and particularly gay men, are grooming children (Boynton, 2023). Queer educators and activists are continuously being targeted for teaching outside of heteronormativity.

Moving forward into a discussion of contemporary educational research, queer theory has appeared most frequently in curriculum theory (Pinar, 1998). Amongst these scholars is Britzman, who was and continues to be a key scholar in heightening the visibility of queer scholarship and challenging heteronormativity. For Britzman and Gilbert (2004):

Queer theory deepens our narratives of gayness and education: it shifts the difficulty from disparaged identities to reading practices, it raises the problem of learning to be normal as a place of inquiry, and it highlights the work of identifications, or our psychical attachments to objects in the world.” (p. 85)

A formative piece of writing for me was Britzman’s, *Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight* (1995). Prior to reading their work, I had presumed that queer identities or queerness needed to fit within institutions and society. If us queer folks could just try harder then, maybe, society would ‘accept’ us. In the opening paragraph, she writes:

Can gay and lesbian theories become relevant not just for those who identify as gay or lesbian but for those who do not? What sort of difference would it make for everyone in a classroom if gay and lesbian writing were set loose from conformations of homophobia, the afterthoughts of inclusion, or the special event? (p. 151)

Discussing inclusion, disruption of ‘normalcy’, resistance, and construction of knowledge, Britzman (1995) highlights how people, particularly straight heteronormative society, engages with queer theory. Britzman remains essential to my work, because of the way that she has pushed against heteronormativity, seeking ways of knowing and understanding that challenge socio-cultural norms or are not otherwise commonly and widely shared. Sumara and Davis (1999) also inquire into the ways that heteronormativity can be interrupted. They argue that studying sexuality must become intertwined with all questions around the curriculum. Queer theory “does not ask that pedagogy *become* sexualized, but that it excavate and interpret the way it already *is* sexualized” (p. 192). They note that all educators should become interested in queer theory not only as a theory that is about queerness, but as a way of understanding complex

relationships and how sexualities and genders are embodied, created, produced, and represented throughout education and the world.

de Castell and Bryson (1993) question the importance of identity within classrooms, asking what difference it makes to be 'queer' in the classroom and what being queer in the classroom even means, both pedagogically as well in praxis. For them, they question how we could accept any learning environment that puts "certain knowledges and certain identities out of sight and out of mind" (p. 205). de Castell (1998) even writes a queer researchers' manifesto, in order to ensure that queerness is not sidelined or ignored, including tenants such as, "I will not pass as straight in my research work, whether in the field or in the write-up of my research" and "I will not engage in any educational intervention designed to promote heteronormativity in schools; on the contrary, any interventions in which I participate will be designed expressly to encourage and nurture difference" (p. 205).

Examining queer narratives more broadly, queer stories are often framed within harm. Eve Tuck (2009) calls on communities, researchers, and educators to push against what she calls "damage centred" research. That is, "research that intends to document peoples' pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression" (p. 409). Tuck (2009) shares that she is concerned with research that only invites oppressed people to speak from a space of pain. For her, a damage-centred framework centres pain and loss as a way to obtain particular political gains. Tuck (2009) urges us to re-vision research, not only to document the effects of oppression, but also to consider the long-term repercussions of "thinking of ourselves as broken" (p.409). While Tuck's (2009) letter was written particularly from an Indigenous perspective with Indigenous communities in mind, and I do not mean to appropriate or correlate queer experiences with Indigenous experiences (though of course there are queer and Two-Spirit

Indigenous people who experience this correlation), I find Tuck's writing powerful for examining how marginalized and outcast peoples' identities and experiences are shared. Frequently, queer lives become associated with violence and victimhood. Where is the queer joy? The community? The love? Asking the open-ended question of "is this a good place to live" opens the possibility for people to share in their own words and voice their experiences, without being automatically associated with trauma, pain, or violence. Tuck's letter reminds us that research should not exclusively be about sharing the stories of the "broken and conquered" (p. 416), and highlights that "damage can no longer be the only way, or even the main way, that we talk about ourselves" (p. 422).

Within this section, I discussed the history of queer theory, its critiques, and the connection of queer theory to educational research, including situating ourselves within the colonial history of education and key educational scholars. Now that the dissertation methodology, method, epistemological lens, and theoretical orientation have been discussed in the previous sections, I move into the first of the five hermeneutic holds, titled after a question that I used to be asked as a child.

### **On where my dad works**

The oil sands and their camps are often what first come to mind when people imagine Fort McMurray. People are often shocked to hear that the urban service area is forty-five minutes away from the closest oil sands plant, and that I did not actually grow up playing beside tailings ponds. It is, however, a place dominated by men (MIHRC, 2013). When I was growing up, if my mom and I were flying back into Fort McMurray after a trip away, we were often the only woman and girl on the plane, the rest of the seats filled with men flying in to work their shifts.

“Who are we when we are in a space so dominated by men?” I think, as I read through my interviews, working through the hermeneutic interpretations.

In many of the interviews, our orientations towards straightness and masculinity came up time and time again. Who we are, and how we have learned to live in this place as queer women, I found, is frequently determined by our interactions and orientations towards and with straight, cisgender men. Growing up in Fort McMurray, men have always been the majority. It was not until much later that I realized what an impact it had on me growing up as a queer girl. I named this section ‘on where my dad works’, because of the number of times I was asked that question growing up—rarely did people think my mom and I lived there without a man in our lives. Even the stories shared in Huberman’s (2001) book are predominantly those of men ‘settling and conquering’ the area.

One of my participants, Jaime, in the first of our collective interviews, recalls a story that stood out to her in Huberman’s (2001) book:

*There's this story about like being in camp where they [women] had to have like security, like walking up and down their hallway to make sure they were okay because the men were like literally streaking past their rooms naked and it's like, that's Fort McMurray... That sounds completely normal, but then also like it does speak to that heteronormativity that like that's just ingrained in this book and in the reality of this place.*

Here, ‘normality’ is literally nude men running around. How does one learn how to exist within those kinds of environments? Gruenewald (2003) writes, “as centers of experience, places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy” (p. 621). If Fort McMurray and all its places and spaces taught us about how the world works, then how did

we learn to be there, and who are we when we are there? This section discusses how we have learned to live across the three nested systems within a place that is so heteronormative, and male dominated.

One memory came to mind during the interviews, where I shared:

*I just thought in my childhood, you know, when I was trying to figure out my own identity, I would see women at the bus stops waiting for... Like they'd be in their work clothes, right? Like they'd be in their jackets or construction wear... and I remember being so intrigued by them and the way that they presented their bodies in that way. Like they were very masculine, right? Most of the workers, I assumed, at site were men and then you'd occasionally see a woman. And so that was such a, I don't know, formative experience for me was seeing women in what I had been taught in school was menswear or doing men's work. And that was like the first kind of investigation of who I was in relation to these bodies... here I see these women, you know, also at the grocery store after work in their workwear, and not being what I was told bodies should look like.*

It was seeing the very few women on my daily commute to school, or out in other public spaces that helped me come to understand my own identity. In this memory, I was a young girl oriented towards women who were filling and expanding space that I had presumed was only for men. These women challenged the other spaces within Fort McMurray, by presenting themselves in clothing that I had presumed were masculine. This provided me the opportunity to think outside what I thought was possible for women to be. For the oil sands, a space that is so masculine, bodies have become accustomed and normalized that the space being filled is by cisgender, male bodies. No wonder seeing a woman in 'men's clothing' was so bizarre to me.



Ahmed writes that “spaces are not only inhabited by bodies that ‘do things’, but what bodies ‘do’ leads them to inhabit some spaces more than others” (p. 58). In spaces like Fort McMurray then, “gender becomes naturalized as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces...which leads bodies in some directions more than others as if that direction came from within the body” (p. 58). The gendered expectation expects men and women to fill and perform in space in particular ways.

Kate and I laugh in an interview, talking about interacting with straight men:

*When I have to talk to one at work, I'm like, oh my God, you guys. Like, you're unbelievable to talk to. The amount of space they take up in our world!*

While we were joking together, there is truth behind these words, about how much space is taken up by straight men. In Fort McMurray, what men’s bodies do for the workforce, for the economy, for the city, has shaped how much space that they take up, and have been permitted and encouraged to take up, which leaves a gap for understanding how women, genderqueer, and queer people exist and live in these spaces.

Scholar Scott (2007) describes how working-class communities are usually identified by what the men do: steel, mining, manufacturing, to name a few. Scott posits that these kinds of places hold the idea of frontier masculinity, which is “premised on a vision of the masculine as strong, rugged, self-sufficient – conquering the dangerous wilderness in the hope of striking it rich” (p. 268). This example of hegemonic masculinity is:

Imbued with nostalgia for (real and fictive) accounts of a historical era where independent white men were iconized as heroes. Women were only minimally present and committed to servicing the needs of men, while the natural environment was viewed as a boundless source of riches. (p. 268)

This, combined with images of the Canadian north as rugged, tough, and harsh, that requires fortitude and tenacity to survive, have created long lasting cultural imprints that perpetuate a certain kind of masculinity that is felt by not only women and queer folks, but all of society. Jamie notes after reading Huberman's (2001) book that Fort McMurray:

*Was like an old boys club. Literally an official club of men. They made all the decisions for the town. And I'm like, you know, like, do I see myself in that? No. But do I see our current reality in that? Absolutely I do. And I think that there's a lot of like instances of that in this book where it's like, yeah, some of the remnants of those types of thinking still exist and still kind of make up our reality of today. There's still like a very like small-ish group that make decisions for the whole region... It's not the whole region that makes decisions about the whole region. It's a handful of people. It's the same people. The same families.*

Frontier masculinity and aggressive heterosexuality is also reinforced by Alberta as a province at large. Alberta's social-political history perpetuates frontier masculinity through a long history of capitalism, colonialism, and Catholic and Christian settlement. From a political perspective, the normalization of heteronormativity within Fort McMurray and Alberta at large has been in action for decades through a long-reigning conservative government. As only one example, I look to the period of 1992 to 2006 in which conservative Ralph Klein was Alberta's premier. While the Canadian federal government voted on whether to extend human rights acts to include and protect homosexual people, Klein profusely declined to amend Alberta's provincial Human Rights Act. He defended his position "by indicating that 'severely normal' Albertans do not support such measures" (Filax, 2006, p.xiii). For Klein, Alberta, a province of

the severely normal, consisted of very particular people and bodies. This absolutely did not include queerness in any shape or form. As Flilax (2006) notes, severely normal Albertans were:

Exemplified by white, Euro-Western descendants who are progressive yet traditional; natural yet highly cultured, and who are ordained by God to live within a traditional family, with ‘man’ as dominant over the planet and all its life forms...it is a father-led family consisting of two parents of ‘opposite’ sexes. (p.109)

The people of Alberta, therefore, were to be heterosexual white people.

In *A Minor Chorus* (2022), Belcourt writes, after reflecting on an interview with an older gay man living in Driftpile Cree Nation:

The generations that preceded his were socialized to believe homosexuality was a crime. It was only removed from Alberta criminal law two years after he was born, in fact. The sentiment wasn’t magically vanquished when reform happened. Heterosexuality was the limit of identity. So much so that when the AIDS epidemic ravaged gay communities all over the world, the town caught only bits and pieces of the circumstances. What made its way out here, north of the last major city, was enough to piece together an intoxicating myth of gay impurity. To be gay was to be dead or dying. (p. 68)

For generations, being queer in Alberta was a literal death sentence. No wonder frontier masculinity and heterosexuality has presided as ‘severely normal’ within the province. When people asked me, “where does your dad work?” They were consciously or unconsciously embodying the beliefs and images of the severely normal Albertan. Even those who did not grow up here receive a variation on the question. Kate shares:

*I try to make it clear that [I am queer] ... I still at work get asked like, oh, do you have a husband? Are you married?... Like those kind of like heteronormative*

*questions, and I'm like, how do I make it even more clear? And mostly... to deter people from even starting down the road of any kind of homophobic discussion in front of me.*

Unfortunately, the struggle of human rights protections for queer people in the province has been consistently in a tug of war between provincial and federal interests. Alberta, with its frontier values, has never liked being told what to do by Ottawa. Queer Albertan historian and theorist Filax (2006) writes:

Alberta is an oil-rich province whose dominant identity and brand of politics is informed by a frontier mentality that focuses on rugged individualism entwined with an ethos that insists that Albertans are misunderstood by an eastern, centrist, urbane, large, and biased federal government. (xiii)

Therefore, the struggle concerning political interests also concerned “determining what constitutes a proper, ‘normal’ Alberta identity and who rightfully belongs within the Alberta community/mosaic” (Filax, 2006, p.xiii). Families like mine were certainly not within this realm.

It is not a coincidence that homophobia and the oil-sands are so deeply intertwined. As an economic center surrounding ‘men’s work’, the beliefs of capitalist heteronormative values became part and parcel of the structure of Fort McMurray. Filax (2006) writes that, through capitalism, “capitalist productive relations were premised on the reproductive relations of the heterosexual family. Consequently, capitalism reinforced the primacy of the reproductive family unit” (Filax, 2006, p.77). When Fort McMurray became an established industry town, already imbued with the values of frontier masculinity, it took on the heterosexual values of capitalism as well.

Reflecting on my comments around the women waiting at the bus stop for work, a much younger me saw masculine women as an alternative way of being. However, this too has been influenced by hegemonic masculinity. O'Shaughnessy and Doğu (2009) found that women in Fort McMurray have been marginalized simultaneously for being too feminine and not feminine enough. Women who attempted to minimize their femininity physically by wearing Carhartt's like the women I would see at the bus stops, or behaviourally, by acting less "bubbly" or friendly, were labelled as "bitches" or as "mannish" (O'Shaughnessy & Doğu, 2009). Women who were more traditionally 'feminine' in either their appearance or personality were picked on for being too girly and not seen as tough or a hard worker. Connell (1993) argues that hegemonic masculinities, like frontier masculinity, are not just spaces in which men see themselves, but also shape different social relations and political and economic powers.

Within the context of this research, we can see how frontier masculinity erases women's experiences, and does not even consider queer lives. Fort McMurray has become a space in which men throughout history have created and become the 'norm', with all of those who are not men, gravitating around them. Ahmed writes that this phenomenon of space which loops in repetition, "leads bodies in some directions more than others as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 58).

Massey (1994) writes:

Space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through. Moreover, they are gendered in a myriad of different ways, which vary between cultures and over time. And this gendering of space and place both reflects *and has effects back on* the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live (p. 186).

Fort McMurray, therefore, deeply affects the ways in which queer people, who often resist gender categorization, come to understand themselves and the tactics they must use to live there. O'Shaughnessy and Doğu (2009) write that “nowhere is frontier masculinity more ‘out there’ in Canada than in Fort McMurray” (p. 269).

Unfortunately, frontier masculinity, imbued with individualist heterosexual values, continues to create an often-hostile environment towards queer people. In a conversation with Kate, she shares:

*How some of the stuff I've seen come up [protesting drag queens] and just how terrible it is. And I was just thinking like, these people [anti-drag protestors], I personally think, are just so lonely. And that is, I think, often a theme in Fort McMurray, like how isolated and lonely people are. And people don't build the community here, which, you know, it takes work to build a community. But I also think like you're an uphill battle in Fort McMurray, like people are transient, and people are fly in fly out, or they'll come and work for nine months and never come back. And like, you know, there's lots of things working against you. But ultimately people are really lonely here. And I think sometimes they find community in being homophobic, and it just leads to this like echo chamber of like worsening political views. And Fort McMurray is like, exceptionally susceptible to that.*

Here, Kate highlights the aspects of Scott's (2007) description of working-class communities and how it impacts the queer community due to the conscious or subconscious embodiment of frontier masculinities values.

Many social scientists, many of whom have never spent a day in Fort McMurray, do a disservice to the place and the people by creating simple narratives that point to Fort McMurray as a desolate, oil-filled, frigid environment. I do think however, that the idea of frontier masculinity applies to my examination of queer lives in Fort McMurray. Less so on how frontier masculinities are specifically enacted, as this research has been conducted elsewhere, but more in relation to how we as four queer women are oriented towards it, and how it has impacted who we are when we are within the three nested systems. Therefore, part of learning how to live in and across the nested systems is rooted in the process of reorientation particularly as it relates to the lessons that we were taught surrounding masculinity, heteronormativity, and frontier masculinity.

