

QUEER INTERSPECIES INTIMACIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Queer Interspecies Intimacies

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Environmentalism is an exercise in collectively imagining the future. The idea of the Anthropocene is the dominant paradigm for our environmental future. At the margins of this construct, new futures are emerging through interspecies kinship in the queer ecological imagination. Appeals to “nature” and the “natural” cast queer bodies as deviant, morally wrong, and less human in contemporary biopolitics.⁴ From this transgressive position, some queer individuals develop personal narratives aligning their human *otherness* with non-human *otherness*. *Queer Interspecies Intimacy* explores this phenomenon through a multi-stage storytelling and quilting project using Emergent Strategy as a participatory research framework. What sort of narratives emerge when queer otherness encounters the non-human other, and how are these narratives reshaping the boundaries between human and non-human? Taking inspiration from queer writers working at this juncture, I propose that intimacy is a material and spiritual process of meeting the other in such a way that the self is implicated in relations of power and responsibility. Through qualitative narrative analysis, I explore the idea of queer connection to non-humans as the practice of turning toward a wound. The boundaries between human and non-human dissolve through intimate witnessing, shared ecological otherness, reconfigured kinship, interdependence and decomposition.

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Introduction

The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human.¹

-Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Patty follows Slug through the trees behind her apartment building, their slime smoothing them over wet leaves and limp twigs, over thin gravel, the occasional rotting pine cone, until they come to a heavy dampness under a half fallen tree trunk. Slug turns back and nudges her playfully, his tentacles fondling hers. Then he leads her up the trunk and out onto one of its outstretched limbs. There they mate, Slug showing her how to wrap around his length as he wraps around hers, so that they are like DNA strands, like corkscrews, hanging down from the limb on one rope of slime. It is easy, like love, this full-body writhing. For a long while they are content to lick each other, lapping up one another's slime and producing more in its place.²

-from *Slug* by Megan Milks

It is the delightful queerness of the above encounter between human and slug that inspires this project. This piece of short fiction by Megan Milks appears in *Fist of the Spider Woman: Tales of Fear and Queer Desire*, a queer horror anthology. I chose this story as an example of how queer ecological narratives lean into the fear, described by Gloria Anzaldúa above, of being the inhuman other. In this scene, which comes toward the end of the story, Slug and Patty are mating in the forest. Just prior to this however, Patty is a human asleep in her bedroom when Slug enters through the window to have sex with her. Patty consents to Slug with simultaneous horror and desire and, following their

¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. p. 40

² Milks, "Slug." p. 20

coupling, she finds herself transformed into a slug. After she and Slug mate in the woods and she chews off his sex organ which is stuck in hers, a common occurrence in slug mating, Patty returns to her bedroom offering the reader the concluding thought, “she will creep back to her bed. But her home can no longer be her home, she knows, for there the air is dry. She must go where the air is moist.”³ With this thought she articulates her turn towards queerness.

The first time I read this story I was struck by the affirmation of my body and sexuality as a queer person. I felt inhuman from an early age. Gender divergence, fatness, and family trauma all marked my seemingly other than human body. Patty is confronted by her own queerness through Slug’s attentions and she does not recoil. Instead she turns toward queerness, toward inhumanness. This sexualized cross-species narrative is a delicate place for a queer person to locate oneself. Contemporary biopolitics often engages the concepts of “nature” and the “natural” to condemn queerness.⁴ From associations of same sex desire with bestiality to the use of “pansy” as a homophobic slur, the implication is that to be a queer is to be less human, unnatural, deviant and criminal. From this transgressive position, some queers develop personal narratives aligning queer *otherness* with non-human *otherness* as a form of resilience and resistance.

These narratives turn up in queer arts and literature, and are often a focus of analysis in queer ecology, which is a field of inquiry concerned with interrogating the

³ Milks. p. 21

⁴ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecology: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*.

mutually reinforcing construction of sex and nature.⁵ The violation of queer bodies and the violation of non-human bodies are often jointly justified through a contemporary biopolitics which relies on the separation of human from the non/human and a dominant paradigm of human exceptionalism. My research focuses on the question posed by cultural theorists Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen: “when the ‘sub-human, in-human, non-human’ queer actively connects with the other-than-human, what might that connection spawn?”⁶ With this question, Luciano and Chen turn our attention to what queerness reveals about the nature of humanness as a constructed category, and specifically, what “other forms, other worlds, other ways of being”⁷ are emerging when queer humans deal with this dehumanization not by seeking assimilation into the category of human but by reimagining a humanity that embraces the human and non-human queer.

I interpret the word “spawn” in Luciano and Chen’s question as an invitation to wonder about queer ecological futures in the context of a U.S. climate change response that centers future generations of white western human spawn as claims making objects.⁸ A claim that is reliant on colonial cis-, hetero-, patriarchal ideas about reproduction and kinship.⁹ Nicole Seymour posits that futurity is central to environmentalism, and that queer narratives reveal an alternative to mainstream environmentalism that is influenced by a similar alignment to the queer nonhuman describe by Luciano and Chen. While these theorists ground their analysis in art and literature to uncover a queer environmentalism, I am interested in how these queerly inhuman narratives are unfolding

⁵ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson.

⁶ Luciano and Chen, “Has the Queer Ever Been Human?” p. 186

⁷ Luciano and Chen. p. 186

⁸ Davis, “Toxic Progeny: The Plastisphere and Other Queer Futures.”

⁹ Edelman, “The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive.”

in my own queer narrative network. If environmental scholarship promotes the Anthropocene as the dominant paradigm for our ecological future, a future structured by the human/nonhuman duality that queer inhumanism challenges, then what alternative futures for human/nonhuman relations are emerging at the margins of this construct through a queer ecological imagination?

My research tackles these questions using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach with narrative network analysis and art practice as tools for narrative inquiry. PAR reconfigures the traditional roles of the researcher as separate, active, observer, and the subjects of the research as passive objects of the research. In PAR, research subjects are treated as active creators and knowledge holders who are empowered to influence the direction of the research and engage the research process as a change-making process rather than purely extractive of their experience. The researcher acknowledges subjectivity and acts as a facilitator for the research process but not the sole knowledge holder. The actual application of this methodology varies widely from project to project. I chose PAR because I am a member of the network I am studying so my relationship to my subjects is an embedded one, and I am embarking on this research with the intention of engaging change through relationship building and healing in the research process.

To guide my PAR approach, I work with Emergent Strategy¹⁰ as a research philosophy to create opportunity for connectivity and deep inquiry through strategic storytelling. Emergent Strategy is a social movement building framework developed by Adrienne Maree Brown based on ecological principles and Afrofuturism. Emergent

¹⁰ Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*.

Strategy speaks to the importance of relationship building, co-visionary practices, and healing justice as critical to moving toward futures not defined by a colonial power-over mentality. According to Brown, “emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical, deep and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience. The quality of connection between the nodes in the patterns.”¹¹ Strengthening these co-visionary connections and moving toward collective healing is a central intention of my research process. Brown references the flocking patterns of birds, fish, and bees as a metaphor for these resilient care and change networks. By focusing my research on the birds around me I am seeking to understand myself as part of a movement for a queer ecological future. What sort of individual narratives shape this future and how can I deepen my connections and support co-visioning the future through my research process?

My narrative network consists of queer-identified individuals who are engaging in healing and resistance through connection with the more than human world in this context of increasing biopolitical pressure on both queer humans and the more-than-human environment. I see these connections as forms of intimacy, and I propose that intimacy is a material and spiritual process of meeting the other in such a way that the self is implicated in relations of power and responsibility. For this reason I will ultimately discuss queer intimacy in terms of Aurora Levins Morales “turning towards the wound.”¹² The driving intention of my research is to address this wound as a site of co-visioning and

¹¹ Brown. p. 14

¹² Morales, “Foreward to the 2015 Edition.” p. xix

collective healing. On collective healing, Clare writes:

The body as home, but only if it is understood that the stolen body can be reclaimed. The bodies irrevocably taken from us: we can memorialize them in quilts, granite walls, candlelight vigils; remember and mourn them; use their deaths to strengthen our will. And as for the lies and false images, we need to name them, transform them, create something entirely new in their place, something that comes close and finally true to the bone, entering our bodies as liberation, joy, fury, hope, a will to refigure the world.¹³

By asking for, witnessing, and responding to the stories of members of my queer network I am engaging in a process of connection and transformation at the site of wounding, which feels integral to refiguring relations of power over queer bodies and non-human bodies.

Phase one of this project consists of research design, interviews and a traditional narrative analysis in fulfillment of my Master's in Environmental Studies. Phase two of this project will focus on storytelling and intimacy through craft. I will create quilts, which are responsive to the narratives I gather through interviews. I intend the quilts as an offering of spiritual intimacy to restless queer bodies dreaming up more ecologically just futures.

¹³ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*. p. 13

Research Philosophy and Methods

My dream is a movement with such deep trust that we move as a murmuration, the way groups of starlings billow, dive, spin, dance collectively through the air—to avoid predators, and, it also seems, to pass time in the most beautiful way possible... Here is how it works in a murmuration/shoal/swarm: each creature is tuned into its neighbors, the creatures right around it in formation. This might be the birds on either side or the six fish in either direction. There is a right relationship, a right distance between them—too close and they crash, too far away and they can't feel the micro-adaptations of the other bodies... There is a deep trust in this, to lift because the birds around you are lifting, to live based on your collective real-time adaptations. In this way thousands of birds or fish or bees can move together, each empowered with basic rules and a vision to live.¹⁴

-Adrienne Maree Brown

At the core of this research project is my engagement with the collective queer ecological imagination like a starling in a murmuration. I take the position that a research process can be a mechanism for contributing to co-visioning and healing. To this end, I utilize Emergent Strategy (ES), a theory and practice for social change created by Adrienne Maree Brown, as a research philosophy for guiding Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology. While ES offers a culturally accessible theory of change that emphasizes relationships and co-visionary practices, Participatory Action Research (PAR) encourages collaborative inquiry, transformational action, and critical reflexivity throughout the research process. I focus this lens on my narrative network, which, like the above description of a murmuration, functions as a co-visionary space. I engage members of this network as research participants in conversational-style interviews as a

¹⁴ Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. p. 71

format for witnessing stories of queer/nonhuman relations. The following section provides an in-depth discussion of my research philosophy and methodology.

Research Philosophy

Emergent Strategy (ES) grounds my research in an accessible theory of change based on ecological observation, Afrofuturist visionary fiction, and the social movement leadership of black queer women. Adrienne Maree Brown, facilitator of ES, describes this theory of change by saying “Many of us have been socialized to understand that constant growth, violent competition and critical mass are the ways to create change. But emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical, deep and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience.”¹⁵ What Brown articulates in this contrast, and throughout her writing, is a move away from the Social Darwinist theories of change, toward a theory of change based in the ecological principles of mutuality and interdependence. She uses biomimicry metaphors, such as the murmuration, to draw accessible parallels between ecological systems and human social systems as inspiration for new ways of thinking about practicing more just social and ecological futures. Thinking about this in the context of my own research, I noticed how my own environmentalism is relationally embedded in a collective vision. Taking inspiration from Brown, I considered how my research process might embody a new philosophy guided by the desire to strengthen these connections.

¹⁵ Brown. p. 14

Brown notes in ES that “what we pay attention to grows,”¹⁶ which is a call to shift from a reactionary or assimilationist politics toward a politics that focuses visionary energy on the world we wish to create. Brown describes this co-visioning as collective ideation. Her writing is largely inspired by the radical black imagination expressed through Afrofuturism as a form of collective ideation. She identifies this radical imaginary as expressed through the individual acts of resistance that speak to a vision of a different future. She writes:

“Africans leaping off slaver ships were Afrofuturists. Slave-era parents teaching their babies a foreign alphabet in the candlelit dirt were Afrofuturists...It is the emphasis on tomorrow that centers the dignity of that seed, particularly in the face of extinction, that marks, for me, the afro-futurist.”¹⁷

In this statement, Brown is turning from an individualizing white hero narrative of racial justice, change and future building toward a history of collective change guided by daily beliefs and practices of Black people asserting humanity in the context of colonialism and enslavement. Brown finds this theory of change written into resistance narratives in contemporary Afrofuturism literature. As Brown points out, “visionary fiction intentionally explores...how change works in collective ways, disrupting the single white male hero narrative.”¹⁸ As part of a research philosophy, Emergent Strategy encourages me to approach research as a way of engaging and strengthening the marginal environmental imaginary in my queer narrative network.

¹⁶ Brown. p 19

¹⁷ Brown. p. 162

¹⁸ Brown. p. 163

Finally, I use ES because it is a theoretical framework that speaks to a broader audience than a traditional research philosophy. ES decenters white, colonial, ci-, hetero-, patriarchal narratives norms for scientific research. ES uses common language, culturally accessible references, and personal experience within social movements to communicate an accessible approach to producing knowledge. ES is not constrained by the presence of institutionalized research agenda or researcher, but can be adapted and used freely by anyone wishing to engage relationship building in a community of change makers. These characteristics make ES an ideal complement to Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology.

