

# (Un)Settling the Prairies: Queering Regionalist Literature and the Prairie Social Landscape in Shane Rhodes's *The Wireless Room*

KRISTEN WARDER

THE TITLE OF THE INTRODUCTION to Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh's recently published edited collection *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies* (2005) asks "When Is the Prairie?" The question reflects a growing concern among contemporary Canadian cultural theorists, historians, and literary critics with the dominant discursive constructions of the Canadian Prairies currently circulating within Canadian public culture, constructions that typically fail to reflect the increasingly modern, urban, and multicultural reality of contemporary prairie life. Not only do photographs of wheat fields and grain elevators continue to dominate prairie postcards and calendars, but many of the most recent popular depictions of the Prairie Provinces, such as the slow-paced, small-town prairie life simultaneously mocked and celebrated in the locally produced television show *Corner Gas*, also locate the region in a nostalgic, rural past.<sup>1</sup> Calder and Wardhaugh argue, in fact, that even though the region has undergone tremendous change in its successful bid to adapt to new global realities, until recently, it has

been possible to believe that the Canadian prairies have ended, or at least that time has ceased to pass here, judging by representations of the prairies in much literature and popular culture, and that we are permanently frozen in a rural agricultural scene alternately coloured by the grainy, sepia tones of the Dirty Thirties or by the romanticized, golden glow of a nostalgic small-town sunset. (3)

Those of us who are familiar with the region recognize that these ongoing nostalgic self-representations, which typically feature white, rural, and of course, heterosexual subjects, uphold the conservative place identity of the prairies by obscuring the lives and realities of millions

of people.<sup>2</sup> What is now an increasingly multifarious society appears misleadingly homogeneous in Canadian public culture, and those who are commonly left out of the picture(s), those who identify as urban, non-white, and/or non-heterosexual, for instance, are effectively denied a prairie identity. Such regrettable outcomes have led scholars such as Calder to call for new and varied representations of the region that do not hearken back to a “false and simple past,” but that instead depict the social diversity and complexity of contemporary prairie reality (Calder 98).

A recognition that cultural representations play a central role in determining the identities of places lies at the base of these calls (and of this paper). Literature provides one such locus for engaging in what Pat Jess and Doreen Massey have dubbed “imagining geography,” the practice of challenging or (re)constructing the identities of places (2). Imagining geography is a vital political activity because discursive constructions of places have very real material consequences. Queer geographer Lawrence Knopp argues, for example, that along with other spatial concerns (such as investment), migration is greatly affected by imagined geographies (Knopp 153). There can be little doubt that the continuing exclusion of sexual minorities from the prairie identity discourages queer subjects from settling in the region. And these individuals are already under the influence of other very powerful imagined geographies. Many, particularly those raised in rural areas, for example, feel compelled to migrate to Canada’s largest cities, conventionally believed to be spaces of tolerance and queer belonging. In her 1994 article, “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” Kath Weston argues that because cultural representations of gays and lesbians have been largely dominated by metropolitan identities and communities, a “symbolics of urban / rural relations” has long played a prominent role in shaping North American constructions of homosexuality (255). She asserts, “From the start the gay imaginary is spatialized just as the nation is territorialized. The result is a sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community, the country a locus of persecution and gay absence” (262). The outcome of this dominant sexual geography, as many of us well know, has been an influx of queer migrants into North America’s largest urban centres in search of gay communities and an ensuing focus on urban sexualities and communities within queer theory and popular culture.

In this paper, I will argue that by placing his queer persona within several key rural prairie spaces, Shane Rhodes simultaneously contests the conventional gay geographical imaginary and unsettles the identity of one of Canada's most socially conservative regions. In his inspired first book of poems, *The Wireless Room* (2000), Rhodes, a queer poet from central Alberta, claims belonging in an imagined prairie community by methodically displaying his knowledge of the prairie *literary* landscape through an extensive engagement with the region's "poetic culture," the genres, tropes, texts, and traditions of contemporary Euro-Canadian prairie writers. His poems feature a queer persona who returns to his rural home on the prairies and claims belonging in the landscape by virtue of his family's settlement there and his own knowledge of the oral history of the area. Although the speaker's homosexuality is merely hinted at in the early poems, it becomes increasingly visible until, in the final poem of the collection, the persona officially "comes out" into the prairie landscape. Within *The Wireless Room* we find poems that not only engage with such canonical prairie poems as Lorna Crozier's "The Sex Lives of Vegetables," and Robert Kroetsch's "Seed Catalogue," but that also both reinscribe and redirect such prairie tropes as environmental determinism, garden poems, and the prairie tall tale. I contend that by exhibiting many of the most common characteristics of earlier celebrated prairie literature, *The Wireless Room* demands to be read as a prairie text.