In a conversation between Audrey and I, as two people who were born and raised in Fort McMurray, we discussed our experiences from childhood to adulthood. Talking over Zoom from our respective living rooms, our animals playing and lounging around us, we unpacked how masculinity and heterosexuality shaped how we were oriented in the world. Audrey laughs slightly as she talks:

*Growing up here was just like extreme misogyny and like the male gaze, was like, ever present and like compulsory heterosexuality. It's just like you never saw any alternative example, right? Like no representation at all. No differing identities, relationships, nothing was presented. So I feel like I learned a lot about like, okay, so you're going to meet a man and you're going to fall in love, and you know what I mean? Like, that was it. And like the things that your body is meant for is to be pleasing to men... I had to do a lot of like unlearning of that and like as a woman, like my body not existing to please men or entertain them, or you know what I*

*mean? Just like detaching self-worth and self-confidence from the male gaze... I think, like me, being queer has a huge part to do with that because as I've adopted like a queer lens of the world and of myself, I'm like, oh, like, no, that's bullshit. Like, I just yeah, like being queer. I'm just like, Oh my gosh. Like, there is so much freedom from that now that, like, I get to enjoy in my body and like. Yeah. Like, that's just like, that's, that's a big freedom of not having to be gripping so tight to that mentality. Right? So, for me, that was definitely the biggest thing to unlearn because, yeah, here it was like very... Also like the ratio of like straight cis men to femmes like has always been, like, so skewed here. So yeah, that was like, I think like as a young person, like going through puberty and like young adulthood and in your twenties. Like that was really messed up. Like that really, I think messed up a lot of us.*

*I reply:*

*I was going to say that really resonates... Like you hit the nail on the head I think with the male gaze or that male dominance or that we were consumed by that. Because I didn't heal my relationship with my body, particularly with diet culture, until I realized that I didn't need to be for consumption or for the male gaze. Right. Like because I like I remember dieting like starting in junior high. And my relationship with my body didn't, like I didn't feel at home in it until I unlearned that too of, oh, this is kind of messed up, like, messed up what we were either explicitly or subconsciously taught and applauded for and, yeah... How that masculinity just seeped right into our classrooms and our and our day to day lives.*



Audrey continues:

*Yeah. It's like interesting also to kind of like reflect on my own self in a relationship with like a queer woman, like non-binary individual. And then myself interact with like cis man, a straight man. I've never been in a partnership with a queer man. So like that in itself I'm like... Like, I don't know if I could date a straight cis man again, because I don't... You know what I mean? Like, I don't know if the requirements of me to be in that partnership... I don't know if I could do that anymore. Like I could not compromise that anymore. And I think the vast majority of those relationships, like, would require me to, like, abandon myself. Because it would require me abandoning a lot of my queerness because I don't see the world in that way anymore and I'm not okay to participate in that way anymore in relationship to others. So it's like... But before, like, oh yeah, my sexuality was not my own. It was like, a man's. Like my sexuality existed for a man and was legitimized by a man. So and like being bisexual, it's like a constant, kind of like wave of of like figuring that out and like, negotiating that and being really having to be really self-aware of that.*

In this conversation, Audrey and I both had to disentangle our relationships with men and the expectations that were placed on us as cisgender women in order to feel more comfortable in ourselves and in our bodies. It was not until we were presented with alternative ways of living and being that we understood how previously we were taught how *not* to be queer. We were oriented towards a particular way of living and being, and the process of reorientation involved carefully dismantling the frontier masculinity and ingrained heteronormativity that we grew up around to become ourselves more fully—and feel safe enough to do so.

When Audrey says, “*I learned a lot about like, okay, so you're going to meet a man and you're going to fall in love,*” we can see how frontier and hegemonic masculinity oriented and shaped us to believe that heterosexuality was our only option. Ahmed (2006) writes that “the naturalization of heterosexuality as a line that directs bodies depends on the construction of women’s bodies as being ‘made’ for men, such that women’s sexuality is seen as directed toward men” (p. 71). McDowell & Sharpe (1997) note that:

The body, its size, shape, gestures, the very space it takes up, those masculine and feminine norms which mean that men sprawl and women don’t; the differences in physicality that construct and reflect gender norms create ways of being in space.  
(p. 203)

Within each nested system, we were taught to be oriented and directed towards men and heteronormativity.

Being queer people committed to reorientation, however, has enabled my participants to find freedom and flexibility in their identities. While there are still expectations and judgements placed on queer people, my participants have come into an understanding of how to be, even within frontier masculinity. Through the process of reorientation, we became more confident as queer people, and more importantly as queer people living in our bodies. Two of my participants share their changed relationships with their bodies:

*Being queer. I'm just like, oh my gosh. Like, there is so much freedom from that now that, like, I get to enjoy in my body and like. Yeah. Like, that's just like, that's, that's a big freedom of not having to be gripping so tight to that mentality. Right? So, for me, that was definitely the biggest thing to unlearn.*

*At this point in my life, and also my identity as a queer person like trying to unpack a lot of that individualism and trying to reorient myself in more of like a collectivist communal way. And like rewriting scripts for myself that I have on like, okay, well, what does self-care look like? Or what does time for myself look like? What does activism look like and feel like and things like that? Because yeah, growing up like a white, cis, able-bodied middle-class person and has afforded me a lot of like, individual benefits and like ease and also like very easy scripts to follow, like what those things look and feel like. But I'm like really trying to unlearn a lot of that mentality.*

In reorienting ourselves away from the axis that we were placed on since birth (Ahmed, 2006), we turned towards how we *actually* wanted to live in Fort McMurray. Within this process, we engaged in acts of refusal. That is, we refused to fit within the space we were given, refused to accept normativity, refused to accept the narrative that surrounds Fort McMurray. These acts of queer refusal involve recognizing the pressures to conform to normative demands and, rather than conforming, the person says no (Russell, 2019). Within queer theory, Sedgwick (1993) writes that if refusal is one of the things that queerness may refer to, then the act of refusal will be expressed through “an open mesh of possibilities” (p. 87), never limited to a homogenous format. In other words, queer refusals come in all shapes and forms. Within the whole interview process, there were many sites of queer refusals, many stemming from acts of reorientation, that my participants engaged in across the nested systems.

When people asked me where my dad worked, I understood that they were trying to sort through the sociological order of things, attempting to make a connection with me or understand how I came to be in the area, or if they have ever interacted with my dad at work. People wanted

me to fit within the narrative they had created about the kind of people that live in Fort McMurray. It was not an unfounded question, after all, most people arrive in Fort McMurray because of the oil sands, and most of those people are men. Except, I would never answer the question the way the questioner intended.

“Where does your dad work?” someone would ask.

“My mom is a teacher,” I would reply.

Reflecting, this was an unconscious act of refusal that I was making, refusing to answer the question the way they intended. Rather than fitting within the narrative of what it means to be from, or live in, Fort McMurray, I refused by turning around the situation and dodging the question. Living in Fort McMurray as a queer person is often filled with experiences like this, filled with moments of refusal, where we flip what is expected—from a conversation or to the way we present and live as queer people. One interesting and perhaps unexpected act of refusal stood out to me. Rather than assuming that under frontier masculinities, queer people would accept the space that has been perpetuated and created as the norm, the remote geography and small town nature of Fort McMurray has actually allowed for my participants to utilize their professions, their relationships, and their public positions in Fort McMurray to enact change. They have engaged in the act of refusal by learning to live across the nested systems in a way that involves teaching *others* and utilizing their experiences to work towards change rather than maintaining the status quo. By refusing to accept that nothing could be done, kowtowing to a long history of homophobia and hegemonic settler colonial traditions, my participants are actively engaged in dismantling heteronormativity, in whatever way they can.

Within this refusal, my participants came to understand how valued and needed their queerness and their contributions are to Fort McMurray. They noted that, because of queer

refusal through education and activist commitment, they felt more valued and more a part of the community. Below I have amalgamated some examples from across the interviews of the value they feel being engaged in activism and other community involvement in the geographic region:

*Me coming out was like not just my own personal like journey it was also like a very targeted political act to humanize something that is erased and othered here majorly. To like, have that ripple change. And that's not to be like, I'm amazing, I did the thing. But it's just like I recognize in a small town like you, like the impact of that can be massive. Whereas if I was in Toronto being like, yeah. I'm queer, it'd be like, yeah, you and one million other people, you know what I mean? So like what we lack in anonymity here can also be leveraged.*

*I feel so lucky that I found people my age with my values that are also queer. And I came across that from being on the (activist group). But if I didn't have the capacity or interest or we didn't have (activist group), I'm like, where would I even get that?*

*There's a huge part of activism to this identity that Fort McMurray has offered me a venue to be that I didn't have in Toronto. Like I didn't feel like I was really needed in Toronto the way I'm needed here. And there's so much value in that...But the longer I'm here, the more I'm almost fearful to go to a bigger city where I feel I'll get lost in that like queer community, versus here I feel I have a very clear place in our queer community, and that's what makes me enjoy living here as a queer person and makes this a good experience.*

*My voice is deeply valued in Fort McMurray from my own experiences. And I love that. And I do feel very seen and very found.*

*Just seeing like so tangibly like the impacts that you can make and like that doesn't feel like that's not from like an egotistical place. It's from like a real tangible, like, you know, like you're not going to go somewhere in the city and not run into someone you don't know. Or you know, you're not going to be part of something that you can't see immediately change stemming from. So I think that's like a an amazing part of living here is like when you are passionate about something and you do see all of these like things in the world. It's like obviously one place, one community is just a microcosm of like so many systems replicated throughout the world. So, if you feel powerless to change the world, you can at least start in your own community and I think here it's like really empowering to do that because you can be an agent of change, when maybe somewhere else you're like, yeah, I have no impact here.*

*Fort McMurray is a great place to live because there's so much potential and because... being me and the privilege and position that I hold is not possible in many places... When you talk about the queerness of Fort McMurray, like that's it. Like there's places and opportunities that are so like just not an option in other places. And so figuring out like where those pressure points are, where those levers are, to enact the kind of change that we want to see in this community, I think is... That's the crucial part.*

Despite Fort McMurray being described and perceived as a site of frontier masculinity, my participants found that their connection to Fort McMurray and the people who live there was an opportunity for learning and education. Engaging in activism and education, rather than accepting normativity, is an act of queer refusal. Not only does this refusal focus on changing the status quo, it also had the effect of creating a positive space for them to feel better living within their nested systems. Through education and activism, they found like minded people, engaged with the community, and utilized their privileges and positions to enact change. This resulted in positive outcomes for each of them, with Kate noting that:

*I feel really fulfilled and like I'm doing meaningful work and really finding myself and like, that's, you know, I could be a [job title] anywhere, but I feel like I'm making the biggest difference and I'm true to myself as a queer person here.*

It is also important to note that this act of queer refusal does come at a cost. So, while the benefits of this refusal are felt, the repercussions on their bodies and minds are also present and the weight of this refusal often weighs on each of them. I share a few of these examples here:

*I was thinking how nice it is when there are spaces where you can just be like an end to yourself and just be a queer person and hang out and not... And how many times I spend time with another queer person and it ends up turning into a discussion of like, what's coming up next for [activist group] or like something else in the community that we have to think about or work on, or like how often like we switch gears from just like existing into talking about like a bigger goal or something for the greater good or like, yeah... transition from just existing in our own bodies to like existing for like a bigger cause, which sometimes is really fulfilling, but other times can be just like a little bit draining.*

*I think sometimes, like, I get into this space where I'm ignoring the signals of my own body that I need rest. And you're kind of like, pushing past what your body is telling you it needs. And I think for me personally, because I'm not out in every space that I exist in, in Fort McMurray, I feel like I have to morph my body into something that it's not in order to kind of move things forward for the greater good of the community. And that is harmful to my body and myself.*

*I find it's really hard to exist here sometimes as like a really complex, like multi-dimensional person because it's really easy to just kind of like for one part of like identity to be really amplified and then to feel almost like a pressure that like, well, this is all on me because like, I'm the person that, that is, you know, visible. Or I'm the person that has like some sort of level of influence or power here so I better like, make the most of it.*

*I think, you know, to a lesser extent that is happening in the movement here in Fort McMurray, where we're pushing our bodies to their breaking point for the greater cause. We're burning out.*

These acts of queer refusal to acquiesce to frontier masculinity have allowed participants to feel as though they can impact the region of Fort McMurray and shift the culture towards something more inclusive. While it can take a toll on their minds and bodies, each of them affirmed throughout the entire interview process that this work was important and meaningful to them, and is often overlooked in the grand narratives about Fort McMurray. Their refusals rendered invisible in the larger stories told about the place. Their persistence to refuse the



stereotypical and engrained stories and realities of the place has opened space for new possibilities.

In this hermeneutic hold, I have explained how queer people in Fort McMurray, while living in a space that is deemed ‘masculine’, have carved out spaces and expanded the imagination of what Fort McMurray is and can be. By being queer and queering various spaces, the queer people living in Fort McMurray push against the stereotypical expectations that are typically assumed by outsiders to the city. While frontier masculinity and heteronormativity are the water that we all swim in, we have engaged in the act of reorientation, moving towards education and action to not only shift the culture for future generations but ensure that our lives can be good ones within Fort McMurray. My participants and I have learned who we are when we are in [x] space not because of what we were taught. Rather, it was through our queerness that we reoriented ourselves, and imagined how to shift space away from heteronormativity. Though the question “where does your dad work” appears innocuous, it speaks to the deeply imbued frontier masculinities that are embedded in how Fort McMurray operates and has opened the possibility of questioning who we are when we are in such a geography, and how we each have learned (and continue to) learn within it.

In the next section I extend the discussion of geography to expand on the narrative of Fort McMurray and how it impacts the queer residents. The upcoming hold is named on outcasts in the outcast because, as a place that is often defined by perspectives such as frontier masculinity, there has been little room for expansion of narratives that are more encompassing of the experiences of queer people in Fort McMurray. Outcasts in the outcast discusses the experiences of marginalized people living in a marginalized geography.

### On outcasts in the outcast

Fort McMurray is, in many ways because of its notoriety or stereotypes, an outcast. This is in part owed to decades of being under a critical global lens due to the oil sands. The story that has been told repeatedly of Fort McMurray is one of destruction, isolation, money, men, and exploitation. The section on ethical considerations expands on the paradoxes of living in and writing about Fort McMurray because, of course, so many of these stories told about the region are true. However, the nuances of the place are seldom investigated, and the narrative about what Fort McMurray is conclusively imagined to be like has been solidified within the Canadian and global imagination. An outcast. The story of Fort McMurray has been connected to bad things.

In the first interview with my participants, they noted almost immediately the way that Fort McMurray is portrayed.

Kate shares:

*I feel like Fort McMurray is a small town that's the most in the media and like yeah. Because of the natural disasters and also the industry here.*

Jaime agrees:

*Yeah... more under a microscope than another small community.*

I even googled “Fort McMurray” to see what was being written about the place at the time I was writing this dissertation. There were some local news stories, a few think pieces on the oil sands, and a couple of climate activist calls to action. An op-ed titled *Beauty and heart, not flames and tar*, caught my eye. Ellis (2023) writes:

As a Calgarian who'd never been north of Edmonton, Fort McMurray seemed like a land of mythical proportions — a dark place with piles of flaming tar shrouding a brooding,

treeless landscape, too removed from my everyday life to exist apart from the stories that surrounded it. The prospect of me living in an Alberta folktale, a place famously compared by Canadian activist Maude Barlow to the barren *Lord of the Rings* landscape of Mordor, was never a legitimate life prospect. (n.p.)

The narratives of Fort McMurray are so deeply ingrained—dirty, dark, barren—that it is easy to understand how people who have never been there automatically assume the worst of the place. Ellis (2023) goes on to write about her time in Fort McMurray and how she felt connected to the land, the people, and the community, and, after living there for two years, finally seeing the beauty of the place. It was only in challenging the perspectives and narratives about the place that Ellis (2023) understood that there was more than what meets the eye.

On one of my dog walks, this time circling around the Glenmore Reservoir in Calgary, I was mulling through the concept of being an outcast in the outcast, the words tumbling around my mind, falling into the rhythm with my steps: *outcast, outcast, outcast*. An outcast is defined as both an adjective and noun. As an adjective, it means to be rejected, or cast out. As a noun, it is a person who has been rejected by society or a social group. An outcast, therefore, is something that exists on the margins of society, because the society refuses to accept them. An outcast does not fit within ‘normal’ society, which can result in a sense of isolation. Outcasts are people or things that are set outside of the normative ways of being. Many queer people who grew up in Fort McMurray felt like an outcast too. Both queer people and the urban service area of Fort McMurray are outcasts, which presents an interesting perspective when thinking about learning to live in and across the nested systems.

