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"Until Death Brings Us Closer Together Forever": Spirituality, Corporeality, and Queer Identification with Nature in Transcendental Literature

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“Until Death Brings Us Closer Together Forever”: Spirituality,
Corporeality, and Queer Identification with Nature in Transcendental
Literature

Presented to the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Honors by

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Connecticut College

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*poems are like soul bits
they float and lodge
in all the right places
—puzzles
-Anique Ashraf
1/10/1995 - 12/18/15*

This thesis would never have been written without the support of my professors, friends, and family.

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Introduction

The idea of what is “natural” is often employed in homophobic discourse to devalue and dismiss queer identities. The implicit assumption in these arguments is that the natural and the heterosexual are one and the same, and that the only motivations for life are heterosexual ones—continuation of the self through offspring and, more widely, continuation of the human species. Such arguments are held up by their proponents as “simple biology” and are repeatedly employed in attacks against the LGBTQIA+ community. However, nature has a much wider definition than homophobic employment of the term would like to admit. Heterosexual reproduction is not the sole motivation for one’s life, and reproductive futurity can be better described as anthropocentric futurity. The queer in nature has been identified and described throughout the centuries in several different terms. In this paper, I look at the queer implications of nature descriptions as they appear in Transcendental literature. The inclusion of classic “nature writers” in a queer canon is significant because it pushes back against the normative assumption that queerness is against nature, pointing out connections between the queer and the natural while simultaneously invoking the canon to reinforce that these ideas did not spring fully formed out of the theoretical moment of post-structuralism.

The project of this thesis is to link Transcendental literature of the 19th century with contemporary queer theory, reading sensual nature imagery from the classic environmental texts as a representation of non-reproductive erotic attachment. The goal is to trace in these 19th century texts a queer environmental way of being in the world that refigures the “natural world” as not inherently driven by reproduction. This queer ecological lens opens space for romantic attachments to nature entities and privileges continuation of the self through compost and non-anthropocentric oneness with nature, rather than through offspring. For this reason, I chose to quote performance artists Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle in my title, invoking a phrase from

their “Ecosex Manifesto:” “Until death brings us closer together forever.” (Stephens, Sprinkle) This rewriting of traditional marriage vows (“Until death do us part”) captures the essence of a radically affectionate human-nature relationship which I repeatedly point to in the literature engaged in the following chapters. Such expressions of longing for an ecological and infinite mingling with the natural allow for a wider view of the relations between humans and nature, dismantling some of the rigid barriers that have been set up by a heteronormative and anthropocentric dominant discourse. The inclusion of Transcendental texts in a queer environmental analysis of such discourse serves to demonstrate that these views have been part of the collective consciousness for centuries, part of a communal human / nature experience.

This argument questions heteronormative and anthropocentric structures that contribute to the dehumanisation of queer people and the devaluing of the other-than-human. It taps into a queer environmental discourse that expands on ecofeminist theory, which forged an intersection between feminism and environmentalism. Understanding the interconnection of oppressive systems is important, particularly in a time of global climate change and political upheaval. In her 1997 article “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism,” Greta Gaard explores some of the connections between these historical structures, noting that what is “natural” is consistently equated with procreation in Western thought, creating a culture that “constructs queer sexualities as ‘unnatural’ and hence subordinate.” (Gaard 27-28) Twenty years later, this observation remains urgent as conservative political groups use paradoxes that Gaard identifies as central to oppressive structures (Gaard 26), violently maligning homosexuality and non-procreative sexual activity as “unnatural” while dismissing environmental concerns that privilege the natural world over corporate profits. Queer environmentalism combines two liberation battles against the same structures of contradiction and violence.

This post-structuralist critique of heteronormative and anthropocentric structures can be applied quite readily to Transcendental literature. The attributes of Transcendental literature that invite this reading are the emphasis on Nature as sensual and sensate, enacting queer love for the other through non-reproductive romantic attachments. I am not suggesting that these 19th century writers were engaging in queer environmental theory, but rather that the presence of such attributes in their work is evidence of how pervasive the experience of what we today call queer environmental attachments has been throughout history. Through an exploration of these classic texts through a contemporary and radical theoretical lens, it can be shown that the pleasures, joys, and empowering potential of a sensual human / nature dynamic has been inspiring art and resistance for centuries. In my thesis, I will explore all of these themes through the work of Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. By demonstrating the queer ecological commitments of these three Transcendentalists, I will argue the literary importance of this perspective.

