



Kael Reid

# ACCOUNTING FOR THE SELF, LOCATING THE BODY

Stories of Queerness and Place

Queer and LGBT+ Studies

Collection Editor

**PATRICK THOMSEN**

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





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These stories are dedicated to all of us who are finding our way in this complex world. Our paths are precious and full of possibility.

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# Abstract

Kael Reid's stories, lyrics, and poems delve into the complexities of queer existence, exploring themes of relationality, embodiment, movement, and place. A white settler, lesbian singer-songwriter turned genderqueer researcher and educator, Reid reflects on their life journey from a farm in southwestern eastern Canada<sup>1</sup> to the mountains of western Canada<sup>2</sup> and back. Reid's narratives cover diverse experiences: a moment of reflection while cooking lunch over a fire in the woods as a youth, sexual assault, watching a lesbian docu-drama, drug abuse, waking up beside a woman for the first time, homophobic violence, an unplanned pregnancy, a past-life experience while hiking, singing with a musical companion in a run-down biker bar, finding love, and undergoing gender-affirming top surgery. Through these tales, Reid connects to the more-than-human world and captures the essence of being human.

## Key words

Body, Flesh, Gender, Homophobia, Land, Lesbian, Love, Music, Teaching, Place, Sexuality, Song, Spirit, Relationships

# Content warning

This book contains references to and descriptions of situations that some readers may find distressing, including:

conversations with expletives

queerphobia

sexism

sexuality

sexual assault

substance use and abuse

violence



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# Learning objectives

1. Readers will develop an understanding of the diverse lived experiences, highlighting the intersections of identity, place, and self-discovery.
2. Readers will critically analyze how geographical and social environments impact the formation and expression of gender and sexual identities.
3. Readers will be able to connect personal narratives to broader theoretical and empirical research on LGBTQ+ issues, enhancing their comprehension of assigned research-based academic texts through real-life accounts.
4. Readers will explore the concept of intersectionality by examining how different aspects of identity (e.g., sexuality, gender, gender expression, race, class, connection to place, and socio-economic status) intersect and influence personal experiences and societal interactions.
5. Readers will cultivate empathy and perspective-building skills by engaging with intimate stories of struggle, resilience, and joy, fostering a deeper appreciation for the complexities of LGBTQ+ experiences.
6. Readers will apply theoretical frameworks and research findings to understand and analyze the personal stories presented, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and real-world experiences.



# Introduction: Building a queer lineage through storytelling

When we want to make sense of who we are, we often look to our families to know and understand ourselves. We turn to our childhoods, and to the adults who raised us, to account for the ways we view and experience the world, to fit the puzzle pieces of our lives together, to find answers about who we are. We research family trees and trace ourselves back through the branches of our lineage to unearth the rhizomes of our heritage. We follow our bloodlines like roads that crisscross one another on a map, or like footpaths and trails through the forest of our ancestry. To become familiar with our lineage orients our bodies towards that lineage, locating us in the world. Knowing where and who we come from helps us decipher ourselves and anchors us to other bodies, stories, and lives.

But what happens if our *queer* identities, bodies, lives, and lineages cannot be traced? What if we cannot follow our queer identities back through a family line—if pieces of us cannot be

pinpointed in the pedigrees of our heterosexual family members or accounted for by examining the history of a family that is cis-gender? What if our queer stories have been overlooked, deliberately left out, not talked about, or erased by our family of origin and society—our bodies and lives shrouded in secrecy, shame, and fear?

And, what if these fragments could be pieced together one by one, by reading, witnessing, and resonating with the stories of queer others? What if words and imagery could fill in the blanks of one's queer life and become the scraps of fabric that, when stitched together, create a whole person—a rich, lived life? What if, through story and words, queer people could be brought together in community with others? What if, through story and words, we could be related to one another?

Then, through the sharing of our stories that run in our DNA, my queer loved ones and I—friends, partners, their friends, their partners—and perhaps even you and I, would be kin. Queer storytelling would be an act of constructing a lineage, building family relations, and expressing love. Queer storytelling would thread our narratives together and weave an archive of authored ancestry that we would share with one another, pass down to our descendants like an inheritance that binds us, and locate us in time and place. Queer storytelling would create a *queer* genealogy—our bloodline, our heritage, our collective history of kinship.

