Among the iconic, evocative images of the prairies are those marvelous bird’s-eye–view maps and photographs that cities and towns commissioned to graphically depict their settlement and expansion. As a cultural historian and a newcomer to Prairie studies, I have taken tremendous delight in looking at these pictorial and geographic mappings of progress. It is only belatedly, when invited to assess the role of histories of sexuality within the Prairies and more importantly, the inherent potential such a thematic approach offers to Prairie scholars, that I have realized that my work is as intimately involved in mapping the modern, urban history of Western Canada as it has previously been concerned with historicizing the emergence of gay and lesbian community formations. Employing a “queer-eye view,” as this paper argues, has much to offer Prairie historians as it both reorients and complicates our social histories of the West. By enumerating the regional and international historiography on this topic, I hope to both contextualize and encourage further work in this area. Ultimately, introducing queer histories to their rightful place in our regional history offers a more inclusive and accurate social history of contemporary Western Canada.
Uncovering the histories of gay and lesbian communities in Western Canada has occupied my attention since 2000, when I began a project to collect and analyze Prairie gay and lesbian oral histories. That larger project, a monograph in progress entitled *Prairie Fairies*, investigates the gay and lesbian social, cultural, and activist development in the five largest Prairie cities—Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton, and Calgary. What began innocently enough as a proposed “small book” has now morphed into an increasingly larger, more complicated study of the development of Prairie queer experiences, identities, and communities. Conceived as a topic firmly situated in the North American histories of sexuality and gender history literature, it became apparent that the setting, the Prairies, would become a third focal point of the study. Thus, in my essay, I want to offer three individual case studies that illuminate how employing a queer-eye view of the Prairies forces a confrontation with a number of key issues for contemporary Prairie scholars and in so doing, raise some substantial questions about how we imagine, historicize, and mythologize the Prairie West.

This research is part of a growing international historiography that implicitly seeks to compare and contrast the diverse experiences of gays and lesbians in international gay metropoles—London, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, and Vancouver—with their counterparts in cities not initially associated with gay and lesbian enclaves and cultural, commercial, or activist activity. To date, excellent work has been completed on cities as diverse as Buffalo, Philadelphia, Chicago, Memphis, Portland, Jackson, Mississippi, and Deadwood, South Dakota. While primarily a sexual and cultural history of the Canadian Prairies, this research has benefitted from an international literature concerned with “mapping desire,” to borrow David Bell and Gill Valentine’s term. Increasingly, larger coteries of cultural, social, and feminist geographers have theorized extensively about the complexities of writing what Kath Weston calls “the great gay migration of the seventies and eighties.” Like studies of lesbians in Grand Rapids, Michigan, or gay people in Minot, North Dakota, my research about Prairie gay and lesbian communities uncovers both urban spaces and communities that few outside of those communities knew existed. Because of the dearth of Canadian sources, and owing to our misconceptions that most Prairie lesbians and gays migrated to larger centres, this study began with relatively simple questions: Where were the gay and lesbian people in the Prairies? How did these groups form cultural and political organizations? What did it mean to be gay or lesbian in the Prairies? Now, this research also includes the acknowledgement that the concept of a unitary gay community, while a long-desired goal of some residents, was unattainable. Class, race, and sex divisions were nearly always in evidence in the region at the same time that the “gay imaginary” dreamt of and worked toward building community. As Weston astutely notes, “the gay imagi-
nary is not just a dream of freedom to ‘be gay’ that requires an urban location, but a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between rural and urban life. It is also the odyssey of escape from the isolation of the countryside and the surveillance of small-town life into the freedom and anonymity of the urban landscape.” Many of the narratives of coming out in the Prairies, and of the urban gay life available there, reference either the physical migration from farms, rural areas, and small towns, or the psychological migration from the straight world to the gay world.

However, “if the Great Gay Migration participated in the construction of the imagined gay community, it simultaneously undermined this sexual imaginary” because “individuals often found themselves asking, ‘Am I them? And who are we?’” Questions of whom to include in such studies and how to analyze people’s understanding of their sexual behaviours, orientation, and identity posed a continual challenge. As evidence provided below illustrates, while some individuals were prepared to identify and label themselves relatively early as gay or lesbian, others were latecomers to gay and lesbian identities, coming out only in middle age, after heterosexual marriages. Still others were prepared to participate in sexual or social events, while eschewing any labels based upon their sexuality. For example, one female informant took great care to explain how she believed that it was not necessary or appropriate for her to indicate her orientation to co-workers, family, or straight friends. Instead, she just lived her life and if people chose to speculate about her and her long-time companion, then that was their business.