Methodology

My preference for Participatory Action Research (PAR) originates with my training in popular education and subsequent work in environmental education with marginalized learners. PAR is distinguished by an epistemological shift from positivist scientific process as the ideal research philosophy towards collaborative inquiry methods, which attempts to address the power dynamics of knowledge production by empowering research subjects as critical knowledge holders and actors.¹⁹ PAR is an ideal methodology for engaging ES as a research philosophy because of PAR's complimentary core concepts: (1) collaborative inquiry, (2) transformational praxis, and (3) critical reflexivity.²⁰

(1) *Collaborative inquiry* refers to the processes involved in engaging local knowledge systems and actors not just as subject but as agents in the research process. Therefore, PAR is often described as a more democratic

¹⁹ Lykes and Coquillon, "Participatory and Action Research and Feminisms: Toward Transformative Praxis."

²⁰ Lykes and Coquillon.

scientific approach because it opens up the research process to these subjects as co-researchers who shape the trajectory of the research .²¹

(2) *Transformational praxis* in PAR refers to both change-making multi-faceted social impacts as these co-researchers use the research process to address problems in their community.²² These impacts include community level response to social problems as well as the personal empowerment of the participants as co-researchers.

(3) *Critical reflexivity* refers to the process of self-reflection on the part of the researcher to uncover their subjectivity, power, and intentions relative to their research participants. Critical reflexivity is expressed through multiple scales: personal, interpersonal, and group and aims to intervene on the politics of knowledge production. This can also be understood through Brown's focus on fractals, naturally occurring patterns that repeat at multiple scales, to describe how "what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system."²³ She asks us to think contextually and questions whether we can manifest more just systems if we do not address relations of power on a personal and interpersonal level.

Taken together, Emergent Strategy and Participatory Action Research methodology provide a framework for my research. In particular, they highlight the interrelated nature of process, content, and outcomes in research. Ultimately, "what we pay attention to grows,"²⁴ and so I orient myself to the centering of marginal knowledge producers, the valuing of non-institutional approaches to change, and the importance of critical reflexivity for facilitating transformative praxis.

²¹ Chevalier and Buckles, *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry*.

²² Dutta, "Creating Inclusive Identity Narratives through Participatory Action Research."

²³ Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. p. 53.

²⁴ Brown. p. 19

Methods

Reflexivity

Reflexivity aims to address the power dynamics of knowledge production between the researcher and the researched, and to highlight the subjectivity of the researcher. Traditional positivist epistemology privileges knowledge produced through methods deemed objective, value neutral, and universal.²⁵ Critical cultural theorists, including queer theorists, challenge the idea that a researcher can be truly objective, regardless of methodology, because even the choice of research questions is driven by subjective factors.²⁶ Furthermore, researchers are granted institutional authority that privileges their knowledge production over the knowledge produced by those researched. Institutional knowledge, held by a precious few, is then used to influence policy and resource allocation. Marginalized groups remain underrepresented in research institutions while being subject to an outsider voice to narrate their strengths, challenges, and needs. Reflexivity asserts an epistemology of multiple subjectivities over the idea that there is *one* scientific truth.

Reflexivity methods are used to moderate these power dynamics throughout the research process by critically examining how the researcher's lived experiences, social position and institutionally granted authority influence every aspect of the research.²⁷ While I am an insider in my narrative network, I acknowledge that the group contains many unique individuals with complexly subjective experiences. Most of these individuals are embodying many viewpoints by way of identifying with multiple

²⁵ Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, "Holistic Reflexivity: The Feminist Practice of Reflexivity."

²⁶ Hesse-Biber and Piatelli.

²⁷ Hesse-Biber and Piatelli.

marginalized groups and learning to see through different cultural lenses. I myself embody multiple viewpoints as I approach this research from my own specific social location: my positionality.

Positionality

This research project is deeply personal for me as a queer/trans person. I intentionally set forth to explore the queer ecological relations around me with the desire to feel more closely connected to my queer relations and our own resilience and resistance in environmentally uncertain times. This process required me to confront my own internalized sense of otherness and unworthiness as a queer person in order to explore the value of queer ecological knowledge. Even if I believe unbiased research to be possible, this particular research project could not possibly fit such as detached convention. Instead, I take some space here to share my positionality with regard to this research project in order to communicate my vantage point on queerness and non-human relations.

My social position is shaped by being white, settler, queer/trans, masculine, female-born, United States citizen, fat, able-bodied, college educated, owning class, and cultured Christian and rural. I think of these as structuring my access to cultural and material resources for advancement, legitimacy, wellness and survival. For me, experiences of otherness and queerness intersect with many forms of privilege that buffer the dehumanization of supremacy and colonial oppression in my day to day life. I see the places where I have unearned privilege as places where I have a responsibility to work against this impact on others, and places where I experience marginalization and oppression as places where I need to rebuild something for myself and others like me. I

struggle with what this means in practice as these categories are messy and weighted. Nevertheless, I have a sense that this research project is about balancing these two areas with regard to narrative and knowledge construction.

All of these ways of being seen or not seen in the world shape my life experience and perspectives on queerness and the non-human. My queer narrative is one of growing up rural and isolated from other expressions of queerness. The land of the Delmarva Peninsula, where my family was privileged to own land, is unceded Nanticoke ancestral land that was also worked for generations by enslaved and working class blacks, poor whites, and Latinx farmworkers. Being white and rural facilitated my growing up with access to land and precious memories of connecting to the more-than-human world without the experience of dislocation and violence that mark Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) relations with land in colonial U.S. history.

My access to the land and rural place shifted as I came into adolescence and struggled with the complex reality of being queer and trans in a conservative rural culture and Catholic school setting. I experienced overt violence through bullying, struggled to access basic conveniences like public restrooms, and internalized a sense of my body as being monstrous and shameful. I struggled with isolation, depression and suicidality, and a yearning for connection to others. My childhood was also significantly influenced by trauma related to growing up with one mentally unstable parent and one absent parent. I note these early experiences because they are so integral to my queerness, and I believe they impact my interest in intimacy and my tendency to feel safer and more in my body with non-humans.

I developed a deeply escapist imagination to cope with early childhood trauma. One form of escape was reading the romantic back-to-the-wilderness genre of children's literature. These stories featured young white boys in coming of age stories of survival in wilderness. I would spend long days in the woods living out these stories and connecting with the beings around me. I mention this because it feels like a formative experience finding safety and connection through non-human nature, but also because it indoctrinated me into a masculinist and individualistic narrative of wilderness as a place of freedom, self-determination and escape. I am critical of this as I work through this research project because this narrative so easily shapes how I read others' environmental narratives.

As I worked through this thesis, I questioned the appropriateness of how I, as a white queer settler, engaged the writing of queer women of color to shape my research. I take seriously the critiques of feminist and queer theory that highlight how often research in these fields builds on the creative work of queer women of color without credit or compensation for this labor. Still, I kept coming back to my desire to advance a queer culture that is deeply anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-misogynist. Choosing to feature this work prominently in my research is ultimately about listening and uplifting and trying to decenter the white settler in academia. In addition to listening and acknowledging, I also chose to pay reparations as part of this research project, which I hope acknowledges the fact that my social position has been built on not just the theft of cultural knowledge but also material wealth through the theft of land, labor, and lives. I intend to continue financially supporting projects and people who center queer women of color as a way of

paying forward the access to economic advancement that my educational and racial privilege affords me.

Narrative inquiry

In order to collect personal narratives for this project, I completed in-person, semi-structured interviews with individuals drawn from what I call my narrative network. I respond to the idea from network theory that an alternative environmental sub-politics develops through social network narratives in the absence of effective state response to environmental (and social) issues.²⁸ The alternative queer environmental narratives in my social network would be considered a form of sub-politics.

I solicited participants from my narrative network using advertisements posted to my Instagram account: @pansiesforpansies. I chose this approach for my research because online social networks help facilitate the expansion of sub-politics and counter-narratives beyond local contexts. Relatedly, internet connectivity is especially significant to the development of queer culture, especially queer rural culture. Online social networking provides a space for anti-assimilationist queer representation, which counters the development of a mainstream assimilationist LGBT political narrative. For rural queer individuals like myself, groups like @queerappalachia and @queernature represent an alternative to the mainstream narrative of queerness as an urban lifestyle. More generally, the internet provides a valuable community resource for everything not available through mainstream institutional arrangements, from queer sex education absent from public schools, to advice on acquiring gender affirming hormones or surgery in the

²⁸ Ingram, Ingram, and Lejano, "Environmental Action in the Anthropocene: The Power of Narrative Networks."

absence of queer positive medical care. These resources can be especially limited in small towns and rural locales. Using my social media account as a starting point for reaching out to participants allowed me to tap into this broad queer audience.

Each participant was provided with an informational letter, a statement of my positionality and research intent and asked to read and sign an informed consent letter in order to participate. I attempted to moderate some of the power dynamics inherent between researcher and subject by making the informed consent fairly adaptable to suit the needs of different individuals. I gave participants the option to waive the audio recording, choose their own pseudonym and pronouns or choose to keep their true name attached to their answers, and I left a write-in section for additional agreements to be added to the form at any point in the process. For example, some participants chose to note specific statements or topics that they wanted deleted from the recording or not used in my writing and presentations.

I completed five interviews in February and March of 2019. I intentionally chose to emphasize a small sample size based on the ES concept of shifting from “mile wide, inch deep” movements to the “inch wide, mile deep” work of building relationships.²⁹ In the context of my research this means resisting the urge to aim for large sample sizes and conclusions that can be generalized. While these approaches are important to evaluating larger patterns such as species distribution or social inequity, my research is concerned with the relationships that can be built through storytelling and listening in a research process.

²⁹ Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. p. 20.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured, conversational approach. I developed a large set of prompts based on my literature review, but I did not intend or expect to use every prompt. Instead, I let the participant's answers dictate the next prompt, and I occasionally developed new prompts as necessary. I freely engaged in dialogue and invited participants to ask me questions in return or invite me to answer the interview prompts in return. After each interview, I returned to my original set of prompts and adjusted the language or added prompts as needed. I kept records of the changes and my reasons for them, which functioned as a form of reflexivity sampling during this data collection phase.

Quilting

The second phase of the project, which will begin in Winter 2019-2020, will employ craft, specifically quilting, as an epistemological process.

A Note on Language

‘Queer’ is a slippery term in public, academic and cultural discourse. The origin of the word is uncertain, however it may be linked to the 16th century German word ‘*quer*’ meaning oblique or perverse. The association with a slanted line or unacceptable behavior offers a reasonable connection to the current English use to describe something difference, ‘strange’ or ‘odd.’ In public common discourse, queer typically refers to something outside the norm, with the implication of being socially unacceptable, particularly sexually unacceptable, such as homosexuality, transsexuality, kink, or bestiality. In academic discourse, queer theory typically serves as a critique of norms, particularly for gender and sexuality, and the histories, maintenance and underlying purpose of these norms.

Queer has a decades-long history as a homophobic slur. In *Exile and Pride*, Clare consistently returns to the complex implications of slurs in marginalized groups. “I think of the words *crip, queer, freak, redneck*. None of these are easy words. They mark the jagged edge between self-hatred and pride, the chasm between how the dominant culture views marginalized peoples and how we view ourselves.”³⁰ Here Clare points out the tension that arises when a group is faced with trying to reconstruct a sense of selfhood and identity when that identity is deeply interrelated with internalized oppression. Importantly, marginalized subcultures sometimes address this tension through the process of reclaiming slurs as a form of empowerment and political resistance. In this way, the

³⁰ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*. p. 12.

word queer has undergone reclamation to become a term that expresses pride and resistance to dominant norms. Speaking about this shift, Jen Labarbera, who describes herself as a queer brown femme survivor, states, “When I chose to identify and embody my (always evolving) queer sexuality, I chose to use my queerness as a tool for surviving the gauntlets of oppression, as an opportunity to find and build a new, safer world for myself and to embody queer space of my own making.”³¹ Labarbera’s statement not only demonstrates the sense of empowerment that comes from reclaiming language—queerness as a “tool for surviving”—but also introduces the idea that queerness is about choosing a path of world building over a path of assimilation to acceptable sexual norms.

At this point, I must acknowledge that not all people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) or otherwise alternatively identified would consider themselves queer. Furthermore, not all people who identify as queer define the meaning of this in the same way. For those who are in my narrative network, queerness is a reclaimed term. Though in the interviews participants express an understanding that queerness is highly contextual and fluid. As one participant, Mister Lucky, described:

It is still in this white western framework that I exist in and that’s not the only way to be outside of the cis and straight experience there are so many other ways that I haven’t experienced or have not witnessed and can’t or won’t... and they might not even be named queerness but I guess I define queer as being less defined which is how I want it.” (Mister Lucky, they/them)

In my narrative network, individuals are generally constructing queer identity relationally in a context that is dominated by whiteness and western educational privilege in

³¹ Labarbera, “Queer Resistance: Reclamation and Resilience.” p. 171.

particular and these are ultimately limiting to a full understanding of queerness. Mister Lucky's preference for queerness as being less-defined is a familiar characteristic ascribed to queerness. This is often romanticized as a gateway to coalition politics in white narratives of queerness. As Clare states, "queer... is a coalition building word."³² An alternative perspective is offered by Qwo-li Driskill, Two-Spirit Cherokee theorist, who asserts, "Queer risks erasing difference"³³ when discusses how queer studies often fails to intervene on settler colonialism.