Canadian cultural theorists have long held that the continuing organization of both the Canadian literary canon and the Canadian publishing industry around regionalist writing has furthered the marginalization of minority writers whose works are most often excluded from the very narrow definitions of regionalist literature. So that, to use Arun Mukherjee's example, literary texts produced by a Caribbean-Canadian writer, such as Claire Harris, who has now lived in Alberta for more than thirty-five years, will not only be rejected by certain Canadian publishers because they are ostensibly not "Canadian" enough but will also be deemed not "prairie" enough to be published in a book on prairie writing or to be taught in a course on prairie literature (433). Queer Canadian writers, like many other minority writers, often give priority to subject positions and identities other than regional or national ones and thus face similar obstacles in terms of getting published and garnering critical attention in Canada. I will argue, however, that by strategically writing

within the familiar tropes and genres of prairie poetry, Shane Rhodes effectively clears a place for queer subjectivity within prairie literature and pioneers a poetic tradition that marks itself as both queer and firmly rooted in the Canadian prairies. Frank Davey claims in “Toward the Ends of Regionalism” (1998) that regionalisms “cease to be regionalisms” once they fail to project a homogeneous population determined by a particular environment and “begin to include other grounds for identity” (8). Arguing that regionalisms are homogenizing political discourses, Davey proposes that we move from the current model of regionalisms to “regionalities” that are “open to internal differentiation” and “ideological diversity” (16). In *The Wireless Room* Rhodes moves towards engendering just such a prairie regionality, one that allows for subjectivities firmly grounded in both place and sexuality.

### (A) Travelling Home

In “Home Roads,” the first poem of the collection, Rhodes’s poetic persona undertakes a conventional return to the rural area of his childhood, a return so common in the works of prairie writers that after a cursory survey of prairie literature in his seminal essay, “Writing West: On the Road to Wood Mountain” (1977), Eli Mandel concludes:

My image for the prairie writer then ... is not necessarily the one who is in the west, or who stays there, but the one who returns, who moves, who points in this direction .... It is not place but attitude, state of mind, that defines the western writer — and that state of mind, I want to suggest, has a good deal to do with a tension between place and culture, a doubleness or duplicity, that makes the writer a man not so much in place, as out of place and so one endlessly trying to get back, to find his way home, to return, to write himself into existence, writing west. (146)

Prairie poetry collections that depict autobiographical returns, such as Andrew Suknaski’s *Wood Mountain Poems* (1976) and Mandel’s own *Out of Place: Poems* (1977), typically feature a male persona who journeys west to the prairie town of his birth in search of a home that he soon discovers no longer exists. Rhodes’s speaker shares this sense of displacement and desire to return to a land whose culture he does not fit. After having returned to rural Alberta as a young adult, he promptly

experiences his alienation from the conservative community in which he grew up. The poem begins:

How easy these gravel roads seem  
 as if laid out in pre-history. The night air  
 full of wings: meadowlarks, dragonflies and overhead  
 a jet splits the sky, a scalpel in a Caesarean.  
 In the distance, a pick-up truck fades away  
 with the oiled ease of the mechanized,  
 a planned thing dragging dust clouds,  
 its tail-lit fire soon snuffed out by dark.  
 Walking from the car, each step is one across oceans  
 into foreign countries. (8)