# 1

## Groundhog in the woodpile

I trudge across the quiet, snowy field facing south towards the hardwood forest on the farm that my parents bought back in 1979, when I was 8 years old. Now, I am 13 years old. The bitter February afternoon wind stings my cheeks. A little knapsack is slung over my shoulder.

In the woods, I follow the imprint of tractor wheels in the snow to a plywood shack, grey and faded from the weather. When we first moved to the farm 6 years ago, my sisters, Lucy and Ava, and I decorated the shack so we could play there. Now, the shack looks abandoned.

Opening the door, I look inside. Three rickety wicker chairs and a small table sit in the middle of the floor. Two rough-hewn, 3-foot boards are nailed to the wall beside the door, providing a makeshift set of shelves. A rectangular piece of light blue cotton fabric with tiny sprigs of flowers, now threadbare and frayed, hangs over the cracked window with rusty thumbtacks. There is a short stack of mismatched plates and bowls on the shelf. A couple of framed pictures hang crookedly on one wall. The floor is rotted away in one corner. One of the hinges on the door is rusted and

broken. It smells like rat piss and mouse shit. We never could keep the rodents out of there.

I close the door and turn around, tramping a few steps in the the snow towards a large old stump. I sit down and open my knapsack, pulling out a wad of newspaper, a few short pieces of kindling and two small wedges of chopped wood from the woodpile beside the stove in our kitchen, a small book of matches, a fork, a pair of metal tongs, a can opener, a thermos of hot chocolate, and a can of Libby's Brown Beans. I clear away the snow in front of me until a small fire pit encircled by rocks appears. Among the rocks, I stack pieces of kindling, one on top of the other, in the shape of a tiny log cabin, like I learned at summer church camp. Crumpled paper stuffed inside the middle of the cabin lights quickly, and smoke drifts up into the frosty air. Blowing on the flames, I add more kindling, then, a piece of wood.

Opening the can of brown beans, I tuck it beside the piece of wood in the coals. I lean back on the stump. The forest stands on guard around me. Sugar maple, green ash, and yellow birch trees reach skyward from the crusty snow, cold and hardened from the long winter months. I feel held by their presence.

I breathe in the quiet air, and the stillness envelops me. I relish being away from the house. Away from Lucy's many health issues. My father's frustration and demeaning comments. My mom's quest to understand what's wrong with my sister, how to help her—the doctors, hospital visits, medical and psychological tests, psychiatrists in white coats—and how to keep it all together. My own guilt that I am not sick. That I, too, am



irritated with her. That I'm embarrassed by her. That I can't save her.

Then, a soft, strained sound comes from the calloused logs that my father and I stacked a few hours ago. I cock my head to the side, trying to make out the sound, but there is only the sound of the crackling fire in front of me.

In a few days, my father and I will return for the logs. He will buck them up with his chainsaw, and I will toss the pieces onto the trailer attached to the tractor. Then, we'll drive back to the house, unload the firewood on the porch, and stack it in neatly arranged piles.

When I help my father around the farm, he is impressed with my strength and determination. I try to make up for the fact that he has three daughters. He never says it out loud, but I think he wants a son. Sometimes, he jokes that he's the only man in the house, that he's surrounded by girls, outnumbered. Mostly, I think he's okay with it, but sometimes, there's something in his voice, something that suggests he got the short end of the stick. That he's longing for something that would make his life complete. That he feels alone.

And I feel guilty that I'm a girl.

I am determined to be the son he never had. To be his right-hand boy and help him around the farm. I don't mind so much because it means I get to spend more time with him.

And, it feels good being boyish. It feels good being noticed. It feels good when he brags to my mom about how strong I am, what a good worker I am. After a morning of tossing hay bales

into the barn, he proclaims proudly one afternoon over the lunch table, "Katy sure is robust!" Pride brims inside me.

I eat a forkful of brown beans from the can in the fire, the warm syrupy legumes soft and velvety in my mouth.