As research progresses, another issue is emerging: a contemporary re-evaluation of the historical perceptions of Western Canadian cities and society in a far broader sense. Much important gendered history-of-sexuality research has been done on the contact period and the early settlement years—work by Sylvia Van Kirk, Sarah Carter, Adele Perry, Terry Chapman, Lyle Dick, Angus McLaren, and others, all of which clearly illustrates the centrality of sex, heterosexual marriage, and imperial racial policies in creating a particular form of settler society in Western Canada. Equally, Western Canadian histories were at the forefront of Canadian urban history in the seventies and early eighties (Winnipeg in particular is well historicized), and this work needs to be extended into the post-World War II era. The absence of such work is problematic because it hinders social history of this time period and, again, fails to account for how the West has transformed itself into an increasingly urban region in the second half of the twentieth century. Despite those innovative and important contributions, the field has failed to capitalize on its early lead in this area, and thus the scholarship that might logically have been anticipated, and that might have charted similar trends into the twentieth century, remains underdeveloped. Most Prairie
historiography continues to prioritize histories of settlement, native-newcomer relations, and economic and agricultural developments. The other temporal focal point of Prairie scholarship, the Depression, offers much scope for those interested in gender, political, economic, and urban studies, but it also represents virtually the terminal date for most Prairie historical scholarship.

There are a number of ways to proceed. First, as a specialist in Canadian cultural and gender history in the post-World War II era, I encourage Prairie scholars to focus more intensively on the later twentieth century, for both scholarly and pedagogical reasons. This was a time of considerable transformation for the Prairie West (some might argue Western ascendancy, albeit uneven) as it reconfigured from a primarily rural to an urban place, as it became an economic powerhouse, and as demographic shifts made it an increasing social and political force within the country. This transformation needs to be explored and assessed historically. Regrettably, Western historians have failed to participate in enumerating and evaluating these substantive historical changes in the second half of the twentieth century, hence ceding our important scholarly role to academics in political science, economics, sociology, and law. Our undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom are interested in more contemporary histories (or are tired of the pioneer narrative that still predominates in the literature) have not been well served by this disinclination to study the post-war era. Finally, Western histories need to be more engaged with the national and international literatures, both to keep our work engaged with the current scholarly debates and so that our scholarship is more accessible and recognized by scholars in our thematic sub-fields outside the region.

Having indicated some of the temporal and thematic limitations in this field, let me now chart some reasons for renewed optimism. In the past decade, there has been a seismic change in the legal status and social inclusion of gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual Canadians. The hard-fought legal victories achieved over the past fifteen years in provincial human rights codes, Charter challenges, pensions, adoption benefits, marriage, and most recently, divorce have reframed such issues in terms of human rights and away from morality discourses and notions of “special rights.” Extensive and often contradictory media coverage has produced renewed academic interest in human rights scholarship, politics, and historical assessments of how these changes materialized. Within the Prairies, Gallup polls indicate increasing awareness and acceptance of queer people, particularly in urban areas, although this still lags behind the rest of the country. For example, an Ipsos Reid poll (for CanWest News Service) in 2006 polled Canadians on a variety of topics, including the statement “To me, homosexuality is morally acceptable.” According to the Saskatoon StarPhoenix 54 percent of Canadians affirmed that homosexuality was acceptable to them. This
average masked some striking provincial differences. For example, 69 percent of Quebeckers agreed that homosexuality was personally acceptable, whereas only 40 percent of Saskatchewan residents agreed with the statement. Later polls indicated that one key determining factor in this poll and others, both regional and nation-wide, was locale—urbanites had a tendency to be more tolerant than rural dwellers. It is significant and appropriate to note such gains, but they must not be overdrawn. Much work remains to be done in translating the so-called equity agenda into tangible gains at the societal level. Interviewed in a recent edition of Winnipeg’s gay periodical Outwords, sociologist Gary Kinsman noted, “Many people have the position that if we have formal equal rights with heterosexuals then everything is resolved. But, of course, formal rights don’t actually mean very much in terms of substantive social equality if you still live in a society in which there’s heterosexual hegemony.”