Despite this limitation, this thesis is still concerned with advancing a queer politics that considers intersectional expressions of queerness and resists assimilationist sexual politics that privilege whiteness and colonization. Intersectionality describes the phenomenon of multi-subjective experience of power and privilege and the exponentially greater oppression experienced when one is a member of multiple marginal groups. Ultimately, an intersectional sub-politics recognizes that oppression, whether expressed ideologically, individually, institutionally or internally, cannot be understood or addressed singularly. Forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism, are mutually reinforcing and originate in the ongoing process of colonization of land, bodies and culture. As Labarbera describes herself above, queer is one identification that intertwines with being mixed race, femme, and a sexual assault survivor. Each of these identities also poses its own set of overlapping challenges for a person's wellness in a society that privileges white men. Eli Clare talks about the intersubjective nature of identity saying "Gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality, sexuality folds on top of

³² Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*.

³³ Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies."

race...everything finally piling into a single human body. To write about any aspect of identity, any aspect of the body, means writing about this entire maze.”³⁴ Both Labarbera and Clare express how queer identity is complexly informed by a person’s full social and cultural experience, rather than being a singular, fixed and universal category. From this perspective, a queer intersectional narrative recognizes queer liberation as interdependent with racial justice, disability justice, feminism, and other struggles for liberation simply because, for most queer people, these struggles co-exist in the body.

In a society that often treats identities as singular, fixed and universal categories, intersecting oppressions can make inclusion in any one group more difficult. Clare points this out by asking difficult questions about the intersection of sexuality, gender, and child abuse. “I get afraid that the homophobes are right, that maybe in truth I live as a transgender butch because [my father] raped me, my mother neglected me.”³⁵ Here Clare responds to the efforts of assimilationist LGBT politics, which sought to establish a new dominant narrative casting alternative sexualities and genders as “natural” in response to the prevailing psychiatric and societal narrative that sexual and gender deviance is a failure of nurturing and/or personal morality—in Clare’s case, a form of damage. Clare’s intersectional position of transgender butch and abuse survivor straddles the narrative of the oppressor and the narrative of the assimilationist LGBT rights movement. This reveals how intersectionality inhibits one from even pursuing assimilation into socially acceptable forms of sexuality. Clare’s example represents a more internalized cultural struggle; however, intersectionality often produces an increased visibility of the queer

³⁴ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*. p. 143.

³⁵ Eli Clare. p. 149.

person that can make assimilation incredibly difficult as well and result in more overt forms of oppression in the form of societal prejudices or institutional policies. For example, queer people of color may be able to assimilate into a heterosexist society but remain precariously visible in a white supremacist society. In this thesis I promote a queer narrative that embraces intersectionality and resists assimilation in recognition of the interdependent nature of liberation.

Literature Review

The very queer nature of nature, like how freaking gay everything really is, just sitting out here all of these little flower bits and what not like this is like a reproductive strategy like they are just shooting it all out there.

JMG, They/Them

Queer Interspecies Intimacies responds to non-academic and academic discourse relating queerness to the more than human world. Social media projects such as @queernature and outdoor recreation groups such as Wild Diversity and the Venture Out Project are drawing attention to queer relations with the more-than-human environment. Meanwhile, the growing field of Queer Ecology is investigating queer environmental values, ethics and politics through an analysis of environmental discourse and queer film and literature. Despite this burgeoning focus in academia, few studies consider queer individual's lived experiences, attitudes, or practices with regard to the more than human world. This gap reflects the long-standing culture/nature divide between queer studies and environmental studies.³⁶ My research responds to this by engaging the queer eco-narratives in my narrative network. The preceding sections introduce relevant contributions from queer ecology, discuss the existing scholarship on queer eco-narratives, and introduces Molenda LeMay's concept of *interspecies intimacy*³⁷ as a decolonial queer framework for my analysis of queer eco-narrative.

Section one, *The Unnatural Other*, introduces queer ecology as a field that historicizes the mutually reinforcing relationship between sex and nature. Queer ecology

³⁶ Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*.

³⁷ LeMay, "Bleeding over Species Lines."

responds to the framing of non-normative bodies as unnatural by exploring queer interpretations of nature, ecological relationships, and environmental politics from the perspective of the unnatural *other*.³⁸ I highlight several key theories and critiques from queer ecology, and I discuss their relevance for my research. I also point out where this academic discourse falls short, especially regarding consideration of how intersecting oppressions such as race, indigeneity, and ability influence queer relations with the more than human world.

In Section Two, *The Queer Ecological Imagination*, I narrow my focus to queer eco-narratives. This section explores how queer eco-criticism and the limited ethnographic/interview-based studies jointly contribute to the production of a collective queer ecological imagination.³⁹ I interrelate Adrienne Maree Brown's writing on collaborative ideation and Afrofuturism and discuss how her work provides an important decolonial influence on the queer ecological imagination.

Section Three, *Interspecies Intimacy*, deals specifically with human/non-human relationships in queer eco-narratives, which is ultimately the focus of my research. I consider how the turn towards the non-human as a subject in post-humanist critical cultural studies introduces new frameworks for analyzing human/non-human relations in queer eco-narratives. I focus on the concept of *interspecies intimacy* developed by Molenda LeMay in her analysis of human/nonhuman border crossings in contemporary

³⁸ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecology: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*.

³⁹ Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*.

queer of color fiction. I relate this research to other queer eco-narratives previously cited in this paper: *Slug*⁴⁰, *Exile and Pride*⁴¹, and *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*⁴².

The Unnatural Other

Queer ecology broadly addresses the historical biosocial framing of sex and nature as mutually reinforcing constructions. Luciano and Chen define the field as beginning “precisely from the conjunction of an idealized nature as a tool to discipline sexual and gender dissidents and the debasement and exploitation of material nature.”⁴³ I appreciate that this definition captures the concurrent devaluing of both queer humans and the more than human world. This recalls the usage of “pansy” as a homophobic slur or the associations of queer sex and interracial sex as associated with bestiality. Queer ecologists explore this relationship between sex and nature as it is expressed and produced “institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically.”⁴⁴ Importantly, the field historically contextualizes queer intersections with nature for the purposes of analyzing contemporary cultural representations and political framing of both queerness and environmentalism. These histories ultimately influence queer narrative.

⁴⁰ Milks, “Slug.”

⁴¹ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*.

⁴² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

⁴³ Luciano and Chen, “Has the Queer Ever Been Human?” p. 188.

⁴⁴ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecology: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. p. 5.

Early queer ecology precedes from ecofeminist theory, which links the denigration of women and the feminine with the denigration of more than human nature under colonial patriarchal social order. Greta Gaard's (1993) argument for a queer

human	Animal
male	female
heterosexual	queer
reason	the erotic
mind	body
reason	emotion
white	non-white
self	other
master	slave
empowered	impoverished
civilized	primitive
culture	nature
universal	particular

Fig. 1 Master Model (additions by Gaard in bold.)⁴⁵

ecofeminism is particularly influential for thinking about the queer other in relation to the non-human other. Gaard incorporates queer/heterosexual, reason/the erotic, white/non-white and empowered/impoverished into Val Plumwood's "master model" of the normative dualisms in Western society (See Figure 1).

Normative dualisms are simplistic binaries, such as male/female, constructed through and framing social identities and relations. Each category in a dualism or binary is defined in opposition to the other and, therefore only exists epistemologically in relation to the other. The

"master" model refers to the idea that Western society places greater value on a master identity, expressed on the right side of this model: the human is privileged over the animal, the male is privileged over the female, the heterosexual is privileged over the queer, etc.

According to Gaard, categories are associated vertically as well as horizontally, which contributes to common justifications for oppression. She asserts, "queers are

⁴⁵ Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism."

feminized, animalized, eroticized and naturalized in a culture that devalues women, animals, nature and sexuality.”⁴⁶ An example of this would be women being chastised for being too emotional, or the associations between queerness and animality in anti-gay discourse. By incorporating queer/heterosexual, reason/the erotic, white/non-white and empowered/impooverished (Fig 1. in bold) into this master identity, Gaard brings other binary categories for marginalization clearly into our consciousness. This model is influential for conceptualizing experiences of otherness in queer eco-narratives, though it is not the only way to frame human/non-human relations, which I will discuss further in the preceding sections.

The culture/nature divide from the “master” model limits the reading of queer narrative as environmental narrative and has generally supported a framing of queer culture as against the environment. The culture/nature divide prevails in Western consciousness, treating human societies as separate from “nature.” This thinking then influences both mainstream environmentalism and mainstream representations of queer identity. As Seymour discusses, in mainstream queer politics, the culture/nature divide extends the claims of the “naturalness” of sexual and gender difference into the cultural realm. takes on early political claims associating queerness with urban immorality⁴⁷, the-out migration of queers from rural areas⁴⁸ and the popular media representation of queer culture as oriented toward urban space. As a result, mainstream queer culture is more

⁴⁶ Gaard. P. 3

⁴⁷ Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*.

⁴⁸ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*.

likely to be associated with the excesses of capitalism consumerism and micro-plastics (glitter) then with environmental ethics.

Queer Ecological Imagination

“Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography. Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity.”⁴⁹

-Adrienne Maree Brown

The collective imagination plays a powerful role in *Emergent Strategy*. Here Brown speaks to how the colonial imagination exerts power over the future of Black people. Asserting a Black imagination is therefore a strategy for healing and resistance. Inspired by this, I find a parallel in Nicole Seymour’s framing of environmentalism as a collective imaginary⁵⁰, and Melissa Davis’s assertion that the Anthropocene is the mainstream narrative shaping our environmental future.⁵¹ The Anthropocene is a western paradigm, which largely fails to implicate colonial systems of power in environmental crisis, but instead treats humanity as universally against the environment. Meanwhile, as Brown, Seymour, and Davis assert, there are alternative environmental futures emerging at the margins of this colonial narrative. While few read queer narratives as environmental narratives, analysis of queer fiction, memoir, visual arts offers insights into queer environmental politics/ethics. Seymour describes queer ecocriticism as

⁴⁹ Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. p. 163-164.

⁵⁰ Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*.

⁵¹ Davis, “Toxic Progeny: The Plasticsphere and Other Queer Futures.”

offering “a political model that we might extend to the “real world”: one in which imagination and empathy allow humans to build political coalitions across divides such as race and sexuality, and to identify across species in ways that benefit the biosphere rather than the individual, the nation, or the corporation.”⁵² The following section offers a glimpse of a queer environmental politics through “organic transgenderism,” polluted politics, queer mourning, and one study on queer belonging in wilderness.

Narrative in Queer Eco-criticism

An example of finding a counter narrative in queer ecological writing is the idea of “organic transgenderism,” defined by Seymour as “gender transitioning as a phenomenon that is at least partly natural—that is, innate and spontaneous—rather than primarily cultural or constructed.”⁵³ Seymour develops this concept through a queer ecocritical analysis of queer fictions: Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*, Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* and Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Seymour demonstrates how each of these author’s choose to deal with characters’ gender transitions as grounded in natural, self-defined, and self-empowered processes, which counters the narrative of transgenderism as a medical phenomenon. This is not to suggest that this is another either/or dichotomy, but to suggest that transgenderism might be something more fluid, complex and individual than contemporary medicalized discourse around transgenderism would have us believe.

Mortimer-Sandilands discusses romanticized experiences in nature in terms of a melancholia, a suspended state of mourning, in a capitalist system which treats loss as a

⁵² Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*. p. 28.

⁵³ Seymour. p. 36.

process of “substitution and consumption.”⁵⁴ They examine Derek Jarman’s *Modern Nature* and Jan Zita Grover’s *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear-Cuts* as memoirs of loss that intertwine queer grief with ecological grief. Mortimer-Sandilands applies Freud’s concept of melancholia and Butlers concept of a queer politics of grief to our environmental relations. They posit that commodified environmentalist practices, such as ecotourist pilgrimages to see a “pristine” place before it is gone, are products of a society where non-human life and places are so devalued as to be ungrievable. I would add that in addition to this colonialist mentality is a pervasive sense of saviorism, a product of a missionary culture, which can be seen in the desire to preserve, as if in amber, a single place or species.

Belonging, home and chosen family are culturally significant themes in queer narrative. This reflects the queer experience of dislocation from body, blood family and place through bigotry. Eli Clare describes this best as exile, which “implies not only loss, but a sense of allegiance and connection—however ambivalent— to the place left behind, an attitude of mourning rather than good riddance.”⁵⁵ As a result, queer culture is often filled with individual and collective stories aiming to re-establish a sense of belonging and family following geographical or categorical exile. Several queer writers point out that the culture of openness to non-blood family creates kinship that transcends the

⁵⁴ Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies.”

⁵⁵ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*. p. 35

human/non-human divide.⁵⁶ For me, and many other queers, the non-human world mirrors our queerness and helps us belong in our bodies and in places.⁵⁷

While the above research address queer eco-narratives in literature, social science research on queer personal narratives typically focuses on experiences in human organized environments, such as individuals experience in schools, workplaces, and social services. This research addresses how to make these environments safer or more equitable for those outside of sexual and gender norms. This is reflective of the culture/nature divide and emphasis on assimilation and diversity to the benefit of the heteronormative society. Searching for the terms “queer” or “LGBTQ” alongside the term “environment” or “nature” does not yield much in the way of narratives relating to the more-than-human environment. The closest qualitative research on this topic comes from feminist research addressing the gendered experiences of women in a “wilderness” context, often in the context of back to the land movements led by radical faeries and lesbian separatists. These studies generally focus more on group identity formation and less on material relationships with the more-than-human world.

One study, by Meyer and Borrie (2013), identifies this gap and responds to it with research that examines the individual experiences of gender and embodiment in “wilderness” settings.⁵⁸ They use in-depth/semi-structured interviews to collect the personal stories of mostly white, self-identified LGBTQ individuals who, also at some point in life, identified as female and had spent extended time in wilderness. They

⁵⁶ Johnson, Jay Emerson, “Liberating Compassion: A Queerly Theological Anthropology of Enchanting Animals.”