Again, I hear the strained sound coming from the pile of logs. I drop my fork into the can of beans and rise from my stump in the snow. Following my ear to the edge of the woodpile, I kneel beside the logs, listening. It's the sound of a small animal breathing. Wheezing, panting, and grasping at life in the darkness between the logs. There is an awkward rhythm to the breath and the soft sound of "kuh...kuh...kuh" with each mouthful of air. There is a pause too, between gasps; the thin space between holding on and letting go.

As I crouch in the snow, the sound moves into my body. Down past my throat, along my windpipe, and into my heart. I realize it is the laboured breathing of the groundhog my father had shot earlier that day. He's always on a mission to rid the farm of groundhogs because they dig large holes around the fields. Holes that could cause one of our horses to break a leg should their hoof land in one. Holes that could cause a tractor to get jammed in the ground and break an axle.

Once, I accompanied my father as he drove our pickup truck out into the fields of the farm, looking for groundhog holes. When he found one, he blocked it with tightly packed dirt. "The back door," he told me. Then, he located the front door of the burrow and fed a large hose down the hole that he attached to the tailpipe of the truck. He turned on the engine and gassed the unsuspecting groundhog family to death.

As I huddle there by the woodpile, listening to the dying groundhog, rage and dread suddenly bubble up and melt together into

fiery lava in my blood, searing the thin membranes of my veins. The dark, red sponge marrow in my bones screams inside of me and rushes up to my neck, spreading up across my face.

A sudden urge grips me. I want to tear the log pile apart with fierce, angry fingers. Rip through the timber to the huffing and gasping until I find her, trapped, terrified and small, her brown, coarse fur caked with blood, eyes brimming with fear. Reach past my fear, grasping her limp body.

If her yellow rodent teeth sank into my hand from panic, drawing blood, I would ignore the pain. I would pull her up out of the icy logs and clasp her to my heart inside my red plaid lumber jacket. I would stroke her body and hold her as she rattles and rasps and dies in my arms. At least, she would die with the warmth of my body. Not alone in a cold, hard, winter woodpile.

But, I don't do any of it.

Instead, I kneel in the crunchy, frigid snow, listening to her short, laboured breathing, and cry. Frozen in my loyalty to my father and his gun and the pickup truck with the gassing hose. Frozen in the fear that if I went against his actions and dug the groundhog out of the woodpile to try and save her, I would have to face him and tell him what I did, knowing it wouldn't end well for the groundhog anyway. Frozen in the understanding that if I defied him and told him that I didn't like that he killed groundhogs, he would be angry and something bad might happen to me.

Like the time when Lucy was on a weekend pass from London Psychiatric Hospital. She was living there because she was sick in the mind and my parents didn't know how to take care of her. On that Sunday afternoon when it was time for her to go back, she refused to get in the car. She didn't want to go back to

that place. That place where people shuffled aimlessly up and down the hallway, mumbling to themselves. Where they were slumped over in chairs lined up, side by side, against the wall. So, my parents called our family doctor. He drove all the way out from Cambridge to our farm to give Lucy a needle in her arm that reduced her to jelly at the kitchen table. Then, he and my father carried her out to the car, and put her in the back seat. My mom told me and Ava to squeeze in beside her and we drove her back to the hospital. We never talked about it.

I hear a gunshot off in the distance that jolts me back to the groundhog in the woodpile. Tears stream down my red cheeks, turning icy in the frigid air.

The grey clouds part, and shafts of late afternoon sunlight stream down through the trees. I realize that I don't do anything about the groundhog because, somewhere deep down, I know there is nothing I can do for her now.

Her tiny, struggling breath slows down. Then, there is one short, final gasp and it is silent.

I place my bare hand quietly on the logs and turn my tear-stained face up to the sky, inhaling the late afternoon winter air. I feel the groundhog's spirit float away. Shafts of sun dance among the treetops. The wind spirits waft around me, through me. The tree-tops bend and bow in rapture.

My knees are cold and soaked from kneeling in the snow beside the woodpile. I stand up and look back at my fire, now smoldering.

Then, a rush of a thousand tiny groundhogs flows into the rivers inside of me, swirling and swimming through the tunnels in my marrow, laughing and singing through my bones.

