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Redesigning Wreck: The beach as site of queer place-making and homophobic reaction in Canada



This is the more heavily visited portion of the southern end of Wreck Beach. This area is frequented by most of the gay and bisexual men who visit Wreck. Above the beach is the sprawling campus of The University of British Columbia with its Botanical Gardens, landscape architecture teaching studios, experimental fields, and dormitories shown. All the aerial images in this essay are from the mid-nineteen nineties.

I think a lot about the qualities and designs of the public spaces that I visit regularly. I want to believe that this sensitivity to my environment, verging on a fleeting obsession, is rooted in some deep well of creativity. But my narratives of design and redesign are also part of a twentieth century, Canadian fag thing. I note to myself escape routes from possible violence. I seek out visual screens for privacy and to avoid more obvious forms of hostility. I covet sites in which to have fun with my friends (new and old) -- natural stages on which to see and be seen. I am especially interested in the places where I find new forms of communality -- which often is obscured by archaic notions of community. I take great pleasure in complex places that I can explore quiet and in which I can get lost. And I am not the only one. This preoccupation with homoerotic (when not specifically homosexual) contact in public landscapes has a long history in Canadian gay male culture and activism. And in the pantheon of Canadian male homosexual cultures, the West Coast's Wreck Beach, on the edges of The University of British Columbia and the City of Vancouver, is a particularly symbolic and strategic landscape.

How does a gay male social scene on a nude beach become (Canadian) culture and lay the basis for a kind of rudimentary queer scape architecture? How do homoerotic bodies, mainly those of naked men, transform space? Relating to these questions, I also want to begin to unravel a disturbing paradox. Why are architecture and public art increasingly considered central in contemporary culture while queer desires in and designs for outdoor space, celebrating homoeroticism and disrupting notions of sexuality and gender, are still largely taboo in both academia and in decisions made about such queer sites? Given that Wreck is a cultural landscape, still claimed by aboriginals with the headquarters of the Musqueam Nation nearby, can this space be used to 'naturalise', or at least normalize, consensual homosexuality between adults?

In revisiting Wreck, I want to explore some links between desire, communality and conscious alteration of environments -- what I argue is 'design'. But design, as conscious, collective and co-ordinated, is relative. Places are only in part the result of conscious designs, ones that are rarely sexual in overt terms, and result often more from natural (and unnatural) change and political economic conflict (and chaos). These tensions between identification with landscapes supposedly 'wild' (local) or urban (metropolitan and imperial) and between found space and made place has been central elements of Canadian culture for over a century. Within these dialectics, the roles of strategic sites¹ for homoerotic social exchange and cultural expression have been poorly explored. Even less understood has been the link between spaces of contact, cultural expression and placemaking as forms of cultural production. In this essay, I examine the southern half of 'Wreck' -- an area that on sunny days is inhabited, almost totally, by men comfortable with, or only sometimes engaged in, homosexuality.

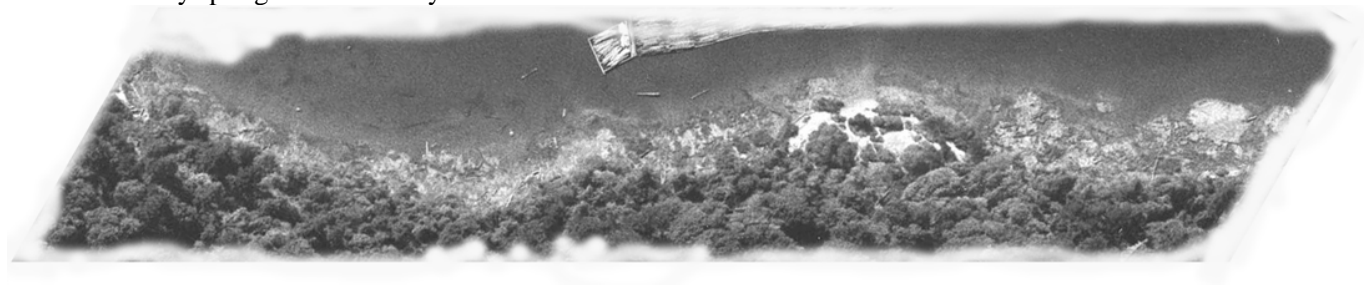
Wreck is a particularly conflicted Canadian landscape. There are unresolved land claims from the Musqueam Nation whose office is a less than a kilometre to the south. On warm days, the southern half of Wreck is a highly gendered and somewhat phallogocentric landscape. For some of us, who perceive of Vancouver society as being short of spaces of male nudity, this particular space of phallogocentricity provides a much-loved refuge. But Wreck is still a racialized landscape where European corporeality is normalised and Asian, African and Latin bodies remain exoticised and marginalised. And Wreck is part natural and part very much a manipulated and designed space. Today, this 'design' is more through careful neglect by the Greater Vancouver Regional District. 'Wreck', as in diving into the wreck, and shipwrecked, and wrecked from not enough or too much sex, is the stuff of Canadian regional icons.