One thing emerging from the substantive political and legal debates about gay and lesbian rights is that undergraduate and graduate students have begun gravitating toward these topics. Specifically, the current generation of graduate and undergraduate students at the Universities of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Queen’s University, and Simon Fraser University are engaging with these topics and situating history-of-sexuality topics in the modern Prairie West. This heartening development is matched by innovative research and teaching within the fields of education, political science, social work, and law at the Universities of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Regina.

Equally encouraging are the increasing archival and library holdings that have been amassed. Here a few short examples must suffice. Gay and lesbian community history projects are underway in Edmonton and Winnipeg, and a growing body of secondary literature within the University of Alberta collection bodes very well for the ongoing health of this subject. The leader has been the Saskatchewan Archives Board and the University of Saskatchewan, thanks to the energy and passion of special collections librarian Neil Richards, who has quietly worked for over thirty-five years collecting books and periodicals by and for North American homosexuals, preserving the key foundational documents of the Prairie gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered organizations. These collections are variously located at the Saskatchewan Archives Board office in Saskatoon, the University of Saskatchewan Archives and Special Collections, in online collections such as the Saskatchewan Resources for Sexual Diversity, and in the general library holdings of the University of Saskatchewan. These collections rank second among Canadian research libraries (Toronto’s collection ranks first, given the combined strengths at University of Toronto, Ryerson University, and the Canadian Gay and Lesbians Archives) and offer the strongest Western collection.
Having assessed the historiographical developments within the field and reflected upon the expansion of academic work in this area, it is time to back up my assertions and offer three case studies drawn from my research. These histories are representative of many of the larger themes within my work—how people came out as gays and lesbians, how they entered and forged communities, and finally, how they came to become activists, both in their daily lives and in their political engagements. Above all, these histories illustrate how despite the persistent efforts of churches, government, communities, and families to continually inculcate and reinforce heterosexual hegemony, a number of rebels refused to follow the normative prescriptions. Those iconoclasts profoundly suggest that the region was far more diverse than many long-cherished stereotypes and histories might wish, and they break down the existing silence about Prairie gays and lesbians.

Norman Dahl

Norman Dahl was born in 1928 in Birch Hills, Saskatchewan, a predominantly Norwegian community in north-central Saskatchewan. Dahl was raised in a Lutheran household by his Norwegian Canadian parents. He was the second of three children and the only son. His father was a grain buyer, his mother worked at home, and in his family education, music and art were highly valued; thus his parents strongly supported Dahl’s aspirations to be a pianist, artist, and singer. According to Dahl, life in Saskatchewan small towns and the countryside in the thirties and early forties was rife with sexual possibilities for boys—from skinny dipping at the local pond to the indulgence for boyish curiosity and hijinks that time and space permitted. Routine exposure to farm animals meant that all rural children had a basic familiarity with sexual activity. Dahl recalls that lack of sexual terms and concepts, far from impeding his adolescent sexual activity and experimentations, and the absence of pejorative or medicalized language to describe same-sex acts freed him from fears of censure. Only when his eldest sister, who attended the University of Saskatchewan, brought home stories about a “perverted, homosexual” professor whom she reportedly found “revolting” (all her words) did Dahl first hear those terms.

Very talented musically, Dahl took piano lessons for years, and as a teenager he travelled throughout the province to music camps, recitals, and other events. It was during these travels that he began to notice the other men and teenagers like himself. He attended the University of Saskatchewan for one year in the late forties but had to drop out when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. In the sanatorium, he had his first male love affair—a chaste but intense one—and recalls mourning this man’s death for years afterward. After his recovery, he
returned to intensive music training, with summer programs at Emma Lake and classes in Prince Albert and, later, Saskatoon. He reminisced that the evening of his final piano recital in Saskatoon in 1949 was very memorable. In the audience that evening was "Brad S," a motorcycle-riding St. Andrews College seminary student. After the recital, Brad and Dahl returned to Dahl’s room at the Senator Hotel, where they had a night of “wild sex.”