The nostalgic speaker initially perceives both an effortlessness and a peaceful simplicity of life in this rural area, using words such as “easy” and “ease” to describe movement in the first stanza; yet, his own movement here is clearly laboured. Rhodes skillfully conveys the amount of psychological ground each of the persona’s steps covers by extending the line-length and by moving into a dominant trochaic rhythm that slows the reading of the lines: “Walking from the car, each step is one across oceans / into foreign countries.” Although his movement is presented as arduous because he is no longer habituated to the area, I would argue that this first poem, in fact, invites the reader to consider whether this speaker ever could have moved effortlessly within this cultural milieu; life is unquestionably far from simple for all who live here. Characterizing his movement from the country to the city and back again as migrations, the persona now speaks as if exiled from this land he still knows so intimately. As only one who is familiar with the landscape could, he identifies the variety of trees on the horizon, the species of birds that are singing, and whose slough is whose. He even claims queer kinship with the meadowlarks, characterizing them as “anxious divas.”<sup>3</sup> His familiarity with the natural environment does not ameliorate his sense of isolation, however, for it is the inward-looking rural prairie community from which he feels alienated:

As kids, we thought  
 fences were here to keep us in,  
 but now “No Trespassing” signs dot the road  
 in stalled conversations. (8)

Once kept in the fold by fences, he is now kept out: the “No Trespassing” signs that “dot the road” are not only stalled conversations themselves but also work to forestall conversations between those on each side of the fence. The absence of dialogue between the members of the community and those on the outside is best embodied by the fence, “a four-stringed instrument of silence” that “sounds the sound of between” (8).

Realizing that he is caught between two worlds, both unable to return to his rural homeland and incapable of leaving it fully behind, the speaker laments that his very existence here is erased: “so I walk through two worlds, haunting the place I grew up / and being haunted by it, a ghost without allegiance / in houses possessed by the living” (9). The poem’s central image of roads, transient spaces of the in-between, symbolizes the speaker’s interstitial existence, suspended between the urban and the rural. Unlike many earlier prairie poems that locate a home quarter on the map, such as Robert Kroetsch’s “Seed Catalogue” (“the home place: N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian”), and Andrew Suknaski’s “Homestead, 1914 (Sec. 32, TP4, RGE2, W3RD, SASK.),” this poem’s title “Home Roads” suggests that home cannot be firmly located within this prairie space, but has become a form of exile itself (“Seed” 30). Given the title’s pun on “Roads” and “Rhodes,” we might also extend this homeless condition to the poet himself and interpret the title as Rhodes’s search for home. This momentary flash of self-reflexivity in the title of the collection’s very first poem briefly registers the implication of its author in the issues it represents; the title signals Rhodes’s refusal to depersonalize the poetic process and almost certainly hints at an autobiographical impulse found within the collection.

It should not go unnoticed that this place to which the persona longs to return is not simply the idealized land of his childhood. Rather, in this first poem, Rhodes challenges the nostalgic identity of the prairies as a place still dominated by a traditional way of life by dismantling the facile binary of rural pastoralism and urban modernity; this rural area is not as pristine or traditional as it first appears. Even in the tranquil countryside seemingly “laid out in pre-history,” modern life intrudes, engendering a rebirth in the landscape: “a jet splits the sky, a scalpel in a Caesarean” (8). The poem thus effects a destabilization of the notion of places as enclosed or self-contained: while traditionalists might want to secure the purity of this rural cul-

ture by contending the area remains unchanged, like all places, it is in no way completely self-determining or separate from the outside world. In fact, the majority of spatial theorists now argue that in our ever more globalized world, the rural and the urban are increasingly interdependent and mutually determining, as are the local and the global. Setting the groundwork for the rest of the collection, Rhodes subtly reminds his readers in “Home Roads” that although often considered traditional, the Prairie Provinces have undergone immense changes. In so doing, he undermines the mythical timelessness of the prairie so common in popular representations of the region.