Fort McMurray is an outcast in a multitude of ways. The first, is the geography itself. The north in the imaginations of Canadians, and perhaps globally, is outcast. Most people have never

been to northern Canada. Even within Alberta, Edmonton is often the most northern place that people imagine others realistically living. There is a real danger in being an outcast, just as there is real danger to living in Fort McMurray, not just as queer people, but generally. With winters often dipping into the negative forties and fifties Celsius, the remote location with a hospital not necessarily equipped for every circumstance, and the closest major city a five-hour drive away on one road that leads in and out of town, the literal geography and isolation of the region contribute to its outcast status. Within the imaginary of the north, Fort McMurray sits on the margins.

I note in one of our collective interviews, laughing:

*Is Fort McMurray a metaphor? Like Fort McMurray is picked on and bullied. And so we defend it and queer people are picked on and bullied so we defend them? But I get I get, I get it. It's like the weird underdog, kind of. But it's not an underdog. It's actually a very big powerhouse that controls the world. But in many ways, it's kind of an underdog.*

Audrey replies:

*Totally... As much as we're like this powerhouse that, like, controls the world, like Fort McMurray itself isn't. Like, do you know what I mean? Like, if we truly were, we would have like state of the art, everything. We would never want for anything. We would have everything at our fingertips, the amount of money that flows through here, but we don't. So I think that's also like maybe a big piece of it too, is that like, just because the oil sands are here doesn't necessarily translate to, you know, we're not all experiencing this like incredible lifestyle or quality of life. You still kind of bond over the fact that you are in the margins as a whole city*

*or like municipality. You kind of get... Like people forget that people actually live here, right?*

Here, Fort McMurray is misunderstood again, presumed to be rich and wealthy, though the reality is much different, contributing to its outcast status.

Audrey passionately shares near the end of our first interview:

*I think that's also something that gets really neglected is just like the land, because people sometimes just think of, well, what does the oil sands look like? And that's the image in their mind, that like we're the shanty town like around an open mine, literally! Like that's what I've had people think that's what it's like. And so that's always an interesting like counter like perspective of it's like, no, this place is absolutely beautiful. Like we're in the middle of the boreal forest and like, I think that's what a lot of us grieved so much in the wildfire is like, of course, loss of property and things, but like the trees. The trees are gone. And so, I think like that to me is like such a beautiful, important part of this place is like the physical landscape also, because it's not just that we're we're on top of this like massive oil sands deposit. It's like we're also in the middle of the boreal forest. We have like three rivers that connect and like a north flowing river and just I don't know, I think that's like something I always want to remember about Fort McMurray and make sure people know.*

I can still hear Audrey's voice as she talks, the passion and frustration reverberating around the room. The people who live in Fort McMurray are constantly aware of the perceptions of the place, and how they feel so dissimilar to our own experiences. This part of our conversation stands out to me when thinking about outcasts, because of the aspects of Fort

McMurray that are rarely acknowledged, but concretely exist and are experienced in joyful and loving ways—ways that are not extended to outcasts, normally. There is an outcast narrative about being and living in Fort McMurray that is both inhabited and inherited. You cannot capture the fullness or beauty of Fort McMurray within the demonized narrative that has been written about the place, particularly by people who have never been there.

An ongoing paradox of living in the place is that we all also acknowledge *why* Fort McMurray is demonized, rejected, or cast out. As climate change affects our planet, there are more missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, wealth is continuously garnered through stolen land, and capitalism's divide between rich and poor grows, Fort McMurray is not an innocent place. I recall Maynard and Betasamosake Simpson's (2022) letters to each other talking about the impact the oil sands have on already marginalized communities. I do not for one minute claim or believe that there are not deep issues that are perpetuated and created in Fort McMurray. I do believe, however, that because of the notoriety of the place, Fort McMurray has become a type of outcast. Rejected and alienated from the rest of the world, the realities of enacting harm and the reality of being an outcast can and do exist simultaneously. As the Sinopoulous-Lloyd's (2022), two queer ecologists, remind me:

Joy, beauty, and meaning making are possible, even in conditions of collapse, of fragmentation, of scarcity. Like the caterpillars that have learned to metabolize plastic or the wolves that thrive in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, belonging can be built, or grown, out of the detritus of failing empires and ideologies. But it won't always match the bucolic dreams of our forebears. It can be monstrous. (n.p.)

This quote stood out to me as a recognition that *more* can always be possible in places that are deemed ruined, uninhabitable, or outcast. There is a deep fondness and pride for the

place because, I argue, we recognize it as queer. Within the narratives shared about both Fort McMurray and queer people, we have been painted as outcasts—seen as evil deviants on the margins. Despite this outcast status though, what is not often reported or discussed is the complexity of the region, and the connection people have within it.

“Part of being an outcast is also being aware you are an outcast, right?” I thought to myself, bracing against the cold wind off the water of the reservoir.

When one is deemed an outcast, there is an awareness that you are on the outside. To be defined as an outcast relies on the existence of a place to be cast from. Outcasts existing on the margins are oriented towards a place in a very particular way. Within a heteronormative society, queer people are outcasts. When you are a queer person, you are, or become, very aware of how you are positioned against the norm. The outcast within the outcast refers to queer people who are historically socially cast aside and marginalized, within a geography that has been demonized and misunderstood. Queer itself is a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a straight line, a “sexuality that is bent and crooked” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107).

Continuing my walking loop overlooking the Glenmore Reservoir, icy water lapping at the banks, I wonder about the power of being an outcast in the outcast, and how that experience has taught us to live in our homes and bodies. Repeatedly, my participants and I talked about the weather, seasonality, and the land. I initially thought that I would write about the importance of land and place in creating a sense of belonging but, on this walk, I realized that there was a connection I had not previously seen, surrounding the *awareness* of being an outcast in the outcast. The connection between the land and the body where queer people, by nature of being outcast from heteronormative society, are very aware of their bodies and identities in relation to others, including nature. I wondered, stopping at a bench, my dog happily jumping up to sit

beside me, what if the awareness of being an outcast helps orient us towards nature. In the essay, *Beyond the Human* (2022), the authors note about how, when the status quo becomes toxic and damaging, what is strange and odd can point an alternative route forward. They write that their encounters of marginalized creatures, like endangered birds weaving their nests out of plastic pollution, teach us that those on the outcast can persist and even thrive. They write, “these are astonishing, fugitive presences that haunt our heavily mediated culture with their realness, their grit, and their existence on the margins of human centers, where most of the universe exists anyway” (P. Sinopoulous-Lloyd & S. Sinopoulous-Lloyd, n.p.).

What if outcasts, those on the margins, end up being more conscious about their bodies in relation to place? Does the connection between being an outcast in the outcast help us connect to the geography? Does learning to live in and across the nested systems come from the experience of being outcast, resulting in a more conscious awareness of how to create and live in the margins? I argue that being an outcast in the outcast has allowed for queer people to carve out space for themselves on the margins. After all, as the Sinopoulous-Lloyd’s write, that is “where most of the universe exists anyway” (2022, n.p.).

In reading back through the interviews, as part of the iterative process of narrative hermeneutics, I noticed the deep connection to land and place that my participants and I have experienced living in Fort McMurray. Within the nested systems, geography is an incredibly important piece of our lives as queer people and understanding the connection we have to the geographic region reveals the ways in which we, despite being outcasts in the outcast, have forged deep connections. Below are some of the moments that stood out to me within the collective and individual interviews:



*I feel like our whole lives in Fort McMurray are like centered around these like natural phenomena that happen throughout the year. Like you have the first freeze, and you have like, you know, the river break up, and then you have the wildfire season. Like you have these kinds of points throughout the year that very much like dictate our lives and our isolation. Like, I don't go down to Edmonton. I stop driving, you know, once we have our first big snowfall, so that like for me kicks off a point in the year where we're isolated. So, I think in that way I guess there's a connection to life here and nature that I've never experienced in other places.*

*I grew up, you know, on Sunday mornings from when I was two years old, and they still do it on Sunday mornings, (skiing with) the Jackrabbit cross-country ski program. And I was out on those trails every single day. And that's the first thing that I did when I pulled up in Fort McMurray is I pulled on my Sorel's and ran into the woods.*

*I got to watch like the same river, like from being a newborn baby until now. And like, I know those changes and I know what that looks like in every season, and I know when there's something new, and I know when there's, like, an animal seeing a place transform around you, like, and you're kind of just, like, being able to observe.*

*I just think the rivers are so powerful because even just like my own personal history is like the Athabasca River, just the river break up. Like that's the thing. Like the community, like people are like it's this phenomenon that like we wait for*

*the river to break in the spring and.... my grandpa used to be the person who hung the clock off the bridge to, like, time when the river broke up. And so, it's like those kinds of things are like so, I don't know, like, you hear about, like, the small town I guess, like well, what else we going to do to pass the time?*

*I really like sitting by the river. It's just... It's not like you need to go some... It's not like you need to leave the city to, like, immerse yourself in nature. It's, you're right there. Like, you have to engage with the land to literally get anywhere here.*

*I kind of relate to, like the idea of the climate being a big factor in how I relate to my body here. Like seasonally, like I find my body really changes with the season and I notice that a lot in myself, like winter and summer and then even like the transitional seasons of fall and spring, like my body is very different and the way I feel in my body is very different. And I think also for me, since I grew up here, I can like I kind of situate my body here as like seeing different points in my lifetime been like from childhood to now, like my teen years to adulthood. So, kind of like being here and like, going to like the same place. I'm like, oh, I remember at this age I was here and like, this was how I felt, and this was what was happening. So, kind of almost like holding a history in my body in this place for me.*

Repeatedly, we would discuss our bodies in relation to the seasons. In the sharing of these experiences, we can see how much we have learned to adapt and be reflexive to the changing weather and seasons. How deeply our lives in Fort McMurray, as outcasts in the outcast, are shaped by our geography, and in turn, has connected us more deeply to our bodies.

Ahmed (2006) and Merleau-Ponty imagine that queer and straight bodies exist on an axis on a grid. Straight bodies in our heteronormative society are on the straight horizontal or vertical axis, and queer bodies and people on the diagonal axis. The vertical is then “normative; it is shaped by the repetition of bodily and social actions over time” (p. 66). The vertical is the place from which people can be cast out from, because if the world runs on the horizontal and vertical lines, those diverging are seen as off course. Here, queer bodies and people are those that are bent and crooked. Ahmed argues though that within this orientation, queer people can utilize and even thrive within their positions, through what she calls a queer orientation. A queer orientation would be those that “put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don’t line up, which “by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow other objects to come into view” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107). Seeing the world slantwise then is how queer people in Fort McMurray are learning, by participating in and viewing these objects or moments that are otherwise concealed. Turning towards the slant includes holding a history of place in our bodies, and centering our lives around the seasons, as shared above. Outcasts, by nature of being on the margins, can see the world slantwise. It is in these queer orientations where queer outcasts have learned to live in their geographies, bodies, and homes—not as separate, but truly as interconnected and nested systems that cannot operate separate from one another.

Ahmed (2006) writes that:

Inhabiting the queer slant may be a matter of everyday negotiation. This is not about the romance of being offline or the joy of radical politics (though it can be), but rather the everyday work of dealing with the perceptions of others, with the straightening devices and the violence that might follow. (p. 107)

Kate exemplifies this frustration in relation to the geography, demonstrating the daily work of dealing with people's perceptions:

*They don't know about Fort McMurray that way. They miss out on like those things that we do here that they have no understanding of why we care so much about that and I'm like, I think maybe that's partially why they think of Fort McMurray the way they do, is that they don't think there's like real people here doing real things.*

Instead of allowing the role of outcast to be one of isolation or damnation, a queer orientation from the margins allows for queer bodies to take up “spaces that do not extend their shape, which can in turn work to ‘reorientate’ bodies and space” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 61). As outcasts in the outcast, my participants have worked from the margins to take up spaces that exclude them, marginalize them, or survey them. As part of fighting for their queer identities within Fort McMurray, they have taken on the identity of Fort McMurray as an outcast, fighting for it alongside themselves. I have come to understand that in fighting so hard for space as queer people, you end up also fighting for the space itself.

As I was working through the ideas within this chapter, I kept returning to the moments where we could not quite articulate *why* we felt so strongly about Fort McMurray. Even prior to beginning this research, I wondered about the defensive and prideful way that people would talk about Fort McMurray. Regardless of how people feel about the place, those who have lived there feel an incredible embodied feeling of defensiveness swell up in their guts, defending the place almost on a subconscious level. I realized that, consciously or unconsciously, Fort McMurray has become a layer of ourselves. Fort McMurray is an inseparable part of who we are and is connected to every nested system. We are all outcasts in the outcast, and fiercely defending or

talking about the geography and community within the region has become a part of the way that we have all learned to live across all three nested systems. In learning to feel at home in our bodies and homes, particularly as ‘outcasts’, queer people turned to pride. Pride in our identities, pride in the place we live, and pride in our homes. The pride created through connection, family, geography, and seasonality has helped queer people form strong feelings about the place, because we saw parts of ourselves woven into the streets that we walk on. Off axis, oriented as ‘other’ (Ahmed, 2006), new orientations were carefully formed.

My participants and I sat down in the Wood Buffalo Regional Library, taking off our layers of outdoor clothing, coats stuffed with toques and mittens slung over the backs of our chairs. A tray of Starbucks drinks was placed on the large table that took up most of the small private meeting room. We each took our cups, eagerly seeking out the warmth they would provide. We all laughed because there was a fight over who was going to pick up the drinks—everyone had offered. It was minus forty Celsius outside, and snow was gently falling. I joke with them, easing into our conversation:

*We are at the mercy of what Fort McMurray wants us to be at the mercy of, you know, like driving here this morning it was like, okay, I need to start my car. I need to make sure it's defrosted. I need to do this, and then I need to leave ten minutes early because I'm a nervous driver and like... And everything is dictated because Fort McMurray is doing what she wants today!*

Jaime replies:

*Yeah, never once did I say, I wonder if it's canceled.*

Everyone laughs. The seasons of Fort McMurray are felt deeply in our bodies. None of us could talk about the three nested systems without mentioning the weather, and how the seasons move around us.

As we sit around the table, our conversation continues. Jaime shares:

*I often talk about the community and the people. You go to a store and they're like, 'oh, where are you from?' 'Fort McMurray.' 'Oh, sorry'. And I'm like, actually it's a really nice place to live. Like I love it there.*

Kate nods in agreement, adding:

*As soon as I was here, like the community and the people just made it so fulfilling and we're staying and like that is probably the thing I defend most. Like if I try to explain like the resource extraction and that stuff, I really like stumble over my words and like sometimes where I don't get that right and I'm like, no, it's the community here that is like so valuable and so meaningful and the thing I love the most and like... I am more happy in Fort McMurray than any other city I've lived.*

There are many more examples of us discussing things like loyalty, defensiveness, and pride across all the interviews where, despite the contradictions of the place, we all have pride and love for the place we call home. I share some of these moments found within and across our interviews below:

*There's like, I guess a really strong sense of loyalty to like, this collective identity of, like, being a Fort McMurray-ite and like, what that means and like how it's so different than, like, living anywhere else. It's like a protectiveness of like, you know, like for me, like, this is my home, but it's like a protectiveness of, like,*

*continually seeing over and over and over people come, extract as much as they can out of this region, or come, start something that they know that they couldn't start anywhere else because here you can be a big fish in a little pond and then get to a level of success that they want and then get the eff out and reap the benefits of a place but never invest back into it. And so that's like... I mean that's like a through line through my whole life growing up here is like seeing that like process of like extraction and then no investment and then people just have this negative either experience of the place or a negative perception because not a lot ever gets invested back in to build it up. And so, I get that sense of like, well, who's going to take care of us if we don't take care of us mentality because no one else, you know, everyone just comes to get what they can and then move on and and then turn around and be like, "well, you're doing all this bad stuff in there and we couldn't be associated with that at all."*

*I think I like... I see it a lot. And I see it in like when researchers come in and do, because we're very much in a fishbowl that people want to research for everything, and there is this attitude of like, they don't know us and they're just going to take what we have and leave. Take that knowledge and take that expertise and leave... And that's that's seen as extremely problematic, and I think that that kind of is reflected in the attitude towards oil sands as well. It's like, you know, they... Everyone benefits from the stuff that we do here, and they take, and they take, and they don't really appreciate, or they don't give back to the region. So, it creates this kind of animosity right, of like we're doing all of this stuff for everyone in Canada, and yet we're shat on all the time because like Fort*

*McMurray is terrible. Right? Like that's what the attitude is... There's this idea that like, no one understands us. Like we're this misunderstood child. Like, you can't know Fort McMurray unless you're in Fort McMurray.*

*I don't want the five-year plan anymore. And then even before I like made that switch and started telling people about that being my mindset, I was kind of like, stop judging Fort McMurray. You don't know you're not here like to everyone. Everyone was like why are you still living there?... I felt the defensiveness.*

*There's actually a community here, and almost immediately you get this sense of like defensiveness about the community. It's like you get all these questions like, what are you going to do in Fort McMurray? What are you doing? And you get defensive about it, and you start to be this kind of like protection for the community. It's a very strange switch and it happens like so quickly.*

*The way that you see Fort McMurray, and it's perceived in the story that's told about Fort McMurray, it's very contradictory, I think, the feeling that everybody has about the place, once you've been here. Which is so weird and I'm like, is this like this for all small towns? Like, do people have this weird pride and, like, defiance about the place like in any other small town? Or is it just something about this place? I don't know.*

*Like maybe it also has to do with being like from somewhere that a lot of people love to hate or like are really critical of. You almost like... It's like a pride that develops out of like, no, like you're wrong. Like, let me prove you wrong or like.*



*Like, I don't know. Like a protectiveness because there is so much negativity towards this place. But you're almost like... Yeah. It's like an extra level of protectiveness.*

The protectiveness, the pride, the defensiveness around Fort McMurray and our queer identities are all connected in a paradoxical and incommensurable way, which is exemplified in the quotes above. While we recognize that Fort McMurray holds problematic values and is imbued with frontier masculinities and heteronormativity, we also have unconsciously taken up the role as Fort McMurray's defenders. To know Fort McMurray is to love the place, and I believe that this is because we see ourselves here in deep, unconscious ways.