Contrary to what some might suspect, neither man agonized over this night, although they did branch off in two very different directions. Afterwards, Brad told Dahl that he was “completely heterosexual” and Dahl, clearly enjoying relaying this tale, reportedly told Brad that he had “improvised brilliantly.” Witty repartee aside, Brad was clear about his intentions, as he chose the conventional path—heterosexual marriage and children. Still, he continued to have same-sex liaisons on the side. This bisexual dalliance angered Dahl for two reasons. First, he had two sisters and he claimed that he did not like to see women deceived. Secondly, because he chose the more difficult road, he had little sympathy for those who would not make similar choices. Asked to recollect his coming out, Norman simply laughed and replied, “I’ve never been in.”

Later, Dahl studied at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. His grandmother, who lived in Oakville, Ontario, introduced him to her neighbours, the Wilkes, and their son George, who was doing graduate work at the University of Toronto after serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. Smitten, Dahl remembers getting invited to Wilke’s Toronto apartment for dinner and then pursuing Wilke throughout the following year. After Dahl completed studies at Toronto, Wilkes and Dahl became life partners, splitting their time between Ottawa and their cottage in Gatineau, Quebec (a noted gay Ottawa hideout), which they designed and built themselves. Wilkes was employed by the federal civil service while Dahl worked for a variety of governmental and cultural institutions, including the Canada Council, the Canadian Welfare Council, the National Gallery, and others. Together now for more than fifty-five years, they acknowledge the challenges and stresses of living in more homophobic times, and in a city where governmental purges of gays in the civil service are well documented. But they take immense pride in being survivors and in their determination to live their lives as they choose. Their life has revolved around work, volunteer activities, social and gay activism, their homes, and travel.

While Norman Dahl’s youthful, relatively carefree sexual escapades in Saskatchewan seem very daring—and atypical, in that he stresses his family’s liberal values and their whole-hearted support for their artistic son’s aspirations—his decision to migrate outside the region for advanced education and later for employment is a supremely conventional narrative, and it is what ulti-
mately enabled his life choices. There would be many others like Norman Dahl, men and women who shrewdly left the Prairies in search of better jobs, more cultural opportunities, and a gay life. Even a partial list of well-known Prairie gay and lesbian émigré’s—playwright Brad Fraser; journalist, editor, and museum impresario William Thorsell; accountant and activist Tom Warner; musician k. d. lang; and the late journalist and activist Chris Bearchell—attempts to the region’s rich heritage of talented expats. According to Chris Vogel, a well-known Winnipeg activist, the large number of former Prairie and in particular Winnipeg gays now resident in Toronto has immeasurably strengthened and enriched that community, while weakening the one in Winnipeg.

**Lilja Stefansson and Evelyn Rogers**

*The Oral History of Stefansson and Rogers* offers a distinctively “queer view” of small town life, but it is richly suggestive of how mapping queer histories of the Prairies both enriches and complicates our histories of the West. In 1959 Evelyn Rogers and Lilja Stefansson were conventional heterosexual prairie wives and mothers, living in the small town of Rouleau, Saskatchewan. Rogers had been raised in a middle-class family in Regina, and from the age of twelve, she recognized that she was different from other girls. She repressed her feelings, not knowing how to name or positively interpret them, and a year after graduating from high school, she married into a prominent Rouleau farm family. There she became a typical farm wife—working in the house and fields, and raising two children. Stefansson was raised in rural Manitoba, in a very large Icelandic Canadian farm family. Her formal schooling ended at the eighth grade, after which she worked for family members and subsequently moved to Winnipeg for work. There she met a local serviceman, and after a very brief courtship, they married. Her first marriage produced two children and ended in divorce. In Rouleau, both women were active in their community and they soon became fast friends, sharing a bond of marital dissatisfaction and ennui. After more than
a decade of friendship, Evelyn mustered the courage to talk to Lilja about a recent *Chatelaine* article on lesbians. 28 Lilja remembers being shocked by the article because she had never imagined such a possibility. Using the article to stimulate discussion, as the editors routinely encouraged their readers to do, Evelyn made two further revelations—that she now self-identified as a lesbian and that she loved Lilja. They hatched a plan to go away for the weekend together, reportedly to talk Evelyn out of leaving her marriage, and they had a fun-filled trip to Williston, North Dakota. In the end, it was Lilja who did not want to return to conventional, heterosexual married life, and after a long, intense affair, both women divorced their husbands, moved to Regina, and re-established themselves there as a lesbian couple.