While illustrating the absurdity of strictly holding on to the rural / urban binary at the end of the twentieth century when there is increased traffic of both people and goods between the country and the city, Rhodes also exhibits the multiplicity of his persona’s migrant subjectivity. Although the speaker felt pulled to return to this rural area, once in it he feels equally drawn to the city: “And how many hours or years have I driven / to escape the city, only now to sense its magnetism / radiating through the air like musk?” (8). The usual representation within queer narratives of the city as an escape from the rural that Weston describes has here been inverted — until now, the persona has been trying to escape to the country. As someone who grew up in a rural area and now lives an urban gay life, he is “a ghost without allegiance,” a migrant subject whose sense of place and identity cannot easily be classified as either urban or rural. He displays the inner turmoil described by Russell King in “Migrations, Globalization, and Place” (1995): “the migrant’s sense of place and of personal identity often involve a duality: ‘here’ and ‘there’—which is an important aspect of their lives. When they are abroad they tend to identify with home, when they are back home they tend to identify with abroad” (29). Indeed, the speaker feels so conflicted that he clearly no longer has a “home” to which to return; at the end of the poem, he remains an invisible outsider, staring at the summer fields with “immigrant wonder” (9). Yet having compared his speaker’s loneliness and alienation to the experience of placelessness often expressed by earlier Canadian settlers, Rhodes will proceed to unsettle the prairie by queering prairie (agri)culture and by writing his gay speaker into the landscape in subsequent poems.

## The Garden

Rhodes further grounds his work in contemporary prairie poetry traditions in “Garden Time,” a playful long poem that alternately personifies, sexualizes, and apostrophizes various herbs, vegetables, and berries commonly grown in prairie gardens. The poem’s title, a pun on “garden thyme,” itself indicates the frequency with which garden poems appear in prairie poetry collections by implying that the reader has been anxiously anticipating this trope; the title cheerfully announces that it is finally “garden time”! While reading the poem, one quickly deduces that this garden and its personified plants metaphorize the prairie social landscape in a manner strikingly similar to those in Lorna’s Crozier’s memorable garden poem “The Sex Lives of Vegetables” (1985). Crozier’s explicit sexualization of the garden remains unparalleled within Canadian literature. Who among us could forget Crozier’s carrots, “fucking their brains out / in the hottest part of the afternoon” (99)? Or her cucumbers, “popping out / when you least expect / like flashers in the park” (108)? In her 1991 essay, “Let Us Revise Mythologies: The Poetry of Lorna Crozier,” Susan Gingell astutely argues that Crozier’s sexualized plants undermine the “puritanical” identity of the prairies by reminding readers that “the natural life of the garden vibrates with sexual energy and activity” (79). Rhodes’s poem does the same, but goes even further: it not only subverts the identity of the prairie as puritanical, but also as a realm dominated exclusively by heterosexuality. By cultivating a new non-reproductive order in a space highly symbolic of fertility, natural reproductivity, and (certainly within Christian mythology) heterosexuality, Rhodes (re)presents the prairies as a decidedly queer new world paradise.

Within the first canto of “Garden Time,” the speaker calls attention to the largely arbitrary distinctions made between plants and weeds by suggesting that the two are virtually indistinguishable, perhaps even interchangeable, the difference between them simply a matter of perception: “garden time stretches like a tight ligament / from plants that look like weeds to / weeds that look like plants” (69). Unlike heterocentric Canadian hegemony that relies on sexuality to determine whether individuals are culturally valuable or undesirable, morally upright or morally bankrupt, necessary plants or worthless weeds, this persona cherishes every plant in his garden; using the language of *laissez-faire* economics,



he promises that he will not meddle with its natural order by fostering the growth of certain plants to the detriment of others:

I will become *laissez-faire*  
and leave the hoeing to the invisible hand.  
I promise no interference. My garden  
will weed itself. (69)

While the verb “to weed” conventionally means “to remove weeds,” one suspects that in this context the verb instead means “to proliferate with weeds,” thereby engendering a highly diverse garden. Already this prairie garden is “weedy”; it is a space where unabashedly non-heteronormative plants flourish. Among others, the garden harbours the spinster-like radish who “is always left to seed itself” (71); the promiscuous sage who lures many off into the shadows to “taste olympus,” to “feel the wrinkled skin of a god” (72); the sassy Saskatoon berry, “the perfect lover / who slips from his skin to stain our hands” (74); and the soothing beet for all those in need of comfort:

wrap your lips around this  
gentlest of wounds  
let it bleed through your tongue  
and when it says  
just let it be  
just let it be. (78)

These anthropomorphized plants that purportedly engage in a wide variety of non-reproductive sexual activities, including onanism, fellatio, mutual masturbation, and cunnilingus, actively contest the predominance of reproductive heterosexual intercourse in the prairie landscape by giving visibility to alternative sexual paradigms and practices.