Within this hermeneutic hold, I have discussed how Fort McMurray and its queer residents are outcasts in the outcast. Both Fort McMurray and queer people have historically been cast within a certain marginalized narrative, often misunderstood, and misrecognized from outsiders. My participants, however, have all discussed that within the outcast, they have become more connected to the geography, the seasonality, and the community. Being outcasts in the outcast has allowed for queer people to carve out space for themselves on the margins. In the next hermeneutic hold, I write about the effects of surveillance on queer bodies, both historically and how it affects my participants to this day.

### **On hiding in plain sight**

Surveillance is defined as close observation. It is the monitoring of behaviour, many activities, or information for the purpose of information gathering, influencing, managing, or directing (Lyon, 2007). The military sphere yields the earliest contemporary examples of bodily discipline and technical advances that are central to surveillance today. State administration,

census gathering, passports and border patrols, workplace monitoring, commercial data collection and cyber monitoring are other types of surveillance (Lyon, 2007).

The surveillance of queer people and bodies is not a new phenomenon. From the first colonial settlers who observed, and then enacted violence against those who did not fit their narrow ideas of gender and sexuality (Morgensen, 2010), to the creation of the police state that continues to target people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, and pansexual and, in particular, racialized queer people, surveillance is a way of enacting control over queerness. Warner (2002) notes that prior to the advent of modern lesbian and gay liberation movements in Canada, those who refused to “succumb to social oppression—were branded as miscreants, condemned as criminal, sinful, deviant, malevolent, or predatory” (p. 3). Queer people were harassed and discriminated against in many ways, including imprisonment and forced psychiatric treatment, which are both ways of controlling and surveilling queer bodies. They were victims of intense violence, subjected to social ridicule and marginalized in their homes and communities. This violence continues to impact queer people to this day. As only one example, surveillance is seen through the ongoing panic surrounding queer education and inclusivity in elementary and high school classrooms (Maine, 2020).

The creation of Canada was and continues to be “a network of institutions through which violence against queer people has been enacted in order to sustain the national space as heterosexual space” (Russell, 2019, p. 20). These institutions include: the literal police and RCMP, the justice system (Dwyer, 2008), and public school classrooms (Maine, 2020; Payne & Smith, 2016). Filax (2006), quoting Foucault, notes that:

An effect of nation building in Canada was ‘to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive

activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation' (Foucault 1980, p. 36 in Filax, p. 77).

Russell (2019) writes that queerness is “frequently marked as excessive, hyper-visible, and perpetually ‘out of place’ - a construction that is affirmed and reproduced by police practices” (p. 20). Foucault notes how conversations around sexuality became administered, allowing for even more surveillance. Under the moralism of cis-heteronormativity, sex and sexuality became something not just that a person judged, “it was a thing one administered... it called for management procedures; it had to be taken charge of by analytical discourses. In the eighteenth century, sex became of ‘police’ matter” (p. 307).

The history and continuation of queer surveillance is not homogenous. As Kafer & Grinberg (2019) note, “surveillance is unevenly distributed and experienced” (p. 597). From class, race, disability, and gender, the ways in which bodies are placed under surveillance varies, just as the severity of the consequences of surveillance vary. For example, transgender people often face medical and legal surveillance to live as they are—something that cisgender people do not experience. Because of this, the “politics of visibility takes a much different shape than for those whose gender identity is under constant scrutiny” (Kafer & Grinberg, 2019, p. 597). The surveillance of trans bodies is apparent, if we look towards any news channel now, we could easily find a headline panicking about trans bodies participating in society in any way, shape, or form. In the United States, there are currently over 300 bills (ACLU, 2023) circulating that target queer bodies and their right to exist, access healthcare, and participate in society. These bills are made possible by the protection of ‘normalcy’ by the settler police state, enforced by white supremacist organizations and governments that are operating on stolen land. The current-day surveillance and criminalization of queer people continues to harm the most marginalized

people, primarily Black, Indigenous, and racialized queer people because racism lives within the prison industrial complex that enforces queer surveillance. After all, the goal of surveillance of queer bodies and people have nearly always been to advance colonial, white supremacist interests (Morgensen, 2010; Raha, 2017).

While this hermeneutic hold could simply be about the effects of surveillance, I have focused on the lack of anonymity, the surveillance, the rural geography, and how my participants have learned how to navigate and negotiate these factors as queer people. This section unpacks the idea of invisibility and visibility as queer people under surveillance in Fort McMurray. Through narrative hermeneutics, I was curious to understand and discuss how queer people have worked within the nested systems to learn to reconcile and live with the surveillance, visibility and recognition that occurs in their daily lives. Through connecting with the community of Fort McMurray, the creation of queer home spaces, and coming into an embodied knowledge of their individual and collective queer bodies, my participants have each learned various ways of navigating and dealing with pervasive surveillance. After all, “queer and trans subjects have long found ways of contesting surveillance to extend their life chances” (Kafer & Grinberg, 2019, p. 598).

My participants and I all sit around the square table in the Wood Buffalo Regional library, a small heater warming the mostly windowed room, snow blowing and falling gently outside. In the moments leading up to this collective interview, as I walked into the library, I noticed a small poster of a pride flag with some dates and times at the bottom of the page was taped to a wall. It was a sign advertising a queer book club for youth hosted by the library team. I was held in place for a minute as I processed what I was looking at. A queer book club here? For youth? I can honestly say I thought that I would never see the day. I wonder what my life would

have been like if I could have gone to the library, a place I visited nearly weekly in my childhood, and known about gay people. Read about gay people. Felt like I could *be* a gay person.

Now, as a queer researcher, returning home to try and understand the place I grew up in, engaging in queer theory, I think of how, previously, queer theorists were geographically situated in cities with academic institutions, making the focus of their work about city life. Much of the literature and documented history within queer studies has focused on urban settings (Johnson et al., 2016), with many queer stories and experiences left out of the conversation—mine and many others, included. Because of the emphasis on larger cities, unintentionally, a narrative has been created that queer people can only exist and thrive in larger cities (Marple, 2005). I think about how Audrey and I grew up here believing that it *was* true – there was no representation of queerness for us. For the two of us, it was going to the city where we found queer people living their lives. Maybe I did too, for a while, believe that queer people could only exist in cities, and for that reason felt the need to come home and prove otherwise.

Audrey shares:

*I didn't really even have the language to describe my inner experience of like identity and sexuality, like, let alone whatever those words were being like positive, negative, safe, unsafe. Like just the fact that it was like, completely erased is like, how could you even like... You can't love something that's completely invisible and erased from a place.*

We both grew up not seeing ourselves in Fort McMurray. Many parts of ourselves were nurtured and cared for, but our queerness was invisible. I knew queer people existed, of course, but I truly believed they existed in cities, not rural places like where I lived. Halberstam (2005)

calls the focus on city queer experiences “metronormativity” (p. 36). Metronormativity highlights the “queer migration from country to city, from rural homophobia to urban liberation - dominating and monopolizing the discursive space of queer life” (Petrychyn, 2016). It perpetuates the idea that modern sexual achievement (being out, open and visibly queer) is the be all and end all, and effectively erases the queer people who are not in urban areas.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fort McMurray’s population was only a few hundred people. Around 1921 there was increased interest in the oil sands, and, by the end of World War II, the population began to increase with oil production. In 1948, Fort McMurray and Waterways (what was a nearby waterway extension of the railway) amalgamated, and became a town in order to receive more provincial funding. By 1966, the population of the town was around two thousand people. Following the boom and bust of the oil sands, in 1995 the City of Fort McMurray and Improvement District No. 143 were amalgamated to form the Municipality of Wood Buffalo. In 1996, the name was changed again to be the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, which includes Anzac, Conklin, Fort Chipewyan, Fort McMurray, Gregoire Lake Estates, Saprae Creek, Janvier, and Fort McKay (Alberta Government, 1996). Presently, while Fort McMurray is often referred to as a city, with a population hovering around eighty-five thousand, it is technically an urban service area within a specialized municipality. From the time I was born to the present, the population of Fort McMurray has more than doubled in size (Statistics Canada, 2021). While the definition of “urban” versus “rural” is interpreted in various ways in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016), and now is defined by population centre sizes (small, medium and large), “the term 'urban' is widely used and one that people intuitively understand – a concentration of population at a high density. It is the opposite of 'rural', where population is not concentrated but dispersed at a low density” (Statistics Canada, 2016). While Fort McMurray is

considered an urban area now, there are many aspects of the place that make it still feel rural, in comparison to a larger Albertan city like Edmonton or Calgary.

Examining the idea of if Fort McMurray is a good place to live created space to hear and explore narratives that validated and examined the complexities of being queer ‘right where they are’. Many rural, queer scholars remind us that queer people exist everywhere—it is just whether we are listening to them or not. Petrychyn (2016) writes, “rural spaces are queer spaces. They have to be, if only for the simple fact that many queers call rural spaces home” (p. 1).

I am reminded of this excerpt from Clare’s (1999) writing:

Queer people- using the narrow definition – don’t live in Port Orford, or at least I never found them. And if we did, we would have to tolerate a lack of community, unspoken disdain, a wicked rumor mill, and the very real possibility of homophobic violence. Now if I moved back and lived quietly, never saying the word dyke but living a woman-centered life, no one would shoot at my house, throw stones through my windshield, or run me out of town...As long as I maintained the balance - my unspoken queerness weighted against their tacit acceptance- I would be fine. (p. 33)

Like Clare, I did not believe that queer people lived in Fort McMurray, and growing up, I certainly never found them. Of course, now I understand queer people have always existed there, it was just that the possibilities for being queer in public within Fort McMurray looked a lot different than they do today, at least for my participants and me. Metronormativity, and a lack of visibility of queerness within Fort McMurray convinced me that, to be out and queer, I had to move away. Otherwise, I would have to face the reality of being queer and surveilled within the urban area. It was a constant negotiation of visibility, safety, and as Clare writes, a maintenance of balance.

Clare (1999) describes how within a larger center; urban anonymity is a protective factor when it comes to surveillance. They write that if they are discriminated against in the city, they will defend themselves in whatever way is necessary, knowing that they will most likely never encounter each other again. However, in their small town, they are incredibly aware of how their queerness is oriented to their surroundings, noting:

If someone harassed me- the balance somehow broken, some invisible line over-stepped, drunken bravado overcoming tacit acceptance - I would know him, maybe work with his wife at the cannery, see his kids playing up the river at Butler Bar, encounter him often enough in the grocery store and post office. He would likewise know where I lived, with whom I lived, what car I drove, and where I worked. This lack of anonymity is a simple fact of rural life, one that I often miss in the city, but in the face of bigotry and violence, anonymity provides a certain level of protection. (p. 35)

Clare highlights how rural queer people face different obstacles of in/visibility than those who live in the city. The decision to live in a rural or urban area is an incredibly difficult choice to make for a lot of queer people, whose safety and access to community may come more easily in a city. My participants all shared stories of this kind of anonymity, echoing similar experiences as Clare:

*I feel like in a way, it's like a small-town thing plus it's queerness thing to feel like I just need at least one safe space that I know is always going to be there and like that is somewhere I can always be truly unguarded. So, like, queer or not, like, I think a small town, like that factor, will always be there just being, you know, under surveillance or like people knowing each other's business. But then*



*compounding queerness on top of that is like another level of like, yeah, like there are public safety concerns also.*

*I think the anonymity is huge. Like, you know, living in (big city), you know, no one knows who you are. Like, it doesn't matter. Go do whatever you want.*

*As queer people, that's another layer of going into spaces with walls up. Going into certain areas with your guard up. Not feeling like you can be fully visible because you don't know if it's safe. So, I think that's like... It's hyper you're hyper aware here too, in a small town because you're hyper visible.*

*I also spent like some time really deciding if I wanted to be that visibly queer because that was kind of like, well, you can't go back in the closet here. Like, you can't, not like in (big city) where like, you can kind of be a little more anonymous and, and like have, you know, different people that you're around where you're like code switching in different ways. Here it's kind of like no, you have these 20,000 people that are in the community that you see all the time and run into, like at the grocery store and all of these places, you're like, okay, this is my identity. I've made this choice... Everyone here knows me. I also feel like in a small town, like because everyone is so much more well known.*

As part of living in a rural area, my participants, as openly queer people, navigate the surveillance in various ways. Their tactics for living in Fort McMurray include code switching and being aware of their surroundings for safety. Throughout all the interviews, they were all acutely aware of how they were oriented as queer people in Fort McMurray. By this, I mean that in many of the stories and anecdotes that were shared, there was an undercurrent of the various

negotiations that they undertook whenever they were in public spaces. Do they choose to go in a certain store? Do they go in the morning or evening? Do they just order online? While these three people are unique in that they are all more public figures in the community, they all are still acutely aware of the surveillance that takes place, anticipating the reactions and engagement from others.

Kate shares:

*When I think of like the city (of Fort McMurray) as a whole, there's definitely spaces where I can kind of feel what Jaime is describing (hyper awareness of body) and kind of like a fear or like a something doesn't feel right in your body, and we know the surveillance feeling or that politics are kind of like different here.*

The rural geography, in combination with a conservative politics, has created an environment in which each of us have to make very thoughtful and considered decisions when it comes to sharing our queer identities.

While the geography is important to contextualize and understand surveillance of queer bodies, I move forward to discuss queerness in relation to the second nested system: homes. The study of queerness as it relates to home life has been extensively written across a variety of fields, from historical documentation of queer inner lives (Potvin, 2021; Salter, 2020), to feminist studies (Konrad, 2014), geography (Gorman-Murray, 2012), child studies (Kokkola, 2014), and migrant studies (Büchler, 2022). The topic of discussion varies, covering everything from familial violence (Linde, 2019), domesticity (McKinney, 2010), to chosen family support networks (Andreassen, 2023). After colonization, when any non-normative gender and sexualities were criminalized and stigmatized (Morgensen, 2010), the private space of the home

was the most “appropriate site of sexual activity, although any such activity outside the institution of heterosexual marriage has often been heavily sanctioned” (Kentlyn, 2008, p. 329). In the United Kingdom in 1957, the Wolfenden report was the first to recommend that “homosexual behaviour between consenting adults *in private* be no longer a criminal offence” (Kentlyn, 2008, p. 329). This report had effects on the United States, Canada, and Australia, where the “private space of the home became the first legally ‘safe space’ for the exploration and enactment of queer identity” (Kentlyn, 2008, p. 329). Home spaces for queer people, away from public life, have been spaces to explore gender and sexuality in ways that public, heteronormative spaces have not allowed.

Recommendations to relegating non-normative gender and sexualities to private spaces have also had negative effects. It siloed queerness to private moments, evoking shame, as if there was something about our identities that we need to hide. As only one example, I think of Pierre Trudeau's 1967 statement where he introduced the controversial Omnibus bill to the House of Commons that called for changes to the Criminal Code of Canada, which included advocating for the decriminalization of homosexual acts. In one interview (CBC, 1967), he stated, "there's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation". While seemingly ‘progressive’ at the time, his statement perpetuated the narrative that queerness is inherently sexual, and not social or political, and something that needs to remain outside of public spaces. Despite this, queer activists have pushed back, refusing that our homes are the only spaces that we should be allowed to be. In the Gay Liberation Front’s manifesto, one of their demands was “that gay people be free to hold hands and kiss in public” (GLF, 1979, n.p.), amongst many other calls for radical change and dismantling of heteronormativity.