In 1997 Regina’s *Sensible Shoes News* published Evelyn Roger’s essay entitled “Reflections on the ‘Good Old Days.’” Here she describes the trepidation she and Lilja felt about their actions and her excitement about an ad in the Regina *Leader Post* in 1972 that read “Gay or lesbian? Want to meet socially with others?” and listed a phone number. “The year was 1972,” she continued. “I was married and living on a farm, BUT, recently my whole life had changed! My 25-year secret desire of wanting a woman lover had come true. She was content to keep this to ourselves but, now, I wanted to meet others like us!” After a few months of working up the courage, she finally called the number and spoke to Heather Bishop, a local feminist and well-known Canadian folk singer, who invited them to her house in Regina for coffee. After months of meetings, Heather Bishop and Bev Stiller took Stefansson and Rogers to Regina’s gay club, then called the Odyssey Club. Rogers recalls that the club was a “larger, old, three story house almost hidden behind the overgrown bushes,” yet “the subdued lighting, the smoke filled air, the smell of booze, the music and the mingling of people certainly gave this old house a rather cozy, club like atmosphere.” Rogers goes on: “When we left that first night we knew we would be back. We had officially come ‘OUT’!” Rogers was thirty-eight and Stefansson fifty-one. Some thirty-six years later, they are still together; although Lilja has recently moved to a nursing home, Evelyn lives close by and visits her daily.

Rogers and Stefansson’s experience with the Regina club was repeated across the Prairies, whether it was at the Zodiac Friendship Society Club in Saskatoon, Club 70 in Edmonton, Club Carousel in Calgary, or Happenings Social Club in Winnipeg. 30 These members-only social clubs are a hallmark of post-1970s Western Canadian gay and lesbian community formation. They largely replaced the older queer spaces located in working-class bars, railway hotel bars, public toilets (tearooms), and outdoor parks and cruising areas that marked primarily male queer spaces prior to the early seventies. The new clubs were usually located behind unmarked doors, often with alley entrances, or
else were initially situated in marginal areas of the city and were purposely hard to find—you had to know someone to find them. The majority of lesbian and gay people who entered those spaces spoke and wrote evocatively of the joy of being surrounded by hundreds of other gay and lesbian people. For women in particular, this represented a significant expansion of their social and political opportunities. William Thorsell recalls the experience of attending Edmonton’s Club 70 in the mid-seventies:

You’d drive out in 20 below weather at night where there’s no cars anywhere in sight, and suddenly you’d see this clench of cars in an abandoned area of town around a one storey cinder-block building with a little light over the door, and that’s the gay club and it’s suddenly quite thrilling. It was as close as you got to being an outlaw. I’m glad in a way that it doesn’t happen [that way] much anymore. But it did create a sense of community.

Not surprisingly, the vibe of each gay and lesbian community was slightly different, befitting their different cities, provincial culture, economy, and scale. Given its size and wealth, Edmonton was a popular regional gay and lesbian mecca. Many informants from Regina, Saskatoon, and Moose Jaw fondly reminisced about weekend trips to the Alberta capital. Thorsell recalls reading Toronto’s activist nationally available newspaper *The Body Politic*, as well as the work of American gay writers and activists, but “in Edmonton,” Thorsell says, “it wasn’t a politically active community. It was just ‘Let’s go dancing,’ and we didn’t cause ripples otherwise. You’d get *The Body Politic* and it was another world, a politically charged world that just did not happen in Edmonton.” Naturally, however, that was not the whole story. As the final case study illustrates, some people were dissatisfied with the club scene and sought more than just socializing in what many activists derisively called “a bigger closet.”

**Maureen Irwin**

Maureen Irwin was born in Windsor, Ontario, in 1934 and during her teen years recognized that she was attracted to her female classmates. Trying to decipher what this meant, she went to the public library and found a definition of the word *homosexual*, one that stressed the pathology of such individuals and stated simply that this was an illness. In 1953 she joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Stationed in Montreal, she experienced the city’s gay bars first hand. “It was a secretive, rough life in late night bars,” Irwin reports. “More women wore campy leather or distinct mannish outfits. Often there was
violence.” Yet, conversely, “[t]he only place you could be yourself was in the gay bars for men, which wasn’t for me,” says Irwin. “There was a lot of heavy drinking and a lot of women were into the heavy butch (male) image.” Instead, Irwin found lesbians in another time-tested way, through amateur sports. Years later, she would joke with younger lesbians, reminiscing that “they didn’t call us lesbians in those days. They called us baseball players” because “sports was one of the ways women of this self-identity could come together.” After a series of strikes with bar culture and with lesbian teammates who already had partners, she did eventually have a two-year love affair with another woman in the RCAF. While she realized that lesbianism was her true identification, she also knew that she could pass as a heterosexual woman. After her partner was reposted elsewhere in 1955, Irwin met a “nice man,” Ron Warren, who was also in the Air Force, and they married a year later. They had four children, and the family followed Warren through his various postings in Canada, France, and Germany. In 1965 Warren was transferred to Cold Lake, Alberta, and nine years later, they moved to Edmonton when he retired.