Before illustrating in the collection’s final poem that the regulation of transgressive sexualities is a very serious matter commonly experienced by sexual minorities as one of life and death, Rhodes playfully aligns forbidden sexual pleasures with such innocuous sensual pleasures as the eating of garden fruit and vegetables in “Garden Time” to suggest that there is little reason to regulate sexuality at all. In this late-twentieth-century untended garden casually “dedicate[d]” “to the free market,” both eating and having sex have shifted from a means of human survival to a simply matter of pleasure and taste. The tenth canto of “Garden Time” contains the most extended planting of queer sexuality in the

prairie garden when the male speaker draws an extended comparison between eating gooseberries and losing his virginity:

The gooseberry should have been my first lover.

We'd court each other

like nervous attorneys

whispering Latinate phrases

or maybe in the way a typist

seduces the letter q *let's not be shy*

*but, baby, let's not be quick.*

The gooseberry taunts me

behind a moated grange of pricks.

Of course it hurt

we were both embarrassed

but we both grinned. (79)

The duplicitous diction of the first two stanzas cunningly engenders homoerotic images, such as the seduction of the “letter q” (an image evocative of queer seduction), the plural nature of the word “pricks” (a word denotative of both thorns and penises), the words “behind” and “pricks” in the same poetic line, and the male speaker’s disclosure, immediately following the word “pricks,” that he experienced pain while having sex for the first time. Perhaps even more suggestive of homosexuality, the berry’s name is itself allusive of the colloquial verb “to goose,” which means to “poke (a person) in the buttocks” (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary*).<sup>4</sup>

The analogy between the pleasurable pain of eating the tangy fruit and that of having sadomasochistic gay sex (enjoying another kind of “fruit”) is in large part achieved by the persistent use of the indefinite pronoun “it” in the phrases, “Of course it hurt,” “it tries to kill you a little,” and “Yet before it wipes you out.” While the reader is initially unable to determine whether the pronoun refers to transgressive sex or to the eating of berries, the poem’s second last line decisively confirms that the pronoun refers to both, thereby conflating sexual and sensual pleasure. The caesura that divides the line and instructs the reader to pause after the phrase “your first lover,” suggests that your first lover is *simultaneously* one’s first human lover and the gooseberry: “think of your first lover, the gooseberry.” Accordingly, the poem’s final image, “this white explosion:” signifies both a sexual orgasm and the sensual explosion of berries in the mouth.

### “The Unified Field”

After having established his belonging within the region by exhibiting both his knowledge of the local history and his family’s longstanding place within it (in poems such as “One Whole Year Wasted,” “Haynes Town Store,” and “Claims”), Rhodes’s persona officially “comes out” into the Canadian prairie landscape in the final poem of the collection “The Unified Field,” thereby planting a solid gay presence in the most recognizable of prairie spaces, the open field. The title of the coming-out poem lends itself to more than one interpretation, each consistent with the poem’s main theme: the insistence that, although largely invisible, sexual dissidents do exist in the prairies. The title phrase can be read, for instance, as a likening of the persona’s subjectivity to a field, an area under the influence of different forces. The poem’s title thus suggests that all aspects of the persona, each of his identities, such as prairie and queer, have come together to create his complex subjectivity; they are “unified” and inseparable, if sometimes conflicting. At the same time, given Rhodes’s interest in Physics, evident in poems such as “Meditation on the Quark” and “Meditation on the Atom,” I think one can safely assume that the title of the final poem also makes reference to the current race among physicists (begun by Albert Einstein) to come up with a unified field theory, otherwise known as a theory of everything (TOE). Scientists are reportedly searching for such a theory in the hopes that it will “[tie] together all known phenomena to explain the nature and behavior of all matter and energy in existence” (*Whatis.com*). The search for such an all-encompassing theory reveals an underlying belief within the scientific community that all matter is governed by the same laws and principles, that the world is, in fact, a “unified field.” Inasmuch as Rhodes reminds his readers that sexual minorities are often not governed by the same rules as their straight counterparts, but are instead subject to potential rejection by family members and to random acts of violence, the poem’s title must be read as ironic.