During my conversations with my participants, our homes were most frequently described as refuge from the surveillance that occurred within the various spaces that we all work, live, and exist within in Fort McMurray. Nowhere was it clearer the stark boundary between the outside and the inside than when we talked about our home spaces. The creation of a queer home was a way in which my participants navigated both the in/visibility and surveillance they experience within the geography of Fort McMurray. Kentlyn (2008) describes how a queer home “provides a safe space where people can cast off the constraints of heteronormativity and do varieties of gender and sexuality which would be sanctioned in other contexts; thus the home becomes a subversive space” (p. 327). Ahmed (2006) also discusses queer homes, writing:

To queer homes is also to expose how ‘homes’ as spaces of apparent intimacy and desire, are full of rather mixed and oblique objects. It is also to suggest that the intimacy of the home is what connects the home to other, more public, spaces. (p. 176)

Here, we can understand how living in queer homes is intricately connected to the nested systems, as the home is not simply a building, but rather a space that is closely intertwined with their geographies and their bodies, and I am reminded of Maynard and Betasamosake Simpson’s (2022) letters, where Betasamosake Simpson writes:

Home is never just your home. It is not an enclosure. It is not property with a picket fence and a guard dog. It is a space created by relationality, constantly visited by insects, mice, squirrels, bears, spirits, winds and rain, plants and medicines, and this visiting forms the network that is the container of home. (p. 135)

Our homes are more than four walls, rather, entire ecosystems that provide us with an abundance of possibilities.

Of course, these descriptions of home are ones that not all queer people experience. Home lives for queer people can be the opposite of these descriptors – tense, unsafe and guarded. This phenomenon is studied and explored in many other studies as I have mentioned earlier, and for the purposes of this dissertation my interpretation of home rests within the nested systems. Our homes are places that are deeply connected to the way we can maneuver around Fort McMurray at large. As Massey (2005) states, place is formed out of the various social relations interacting in a specific location. Therefore, a queer home as a safe space is then produced by careful and chosen dynamics and interactions of the person/people living within the home. For my participants, in creating and nurturing our home spaces we have learned to prioritize care for both our communities and our bodies.

While surveillance occurs nearly continuously for queer people outside of home, queer home spaces are places where they can be themselves - not seen by the outside. Each of my participants note this, particularly within the second interview that focused in on home as a nested system:

*I feel like because we're so visible in such a small town in these roles that we're all like, having to be in, and be models in and all this stuff. Sometimes I think that makes it so that when I get home, I'm sometimes like the worst version of myself.*

*I know that there is no surveillance, I guess (at home). That would be how, you know, we move through the community. Highly visible... And I think that is why I've been, you know, like the word intentional keeps coming up but like, protective also because of that. It's like that is the one place that I don't want to experience that level of visibility or expectation or surveillance. And so in order to preserve*

*that, then I do have to also be intentional about who is coming in and out or...*

*You know what I mean?*

*I feel like it's (home) the one, one of the very few places that I can truly relax.*

*Like my nervous system can actually relax. Not like, oh, I'm doing something relaxing, so I'm not feeling actively, like, stressed out, but like, actually, really take a breath out and exhale. And, like. Yeah. Being more soft, like, I don't... I know that there is no surveillance, I guess. That would be how, you know, we move through the community. Highly visible. So going into... And I think that is why I've been you know like the word intentional keeps coming up but like protective also because of that. It's like that is the one place that I don't want to experience that level of visibility or expectation or surveillance. And so in order to preserve that, then I do have to also be intentional about who is coming in and out.*

Behind the closed doors of their private homes, each participant and their friends, their partners, their families, all have refuge from surveillance. While understanding the complexities of home spaces can be interpreted, interacted with, and discussed in hundreds of ways, what intrigued me was Ahmed's (2006) discussion on queerness and home spaces. She writes about how homes are spaces in which queerness can be created, nurtured, protected, and experienced in joyful ways. Each of my participants expressed the kinds of surveillance and visibility they experience in Fort McMurray, due to their jobs, their activism, and the small-town nature of Fort McMurray. Their homes became spaces away from prying eyes, expectant demands, and heteronormativity. These spaces are what they describe as "sanctuaries", a place to "actually relax", be "more soft", and somewhere where "I can always be truly unguarded." In contrast to

the surveillance felt within Fort McMurray, home is a space where they can be without expectation and demands. Two of my participants note:

*I think I'm me without expectations... Like being able to be unapologetically queer at home. But on top of that, I think even in queer spaces, there is a certain level of expectation that we are just by nature of who... The roles that we play I guess in the community that there is not that expectation at home either.*

*How visible you are in Fort McMurray with it being such a small town and I feel like because we're so visible in such a small town in these roles that we're all like, having to be in, and be models in and all this stuff. Sometimes I think that makes it so that when I get home, I'm sometimes like the worst version of myself because all day I have been like having to be this like, you know, on the (activist committee) or a (job title) or a (job title) or like all these things. And then I get home and I'm like, woah, that was like all the energy I had to be a good person, and now I'm going to probably like, cry a little bit and be in my safe space and like that's, you know, it's nice to think that I have that space, because what if I didn't?*

Ahmed (2006) writes, “for some queers, at least, homes are already rather queer spaces, and they are full of the potential to experience the joy of deviant desires” (p. 176). So, in creating a subversive, queer home space that nurtures and protects them, the home space serves multiple functions. The first, is that within our homes, we have learned to nurture ourselves. To create time and space outside of the peering eyes and demanding stares. Home is a retreat, carefully curated and guarded. Queer people, despite the nosy neighbours or the judging eyes that rake over our skin, have in many ways *had* to find places away from surveillance. Home as a private

space, while historically was perhaps the only place to exist safely, is still important to recognize as an incredibly important space of gathering, of recharging, and of existing.

The second, when my participants and I focused on the topic of home, many stories and memories were shared, but a word that kept being repeated was intentionality. Ahmed (2006) writes that this process of intentional curation, “the work of inhabitation” (p. 11), occurs through the process of becoming intimate with where one is located. This creation is:

An intimacy that feels like inhabiting a secret room that is concealed from the view of others. Loving one’s home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one’s body...home as *overflowing* and *flowing over*.” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11)

Intentional creation and curation of a queer home was a necessary factor in combatting surveillance and again, nurturing their queer identities within the nested systems. Examples of this intentionality is seen in each of these interview moments:

*I think like the the artwork and the artifacts that I have in my home and that I surround myself with, I just have a lot of meaning for me. And to create little spaces where I feel safe and comforted and can kind of go to when things are like crazy and stressful and to to have that that space to just settle. And for me, that's a lot of like... I like reading and books and just like that comfort of home, I guess. And then for the last couple of years, like trying to I guess create this space in our lives for a little human has meant a lot of like very intentional shifts in our home to create that space. So, it just feels much more intentional.*

*I think for me having like the artwork in my home is very intentional. Like it's like mostly done by my friends. Like friends who are artists or like trying to have a*



*space that I can look at and just feel also like the presence of my friends, my family, you know, people that inspire me or objects that inspire me and books. Like I have a lot of books in my home because that's like, like being surrounded by books has always felt like, very comforting to me. Like I love being in libraries. I love that feeling of like, you know, like being cozy and just like, surrounded by books.*

*Every apartment that I've ever lived in, I have painted every wall. Because I like when... It needs to be me. Like I can't live in a space that doesn't reflect right. I mean, it just doesn't feel safe. It doesn't feel homely. So, I think I've always done whatever I can to kind of make that space.*

*I just know I'm going to stay here. And also, like that, like making it more a queer space, like you said, like more like queer art and queer books. Like, so, like I never really owned a collection of books and now I'm being really intentional about not only like purchasing books that I think are reflective of things I care about, but like displaying them in a way that like shows people that are in my home like the things that I've read and care about and are interested in and like are reflective of me in that. Like having a bookshelf with lots of books on it is a nice thing. And it's also the first time that, like my partner and I lived together. We were together for four years before we moved in together and so that makes it kind of like special and different and not like any other place I've lived.*

The intentional curation and creation of home spaces have ensured that they have a space to express their queerness that is not possible within the larger nested system of Fort McMurray,

because of the ways that they are surveilled in public. Homes, however, can be filled with all the things that make them, them, which provides a space to relax – and even be their ‘messiest’ selves. These quotes highlight how queer homes can be expressive, safe, and special.

Now, focusing on the final nested system, the body, I discuss the ways in which queer people in their bodies, are hiding in plain sight. In Sumara’s (2020) essay on the power of not passing, through a hermeneutic reflection, he investigates his time as a Dean of Education. Within his role, he found himself as a queer person trying to fit within the heteronormativity of the institution he was working for. Eventually, amidst the repetition of normative acts like attending dinners, donning a suit and tie, talking and meeting with faculty members, he became disoriented from his previous counter normative queer ways. In other words, he lost his connection to self and became enveloped in the normativity of straight, cisgender culture. So much so that, he writes:

I had become unrecognizable to him [his former partner] and to myself—an impersonation of a normative Dean of Education that I was unable to shed after taking of the suit and tie. I was no longer able to pass as the person I remembered myself to be. (2020, p. 7)

All of us, as queer people, have ‘become straight’ in many instances. Perhaps, like for Sumara, it is because of job requirements, or perhaps it is geography or safety or family that require us to be invisible. What struck me in Sumara’s (2020) writing though, is the idea of recognition. So, what does it mean to recognize?

There are a variety of distinct definitions, (1) an act of intellectual apprehension, (2) a form of identification, (3) the act of acknowledging or respecting another being. Important to this hold is the third type of recognition. Rooted in a philosophical realm, it is taken to mean that not only is recognition an important means of valuing or respecting another person, but it is also

fundamental to understanding ourselves. What happens, then, if we apply this definition to surveillance and in/visibility? Who are we? How are we recognized? How are we seen? How does how we are seen or not seen impact us? Sumara became unrecognizable to both himself and a loved one through ongoing misrecognition and heteronormativity. In this process, he was then recognized differently within his position, seen by others differently as well. To pass or not pass is also about in/visibility and surveillance. Who is seeing you? What are they seeing or not? In some spaces, a queer person may choose to ‘pass’ by making parts of themselves invisible, and conversely, as my participants can attest, are often misrecognized, their queerness made invisible by others even when my participants *want* to be visible. There is a complicated relationship that queer people have with our identities and the decisions we make to disclose who we are within heteronormative spaces. While many of the ways that we are oriented as queer people in Fort McMurray is determined by the gendered geography of space/place of the region, as discussed in the previous hold, we also deal with the complexity of revealing our queerness or concealing it.

Looking historically, investigations into queer criminalization often failed to recognize women and transgender people. While gay men were overtly targeted by sodomy laws and institutional policing and more likely to be imprisoned (Russell, 2019), the surveillance and visibility of queer women varied. Lamble (2009) writes that the “capacity to ‘not see’ or ‘not know’ queer bodies and sexualities is not simply a matter of inadvertent omission but involves willful acts of ignorance” (p. 112). Jaime shares her experience of being a queer woman helping organize events within Fort McMurray. Even though she volunteers and has had conversations about her queer identity, her sexuality is often misrecognized because she is married to a man.

*I've been involved for years as a queer person, and they still call me an ally.*

Here, we can see how willful acts of ignorance occur. Despite all the ways in which Jaime has identified herself, people fail to recognize that a femme woman married to a man could possibly be queer.

*You want to be seen for who you are. Right? And but like, how how do you make that happen when there is the ignorance that exists in society in the way that you are, is read as straight. A straight woman. Right?*

For Jaime, this is an ongoing painful and frustrating act of misrecognition that contributes to her exhaustion in finding spaces where she is not rendered invisible.

As part of hiding in plain sight, is the notion of self-disciplining the body. As Shogan (1999) writes through a Foucauldian lens, the “regulation of time, space, and movement [to] train, shape and impress bodies with the habituated gestures, procedures, and values of a discourse” (p.9). The idea of self-discipline is often considered a good thing. In the field of education, self-discipline is seen as advantageous, even, where one person can dedicate themselves to work, or to study. Discipline establishes “standards of achievement, behaviour, or performance for specified tasks in relation to the physical and social spaces within which these occur. Everyone engaged in or by a discipline is measured in relation to these standards” (Filax, 2006, p.4). However, can discipline also be a negative? I argue that the disciplining of the queer body is an act of violence that occurs daily to queer people. For example, as four queer cisgender women, we are disciplined and standardized to a certain behaviour within heteronormative society, and this disciplining of the body results in “knowledge about the ‘feminine’ and through constraint produce the subject who controls and shapes one’s body in an effort to conform these homogenous standards” (Helstein, 2007, p. 84). This is also seen within an earlier chapter, on

where my dad works, where we can understand how discipline operates within the broader socio-political sphere.

de Beauvoir (1949) states, “one is not born a woman, but becomes one”. In other words, learning about *how* we are supposed to be as ‘male’ and ‘female’ is taught. The disciplinary embodiment of gender makes gender feel ‘natural’ to most people. Within frontier masculinity, this ‘natural embodiment’ is felt intensely. Consequently, the prevailing story that gender “entails a coherence of bodies, behaviour, desire, and practice persists despite influential work by some theorists of gender who have attempted to disrupt the assumption that behaviour naturally follows from bodies” (Filax, 2006, p.5). This disciplining of bodies is seen within the surveillance that occurs to queer people in Fort McMurray.

Kate shares:

*I think I mean; I think in in being in different spaces, I'm more or less aware of my body and I think, you know, having certain experiences kind of like sit in yourself, in ways... In your body that you might not be conscious of. So like walking into a room where you're just like, something doesn't feel right, like you don't... Your body is reacting to something that isn't necessarily like conscious, but for some reason, like your body's trying to tell you something. And I think that that that is a very real experience for me, I think. And it's different, I think, in Fort McMurray than other places that I've lived. Just I mean, we've talked a lot about kind of the surveillance, and I think that it kind of impacts at the level of the body as well.*

Here, Kate discusses the unconscious recognition of discipline in action. While she cannot identify why her body is reacting, she feels the ongoing surveillance that is required to police and enforce heteronormativity.

Passing or not passing, as discussed by Sumara (2020), is not merely a choice of navigating internalized heteronormativity, rather, it is a safety tactic that queer people have developed in response to continuously changing spaces that could leave queer people vulnerable and/or unsafe. Kate's body reacting in space is like a giant embodied siren, warning signal wailing loudly. Hiding in plain sight is a learned tactic that queer people engage with to live in our current world. Being aware of our bodies in every space as queer people is learned because of how we are oriented towards 'normalcy'. We may think that it is a privilege to have the safety of passing – and for many people it is. For my participants and I, most spaces we go in to are safe ones, and we can share and disclose to others about our queerness or choose not to. For many transgender and non-binary people, that may not be choice they even have. However, self-disciplining of the body and of queer identity through, for example, acts of non-disclosure, can be a normative response to aggressive acts of misrecognition.