In Edmonton, Irwin worked as a librarian at the Edmonton Journal newspaper, and through friendships with some of the feminist journalists there, she discovered the local independent bookstore Common Woman Books. There she discovered positive books about lesbianism and in volunteering at the store, met a larger circle of feminist friends. In 1978 her husband asked for a separation and subsequently a divorce. After discussions with a counselor, she determined to kick-start her life again and in 1981 came out as lesbian. Immediately, Irwin began to get involved with many activist activities in Edmonton—she was one of the founders of Womonspace, which provided an alternative space for lesbian women to socialize (outside of the bars); worked the phone lines at GATE (Gay Association Toward Equality in Edmonton), later GALA (Gay and Lesbian Awareness Society); and eventually got involved with the drive for gay and lesbian human rights. Since Irwin had been the recipient of a number of civic, gay, and national honours for her extensive volunteer work, in 1993 the Pride Committee of Edmonton created the Maureen Irwin Award for Committee Service. When Irwin died in 2002, she was treated to a glowing “Life and Times” feature in the Edmonton Journal that eulogized her as one of “Edmonton’s leading lesbian activists.”

One of Irwin’s finest moments came in 1990 at an Edmonton conference entitled “ Flaunting It!” which brought activists, lawyers, and Prairie and federal human rights commissioners together for two days of discussion about how to advance the agenda for gay and lesbian rights in Alberta. Irwin was one of the co-organizers as a spokesperson for GALA. In a poignant and very effective speech, she reflected on her life:
During the 23 years I was married I had all the rights of a Canadian citizen. But since my separation and divorce I have lived for the last 13 years as a lesbian in Alberta without most of the rights that were afforded to me before. Am I any less a person now than I was when I had a Mrs. in front of my name? Of course not, but let me tell you how the laws of Alberta have treated me and you may understand why I feel the need to work to change them. It is not just so my children and my grandchildren can live in a better, fairer, province but because I am a person and it is the right thing to do. We should not have to pay our dues to get admitted to the Club of Equal Rights.37

Irwin went on to describe how her lesbian status made her unable to get a mortgage or insurance with her same-sex partner or medical and dental coverage; she spoke about her challenges negotiating the hospital system, which made it difficult for her to be with her hospitalized partner and barred her from acting as next of kin to make treatment decisions. As a final indignity, she was told that her children could contest her will. The speech was powerful, and at the end, the audience erupted in applause. The following day, the Edmonton Journal carried a quote from Irwin criticizing Fil Fraser, then Alberta’s chief human rights commissioner, for his admonition to gays and lesbians to “try and show people that you’re okay” in a non-confrontational way. To emphasize his point, and presumably to make his message more palatable, Fraser revealed that he well understood the challenges of being a minority, and shared his experiences of growing up Black, Protestant, and middle class in a working-class, Catholic area of Montreal. Visibly angered by this patronizing advice, Irwin told reporters, “I need these rights now … not in ten years or when Mr. Fraser thinks I’ve earned it!”38

Such simple but effective calls for equity were made by other Prairie gay activists, including Winnipeg’s Chris Vogel and Richard North; Saskatoon’s Gens Hellquist, Peter Millard, and Doug Wilson; Calgary’s Stephen Locke; and Edmonton’s Liz Massiah, Michael Phair, and Delwyn Vriend, to name just a few.39 These and other unnamed activists, in work that spans from the early seventies through to the present, bravely stepped into the harsh media spotlight. Every call for gay and lesbian rights triggered an onslaught of homophobic, often religiously inspired, critique. While this has lessened over time, it remains a fact of life in the Prairies. It would have been far easier to take their activism to other, more congenial cities, but these people were determined to make the Prairie West a more equitable place for all queer Westerners.
Conclusion

Although there are encouraging academic, regional, and political developments for history-of-sexuality studies within Western Canadian studies, there is much room for growth. There are a wealth of documents, burgeoning academic and popular archives, and an interest in preserving the histories of gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual people in the West. Within the field of the history of sexuality in North America, many significant studies in the United States, and belatedly in Canada, offer workable models and research questions from which we can build to address histories of political engagement and political activism, social organization, legal histories, community development, and medical histories of at-risk communities. Now, with the burgeoning fascination with the West and modern Western identities, one hopes that we will witness more academic interest in historicizing the modern West.