⁵⁷ Meyer and Borrie, “Engendering Wilderness.”

⁵⁸ Meyer and Borrie.

identify *ecological belonging* as an overarching theme, describing experience in wilderness for these participants. They describe this theme through four subcategories: (1) *Wilderness Setting*, (2) *Feelings of connection and bodily awakening*, (3) *Feelings of vulnerability* and (4) *Refuge from normative gender*.⁵⁹

- (1) *Wilderness Setting* refers to how participants define wilderness and some of the cultural implications of this definition. For instance participants report associations of wilderness with masculinity, isolation, or exploration. They also reproduce colonial narratives of wilderness as a pristine nature, free from pollution and human influence.
- (2) *Feelings of connection and bodily awakening* refers to participants expressions of feeling more connected to their body when in a wilderness setting. This was felt through how wilderness required them to use their body and senses more and feeling less visible away from the gaze of expectations for normative bodies.
- (3) *Feelings of vulnerability* refers to participants descriptions of themselves as subject to risks in a wilderness setting, such as predation and natural disaster.
- (4) *Refuge from normative gender* refers to the perception that Wilderness is a place where gender expression is not restricted by social norms. Participants describe feeling that gender is neutral or non-existent in these settings.

These results from Meyer and Borrie offer interesting insight into personal wilderness narratives for a mostly white, female-born, LGBTQ outdoor recreationalists. Importantly, these narratives tend to diverge from the queer environmental politics constructed

⁵⁹ Meyer and Borrie.

through Queer Ecological analysis in academia, which raises questions about how queer environmentalism operates in the general public. Many of the narratives found by Meyer and Borrie continue to support a colonial framework for environmentalism. Wilderness is sought out by these individuals as a space of freedom and self-discovery and there is enormous privilege in the idea that one must seek out natural predation in a wilderness setting to achieve a sense of being out of control or at risk. In the following section, I discuss how cultural theorists are engaging alternative narratives through the idea of interspecies intimacy.

Interspecies Intimacy

There was this little scrubby plant that would grow in all our gravel roads, and we would squish it and it would smell sort of lemony. That's pineapple weed, and I didn't know that until much more recently, but we call that lemon flower, so I knew this plant and I knew what it tasted like and I knew what it felt like, but I didn't...I had a relationship with it, I had named it or it had given itself a name to me, however you want to look at that...either way, I didn't know the species but I knew the individual.

–Mister Lucky, Research Participant, They/Them

Species marks the limits of imagination, identification, and even empathy...the borders between humans and other animals threaten to collapse in intimate encounters⁶⁰

-Molenda LeMay

Interspecies

In this thesis I use the term *interspecies* in an effort to destabilize the categorical separation between humans and non-human animals using a decolonial framework. Julie Livingston and Jasbir K. Puar (2011) define *interspecies* as studying the “relationships between different forms of biosocial life and their politics effects.”⁶¹ They offer this concept as a critical response to Animal Studies and Post-humanism, which, they assert, at times fail to effectively decenter the human, especially the Euro-American human, as the subject of study. They ascribe to a study of interspecies interaction that takes the agency of the non-human seriously, and questions the use of the non-human to increase human exceptionalism or the universality of the human construct. *Interspecies* centers

⁶⁰ LeMay, “Bleeding over Species Lines.” p. 2.

⁶¹ Livingston and Puar, “Interspecies.” p. 3.

critical race studies and postcolonial studies as fields grounded in questions of humanity in the context of slavery and colonialism.⁶²

Gloria Anzaldúa's text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) is a foundational text in feminist and decolonial theorization of borders. Anzaldúa writes from a Lesbian Chicana decolonial perspective and articulates borders as a liminal space that is both material and cultural, embodied and psychic. Importantly, Anzaldúa theorizes from a lived experience in the space between seemingly fixed categories of nationhood, race, indigeneity, gender, and sexuality. This is distinctly different from the master model, which emphasizes singular categorical identities and uni-directional power dynamics that don't translate well to the realities of mixed, shifting and interdependent (not just oppositional) cultural experiences. Anzaldúa addresses the border between categories as a powerful site of cultural rupture: "una herida abierta [an open wound] where one culture grates against the first and bleeds."⁶³ This choice to describe this border in such material bodily terms reflects the focus on the border as an embodied phenomenon in addition to a linguistic, political, and cultural construction.

Intimacy

The quote from Molenda LeMay, which opens this literature review speaks to the power of intimacy as a disruptive force in human/non-human biopolitics: "*species* marks the limits of imagination, identification, and even empathy...the borders between humans and other animals threaten to collapse in intimate encounters."⁶⁴ Following LeMay, I

⁶² Livingston and Puar. p. 5.

⁶³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. p.25

⁶⁴ LeMay, "Bleeding over Species Lines." p. 2.

intentionally use the term *interspecies intimacy* for just this reason: to describe the culturally and materially disruptive character of queer interactions with the more than human world. Intimacy demands a relationship to a being that recognizes our interdependent bodies and therefore our mutual vulnerability. The literature I consider in this section further articulates intimacy as a physical disruption of borders between human and more-than-human in sensory, material terms. While I discuss LeMay's research as the origin of this term, I also consider other important work on interspecies intimacy including Melissa Nelson's research on native eco-erotics⁶⁵ and Felicity Amaya Schaeffer's research on spiritual human/non-human crossings in Gloria Anzaldúa's writing.⁶⁶ What these texts have in common is a focus on intimacy as a form of crossing material and categorical borders. Gloria Anzaldúa's theorization of the embodied borderlands has significantly influenced how LeMay, Nelson and Schaeffer's read intimacy as a border crossing phenomenon. Together these texts form the foundation for my readings of queer interspecies intimacy.

Molenda LeMay's literary criticism takes up Livingston and Puar's *Interspecies* concept to analyze what she refers to as *interspecies intimacy* in queer of color fiction.⁶⁷ Speaking about interspecies intimacy as a social affective process of crossing, LeMay claims, "what binds race, sexuality, and species together is a panic around the capacity of bodies to forge physical intimacies against the regulative taboos that would keep them separate."⁶⁸ LeMay speaks to the significance of intimacy as a disruptive force to a

⁶⁵ Nelson, "Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures."

⁶⁶ Schaeffer, "Spirit Matters: Gloria Anzaldúa's Cosmic Becoming Across Human/Nonhuman Borderlands."

⁶⁷ LeMay, "Bleeding over Species Lines."

⁶⁸ LeMay. p. 2.

racialized and sexualized hierarchy of humanness. She points out how queer of color writers develop characters who rub up against the biopolitical use of animality to debase people of color and queers as primitive. The writers whose work she analyzes, Sherman Alexie and Monique Truong, approach this challenge, she posits, by allowing their characters to interact with animality and in doing so reimagine/decolonize what constitutes humanness beyond a cis-hetero-patriarchal set of norms.

Intimacy is a pathway to ecological ethics in Melissa Nelson's analysis of eco-erotics in indigenous oral storytelling.⁶⁹ Nelson records and retells stories of women in eco-erotic, at times explicitly sexual, relationships with the more-than-human. These stories she argues, support an native ecological ethic marked by interspecies vulnerability, kinship and empathy, which is necessary for living in balance with the more-than-human world. These stories were largely lost through forceful introduction of hetero-patriarchal sexuality via Christian missionaries and boarding schools.⁷⁰ Nelson retells these stories as an explicit effort to decolonize her indigenous sexuality and indigenous relations with the more-than-human.

Nelson defines eco-erotics as "a type of *meta* (after, higher)-sexual or *trans* (over, beyond)-sexual intimate ecological encounter in which we are momentarily and simultaneously taken outside of ourselves by the beauty, or sometimes the horror, of the more than human world."⁷¹ Nelson describes eco-erotic interspecies intimacy in profoundly sensory terms, such as when she recounts her pleasure at eating dirt as a child.

⁶⁹ Nelson, "Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures."

⁷⁰ Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism."

⁷¹ Nelson, "Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures." p. 232.

“Eating dirt with great joy. I felt an intimate, sensuous, and, dare I say, “erotic” relationship with the physical earth I consumed. Red rock on red tongue, slick, earth clay slowly sliding down my throat...”⁷² Contrary to the western colonial perspective associating eroticism with deviance or primitivism, Nelson asserts that these “stories provide critical insights about humans’ eco-erotic relationships with other-than-human beings and that stories of falling in love with a star or a beaver should be considered signs of intelligence about the ethics involved with maintaining harmonious and resilient kinship relations.”⁷³ In this sense, Nelson employs a definition of eroticism that is broader than sexual, “Eroticism is playing on the edge of self and other, certainty and uncertainty, security and danger, power and surrender.”⁷⁴ These dualisms recall the master model *reason/the erotic* proposed by Gaard, which articulates the Western separation of thinking intellect from a feeling intellect.⁷⁵ Nelson posits a pansexual relationship between human and more-than-human that is embraced through these intimate stories. *Pansexual* meaning an attraction all forms of being as opposed to the attraction someone hetero- , bi-, or homo- sexual has with their preferred sex(es).

Nelson’s definition of eroticism as “playing at the edges of self and other”⁷⁶ calls to mind Felicity Amaya Schaeffer’s writing on spiritual crossings of the human/more-than-human in Gloria Anzaldúa’s published and unpublished writing. Schaeffer

⁷² Nelson. p. 229.

⁷³ Nelson. p. 238.

⁷⁴ Nelson. p. 256.

⁷⁵ Gaard, “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism.”

⁷⁶ Nelson, “Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures.” p. 256.

describes Anzaldúa becoming “utterly otherwise” through a practice of making “oneself vulnerable to other embodiments of visioning and to surrender the safety of rational thinking and progressive time.” Schaeffer also names this as a practice of *communing with*, which I read as another articulation of intimacy. As Schaeffer describes, *communing with* allows Anzaldúa to challenge the construction of the Western human, which denies the spiritual and embodied knowing as so-called “primitive” forms of knowledge production.

After reading the above conceptualizations of interspecies relations and intimate co-becomings, I came to think of intimacy as a material and spiritual process of meeting the other in such a way that the self is implicated in relations of power and responsibility. These moments of intimacy at the border between queer humans and non-human others are ultimately the focus of the narrative inquiry in the following section.

Queer Interspecies Intimacies

There is this sort of liminality of being some place in between human and beast, not quite one, not quite the other, definitely something different.

— Mister Lucky, They/Them

Five friends from my narrative network were interviewed for this research.

Individuals ranged in age from 25 to 45. Four identify their racial identity as white settlers (non-indigenous), one identifies as mixed race. All but one are college-educated. All individuals describe varied sexual and gender identities as adults that do not align with a heterosexual or cissexual experience. One identifies as lesbian, non-binary and trans, three identify as both queer, non-binary and trans, and one identifies as a queer woman. I refer to each person using their preferred pronouns throughout this paper. Four prefer they/them pronouns, one participant prefers she/her pronouns.

When asked why they were interested in participating in the project individuals expressed that the topics felt personally relevant to them. These friends all devote significant parts of their lives to engaging the intersections of queerness, ecological systems and the more-than-human environment. They are queer climate scientists and environmental justice advocates, biologists, performance artists, eco-sexuals, radical faeries, outdoor recreationalists, furies and environmental educators among many other things. Many describe feeling a sense of cultural resistance or healing associated with talking about queerness, queer intimacy, and interspecies relations. One participant, EV (They/Them), states, *“my heart feels so good right now, I think this is shit that I haven’t necessarily named before um that’s often how I like function because when I name shit it*

feels more real.” These individuals were also particularly interested in concept of crafting as a form of knowledge production and healing work. As JMG, a queer environmental biologist describes,

In an academic setting knowledge feels really cerebral, really disconnected, um in a lot of ways, but there is so much tactile knowledge in knowing the earth and like building a relationship to the earth and just the repetition of crafting and the knowledge that comes along with it. So just every aspect of the project I was like fuck yeah. (JMG, they/them)

This appreciation of non-academic forms of cultural production directly intersects with healing work. EV discusses the idea of queer intimacy and quilting and they exclaim, “*Hahaha, like maybe we can’t wrap around each other yet, but we can make something that we can be wrapped in. Haha yeah I love that!*” These comments express some of the relevance of this project, which is, in part, the interpersonal healing that comes from engaging these conversations in intimate relationships. Politics?

This sample is not intended to be representative of all queer people. It is a snapshot of some of my social relations, which recalls Brown’s concept of a murmuration.. This sample leans towards white, settler, U.S. citizen, queers, non-binary queers, and college educated queers. All participants expressed an awareness that queerness is contextual and that cultural hierarchies exist in queer space, which privileges white, settler, urban, academic and able-bodied representations of queerness. The sample cannot be generalized to represent all queers, though many of the concepts I discuss might run through a queer social fabric even if they manifest in distinctly different ways across different contexts.

Section One, *Queers and Non-human Otherness*, recounts narratives of otherness that anchor individuals' perceptions of what it means to be queer, and how this otherness is extended to non-humans. Individuals recount experiences of “weirdness,” “difference,” “trauma,” and “isolation” from family, peers, and/or the dominant social order as formative in their sense of self. Embracing queerness is described as a process of connecting and relating to othered humans and nonhumans. As EV describes, “*we can like, be in that discomfort together, and in like a very loving gay platonic sort of way ya know, and it feels like those kinds of interactions are what opens up the space of queerness for ourselves.*” In contrast to individualizing experiences of otherness, queerness is described as a relational “space” held by intimate connections with queer others.