To be misrecognized is a type of in/visibility. Within this hold, while surveillance and in/visibility are very present in the daily lives of my participants, I noticed there was also a common theme of being invisible within the small queer community of Fort McMurray as queer femmes. In a conversation, that I share here in full, we discuss the ways in which we are recognized and misrecognized, rendered invisible, or visible:

*I think just the way that I present... People aren't going to look at me and be like, 'oh, you're queer'. Right? And so it becomes kind of like... It has to be almost like a choice to disclose because it's not going to be kind of innately known, you know,*

*unless someone else is queer or part of the community, they might not pick up on some of kind of the ways in which I am queer in my body. So I think that, yeah, it is it's kind of like a choice of disclosure or not in some spaces that I'm in. And whether that's actually appropriate or whether it's not, or whether it's like, you know, sometimes for me it's a decision of whether it's useful or not. And I think that for me, it's also true within the 2SLGBTQ community. I also feel invisible in the community. And I've had multiple instances where people... I've been involved for years as a queer person and still call me an ally. And so, like, I'm not visible or recognized within the community either. And so, it's very much like that is also harmful. You know, I feel it in my body, I feel that. And it's almost like I... Trying to be in your body in certain ways, in in the space, in the community, to out yourself. Like it's a very strange experience.*

*I note:*

*I think historically, of all the ways that, like queer people have created codes and signals and dressing of indication and, you know, long before it was, you know, when it was, at least in North America, more acceptable to be queer and how we still continue to do that to signal. And even though it's not a hanky code or it's not whatever necessarily, it's still, you know, the ways that we choose to, like, adorn ourselves or not, or like what we wear or not, or how our hair is or not, it still somehow is signaling or not who we are, but then also the stereotypes that come with it. If you don't look a certain way or not. I think about often when I had very short hair and would dress, like I was read as queer immediately, and now I'm growing out my hair and I'm not as much... So, there's that disconnect between*

*what we like and what we want to do with our bodies, but then also the codes of signaling, you know, who we are at our core as well. And like, what happens when they don't align?*

Kate adds:

*Yeah, I really feel that. That I just want to exist as the person that I look like but then it just feels like there's so few other ways to communicate, like to your own community or to the broader community about your identity. And as Jaime said, is that even useful or appropriate or valuable or like? But like all those things aside, sometimes I just want to be visibly queer regardless of the utility and like, then that... Yeah. What does that leave femme queer folks with?*

Jaime replies:

*Yeah. You want to be seen for who you are. Right? And but like, how do you make that happen when there is the ignorance that exists in society in the way that you are, is read as straight. A straight woman. Right?*

I add:

*Yeah. And then it's like, what are the ways that... I get that identify and, you know, wearing certain things was, was helpful at one point for folks. But at what point does it then circle back and is just harm, right? That as Audrey said, these things that we were supposed to be breaking norms and transgressing, but yet we see a femme with long hair and assume straight. And how is that radical or how is that, you know, how do we... How do we then exist in a community or a space that's supposed to be safe, but then we're invisible in it? Right. Like I think that word invisible is such a strong one because we could be invisible to both communities,*



*straight and, and queer and the effect that has on us that maybe we don't even really... Like the day to day, just like wearing down of like no one saw me today. Or in order for someone to see me, I had to dramatically alter who I was. And that also didn't feel good.*

Jaime finishes, saying:

*Right. Yeah. I mean, I think like, I've talked about this before, but, like, it almost is like you don't exist at all. Like, if you aren't seen in either space as who you actually feel yourself to be, are you even that person? Like, are you even that identity like? It becomes this kind of like existential crisis of like, do I even exist? Like, is this real?*

My participants and I all present more femme, which leads to a misrecognition of self from others. Because there is an expectation that queer people dress a certain way, when we choose to dress in traditionally 'masculine' or 'feminine' ways, we are not seen as queer. Femme presenting queer people are again, hiding in plain sight. Queer, yet misrecognized. In both queer and non-queer spaces, femme presenting queer people often have their identities erased or rendered invisible. Femme invisibility has been researched since the early 1990s (McCann & Killen, 2019). Femmes are more perceived as heterosexual because of their gender presentation, whereas "masculine-presenting or gender-crossing appearance is read as queer" (p. 136). So, while on one hand, this invisibility means that we are less likely to experience homophobic violence or discrimination within Fort McMurray, the discrimination and invisibility within the queer community creates a "pernicious homophobia that can only see queerness according to certain logics of self-presentation" (McCann & Killen, 2019, p.136).

Kate remarks:

*How like invisible sometimes I am in the community or how sometimes queer people are so like invisible in their own communities... You're not out in all spaces. And I was thinking about, I'm really trying to be out at my workplace as much as possible... There's only so many times where it's appropriate to share your orientation, even to have all the rainbow flags and like, do all the things, that I still feel kind of invisible in my own community. And I was talking to a colleague about this who is also queer, and she said, it's really not a privilege to be invisible in your own community. And I thought... that was probably a fair thing to say. But I also feel a certain amount of privilege that I can be invisible.*

Kate, in our final individual interview together notes:

*Yeah. And it's, it's never going to... I don't want to say never. It's often very difficult to to be seen in those spaces. You have to try so hard that it becomes not you anymore, because you're trying so hard... I'd say it's it's true within the community as well, like within the LGBTQ community as well. I'm not sure if there is an existing space right now in Fort McMurray where I guess 'presenting straight' people are seen and have like safe space.*

In both queer and non-queer spaces, there are complex contradictions in femme in/visibility. They both rely on explicit and policed forms of gender presentation - ones that are reinforced by the themes of frontier masculinity and heteronormativity that I have written about throughout this dissertation. As McCann and Killen (2019) write:

Femme belonging relies on a specific kind of exclusion- maintaining the queer, excluding the straight - that may inadvertently cement what appears to be 'queer enough',

thereby undermining the potential to see feminine presentation as queer in the first instance. (p. 145)

Audrey shares:

*I'm just like the most empowered I feel is in my body is when I'm like a queer femme, and not trying to be like, okay, I need to like find more symbols and signals that I'm queer because so often that also means like, well, I need to like, flip this gender norm to be read as queer, but I'm like, but do I actually want to do that to be more me and my body? Or do I want to do that to be read more queer? Because those are two very different things. And so it's like how much of like my experience of being a queer person in my body is like just needing to be perceived by others versus like, actually feeling like myself in my body.*

Femme in/visibility was not a discussion I anticipated happening when I began the interview process. However, I believe it is an important aspect of understanding the complexity of living across the nested systems in Fort McMurray. The ongoing misrecognition of their identities extends across Fort McMurray and has significant impacts on their lives.

Surveillance happens at every level of life and is experienced differently by people who are in the outcast. Black and Indigenous bodies are surveilled and policed more heavily than White ones. Transgender bodies are surveilled and policed more heavily than cisgender ones. All outcasts, those who do not fit within what has been defined as 'normal', are constantly under these levels of surveillance. Despite the challenges of in/visibility, surveillance, and disciplining of queer bodies, my participants have learned to live within the nested systems, finding space for visibility and strength within community. I return to Sumara's (2020) notes on passing, where he writes:

Ironically, my most profound shame, the one that has been the most productive as a site of learning, was *not* shame associated with the way I was recognized or misrecognized as a Dean of Education; it was how I came to misrecognize me. (p. 11)

From femme in/visibility to frontier masculinity and heteronormativity, to ongoing surveillance and policing of queer bodies, I understand that a learned tactic of survival in Fort McMurray was to pass. Now, my participants have shown me the power in not passing.

In the next hermeneutic hold, I move to a conversation around the juxtaposition of seemingly incommensurable experiences of living in Fort McMurray, sharing both the inseparable negative and positive experiences of my participants.

### **On when the worst thing is the best thing**

In the collective interviews with my participants, it became interesting to me how we returned to certain topics, and what exactly those topics were. In one moment or day, we would discuss an idea in a positive light and, in another moment or day, comment on how it would also negatively affect our lives. This push and pull was intriguing to me. Of course, not everything is clearly bad or good, to make a blanket conclusion would not take in the diversity of experiences. However, upon noticing these contradictions, I began to put together the choices, sacrifices and reconciliations we have all made within each nested system. As I have previously written, each participant adamantly stated that they believe Fort McMurray is a good place to live. We have all felt valued and seen, which is a vastly different narrative than the one we commonly hear. However, through the process of interpretation, I was made aware of the incommensurable experiences we have all had. The conversations walked the line between positive and negative

with each story shared. While it may be thought that incommensurability is a problem or a negative thing, for queer people living in Fort McMurray, it is ultimately a necessary and unavoidable condition that is part and parcel of living there. The worst thing *is also* the best thing, and queer people have learned to live with both the good and the bad. They have reconciled the seemingly irreconcilable. Within this hold, I discuss three incongruous factors of living within the nested systems, and how my participants have learned to live through and with them.

Connected to the discussions on in/visibility and surveillance, my participants all discussed how proud and comfortable they were being queer, even within a community that makes it often extremely difficult to be queer within. They are proudly queer, but they are not the only ones. They are all proudly queer, *but* they also have found it difficult to be part of the handful of openly queer and publicly engaged people in Fort McMurray. As mentioned in previous holds, all my participants are engaged in meaningful activist and education work alongside nurturing and caring for their queer selves. While they have all made decisions to be openly queer and use their time to engage with the community, they have found it hard, and often exhausting, to be one of the few queer people that people in Fort McMurray engage with daily. This, combined with the rural geography of Fort McMurray, has created an ecosystem where they are surveilled, and an immense amount of pressure is put on them to ‘get it right’. Below are a handful of examples of this pressure:

*You're really taking a risk by putting yourself out there and getting it wrong and not just getting it wrong for yourself, but for the whole community that you, you know, quote unquote represent.*

*Yeah, I think we feel... any like kind of statement we make has to be so well thought out because like we're representing every queer person in some of these people's eyes. And so then we don't want to take like some really big risks or like really strong political stances and I think in a way that makes it hard to be progressive sometimes because there's so much pressure and because you're like some people's entire representation of like that specific identity.*

*In one way it's like, yeah, it sucks to then be this figurehead because you really don't have the same level of just ease and the ability to be a messy human because so much is riding on maybe like you as that representative now to be like, well, I've got to be the model minority essentially. But it's like, okay in doing that, like there is a lot of potential to like create major change.*

The challenge of getting it right was felt by each participant throughout all the interviews, regardless of the nested system on which we were focusing. This is connected to the surveillance and in/visibility that queer people face but, within Fort McMurray, is taken to another level. Although they are proud to be queer, the pressure of being some of the only queer people that cis, straight people in Fort McMurray are engaging with has added a lot of mental pressure. Further, they hold fear or resentment towards being tokenized as part of the perceptions and often reality, that they are the only queer people that some people know.

One participant shares:

*Something I think I, I've always struggled with here is like it's very easy to become the token in whatever identity that you hold and that you like invest a lot into, because it's so small (Fort McMurray). So like you can be the only one in like a million different like, roles, but like you could be the only one of that. Or you can*

*easily become like the representative of that. And so it's like it's... I find it's really hard to exist here sometimes as like a really complex, like multi-dimensional person because it's really easy to just kind of like for one part of like identity to be really amplified and then to feel almost like a pressure that like, well, this is all on me because like, I'm the person that, that is, you know, visible. Or I'm the person that has like some sort of level of influence or power here, so I better like, make the most of it...I do have kind of like two separate (her name) that have existed here. Like the (her name) that like wasn't visibly queer and like didn't even have the language or any community, like growing up, to be queer, to like to say that I knew that that's what I was. And then the (her name) that is now like super visibly queer and like a leader in the queer community... But it's very easy for to kind of then like for that to almost like overtake, I find, like everything else and be like, but wait a second. Like I'm also all these other things. And I also like feel that there's a really big like public presence that we have here. And then it's like, but how many people here know the real me or like know me and all my complexity? And how many people just know my public facing persona or the roles that I that I have here and like the space that I hold for others here? But like, who knows, like the me when it's like, okay, this is like unguarded.*

This participant highlights that while she is now in a queer leadership role, people are sometimes missing out on her as a full and complex person. Tokenism is based upon one person being included in a group or community to show that a group is diverse. Tokenism occurs with many marginalized groups, including BIPOC individuals, and has a serious impact on an individual's mental health. It leads to depression, burnout, and attrition, as well as higher

attention to others (leading to pressure), and further separation from those in non-tokenized groups. (Gillespie, 2022). While this participant is glad that she is now openly queer and a leader in the community, the worst part is that she becomes siloed into her identity, with people failing to see her as a complex human.

Green (2008) writes about the failures of not seeing people complexly:

Let me tell you what is, in my opinion, the central problem of human existence: I am stuck in my body, in my consciousness, seeing out of my eyes. I am the only me I ever get to be, and so I am the only person I can imagine endlessly complexly. That's not the problem, actually. The problem is you. You are so busy taking in your own wondrousness that you can't be bothered to acknowledge mine. (n.p.)

Here, the worst thing is not being recognized and seen as a complex human being, beyond and including queerness. Within the confines of Fort McMurray, my participants deal with both hyper visibility and invisibility, while dealing with being tokenized and misunderstood. Layers and layers of contradictions occurring simultaneously, which have deeply impacted their experiences living within the nested systems.

In our conversations, I noted that participants felt the absence of queer spaces. Kate shares:

*I was really thinking about like more ways to live as like... my authentic self in Fort McMurray and be more like visibly queer and just like, really like honor that part of my identity a lot more in Fort McMurray because it's so like, limited up here, is one of the things I was feeling from our discussions, is there's not a lot of venues to be super queer.*



Unlike bigger Canadian cities such as Toronto or Vancouver, there are very few queer spaces in Alberta. In Calgary, there is the Backlot, Rising Tides, Twisted Elements, Texas Lounge, or the bathhouse. The queer spaces can be counted on only one of my hands. In Fort McMurray there is... nothing. There are of course, private spaces in both geographies that are made queer, such as underground bars, kitchen parties, homes for the outcast and gatherings of queer friends and families. However, I am specifically referring to public spaces, with building codes and public taxes and a door that might ding when you open it. Queer space is often understood as a group of venues, community organizations, and different housing options with higher amounts of queer residences. Queer space has been widely conceptualised as a site of resistance, since “the presence of queer bodies in particular locations forces people to realise... that the space around them..., the city streets, the malls and the motels, have been produced as (ambivalently) heterosexual, heterosexist and heteronormative” (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 18). Queer spaces, produced and created by and for queer people usually are within urban city centres, hence why metronormativity assumes that all queer people live only in cities. The normalization of queer public spaces in cities “has become invested with political meaning, since visibility and recognisability are seen as proof of the legitimisation of queer presence in public space” (Stella, 2012, p. 4). Public queer space challenges the stigmatizing in/visibility of queerness, pushing against the perceptions and beliefs that queerness should be relegated to the bedroom or private homes/spaces. Queer spaces are “based on the principle of reclaiming public space and making queerness visible” (Stella, 2012, p. 4).

I remember visiting the Village in Toronto as a child with my dad, the memory as vivid in my mind as if it only happened yesterday. It is a warm, sunny, and bright Sunday in 2010. I am fifteen years old, and I am sitting on a long wooden bench outside a restaurant on Church

Street in Toronto. It is nice enough outside that I do not need a sweater. It is early afternoon, and I can hear a cacophony of sounds around me—cars rushing by, snippets of conversations from people passing me on the sidewalk, music coming out of a loudspeaker, and the high heels of a drag queen clicking on a makeshift stage. I am sitting with my dad and his friends, who raise their glasses of mimosas in the air, gesturing for me to lift my glass of plain orange juice the same way, with smiles on their faces. Clinking our drinks together, they laugh loudly, smiling lovingly at each other.

There are no queer spaces like this in Fort McMurray... but they are being created.

It is only recently that queer community events outside private homes have been happening in Fort McMurray. Pride YMM, the only queer organization in Fort McMurray, organized the first pride week in the region in 2017. Since then, they host a variety of events, from educational to community-building. They hold a transgender support group, host family fun fairs, and cheer on local drag queens. Though, as one participant notes:

*I was kind of thinking so many of the events where maybe there'd be a venue for that, like it's more geared towards kids. Like we, we have drag story time here. I think they're going to try to make it more of like a monthly thing, which is great, and like, I will try to go and support that, and I will be present, but I'm like, that's not really for me, obviously. I mean, in a broader sense, it's for me and for all queer people and that's lovely, but like for me as an individual, it's not for me and like, okay, fine.*

The struggle to find queer events aimed at adults, with higher turnouts within Fort McMurray continues to persist, despite the increase in events.

In 2018, the Mayor, Don Scott, of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo declared August 18<sup>th</sup> “Pride Day”. They have had a lot of negative reactions from people in Fort McMurray and the journey in hosting these events are still faced with hate and loathing by people who cannot stand to see queer people taking up public space. Queer people are continuously surveyed within their community. In an interview with a local Fort McMurray drag queen (Bowers, 2022), they share:

I moved to Fort McMurray at 18, I was just starting to come out, leaving the pressure of my small hometown I felt I could finally live as my true self. Boy, was I wrong. Just one week after I moved to Fort McMurray, there was a group of community members who tried to throw a Pride event. It would be fair to say it was less than successful as it ended with the Pride flag being torn down and burned in the parking lot. (n.p.)

While none of these events hosted by Pride YMM are brick and mortar locations, nor does Fort McMurray have a longstanding queer venue, they are public queer events in which the community at large can take part. It is problematic to continue to equate queer with urban and metropolitan, and queer people in Fort McMurray are not less legitimate in their identities because there are no public spaces for them; rather, they are taking what is worst about the place, and turning it into the best—they are creating community. As Petrychyn (2016) writes, “rural spaces are queer spaces. They have to be, if only for the simple fact that many queers call rural spaces home” (p. 1). In *Queering the Countryside* (2016), the authors write:

Many rural queers struggle with reconciling their deep connection to or pride in their hometowns with the popular representation of their communities as backward, ignorant, and unlovable - not just for queer folks, but for anyone with taste or class. They feel they are not supposed to see their communities as viable places to live, and they are 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. (Gray et al., p. 15)

It is deeply relatable to me the challenge of having hometown pride for a place that is perceived (or genuinely is) harmful to queer people. Gray et al. (2016) state:

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. (p. 14)

Despite the lack of queer spaces, they have come to learn that other spaces can become queer, and that their geography does not need to be a sentence for misery.

