ARRIVAL AT HOME

Radical Faerie Configurations of Sexuality and Place

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The tiny southern Oregon town of Wolf Creek is located off Interstate 5 in the forested valley of its namesake river. Since 1987, the San Francisco–based organization Nomenus has owned land nearby that hosts gatherings of radical faeries. On my first visit to the Nomenus Wolf Creek Sanctuary, I turned onto a private drive off the valley’s public road and crossed a small bridge over the creek. I found myself alongside parked cars in a clearing at the edge of a wide meadow, bordered in the distance by a dark, conifer-forested ridgeline. I saw no sign of habitation apart from a path into the meadow, which I knew would lead me to the land’s common buildings. As I began walking along this path in the late afternoon light, I noticed a slender archway looming over my head. On either side of the path stood tall thin poles decorated with colorful fabrics, between which hung a string of letters woven from twigs that announced “WELCOME HOME.”

What does it mean to arrive somewhere that one has never been and be welcomed home? I play here on the classic trope of arrival at the site of ethnographic research in order to complicate any idea that I had to navigate great social differences to come to this place. I knew friends and neighbors who identified as radical faeries throughout my time in the urban sexual minority communities of Northern and Southern California. I came to Wolf Creek expecting to meet a distant branch of my own social networks. I also knew that I and many other white gay critics of urban capitalism, religious heterosexism, or U.S. imperialism at some point had shared the experience of being invited to find a place for ourselves and our politics in radical faerie communities. Thus I stood under the Wolf Creek archway feeling bemused by the resonances of its welcome, which I sensed was directed at me. For if “home” signifies a site of origin, then an authentic home should be found nowhere but there. But if home is where the heart is, then its sentimental promise of original and eternal intersubjective belonging becomes

GLQ 15:1
DOI 10.1215/10642684-2008-019
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portable; requiring no particular recollected person or place, home can be discovered anew. This last framing seemed to explain my Wolf Creek welcome; before I went there, friends assured me that on my arrival I would feel that I belonged. Yet the specificity of the sign standing at this site demands a more complex account. Can home be portable, accessible wherever comrades assemble, yet still be linked profoundly to one particular site? Can that one site be the source of innumerable analogous places and times where future homes may be found, all of which may be experienced as home on arrival there?

The founders of the radical faeries formed gatherings and sanctuaries as sources for the discovery by gay men of an authentic gay subjectivity. Radical faeries today diversely represent the senses of self they gain at gatherings or sanctuaries. But the radical faerie founders argued that authentic gay subjectivity derives from a biological or spiritual nature, which they claimed was recognized first in indigenous societies that honored gay men as bearers of spiritual insight.1 I engage such claims of an originally indigenous gay nature by ethnographically interpreting how they arise at gatherings and sanctuaries and contextualize the experiences of visitors to those spaces. Specifically, I argue that in traveling to rural spaces, participants in radical faerie culture form a mobile relation to emplacement that mediates the racial and national formation of sexual identities in relation to histories of colonization. Scholars are beginning to ask how colonial discourses inform the radical faeries’ use of rural spaces to discover an indigenous gay nature.2 I center colonial discourses in my study because of my grounding in ethnography. During research, I joined other predominantly urban gay men in travel along the spatial circuits of gatherings at rural sanctuaries. The nonnative and white U.S. gay men who founded the radical faeries sought to free an indigenous gay nature by briefly removing to the rural and natural sites that code as indigenous in a settler society. Their travels placed gay men in motion from modern to primitive and settler to indigenous while grounding radical faerie culture in a mobile relationship to emplacement. Radical faerie culture thus traverses the material and cultural legacies of colonization by investing in rural spaces as sources for liberating sexuality among the racialized subjects of a settler society.3

Radical faerie narratives of indigenous gay nature were announced in 1979 when gay men gathered from across the United States at the first “Spiritual Conference of Radical Faeries.” Harry Hay and other leaders in Los Angeles gay organizing created the summer weekend event, which drew over two hundred primarily urban gay men to a rented retreat center in the Arizona desert. At this and later gatherings, a few dozen to a few hundred gay men briefly removed to rural sites in order to liberate gay subjectivity.4 They took inspiration for their assertions of
self-love and social acceptance from tales of gay men’s roles in indigenous societies, which Hay drew in particular from histories of Native Americans and anthropological writing on the colonial object “berdache.” Radical faerie networks then formed in the urban regions where most participants lived in order to sustain their culture between gatherings, in part by raising funds to buy land as sanctuaries that could host gatherings in perpetuity. White men from urban and middle-class gay communities became the core constituents of radical faerie networks, although they always drew a wider array of people. Gatherings included a sizable minority of rural men, among them many urban expatriates, while a “no one turned away for lack of funds” policy welcomed people across class differences, with poor or itinerant people being supported by the resources of wealthier ones. Women and bisexual men at times visited gatherings and sanctuaries or identified as radical faeries, even while acknowledging that radical faerie culture formed to reflect gay men’s lives. Gay men of color participated by claiming radical faerie identity or by engaging the culture as part of their own investigations of ancestral histories of sexual diversity. Yet on joining, all met a formation that promised to liberate gay nature by addressing the relation of nonnatives to life on originally Native American land. While my larger project interprets the varied investments in radical faerie culture by diverse nonnative and Native people, this study more narrowly examines that culture’s founding on normatively white and nonnative terms, which all participants must negotiate. By making rural space invoke Native Americans and, by extension, all indigenous people, gatherings and sanctuaries formed in the United States as a basis for nonnative gay men to realize their sexual nature. In the process, acquiring sanctuaries grounded radical faerie desires for indigenous gay nature in negotiating nonnative occupation of settled land.

The emergence of radical faerie culture is therefore a mediation of the colonial conditions of modern sexual minority identity in the United States. The distinctive qualities of radical faerie culture, including its assertion of a critical distance from the gay mainstream, comment on the colonial formation of modern sexual minorities and so present a proper basis for asking how sexual minority identities mediate their racial and national locations within colonial histories. Specifically, I argue that radical faeries invite travelers to gatherings and sanctuaries to arrive at home—despite neither originating nor remaining at these sites—by finding in rural spaces and in tales of indigeneity a self-acceptance and collective nature that also grants new belonging on settled land. The promise of homecoming appears first in the rare and transitory spaces of emotional communion formed at rural gatherings, which also assemble a global and transhistorical sense of subjectivity that gay men can belong to wherever they go. Yet over
time, the grounding of gatherings at sanctuaries saturated sanctuary lands with memories of past community and desires for indigenous nature that brought gay men home to originally indigenous land, in a process that was enhanced by radical faerie responses to the AIDS epidemic. The Wolf Creek welcome arch thus announces that the authentic subjectivity and radical community promised by rural gatherings is recalled at sanctuaries for visitors to reawaken. Radical faerie culture promises liberation by using rural mobility and emplacement to grant modern sexual minorities a new sense of belonging to the originally indigenous roots of an authentic sexual nature.