This research will contribute to our knowledge of sexual histories in Canada and challenge the notions that Prairie society remains rural, religious, and agrarian, both within and outside of the region. Taking a queer-eye view of Prairie history from 1945 to 1990 and restoring queer histories to Western Canadian history offers much valuable information about these minority communities and the urban centres in which most openly gay and lesbian people lived and worked. It speaks to the increasing urbanization and diversity of the West. Not surprisingly, it offers valuable material from which to historicize and analyze gender differences, both masculinity and femininity, and the ongoing gendered conceptions of Western spaces and people. Though I have highlighted two women’s stories here, the male narrative predominates in my work. In part, this is because the men were more willing to be interviewed or to leave documents behind. Most of the men I have spoken with have provided me with wonderful interviews, many of them sketched in Technicolor, proudly noting their sexual experiences as well as their extensive knowledge of cruising areas, clubs, and travel, in addition to their political endeavours. Most of the male informants have relished telling their pioneering tales and see their lives contributing to a different Western Canadian experience. Like Norman Dahl, many knew conclusively from a young age that they were attracted to other boys and men, and few whom I have interviewed sought out heterosexual marriages, preferring to follow their impulses and desires. Few, though, have been in a lifelong partnership like Dahl and Wilkes.

Women’s stories have been harder to capture, as Prairie lesbians have tended to lead more circumspect lives, known to their friendship circles and a few other confidants. They seldom broadcasted their status the way Maureen Irwin did when she turned to open activism. Many married, in part because it was
expected of them, in part because economically it was the surest route women had for keeping one’s head above water, but also because many desired children. Thus, it is not uncommon to find Prairie lesbians, particularly those who came of age in the fifties and earlier, who lived their lives in two shifts—the first conventionally, as a married wife and mother, and the second often coinciding with their children moving out or becoming teenagers, when they moved, rather unconventionally, into lesbianism. Many were so conditioned into pleasing families, suitors, and then children that they were well into adulthood before they realized that it was permissible to act on their own desires. Times assisted them, as the marked shift in homosexual experiences and acceptability from the fifties through to the present has been seismic. Thus, they now find themselves apologizing for their inability to live a lesbian life from their earliest adult years. They should not. Life stories such as those of Lilja Stefansson and Evelyn Rogers indicate the courage it took to leave unfulfilled marriages and small-town life to move to a large city and re-establish themselves as a lesbian couple. Stefansson and Rogers continued to face challenges as an older lesbian couple negotiating a seniors’ apartment complex in Regina. While there was a general acceptance in the building, there were those whose gossip or incredulity added a layer of strain to their lives that perhaps few others in the building experienced. Now, with Lilja in a nursing home, they will face other challenges in making the system respond to their familial situation. These daily acts of activism are important, historically and socially, because they reflect upon both the couple in question and the social cohesion, inclusions, and exclusions in Prairie society in general. It is one thing to write and speak abstractly about “progress”; it is another matter indeed to carefully explore the lived reality of this elderly couple. Their experiences offer a cautionary tale about creating too stark a dichotomy between urban and rural life. For most Prairie gays and lesbians, urban life held far more possibilities and opportunities for creating gay and lesbian communities. However, they noted that this was a far from perfect world, as intolerance, homophobia, and violence (directed at gay men in particular) was not unknown in the cities. Some were nostalgic for smaller towns and rural life, most notably gay activist Doug Wilson, who openly wrote of a future time when rural gays would not face ostracism and intolerance. Though my study concentrates on the largest cities, evidence exists to document the formation of a handful of gay and lesbian social groups in the mid-sized cities (Brandon, Manitoba; Prince Albert, Saskatchewan; and Red Deer, Alberta). After gender, migrations feature prominently—from region to metropolis, whether big Prairie cities or cities in Ontario. Later, in the seventies and eighties, for Albertans the tide turned the other way, and that province was inundated with economic migrants headed there in search of employment. Ironically, a
number of the administrators, social workers, and government employees who were recruited to Alberta were gay and lesbian, and thus, Edmonton has been the beneficiary of many gay and lesbian professionals who brought to the province not only their professional skills but also their activist instincts. This migration points to our misplaced notions of prairie solitude and isolation from the rest of Canadians. Most people interviewed were constantly moving, either for jobs or for travel. They subscribed to periodicals, joined clubs, read novels, and purchased recorded music from the region and beyond. In more recent times, they would watch television programs or movies, and later cruise the Internet, searching for others. These activities significantly changed gay and lesbian culture and communities, and brought recent political changes and challenges. My research is not just uncovering and celebrating the lives of the marginalized but is centrally important to rewriting an inclusive history of modern, diverse, Prairie cities and their hinterlands that historicizes the growth of gay and lesbians spaces, politics, and communities.