For my participants, their home spaces, spaces that they have intentionally curated and nurtured, have been able to *become* queer spaces that allow them to connect and feel a part of the community. As Ahmed (2006) writes, “the queer body is not alone; queer does not reside in a body or an object and is dependent on the mutuality of support” (p. 170). In many ways, and for many people, visibility is not desired or empowering, and these queer spaces that are created *anywhere* are important. Others, such as Kate, find themselves at home more because of the lack of public spaces, sharing:

*I feel like there's... no, like queer designated spaces here. So, the queer community ends up spending more time at each other's houses. Like, how often do we, like, go places as a queer friend thing? We are more likely to go to each other's houses, I think. And maybe partially that's COVID... but maybe partially that's like we don't have queer spaces here and so we spend more time in our homes.*

Others mention that, despite there being no publicly designated queer spaces, their very presence makes the space queer. It is not necessary for the space to be a queer one for, when queer bodies come together, it becomes queer. For example, Jaime says:

*It really resonates for me for sure that like there's no queer spaces that exist that you can kind of walk into and feel seen or just like reflected back to you. But I will say I think that there are certainly instances where we queer those spaces, right? Like, if we go into space together, that space becomes queer because we've then made it that way. And I think that that's how we end up, you know, taking those spaces back as groups. But it's very hard to be that as an individual and go into the space and kind of... It doesn't like, shift.*

While the lack of queer spaces in Fort McMurray is concerning, it is not unusual for rural and/or isolated smaller communities to lack explicit queer venues. This is a 'worst thing', for I know many of us would have loved to have a space to be ourselves growing up, but it is also the best thing, because on the margins, other spaces can be queered. As Ahmed (2006) writes:

When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies, which gather. (p. 62)

In Fort McMurray, queer bodies are inhabiting more spaces. Publicly and privately, loudly, and quietly. And perhaps, through this activism, new lines, and orientations—queerer ones—can emerge and are emerging.

Fort McMurray is a remote urban service area. The biggest closest city, Edmonton, is a five-hour drive away, often made difficult in the winters, when our one highway in and out of the

city becomes snow and ice packed, prone to whiteouts and head on collisions. Prior to the highway being twinned, it was nicknamed as the “highway to hell”—not only for the often-treacherous conditions, but because the road leads to Fort McMurray and then eventually the oil sands. I anticipated that my interviews would veer into conversations about the remote nature of Fort McMurray, particularly in the first collective interview, where the theme of conversation centralized around the geography. For both Audrey and me, growing up in a remote geography and living most of our lives there has shaped us. Audrey shares:

*I kind of relate to, like the idea of the climate being a big factor in how I relate to my body here. Like seasonally, like I find my body really changes with the season and I notice that a lot in myself, like winter and summer and then even like the transitional seasons of fall and spring, like my body is very different and the way I feel in my body is very different. And I think also for me, since I grew up here, I can like I kind of situate my body here as like seeing different points in my lifetime been like from childhood to now, like my teen years to adulthood. So, kind of like being here and like, going to like the same place. I'm like, oh, I remember at this age I was here and like, this was how I felt, and this was what was happening. So, kind of almost like holding a history in my body in this place for me”.*

For Kate and Jaime, they adapted and grew as they got used to being in a location so far away from what seems like the rest of the world. As Kate shares:

*I like, got to my sister in law's house and she was like, ‘yeah, I think I really want to go to Edmonton. I just have to go to The Bay.’ And I was like, ‘why would you go to Edmonton to go to The Bay? Is it better there?’ And she was like, ‘we don't have a Bay here’. And I was like, ‘oh, like, where am I right now?’*

In thinking about queer bodies in rural and remote spaces, I am reminded of a section in *A Minor Chorus*, where Belcourt (2023) writes:

I stopped at the first roadside truck stop in more than a hundred kilometres. Unthinkingly, I opened the Grindr app, which revealed a grid of mostly ghost profiles, some with no information whatsoever, others with just an age or height... What was and wasn't brave in the world of the sexual changed drastically the further one travelled from an urban centre. I wished there was a way to communicate the equivalent of a non-sexual salute, something to show I recognized the social cost they paid and will continue to pay, a gesture of solidarity. (p. 154)

To be queer in northern Alberta is a complicated experience filled with negotiations, as shared throughout the various holds in this dissertation. What stood out to me when Belcourt writes, is how despite the danger, the obscurity, and the remoteness, queer people will continue to learn to find ways to connect. This connection could perhaps come through apps for sexual connection, maybe through Facebook groups to share beers together, or maybe through word of mouth to gather for something as simple as a walk. The commonality throughout all of the interviews is that my participants have all found connection *despite* the challenges of living in a rural geography. The remote nature of Fort McMurray continually influences how we have lived to learn there, as I am sure the people who Belcourt (2023) interviewed found. From embracing seasonality, to engaging with more people that you would not usually, my participants have taken what can be perceived as a negative, being far away from an urban center and all the people and services that come with that, and adapted to it. What was most interesting though, was how deeply the remoteness was felt in our bodies, and how it impacts and shapes our lives

as queer people living there. This hold discusses the various aspects of how we have come to learn to be in our bodies in a remote area.

First, when we discussed our bodies, the conversation led us to the lack of health care services, both generally, and specifically for queer people living in a remote region of Canada. As this research is concerned with how queer people live in and across the nested systems, I acknowledge that our own lived experiences are not all encompassing. A concern that is faced by all of us in relation to the remote geography, but affects transgender and non-binary people at a larger scale, is how our bodies are taken care of. Part of the danger of living in the outcast is that there are less services than other areas. This is seen in other rural and remote communities across Canada, though is exacerbated in northern communities. This also disproportionately affects Indigenous communities (Young & Chatwood, 2019). Browne (2010) writes:

Rural communities generally face a higher turnover of health care staff... Part of the difficulty in attracting and retaining health care providers to northern and rural regions stems from the challenging working conditions. These challenges include long working hours, a lack of colleagues to share the workload, the lack of extra education, difficulties obtaining routine continuing education. (n.p)

While we are all cisgender, we discussed how living, and loving living, in Fort McMurray would be a completely different scenario if we were transgender or genderqueer. We already have a lack of services in the area, and for those whose bodies do not conform to certain gendered expectations, the risk of violence, lack of knowledgeable professionals, and safety is a genuine concern. When Audrey and I were talking one-on-one, I asked her if she thought Fort McMurray was a good place to live, and she highlighted this concern as well:



*I find it really hard to separate one piece of identity out and be like, yes, definitely this is why it's a good or bad place to live because I feel like my other identities, probably have a lot, like even more influence on, like whether I get around this community with ease and safety and, you know. Like. Yeah. That's hard to say because also, like, if I was trans or, you know, gender diverse, like absolutely not. It's not a good place to live because there's zero resources here, you know, and services other than like basically the pride committee of, you know, so I think like it's hard for me to answer that because I know, like so many people in my community and like friends and chosen family and things like that, still have a really hard time living here and like, thriving here. Like, of course you can live and you can make a living and you can find something to entertain yourself with and all those things, but like true quality of life... It's like really tough to be trans and gender diverse here. But for my, for myself, I guess I as like a cis woman, I do feel like Fort McMurray is a good place to live now."*

When I asked the group what it was like for them to live in their bodies during the third group interview, a variety of answers ensued. One participant shared:

*I just feel, when you ask that question, how genuinely privileged I am to be like a cisgender person in our society and able bodied and just like, you know, I think I generally have a pretty easy time in my body. And that's what kind of came to mind. And there is no, no big flashing like major hurdle that I think I could identify. And so that might make my answer a little bit boring in a way, but I feel so genuinely privileged in my body.*

However, true to this hold, the positive with the negative, the participant had earlier mentioned:

*My fear a little bit of the Fort McMurray health care system, and how I think if I ever got really seriously sick, like if something went wrong with my body or my mind, I don't think I could live here, and I would have to move to somewhere with better health care. And I think about that like every time something changes with my body, I think, okay, if this is something big, I have to leave Fort McMurray. And that, like, freaks me out.*

This participant, as a healthcare worker, has encountered the struggle that transgender individuals in Fort McMurray face, sharing:

*It like really hit me that I was like, the only health care in Fort McMurray that had the capacity to support trans people, like dealing with that. And I found (doctor) and he does all that and he's just full. And I think the pressure on (doctor) and I, is that people send patients to us with the expectation that we are experts in trans and non-binary health. And I'm like, I'm not an expert. I'm working on it.*

The lack of healthcare options in Fort McMurray for queer people is dismal. From the general dearth of service providers to the lack of *skilled* and queer competent service providers, this is undoubtedly a worst thing that is very hard to understand how it can also be a best thing. For many queer people, there will be no ‘best’ thing about lacking access to care. For my participants though, despite the remoteness and the challenges that come with it, the best part for many of my participants is that living in a remote area has allowed them to connect with their bodies in ways they had never previously. This is not to disregard the healthcare crisis but,

rather, to note that they have learned to care for their bodies in different ways, and in relation to different things than if they lived in an urban area.

In being in connection with the geography and the seasonality of the place, the participants have learned to flow with the seasons, build resiliency and build a better relationship with their bodies. In participating in this research, they have had space and opportunity to reflect on how they *have* learned to adapt and where to go moving forward.

*I feel really grateful for my body. And I also feel like I just have to I don't know, this conversation kind of like, inspired me to be a better caretaker of my body almost. Like to see it as like this... Not like a child, but like, oh, my gosh, like, you never asked for this. Like, my body, you never asked to be in a world of, like, capitalism and patriarchy and fatphobia and homophobia... Here I am placing you in these scenarios and like, you're just reacting how you're supposed to react with your nervous system. And like, it's my job to be able to take care of you after the fact. So, like, I kind of want to have a better relationship with my body as like a caretaker or like, realize these harmful environments are probably going to continue to exist for the next, you know, little bit... But like, you know, seeing how I can redefine maybe a relationship with my body over and over and over again and be like, how can I be a better caretaker? Because it's it's really just like reacting the best way it knows how to protect me and make sure I survive the world. But the world is in a constant, like survival mode at this point of. Yeah. Everything... I feel like having conversations like this together, it's like also unites... You know, that's the conversations I want to be having more of is like, well, how are how are we all taking care of each other? Taking care of ourselves?*

Here, I see how this participant understands the interconnected complexities of living and being queer in Fort McMurray. In connecting the nested systems, they are asking how we can move forward as queer people while understanding that so much is out of our control and in flux.

Similarly, Kate shares:

*The word fluidity, like that word really resonates me with me because a thing I was kind of thinking of living in Fort McMurray was wanting to just reflect more on like resilience and on like just how cold it is sometimes and being like, yeah, that's okay. Like my day is going to continue as normal and I'm going to be kind of resilient to that. And I think being here for three and a half years has offered me a little bit of resilience and I'm in my body becoming a little bit more resilient to, you know, physical, seasonal changes, but also like mental emotional hurdles that I think would previously have really gotten me down. And it changed my bodily experience that now I can kind of like hold space for or just like not let it get me down so much or affect me on such a bodily level.*

Despite the remoteness of Fort McMurray, each participant has learned to live within their bodies in a remote geography by engaging with the seasons, building resiliency, and taking care of their bodies as best they can. While the worst thing is the remoteness, the best thing is the connection that comes with the unique location. Audrey notes:

*That's like the standard answer almost at this point that it's like, well, why would you stay some are so isolated? Why would you stay somewhere that so small and under-resourced and all these things? Yeah, because like the people here make the place worth living.*

Within this hermeneutic hold, I have discussed how sometimes the worst thing is also the best thing. Within my hermeneutic interpretations, I was made aware how my participants would discuss seemingly incommensurable experiences, but how they learned to live navigating them within the nested systems. The negatives were not permanent fixtures in their lives; rather, they all found ways to live with the bad, and make them better, thereby helping make Fort McMurray a good place to live. In the final hermeneutic hold, I discuss the idea of being as queer as possible under the circumstances, diving into the disorientation that my participants have experienced living in Fort McMurray.

### **On being as queer as possible under the circumstances**

In a 1972 radio contest, CBC host Peter Gzowski asked Canadians to “complete the adage, as Canadian as...”. The submissions that came in were seeking to describe a quintessential part of our lives, falling to predictable suggestions, including snowfall and the RCMP mounted police. Seventeen-year-old Heather Scott submitted the phrase, “as Canadian as possible under the circumstances”, thereby winning the contest. Authors Sumara, Davis and Laidlaw (2001) wrote an article on curriculum theory surrounding this CBC radio contest. The article is about the emergence of Canada as a nation, about education, and about identity. Canadians would “prefer not to identify those qualities that we imagine might pin us to a particular way of identifying ourselves...we do not imagine there to be a quintessential Canadian identity” (Sumara et al., 2001). The sentence, “under the circumstances” resonates as the final hold. What are the qualities that we imagine are tied to our identities and our understandings?

This hold only originated after the previous four were written, as the hermeneutic interpretive process is a path laid while walking. Learning to live in Fort McMurray as a queer person depends on the circumstances of orientation. Throughout this dissertation, I have

discussed Ahmed's (2006) writing on orientation, but what is it to be disoriented? And how does this help us understand how, as four different people living in Fort McMurray, we have all become as queer as possible under the circumstances?

*I didn't intentionally want to find a queer community. I just joined (community group) to make friends because I literally was like, where else am I going to meet people? It's only me and (her fiancé) running our business. I'm not going to meet someone at work. I'm not in school. I don't have family. I have like zero connections. So, it was just kind of a way to like, meet some other people and be in the community and see what Fort McMurray is like. But there was no part of me that was like, I need to be around more queer people.*

Here, Kate discusses when she first moved to Fort McMurray. Her goal was not to find queer people but, through her personal work/life circumstances, realized she needed to connect with other people outside her immediate family. To me, I come to understand that Kate, through connecting with queer people in Fort McMurray, exemplified becoming as queer as possible under the circumstances. The connection with the queer community resulted in her reorienting herself within Fort McMurray.

Ahmed (2006) writes that if orientation is “about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into a space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails” (p.11). These moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can “shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel liveable” (p. 157). Disorientation, Ahmed (2006) notes,

Can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body. (p.160)

Disorientation involves failed orientations: "bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape or use objects that do not extend their reach" (p. 160). I have come to understand the experience of disorientation as part of experiencing the variety of circumstances connected to being a queer person within a heteronormative world. The moments of disorientation are where we learned *where* and *how* we want to be oriented as queer people. Within this hold, I discuss three different areas of incommensurability that occurred within disorienting instances of transition. The first was my own disorientation that I experienced moving in between my mom and dad as a child. The second was a participant's experience of the movement between work and their queer identity, and the third, was an example of the fear a participant felt regarding future disorientation that could potentially disrupt the peace they have currently.

For myself, I experienced disorientation within the transition between Fort McMurray and where my dad lived (London, Toronto, Calgary, to name a few). I was oriented in a particular way at both parents' homes, and I questioned neither of them as being strange—after all, it was my reality. However, in the transition between the two places there was a period of disorientation as I tried to become reaccustomed to a whole different home and place of living and being—one that was so diametrically opposed to the other. The circumstances of my life *within* disorienting spaces made me conscious of how my body, my home and my geography impacted who I was or, rather, who *I could* be. The process of disorientation made clear the various boundaries that heterosexist society placed on me as a young queer girl and allowed me to imagine a different future for myself.

For my participants, the act of disorientation, and the transition between worlds, is one that they have all encountered while living in Fort McMurray. For one participant, disorientation occurred in their workplace. As an employee, they inhabited a space that did not extend their queer shape, and where they had to use objects that did “not extend their reach” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 160). In other words, their queer body and politics did not fit within the agenda of the institution within which they worked. They describe the institutions of Fort McMurray as one space and their home as another, where it is apparent that, in transitioning between the two, my participant must, by nature of the space and the objects within the space, become something different. They state:

*I think the things that I see in our institutions and our systems and the people who make decisions for our region, you know, there is... I guess the decisions that are made in those systems and with those people frame my understanding of what it's like to live in Fort McMurray. It frames kind of how I how I see myself in this space and kind of where I fit in... I think my job requires me to sit in this weird space where I am simultaneously doing what I love most and where I think that I belong in terms of making changes and impacts that I want to see in the community and for the people that live here. But it also requires me to mask pieces of myself. So, I have to... be a different, not necessarily a completely different person than I am, but I'm a different make up.*

Within their career, they transition to fit within an institution that was not designed for them to take up space. How they are oriented as a queer person at work is towards straightness, whiteness, and cisness. In the transition between the two spaces, they recognize the different



aspects of themselves that they must be to enact the change they want within the community.

They share:

*There's definitely this like out-of-body experience that that like you kind of have to... I can't totally be who I want to be in those situations.*

However, in this disorientation, they recognized the power their position holds and how they can use aspects of their life and their queer beliefs to create change within Fort McMurray.