My argument arises from reflexive ethnographic engagement in radical faerie practices, which holds me accountable to addressing radical faeries while writing within critical queer studies. I first examined radical faeries in an article accepted by this journal in 1994, in which I critiqued their claims on sexual nature and indigenous culture as essentialist. After I began ethnographic work with radical faeries, I saw that my earlier writing dismissed them from a distance based on reading a few early texts outside any relation to radical faerie communities. This stance obviated the methodological value in ethnography of privileging reflexive investigation of situated practices—for which my claim of essentialism had seemed to offer total explanation. I chose not to publish that article, and I redoubled my effort to make ethnography reposition me in relation to radical faerie culture as much as my writing repositioned it. This article is one result of that effort. My argument still suggests that radical faerie culture can be essentializing, particularly when adaptations of Native American culture for use by nonnatives naturalize the racial and national formation of sexualities. But however important this argument is to queer studies of intersectionality and coloniality—and I believe it is important—I now see it as no less so than my effort to compose it ethnographically. By centering stories as contexts in which I and my reader must interpret the common sense of radical faerie practices, I build my claims first by asking why and how radical faerie narratives arise and become meaningful to their narrators. Thus, across the breadth of my audience—perhaps including queer scholars (like me, long ago) inclined to critique before asking what radical faeries mean or do; or radical faeries or friends (including queer scholars) who may be inclined to defend before pursuing critical reflection—this text invites an ethnographic reflexivity, just as was required of me while writing as an ethnographer and friend of radical faeries.

During five years of ethnographic study (1995–99) I participated in radical faerie networks in the San Francisco Bay Area and across the United States, including by visiting sanctuaries at Wolf Creek, Oregon, and also Short Mountain...
in Tennessee during and between major gatherings.7 My locations as a white U.S. gay man and longtime friend of radical faeries made me a likely target for cultural adoption, but prior to my research I never chose to participate in radical faerie communities because of my ambivalence about the racial and colonial dynamics that I perceived within them. Yet being repositioned as an ethnographer made me newly accountable and receptive to meeting radical faeries on their own terms. I listened to how radical faeries narrated their own experiences, and I participated in many practices that they asked me to join. In the process, if radical faeries met me first as an outsider, over time many experienced me also as a nascent member and an old friend. Some affirmed my self-positioning as an ethnographer while playfully reframing this as a deflection of a deeper desire on my part to identify as a radical faerie. While I acknowledged people who ascribed to me a radical faerie identity, I never assumed that identity as my own. But over the years I came to respect deeply the historical integrity of radical faerie culture, particularly the friendship networks that have positively informed my life.

I recall the blurring of my critical distance from radical faeries and my potential absorption among them in order to mark this liminal location as the source of my account. I experienced radical faerie culture as a set of material practices that, by linking mobility to emplacement, interpellated subjects as non-native gay men with indigenous nature. I therefore wrote my analysis around stories in which I figure centrally—like my encounter with the Wolf Creek archway—in order to mark that my claims about the interpellations forming radical faerie culture reflect my own experience of being “hailed” by it and then asking what I had been called to be. This study narrates key moments when gay men came home to authentic subjectivity and radical community by means of loving communion, multigenerational rural ties, indigenous spirituality, and a newly indigenized relationship to settled land. The study thus engages radical faerie culture by ethnographically interpreting potential meanings in the quotidian practices I met as a subject of its interpellation. My reading affirms Povinelli’s desire that scholars of radical faeries “not define the terms and then find those who satisfy its criteria” but rather “understand the modes of life across which this social genre is dispersed, contested, and made sensible.”8 My study thus does not attempt a total historical or sociological analysis of radical faeries. The variability of radical faerie culture assures that no account can describe all its forms or meanings.9 In turn, every account of radical faeries will reflect the positionality of its narrator. Despite my best efforts to describe what I met, undoubtedly some radical faeries will not recognize themselves in my account or will take issue with my claims, a possibility I acknowledge here by noting that my historical relationship to radical
faeries shapes the account I can provide. For instance, my study highlights the beliefs of Harry Hay and his followers largely due to my research having been centered in the Pacific coast region, where such beliefs deeply inform Nomenus and the Wolf Creek Sanctuary. In contrast, studies centered more on Short Mountain might privilege how that land sustains histories of radical southern and rural gay collectivism that precede and exceed Hay’s legacy. Nevertheless, Hay’s key role in initiating the radical faeries means that his call to awaken an indigenous gay nature through retreat to originally Native American land informs radical faerie culture wherever it transpires. Even if Hay’s call is rethought or displaced, radical faeries must engage its significance, which is what I have endeavored to do.

This study insists that future scholarship on radical faeries must take note of their origin in the cultural contexts of the late-twentieth-century United States and must theorize their racial and national formation of sexuality within colonial histories. I argue for this framing because of a crucial realization I gained during ethnography that inspires this study and its focus on “arrival at home.” Radical faerie communities arose historically from deliberations on the intersections of sexuality, race, and nation within colonial histories. While I suggest critical perspectives on this topic that some radical faeries may experience as new, the topic itself has a history in radical faerie conversations. When I introduced my analysis at gatherings—that nonnative gay men in the radical faeries have adapted indigenous histories in order to reconcile to a racial or national inheritance of settler society—I was listened to carefully, and many agreed, often by recalling their own long-standing discussion of this topic. Our readings did tend to differ: in agreeing some also argued as nonnatives that their sense of intimacy with indigenous cultures was natural, or independent of histories of settlement or cultural appropriation. Yet I still recognized all such claims as evidence of modern sexual minorities coming into being by marking and mediating their racial and national locations within legacies of colonization. I offer my reading of sexual minority subject formation to queer scholarship on intersectionality and coloniality and to broader scholarship on radical faeries. But mindful that my critical resituation of radical faerie beliefs is being read by radical faeries inside and outside academia, I also offer my reading as it first arose: as a contribution to and continuation of radical faerie conversations, in order to inspire further critically reflexive analysis of the historical formation of radical faerie culture.
When I visited radical faerie sanctuaries at Wolf Creek and Short Mountain, I encountered lands suffused with signs that invoked distant yet sustained communion (fig. 1). Wolf Creek’s eighty acres surround a rectangular meadow interwoven by paths. On one long side runs the namesake creek’s ravine, which is bordered by Garden House (a common house) and the Barn (kitchen with storeroom); beyond them the meadow’s low slope leads to a forested ridge. Short Mountain’s two hundred forested acres of mostly uninhabited gullies surround a ridgetop meadow, which hosts a kitchen and dining building, barn, gazebo, and bathhouse, and from which paths radiate across the land. The material space of each sanctuary evokes its history as a locus for gathering generations of gay men and friends. Each barn houses a drag closet for visitors’ use, which contains second-hand dresses, pants, shirts, wigs, and costume jewelry that have accumulated for years. The main buildings house small libraries of texts that recount the gay, naturist, and pagan cultures that inspired each community. Paths are dotted with a handful of cabins for long-term residents, the remains of old campsites, and farther in amid the trees, nooks for isolated rendezvous. Walking beside a stream scoring the hills above Wolf Creek, one may meet a trickling waterfall encircled by logs arranged for contemplative sitting. On a stroll down the main gully at Short Mountain one might cross the fire pit of an old radical faerie sweat lodge. Closer to each land’s
center, paths pass small groves, altars, or statues memorializing radical faeries and others who have died of AIDS. In these many ways, the materiality of each land evokes the sexual, spiritual, and communal pursuits of a multigenerational constituency, which makes this site key to its continuity.