Chapter 1: *Walden*

I. Queer Contradiction: Slippage in the Signifier/Signified of Thoreau's Natural World

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life... to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world... (Thoreau 88)

Readers of *Walden* are often frustrated by Thoreau's paradoxes, the way he constantly goes back on himself in his descriptions and declarations. There is a tendency to read the text as a manifesto, and frequent unsuccessful attempts to discover some concrete result of the great existential experiment. The grand excerpt above illustrates why such readings of *Walden* are tempting. We turn to Thoreau as though he could reveal to us the meaning of life—in his paradoxes, he tells us he cannot. These paradoxes can be read in queer terms, revealing a rejection of binary thought that enforces heteronormative conceptions of fertility and industry.

In "Walden's False Bottoms," Walter Benn Michaels discusses this aspect of the famous book, using Thoreau's description of the deceptive depth of Walden pond as a metaphorical framework. He asks what is "at stake in the search for a solid bottom," (Thoreau 137) positing that readers take it as corresponding to a "political and philosophical hard bottom." (Thoreau 138) However, one finds through reading *Walden* that this analogy curiously does not hold. In making the analogy, Michaels pinpoints the tension between nature and culture in Thoreau's writing. He writes that "Thoreau's doggedly ascetic insistence on distinguishing natural values from artificial ones leads him to reject the tokens of natural values which his society provides, and so the category of natural becomes an empty one." (Thoreau 140) Michaels suggests that Thoreau was aware of the shaky relationship between language, categories, and material reality. By consistently emptying out the very category that he relies on as the basis for his stay at

Walden pond, Thoreau seems to be bringing up slippage between the category “nature” and that which it purports to represent.

One of Thoreau’s great paradoxes lies in the slippage along a dialectic which opposes animality to humanity, sensuality to purity. As Thoreau celebrates the earth throughout *Walden*, rejoicing in that which is wild, he also maligns it, anxiously retreating to a pure and chaste asceticism. There is no attempt to reconcile this paradox. In “Solitude,” he writes of a jubilant reciprocity with nature:

Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself? (Thoreau 134)

However, in “Higher Laws,” he despairs at the idea that man is one with nature, at quite some length:

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly external; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear the we may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure. (210)

Here we see Thoreau pivot sharply to a deep fear and rejection of animality and sensuality. He betrays an unease with interiority, the inner workings of the physical body and our animal connections with the nature that is within us and that we cannot control. He expresses anxiety over the paradox that even physical health may not be synonymous with purity. It is also in this section that Thoreau decries “sensual sleep,” a denunciation of even unconscious sexual desire. What are we to do with this rapid, decided turn to absolute separation from nature— an antiseptic asceticism? What happened to the Thoreau who wrote that the forest was his only friend with such fervor, declaring “Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me?” (Thoreau 128)

These contradictory passages reveal a central tension within Thoreau's Transcendentalist view of nature. Thoreau is influenced by Cartesian dualism, which is seen clearly in his desire to transcend his physical form. He views the "self" as a dual mind/body entity, constructing an oppositional dialectic between the two. The body grotesquely performs natural processes, such as eating and producing waste. The mind is noble and pure, an intellectual and aesthetic self which serves to better humanity but is too often dragged down into baseness by the impure corporeality of the human form. This dualism leads us to the transcendent individual, the inner man who through thought transcends the gross excess of his physical form. In this tradition, such transcendental thought is inspired by the aesthetic beauty of nature. Thoreau's paradox is rooted in the fact that he finds the same dualism in nature as that which is contained in his own human form. Contained in the signifier "nature" is both divinity and beastliness. Its meaning slips. It is in "Higher Laws," also, that Thoreau writes of hunting as murder. "No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature, which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The hare in its extremity cries like a child. I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies do not always make the usual *phil-anthropic* distinctions." (Thoreau 204) Although animality can be brutal, so may man. And so can an animal be pure, imbued with innocence and an instinct toward self-preservation. Thoreau is rejecting anthropocentrism here, allowing brutality to be a possibility of either animality or humanity. Thoreau allows the term "nature" to have multiplicity. In doing so, he acknowledges that the term is infinitely unwieldy—but this is as far as he goes. The rest, it seems, is up to the careful reader.