For the second participant, disorientation occurred when they were forcefully and violently disconnected to their queer identity and self, or as Ahmed (2006) describes, “affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body” (p.160). They share:

*As I got older and wanted to come out and realizing that like I still had to be closeted for a reason that was beyond my control at that point, that was probably the least safe I ever felt in Fort McMurray because I literally had to hide and like pretend me and my partner were not together in public and like not be holding hands and things like that. So, like for me, that was like a year and a half of living in utter terror and fear because it's very easy to be recognized here. So like that experience at that time really felt not safe and not good.*

While this participant wanted to be recognized and seen as queer, their circumstances violently forced them to be hidden. In the transitory space between wanting to be openly queer in the community, disorientation resulted in a forceful ‘closeting’ that did not allow for them to *be* themselves. This instance of disorientation truly was incommensurable for them. They could not be themselves at work nor in the community, resulting in immense emotional disruption in their life.

The third participant noted the potential for future disorientation. One that disrupts the community she has built in Fort McMurray. She shares:

*I'm so scared that things will change, and I just want to like, keep my community here. I just want my friends to stay here. And whenever people talk about like I have a five-year plan, I'm like, no, you don't. Like, stop. Get out of that mindset. And so I just want I want to literally keep the people I know here. But then I also just want to continue to develop this community that I've built. And even in my own workplace, I'm like, is there a way to only hire queer people? Like, is there a way? Like, how do I do that? I can't. But I kind of can. Like and is there a way to like, only surround myself with queer people? And I feel kind of extremist, like saying all those things, but I really feel that way... I just want to keep building this space I'm in as much as I possibly can.*

For this participant, she has created space in Fort McMurray that affirms her identity as a queer person and has become as queer as possible under the circumstances. She has built a queer space in Fort McMurray, and does not want to anticipate what future disorientation, one that might thrust her into a heteronormative world, might bring.

In each of these cases, disorientation has pushed us as queer people to question the circumstances in which we can safely, and even happily, be queer in Fort McMurray. Just as there is no unified or quintessential Canadian identity, there are no quintessential aspects of being queer in a particular geography. There are, though, repeated instances of how in moments of disorientation it has become apparent that, despite these experiences, we have remained as queer as possible under the circumstances. These queer moments of disorientation are not necessarily visible to non-queer people. The things that are completely obvious to us as queer

people are not visible to non-queer people because they have not experienced disorientation in the ways that we as queer people have. These acts of disorientation are only visible to those who know where to look. My participants were able to identify these moments throughout the interviews, reflecting on how moments of disorientation have led to a different kind of orientation to their geographies, homes, and bodies. As Muñoz (2009) writes:

Queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds' mapping of space...one's queerness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To queer is to distance oneself from norms, and to embrace that distance. (p. 73)

We have all become as queer as possible under the circumstances because, rather than allowing disorientation to become permanent, they have become moments in our lives that have oriented us to different spaces, possibilities, and futures.

This section was the final hermeneutic hold of this dissertation. Within it, I discussed disorientation as a way of leading towards different types of orientation through three examples of experiences my participants and I had living in Fort McMurray. In the final section, I discuss what I have learned that I could not have previously known prior to conducting this research, concluding on a restorying of disorientation.

### **On disorientation**

Queer lives are about the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child rearing, whereby 'not following' involves disorientation: it makes things oblique. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 178)

Springtime has arrived in Calgary. Alongside the writing of this thesis the seasons came and went, the leaves browning, falling, and re-budding. I leash up my dog and begin our morning

walk around the neighbourhood. The tulips are growing, only the green leaves visible, and the blue violets carpet many of the south facing front lawns. My dog greets another, and I chat with my neighbour, exclaiming how wonderful it is outside. Living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic made me not only incredibly aware of how isolated I was, but made me pay closer attention to my geography, my home, and my body. When it came time to write my research proposal, I was curious about what research about Fort McMurray could look like through a queer lens. I came to develop my inquiry question, asking “is this a good place to live?”, to understand how queer people in the northern Canadian urban service area of Fort McMurray learn to work and live in and across three nested systems—geography, home, and body.

I opened this dissertation by titling the chapter ‘on orientation’ and am closing with ‘on disorientation’. Disorientation has the power to expand past notions of normativity, allowing for an expansion of possibilities. Disorientation can help us to make our realities more visible and in seeing our realities in a new light, new orientations are possible. This dissertation is a result of my interpretations that help provide different and new understandings surrounding my research question, through each of the five hermeneutic holds. Within the holds, my participants and I experienced moments of orientation, reorientation, as well as disorientation, as we revisited memories and experiences in our collective and individual interviews. When I first set out to inquire how queer people in Fort McMurray learned to live in their geography, home, and bodies, I was not sure where the research would lead me, and what would come from the research process. Within this section, I will summarize and revisit the hermeneutic holds before moving on to a reflection about my new understandings and interpretations of the three nested systems after completing my dissertation writing.

In the first hermeneutic hold, on where my dad works, I discussed the concept of frontier masculinity, a way of describing rural and remote industry towns that surround the predominantly male workforce. Within the section, I discussed how we as queer people, as women, and as femme presenting people are oriented within Fort McMurray. It was interesting to me to understand more deeply how space is taken up by certain bodies and not others. My participants shared their experiences of reorientation, away from heteronormativity, and towards queerness. They reoriented themselves in environments that from the outside, do not seem hospitable. Instead of resigning themselves to living within normativity, they turned towards community, connection, and activism. Their refusal to simply do nothing resulted in positive impacts for them within each of the nested systems. By being queer and queering various spaces, my participants have pushed against the stereotypical expectations that are typically assumed by outsiders to the city, reorienting towards queerness, rather than away from it.

In the second hermeneutic hold, on outcasts in the outcast, I spent time writing about the grand narrative of Fort McMurray, how the global imagination has shaped Fort McMurray into a very specific story that often excludes many other voices. In engaging in hermeneutic interpretation, I came to understand that both Fort McMurray and queer people are outcasts in the outcast - misunderstood and rejected, set outside the normative ways of being. Throughout all the interviews though, my participants shared their love and pride for the region, and through being on the margins they have become more connected to their geographies, homes, and bodies. Instead of allowing the role of outcast to be one of isolation or damnation, a queer orientation (Ahmed, 2006) from the outcast allowed for my participants to work from the margins to take up spaces that exclude them, marginalize them, or survey them. As part of fighting for their queer identities within Fort McMurray, they have taken on the identity of Fort McMurray as an outcast,

fighting for it alongside themselves. I have come to understand that in fighting so hard for space as queer people, they also ended up also fighting for the space itself.

In, on hiding in plain sight, I found it difficult to resist the history of surveillance on queer bodies and people. Nonetheless, it was important for contextualizing the surveillance that my participants experience in their daily lives, and how ongoing colonial beliefs continue to impact how we live to this day. Within this hold, I learned how queer people navigate and negotiate their lives in Fort McMurray - whether it be gathering in the safety of their private homes or coming together to queer public locations. It was within this hold that I realized how surveillance is connected to recognition and in/visibility. In some spaces, a queer person may choose to 'pass' by making parts of themselves invisible, and conversely, as my participants can attest, are often misrecognized, their queerness made invisible by others even when my participants *want* to be visible.

The fourth hold, on when the worst thing is the best thing, came out of months of repeatedly reading through the interviews. I noticed how in one moment, we would discuss an idea in a positive light, and in another comment on how it would also negatively affect our lives. This hold inquired into the complexity of living in the nested systems, the fine balance of positives and negatives. Here, I found three moments that stood out to me as worst things and best things: proudly queer... but I am not the only one, no queer spaces... but we will make them, and remote bodies... connected bodies. My participants each made a seemingly incongruous or negative experience also a positive one. This hermeneutic hold exemplifies the complexities of living and loving in a geography that also holds a lot of violence, isolation, and hardship.

The fifth hermeneutic hold, on being as queer as possible under the circumstances, stems from Ahmed's (2006) writing on disorientation. This hold asked how, as four different people living in Fort McMurray, we have all become as queer as possible under the circumstances? Disorientation has pushed us as queer people to question the circumstances in which we can safely, and even happily, be queer in Fort McMurray. Just as there is no unified or quintessential Canadian identity, there are no quintessential aspects of being queer in a particular geography. Through this hold however, there repeated instances of how in moments of disorientation, particularly through periods of transitions, we have remained as queer as possible under the circumstances.

My research question came from the curiosity surrounding the question, "is this a good place to live", and this dissertation cannot answer that question, for there are no definite conclusions. Rather, my research examined the various complexities of being queer in a remote, northern, Canadian community. It questioned what it is like to be queer in the province of the severely normal (Filax, 2006), and how queer bodies have made and found space in places that are imagined to be inhabitable for them. I am conscious that this dissertation was delimited to a certain perspective, a certain orientation, and a certain sub-set of people. I did not, nor could I, include all voices, and many perspectives are missing. My interpretations are that – my own. To me, this dissertation acts as a starting point for looking more queerly into our own lives and experiences within our geographies, homes, and bodies. While the delimitations of my own research exist within this dissertation, this section is not a conclusion. Rather, it is an opening for future possibilities and orientations. I look forward to future research into the ways in which queer people learn to live and work in various geographies and under various other circumstances, and future research can only expand the canon of queer embodied knowledges.

In this research, I learned a lot about what it is to live in Fort McMurray as a queer person, both historically and presently, and the complexities of being queer in a place that is cast out and misunderstood. I approached this dissertation through the three nested systems because I knew there was something incredibly important about paying attention to the ways in which geographies, homes, and bodies impact queer lives. What is brought forward by the nested systems are the social, political, and systematic ways in which heteronormativity continues to be pervasive in society. It is through my participants' experiences in the nested systems that have illuminated new knowledge because the nested systems encompass the variety of experiences that happen within them and provide a more comprehensive understanding of queer lives.

Within the nested system of geography, the hermeneutic holds brought forth how our geography and location holds a long-storied past that continues to affect the present. In Fort McMurray, from colonization, to the imagination of Canadian northern spaces, to the ongoing exploitation, the socio-political history of the place impacts queer lives – how they are seen, not seen, and how they are valued. The geography of the place also has an immediate impact on our memories and interpretations, our lived experiences steeped in memories of specific places. Further, brought forward in this dissertation were the differences between urban queer experiences and rural/remote queer experience. Within the rural queer experience of place, there is much more of an active participation in community building and support. This is shown in 'on when the worst thing is the best thing', where my participants, despite the very real hardships of being an engaged and out queer person in a rural place, still actively show up to fight for their homes and their relationships. The queer experience of place is one where it is not about the place *being* inherently a good place to live, rather it is the *creation* of a good place to live.



Within the nested system of home, the hermeneutic hold ‘on hiding in plain sight’ revealed the dichotomies and negotiations of private and public spaces and how surveillance affects how queerness is embodied. In the nested system of bodies, we can see how queer people navigate themselves and their presentation based on perceptions of safety. Our bodies hold so much knowledge, from trauma to joy, from childhood to our present. In connecting this knowledge to geography and home, a better picture is painted of the vast range of experiences queer people have, and the ways they converge and diverge.

The sun warming my back as I walk, I stop to sit on a park bench and my dog jumps up beside me, sniffing the air for the scent of a squirrel. I have spent most of the past two years thinking about queer people in Fort McMurray and about why, we as queer people, are drawn to the spaces and places that people have said queer people do not and cannot exist. Sitting in the sunshine, I know with certainty that this dissertation, while it does highlight inequities, injustices, violence, and deeply ingrained and enacted beliefs surrounding masculinity and heteronormativity, also shows that queer people in Fort McMurray can and have made it a good place to live. This is not a dissertation about sad, dejected queer people. My participants are smart, optimistic, compassionate, and hopeful people. They are engaged in community creation, pushing against the narratives that have painted Fort McMurray and queer people as outcasts. Ahmed (2010) writes on queer happiness and unhappiness, noting that heterosexual happiness and the ways in which straight people are celebrated, from weddings to babies, is severely overrepresented. In contrast, queer people are not celebrated in such ways, our lives often converging from straight expectations and timelines. As a result of being oriented away from normativity, queer people are not seen or imagined as happy people. Queer people, and in

particular, rural, remote and northern queer people, are not imagined to be living the fulfilling, joyful and hopeful lives that my participants shared with me.

Looking more broadly, the narrative of the ‘unhappy queer’ is extremely pervasive. In popular culture representations, queer people rarely get their happy ending. There is even a phrase, “bury your gays”, which describes the common trope of how queer characters in movies and TV must be killed off. This dates to the Hays Code, a rule in early Hollywood that said that perverse sexual acts which is inclusive of anything outside of a straight, heterosexual married couple, needed to be shown in a negative light with negative consequences (Mondello, 2008). This trope continues to this day, seen in Alberta, the province of the severely normal. However, in conducting this research, my participants and I refuse to be buried. By this, I mean that this research has illuminated that we are not the perpetually unhappy people that the world so desperately wants us to be and/or depicts us to be. Ahmed (2010) writes that queer people are not inherently unhappy because they are queer, rather:

It is because the world is unhappy with queer love that queers become unhappy... It is not that queers feel sad or wretched right from the beginning. Queer unhappiness does not provide us with a beginning. Certain subjects might appear as sad or wretched, or might even become sad or wretched, because they are perceived as lacking what causes happiness, and as causing unhappiness in their lack. (p. 98)

It is in Ahmed’s (2010) words, and throughout this dissertation, that we understand that queer people are continuously contrasted and compared against heteronormative society. From frontier masculinities to surveillance of bodies, queer people who are not oriented towards normative ways are set up to feel the unhappiness, and have heteronormative society presume inherent unhappiness of us. This is not to say that unhappiness is not a factor in queer lives, but

rather, that being “happily queer can also recognize that unhappiness; indeed to be happily queer can be to recognize the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 117). Within these pages, I have shown that there is recognition of the struggles and frustrations of being queer in Fort McMurray, but that it is only one part of a much larger picture. Audrey, in our final interview together, notes that in growing up in Fort McMurray, she did not always find it a good place to live, lacking community, visibility and support. Now though, she shares:

*As like an out queer person I do feel like it is a good place to live. And I think I think it's it's like mainly thanks to the small queer community that's developed and just like continued to get stronger and stronger, the more the more of us that like join, I guess. Like it was like the tiniest little seed and then it's like very slowly growing and growing and growing, and those roots are getting a lot stronger.*

I continue my walk, the day warmer and brighter already, having only been out for an hour. I make my way to a local bakery which is owned by a lesbian couple. I am craving a chocolate croissant and they generously give my dogs treats. The bakers hand me my pastry and I sit down outside again. I wonder about the bakers' lives, and how they made it to Calgary. I wonder how and why they decided to become bakers here. I have questions about how their geographies, homes, and bodies all reflect a new and different (or perhaps similar) experience than the ones outlined in this dissertation. There are many questions that I have now that I did not before, which is the process and intention of narrative hermeneutics – to open more possibilities for understanding. I wonder how these nested systems might be taken up by others to illuminate other aspects of queer experiences of place, particularly by queer people who are racialized, live outside of Canada, or are of different ages, abilities, and genders. I am interested

in queer experiences of place and happiness/unhappiness. I am curious about how our queer experiences of place continue to evolve and change over time. How do queer experiences of place affect our memories, and our sense of time? What other industry towns can relate and expand on this research? For example, I wonder what queer people in Appalachia would have to say and add to these interpretations, or what the relationship of queer people of Pincher Creek, Alberta would have to my writing.

Belly full, I wave goodbye to the bakers, picking up my dog's leash. We make our way home. I realize that this dissertation, while about queer lives in Fort McMurray, is not really about Fort McMurray anymore. It is about the places that queer people were told could not exist. Places that are rural, remote, industry focused towns. Places that are not metropolises or sprawling suburbs. Places that are so tiny on maps that you must squint to read their name. It is about the ways in which queer people, despite being under surveillance, under heteronormativity, under violence, have found joy, family, friendship, activism, and community. It is about how the positives will always exist alongside the negatives, and that the worst thing can also be the best thing. It is about how queer experiences of place are so vastly different but connect us all. While this dissertation revealed the complex ways in which queer people live in the remote, urban service area of Fort McMurray, this dissertation is only the beginning of centering queer embodied knowledges in nested systems. Ahmed (2010) states that "the queer who is happily queer still encounters the world that is unhappy with queer love but refuses to be made unhappy by that encounter" (p. 117). The biggest learning outcome from my research is how queer people experience place through acts of joyful refusal, encountering a world that is designed to be unhappy with queerness, but refusing for it to be the *only* defining narrative. In asking "is this a good place to live?" I now understand the question as less about if a place is inherently good or

bad, but rather, the complex ways in which queer people, through their geographies, places, and homes, have made good places to live – for themselves, and for all others who may find themselves there.

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