I felt the land’s invitations into community during a week’s stay at Wolf Creek in 1995. While most people visit sanctuaries to attend gatherings that occur once or a few times each year, visitors are welcome almost any time, and I and a friend took up this invitation over our winter vacation. One cold, wet evening, the land’s four residents and a handful of visitors welcomed us to Garden House, where we cooked a meal together and got to know one another for the first time. Over the ensuing days, I slept on the Garden House floor and ate as I wished while contributing work and a small amount of money. One afternoon I built compost piles with one of the land’s prospective residents; another I spent alone in the Barn cleaning up from the last gathering’s celebration of the pagan holiday Samhein. Early in my visit I felt that I had entered someone else’s home, and I tried to fit into the rhythm of the residents’ lives. But as we finished tasks and spent evenings together relaxing, I sensed that the residents offered the land and its community to me to inhabit or even to identify as my own. I noted how they appreciated my willingness to work on vacation—“playbor,” some called it—acknowledging their need for an extended constituency to help sustain the land and prepare it for the next big gathering. I felt the residents affirm my everyday contributions as manifestations of radical faerie culture.

One day two residents invited me into the land’s legacies by introducing me to the Garden House library, where we rifled through texts left by residents or visitors, including a collection of the reader-written magazine RFD. Subtitled a “country journal for gay men,” RFD circulated across the United States after its 1974 founding by a network of rural gay men’s collectives. What we read corroborated stories I had heard residents tell of the histories of Wolf Creek and other sanctuaries. In the late 1970s, this land was known as Magdalen Farm, and later Creekland, when it housed gay back-to-the-land collectives that formed relations with similar groups across the United States (including Short Mountain) through RFD and periodic gatherings. Although rural gay collectives predated the formation of the radical faeries, Wolf Creek residents projected their roots into those collectives’ histories. After 1979, radical faeries hosted gatherings at rented retreat centers before being invited to gather at rural gay collectives. Short Mountain was the first to focalize radical faerie culture, which it affirmed on inheriting publication of RFD in 1988 and sustaining it as a de facto radical faerie journal. During the 1980s, radical faeries made Short Mountain prosper even as other rural gay
collectives faded away. In 1984, West Coast radical faeries sought to end itinerant gatherings by forming the San Francisco group Nomenus, with a mandate to acquire rural land. During a 1986 gathering at Creekland, years after it had ceased to host a collective, the owner agreed to sell, and in 1987 the Nomenus Wolf Creek Sanctuary came into being. In this way, by absorbing the form of rural gay collectives and inheriting their legacies, radical faeries grounded their multisited and mobile practices in a solid rural infrastructure, which appeared to grant their culture a deeper history and integrity for visitors to enjoy.

Major radical faerie gatherings recall histories of back-to-the-land collectivism when small groups of residents are joined by up to hundreds of visitors — some of them old friends, many meeting for the first time — to form ephemeral yet expansive rural community. Over days or weeks, gatherings connect participants in activities such as cooking communal meals, repairing the land’s buildings, and hosting performances, pagan rituals, or discussion circles where people share feelings about the gathering and their lives. Registration fees let residents stock the kitchens in advance, and common areas remain occupied day and night with people making food and company. The many hidden corners of both lands also join visitors’ tents as spaces where people may find intimate encounters. I recall my return to Wolf Creek for a summer gathering, and my stroll one darkening evening from my tent to the common buildings after a distant conch sounded the call to dinner. I heard quiet murmurs from tents near mine and negotiated the cars parked at the land’s entrance. After walking under the welcome arch, I neared Garden House, where people chatted on the balcony in the dim light, and then I began hearing more conversations as the barn’s roof loomed ahead. My path through the garden opened onto the lights of the gathering’s pavilion tent, where dozens of people filled plates from pots of food or sat on pillows to eat, and those nearby invited me to join. This scene suggests that while sanctuary gatherings form a community that the land could never sustain, they still invoke back-to-the-land collectivism when they invite visitors to belong to the land and each other. Despite the fact that no one lives at sanctuaries apart from a few residents (and even they moved there from somewhere else), sanctuary gatherings act similarly to my vacation trip to Wolf Creek by welcoming visitors home.

How and why do gatherings and sanctuaries deliver a promise of homecoming to their many visitors? Recalling historical debates about home among U.S. sexual minorities helps answer this question while illuminating how radical faeries offer a rural homecoming to indigenous roots as authentic gay subjectivity. Questions of home have focalized the politics and historiography of U.S. sexual minorities in ways that mark their racial and national form. Historians argue that
modern sexual minority communities arose to offer refuge from the heteronormative terms of social belonging, at times redefining normative discourses in order to call themselves chosen families or homes. Yet scholars debate whether sexual minority invocations of home or family naturalize their heterosexual origin; while some champion the agentive qualities of adapting such discourses, others warn of the homonormative marginalization of lives that cannot be reconciled to notions of family or home. Across their differences, such readings tend to argue that sexual minorities are exiled from home and family by sexuality or gender, in a manner marked as limited by scholars of U.S. queer of color formations. Exile for queers of color raises simultaneous questions of sexual, gendered, racial, and national belonging, particularly in relation to normatively white sexual cultures and heteropatriarchal racial and diasporic nationalisms. Scholars have cited women of color feminist theories of subjectivity in order to ask how queers of color have challenged exile from home and its recuperation, by destabilizing identities of exclusive belonging and by fostering critical mobility across the material spaces of colonization and globalization. Such readings recall that neither home nor exile can be explained as at root or centrally sexual. The sexual terms of home and exile are negotiated in relation to the racial, national, and global formations of family, nation, and land. My study responds to queer of color and queer diasporic critiques by tracing how radical faerie culture offers gay men a new sense of home precisely by engaging their racial and national locations in settler society. Radical faerie identity originally arose in the United States to shift members of urban and middle-class gay communities from normatively white gay identities into new affinity with indigenous roots on settled land. Thus, while radical faeries first appeared as a critical fringe of U.S. sexual minority communities, I take this as evidence that they arose within those communities to mediate their normatively white and settler formation.

I historicize the sexual, racial, and national homecoming offered by radical faeries by tracing it to early U.S. gay liberation and lesbian feminist activism. In the early 1970s, radical white lesbians and gay men grounded their sexual politics in revolutionary opposition to racism, capitalism, and imperialism, by seeking self-exile from privilege. Historians insist that studies of the racial or national formation of gay liberation or lesbian feminism address how they each inspired radically multi-issue politics. My project here asks how multi-issue radicalism articulated desires by white U.S. lesbians or gay men to reject racial, economic, national, or global privilege by relocating to new homes based in democratic socialism, anarchism, or counterculturism. The belief that removing white U.S. gay men or lesbians to spaces coded as communal, anti-authoritarian, or premod-
ern would interrupt their inheritance of normative power was the very means by which those spaces produced sexual politics defined by colonial discourses. When white U.S. gay and lesbian radicals formed rather homogeneous networks, their efforts to reject privilege by identifying with oppressed people led less to forming alliances across race, class, or nation and more to emulating or embodying the oppressed peoples whom they knew they were not. This effect defined the ruralist, naturist, and primitivist projects formed by radical gays and lesbians.