Wreck comprises the southwestern shore of the peninsula west of central Vancouver. Here nudists and male homosexuals are crammed in some of the last remaining habitat, in the centre of the metropolitan region, for Bald eagle and Great blue heron. On the cliffs, are some of the few remaining ancient Douglas fir and Red cedar trees in the area. On warm and sunny days Wreck embodies the most expansive constellation of queer outdoor space that Vancouver has so far seen. In fact, space as in territory becomes a kind of fetish in itself. In the summer, the southern portion of Wreck involves more area of homoerotic social space than the rest of such open spaces in western Canada combined. Wreck is a mythic configuration of sites, a distinct location, of national significance as well for neighbouring parts of northwestern United States. And today,

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Wreck is something of a lightning rod for the contradictions in contemporary West Coast homoerotic culture, aesthetics, social relations, and sexual expression.

Wreck is also one of the largest, in space and daily visitors, of the gay male nude beach in the world. There are only a few other beaches in British Columbia, clothed or clothing optional, with such extensive summering populations of sexual minorities. For example, the stillborn women's space at Lions Bay, north of Horseshoe Bay, has seen lesbians repeatedly intimidated by neighbours and the RCMP. At Wreck, a diverse and idealistic erotic culture has taken root that at times re-enforces consumerist body culture and at other times contests it. At this margin, many of the unresolved issues around gender, race, class, and physical ability are reiterated as Vancouver transforms itself in its second century. Perhaps, Wreck can show us some new possibilities. And at its most trivial, the south end of Wreck is a clothing-optional queer theme park (with its share of married men) that warrants a closer examination. Before the theory, imagine a walk on a warm and sunny spring or summer day.



The Outer Limits, with older men, is on the left. The Oasis, with several hundred younger men at a time on sunny weekend days, is in the centre-right. The Flats, the major gay area from the nineteen seventies, is on the right.

**Walking Wreck Beach:
 From *Thah'thutlum* to *Stsulawh***

In this shore route, walk southwest, south, and then southeast in an arc that stretches around Point Grey. This landscape appears deceptively natural. Social conflicts become evident in tensions within and between bodies and the physical landscape. Aesthetics mark broader cultural and political economic relationships. Much of this walk is "clothing optional" and you may feel conspicuous, from April to October, if you chose to overdress. But various technologies and fetishes complicate exposure of corporeal surfaces -- anyway. From backpacks and boots to tattoos and piercing, even nakedness at Wreck is relative. |■=||■ Begin at the cliffs above Spanish Banks that look north to the site of greater Vancouver's European so-called discovery by the Spanish and British in 1792. This is just east of the former village site of *Thah'thutlum*, "shivering woman rock." This area was also an important site in the emergence of the West Coast counterculture in the dying embers of the Beats. ■.■. Moving southwest and along the bluffs, come to one of the most successful buildings designed by Arthur Erickson: The University of British Columbia Anthropology Museum. Of concrete and glass, it houses an exceptional collection of historic northwest coast artefacts including ones from the Musqueam villages of the area. ~■+■ Walking behind the museum, locate the steep stairs beyond the facsimile Haida long houses. Go down the cliffs near *Ka'wum*, "howling dog rock" and walk south along the narrow beach. ■*■. With a view of Vancouver Island, pass the western tip of Point Grey, *Ulksun*, and the former seasonal camp of *Thutsuleek*, "always rough." This was the part of Wreck favoured by many lesbians for two decades. Here, there is prospect for seeing potential trouble from would-be harassers. *■.■ Moving south along the beach, come to the site of the former seasonal camp, *Keekullukhum* or "little stockade," on the site of today's main Wreck Beach. ■|=■|* Search through the thousands of naked people to find a little enclave where people of the same sex are laying down together a

little more closely. This is the little queer pocket surrounded by the heterosexual and bisexual masses.

.■.~+■ Stroll to the beginning of the swampy trail south of the bottom of the main trail. This was the centre of the pre-nude gay male cruising areas from the nineteen forties until the late nineteen sixties. In the early nineteen seventies, this muddy route signalled the shift from the (hetero)sexual revolution to still highly taboo public (homo)sex. Muddy feet on males on the main part of Wreck suggested bicuriosity.