# 2

## Science class, 1987

"Hey, Herteis!" I whisper to my grade eleven science partner. I dump my books on the table and sit down beside her, breathless. I made it to class on time.

Lori's notebook is open in front of her. She's wearing white canvas Tretorn tennis shoes, blue Levi's, and a red polo shirt. She looks good in red.

"Hey, Hancock!" She looks up from her notebook and tucks her shoulder-length dirty-blond hair behind one ear.

"Just seconds before the bell again, eh? Nice one."

Her greenish-grey eyes shine at me from behind thick glasses.

Lori lives on Wrigley Road, two roads over from Alps Road, where I live with my family. Country kids like Lori and me ride the bus to and from school. I hate taking the bus. Cool kids get rides with their parents. The *really* cool kids have their own wheels.

Sometimes, if we're lucky, my mom or dad drives my sisters and me to school in the morning. Usually, we take the bus home after school because they work until five. Lori rides the bus pretty much all the time, unless her coach drops her off at home after practice.

Outside of science class, Lori and I don't hang out together. But there's something about her that I like. She's smart. She seems

confident. She's cool, but in a nerdy kind of way. She plays field hockey, softball, and soccer. A couple of times, I've spotted her leaving the change room in her soccer shorts. Her thighs look smooth, solid, and strong in those shorts. She swaggers when she walks, jutting her head slightly out from her neck, like a chicken strutting around a barnyard.

Her boyish voice cracks a little when she talks. She doesn't go on about having sex with boys, getting married, and having kids when she grows up, drinking peach schnapps, doing hash bongs, taking the pill, or feeling hungover, like me and my friends do.

Lori and her friends talk about school assignments, their grades, and sports. They are polite and well-behaved. They hand their assignments in on time, participate in class, joke around with their teachers, and make the honour roll.

Mr Heffernan stands at the front of the room. He is a tall, hunched-over, soft-spoken oaf of a man with wire-rim glasses, disheveled sandy-gray hair, a kind face, and weak classroom management skills. "Good morning, class. Please take your seats. We will get started in a minute. I'm just looking for something—" his voice trails off as he digs around in the breast pocket of his beige corduroy blazer. He shuffles through some papers and fumbles around on his desk.

Students sit in pairs at science tables with Bunsen burner hookups and small sinks with chrome taps. Carolyn, Melissa, Hannah, Bailey, my best friend, and Lori and I sit up near the front. Steve is an arrogant, lanky boy with dark brown hair and a British accent. He sits in the back beside Adam, a tall, skinny, red-haired stoner with heavy-lidded eyes who can barely string two words together. Steve passes a small, folded note up to Hannah.

She opens up the tiny paper package. I look over to see what's in it. There are minuscule hearts scribbled in red pen beside a 7-digit phone number, and a short message that reads "Will you go out with me?" A little pile of pubic hair sits in the crease of the paper. Hannah shrieks as the pubic hair slides off the paper and falls onto her lap. Her face lights up in a mixture of amusement and disgust.

"Oh my god! Gross!" I gag.

Why any girl would be flattered by any of the things Steve does to get their attention is beyond me. I turn away and hide my face on Lori's shoulder. She smells like boy's deodorant.

"Steve is such a pig!" I whisper loudly to Lori.

"Totally. He's an ass," she rolls her eyes.

Mr Heffernan clears his throat.

"Today, with your partners, you will be using your Bunsen burners to conduct experiments with iodine and water. Then, we will be discussing the physical and chemical changes of the substances you will be working with."

He picks up a piece of chalk from the dusty aluminum trough below the chalkboard. He coughs into his hand, leaving a white smudge of chalk on his lips.

"But before we start, let's review. Will someone please tell me one of the safety rules when using a Bunsen burner?" He glances around the room. Carolyn sticks up her hand.

"Yes, Carolyn?"

"Don't put any flammable substances next to your Bunsen burner?"

"Correct," Mr Heffernan writes her answer on the blackboard. The corner of his white button-down hangs down below his corduroy sports jacket.

"Anyone else? Another safety rule?" he asks. His eyes dart around the room.