Radical faeries inherit the cultural legacies of white U.S. sexual radicals. The anticapitalist collectivism of early gay liberationists at times adapted back-to-the-land practices. For instance, land at Short Mountain was purchased as a safe house by a North Carolina cell of gay and lesbian radicals, which on disbanding in the early 1970s passed the land to Milo Pyne, who then hosted gatherings for gay and lesbian counterculturists in the South. The early decade also saw lesbian feminists adapt women’s back-to-the-land projects to new radical politics. Lesbians who split from gay liberation in conflict over sexism helped redefine women’s liberation around the universalizing principles of lesbian feminism, which new rural women’s communes also modeled and protected. The sexual politics of rural separatism became a context in which lesbian feminists cultivated a women’s spirituality based in European pagan or indigenous alternatives to patriarchal religion. By the mid-1970s, gay male collectivists inspired by lesbian feminism formed rural lands on principles of radical sexual politics, separatism, and feminist paganism, albeit by returning lesbian feminism’s universalizing gestures to a minoritizing defense of gay men. For instance, the gay men’s collective at Magdalen Farm formed by adopting Maoist principles and linking collectivist gay men in rural gatherings, including the 1976 “Faggots and Class Struggle” conference. Participants in rural gay men’s projects also pursued countercultural imaginaries of primordial roots for revolutionary gay culture. Arthur Evans’s *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* tied feminist paganism to colonial ethnology in order to propose “gay shamanism” as an essential quality of gay identity that Native Americans, ancient Europeans, and all “nature peoples” honored in the past and that radical gay men renewed today.

When radical faeries formed in 1979, they adapted gay and lesbian efforts to find a home in opposition to modernity, even as they altered back-to-the-land practices in order to serve urban desires for temporary retreat. Like their predecessors, the radical faerie founders framed the country and primitivity as repositories of an authenticity long sought by urban subjects of metropolitan societies. This articulated a quality of settler subjectivity that Philip Deloria has described as “playing Indian,” in which Indian impersonation grants oppositional voice to...
subjects of settler society while reconciling them to inheriting culture and land won by conquest. Radical faerie practices tapped such qualities by making rural gatherings grant primarily urban subjects an authentic affinity with racial and national differences, letting them feel more rural and indigenous than the locations and identities they occupied in everyday life. While some radical faeries focused on critiquing normative gay culture, all first presented as subjects of that culture, who chose rural mobility from a self-critical rejection of the terms of modern sexuality and who then returned to everyday life to inspire other gay men to follow. The work of cofounder Harry Hay, later extended by Will Roscoe, Bradley Rose, and Randy Conner, emphasized “gay shamanism” (as Evans once called it) as a natural and shared basis for gay men to imagine their identities and roles in modern society. Such narratives never defined all radical faeries, such as when some questioned if the culture or community they created was normatively white, anti-intellectual, or appropriative, although the relative rarity of such claims let Hay’s legacy remain central within their communities. Yet these diverse opinions remained compatible with making recurrent retreat to rural gatherings and sanctuaries a privileged method for finding a sense of authentic home and belonging to gay subjectivity and community.

While the culture I describe arose first in itinerant gatherings where gay men sought to liberate gay nature, over time gatherings became tied to sanctuaries that supported the desire for indigenous roots by caretaking originally indigenous land. Gatherings use rural spaces to produce an ephemeral and portable sense of home but join with landed sanctuaries to welcome radical faeries at once into forms of mobility and emplacement. Material practices that continually shift gay men’s relationship to place offer evidence of radical faerie culture coming into being as an arrival at home.

Gathering Subjectivity

Gathering is a central metaphor and practice through which radical faeries have created community to liberate gay nature. The practice of rural gathering can appear specific to the time and place of its occurrence. Radical faeries often cite the rare community that gathering forms as the truest expression of their culture. I build on this recognition by asking how radical faeries use rural location to create an ultimately portable subjectivity, which can evoke its rural origins long after gatherings end and participants return to everyday life. I argue that a key practice of gathering is to assemble not just people but also their many methods for realizing gay liberation, which the gathering performatively enacts as a model of a
shared gay nature. Gatherings act in this way when their rural locations invoke the indigenous qualities that participants seek. In their U.S. formation, gatherings connect Native Americans to all indigenous people, while attending in particular to ancient pagan Europeans. Gatherings fashion for radical faeries a sense that they share a global and transhistorical nature—framed in the United States most centrally by the desires of white gay men—which promises to welcome gay men home to themselves and a world of sexual truth.

Radical faeries design gatherings to free sexuality and gender from normative constraints by playing on their rural emplacement. Early gatherers cited Hay when they argued that the effeminacy and sexual libertinism assigned to gay men in heterosexual culture could ground the practice of gay liberation. Hay wrote near the time of the first gathering that the epithet “sissy” recognized a truth in gay subjectivity, which he asked gay men to reclaim by shedding “the ugly green frog skin of Hetero-male imitation . . . to reveal the beautiful Fairy Prince hidden beneath.” Gatherings promote drag as a way to practice an anti-assimilationist gay sensibility, although radical faeries tend to eschew passing in favor of genderfuck juxtapositions of masculine and feminine. Gatherings also invite sexual exploration, whether in a “gathering boyfriend” (or, more than one) or in venues for collective sexual play. A mood of sexual possibility at gatherings belies the fact that sex usually does not occur in plain sight, although stories affirm that sexuality here is freed from expectations of privacy, coupling, or monogamy. From the time of the first gathering, such practices accrued meaning specific to their occurring in rural contexts. Genderfuck drag at gatherings regularly troubles urbane images of hyperfemininity in order to parody the putatively unrefined or abnormal genders and sexualities of the rural working classes. Riffing on sex and race discourses that frame rural people as unable to differentiate proper sex, gatherers may perform “trashy” housewives, cowhands, or other figures that mock and indulge degeneracy in order to counter the restrictions of civilizational culture. Radical faeries also parody their own efforts at rural life by feminizing such tasks as clearing hay, harvesting trees, or maintaining buildings, as when one year Wolf Creek gatherers donned eclectic drag outfits for a day’s work under the hot sun to bury electrical wire between the Barn and Garden House. Sexuality also tends to be described at gatherings as unencumbered by civilizational propriety for having appeared in a natural and thus freed state. The status of nudity at gatherings is significant here. If urban gay cultures sexualize nudity at beaches, gyms, and bathhouses while extolling a limited range of beauty based on consumption, nudity appears at gatherings as a form of dress that affirms the body “as it is.” Radical faeries thus resemble naturists by rejecting the shaming concealment of
the body. Yet they apply this sentiment in order to enhance eroticism, hoping that unreconstructed bodies will bring gay men closer to loving one another unconditionally. Gatherings thus promise participants a homecoming to self and community in practices that appear to free sexuality and gender by playing on their rare rural environment.