In *Queer Environmentality*, Robert Azzarello deals with this paradox. He writes of it as an "intense oscillation between economy and excess, simplification and complication." (Azzarello 38) Azzarello identifies the tension as one rooted in queer identity versus

environmental identity. He identifies two main attitudes towards fertility as exemplifying Thoreau's polar positions: the queer as seeing "a form of beauty in the extinction of oneself and one's kind," (Azzarello 40) and the environmental as seeing "a form of beauty in the fertility of oneself and one's kind." (Azzarello 40) By focusing on the way that fertility plays a role in Thoreau's writing, and in environmentalism in general, Azzarello creates a useful framework for writing about sexuality and environmentality at once. If we can theorize the environment as a non-reproductively driven entity, we can depart from a lot of the presumptive structures which place the environment into the boxes of traditional European values. Queer environmentality aims to act as a theory in which the inherent heterosexuality of scientific explanation is made visible and problematized. Azzarello writes that "The problem arises when the biologist assumes his or her calculations can capture the complex web of forces contained under the sign of reproduction. The problem arises, in other words, when the biologist reads the subjects of his or her graph as heterosexual and then extrapolates that essential heterosexuality onto the world as such." (Azzarello 10) He cites Malthusian ideas about population a notable example: "The entire ethical claim—that women ought to have only one child—rests on the presumption that *all* women will have *at least* one child." (Azzarello 14)

A particularly important portion of Azzarello's writing is his engagement with the scientific ecocritical lens that distrusts theory, particularly queer theory, casting it as "impractical, recalcitrant, and dangerous." (Azzarello 8) He cites critics from this camp and seriously discusses their concerns, writing that "the position that nature is 'socially constructed' is indicative of a greater human hubris that they identify as the cause of the environmental crisis in the first place. This hubris and its attendant tragic consequences are part and parcel of the postmodern condition." (Azzarello 9) Azzarello suggests that there is plenty of credence in their

suspicion of the “postmodern condition.” What are the consequences to declarations of total unreality? It certainly breeds a sort of nihilism about the environment, a sense that nothing “truly exists” if it is socially constructed. While this is only one reading of and reaction to Deconstruction and postmodernity, it identifies a dangerous tendency towards complacency or smug *dissatisfaction* with the world order that throws up its hands and, particularly in environmental thought, simply accepts the apocalypse.

But where can we go, theoretically and in our activism and art, when we acknowledge the contradictions of the language we are trapped in? How can we avoid resigned apocalyptic thinking and turn our understanding of such uncertainty into a productive frame for a progressive worldview? Azzarello points out that when ecocritics push queer theory aside as a postmodern and anti-scientific pursuit, they fail to overcome many of their own biases. His critical engagement with this scientific discourse is notable because it reconciles commitments to environmentalism, particularly conservation movements, with a queer theorist’s frustration over pervasive heteronormativity in such supposedly unbiased “scientific” fields. Azzarello, while pushing to champion the happy marriage of queer theory and environmentalism, still concedes that “Pragmatically speaking, heteronormativity certainly does ‘work’ in a number of biological sub-disciplines, such as conservation biology...” (Azzarello 10) By taking the argument for environmental conservation at all costs seriously, Azzarello makes it clear that queer theory and Deconstruction are not trying to “take over” environmentalism or dismantle biology as a whole. He offers queer environmentality as a solution to the perception that biology and queer theory are irreconcilably opposed.

Thoreau, too, offers a solution to the theoretical quagmire that we find ourselves in through his queer contradiction. Thoreau’s words indeed have hints of Deconstructive thought.

Thoreau writes in his conclusion to *Walden*: “In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness.” (Thoreau 315) This is identifying a malleability in terms, a slippage in meaning as humanity becomes more enlightened. Each term that he enumerates becomes both A and not-A through iteration, slipping out of negative connotation to embody an opposite notion, paradoxically from within the confines of the same sound-image. In an essay titled “Walden” in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, Richard J. Schneider writes that “Thoreau as a seer constantly deconstructs his own certainty, questions the meanings of the world around him, and reminds himself and us that there might be as many truths as there are points of view. He begins the lifelong passage to multiplistic thinking by emphasizing the variety of views that nature offers to the observer who is awake.” (Schneider 104-105) Instead of calling nature a “social construct” and leaving it at that, may we acknowledge instead—as Thoreau does—the contradictions that our language creates when we name such a complex and interconnected system and collapse its intricacies into a few insufficient syllables?

