

The Fool Speaks the Truth: The Creation of Queer Archetypes in the Radical Faerie
Community

The evening of Samhain 2011, I along with dozens of other Radical Faeries process from the Wolf Creek's barn to the fire circle. A faerie tells the story of Persephone and her descent into the underworld. He invites everyone to tell Persephone the story of our ancestors, of our light and our joy so that she can carry those into the darkness. A friend wonders why we repeat a story about male domination over a woman; why we don't rewrite the story with her having two lovers. He then yells, "Run, Persephone, Run!" At midnight, two people place Persephone in the fire sending her to the underground and then ask us to invite our ancestors to the fire circle. As people list their dead, both those known by name and those whose names are forgotten, clowns sitting in the fire pit's southeast corner cackle and laugh. During someone's polemic on apathy surrounding environmental degradation, a man in a two-toned jester suit holding a crown runs up, collapses in front of the fire, and places a leaf into the flames. He shouts "this just in from Grandmother Maple." After some confusion, because the person being witnessed has not finished, the trickster stands up, looked at this year's Stag King and says, "I stole your stupid crown."

This presentation focuses on how Northwest Radical Faeries use the figures of the fool and the Stag King as sources of self-creation, community cohesion, and critical dialogue. The uses of these archetypes reveal the continual presence of Gay Liberation- in its levity and mission- within this contemporary queer culture. Since this conference centers on Harry Hay, I focus on how his writings and call to gathering are still present

and relevant to the Radical Faerie community, despite a significant portion of Faeries not knowing who he is or ever reading his work. What this suggests is that while present, Hay's influence is not dominant. New traditions and archetypes arise without Hay's research or goals as the basis. One example is the more masculine five-year old tradition of picking a Stag King, which people developed to create a clearer focus for the Samhain gathering. While more pagan than queer, the ritual provides a point of communal cohesion through making an annual collective resolution, instead of the more typical individual resolution. This alongside the use of a real or imagined past and continual gatherings in the same locations provides interesting insights into a theorization of queer space and community that is counter to some strains of queer contemporary thought.

In *Sex in Public* Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe what they imagine is needed for a queer culture that not only creates safe spaces, but also allows possibilities outside heterosexism.¹ They rightly state that queer culture is “not empty release or transgression but a common language of self-cultivation, shared knowledge, and the exchange of inwardness.” They quickly continue “Queer culture has found it necessary to develop this knowledge in mobile sites.... Sites whose mobility makes them possible but also renders them hard to recognize as world making because they are so fragile and ephemeral.” Now I realize they sequestered community from their discussion of queer culture-making, partly because of the theorization of the concept “community” in queer theory, but this movement detracts from our understanding of queer cultures. Radical Faerie culture is queer but not completely fragile or ephemeral. In my studies, I explore a conceptualization of queer culture that is more solid. A queer world-making established

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through building and sustaining communities, histories, and spaces. In this paper, the creation of history and archetypes will be my primary focus.

In starting the Mattachine Society in 1955, Harry Hay posed three questions: "Who are we?" "Where do we come from?" and "Why are we here?" Hay wrote that answering these questions is key to both the acceptance of gay men into US culture and tapping into queer potential. For answers, he looked to Medieval Europe, Iron Age British Isles, Pueblo, and goddess worshipping cultures. Every example of a queer group or figure was another validation and insight into the role of gay men in culture. Each instance was proof of existence and times when queers were not oppressed or obliterated. The past gave a foundation, hope and a position from which to create.

The political purpose of Hay's research was to gain a place in community, not at the expense of assimilation, but to challenge heterosexist culture. The role of queer people is to work within society- to heal, to entertain, to teach, to govern, and challenge it. Secondly, by looking at pre-mass culture societies, he promoted clear examples of how cultures and communities functioned when culture was not just consumed by people, but created by them. Thirdly, this research transforms historical isolation- a feeling that one is an aberration, a reject within culture that has no past and certainly no future. Instead it shows how gender and sexual others have a history. These three pieces come together to form a place of dignity, a place to build a life and the idea that one could at this contemporary moment be part of a larger community.²

This sounds essentialist, and I realize that, but the fear of essentialist dialogue and the long-done argument between essentialists and social constructionists does not concern