Gatherings also promise sexual and gendered freedom by mobilizing global and transhistorical evidence of indigenous cultures as gay spirituality. Reports from the first gathering tell how it focalized around feminist pagan and quasi-indigenous rituals, which honored gay men’s effeminate ties to the earth. Collective performances of drag as expressing a gender-fluid gay nature joined a “mud ritual” that immersed gay men in the land while inspiring ecstatic communion.24 During the 1980s, gatherings spread across the United States in part by coinciding with major European pagan holidays, such as the spring holiday Beltane or the fall celebration Samhein. At Beltane gatherings, I heard some radical faeries reframe the procreative metaphor of the maypole in order to argue that it symbolized the grounding of gay nature in Gaian roots. Indigenous qualities of gay spirituality on rural land were emphasized at one mid-1990s ritual at Wolf Creek, when at the full moon organizers invited gatherers to the meadow in order to dance to Native American and African drums and induce trance that would open them to their shamanic potential. Singular rituals like this joined ones that recurred at gatherings, such as Donald Engstrom’s Queer God ritual, which was initiated in the 1980s and repeated in later years. The ritual combined chant, meditation, and touch while invoking the ancient Greek, pagan European, and Native American roots of gay shamanism.25 Taken together, gathering rituals code a global array of cultures as evidence of the indigenous roots of gay sexuality and spirituality. Yet while drawing on many cultural histories, rituals trace the roots of their indigenity in particular to analogies between the ancient paganisms of Europe and the Americas. In this context, indigeneity tends to invoke Native Americans as the first inspirations of radical faeries and as the history of the land where gatherings first formed. By linking Native Americans and pagan Europeans, radical faerie culture centrally addresses white U.S. gay men by offering them a basis in race or national heritage to claim that they share with Native Americans a specifically indigenous history of accepting gay sexuality and spirituality.

The grounding of rural gathering and gay subjectivity in emulating Native American cultures appears in particular in the ritual of heart circle. Heart circle is the one ritual to have transpired at all radical faerie gatherings, and it has come to embody the meaning and intended effect of gathering. The practice seats participants in a circle to speak “from the heart”—privileging speech about feelings—
while passing an object known as a talisman, which grants the holder a right to speak and obligates others to listen until it is relinquished. Heart circle structures everyday life at a rural gathering: the morning call to circle announces the day’s first event, and all others occur around it, with none preempting it. While some heart circles I attended lasted from one to two hours, some approached four hours or continued throughout the day, so long as speakers carried the group’s attention until an uncontested suggestion to close. Heart circle centers emotional speech, deep listening, and collective conversation in radical faerie subjectivity and sets these qualities as a tone for everyday life at gatherings. The practice ties gayness to emotionality and so affirms effeminacy as a strength, even as it invites gay men into the nurturing solidarity Hay described as a “circle of loving companions,” where gay men mirror their experiences and realize a “subject-subject consciousness.” Heart circle thus incites a collective process of self-discovery, as participants are asked to experience the words of other speakers as expressing a deeply shared truth that all joined to find. Yet such qualities of heart circle rest on linking liberated gay subjectivity to indigeneity. Radical faeries formed heart circle from a similar source as other nonnative counterculturists, who in the 1970s adopted “council process” as a mode of speech that they said derived from the consensus practices of Native American societies. Among other consensus methods, council process was uniquely authenticated by an indigenous source grounding the collectivism that counterculturists desired. The radical faeries’ creation of heart circle then ties the indigenization of true speech in council process to emotionality. This causes heart circle to liberate gay subjectivity by playing on colonial discourses that link emotionality and femininity to primitivity. Heart circle in this way presents a method for creating radical faerie subjectivity and culture, when it grants nonnative gay men a generically indigenous tool to form emotional communion that will realize a specifically gay indigenous nature.

Taken together, the many collective activities at a rural gathering performatively enact radical faerie subjectivity as a homecoming to a global and transhistorical gay nature. I saw this transpire early in my research at a Beltane gathering at Short Mountain, where the vistas afforded by the sanctuary’s central knoll portrayed how radical faerie subjectivity brings gay men home to each other by bringing the world home to them. Under an afternoon sun, I sat with over forty gatherers spread across the grassy knoll. Many had started the chilly morning outdoors in heart circle. As circle participants huddled for warmth and companionship, the spring clouds that had covered this year’s gathering finally opened into sunlight. After heart circle ended, many participants stayed outdoors to revel in the weather, even as kitchen helpers prepared a lunch that people coming to the
knoll brought to share. With the addition of passersby, a growing group sprawled lazily across the grass in varied forms of drag and nudity, and sustained the sense of connection from heart circle in new conversations. From this central point in the commons, we in the group could observe as the events announced in heart circle began to occur. Just across the knoll, people dressed in yellow fabric or nude entered the bathhouse for a Santeria-inspired ritual honoring the goddess Oshun, led by a pale and androgynous radical faerie who served as priest/ess of the ceremony. As chants droned over the bathhouse roof, other people passed on their way to the common buildings, saying that a discussion was about to begin on the Mayan calendar. This calendric form recently had become popular among rural and itinerant gay men who sought alternative modes of keeping time while living “off the grid.” The picnic on the knoll continued unbroken until, without warning, a strong chant arose behind the common buildings, and with the repeated phrase “Purple hands of healing, faggot god, faerie god,” a group of twenty or more strolled down the hill toward us, chanting to the beat of their steps. Thus began the gathering’s Queer God ritual, as participants wove around our encampment to sit in the gazebo on our other side. That shadowed structure stood just far enough away so that we could see their ritual begin without its sounds interrupting our conversations, which continued throughout the afternoon.

The group on the knoll enacted a key promise at gatherings of emotional communion, even as the surrounding rituals mapped global and transhistorical insights into the gay nature that was said to ground our bond. For if this gathering welcomed us home to ourselves and to one another, we were made to belong to a remarkably small world. In the bathhouse one could meet Caribbean indigeneity and the African diaspora; on the hilltop, the ancient Maya; and in the Gazebo, a modern gay refashioning of ancient Greeks, Celts, and Native Americans. “Above,” lunch came from a hilltop kitchen organized by a rural collective of handymen, while “behind” us, at the start of the day, heart circle had offered a Native American technique to tap our inner truth. We on the knoll did not join in all these events, just as most of their participants experienced only one, but our vantage modeled how the gathering drew them together as complementary routes to a shared nature. As participants at this gathering who wished more to socialize that day than to join in formal events, we might not normally register in an account of rural gathering as a ritual space. Yet our time together constituted a key ritual activity of rural gathering: creating emotional communion in the supportive context of a world of gay spirituality. I do not recall us talking on the knoll about the rituals that transpired around us. Yet their naturalization into our surrounds is precisely why they present a crucial image for imagining how a global and trans-
historical nature provides gay men at gatherings a basis and context for finding self-love and social acceptance. Undiscussed, the day’s formal rituals did not go unnoticed by us. Their tableau performed the eclectic array of knowledges that the gathering, like a crucible, melds into a map of the global and transhistorical routes of gay nature, which all who witness or experience them may choose to follow later in their everyday lives.

Gatherings produce radical faerie subjectivity in these ways whether they occur at retreat centers, wilderness campsites, or sanctuaries. But my story’s location at a sanctuary communicates unique qualities that I now must consider. By forming an ultimately portable subjectivity, gatherings beg the question of the arrival that began my account: for the archway at Wolf Creek continually welcomes radical faeries home even when no one gathers to witness it. Sanctuaries may seem to be naturalized backdrops for gatherings, but they differ from camps or retreats by being permanent repositories of a multigenerational gay community that residential collectives sustain year-round. Sanctuaries indicate that the portability of radical faerie subjectivity crucially articulates particular lands, which may be called to mind after gatherings end and participants disperse as key sites where radical faerie desires for liberation are sustained.