Through such acknowledgement, we can open our eyes to the beautiful multiplicity of the world around us, which Thoreau repeatedly celebrates and critiques in turn. He professes love for beauty and despairs at shortcomings he finds, but makes no attempt to qualify one with the other. In this way, Thoreau problematizes nature as a term and resists the urge to choose one meaning for it. His careful reader is shown how our language is, in many ways, without definition. This is part of what makes Thoreau’s writing so immediate, even to twenty-first century scholars. A postmodern audience can look at Thoreau’s writing and find ways to deal with the head-spinning variousness of a world that defies the binary structures of our language and retain our conviction that it has importance. When we read *Walden*, we see that nature is constructed out of our

inevitably socialized experience, yet we come away feeling that this only makes it more mysterious, important, and inspiring.

II. “Holy Shit”: Mother Nature’s Bowels

In the “Spring” section of *Walden*, Thoreau writes lovingly of connections between the human body and the natural world. His corporeal outpouring is driven by metaphor, a colorful likening (or “lichen”-ing, if you will) of man to earth. He begins with a description of a feeling that has struck him standing on the banks of Walden pond, of inspiration and privileged witness to creative power: “I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me... I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body.” (Thoreau 295) We see here a blending of four entities: the divine, the earthly, the animal, and the vegetable. The “animal body” here is linked to the vegetable, its inner workings described as “foliaceous” — leafed, distinctly plantlike. Thoreau also moves here to link the divine and earthly, as the banks of Walden pond feel to him like the “laboratory of the Artist,” an unmistakable invocation of the heavenly. Thoreau rolls all four entities into one as he begins to describe the earth as alive, having “vitals” as an animal does. This passage collapses the category of “Other” — Thoreau’s “queer love for the other” is here so complete that the self and the other become indistinguishable.

It is through this collapse of binaries that Thoreau launches into an extended metaphor for the earth as one massive, living creature, a thinking being. “No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly.” (Thoreau 295-296) Here the earth is painted as an inspired and artistic Creator, the passage moving seamlessly from describing it as

“the Artist’s laboratory” to comparing it with the Artist Himself. Thoreau then expands on his notion of the Godly globe as an animal body through an etymological exploration of the word “globe:”

Internally, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat... *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of *lobe* are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b*... with the liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. (296)

It is through this syllabic breakdown of the signifier “globe / lobe” for the signified “earth / animal” that Thoreau chooses to further break down the distinctions between the two. This is an interesting move in that it produces an equivalence between the signifier and signified in this case, examining the sounds we use to describe our environment in a way that suggests they contain the essence of what “globes” and “lobes” truly are. Thoreau gives us a poetic analysis of the world, blending sound-images with sight-images to produce one image—an image admittedly centered on the English language and its particular phonic choices.

Thoreau then turns his mind’s eye back to Walden pond, writing that in the early-morning thaw, as streams begin to flow again towards the pond, one may “see perchance how blood vessels are formed.” (Thoreau 296) He describes the way in which a small stream of water builds and breaks off into tiny branches, carving a veined pattern into the sand as it pushes it aside to run towards Walden pond once more. “In the silicious matter which the water deposits is perhaps the bony system, and in the finer soil and organic matter the fleshy fibre or cellular tissue. What is man but a mass of thawing clay?” (Thoreau 297) The spreading of matter, the affinity of water for water, the striving of streams towards Walden pond and the striving of the heart to pump blood through the veins of the animal body, are seen by Thoreau as a divine

expansion, again a blurring of categories. The human body is thus described as like to nature, and vice-versa:

Is not the hand a spreading *palm* leaf with its lobes and veins? The ear may be regarded, fancifully, as a lichen, *umbilicaria*, on the side of the head, with its lobe or drop... Each rounded lobe of the vegetable leaf, too, is a thick and now loitering drop, larger or smaller; the lobes are the fingers of the leaf; and as many lobes as it has, in so many directions it tends to flow, and more heat or other genial influences would have caused it to flow yet farther. (297)

Suddenly, we find that Thoreau has transmuted all matter into liquid form, and we are left in a dripping landscape of bodies and leaves that can hardly be held in form by their containers. He suggests to us that, were a divine hand to will it, we would simply burst out of our skins and mingle infinitely with Creation.