The coming-out poem, which doubles as a coming out of all sexual dissidents in the prairies, depicts the speaker’s varied emotional responses to his mother, who, rather predictably, is reluctant to accept that her son is gay. In response to his brother, who asks, “*what made you . . . tell her in the first place,*” the persona discloses to the reader, “*Necessity, / I wanted to whisper, as if it really were / a matter of life*” (82). Although his statement initially suggests that coming out is not a matter of sur-

vival, the poem proceeds to demonstrate that it *is*, in fact, a matter of life and death: first and foremost, it is a matter of *his* life in this area. After having presented himself as a ghost haunting the rural landscape in the first poem of the collection, the persona exhibits his need to exist here, to be visible. He insists in the poem's next section:

Necessity, yes, basic as hunger  
to be open for once.  
For what are we if we must cushion our lives  
with suitable fictions If we must  
close our doors to the swirling white. (82)

The importance of coming out as a means for survival, of opening the door and stepping out into the terrifying puritanical prairie landscape, "a landscape so empty it stuns the nerves," pervades the entire poem. The act of writing a response to his mother, of writing himself into existence in this place, is imperative to this speaker who firmly believes that "a life in fiction will never protect us" (85). His urgency to come out stems from the recognition that closeted individuals uphold the fiction that queers exist elsewhere and thus allow the Canadian heterosexual hegemony to ignore the hate crimes and injustices still perpetrated against sexual minorities in their own towns and cities. After admitting that he would certainly have been persecuted a century earlier, the speaker boldly asserts:

But try to believe that these things do not happen  
in this century this year                in this very hour  
and the fictions are starting again:  
   A man tied to a barbed wire fence  
stripped and beaten skull caved in by a pistol butt  
   body doused in gasoline  
lit                left to burn  
   snow melting around him  
in luminous pools  
   outside our window now  
in this century.                                What, if not life?  
   Fictions, more real than this? (87)

The stanza's highly irregular form is instrumental in conveying the unpredictability of specific acts of violence. The fractured lines, isolated fragments of text, spare images, and abundance of white space indicate

the corporeal and spiritual destruction caused by such attacks. The fragmented form also forces the reader to dwell on every phrase and violent image; one simply cannot read this poem quickly or gloss over any of its contents. The poem insists that these attacks occur here, “outside our window” on the wide prairie horizon homologized by the canto’s long sparse lines, and reminds readers that the dominant masculinist, homophobic prairie society in fact sanctions inhospitality to sexual minorities. To insist on the reality and the immediacy of hate crimes still perpetrated against sexual dissidents, the rhythmic anaphoric phrases denoting time also become progressively more immediate: in one line alone the speaker moves from the very general “in this century,” to the more specific “this year,” to the redundantly exact “in this very hour” (87). The next mention of time is the even more immediate “now” (an assertion that jars the reader), followed by a repetition of the earlier phrase “in this century,” which here both reinforces the word “now” and brings the stanza full circle.

Within “The Unified Field,” coming out is also represented as a way to claim a place in the landscape. The empty white page and the bleak prairie snowscape, both of which signify the overwhelming silence and invisibility of sexual minorities in the prairies, repeatedly merge within the long poem, revealing the poet’s belief that the act of challenging the heterocentric identity of the region can effect new mappings. The persona states in the fourteenth canto, for example:

To hold a pen and know I will follow it  
                   through probability  
                                   through enmity  
   stepping  
 across                  this                  page. (92)

The text’s tentative movement from the left margin into the centre of the page, which culminates in the very deliberate expansion of the sparse final line across the entire page, a spatial structure that mirrors the flat prairie landscape, suggests that through the act of coming out, the speaker very deliberately claims new territory. The act of coming out (writing “across this page”) and that of claiming a place in the land (“stepping” across the landscape) have become inseparable.