**Materializing Sanctuary**

Like gathering, sanctuary presents a crucial metaphor and practice with which radical faeries fashion sexual subjectivity in a mobile relation to place. As used by radical faeries, the word *sanctuary* plays on a doubled meaning, promising gay men refuge from embattled lives in phobic society while making rural land a medium for renewing spirituality at its source. Sanctuaries promise safety and sanctity to radical faeries in their U.S. contexts of origin by appearing to inherit not a generic but a specific indigeneity, which permits nonnatives to belong to originally Native American land. I explain how radical faerie culture became grounded in sanctuaries by historicizing their U.S. formation after 1979, which included the responses of radical faeries to displacements U.S. gay men experienced amid the rise of AIDS. Despite having been imagined in a prior era, sanctuaries appeared among U.S. radical faeries during the first impact of AIDS in their lives. In the 1980s and afterward, radical faeries increasingly located gatherings at sanctuaries acquired for this purpose, even as those lands became sites of permanent memorials to radical faeries who died of AIDS. Sanctuaries then became privileged sites where radical faeries could return to recommit to collective survival and sanctify the memory of lost friends, now imagined as part of the spiri-
tual power of radical faerie lands. In these ways and more, sanctuaries assured radical faeries that, although most lived far away, their community and spirituality remained intimately and permanently tied to indigenous roots.

When acquiring rural lands as sanctuaries, radical faeries in the United States linked the gathering’s itinerant practices and global imaginaries to histories of settlement, which made originally Native American land a privileged conduit to radical faerie subjectivity. Adapting back-to-the-land practices placed radical faeries in the historical trajectory of counterculturalists, naturists, homesteaders, and frontiersmen, whose practices of settlement included imperialist nostalgia for Native Americans. When radical faeries acquired land, they could acknowledge the dispossession of indigenous people and locate their land tenure more in an indigenous than a settler legacy, by arguing that they bore a sacred affinity with Native Americans granted by sexuality. Importantly, despite inheriting their first sanctuaries from back-to-the-land projects, radical faeries soon sought lands closer to the urban regions where most lived, not so much for removal to rural life as for ease of commuting. Thus, if sanctuaries offer radical faeries belonging to originally indigenous land, no matter how much those sites resemble settlements, they present not ends of the road but sites of transit, which are defined by the continual arrival, departure, and return of people on the move. In turn, sanctuary lands accrete memories from past gatherings of radical faeries traversing the spatial and temporal scales of gay nature, such that all may be recalled at one site. Sanctuaries thus can be understood to perform an emplaced practice of mobility. Radical faeries who visit may experience both the specificity of originally indigenous land and the myriad places and times it transports their sense of gay nature.

Arrival at the sanctuary heralds the start of a journey for which the Wolf Creek welcome arch stands as a portal. If those who enter feel at home, this home is multiple, even as it is grounded crucially in the history of one site. Legacies of settlement in this way inform how sanctuaries grant radical faeries safe haven and spiritual renewal, as they meld gay nature with the histories of gay collectivists and indigenous people on settled land.

If such effects appeared at the first radical faerie sanctuaries, their promise became especially acute in the United States amid the initial effects of the AIDS epidemic. The safety and sanctity of indigenized homecoming answered experiences of social displacement caused by AIDS, in particular among the white U.S. gay men from urban and middle-class communities that focalized the radical faeries. Histories of the early U.S. epidemic tell of a rapid destabilization of sexual minority institutions, from families and friendship networks to bars, baths, and political groups, although these troubles also inspired new associations

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**GLQ: A JOURNAL OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES**

Published by Duke University Press
that challenged marginality in health, politics, and public culture. Narratives describe the crises of belonging that followed, as confronting dying forced gay men to reconsider separation from phobic familial or religious homes, or to confront a rude awakening that they lacked a national belonging that now required new struggle. Yet historians also note that if many tales narrated these crises as effects of homophobia, their power relations were defined by much more than sexuality. The racial, economic, and national structuring of home, community, and citizenship was marked by early responses to AIDS among U.S. queers of color. While forming independent AIDS projects, queers of color addressed their erasure from state recognition and from white middle-class AIDS activism while they challenged heterosexism in communities of color and presented a new leadership for addressing intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and health. Such histories show that crises of identity, community, or spirituality among gay men facing AIDS always arose intersectionally, such that whiteness, urban class privilege, or appeals to normative citizenship can be marked as informing normative tales of the disruption or renewal of gay cultures amid AIDS. Among early responses to AIDS by U.S. gay men, radical faerie culture was equipped to address people for whom white, middle-class, or urban pursuits of rural, natural, or indigenous life answered their sense of displacement. The culture of gatherings thus can be reinterpreted for how they responded to crises caused by AIDS. In turn, we can ask how this response materialized at sanctuaries, when memorializing struggles with AIDS grounded the homecoming of radical faeries to indigenous sexual nature and land.

Gatherings fostered solidarity among gay men by recalling and sustaining gay cultures threatened by the epidemic. Celebrating drag and social sex defied the increasing pathologization of urban gay cultures as a danger to good health, by promoting them as routes to a healing gay nature that could mend shattered bonds with new community. Indeed, radical faerie culture promoted qualities that would appear in primary and secondary HIV prevention education. Breaking isolation and fostering empowered identities and emotional communication all were promoted by educators to help people choose to keep themselves and others healthy, whether or not they lived with HIV.

Similarly, heart circles invited gay men to articulate feelings tied to illness, death, loss, or survival; to receive aid from comrades who shared their struggles; and to strengthen common identity by tracing their stories to similar roots. Such qualities spoke to people who otherwise may never have approached the radical faeries but who found in heart circle a way to communicate needs and to get support. I recall one gathering at Wolf Creek when a man living with AIDS spoke of
attending this, his first gathering, as part of recovering from his recent caregiving
for his lover, who was experiencing AIDS-related illnesses. The man arrived at
the land taxed from managing their welfare with little support, and I recall he
remained wary of pagan ritual, to which he was new. But in heart circle he spoke
with gratitude for the support he was receiving, and afterward he stated a wish that
he had known connection like this with gay men was possible, for he did not know
how he could have gone on without it.

The deliberate emotionality that heart circle modeled as a basis of radical
faerie culture mediated the line between despair and survival amid the AIDS cri-
sis, which included the ways that it accommodated grief. A longtime radical faerie
practitioner and friend discussed this with me early in my time among radical
faeries, by saying “one thing that would be very faerie—one thing that is a very
advanced faerie kind of interaction that could happen—is for you, when you’re
in a space of profound grief, or knowing that you need to get in touch with some
really raw and difficult stuff, that you could call me, as a faerie, and say, I need
to work through some difficult things, and to have me support you and stand with
you through that vulnerable space.”