In Section Two, *Turning Towards the Wound*, I discuss expressions of intimacy in queer connections to humans and non-humans. I posit that queerness is about “turning towards the wound,”⁷⁷ to borrow a phrase from Aurora Levin Morales. Through intimate practices, participants come to articulate a queer ecological narrative that is based more in interdependence, kinship and change than in categorical belonging.

Queers and Non-human Otherness

When asked to describe queerness, friends discuss building intentional relationships based in shared values emerging out of othering experiences. They all discuss otherness in terms of interpersonal experiences of trauma as well as historical/cultural trauma experienced through membership in groups considered

⁷⁷ Morales, “Foreward to the 2015 Edition.” p. xix

abnormal or inferior in colonial cis-hetero-patriarchal society. Relationships where the complexities of otherness can be shared and affirmed are expressed as being integral to identifying with queerness. This section explores the individualizing experiences of otherness and how non-humans are related to through narratives of otherness.

Otherness

When asked to describe queerness and their queer identity, friends recounted experiences of tension, conflict and trauma in their relations with family, peer groups, regional culture, and institutions. For all participants, being outside gender and/or sexual norms is one factor in a multi-dimensional experience of otherness that includes being othered by class, ethnicity, and family trauma. Several individuals also recognize being privileged by whiteness, class, and ability as a moderator of otherness. Ultimately these individual experiences influenced participants queer identity and perceptions of queerness and non-human connections.

Otherness ranges from subtle but persistent dissonance to explicit exclusion to overt violence. Mister Lucky, speaking on feeling so out of place in their family unit, describes this otherness as a “disharmony,” which they speculate is related to being transgender.

Was it my transness that caused me to feel just a little bit outside of whatever was going on, and for there to be enough of a disharmony that I could hear it and try to listen for it and work with it and live with it in a way that felt a little more harmonic? (Mister Lucky, they/them)

EV expresses otherness as growing up a “weirdo” and “poor.” They generally associate queerness with “discomfort,” and describe otherness as growing up uncomfortable and needing to restricting themselves to maintain others’ comfort.

[I define my queerness] mostly like as opossum screaming into the night... besides the screaming is an idea of like, discomfort, and being able to deal with it, and it being like, a norm. And immediately how that like, connects to all the ways discomfort shows up, of like being like, the weirdo kid that was always trying to like still fit in somehow and not admit my weirdness and like the discomfort of like being poor and you’re just like constantly uncomfortable. and um how like how all of those things like connect to, to like this idea of queerness for me. (EV, they/them)

These general perceptions of otherness are expressed as a feeling of wrongness in the context of strict gender norms, resource limitations, or peer expectations. Often these perceptions are backed up by experiences of overt exclusion. Jesse describes being excluded from a summer youth outdoor program, which would not accommodate their trans identity in the gender segregated facilities at the program.

When I was in middle school I came into a program for inner city youth. They basically sent a bunch of hood rats up to like the woods in western Massachusetts and we all like went wild and all like fell in love with the land in a different way. I grew up in Queens in small apartment buildings and didn’t really have a lot of access to nature, but coming into it that way was really stunning and wild. I just didn’t really know a lot of things about the way that plants grew, the way that animals lived, the way that plants make medicine and what not, and I was just stunned and blown away like this is like magic... and I went through those programs for a few years and I came out as trans when I was 17 and I kind of lost my place in that program because they didn’t know what to do with me as a trans student um which was really heart breaking and I think I was really mad at you know everything. (JMG, they/them)

At the time of our interview, JMG was working toward their B.S. and looking ahead to a career in the natural sciences. They frequently reflected on how these early experiences of institutional exclusion for a time pushed them away from pursuing a career in science. They also note that, in addition to exclusion from outdoor programs, one dimension of otherness for queer bodies is how we are pathologized by science and medicine. JMG perceives this experience as pushing them and other queers further from having the resources to control our own access to wellness. This relates back to Seymour's discussion of *organic transgenderism* as a queer response to the mainstream narrative of transgender bodies as a medical, rather than biological, phenomenon. I discuss this further in a later section on queer embodiment. An important quality that runs through these different experiences is the individualizing character of otherness by way of disrupted relations and resources. Whether subtly or explicitly, queerness implies something other than what is right in mainstream society. This otherness structures how queers relate to family, place, and society.

In addition to subtle dissonance and overt exclusion, otherness is at times felt through physical violence. EV describes fear related to the experience of being a “young women” and queer in outdoor spaces in the conservative rural Alabama town during the legalization of gay marriage.

It was almost like I was kind of I was fearful of being out in nature because of my queerness. Um, and as a kid not understanding it as queerness. It was more of like safety as a young women... yeah so I think about the scariness of like being in Alabama. Of like being in a dominant culture of anti-gayness. I remember you know going through the whole political garbage of like, just gay marriage popping up and how like, unsafe that was in Alabama when that was a nationally talked about topic. And I remember like, not necessarily feeling like safe all the time with the

outdoorsy people cause those were like the motherfuckers who would like beat us up. (EV, they/them)

While EV expresses this fear as relating to regional politics and culture, they also describe feeling allegiance to a Southern rural identity and struggling with feeling othered from this culture by way of anti-gay violence.

Those were the guys that had the lifted trucks and lived in fucking suburbia but wanted to act all bad ass with their trophy kills and shit like that, and they kind of took over the like outdoor culture. It made it feel unsafe as a closeted kid to kind of pursue that. I don't even want to be associated with that shit. And that lingered into my early 20's when I was like, denying my country ass self because I didn't want to be that dude or I was fearful of that dude because I saw him beat up my friends for being gay and shit like that ya know... Stereotyped is toxic, seeing a lifted trucks or seeing someone in camo and immediately assuming their politics, their views... and I think that is part of why I wanted to get back to my southern culture. And give space to that, not give space to that out of fear and now being able to be both queer and a country kid. It is fueling that younger person inside of my it is like giving them a hug and giving them space while also giving myself some space. (EV, they/them)

EV speaks to how otherness is often complexly intersectional and can influence a sense of cultural dislocation. In a later section I discuss how others engage in a process of adapting and reclaiming cultural identity as EV describes here.

In addition to overt interpersonal violence, EV also talks about the systemic violence of poverty as othering. Sometimes the violence of this experience manifests as having fewer resources for being safe in the more-than-human environment. They describe the mix of resilience and resistance while precariously taking shelter in trailers during tornados and hurricanes.

I have like a lot of moments like down south in nature like I think about like what I was sharing earlier like hiding from tornadoes like that was a consistent thing in my life growing up from like the time I was born. Like I lived in Alabama and South Carolina, and there were always tornadoes or hurricanes, and so I think that is where the scared feeling when I think of nature comes up, but also like the resilience and the bonding with my mom and being able to get through something really scary cause we obviously made it through all of those tornadoes but just the moments when the power would go off and we were in a trailer and we didn't have the safety of a basement or anywhere to go and so we would just like light a bunch of candles and my mom would pull out that Marlboro brand safety radio that had like a bunch of different light settings, and like that is how we would keep track of where the tornado was, and we would just like put the light on low, and we would listen to that, and we would sit inside the bathtub um in my room because it was the only room that didn't have windows. Um and so you know, it was like, we're in a fucking trailer so honestly what's the difference? But we had a sense of survival so we did that anyway. (EV, they/them)

Clearly EV's experience of otherness is broader than sexual and gender divergence. Each of my friends speaks of otherness in highly multidimensional terms. In the previous quotes it is clear that otherness is contextual and complexly structured, such as EV articulating their otherness as being influenced by class, gender, political/regional culture, and sexuality. For participants in this project, experiences of being "poor," "rural," "fat," "chronically ill," "mixed-race" or "neuro-diverse" structure experiences of otherness. Toad discusses this as they struggle to describe queerness without relating it to how people responded to them as a neuro-diverse child.

I have a hard time also thinking about these things without thinking about being like a neuro-diverse person.. cause like I'm on the autism spectrum. And I like, when I was growing up, I had a hard time making friends with most people in general and even still I have trouble, but like, when I was a kid it was like, really difficult, and people thought I was just very strange

and didn't want to really want to hang out with me at all. (Toad, they/them)

For Toad, autism significantly influences how people relate to them in ways that they describe as isolating and othering. This complex experience ultimately influences the connections they form with non-humans, which I discuss later in this section.

Otherness as Threatening

Several participants describe otherness in terms of coming to perceive themselves as a threat. This recalls the historical framing of queerness/otherness as morally wrong, dangerous, or corrupting. When this narrative manifests in participants stories of themselves it is physically and culturally traumatic. This is significant because oppressive ideologies function most effectively when oppressed people internalize and enact oppression against themselves and other oppressed people. Several participants describe a pattern of maintaining others comfort over their own needs. This characterizes EV's experience of otherness and influences their perception of queerness as about embracing discomfort.

I feel like a lot of my recognition of my own queerness has come out of like recognizing how suppressed I felt or how for like so many settings and for so many years I felt myself like trying to fit someone else's like image of me or again like comfort like trying to fit their comfort and making myself uncomfortable instead of like its ok for other people to be uncomfortable with me and that doesn't mean that I have to take that on myself and be uncomfortable with myself so like, just the word queer and like queerness for me is so connecting to years in my life not having that word as like a positive. (EV, they/them)

Often this internalization is intertwined with perceptions of the body and physical intimacy. In the following excerpt, Mister Lucky relates their queerness to the mythology of werewolves, whose transformation into a “monster” is out of their control. Likewise, people’s perceptions of queerness as predatory is something Mister Lucky internalized.

With werewolves there’s almost the ‘I didn’t choose this. This was placed upon me. I was made a monster by someone else, and I can’t control it. I am a danger to other people’. I internalized this for a host of reasons, but definitely because of my queerness and the feeling that I and my body and my desires are predatory onto other people definitely has an impact on people and it had an impact on me and how I want to be intimate with other people. (Mister Lucky, they/them)

Here Mister Lucky expresses how the narrative of themselves as predatory changes how they access their body, desires and relational intimacy. Echoing this, Toad describes how this narrative creates uncertainty around being physically intimate with others.

I remember constantly being very afraid of touching my friends because I was very afraid of being seen as a predator, all the time. Oh like I am going to make everyone very uncomfortable because of who I am as a person. I still really struggle with touching people in ways that are like, I just go very either/or with it either I am not touching at all or I don’t know. (Toad, they/them)

These comments reveal how otherness is an embodied experience for participants. As Eli Clare writes, “our bodies are not merely blank slates upon which the powers that be write their lessons. We cannot ignore the body itself: the sensory, mostly non-verbal experience of our hearts and lungs, muscles and tendons, telling us and the world who we are.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*. p. 150.

These experiences impact body identity development, which is conceptualized by Caldwell as process of coming to selfhood through “our explicit and implicit relationship to sensation, movement, physiological processes, relationships, interactions, and bodily awareness of emotions.”⁷⁹ This concept intervenes on a prior model of identity development that treat the body self as primitive and the thinking self as the more advanced site of meaning making. Embodied experiences with queer humans and non-humans is discussed by individuals as a way of reclaiming one’s body.

Ecological Otherness

Throughout narratives of otherness and queerness, friends describe connections to non-human beings and environments as intertwined with early experiences of otherness. Many reflect on how these isolating and individualizing experiences often contrasted with turning to non-human animals and places as a sense of shared otherness through which they cultivate relationships with non-humans.. These connections relationships were important for how they contrasted feeling othered in family and social settings. Individuals then extend identification and empathy to non-humans as ecological others with whom they feel a kinship.

My friends frequently express a special appreciation for non-human beings considered “gross,” “weird,” or “stigmatized.” Individuals explicitly name this as feeling connection formed through a shared otherness, which recalls Anzaldúa’s linking of queer otherness with nonhuman otherness. Some of these non-human creatures are “othered” for being so distant from humanness in terms of hierarchies of scientific species

⁷⁹ Caldwell Christine, “Body Identity Development: Who We Are and Who We Become.”

classification and cultural value. Some are appreciated for their stigmatization as pests, and some are a combination of these two framings. Several non-human animals come up repeatedly, which suggests that participants share a common perception of these animals as othered. Raccoons, opossums, insects, amphibians, lichens and moss all appear multiple times across the interviews. Speaking of their appreciation for these othered creatures, Mister Lucky relates to these creatures as connected to embracing their own queerness.

[I] have more recently grown a really deep care for things that others think are gross and weird. I love mushrooms, I love spiders, I love opossums and racoons, I don't love slugs the same deep way that I love those creatures but I still like them and have a really deep respect for them, and I think the great seed for that was planted when I was young and I feel like there is an echo of that in how I have chosen to embrace queerness too it's like, here are those things that are vilified and othered but have so much beauty and so much difference and fascination. (Mister Lucky, they/them)

EV shares Mister Lucky's love of raccoons and opossums. For EV, shared otherness is specifically connected to their stories of survival as a Southern, poor, queer. Opossums, in particular, are associated with poverty and working class culture in Southern and Appalachian culture, and they have recently been reclaimed by groups like Queer Appalachia as a symbol of queer rural pride.