We are left, in conclusion, with the veined channels of the entire earth and all its beings distilled to the translucent complexity of a single illuminated leaf. We get, finally, to the center of Thoreau's point—that is to say, the bowels of his argument:

Thus it seemed that this one hill-side illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf... True, it is somewhat excrementitious in its character, and there is no end to the heaps of liver lights and bowels, as if the globe were turned wrong side outward; but this suggests at least that Nature has some bowels, and there again is mother of humanity. (297-298)

There is a distinct fecundity to this statement, a final clarification of the excremental glory which has been alluded to throughout the passage. It is, as Azzarello writes in *Queer Environmentalism*, “One can either say *holy shit*, and mean it, or one must appeal to some kind of transcendence.” (Azzarello 48) Thoreau is appealing to transcendence, positing that our waste production is a sort of being-towards-harmony with the rest of the earth, a mingling with our living Earth and generous mother, who wears her bowels on the outside as a badge of (pro)creative power. Suddenly, the excremental and the transcendental paradoxically become one. Both the divine and

the repulsive are contained under the sign of the bowels of the earth. This again is a slippage in Thoreau's meaning, as boundaries delineating what is and is not transcendent (the soul and the transcendent and the body as the transcended) become blurred and permeable.

The creative power of nature, for Thoreau, is ultimately an earthly divinity attributed to a Christian God. He concludes the passage with a transcendental description of the clay which is crafted masterfully into earthly beauty by the great Artist, a biblical motif:

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit— not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic... You may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows out into. And not only it, but the institutions upon it, are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter. (298)

Thoreau's use of biblical imagery, however, preserves a non-anthropocentric view that is rather at odds with Edenic ideals of man's dominion over nature. He rejects the idea that industry, bringing us further from nature and generating more shelter, efficiency, and capital, is a good thing. By painting nature as the very seat of God's creation, rather than human intellect, he disrupts the classic depiction of man's struggles against the Wild. Thoreau pays deep tribute to the many beloved natural entities that were part of his daily routine during his time at Walden pond, imbuing the seeming banality of a simple existence with transcendent beauty. We see one such tribute in "The Bean Field."

III. Queer Love for the Other: Thoreau's Beans

Thoreau's deep connection with the Other in nature and his commitment to pure simplicity and industry come together with unity and clarity in "The Bean Field." In *Strange Natures*, Nicole Seymour identifies a love of the Other and a commitment to futurity as being the

most important queering aspects of environmental thought (Seymour 27). This biocentric viewpoint is certainly one that disrupts our anthropocentric sensibilities. Azzarello unpacks Thoreau's musing in the beginning of "The Bean Field," "What shall I learn of beans, or beans of me?" (Thoreau 150) quite neatly into this framework when he says that Thoreau is disrupting the typical "ontological viewpoint... *either beans or me*" so it is transformed into "an evolving network that includes *at least* persons and beans in a perpetual and mutually reinforcing relationship." (Azzarello 32) It is interesting to note here, as well, that Thoreau does not ask what he shall learn of *the* beans, i.e., the specific beans which he has planted. Rather, he is musing on beans as a whole, constructing a grand "We" of himself and beans that transcends the category of beans which he grows in his garden, expanding it to include beans ideologically as a facet of civilization while musing that they may learn something of him, their caretaker and partner in a larger history.

The reciprocity of this statement and the ensuing statements in the chapter privileges several ways of knowing that are subversive to the scientific, heterosexual order of typical European values systems at once. First, Thoreau is privileging an intuitive way of knowing, that comes not from reading the classics (which he is certainly also wont to do) but from work with one's hands. It is a folk knowledge, which Thoreau has a deep respect and love for, as it serves in his mind the noble work of the parable-writer (Thoreau 157). He writes jubilantly of his own queer position in the sociality of the world that is brought on by his life at Walden pond and work in the bean-field: "A very *agricola laboriosus* was I to travellers bound westward through Lincoln and Wayland to nobody knows where; they sitting at their ease in gigs, with elbows on knees, and reins loosely hanging in festoons; I the home-staying, laborious native of the soil."