I received these words when my struggle
with the illness of another friend was near its peak, and I felt their value entirely
apart from the ways they stated values in radical faerie culture. Yet I also saw
in them an action that participants in heart circle might offer a person in grief:
complete attention, followed by affirmation that amid grief’s continuation, the lov-
ing community promised by heart circle also would sustain. Indeed, my friend’s
words distinguished radical faeries from other people precisely because of their
knowledge of how to bond by forthrightly and reliably facing grief—and, at an
“advanced” level that, perhaps, followed many experiences of heart circle amid
the epidemic. In this way, heart circle acted as an emblem and tool of a natural,
reliable, and enduring solidarity promised by radical faerie subjectivity and soci-
ality amid AIDS.

The indigenous inspirations of radical faerie culture addressed the effects
of AIDS by grounding gay men not just in emotional communion but in a spiritu-
ality that countered their religious embattlement while facing death or survival.
The AIDS epidemic inspired moral attacks on U.S. gay men by the conservative
Christian movements that informed conservative national politics and governmen-
tal neglect. While many religious institutions did not join such attacks or explicitly
opposed them, claims that sexual perversity caused AIDS or targeted gays for
divine punishment circulated even as many gay men tried to return to ancestral
religions or seek new ones. In this context radical faerie culture offered a fully
realized spirituality that affirmed gay men and that answered religious battles by
tracing gay spirituality to indigenous roots. Radical faeries countered homophobic framings of gay sexuality as sin or harm by making it the very path gay men could follow to spiritual healing. Grounding this claim in gay nature’s indigeneity then rendered moot gay men’s rejection by the Christian Right. The feminist paganism adapted by radical faeries critiqued Christianity as a patriarchal and colonial force in European history, such that gay men who claimed an indigenous nature could exist authentically beyond Christianity’s reach. The ancient roots of gay shamanism further obviated conservative religious claims to represent America, by granting radical faeries as nonnatives a voice grounded authoritatively in Native American histories. All such qualities provided a context for gay men to gain a reprieve from displacements in U.S. society by finding a home in its indigenized opposite in radical faerie culture.

Indigeneity was marked increasingly by radical faeries as gatherings invested sanctuaries with memories of struggles with AIDS. Nowhere was this more apparent to me than in the creation of sanctuary memorials to radical faeries who died of AIDS. In the scattering of ashes and in ritual remembrances, lost friends became one with the spiritual powers of originally Native American land. Memorials and their rituals also drew radical faeries back to sanctuaries as sites of pilgrimage, where they could sanctify the memory of those who had died while making this activity key to renewing solidarity in shared nature and collective survival. Sanctuaries nurtured such qualities in the long periods when most radical faeries did not travel to experience them. In this way, sanctuary lands became crucial sites of memory and desire that reassured gay men living far away that their collective history and eternal nature were being sustained.

On visiting sanctuaries I found memorials dotting the landscape, connecting life on the land with a past that gatherers inherited in their present and future community. At one Wolf Creek gathering, while strolling a footpath behind the Barn I unexpectedly found myself before a substantial altar resting near the base of a large tree. Boxes and planks covered with colorful fabrics supported photographs, toy figures, costume jewelry, note cards in Ziploc bags, and metal religious statues celebrating a longtime radical faerie recently lost to AIDS. At Short Mountain, a stroll from the central knoll along a wooded escarpment leads to a shaded clearing that houses the sanctuary’s memorial grove. On each of my visits to this place I recall that among the many objects on the ground, from flowers and fronds to personal mementos and small cairns of stones, in plain view sat one rock with an anonymously carved message: “UNION This place is dedicated to our holding together 1985.” This proclamation of determined communion amid ongoing struggle, placed in the grove in its early years, resonated with me when I
first met it ten years later in a space that the Short Mountain residents tended as part of their own continuation. Sanctuary gatherings also could include rituals in which old and new gatherers experienced memorials as focal points for sustaining community. At one Wolf Creek gathering, I participated in the annual procession, in which gatherers circumambulated the meadow and visited each of its memorial sites. In the afternoon twilight, a group of about forty people began the circuit to the beat of African and South Asian drums. We visited first the land’s oldest memorial, the pendulum, where a tripod suspended a stone under which for years the ashes of radical faeries and friends had been scattered. After some time, we then walked a few hundred feet to a memorial garden planted originally by a longtime resident now passed away. At both sites, people huddled in the evening chill as participants called the indigenous, pagan, and radical faerie spirits of the land to join us and told stories recalling old friends in moments of fun, sadness, or rage. The ritual concluded as we walked under the stars around the meadow’s far side to the warmly lit Barn and tent, where a kitchen crew had laid out dinner. The procession linked its participants by fashioning their shared history or identity through recollecting memories of absent people who were drawn from and invested again in the land. This and other similar invocations made radical faeries not historians of a distant past indigeneity but mediators of a lived and material union with the spiritual power of originally Native American land.

The performative enactment by a dispersed constituency of spiritual continuity on and in the land appeared most dramatically to me in 1996, at the creation of the bridge memorial at Wolf Creek (fig. 2). In early 1995, rains swelled the creek and toppled the sanctuary’s only access bridge. Nomens was emerging at that time from a period when major gatherings had not occurred; the most recent one was well attended, but belief in an extended community’s investment in the land remained tentative. Nomenus leaders promoted raising funds to replace the bridge by establishing a memorial, to which people could donate in the name of radical faeries who had passed away. Many donations followed, including from old-timers who had not participated since the heady days of the 1980s when the sanctuary first formed. Work to build the bridge over the following year linked to other efforts to enliven the Nomenus community. Hundreds attended subsequent gatherings, including the midsummer gathering in 1996 when the memorial was built. Its design and construction were led by a radical faerie who at that time spent part of the year in India following his chosen spiritual practices. Using a plan to fashion a cairn with hefty stones from the creek bed, the designer recruited people in the first week of the gathering to carry stones up the short ravine and assemble them just inside the land near the bridge. The stones encased a colorful central plaque made by a radical faerie artist, on which were inscribed names of
people who had died, not limited to those in whose name donations were received. During the gathering, as people visited the construction or passed it on their way to or from their campsites, the artist invited them to leave items recalling absent friends that would be embedded in the mortar.

One day late in the gathering, a large group of people met to dedicate the memorial. Volunteers assembled the group on the far side of the new bridge and led us single file across the creek while a young man softly played songs on his guitar. On stepping onto the land, each person received a mark of red ochre on the forehead, which the artist had requested to sanctify our act as what he understood as a form of puja. Everyone then sat or stood around the cairn. Its candle-lit central basin was filled with water and flowers, and the bright colors joined the plaque and embedded objects to reflect the colorful and eclectic attire worn by the otherwise somber group. In a silence prior to the leaders inviting people to speak, many wept singly or in small groups seated close together. Then one person after another rose to tell of people who were gone, testifying to their continued presence in the gathering’s play of gender and desire and exhorting us to maintain community by drawing strength from their memory. Some praised a power that they sensed in this memorial, fashioned as it was from the stuff of the land while bonded to spiritual truths that they welcomed from abroad. As silence returned, the leaders closed the ritual and led the group to dinner to share the community whose roots had been renewed in this place.
In this scene and others, grappling with an epidemic brought radical faeries home, when memorials and their collective ritualization materialized the sanctuary’s promise of sacred refuge in indigenous sexual nature. Memorials made radical faeries and sanctuary land one via the scattering of ashes; the building of memorials from the materials of the land, which were informed by local and world-traveling spiritualities; the privileging of those memorials as sites for recollecting lost comrades; and the recognizing of those comrades’ belonging to a spiritual pantheon proper to originally indigenous land. Memorials dotting the landscape thus invested a multigenerational community’s union with rural, natural, and indigenous truth in sanctuary land. The recollection of memorials by radical faeries when they were far away then focalized a mobile and dispersed constituency in shared ties to the sanctuary land and its perpetual promise of homecoming. If those ties ever came under threat, memorials could invite pilgrimage to renew an ancestral community while sustaining a space that promised homecoming even in the community’s absence. Memorializing in the age of AIDS thus shows how radical faerie sanctuaries grounded dispersed constituencies and their mobile quests for indigenous nature in an eternal spiritual communion with originally indigenous land.