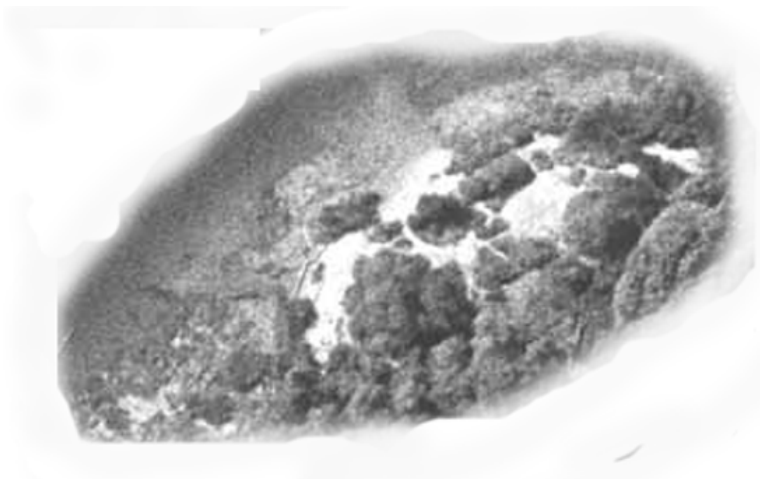
■~■. Continuing on through the salt marsh and mud, come to The Flats, the former site of a stockade and camp, *Kullukhun*, where waterfowl, octopus, and shellfish were harvested offshore. This was the major gay male social space at Wreck in the nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties. ~:■+■ The forest behind The Flats was an important area of public sex for two decades. Today, the well-worn trails are somewhat exhausted; the sites of homoeroticism have become diffused and diversified in the dense forests along the beach to the south. ■~.■. Moving along muddy trails through the forest, come to what today is often referred to as The Oasis a former Salish campsite called *Humlusum* as in "bending down to drink." The spring is still there but it has been polluted from the university campus on the cliffs above. +■~■^■ Out of the forest and on to the sandy beach below, search for a place to lay down. In the early nineteen nineties, this tongue of sand was formed from a series of landslides. Alternatively called Glamour Beach and Attitude Point, one sunny day the beach sees hundreds of naked men, sleeping, chatting, and frolicking, and often no more than several women. Sometimes on particularly hot days, there is more group sex just before sunset.

■*■.■ Going inland through a series of heavily eroticized side-trails and then south from the crowded beach area, find a series of quiet spots in the forest. This muddy shore supports only small groups of people in rich *topoi* of solitude, cruising, conversation, and sometimes a bit of sex. ■|*|■ Back on the main trail going south, come to a side trail up the slope and find a magnificent Douglas fir tree that is well over a hundred years old. At the base of the trunk is a slightly worn area sometimes littered with used condoms.

■.■.~+ Further south, along the main trail, pass many naked men and occasionally a woman and come to several large boulders sacred to the Musqueam. ■=|■ Continuing along the shore, as it shifts to the southeast, come to the mouth of the stream, *Skeymukwalhtsa* or "devilfish [octopus] spring," at the bottom of Trail 7.

■~■. Struggle up the steep trail below the UBC Botanical Gardens and go north on the side road to an area below Marine Drive with drive-by sex frequented by older males. ■|* Down the trail again, meander south for another three kilometres along trails to find small clearings supporting intimate gay male scenes often with more overt fetishists and older men. Moving southeast as the sea meets the great river, The Fraser, the Stalo, come to the still under-used area sometimes called the Outer Limits. After another hour of walking, come to the outskirts of what is left of two Musqueam villages, a cultural centre in the region for hundreds if not thousands of years.

On warm afternoons, several hundred men often enjoy The Oasis and Attitude Point, below, at one time.



Wreck as The Terminal City's almost-utopian queerscape

"In the artificially uncivilised areas of the cities, surveillance and detention threaten; in the externally uncivilised areas, nature threatens and -- worse still -- boredom."

Henning Bech 1997²

Over the last century, beaches have been prime arenas for the homosexual outlaw³ and, more recently, for the gay consumer. The emergence of nude beaches on public lands in twentieth century North America has largely paralleled the emergence of the consciously homoerotic male. Nude beaches have often seen an effective tolerance of homoeroticism when **homosexuality** has been strictly forbidden. In the modernist period that in Vancouver was roughly concurrent with the Cold War, these nude beaches have often seen tolerance of some forms of overt queer, particularly male, communality and social order has predicated on some co-operative and alternative relationships. But with Wreck, the social opportunities of nude beaches are taken to a more advanced phase. Such a large territory is seasonally queered with sites established by a range of relatively open networks -- largely defined by social links and erotic desires.

In relatively new port cities such as Vancouver, from its inception also referred to as The Terminal City⁴, beaches have become surrogates for more purposeful and designed forms of public space⁵ -- and the kinds of social discourses, from cruising to political demonstrations, that take place on such stages. Beaches with adjacent natural areas, and regular warm-weather presence of certain networks of sexual minorities, can be particularly strategic sites. Such homoerotic beach spaces constitute something like institutions, or pre-institutions, though they remain vulnerable to homophobic planning decisions and outright attacks. Typically, such interzones support contradictory blends of behaviour from the communitarian to that of the atomised consumer. This emphasis on the individual has further fostered notions of hyper-commodified⁶ masculinity⁷. With some behaviour at Wreck, there are even tentative equations of this kind of erotic alienation as 'natural'. The over-determination of options for homoerotic pleasure by market forces remains largely uncontested.

Like contemporary Vancouver, Wreck supports a blend of utopianism and cynicism around the body, Eros, love, and community. And in these relatively wild areas⁸ and open spaces, on the suburban edges of Vancouver, there are simmering conflicts over eroticized recreation and habitat protection. The discussions of public sex, with an emphasis on that which is between men, constitute a case in point. Public sex is a small part of a broad body of homoerotic practices (desires, means of contact, acts, interpretations of pleasure), some of that are learned, and improved upon, in places such as Wreck. But here the lines between public and private sex, even between homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual identities, are supple and defined more by spontaneous desire than by the state, the market and ideologies. At Wreck, different homoerotic behaviours tend to overlap more than elsewhere in the city. And the acts that comprise public sex are highly variable and diverge between groups, between networks and locales, and between decades. Across relatively large landscapes such as Wreck, the context of sex acts their meanings and perhaps functions, can vary from site to site. But at Wreck even these generalisations are problematic.