² Hay, Harry. "Mattachine Society Missions and Purposes." In *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*, edited by Will Roscoe, 131–32. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

me here; the implications of this way of thinking does. These movements help create a community for those who need community. It challenges a stream within queer theory. Because of identity's damaging fixed and preconceived notions, it remains suspect. The sacrifice of identity is connected to the dismissal of community. Here I refer to the anti-communitarian turn, most notably Lee Edelman. Less vehement, but nevertheless present, anti-communitarianism is plentiful within queer theory. The more sober Michael Warner writes "the notion of a community has remained problematic if only because nearly every lesbian or gay remembers being such before entering a collectively identified space, because much of lesbian and gay history has to do with non-community, and because dispersal rather than localization continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding."³ Being trepidatious about community's ability to regulate is understandable, but instead of categorically refusing community, we should discuss understand their purpose, mechanisms, and effects. The Radical Faeries, a community of choice, allow for flexible self-exploration alongside the possibility of creating a genealogy, a history, such as Stag King and fool; a move that some radical faeries actually refuse. For those who do undergo this cultural building, it helps them create and solidify a space of dignity and comfort within a culture that undervalues their lives. This can involve the rejecting of life as it has been offered to them, by doing what Hay suggested and "explod[ing] once and for all the obscene unexamined assumptions by which we bind ourself into, the obsolescent social conformities... [instead] I define myself. We define ourselves!"⁴ Here Hay is not lambasting all representation, but instead mass-mediated images, created not

³ Warner, Michael, ed. "Introduction." In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, vii–xxxii. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 15

⁴ Hay, Harry. "Western Homophile Conference Keynote Address." In *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*, edited by Will Roscoe, 190–. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

by communities but by institutions. To find a foundation, Hay looked to the past; the accuracy and realness of this past is not as important as how it is felt and what it does.

Inspired by Edward Carpenter, Hay dug through history to find gay men's societal roles. In Medieval Europe, a queer person was "the Fool" or the Mattachine; this person did not marry or raise a family, but instead denounced unjust laws and oppressive taxation. Fools also organized festivals and rituals creating spaces for the community to mock and speak against those in power. Plays organized by the fools showed how the church dominated the community, but explained how the community could rise up through "their own faith and their own self-created dignity."⁵ Hay marks the rise of a central state, a higher concentration of wealth, and increasing hierarchal organizing to queer folk traditions' demise. The few that survived went underground or became state-sponsored, like the Court Jester.

To work through how Radical Faeries utilize the fool and Court Jester, I rely largely on two sources: my experiences at the radical faerie sanctuary Wolf Creek's Samhain 2011 and an interview with Michael Zero, a Radical Faerie and clown. For clarification, not every Radical Faerie uses archetypes to find their place in this community; this is just one path. Zero has spent almost a decade within the Radical Faerie community and he attributes the community with shaping him into the adult he is. Early on, someone within the community identified him as a "sacred fool." This could have been irreverently dismissed, but Zero investigated it. He began this spiritual work and then later discovered the Radical Faeries connection to the 1950s Mattachine Society

⁵ Hay, Harry. "The Homosexual and History... An Invitation to Further Study." In *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*, edited by Will Roscoe, 94–119. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. 107–113.

via Hay. Zero, citing the Italian peasant clown, the Mattachino, largely repeated the story of the Mattachine that I just spoke and the similar work of speaking truth. This connection via Hay and their shared tendencies of faeries and clowns to walk between worlds and work with shadow, the parts of self not easily explored, provided a solid rationale for the large subset of clowns within the Wolf Creek community.

Zero does "possessory work... utilizing my body as an empty vessel that can be filled with another energy that is not mine personally and the work part of it is the practice of clearing away a portion of ... my self-ness to create space for that other energy or entity to inhabit." Whether the possession is by an external force or something within him is not clear for Zero. This work is in service of himself, cultivating a person he would like to be and also for the community, he serves as a vocal critic, a warning, and a sounding board. During a night when the community allows drinking on the land, Zero invoked Buddy. He rinsed out an empty wine bottle, filled it with water, did ritual, put on face, and showed up at dinner circle intoxicated. In recalling that night Zero switches from speaking as Buddy, to speaking of Buddy as other: "I show up way too early, way too drunk and is just a mess and is falling over and knocking things down and being really abrasive and offensive and not okay." This magic creates an intentional reminder about alcohol consumption. He recalls that both times he has done this libations night had fewer incidences. Clowning offers his body as a momentary sacrifice. He explains that others see "Zero, a level headed and available and clear minded and of service being [as] a real fucking mess."

On a different night, Zero was one of the clowns laughing while people mournfully invoked their biological and chosen ancestors. His reason was that the fire pit

rituals lost their joy and movement. People sit around a fire and witness people's emotional outpours or polemics. This space for expression is not inherently damaging, but when every night is about practicing community ritual the same way it becomes unproductive and boring. People go to bed early instead of bonding with the community, doing their magic, or remembering their ancestors. Their communal and spiritual needs were not being met. They asked to dance, but because of how the power flows in that circle, it didn't happen. There is hierarchy; one that I can point to but have not got the community's thoughts on. In this situation though, the clowns served by laughing during and perhaps at the ritual reminding the community that joy and levity still exists and secondly, to tell us we could be experiencing joy now through rituals of remembrance that were not solemn or solely about watching an outspoken few. The clowns' laughter served as a release valve for the angst around death and loss. In addition to the AIDS epidemic's incredible shadow, the recent deaths of two faeries to suicide and alcoholism on or near the land created an even heavier ritual. The clowns' laughter shocked me out of the mourning state upsetting me at first, but reminding me that the dead Faeries might not want to be remembered in this fashion. Within the community, the Faerie clowns continue traditions of mocking the powerful, the sacred, while also revealing issues, such as alcohol use. They serve the community by challenging the community. Zero hopes his actions would cause people to confront him if he upset or challenged them. Clowns create one of numerous places for feedback. While his work is in service of the community, it also helps him work through addictions, shame around sexuality and being an effeminate and extroverted man. By embodying these things, he works out internal drama externally, allowing if need be, the community to rally around him. That gathering two crying