(Thoreau 152) Thoreau sees himself as outside the sphere of tradition, a character to be wondered at in passing.

He investigates his own queerness of agricultural practice in this passage as well, contrasting his own care for his bean field which is brought on by an attentiveness to the particularity of his beloved crops rather than a reliance on collective knowledge: “sometimes the man in the field heard more of the travelers’ gossip and comments than was meant for his ear: ‘Beans so late! Peas so late!’—for I continued to plant when others had begun to hoe,— the ministerial husbandman had not suspected it.” (Thoreau 152) Thoreau is in “dialogue” with his garden, deciding on intuition when to plant and when to hoe. He does not rely on the intellect-based systems of farming which his neighbors do. This queer privileging of intuition over more entrenched knowledge systems also belies a delayed fertility, unexpected by the domestic heterosexual couples who pass him and his solitary work.

The land is pouring forth vegetables for him with a great deal of fertility, and yet Thoreau is not concerned with the productivity of his land. He writes instead: “I came to love my beans, though so many more than I wanted.” (Thoreau 150) Here Thoreau betrays a queer affection for nature outside of utility, a love of the beans for the beans’ sake rather than for the sake of how they may be used for his own advancement or for human advancement in general. There is also an inclination towards a view of this fertility as excessive and unwarranted, a love in spite of fertility rather than a love for the sake of fertility. This is certainly a queering of the Christian, heterosexual love narratives— that love is noble because it begets fertility, and the increase of man’s dominion over earth.

Such “increase of dominion” bears relation to the colonial American project of Manifest Destiny as described in Henry Nash Smith’s 1950 book *Virgin Land*. Smith describes the project

of Westward expansion as one concerned with agricultural supremacy, citing writers of the time who advocated for such expansion by positing that “The North American empire of the future ... would bring agriculture to the summit of perfection and make the nations brothers by disseminating the riches of the New World throughout the earth.” (Smith 11) This agricultural expansion, Smith writes, fueled a rapid population expansion that created the “American nation” of white Christians. Such expansion was, to the colonial imagination, utopian as it was assumed to be “expansion into an empty, fertile continent.” (Smith 12) The erasure of indigenous genocide in this nationalist narrative was perpetuated by Thoreau and his contemporaries. Acknowledging the glaring absence of Native Americans as a persistent aspect of settler colonial literature, I do understand Thoreau to be pushing back against the dominant ideology of industry and expansion in this section. While he is not arguing against Manifest Destiny, Thoreau’s love for his beans does call into question the glorification of reproductive fertility that was the backbone of this philosophy. By loving his agricultural pursuit not because of its expansiveness but despite it, Thoreau emphasizes a queer love for nature that does not privilege a rampant increase in agricultural dominion or settler populations.

Despite this queer love for the other, Thoreau’s frustrations with nature not living up entirely to cerebral Transcendentalism’s expectation also come through in this chapter. He writes of the seeds of virtue he might have sown but did not:

I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manurance, and sustain me, for surely it has been exhausted for these crops... I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they *were* the seeds of those virtues, were wormeaten or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up. (Thoreau 158)

Thoreau feels as though society's obsession with farming, working the soil to force it to yield more and more, the pursuit of fertility and increasing one's own sustenance, is an unforgivable materiality yielding to an almost moral bankruptcy, a corruption of society that is far from pastoral. Thoreau is drifting to and away from domesticity at once, rejecting dogged industry for industry's sake as he protests the fecundity in the marriage that he sees between man and earth. For all that he loves his beans, he is frustrated by their failure to fully realize the parable that he dreamt they would write for him. Thoreau left the village to escape the corruption and impurity that he saw in civilization, yet the more time he spent in nature, the more he saw those same vices embodied by natural entities. This disappointment is not at odds with a queer love for the natural, as it once again breaks down the binary distinction between man and nature. As humanity can be both pure and impure, so may nature.