[I'd be] a racoon, because I am glittery trash. I have a love for opossums and racoons, and it's partially like southern country boy cultural, but also the more I see racoons, and the more I see myself, the more I see the racoon in me. Like the way I scamper, or the way I get really chittery, or I'll just scurry a lot, or I'll be rummaging in the kitchen for something. The cute but spastic and, like, for lack of word, just like "rawr" the like, "rawr-hiss" of racoons, I feel really connected to and really appreciate. They are cute and fluff, and are also total like total trash animal, and can

survive in so many different settings, but also hide in the open, but also have their nest. (EV, they/them)

Raccoons, opossums and other scavengers have tended to thrive in anthropocentric environments because of their adaptability to human waste streams and the reduction of large predators. Scavengers feed off the waste of others, and these animals also become “pests” in urban and rural communities, where they find sufficient access to food waste in unlocked or overflowing trash cans for instance. This leads to the associated with being “trash.” EV previously mentions thinking of themselves as “glittery trash,” which implies a reclaiming their identity as a poor, Southern, queer person who has been treated as “trash.”

Like EV relating to opossums as trash, others also describe connection to a shared otherness with non-humans as facilitated by conflicting experiences of loving the otherness of these non-humans and feeling treated as less than human themselves. This recalls LeMay’s discussion of queerness as “animalized, eroticized, othered.”⁸⁰ Toad, as their name suggests, expresses a deep love of amphibians and insects. Looking back on early childhood experience being neuro-diverse, they recall a sense of shared otherness with bugs and frogs due to feeling as though people treated them with a similar sense of disgust or avoidance.

I have a hard time also thinking about [queer] without thinking about being like a neuro-diverse person.. cause like I’m like on the autism spectrum. And I like, When I was growing up, I had a hard time making friends with most people in general, and even still I have trouble, but like when I was a kid it was like really difficult and people thought I was just

⁸⁰ LeMay, “Bleeding over Species Lines.”

very strange and didn't want to really want to hang out with me at all, and so all of my friends were like critters, Ya know? Like the amphibians or the bugs. I also felt like people treated me like a bug sometimes... people were always very disgusted by insects and frogs, and I would try to show people something that I was excited about. Like look at this cool bug, frog, whatever, and people would be very disgusted by it. (Toad, they/them)

Finding a connection through shared otherness isn't simply about affirming queer human experience or anthropomorphizing non-humans. As Mister Lucky explains, this sense of connection inspires deeper learning and observation of other creatures. At certain points this connection becomes explicitly intimate, as when they discuss touching or feeding the spiders.

Spiders, because of all their weird biology they are just so inhuman so beyond unmammal they're incredible. when I was a kid I definitely had the 'oh my god spiders are scary' and then when I was a teenager since I was doing so much writing I wanted to create a monster race, I knew about the driders from Dungeons and Dragons, spider on the bottom, human on the top, and I looked at that and was immediately captured by that, and so I started doing more research into spider biology and spider behavior and the different kinds of spiders there are... in my adult life spending so much time in old abandoned farmhouses and spending time in places where spiders are running free and doing what they do I've gotten a chance to have more intimacy with them... or to pick them up and to hold them or to feed them. There are these cross orb weavers in my house...when there is a big one that I can find and the flies get slow I will catch them and I will feed them. I think I love them for how they are and I think I love them the most first because of how other people react to them. (Mister Lucky, they/them)

Mister Lucky goes on to describe a similar relationship to feeding wasps and feeling that they are building relationships of interdependence.

Bees and wasps are also really important to me and I feel like every time I respect wasps, or every time I rescue a bee, or every time I am able to just

spend a little time appreciating a bee, or sharing my food with a wasp, then it feels like building a relationship with this species. Like, not quite currying a favor with the bee,s but also not quite not that. I want to be friends with bees. I want to be friends with wasps. I want to be friends with spiders. I want to be friends with deer. I want to be friends with all manner of creatures, and that feels like it builds resilience because that feels like it builds community. (Mister Lucky, they/them)

Mister Lucky frames their relationship to othered creatures as a recognition of interdependence in a way that recalls Nelson's writing on eco-erotic narratives as teachings on environmental ethics. I return to this example later when I discuss intimacy in queer/non-human relations.

These narratives intertwine queer bodies with non-human bodies and spaces in a mutual process of recovery and change. JMG demonstrates this as they discuss their perceptions of our environmental futures.

Yeah, talking about environmental futures, things are dire, absolutely, and I think that we are at a moment when there is not a lot of hope. But there are these brilliant little moments I am thinking in particular an incredible example of environmental futures, the Elwha river, they took down the Elwha Dam and they're back, the salmon are running so much faster than scientists ever thought they would be though things feel impossible and are dire, I think that if dire steps are taken at this moment... If we can organize and figure out what we can do as individuals and as a collective, I think that yeah really getting back to our own roots of queer world making for ourselves and really just like making that for ourselves, nourishing it and revitalizing it, Restoring land, restoring ecosystems, restoring the fucked up things that trauma does in our communities is. I think that is all sort of connected and part of that work of building an environmental future. (JMG, they/them)

In the above quote, JMG echoes Morales when they relate ecological trauma to cultural/personal trauma. Their environmental and queer politics are co-constituted through the process of turning towards trauma in personal and ecological terms. EV explicitly critiques mainstream environmentalism for how it turns away from the loss and degradation of historical trauma. They describe mainstream environmentalism as a “rich, white environmentalism” defined by building roads and traveling to access pristine nature somewhere else. In the context of our conversation it is clear that they are describing driving to a place, like a national park or other iconic wilderness setting.

.. and when I started understanding environmentalism from a justice perspective it liked clicked and I was like that's what feels honest, that's what feels real um and not just feels, but is like true to my own experiences and what I've witnessed, it felt a lot more fitting then this rich white environmentalism. That is like so pervasive and is what is seen as environmentalism in this mainstream way um which is also still a lot of resource use and access and destruction for roads in order to see the nature. It's like environmentalism that helps us feel better about our destruction but is still harmful and not accessible for everyone. Environmental justice was like a wake-up call, it was like accessibility, it was like just the simple idea that nature is all around us no matter where we are at and we don't have to go to find it, and the like very raw honest truth of the discomfort, again the discomfort, of like we can talk about poverty and we can talk about the smoke stacks in our backyard and we can still have nature around us and it just like those concepts just felt a lot less elitist and a lot more accessible it felt a lot more truthful to what I had lived and seen... it's like heavier to talk about nature when we have those things involved but also is it really, nature is also heavy like it is not just the beautiful awe inspired moments, like that is such a huge part of nature, but I don't know I think the way I function I'm just more able to be in the place of like here is the shit. (EV, They/Them)

In contrast to mainstream environmentalism, EV finds environmental justice discourse more fitting to their experience growing up in poverty. Notably, they once again engage

the word discomfort to characterize the type of environmentalism that speaks to their experience. Recall that they previously described queerness as about embracing discomfort and resisting the expectation that this be hidden for others benefit.

Toad recalls having pet rats and being outspoken about “rat rights” while in high school. They connect this with a present day critique of mainstream conservationist’s focus on saving charismatic megafauna.

*I was very close to rats as a kid and I would get very defensive about that... people were just absolutely grossed out about them and disgusted... and I would always get so defensive. I did speeches in high school about like rat rights... cause I understood animal testing and stuff on an intellectual level, but I would be like ‘people need to be more respectful to rats as a species. They give us so much and we just treat them like trash.’ Anyways, it really upset me at the time, and still kind of does but like insects bugs and amphibians have always been like that to me too and it is actually really upsetting to me because tied in with like when you look at where the conservation funding and where the money goes to like help the world or whatever or help animals even though there is not enough money in general... a lot of the money goes to those charismatic animals... I actually always hated pandas growing up people would be like oh you like animals right so you like pandas and I’d be like ‘no I hate pandas, they’re trash’ ... I was never really drawn to those cutesy animals.
(Toad, They/Them)*

Toad articulate a social distinction between cute/pristine and disgusting/damaged that influences the degree to which humans extend care and empathy to certain types of non-humans and places in the environmental movement. These explicitly relate to their queer experience of otherness through choice of language and pointing out of dualistic oppositions in environmentalism.

Turning Towards the Wound

Whenever I find myself unable to write my way through the maze to where I thought I was going, I write about why I can't write. I turn towards the wound and listen... So I turn again to the land and to our bodies, to the broken cedar and guayacán, and our bodies theft by sexual violation, to mudslides and erosion, nightmares and scars, and the possibility of reclaiming our bodies, lands, and peoples. To this truth: "But just as the stolen body exists, so does the reclaimed body... a bone once fractured, now whole, but different from the bone never broken." ... Skin of our bodies and skin of the world. This is how to understand the land as well as the flesh. To be unsingular, fractured and whole, grieving and proud, in universal solidarity and difficult alliance, never to allow urgency or burning injury to keep us from demanding the whole, intricate, inclusive story.⁸¹

-Aurora Levins Morales

Wounding provides a powerful metaphor for the dispossession of one's body, homeland, and culture without consent. Morales here echoes Eli Clare, Gloria Anzaldúa and others who use this metaphor to describe a liminal space where "one culture grates against another and bleeds"⁸² both materially and psychically. Wounds are the manifestation of unmet needs, loss, degradation, and trauma, and, simultaneously, places of significant connection, resilience, resistance and transformation. Clare writes about the wounding of logging clear-cuts and sexual abuse and the process of reclaiming their body and culture in contact with these wounds. Anzaldúa writes from a place of embodied spiritual resistance in the wounds of colonialism and nationalist borderlands. Both authors relate these complex traumas to queer otherness. Both implicate the legacy of

⁸¹ Morales, "Foreward to the 2015 Edition." P. xix

⁸² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. p. 25.

colonial cis-heteropatriarchal world building in the violent regulation of non-normative bodies and the more than human world. In this section, I discuss how individuals in my narrative network understand and engage queerness as a space for complexity, interdependence and change in response to wounding. Alternative kinship structures are prominent features of these narratives. Throughout these narratives, individuals weave in non-human connection and extend kinship, mutual aid and embodiment to non-humans through intimate witnessing. Finally, I propose that we think of queerness as a practice of intentionally turning towards the wound through intimate witnessing, and I describe how individuals engage the queer imagination as a practice of co-visioning our future ecological relations.

Opening up the space of queerness

For my friends, queerness is described as a collective experience facilitated by relating to queer others through intimate practices that *make space* for complexity, difference, change, pleasure and discomfort. This is very different from the individualizing and isolating character of otherness narratives. Accessing queerness through connection recalls Caldwell's writings on recovery of body identity for othered bodies: time spent with other marginalized people is critical for establishing the space outside of prevailing social norms in order to recover ones embodied identity.⁸³ Participants describe connecting to queer humans and non-humans in terms of intimate sensory practices such as witnessing, listening, and touching.

⁸³ Caldwell Christine, "Body Identity Development: Who We Are and Who We Become."

Friends explicitly define queerness as a collective expression. Toad describes this as a reluctance to even define queer through their individual voice, but instead feeling that queer only exists in relation to others.

I just keep thinking that [queer] is like the air all around... A lot of it is defined in relation to other people too, because I didn't have a sense of being queer until I met other queer people, cause um yeah I just didn't, so maybe that is why it feels like it is everywhere like because it doesn't exist inside me but also within a bunch of other people at the same time too so it doesn't feel like one thing that I can define but that it is something that is held collectively. (Toad, they/them)

For Toad, queerness is a collective/external rather than individual/internal process. Toad identifies their sexuality as lesbian and their gender as trans, but clearly states that they are queer only in context of their queer family relations. JMG echoes this when they describe their queerness as an intentional relationship building practice.

Queerness is so vast and all encompassing, yeah I think everything is like pretty fucking queer. Queerness is kind of for me is about being unafraid of difference. Kind of just being able to be in it, it's about um being real about who I am, being conscious and intentional about who I am building community with, it's about future building, it's about the ways that we build family and we build structures of relationship. (JMG, they/theme)

In the context of queer space, relating to shared otherness is a source of resilience and resistance in the face of othering and at times violent social norms. In this oppositional space, queer culture is, as Toad puts it, “like the air all around,” constantly expressed through different forms of queer meaning making and intimacy. However, the sense of being surrounded by otherness isn't about moving toward a homogenizing and universalized queer identity. It's about witnessing complexity in a social order that tends

to value easy classifications and categorizations. As Mister Lucky points out, the fluidity of queerness is an entirely natural phenomenon.

There is a sort of fluidity to that word that I really like and I like that it doesn't have to mean such a narrow thing that I have to fit the parameters of that at any given time. The nature of my identity is that it sort of moves and shifts and changes. If you want to relate that to nature: there is a piece of land that I know really, really well, where the river floods and comes really high every year, and the riverbank changes every time the water goes back down, and so the shape of that place changes yearly, but it is still the same place, and it is also not the same place, but we still call it chinook bend, and I'm sure there are many other names for it. For me queer feels like that. It's still the same place but it is also not the same place. We still call it a river, but it still is what it is: it's alive, it's not fixed. (Mister Lucky, they/them)

When Toad describes queerness as “like the air all around” or Mister Lucky describes queerness through the river metaphor they are challenging the idea of queerness as unnatural and othering. It seems that queerness feels natural in the context of queer others. Toad also expresses this naturalized experience of queerness as something embodied and sensory; something that can be held and felt. In a similar way, JMG talked about queerness like a fabric, this was related to bodies.