While the zone most frequented by gay males stretches for several kilometres along the south end of Wreck, the lesbian sites, if they can even be called such, are small and scattered. There has been some discussion about the *de facto* segregation and domination of space by gay men at the south end of Wreck. Most of this framing of queer male space has been homophobic -- given that gay men have so few public spaces in the region where they are even close to being in a demographic majority. Except for a few symbolic forays by young Amazons, this area has the "feel" of an all-male club on any sunny afternoon. But the reality is that other groups have little use for the area. Such an area of thick forests and dark trails would be nerve-racking for most women unless they were in groups. Heterosexual females and males have their scene at the main Wreck Beach area. In the cooler months, a few walkers and bird watchers enjoy the entire area. These social spaces have often been indifference or vaguely hostile to women. At the same time, this vacuum and relative disorder is consistent with the arguments of Elizabeth Wilson on how women have been

able to find relative freedom in the city⁹. But for some older gay men, typically socialized into relatively patriarchal and repressive families, women, by their presence, can still disrupt some experiences of freedom.

Queer(ed) by nature:

Some shifting aesthetics of bodies & landscape

"To view body as land or land as body has no essential meaning, yet neither can it ever be innocent. Its politics are always contextual; there are different kinds of looking." Catherine Nash¹⁰

So far in this discussion, I have been attempting to appropriate an often deceptively apolitical discourse on the use of 'wildland' by a particular user group (homoerotic males) for recreation. In this case, the 'wilds' are relatively urban and the recreation is overtly erotic, whether people want to admit it or not. Whoever is at the south end of Wreck is affected by homoeroticism whether or not they choose to act *in situ*. In this line of thinking about 'forest landscapes', aesthetics become important in understanding social interactions. Aesthetics become the matrix for desire, motivation, and even constraints on behaviour. With enough participant-observer information, it might be possible to even reflect on the broader implications of political economy on erotic desire and the tensions that emerge between divergent 'user groups' and 'stakeholders'. But a standard kind of stakeholder analysis, for erotic expression, would soon become exhausted. Wreck is in deed, as Madonna put it, part of living in the material world but sex is as much about desire and fantasy as counting dicks in space. A new model of (grouped) individual aesthetics, around landscapes and other bodies as a sort of environmental corporeality, could be constructed around links between perception, cognition and behaviour. But this would take an exhaustive set of interviews that could not be entirely random. There might even be links to individual development, class, and culture -- even to political economy. This cumulative aesthetic regulates a significant portion of the use of such areas of pleasure -- including the nature of the social interaction and erotic expression. But such a framework is too complex and unwieldy for this discussion of the dynamics of contemporary queer Canadian culture.

Naked corporeality-in-the-landscape, particularly in sites of marginalized sexualities, generates new individual and collective experiences with inevitable and often localised cultural, political, and environmental impacts. These local cultures, in turn, engender new opportunities for individuals. For some individuals, experiences at Wreck confirm that they and what they do are 'natural' -- or at least are normalised. For others, they are queered through their new actions and communalities. This is not a subtle difference. But the recent dialectic, between essentialist ('nature') and constructionist ('nurture' as through culture) notions of homoeroticism, emerges around bodies and landscapes. These themes, now often cliché, echo those in Canadian nationalist culture in previous decades. Wreck has become a large zone, a strip, of multiple overlaps of (queer) ambiguity: between sexual acts and identities that are both erotic and contaminated by political conflict. The milieu of Wreck do not constitute community, in any territorialized sense, but rather a shifting conclave of desire, aesthetics, and ecological sensibilities set on a beautiful but vulnerable cultural landscape. Wreck embodies more of the opposite of the co-operative (and self-disciplined) relationships of communities. Homoerotic sites at Wreck embody a range of relationships between desire and identity from more self-identified and more unconscious, and often essentialised, centres and queerer margins. And the more marginalised is the group; the queer the site and the more it is relegated to the distant landscape -- coping with isolation being another theme in Canadian culture.



South of The Flats

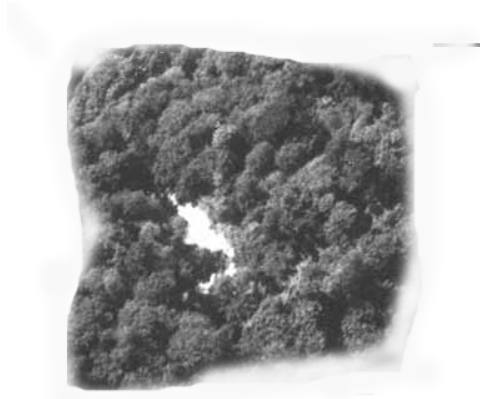
Postcolonial bodies in racialized landscapes & racialized bodies in postcolonial landscapes

One of the locations where essential notions of race -- as in racially defined bodies -- are both enforced and contested is on nude beaches. For many, Wreck is the one of the only locales in the region in which to experience a kind of democracy of the mingling of interracial bodies and sexual identities. At Wreck, it is inevitable to be near and in visual contact with men with very different kinds of bodies. Today, the playing field of the homoerotic gaze at Wreck has not been levelled.¹¹ But public sex and humour have disrupted remaining hierarchies. The forests behind the beach are used to stage jungle fantasies re-enforcing (and sometimes subverting) shifting castes of sex, social recognition, and consumerism.