clowns needed and received that support. Clowning provides a position not only to help, but also to be helpless.

The Stag King is a five-year-old ritual in which the community crowns, celebrates, and then symbolically sacrifices the stag king. This ritual lacks a queer bent to it, although the Stag King sometimes represents the Horned God, who is central to numerous queer pagans. This ritual is not Hay-derived, but created by members of the community in 2008. Its purpose was to focalize a practice and magic around Samhain, like the Beltane pole ritual does for the Beltane Gathering. In 2011, the community gained a Stag King when someone found the silver ring in his cake. For one day, he was king, although he lacked any real authority, he was given perks; his boots were polished, someone cooked him a special breakfast. This movement of reprieve was given to him because for the next year he carries the burden of embodying a communal sacrifice or resolution. That evening May Queen transformed the stag king into a stag and community members hunted him.

While those who hunted the stag king were out, the community reflected on this year's sacrifice, "our illusion of our independence from all our relations." It was a call to become vulnerable and interdependent; a rejection of the American ethos of going it alone and a needed spell as the land and organization undergo dramatic and controversial changes. This was a plea to believe in the community and rely on community. After his death, the king reclined in his chair, the Jester interrupted the ritual and announced that he stole the Stag King's crown and was not giving it back. In his hands he held the brown leather crown with fur and a pair of antlers affixed to the front. This theft was not without motivation. The Jester announced that Faeries do not have kings. Perhaps letting the

community know that this ritual went too far into realism, was not enjoyable or too hierarchical. Or perhaps the Jester, like my friend who yelled for Persephone to run, was pointing out the heterosexism within this pagan ritual. He then declared that his friend died on the land the previous week. He sacrificed himself to the land and crowning a living Stag King ignored that sacrifice. Ocean, a former Stag King, agreed that we were not acknowledging his friend's death. He then discussed the role of the jester and how it was a space where gay men survived and contributed to society through mocking the king. The Stag King stood up, announcing his frustration and anger; he wants his crown back. Someone quickly countered, the crown was not his, but the communities. The jester did not give him the crown, but laid on the dirt, crying, and sporadically threatening to burn it.

In contemporary queer studies, shame and pride, and their equivalents, are the affective stances of choice, with not many siding with pride. Harry Hay's research and the work of Faeries bring forward the position of dignity. Unlike shame or pride, dignity is a place to build a life and community. This does not mean assimilation or complacency, but instead the creation or re-creation of a smaller queer culture, which challenges itself and the larger community. The work done here is not meant to stay within faerie culture; it is instead a space to practice and experiment in culture making. The point is not to just learn how to speak up for the community's needs during a gathering, but to gain the experience and courage to take this out into the larger world. The fool and the Stag King position people to reflect on communal needs and their role in speaking them. Touching history, whether five years or several centuries worth provides a sense of comfort, not complacency or conformity. Part of what I need to explore here,

but will remain unaddressed for now, is the experimenting, conjuring and replicating of “archaic” politics and social organization. Here I am thinking of Pierre Clastres’ *Society Against the State* and James Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed*. But to return to my main discussion, the archetypes provide a history that does not determine, but allows a person to contextualize themselves within a community and time. Because few declare themselves an archetype and these positions are not held in perpetuity, it could be a momentary or unacknowledged exploration of self.

The quest for dignity captures what Carolyn Dinshaw calls “the queer historical impulse,” “a desire for queers to relate to something before them and connecting that to the ways of being that are currently being left out” (1). With this Radical Faeries recall and embody the recent past, such as the AIDS Crisis, and times when people experienced more communal or tribal living. The roles people take on are not static, but instead something to be stepped into, made one’s own, and stepped out of or further explored. Instead of being anti-relational, anti-communitarian, and anti-futuristic as proposed by Lee Edelman, Radical Faerie’s queerness is a place to relate and create a culture and inter-dependence. Archetypes provide a felt history of people outside the norm and a felt purpose and usefulness that actively encourages people to reflect on and take action within their life, their culture, and their community. This is one way Faeries create a flexible stability, a shifting continuity, a queer institution, a useable past, a queer culture that is not fragile, but resilient.