Queerness is just kind of such a central tenant of my life that it is just deeply inseparable of anything else and I feel like that is the way it is for so many queer people is that it is not just an aspect of who we are it is just so much like the fabric of what it is not just the thread but it's kind of the pattern that we've set and that holds that. (JMG, they/them)

The embodied/sensory language is repeated by EV, who describes trauma as a barrier to intimacy/connection for their queer body.

Queerness and transness sometimes just breaks that norm down because so much of queer and trans friendship for me has been like around like us exploring our bodies and being open to that. And not just our experiences. Having space for that too kind of breaks down that like cultural wall. It's like work to have that too, even as affectionate as I am and as platonic physical as I feel with people I still notice how many walls I have up a friend wall just move closer for snuggle time under the blanket and I love this person and of course I would love them to be close. My body sometimes has reactions that I have to recognize as trauma responses and not my values responses. (EV, They/Them)

Reconfiguring kinship

The concept of the chosen family is prominent across individuals description of queerness and connections with non-humans. Chosen family is a phenomenon of queer culture stemming from reconfiguring kinship structures in opposition to normative family structures based in heterosexual relations and blood. Participants discuss queer family as relations of mutual aid, mentoring, and cultural transference/production, processes which Western society typically relegates to the heteronormative nuclear family structure and domestic sphere. This cultural characteristic of looking beyond blood and sex for kinship is an important feature of queer relations and is influential to queer relations with non-humans.

Chosen family is described as an expression of empowerment in response to tensions with blood family. Toad highlights chosen family as a way they reclaimed the concept of family from the otherness experienced in blood family.

I think of my household as very queer because were just like a family. So I think about us as a family a lot and as a queer family... [my friend] and I, we also changed our names at the same time and we changed our last names to the same thing because neither of us felt like, connected to our family, so yeah we didn't like our last names, so we changed them. So we

both changed our last names to Woods... it was pretty important because it felt like we were creating our own family... so that is like why we have a queer household and we all just take care of each other and its really good. (Toad, they/them)

Toad speaks to the significance of chosen family for recovering relationships of care and mutual aid. In U.S. society, the traditional nuclear family or blood family is a structure through which material resources, legal rights, mentoring, and cultural transference occur. Being separated from one's blood family or having relationships not formalized through marriage requires queer people to explore alternative kinship structures. As Greta Jane describes,

I feel like queerness is beyond my sexual orientation, and it is like living in like, outside of the norms ya know, and sometimes feeling a little weird about that. Brushing up against that. Who am I supposed to be, or shouldn't I be, or I'm not. And then I think queerness is also so much about chosen family and community, and um, really being open to the curiosity of the unique expression of each individual. (Greta Jane, she/her)

Reconfigured kinship structures in queer narratives often extends to non-humans.

In my relationships, staying close to my loved ones and kind of consistently imagining futures with them feels really important. Talking about things, strategizing... also that work of just being in the woods with someone and having those moments of connection to non-human organisms and sitting with them together. How do we involve plants and non-human organisms within our community structures... my science work is really about these questions. (JMG, They/Them)

JMG goes on to discuss the importance of mutual aid in queer relations and human/non-human relations. not based in blood-family, marriage or even species classification.

And I think that thinking about queerness in ecology, in ecological systems and biological systems is just that's been one of the things that has been really feeding me lately. I've been working on a project that has been investigating nitrogen fixation on a gradient between a place where the Hama Hama river where there are a lot of salmon carcasses and a lot of nitrogen input and follow up the and were looking at a relationship between moss and cyanobacteria that are fixing this nitrogen and just thinking at just like looking at the ways that the organisms are cooperating together and feeding each other... just thinking about that as like a metaphor for how we provide mutual aid and care to each other in queer communities. (JMG, they/them)

Witnessing

Participants describe witnessing as central to both queer human relations and relations with non-humans. Visibility is an important characteristic of queer experience. In the previous section, experiences of otherness are very much influenced by the degree to which someone visibly fails to embody acceptable social norms. Being visible queer can be dangerous in the wrong context, as in EV's recounting of growing up queer in the conservative rural South and their fear of the local backlash to the legalization of gay marriage. EV is quoted describing queerness as about becoming aware of and rejecting the internalized sense of obligation to look out for the comfort and safety of others. For EV, the process of moving away from the internalized suppression is marked by the intimacy of seeing and being seen by queer others. They use the term "witnessing" to describe the sense of connection in the discomfort, a sense that is deeply characteristic of their queerness.

I just think about all the moments of just witnessing other queer people in my life that I really love and how that is what is part of what made me feel comfortable that I had the space to own my own queerness too...and being able to have those conversations, the fun ones and just like the hard ones

to just witnessing and being a sound board for my friends and like, them like, sharing their own stories and experiences and witnessing their struggle and their healing and how like, that is so tied to my own process too like, witnessing someone else live in their truth. (EV, they/them)

Witnessing is different from being seen in an othering way as it implies seeing a person for their whole self, including the discomfoting parts. It is a state of intimate vulnerability, which, EV states, is about “building trust” and mirroring one another’s experiences and healing process.

In some cases this experience is about being able to be with beings that do not regard them as other. Toad contrasts how they experience being seen in the human world with the invisibility they feel among non-humans.

I feel baseline more comfortable in my body outside. Well I also feel more comfortable naked, which definitely makes me feel part of like that animal self. Being outside just like the way the [non-human] world regards my body in a non-judgmental and non-alarming way. Cause like when I think about what would happen if I like got naked and walked down the street, what if I wore my basketball shorts and ran down and just jogged down the street like I see dudes do that down the street all the time, but because I’m like the way that I am, would people crash their cars? When I talk about it people are like “better watch out people will crash their cars by accidentally staring at your tits.” (Toad, They/Them)

Toad suggests that being with non-humans offers an experience of invisibility similar to that achieved through assimilation or passing, however, in this case, it isn’t necessary to change themselves to achieve this, they change the context. In addition to appreciating the invisibility they experience when not around humans, they also express pleasure being able to be in the observer role with non-humans.

I like laying on a blanket on the grass and then just like laying still and letting like bugs l and stuff kind of crawl across and at first your like ahh oh and then your like oh it's just trying to find something to eat and it will move along when it realizes. Like one day I just laid really still and watched this jumping spider for a really long time. And it was really nice, just like watching it. And then just like feeling like the way I am is non-alarming is not upsetting. I don't want to be people to see me positively or negatively most of the time I just don't want to be seen. Like I just want to exist without, I don't know, and I just feel that way outside a lot. (Toad, they/them)

This shift from observed to observer could be a shift into a power-over position, however,

Toad seems to practice a form of witnessing that preserves the autonomy of the bugs.

Witnessing is also about seeing the non-human in such a way as to encourage us to confront narratives that devalue nature, the non-human, and human alike. Greta Jane describes witnessing and appreciating other creatures, and, in doing so, responding to her own internalized self-worth narratives.

For me it is like unconditional love, an animal has got nothing to give you but unconditional love and so does nature and just when we take the time, and that where I feel like in the realm of like queerness in the political sense, but like anti-patriarchal, and it shouldn't be like anti-everything, but in being just against the system, where it is so much about like power over, that when we connect to nature, that just to just like look at this creature and be like "this is what you dedicated your life to, this is what you do with your cells is this?!" it is just like so moving to me. it activates my cells in a really humbling way, and then I don't worry about like: how old am I? or what am I doing with my life? or how much money do I have? or am I important enough? or have I done enough? It's not about being enough, it's about being with. You know and what else really are we here to do but to be with this incredible symphony of nature that we are actually a part of and not a power over. (Greta Jane, she/her)

As Greta Jane concludes, witnessing is a form of being with another and therefore connects her to a sense of being part of a collaboration, a “symphony” as she describes it. I previously proposed that intimacy is a material and spiritual process of meeting the other in such a way that the self is implicated in relations of power and responsibility. Throughout the interviews, narratives of witnessing appears to implicate the self in relationships with the other in ways that inspire kinship and mutual care and therefore witnessing feels like a form of intimacy. EV draws parallels between witnessing and physical intimacy as comparable levels of connection.

I think about just like the interaction of my body and the non-human world...I get so much out of just rolling down the hills...I just wouldn't wear shoes because I just liked being able to feel the gravel and I had really tough feet because of it...I also think about [my cat]...witnessing and feeling her reminds me to cuddle myself and to feel that part of my body. I have a difficult time feeling my body a lot umm I think there's just lots of things about like plants and caring for like plants or just witnessing plants and small like critters that somehow it's like appreciating something outside of myself reminds me to appreciate like what's inside of myself too because I can't disconnect witnessing that stuff and also feeling a part of that stuff. Like oh yeah there is an animal in a tree and I am also that and maybe I should like be in this too. (EV, they/them)

EV also explicitly names witnessing as a form of intimacy:

That makes me think about the thing I was naming earlier about feeling in my body when I am witnessing non-human creatures of plants of whatever because it is like a connection with intimacy without having to be being physical about it all the time you can't necessarily run up and hug this beautiful animal in the forest or like hold each other through different levels of intimacy but you can still feel that intimacy but in a safe distanced way. (EV, they/them)

Witnessing therefore might be considered as a form of intimacy that cares for the autonomy of the other and emphasizes relationships of power-with, as opposed to power-over. JMG expresses this idea as a challenge to the scientific process.

Thinking about the limits of the scientific process in general So much of what we understand as Western science is just based in abusive of powers and exploitative knowledge..I'm here to break open science and make it accessible and I'm here to have conversations with scientists..like saying "our cyanobacterial friends" in my lab group meeting and everyone's like "what?" It's the challenge of being in the program, the world that I am in, where there is supposed to be this giant space between the observer and the observed. I think that is intrinsically within concepts of queerness, that is something that is kind of automatically challenged, there is no impartial observer, everything is contextual and this queerness is so much about the ways that we relate, so of course I'm going to be looking at everything a little bit differently. (JMG, they/them)

Interdependence

Each person I interviewed talked extensively about the idea of interdependence, which speaks to the emphasis on relationships over types in queer narrative. Witnessing is an important gateway to recognizing interdependence and responsibility in queer relations with human and non-human others. Often these narratives are promoting an intertwined community and environmental ethic.

Just thinking about our queer web, the great queer web, the great queer community, how we all have these beautiful moments of connection, how were all out there and there is a real fabric of queer community and you can really touch it and you can pull on different threads, and figure out that there are these moments and space and time and everybody is so intertwined... all these weird locations, people, themes that come up in queerness. Just thinking about the fabric of ecosystems and the ways that strong ecosystems that are nourished and supported all have that similar fabric of connections where you can't pull one thing apart you can't pull

one part of queerness apart you are kind of unraveling this whole thread and thinking about the ways that is really relates to our ecosystems and bringing that to the future and kind of like nourishing strong communities and nourishing strong ecosystems. (JMG, they/them)

Mister Lucky goes on to describe a similar relationship to feeding wasps and feeling that they are building relationships of interdependence.

Bees and wasps are also really important to me and I feel like every time I respect wasps, or every time I rescue a bee, or every time I am able to just spend a little time appreciating a bee, or sharing my food with a wasp, then it feels like building a relationship with this species. Like, not quite currying a favor with the bees but also not quite not that. I want to be friends with bees. I want to be friends with wasps. I want to be friends with spiders. I want to be friends with deer. I want to be friends with all manner of creatures, and that feels like it builds resilience because that feels like it builds community. (Mister Lucky, they/them)

Mister Lucky frames their relationship to othered creatures as a recognition of interdependence in a way that recalls Nelson's writing on eco-erotic narratives as teachings environmental or social ethics. JMG speaks more overtly about how their community ethics and politics intertwine with learning about ecological systems and political resistance movements.

Just thinking about the fabric of ecosystems and the ways that strong ecosystems that are nourished and supported all have that similar fabric of connections where you can't pull one thing apart you can't pull one part of queerness apart you are kind of unraveling this whole thread and thinking about the ways that is really relates to our ecosystems and bringing that to the future and kind of like nourishing strong communities and nourishing strong ecosystems. I think a huge part of it is about community autonomy. My thoughts on this are very much shaped by indigenous land struggle throughout Latin America and the US, like the

Zapatistas, people doing things themselves, the self-knowledge and self-building, making institutions that are supporting the fucked up hegemony irrelevant, building our communities to do that and building our environments to do that, how do we bring our communities and our environment back together. (JMG, they/them)

JMG describes a politics of shared otherness between queer humans and non-humans that reveal their intertwined subjugation. There is a sense of responsibility toward repair in queer relations and relations between queer communities and the more than human communities.

As individuals cultivate this sense of interdependence and responsibility they also reshape the boundaries between humans and non-humans, and challenge scientific classificatory knowledge systems. Participants engage the previously discussed sense of shared otherness with non-humans as an empathetic blurring of the borders between species. Mister Lucky uses the word monster at several points to describe being something in between human and non-human animal. They express that there is a way of relating to this experience that can be either empowering or oppressive.

I related a lot to fauns and cedars and to werewolves specifically in this certain way...with fauns and cedars there is this sort of liminality of being some place in between human and beast, not quite one not quite other definitely something different...there is this sort of staticness to them, like yes they are half goat or yes they are half man, and they are specifically as mythical creature they are specifically about the civilized the human meeting the wild and depending on your different myths that would either be the freeing lets go party in the woods sort of thing and for others it would be the scary boogey man in the woods sort of things. and with werewolves there's the almost the I didn't choose this this was placed upon me I was made a monster by someone else and I can't control it I am a danger to other people, (Mister Lucky, they/them)

The empathy toward the more-than-human makes it difficult for queers to accept conventional scientific narratives of what species are most valuable and how species are classified. As LeMay's asserts: "what binds race, sexuality, and species together is a panic around the capacity of bodies to forge physical intimacies against regulative taboos that would see them separate."⁸⁴ Indeed, Mister Lucky specifically names species hierarchies as something they want to resist.