Today, racialized body and landscape aesthetics are problematic -- especially when they are rooted white stereotypes of Chinese, south Asian, and African groups in North America. On Wreck, three fetishized racial disparities tend to persist around public sex: the social invisibility of the Chinese male¹² and the exoticisation of the dark, (supposedly) studly male¹³ involving both African¹⁴ and south Asian heritages. The 'black' presence sometimes disrupts the neocolonial narrative of British Columbia being primarily white. For the misinformed, people with African heritages in British Columbia are not viewed as having the same historic place¹⁵ as whites. The resulting exoticisation of homoerotic, black male bodies functions to effectively keep these men viewed as being more out of place than whites -- as fetish items rather than full members. In another example, the body of the east Asian, in particular the south coast Chinese male, is too often ignored and treated as invisible¹⁶ in highly charged zones of male homoerotic contact. This is ironic given that men from the same regions have been so central to the construction of the 'British' Columbia. Most problematic, the aboriginal body is largely absent. All of the exotic bodies are supposedly recent transplants, new, supposedly in need of naturalisation to a white and Eurocentric Canada. Like the playful, buff iconography in Bruce Weber's *Bear Pond*¹⁷, there too often remains an allusion to the myth that the northern landscape is primarily white territory.

It is in the more intimate spaces in the forest behind Wreck that the tensions between a more race-blind body aesthetic and public sex that is sometimes intensely racialized, can be observed, experienced and examined. Racial fetishes at Wreck constitute a kind a map of the postcolonial world as played out in Pacific Canada -- or at least one more means of tracking more subtle inequities. The site, by its lack of direct cultural coding, supposedly becomes "natural habitat"¹⁸ while being only selectively public. But the queer naturalist aesthetic, and its associated fetishes, can function to obscure the reality that the opposite is actually closer to the truth. Nature consists of highly coded fragments degraded both by the adjacent campus and by heavy recreational use. But the indications of ecological degradation are often detected less than the supposed 'nature' of unabashed public homosexuality. Of this natural / unnatural dichotomy played out is

largely a result of the obsessive attacks on homosexuality as threats to the neocolonial order of things. And there is nothing particularly natural about a cultural landscape partially created by a group like the Musqueam nor of the interracial encounter that were to come later. The most strategic aspect of these sites of public sex are that at least men of a wide range of backgrounds and forms of racialization are attempting to take homoerotic space on their own constrained terms.



One of the more celebrated public sex areas -- above The Oasis.

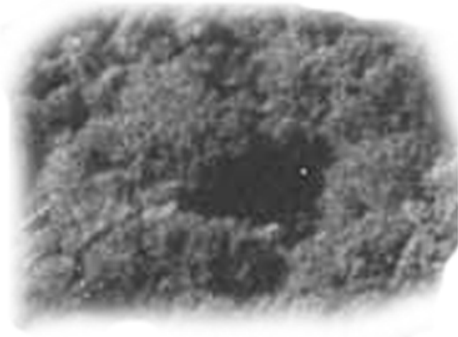
Dicks in public space

At places, such as in the wilds of the southern end of Wreck, the male member, both as a means to pleasure and a cultural icon, is effectively reinvented every three to five years. The phallus, the dick in space, is constructed -- out of more raw forms of desire (and place). In Vancouver, the south end of Wreck is one of the least overtly commercial areas. In this public territory, the fully exposed gay and bisexual male body becomes part of a spectacle¹⁹, an icon, competing with "consumer space."²⁰ But a homoerotic space taken outside of the more typical commercial and institutional constraints, that limit eroticised contact, remains vulnerable. Going into the third decade of the AIDS pandemic, "The viral focus [still often] reduces the already marginalized gay body to a mere vector for illness."²¹ In this sense, exposed phalluses (and buttocks) at the south end of Wreck, showing signs of on-site contact, are can still be sucked into both medicalization of homosexuality and the homophobic project of denaturalising the health gay body. For many, the south end of Wreck is viewed more as a space HIV is spread than for a wide range, of relatively safe, social contact. The tensions in these views, between relative health and high risk of disease, sometimes determines the use of the physical environment and the identifications with and relations in particular sites. Thus the public sex zone behind The Oasis and those in The Outer Limits are perceived by individuals, who like standing erotic contact, as places for exploration and practice and for others as high anxiety locales of risky contact.