The queering of the land is nowhere more evident than in the final poem of the collection when the white prairie snowscape and the landscape of the speaker’s homosexuality merge. In the twelfth canto, the

speaker characterizes his lover's skin as a snowdrift: "My mouth over his chest his skin / drifted beneath me" (90). Rhodes's continual alignment of non-normative sexualities with the natural world in *The Wireless Room* subtly undermines the oft-held belief that these sexualities are "unnatural." Indeed, for the speaker, it is as absurd to regulate sexuality as it is to regulate a leaf falling to the ground (83). He goes even further to claim that the persecution of sexual minorities is that which is really perverse (90). Recognizing that heterosexuality is not simply natural, but rather naturalized, he seeks to naturalize queer sexualities as well:

Writing you this reply:  
 how new paths are created laying them down  
 in repetition until mistaken for nature  
 they become nature These fights are old  
 but not useless. (94)

By making counter-normative sexualities visible in the prairie social landscape, Shane Rhodes's *The Wireless Room* undoubtedly lays down new paths and paves new "roads home." The collection's title, an allusion to the *Titanic's* now legendary wireless room that contained technology advanced enough to avert the boat's sinking (should the ship's crew have paid attention to the incoming signals), must be read with optimism. The title is a metaphor for Rhodes's poetry itself: his poems, a contemporary wireless room, tell us about the cultural sea change long underway in the prairies.<sup>5</sup> The wireless room, a symbol of progress, hope, and change, stands in direct opposition to the final poem's wheat field, a nostalgic symbol of traditional prairie life. The winter aspect of this field also surely depicts what Rhodes views as the sterility, bleakness, and ultimately death-dealing nature of an exceedingly masculinist, homophobic culture. Whereas he suggests that the open space of the field remains a dangerous and ultimately confining space for sexual minorities, one surrounded by the barbed wire fence to which the victim of homophobic violence is first tied and then ultimately tortured and silenced, he represents his volume of poetry, a "*wireless* room," as a beacon, a small protected space from which an incipient queer prairie discourse can safely emanate and circulate (its signals represented by the circular embossing on the volume's cover). Indeed, the collection evinces its desire to transcend the many fences of silence found within its pages in its orientation towards a predominantly heterosexual prairie audience familiar with the established literary discourses of the area.

In “Toward the Ends of Regionalism” (1998), Frank Davey reminds us that “regionalism is *cultural* rather than geographic, and represents not geography itself but a strategically resistant mapping of geography,” one that often erases an area’s internal cultural heterogeneity (4; italics added). I would add that because regionalisms are social constructions, they are also tenuous, contingent, and open to change over time. Through his constant intertwining of regional and queer subjectivity and through his queering of several symbolic prairie spaces, Rhodes remaps contemporary heterocentric political and poetic mappings of “the Prairies” to reflect the increasing social diversity of the region. Indeed, by utilizing and subverting earlier prairie literary traditions and by placing his queer persona in both the rural prairie landscape and culture, Rhodes re-spatializes the gay imaginary and decentres queer sexuality, he reminds readers that migration plays a significant role in lesbian and gay lives and subjectivities, he subverts the socially conservative identity of the prairies by investing the landscape with a solid queer presence, and he moves from reinscribing an implicitly heterosexual, homophobic regionalism to engendering an explicitly queer prairie regionality. In short, Rhodes engages in the process of “imagining geography” within his poetry, and in so doing he complicates the often simplified portrayals of prairie society in contemporary Canadian public culture.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although *Corner Gas* is set in the present, it depicts a contemporary rural prairie community that is clearly not yet up to date. Many episodes portray this community attempting to adapt to (or to resist) modern life and inventions, often with very humorous consequences.

<sup>2</sup> The recent political debates on same-sex marriage in Canada might be viewed as confirming that the Prairie Provinces still comprise one of the most socially conservative regions in the country. Not only have right-wing Alberta Premier Ralph Klein and Alberta-based Conservative Party Opposition leader Stephen Harper been the two most outspoken

opponents of same-sex marriage, the self-proclaimed protectors of “Canadian values,” but polls have also shown that the percentage of citizens who oppose gay marriage is consistently higher in each of the Prairie Provinces than in the rest of the country.

<sup>3</sup> This is one of the first hints given to the reader that Rhodes’s speaker is gay; in fact, the speaker’s homosexuality is not yet readily apparent to readers unfamiliar with the remainder of the collection.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Wiens was the first to make me aware of this colloquial connotation.

<sup>5</sup> The volume’s title, *The Wireless Room*, also invokes the metaphor commonly found in prairie literature of the wheat field as ocean. D.M.R. Bentley immediately recognized and noted the appearance of this trope in “Home Roads” (“each step is one across oceans”) after hearing an earlier version of this paper.

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