And this is also absolutely a break in paradigm of the humans are at a the top and then it is mammals that we like and mammals that we eat and then it is mammals that we use for things that aren't company or food and the line just keeps going down in order of importance. This is such a white western capitalist imperialist framework but it is what I have been raised in I am American um and I want to fuck that up... if I can teach four year-olds that these little baby plants are to be respected or that these mushrooms are doing a really important job so we shouldn't break them and it is really important to be respectful of the plants we are walking through and not hit them with a stick. if I can increase their capacity to understand things that are not human, to understand beings that are not human as still sovereign beings that should still be protected and respected. If I can really teach them that, and we will see how well I can do that, what a paradigm shift! (Mister Lucky, They/Them)

EV point out how human exceptionalism and species classification works against seeing the complicated, interdependent relationships between non-humans.

I often think about just like how superior we act sometimes as humans when it comes to communication like we have like created words and sounds therefore we are like the best communicators um but how much do we not hear from like the ways other things communicate, like we see it all the time, like birds communicate some really complicated shit with each other, the plants communicate really complicated shit to each other and

⁸⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. p. 2.

they don't have to use a single word to do it sometimes there are sounds but sometimes there are other things like the growth of something else or witnessing the death of something else spurs changes in the rest of an area of plants of something... And we like see things in our culture as these like homogenous little like boxes and not this interconnected way of seeing things and so it makes sense that we would like put little plants in the way that they function in these little boxes instead of seeing like oh but these are actually listening to what is happening in the soil. (EV, They/Them)

Echoing this, Mister Lucky speaks of categorizing based on difference versus relationships or commonalities.

In the communities I run with, in the naturalist communities we have lumpers and we have splitters... the splitters care very much about the exact difference between the pacific wren and the winter wren, I don't, I'm a lumper, why are they a different bird like what even is the difference between a tiger and a lion cause they can interbreed and they can interact. how do we define species, where are the limits... like yes, clearly I am very different from a rock or a slug or a bat or a rhododendron but there are so many intermediaries. It's like a color gradient almost like where does blue become green becomes yellow because blue over here is very much blue and yellow over here is very much yellow but there are so many different shades in between so why does it matter why is it an entirely different species why are we saying this is an entirely different kind of creature cause we are saying that the ones over here have coloration on their tail feathers this way and the ones over here don't... why are we saying it is an entirely different species. I am interested in: where do we share experience and where do we community? (Mister Lucky, they/them)

Mister Lucky proposes that the emphasis on categorical difference leads us to overlook relationships and interdependence. Perhaps this perspective opens up the possibility of empathy and mutual aid in queer ecological relations. There is also a question here: when does the blurring of boundaries become an assimilationist erasure of identity. I am recalling the complimentary comments by Clare and Driskill in the earlier section, *Notes*

on Language. Clare asserts that the recognition of intersectionality in queer relations makes queerness as a coalition-building⁸⁵, while Driskill critiques queerness for erasing difference by failing to recognize and intervene on colonial relations in mainstream queer politics and queer theory.⁸⁶ I am reminded of where my own queerness intersects with my white privilege and the narratives on the paternal side of my family that glorified the idea of racial color blindness and that one day we would all just be brown. The idea that boundaries should not exist is its own form of colonialism. This generally is not the tone of the narratives in my network, however the romantic notions of queerness sometimes feel like they dangerously avoid the importance of social identity as a claims making process when material and cultural resources are systematically denied to a group.

Intimacy and Embodiment

Echoing Morales and Clare's writings on the intertwined violation of the land and violation of the body, my friends frequently spoke of bodily trauma and recovery in relation as facilitated by connection with non-humans. The idea of queerness as turning towards a wound is particularly tangible in these narratives as individuals grapple with the impact of trauma on their body and intimacy with others.

For EV, trauma is expressed as dissociation and dysphoria associated with PTSD. They describe how this makes it difficult to be in their body and how communicating

⁸⁵ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*.

⁸⁶ Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies."

through touch with non-humans, particularly their cat, has changed their relationship with their body.

I am sure a lot of it is associated with dysphoria and mental stuff. I think I have been in denial of the mental disorder stuff. For so long I just believed that people just lived feeling like they were floating outside their body, but yeah a lot of memories of being in my body or coming back to my body are associated with being by myself outside. I think isolation has been a coping mechanism. PTSD makes me want to avoid my body because it is such a point of trauma and pain and not quite liking my body and trying to work on that and be in and find that appreciate. I just keep thinking of touching grandpa, my cat... she is like my therapy cat... I never had a cat, never wanted a cat and she got me through some like really depressive episodes and I think she has always kind of been like that for me, like getting my back in my body because we can't be in our heads together because we can't be in our feelings out loud together and we can only exist in our bodies together and we communicate in all the ways we can try to but so much of our relationship is body oriented. I guess that is the case for a lot of the outside world, and like especially animals that were trying to interact with. Like not to say that there aren't like other ways of communicating... but so much of it for me feels like physical. I feel like that in itself helps whether you are intending it or not. It puts you in your body because that is the mode of communication that connects to queerness for me too... like so much of working through sexual trauma and realizing how instinctually my body shuts off to pleasure like that kind of like touch and being able to recognize when I am shutting off to that and doing things with other queer people that are very body centered um there is still like the emotional and mental communication like that doesn't exist with non-human. (EV, They/Them)

The isolation and internalization that EV describes speaks to some of the ways that colonialism not only perpetuates sexual trauma but then denies healing. To talk about healing through the association of physical intimacy and pleasure with non-human animals seems like taboo. The way that reclaiming agency in these experiences of intimacy with the non-human recalls LeMay's assertion that "what binds race, sexuality,

and species together is a panic around the capacity of bodies to forge physical intimacies against regulative taboos that would see them separate.”⁸⁷ Communication through physical intimacy with their cat helps EV inhabit their body and queerness in a way that could be thought of as turning toward the wound.

Mister Lucky talks at length about confronting body shame through witnessing non-human others.

[Connection to the non-human] absolutely has influenced how I think about my body. There are two photography projects that I can think of that almost mirror each other. there is one that is taking pictures of like sand dunes in ways that maybe they could be interpreted as the curve of hips and body rolls or things like that and the one that is taking pictures of curves and body rolls in such a ways that they could be interpreted as landscapes and I've seen both of these projects and I don't remember if they are associated with one another but what a beautiful mirror. Part of my history is also having been a lot heavier in my life, and I am not a thin person, but I have had a lot more fat on my body and I use the word fat specifically because I try to use the word as an adjective, and this is not necessarily a bad thing this is not necessarily a problem and getting to see and be with so many different kinds of landscapes and getting to think of my body as a landscape and getting to see how many different ways there are for a dandelion to grow or for a tree to grow...no other animals care what I look like, really, I mean I've heard that goats like it when you smile at them and I can sure do that because that's really cute, but in my connection with nonhuman animals and in my deepening connection with the non-human world...it is easier to treat my body as an animal and to try to treat it well and to take care of it. (Mister Lucky, they/them)

Waste, decomposition, and change

Waste and decomposition are major themes in several interviews, and they often gateways to the ideas of interdependence, change and restoration discuss previously. Like

⁸⁷ LeMay, “Bleeding over Species Lines.” p. 2

the above discussion of turning towards wounding related to bodily trauma, narratives of waste and decomposition are representative of turning toward personal and cultural wounds related to loss and otherness. In the earlier section on queers alignment with ecological otherness, I highlighted Mister Lucky's connections with decomposers in ecological systems. Rather than turning away from these creatures who are closely connected to our wastes, Mister Lucky turns to decomposition as material and metaphorical process of change, which he also relates to his gender transition.

*I would not call my gender transition a decomposition or a rot, but like maybe it is a little bit, but the gender I was wasn't working... I don't know, change ought to be allowed. This kind of change is a change I chose but is seen as unnatural by other people. I think my mom is so stuck, they are all so stuck, they are like trying to catch sand that is running through their fingers. They are trying to hold onto something that is so ephemeral.
(Mister Lucky, They/Them)*

Mister Lucky expresses deep appreciation for the work of transformational work that decomposers do in the ecosystem. The parallels he draws between decomposition and gender transition recall Seymour's concept of organic transgenderism. Rather than accessing this transformation through a medicalized framework, Mister Lucky restores a sense of gender fluidity as a natural process.

Waste also shares associations with sex and death for Greta Jane, who explores these association through her performances channeling the Goddess of Garbage. She connects this to her own experiences with the trauma of loss in a society that avoids grieving.

I channel the goddess of garbage as one of my performances...but I also feel that there is this element in sex death and garbage that are things we can't control but also things that really connect us. But also I just feel so sad when I see garbage in nature... Well I know that my dad died as a teenager and I just went into a survival mode and I did not grieve for years and um, but I started to notice this pattern right around the time, he died right around the end of July, and every July I noticed this pattern that would sign up for lots of things, and I'm going to do this and do that and do this and do that, and I would just be overwhelmed and I couldn't do anything and I would just sit at home and cry. (Greta Jane, she/her)

As Greta Jane points out, death, sex and garbage are all things we can't control, and they are also places that reveal our interdependence. This leads to a denial of these interactions, such as trying to prolong life beyond what is reasonable.

Our cultural fear of death and the way that we work so hard to fight it and extend life beyond what is natural and that when someone is in a dying place that we are like "oh no" all the resources have to go to saving a life and there are so many times and places where I get that but on a cultural level how we just feel it is so wrong when somebody dies but it's not it is right it is what it is but that is also in relationship to garbage, there is so much garbage that we create that is just meant to be garbage, like it is just plastic wrap to keep it like perfect and nice and clean for you and then it is garbage like immediately after that, but there is also so many things that are like meant to be a precious object that eventually to die and be garbage... it's like a temporal death connection, and I do really feel that garbage is also related to our fear of death or getting things that are dead and damaged because that is somehow threatening our lives you know? Garbage is what separates us from every other species, no other species makes garbage, just us. (Greta Jane, she/her)

When Greta Jane channels the Goddess of Garbage she engages our fears of sex and desire as a way of inviting us into intimacy with our wastes. Greta Jane is also engaging otherness through the sexual innuendo in her work. The idea that the Goddess is

disposable invites us to consider the parallels between the disposability of our garbage and the disposability of othered bodies, namely devalued female bodies.

“you say toss it, I say cha-ching.” and “I am the goddess of garbage, everything that I have is yours and everything that is yours will one day be mine, and may you see possibility where others are afraid to look,” and “you just want some man in a truck to come and take me away in the morning but you just can’t stop making it with me.” We can’t stop making it with her but no one wants to look at her. (Greta Jane, she/her)

The Goddess of Garbage understands that we are intimately connected through our garbage and yet some have the privilege to look away from wounds in our environmental and social relations. This is a very difference environmental narrative then the savior narrative of mainstream environmentalism. Greta Jane asks us to turn towards our own wounding and confront our own deepest fears of otherness. When Greta Jane says, *“I am the goddess of garbage, everything that I have is yours and everything that is yours will one day be mine, and may you see possibility where others are afraid to look,”* she embodies ideas of visibility, interdependence and transformation that are embedded in many of the narratives of queer/non-human connection presented above.

From Here...

In my introduction, I raised the question from Luciano and Chen, “when the ‘sub-human, in-human, non-human’ queer actively connects with the other-than-human, what might that connection spawn?”⁸⁸ What I found through my narrative network is that my queer friends are motivated by deep experiences of otherness that leave them reaching towards queer human and more than human connections. The practice of witnessing is a gesture of intimate relating, through which the queer meets the more than human in such a way that the human is implicated in relations of power and responsibility. This attention to power and responsibility is reflected in individuals’ critiques of environmentalism and scientific discourse as well as how individuals seek to include non-humans in reconfigured kinship structures. Ultimately these intimate relations reflect a yearning for complexity, interdependence, healing and power-with in our relationships with each other and with the more than human world. In a white, colonial, cis- hetero-patriarchal social order where anthropocentric narratives continue to dominate both queer humans and non-humans these precarious interspecies intimacies are bright spots in an often dire mainstream environmental narrative.

Wounding is a powerful narrative that emerged through my conversations within my narrative network. When asked about their perception of what a queer ecological future might look like, EV states:

⁸⁸ Luciano and Chen, “Has the Queer Ever Been Human?” p. 186

And the reason that brought up tears to begin with is because that brought up the realization that I haven't been living as if I have a future...and that is something ingrained from childhood and ingrained from trauma because... the only sort of future I've given myself is like me trying to work out the parts of myself that I saw as broken the part of me that I saw as toxic. Now I get to set goals and intentions and have my values drive me to that future. I think it is really important like to have that space with community and for ourselves and be intentional about it, um, cause I don't know, because it makes me think about how capitalism functions and is so urgent and now and doesn't think into the future besides how it benefits you in the now. (EV, they/them)

As EV describes, we need space in our queer relationships for co-visioning our futures together, and that alone is a radical shift from our current social order and the ecological wounds it produces. I hope that this project played a role in creating this space within my own queer ecological niche, and I will continue to offer this co-visioning practice going forward in the form of narrative quilts as a gesture of spiritual and material intimacy for restless queer bodies dreaming up the future.

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