Through the exposure of male members within a still patriarchal apportionment of public space, Wreck was gendered before it was queered. This old, neocolonial dichotomy is slow to break down. The homoerotisation of these areas, particularly along the southern trails, has been largely the result of an intensified masculinisation rather than challenges to phobias around sex, homosexuality, group contact, and acts of out of doors. If the body is the primary site for the construction of sexuality, an intersection of physicality, culture, and spirit, then this Canadian queerscape constitutes the location, the context, the environment, and the means of support for the supposedly "normative performance" of gender, race and the social structures that they represent²². The queerscape supports both sites of production of body-sex relations and arenas for contests over modes of both social intercourse and its selective restriction and repression.

In margin locations such as Wreck that support social space of the marginalised, different

constellations of public and private have divergent functions in reproduction of broader social relations. Parks and respective designs have relationships to this reproduction of political economic relationships through culture.²³ On nude beaches throughout the twentieth century, gay **men**, as only partially willing defectors from heteronormative life, have often taken on the armour of hyper-masculinity. Fortunately, there has often been a high degree of parody and camp. On nude beaches, such as the southern half of Wreck, there is space for a body culture and aesthetic that can be playfully over-determined by primary and secondary sexual features. In this sense, the homoerotic sites of Wreck still function more as zones of heightened but temporary privileging of some male bodies. But that use of the male body, in the consumer market, has been going on anyway. If anything, serious 'objectification' in places like Wreck is on the decline as it increases for heterosexual males in broader society. As the preoccupation with the male body is on the increase, Wreck provides another key function: for s/m (standing and modelling) -- for spaces of irony and in which to play.



Ancient Douglas fir tree (to the left of its shadow) the base of which is frequented for stand-up sex.

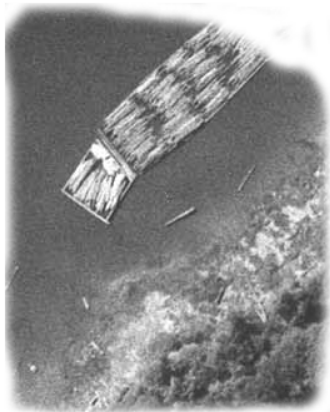
'Natural' queer space as contested sites

Gay beaches in North America have repeatedly been the sites of conflict, around sexual propriety, played out through design and other indirect controls on access and behaviour. In the late nineteen seventies, in roughly the same period as the visits from the Anita Bryant crusades, a would-be Vancouver televangelist lead her flock along Wreck Beach to protest its nudity, drug use, godlessness, and perversity. The idea was to confront sinners and to shame them. It certainly was a conscious attempt at destroying queer space, and Sodom, that code work for anxieties over queer spatial appropriation and territorialisation, was invoked. However, there was a downpour, the only naked people were taunting the group, and the event was ridiculed in the local media. The campaign was a failure. Since then, there have been continued, less overt, efforts to control behaviour at Wreck. After two futile decades of harassment, the police agreed to allow the beach to become clothing optional in the late nineteen eighties. By 1990 in the summer of the second Gay Games, there were dusk orgies on some of the more remote beaches. Over the last decade, the homoeroticism and summer presence of queer enclaves only has been a mild concern for police and to the park managers of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) who now have jurisdiction over management. However as late as 1999, males engaging in public sex were given warnings for being "blatant and in complete disregard for other beach-goers and so-called 'public standards'." Yet there has been little exhibitionism in the southern parts of Wreck because most in sight have been involved in the sex.

In recent years, police sometimes appear suddenly to arrest beer sellers and drug dealers. In turn, targeted individuals usually disappear into the forest. Police entrapment for public sex has never been

effective in the area. And there have been court challenges arguing that consensual sex in a remote natural place, even on public lands, was essentially private and therefore legal. The quasi-privatising functions of driftwood structures have also involved a complex legal discussion. Cruising, on almost any warm day, allows for a sort of community surveillance of any policing. But the

The Wreck Beach Preservation Society formed two decades ago to protect the right to nudity and the natural landscapes of the area. Unfortunately, the organisation has had only limited feminist and queer involvement and has tended to focus on the problems of the main beach. And every few years, there have been pressures and proposals that would effectively drive socially active gay men (and public sex) out of the area. An example of the unsuccessful attempts at homophobia by design occurred soon after the GVRD took over management of the area from the university over a decade ago. Wealthy residents complained that they could not enjoy their beach because it was overrun with perverts. A service road was proposed for the base of the cliffs. The result would not only have destroyed more natural habitat but would have further destabilised the cliffs and campus. In this case, the cost of such closeted homophobia could not be supported through public funds. But over the years, there have been more subtle efforts to block access to and to constrain the growth of the queer nodes.