Conclusion

This study contextualizes radical faerie culture in the United States by tracing how rural practices of mobility and emplacement liberate authentic gay subjectivity by forming new community and ties to settled land. My ethnographic analysis is a response to the ways in which gay men are welcomed home to radical faerie community and land that are and are not their own. I examine how homecoming materializes for gay men in rural retreat when love of self and others and embrace of a global and transhistorical nature also grant a newly indigenized relationship to life on settled land. In such practices, radical faerie culture produces modern sexual minorities by mediating their relation to histories of colonization. Radical faerie culture thus may be distinctive, but it is not unique. As Deloria argued, non-native desires for indigeneity are common in U.S. society, and radical faerie culture promises liberation to the broader sexual minority constituencies from which it arose and which it means to transform. Studying the cultural distinctiveness of radical faeries thus provides one index of how sexual minority subjects engage the racial and national formation of sexuality while reconciling themselves with their inheritance of colonization.

Just as a historical intention of radical faeries was to address and alter U.S.
sexual minority formations, my analysis of radical faeries calls queer studies to investigate the intersectionality and coloniality of sexual minority formations in settler societies. While I note naturalizations of racial and national power among radical faeries, my ethnographic intent is to engage with radical faerie quotidian practices on their own terms. As a result, my critical account foregrounds the integrity of radical faerie culture as a creative mediation of the racial, national, and colonial conditions of sexuality. Queer scholarship benefits by studying such mediations, so that our work marks both how power conditions sexuality and how sexual subjects creatively engage it — work to which ethnography can make crucial contributions. My ethnographic account explained how radical faeries act on their normative formation: when they mobilize a ruralist desire to serve urban subjects, or when they ground their culture at rural sites to address the effects of AIDS. While radical faeries’ creative engagements are even more extensive, I focus on how they turn a mobile relation to rural emplacement into a method to mediate their sexual, racial, and national locations in settler society. The itinerant ephemerality of gatherings accretes as the multigenerational materiality of sanctuaries, which then answer displacement, death, and survival by grounding ancestral ties in eternal belonging on indigenous land. Tracing radical faerie culture at the juncture of mobile gatherings and landed sanctuaries marks how sexual truth can be realized through travel to sites never before seen and finding home — albeit, at the Wolf Creek welcome arch, through a portal to myriad possibilities. In their arrivals, radical faeries continue to come home to sexuality and place and all that each represents in negotiating sexuality’s colonial legacies.

Notes

I thank the many people I met during my time among radical faeries, with special appreciation to residents of the Wolf Creek and Short Mountain sanctuaries and participants in their gatherings. I withheld identities or altered descriptions to preserve confidentiality. Unless otherwise cited, all interpretations are mine and are not meant to represent the opinions or positions of any named individuals, organizations, or social networks. For crucial conversations about radical faerie culture that challenged and complicated my thoughts, I give deep thanks to Kwai T. Lam, G. Schultz, and Tedd Siegel. Many thanks to all who assisted the development of this article, especially Anna Tsing, Lisa Rofel, Gayle Rubin, David Valentine, Karen Ho, Michael Cowan, Michelle Rosenthal, Cynthia Wu, Marc Schachter, Jerry Burg, and the anonymous reviewers for GLQ. For support of research and writing, I thank the Department of Anthropology and Graduate Division of the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Macalester College.


3. This study specifically historicizes the radical faeries’ U.S. formation, which by the mid-1990s included five sanctuaries managed by urban or rural collectives, at least five regional networks sponsoring gatherings at rented retreats, and small year-round collectives in town and cities across the United States, in addition to one collective in Toronto with a sanctuary in rural Ontario. My book also asks how radical faerie culture origins persist or were altered when, after two decades, gatherings and sanctuaries formed in western Europe, Australia, and Thailand. I argue that any account of these contexts must ask first how they translate the radical faeries’ original U.S. formation, which addresses nonnative subjects seeking belonging on indigenous land—a historical baseline presented briefly in this article.

4. Harry Hay, “A Call to Gay Brothers,” *RFD*, Summer 1979, 1; Thompson, “This Gay Tribe.” Radical faerie demography is relevant to my analysis, although it defies quantitative accounting: no central database records historical demographics, and while the Holy Faerie Database recorded early West Coast gatherers, no list collected self-identification by race or nationality. Yet my qualitative account of demography highlights that radical faeries originated in and fully intersect the urban sexual minority communities that produced them by assuring that a rural, natural, or indigenous sexual nature exists and is sustained in their practices. Radical faerie culture thus meaningfully informs sexual identity for many more than just those identified...

5. I call “berdache” a colonial object to reflect agreement among Native American Two-Spirit activists and anthropologists that the term does not describe indigenous cultures. My usage is akin to that of Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, who write the term as “‘berdache’ [sic]” to mark its coloniality. Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, introduction to Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality, ed. Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 21.


7. A rural gay collective at Short Mountain formed in the 1970s and became a hub for gatherings after radical faerie culture caught residents’ interests. During my research the Wolf Creek collective included three to six persons, while Short Mountain’s numbered from ten to twenty. Each maintained the land for an extended community that met regularly: gatherings at Short Mountain in May and October corresponded to the pagan festivals Beltane and Samhein, while in 1995 Nomenus renewed a tradition of midsummer “spiritual gatherings” at Wolf Creek.


9. As Povinelli argues, “‘radical faerie’ can be a longstanding, deeply presupposed resource of the self . . . or it can be a momentary allegiance that is taken up, cast aside, or invaginated with other available social forms” (Empire of Love, 108). I pursue the implications of this claim in my multiple articles on radical faeries. While this essay considers how rural spaces produce collective sensibilities, my other writing on the continuity and contrast of rural and urban practices foregrounds the variability and porousness of radical faerie identities and cultures. Morgensen, “Back and Forth to the Land”; Morgensen, “Rooting for Queers.”


Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Weston, Families We Choose.


20. My analysis of radical faerie rural practices is complemented by writing on their specifically urban formation: see Morgensen, “Back and Forth to the Land” and “Rooting for Queers.” Radical faeries resembled less back-to-the-land movements than they did women’s music festivals, which drew subjects into brief rural retreat in order to experience radical gendered or sexual community sustained thereafter by new identity or culture (Martha Mockus, “Radical Harmonies,” Women and Music Review:


24. Thompson, “This Gay Tribe.”