I look out the window at the row of portables at the edge of the school property, thinking about last weekend. My boyfriend, Ryan, his friends, and I were hanging out at Ryan's parents' house, drinking. Ryan and his friends drank Molson Canadian and I drank Rockaberry Canada Coolers. We all smoked cigarettes. Ryan's friends talked about the girls they had had sex with. They talked about what they did with the girls and made jokes about their bodies. They laughed and punched each other in the shoulders. I just sat there and drank and smoked and laughed once in a while. I hoped Ryan didn't talk like that about me when I wasn't there.

"Hancock, pay attention," Lori elbows me.

I shake my head and look down. Handouts are piled on the desk in front of me. I look over at Lori. She is writing in her notebook. Shit, I just missed the entire review on Bunsen burner safety. I slump back in my chair. I'm behind again.

I take a handout and pass the rest of the pile to the student sitting behind me. Science just isn't that interesting to me. I wish Lori and I could get out of here somehow. I look out the window again. The portables blur.

"Lori and Katie, will you please take the attendance down to the office before we start?" Lori and I nod in agreement. Mr Heffernan



hands Lori the attendance sheet. We walk out into the empty hallway.

"Make sure you're back in five minutes," he calls after us.

"Yeah, yeah." I dismiss his words in the air with a flip of my hand.

As Lori and I walk, I run my fingers along the locks on the lockers that line the hallway. The locks clang as they hit the grey metal.

"Hancock! Cut it out. You're going to disturb the classes," Lori admonishes me quietly.

I thrust my hands in my pockets and keep walking. The speckled linoleum of the floor gleams under fluorescent lights above. I try to think of something to say. Lori strides a few steps ahead of me. I smile at her chicken strut walk. Her shoulders are square and her arms swing slightly as she moves. I can see the outline of her triceps dipping below the short sleeves of her polo shirt. I think about how her thighs look in her soccer shorts.

"Fuck, science is so boring," I groan.

I search my mind for something—anything—to talk about rather than school. But, my mind is blank.

Lori turns her head towards me, peering over the rims of her glasses.

"Aw, I don't mind science. You just kind of have to roll with it, Hancock, you know? Just pay attention in class. You'll be fine."

She raises her eyebrows, and smiles. My breath catches in my throat. Why does it feel like she can see right through me?

"Besides, we need a grade eleven science credit to get our diploma," she says.

We pass a couple of grade 12 girls standing at their open lockers, whispering and giggling to each other. Magazine cut-out photos of American actors, Andrew McCarthy, Judd Nelson, and Rob Lowe are taped over the vents on the inside of their locker doors. They stop whispering and look at us as we walk by.

"Uh, I—I—" I hesitate. "I—I don't think we need the credit. Grade ten science is all we need, as far as I know." Why can't I think of something interesting to say?

"Well," Lori shrugs. "I need it I'm going to go into teaching eventually. Hey, I gotta stop at the bathroom, okay?" She waves the attendance sheet in the air as she turns the corner and heads for the girls' bathroom.

"Sure."

I look down the hall and see the principal, Mr Carlton, marching towards us.

"Miss Hancock. Miss Herteis. What are you two up to?" He stops in front of us, looking at me.

"Just using the washroom before taking the attendance to the office, sir," I say.

He looks at Lori and nods.

"Nice game the other day, Lori."

"Thanks, Mr Carlton."

He looks back at me, his voice stern. "Be quick in there and hurry back to class."

Continuing down the hallway, he vanishes around the corner.

Lori opens the door to the girls' bathroom and walks in. I follow. I lean up against the tiled wall beside the sink. Pink industrial liquid soap oozes from the bottom of the soap dispenser and forms a small glistening puddle on the floor below. Cigarette smoke hangs in the air.

"Oh man! One of those head-banger girls was smoking in here again," Lori says as she hands me the attendance sheet. She disappears into one of the pink stalls.

"It was probably Michelle Smith. You know that skinny chick who wears the Iron Maiden t-shirts all the time?" I scoff. "I've seen her smoking in here before."

I hear Lori unbuckle her belt, unzip her jeans, and pull her pants down. Then, the sound of pee hitting water. Below the bathroom stall door, her white tennis shoes poke out from under a pile of denim around her ankles.