The log booms are part of the operations of a multinational corporation. The timber is exported to Japan and the United States

Conclusions:

Conflicting designs as Canadian culture

In returning to the four questions with which we embarked on in our walk along Wreck, some answers begin to emerge from this not-so-natural forest. For the sunny days for half of each year, the gay male social scene on this nude beach generates a kind of Canadian and regional international culture because there are virtually no other locations in which to socialize in the same way. These densities of homoerotic males, and their dense sets of homoerotic desires, transform the spaces in temporary and more indelible ways. Secondly, the freedom of this space, in relation to relatively tolerant and expansive Canadian landscapes, unleashes considerable energy that leads to both conscious designs, as in where people congregate, as well as impacts. It remains difficult to have erotic desires without designs and without the beginnings of transformation of locations: various tentative forms of queerscape architecture as culture. Thirdly, such 'spontaneous' landscapes are ignored as culture (and any form of architecture) precisely because they challenge compartmentalised notions of culture, architecture, nature, sexuality, body and landscape. Wreck is an exceptional and exoticised Canadian landscape and its culture remains marginalised even when it is no longer so marginal. Perhaps the least resolved question is around whether this place, any relatively wild Canadian landscape for that matter, can function to naturalise homosexuality -- and be 'natural'. There is the residue of over a century of Canadian cultural preoccupation with the natural

landscape that often effectively celebrated the removal and marginalization of aboriginals. With virtually all naked bodies still marked by discredited notions of race, desires and relatively undisturbed habitat, no matter how marginal(ised), can never be transformed back to pristine states -- conditions that may well never existed anyway. To invoke other metaphors from adjacent parts of this landscape, Wreck is as much an arterial and expressway for a range of male homoerotic groups and an experimental station, with its share of toxic residues, than a rich and intact forest and shore ecosystem. As for the log booms, the mystique of the Canadian resource frontier and the fetish of export of 'wood' from a hyper-masculine landscape, have been all but exhausted.

The future for Wreck, as a homoerotic space, is unclear. Wreck, as a queer space, could evaporate tomorrow. Another set of groups could come to dominate the south end rather quickly. Claiming of this public space by homoerotic males remains a contentious notion for heterosexuals, women, and many gay men ourselves. New ways to assess and monitor sexual minorities and sexuality in public space is necessary. For example, the police are using geographic information systems to track many crimes but more proactive tracking of vulnerability to homophobia and violence has yet to be envisioned. Out of more extensive forms of queer inventorying and surveillance, sex-positive forms of landscape design charettes identifying possibilities, could envision new site plans and broader landscape architectures. But erotic desire and minority sexualities in general, will probably continue to remain the poor (horny) cousins in the social parameters of landscape architecture. Today, queer-positive landscape designs of public spaces in Canada will typically be met by covert hostility -- from both homophobes and liberals. The resistance by landscape design and management practitioners to acknowledgement of the entitlements of individuals engaged in public sex, socialising and even romance will continue to constrain prospects for both recognition of the diversity of "recreational" needs and for identification of conciliatory options. Without this queer-friendly landscape architecture, it will be virtually impossible for various social groups (homosexual and heterosexual; women and men; Musqueam and newcomers) to enjoy these precious places together.

What is so problematic about this impasse, in the denial of any sort of queerscape architecture, is that without recognition of the homosexuality in this landscape, natural conditions will continue to be degraded. This denial will continue as long as there is a social and institutional avoidance of this social and cultural 'place'. This situation is not a particularly Canadian condition and dominates many such urban forests here and elsewhere in the world. The Canadian flavour of the conditions at Wreck are the lost opportunities, so nearly possible, for envisioning very different relationships between 'man' (and woman) and 'nature'. In The Terminal City, queer "programming" of public landscapes will remain problematic and largely utopian, relegated to fantasy and culture rather than policy, for some time. Multiple pressures for more use compound the obstacles to queerscape architecture as a social project, by heterosexual in combination with the continued ecological degradation. In these arenas of cultural skirmishes around gender and sexual expression, the struggle for equal access for and of comparable comfort levels for women and ethnic minorities, in relationship to groups of particularly hardy and adventurous gay men will remain difficult. In initiatives to better protect habitat, there is liable to be increased competition between low impact recreation activities, including sunbathing and sex, and the requirements for the conservation of biological diversity. In this *faux* symmetry, assertion of Musqueam options for management and utilisation of traditional resources will remain enigmatic: 'the wild card'. Regardless of these current and potential conflicts, it will be increasingly difficult to ignore the presence of networks of sexual minorities as visitors engaged in valid recreational activities.

Is there a queer utopia emerging at Wreck? No, but Wreck comprises a set of locations that engender those impulses. There are intriguing opportunities for new ways to interact, to express ourselves, and to share. The open space, the forested cliffs, the big and ancient trees, and the beautiful bodies offer respite from a chaotic world and the global market place. But while on sunny days Wreck is a remarkable place of peace and tolerance, it has not escaped persistent pressures from only partially resolved colonialism, male domination, commodification of both nature and the body, and environmental degradation. I have

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posited some unresolved contradictions around the homoerotic body, desire and landscape. I argue that some aspects of these tensions are particularly queer and Canadian. But other contradictions are more derived from the history of British Columbia and still others from the shifts towards globalization of political economies and erotic cultures.