Notes

1 I gratefully acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for supporting this research.


11 Ibid.


presentation at Rainbow Explorations! Sexuality and Gender Discussion Series, University of Saskatchewan, 10 February 2008.


21 Norman Dahl, interview by author, 23 August 2006, Gatineau, Quebec.

22 "Brad S" is a pseudonym.

23 Norman Dahl, interview by author.

24 Ibid.


27 Lilja B. Stefansson and Evelyn Rogers, interview by author, Regina, Saskatchewan, 29 July 2003.

28 See Korinek, “‘Don’t Let your Girlfriends Ruin Your Marriage.’”


30 These members-only clubs, the first exclusively gay and lesbian spaces in the Prairies, were critically important to the growth of an explicit gay and lesbian urban subculture. While the members-only clubs died out relatively quickly in Calgary and Edmonton, they were a hallmark of life in Winnipeg (where Happenings continued in one form or another for over thirty years), in Regina (where their club, run by the Gay and Lesbian Community of Regina, has been in existence since 1972 and remains the key social and cultural centre for the community), and in Saskatoon (where “the club” under various names was a city fixture for over a decade).


32 Ibid.

33 City of Edmonton Archives, GATE Papers, taped interview with Maureen Irwin, 1994.


35 Ibid.

37 City of Edmonton Archives, GALA fonds, MS #595 box 12, conferences, Maureen Irwin, “Panel Address – Flaunting It,” 1 December 1990.


40 See Korinek, “‘The most openly gay person.’”

41 Both the Brandon and Prince Albert communities left behind a small cache of printed materials (newsletters and ads) that enabled a partial reconstruction of their social activities. The most complete set of materials about gay and lesbian experiences in a mid-sized Prairie centre exist at the Red Deer Museum. The museum was awarded a provincial government grant to create a museum exhibit and an oral history collection of gays and lesbians who lived in that city. Regrettfully, much homophobic criticism and controversy ensued. As a result, the wonderful oral history collection has been carefully guarded so as to protect the confidentiality of informants from further embarrassment or harassment. While I was warmly welcomed to peruse the collection, I was denied permission to copy materials and prevented from utilizing them in any scholarly publications. Hopefully, scholars may one day be permitted to utilize this resource as intended, to provide a portrait of the lives of gay and lesbian inhabitants of a smaller Prairie city.

42 While revisions for this paper were underway, the Alberta government announced that they would amend their legislation to formally include human rights coverage for the province’s gay and lesbians. This corrective finally addressed the findings of the Supreme Court of Canada (Vriend v. Alberta, 1998) in which the Court ruled that the Province was contravening the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms by denying human rights coverage to gays and lesbians. Despite that ruling, during the ensuing eleven years, the province chose to have that coverage “read in” to their legislation rather than formally amend the human rights statutes. Now, in finally extending explicit coverage to lesbians and gays, the provincial government has offered a balm to its religious conservative voting base by including a new educational opt-out clause in the same legislation. This clause provides parents of public school children with notices prior to any material pertaining to sexual orientation or religion being taught. Parents will be allowed to request that their children be excused from class during the teaching of this material if it does not accord with their personal or religious views. Within the ruling Alberta Conservative Party, this is widely regarded as a legislative “compromise.” Such “compromises” graphically illustrate the ongoing homophobia within the province and the way that fundamentalist Christian family values serve as expedient political tools.