I smoked a cigarette at recess. I wonder what Lori would think if she saw me smoking. She's such an athletic girl and I'm not. I mean, I do active stuff outside of school but I'm not one of those team player types. But I don't really consider myself a smoker either. I just do it because my friends do it and it would piss my parents off if they knew.

I reach into my back pocket, and pulling out a piece of watermelon-flavoured Bubblicious, I unwrap it, and pop it into my mouth. Looking in the mirror, I lick my thumbs and run them below my eyes to get rid of smudged eyeliner. I spread grape-flavoured Bonne Bell lip gloss on my lips and pucker my mouth.

Leaning back against the wall, I tug at a lock of my long, dirty-blond hair, inspecting it for split ends.

The toilet flushes. Lori emerges from the stall and steps over to the sink. After washing and drying her hands, she turns to face me.

"Ready, Hancock?"

The room disappears. All I see is her standing in front of me.

"Not just yet," I say.

I move my body up against hers and give her a peck on the lips. She pulls back, her eyes wide.

"Sorry," I take a step back.

"I guess I've been wanting to do that for a while."

"It's okay. It's, uh, just—I—I've never kissed a girl before."

"Me neither."

"I've never kissed anyone actually," she admits.

"Oh! Okay." I giggle. "Is it okay?"

"Yeah, it's okay," her voice cracks.

"Good, cuz, you just kind of have to roll with it, Herteis," I smirk, feeling bolder.

She throws her head back and laughs. I notice blonde peach fuzz at the crook of her jaw. I laugh, too.

She tips her head down and faces me again. A one-centimeter scar lies diagonally across her chin. A few freckles dance across her face. There's a small, red mark on the bridge of her nose where

her glasses sit. With her finger, she shoves her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. She looks at me. Her mouth is directly in front of mine.

I press my lips to hers again. Her mouth is soft and moist. She parts her lips slightly. I part mine. Our tongues touch. Hers tastes sweet and minty, like Trident gum. I'm so glad I had some bubblegum on hand. I let go of the attendance sheet and it floats to the floor. I put my hands on her hips. I can feel her hipbones through her jeans. She hooks her forefingers into the belt loops on my Levi's and pulls my hips against hers. I feel her breasts press against mine.

Is this actually happening?

I open my eyes, slowly. Her face is right there. Her eyes are closed and her head is tilted to the side as she kisses me. I move my hand down to find the seam of her polo shirt. I tug it loose from her jeans and reach underneath, still watching her. My fingers graze her skin. It's smooth and soft. I feel her stomach rising and falling under my palm.

Yep, it's happening.

Me and Lori Herteis. Two girls. In the bathroom at school. During class time. What if someone walks in and sees us? This would spread like wildfire through the school. We would be so screwed. They would kick us out of school for sure.

Behind Lori, I make out the words "A.C. is a dyke" scratched into one of the metal bathroom stall doors.

I think about hearing the words "dyke," "carpet-muncher," and "lesbo" in the hallways at school.

I think about the feeling of darkness that pools in my body when I hear those words, like I want to hide somewhere, like I hope that no-one can see inside me.

I think about the porn that was on the television one night at a party at Adam's house and how the two women and a guy were having a threesome and how the guy was all hairy and eager and I didn't understand why the women wanted him to touch their bodies.

I think about how I tried to pretend I wasn't interested. How I drank my beer and talked and laughed with my friends but I kept stealing glances at the TV screen out of the corner of my eye. How I wished that the guy wasn't in the movie at all and that it was just the two women.

Lori didn't look like the women in that movie. She looked way better. More tough, more androgynous, more real. I close my eyes.

"We've got to stop," she breathes into my ear, but she doesn't move away. Her fingernails scrape my shoulder blade. My lungs feel like they are about to burst out of my ribcage.

I feel a tug on the sleeve of my shirt. The bathroom scene fades and the portables of the school outside come into focus. I hear Lori's voice. "Hey Hancock! Buddy! Are you going to help me out with this experiment or what?" I shake my head and turn away from the window. Lori stares at me, her head tipped to one side.

"Oh shit, sorry," I say, my face growing hot. I feel flustered.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Buddy, pay attention!" She laughs and slaps my shoulder.