Contradictions, by themselves, do not make culture or transform spaces (as culture). But the paralysis that sexual minorities have felt in terms of collectively intervening in the physicality of their strategic landscapes is less disputable. If there are queer subcultures, defined by relationships to the Canadian State and culture, with some common experiences and tensions, they remain half-formed even in this time of globalisation. Experience of and interest in relatively natural landscapes may be one of the more common and stable elements of such culture. A second element may be an almost conflicted concern for consciously remaking sites formed by inequities around race, gender and sexuality. In this Canadian context, notions of 'naturalness', rather than indicating vital and diverse ecosystems, better suggest obfuscation of social conflict. The feels of open space, with fewer social constraints, that are invoked by places such as Wreck are largely illusionary. The experience of open space is, in large part, in relation to the nagging claustrophobia of the dwindling sites of neocolonial Canada: the decaying hierarchies that were spawned on the nineteenth century frontiers.

If there was one essence to Wreck as a location of social contact and cultural production, it is that both worlds strangely co-exist side by side and through bodies. Design proposals as culture, in this context, necessitate recognition of these tensions. This explains the lack of design, the illusion of nature conservation, in this Canadian landscape iconography. In ignoring conflict, even between eroticized male bodies, there is a false sense of freedom coupled with new forms of cultural reproduction of social inequities. But having admitted this, Wreck remains one of my favourite places. For me, Wreck is still a kind of home in a region that still often feels hostile to many homoerotic men and women. And even with all of the nagging tensions the pleasure, on a warm day, of being with old and new friends naked on a beach or in a forest is indisputable.



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Wreck transect:

corporate log boom |

(homo)sex beach and forest strand |

cliff forest |

drive-by public sex site |

expressway |

parking lot |

experimental plot

notes

Redesigning Wreck:

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- ¹ Ingram. 1997. 'Open' space as strategic queer sites. in *Queers in Space: Communities / Public Places / Sites of Resistance*. G. B. Ingram, A.-M. Bouthillette and Y. Retter (eds.). Seattle: Bay Press. 95 - 125.
2. Henning Bech. 1997. *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 150.
3. Gay, nude, and semi-nude beaches have been strategic sites for gay activism going back decades as far back as, for example, gay and peace activism in 1950 (Harry Hay. 1985 / 1996. Remarks on Rude's passing. In *Radically gay: Gay liberation in the words of its founder*. Will Roscoe (ed.). Boston: Beacon Press. 313 - 318.) p. 358.
4. The label of "Terminal City" for Vancouver goes back to at the city's incorporation with a poem mentioned from 1887 in Patricia E. Roy. 1976. The preservation of peace in Vancouver: The aftermath of the anti-Chinese riots of 1887. *BC Studies* 31: 44 - 59. See p. 44.
5. Lance Berelowitz. 1994 - 1995. From factor 15 to *feu d'artifice*: The nature of public space in Vancouver. *a / r / c* (Toronto) 5: 32 - 37
6. Jeffrey Escoffier. 1998. *American Homo: Community and Perversity*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 66.
7. Gary Kinsman. 1996. *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*. Montréal: Black Rose Books. p. 304.
8. Susan P. Rust. 1995. The urban wilderness park: An oxymoron? In *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on Social Aspects and Recreation Research*. February 23 - 25, 1994 San Diego. Berkeley, California: USDA Pacific Southwest Research Station PSW-GTR-156. 5 - 6.
9. Elizabeth Wilson. 1991. *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
10. Catherine Nash. 1996. Reclaiming vision: Looking at landscape and the body. *Gender, Place and Culture* 3(2): 149 - 169. p. 167.
- ¹¹ The statements in this section on bodies is based on conversations on various parts of Wreck Beach, with men of a range of heritages, going back to the late nineteen seventies.
12. For a now classic discussion of the de-eroticizing of Asian men in the Canadian context, see Richard Fung's 1991 Looking for my penis: The eroticized Asian in gay video porn, In *How Do I Look? Queer film and video*. Bad Object Choices (eds.). Seattle: Bay Press. 145 - 160.
13. Kobena Mercer. 1991. Skin head sex thing: Racial differences and the homoerotic imaginary. In *How Do I Look? Queer film and video*. Bad Object Choices (eds.). Seattle: Bay Press. 162 - 210.
14. For more on the function of the meeting of bodies of African and European heritages in neocolonialism, see Kobena Mercer. 1994. Fear of a black penis. *Artforum* 32 (April 1994): 80 - 81, 122.

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15. Kadiuta Kanneh. 1991. Place, time, and the black body: Myth and resistance. *The Oxford Literary Review* 13 (1 - 2): 140 - 163.

16. Lloyd Wong. 1991. Desperately seeking sexuality: A gay Asian perspective on Asian men in film. *Rites* (May 1991): 13.

17. Bruce Weber. 1990. *Bear Pond (for Donald Sterzin and his blue canoe)*. New York: Bulfinch Press.

18. *ibid.*, p. 171.

19. Sharon Willis. 1993. Disputed territories: Masculinity and social spaces. In *Male Trouble*. Constance Penley and Sharon Willis (eds.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp. 262 - 281. p. 263.

20. *ibid.*, p. 264.

21. Michael Brown. 1995. Ironies of distance: An ongoing critique of the geographies of AIDS. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13: 159 - 183. p. 161.

22. Harry Brod. 1995. Masculinity as masquerade. In *The Masculine Masquerade*. Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner (eds.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. 15 - 19.