IV. The Impure in Nature and the Potential of Solitude

Thoreau explores the impurities and indulgences of the natural world in "Sounds," where he includes a passage describing the late-night croaking of a group of bullfrogs on Walden pond. The detail is grotesque, depicting the frogs as fat and gluttonous alcoholics:

...the sturdy spirits of ancient wine-bibbers and wassailers, still unrepentant, trying to sing a catch in their Stygian lake... who would fain keep up the hilarious rules of their old festal tables, though their voices have waxed hoarse and solemnly grave, mocking at mirth, and the wine has lost its flavor, and become only liquor to distend their paunches, and sweet intoxication never comes to drown the memory of the past, but mere saturation and waterloggedness and distention (Thoreau 122)

This unflattering introduction shows the bullfrogs to be a rather joyless society, a representation of overly indulgent and self-important men who drink and congregate out of habit. They have forgotten that they once drank wine for its flavor, in celebration of life. They have ceased even to be intoxicated by their wine—or intoxicated by the beauty of life itself. That which they

consume only makes them fatter, “distend(ing) their paunches.” Thoreau expands on his disdain for such gluttonous behavior in “Higher Laws” when he discusses appetite, writing:

I have been thrilled to think that I owed a mental perception to the commonly gross sense of taste, that I have been inspired through the palate, that some berries which I had eaten on a hill-side had fed my genius... He who distinguishes the true savor of his food can never be a glutton; he who does not cannot be otherwise. A puritan may go to his brown-bread crust with as gross an appetite as ever an alderman to his turtle. Not that food which entereth into the mouth defileth a man, but the appetite with which it is eaten... The wonder is how they, how you and I, can live this slimy beastly life, eating and drinking. (Thoreau 209-210)

Here as above, Thoreau makes it clear that there is a slippage in terms in the appetite, as there is in the category nature. There is gluttonous appetite and inspired appetite, the former a pitfall, the latter a blessing. Eating can be good or bad, depending on the mindset of he who goes about the task. Thoreau stresses here that even simple food can be consumed with abandonment to the senses, without deferral to the beauty of the taste which may be the source of deep inspiration. He is calling for a mindfulness of eating, instructing his reader to seek pleasure not in the satiation of bodily pleasure but in the connection between bodily pleasure and intellectual stimulation.

In “Sounds,” the bullfrogs represent the opposite of such mindfulness. They have become so cut off from the intellectual pleasures of their wine and good company that it does nothing to enrich their lives, only serving to degrade them. Again, Thoreau uses the descriptor of the “alderman” to describe their excess:

The most aldermanic... quaffs a deep draught of the once scorned water, and passes round the cup with the ejaculation *tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk !* and straightaway comes over the over the water from some distant cove the same password repeated... then ejaculates the master of ceremonies, with satisfaction, *tr-r-r-oonk !* and each in his turn repeats the same down to the least distended, leakiest, and flabbiest paunched, that there be no mistake; and then the bowl goes round again and again (Thoreau 122-123)

That the croaking of the frogs be described as “ejaculation” is quite appropriate for this section. The descriptor suggests a sort of self-important sexuality, as well as a physical bodily excretion accompanying the intrusive sound. These ejaculations are repeatedly characterised as excessive, solitary, and crass. The result is a masturbatory image, selfish ejaculations that are infertile and improper. The creative power of the bullfrogs’ frenzied croaking is not realized, just as the potential for inspiration that their draught offers falls by the wayside. Instead of opening the door for artistry and industry, “the bowl goes round again and again, until the sun disperses the morning mist, and only the patriarch is not under the pond, but vainly bellowing *troonk* from time to time, pausing for a reply.” (Thoreau 123) Thoreau denounces the vanity in such excesses which the bullfrogs entertain, their messiness as well as their insistence on making themselves known to others of their kind.

Walden, however, does produce an argument for a queer fertility of the imagination in solitude. In *Settler Common Sense*, Mark Rifkin writes of “masturbatory personhood” (Rifkin 94) as a tenet of Thoreau’s teachings. These practices are not decried in *Walden* as wholly evil. Rather, Rifkin writes: “In promoting a bachelor’s life in the wilderness, *Walden* upends anti-onanist warnings about damage to one’s health and welfare that comes from ‘amorous reveries.’ Thoreau makes reverie, and associated forms of apparently unproductive and wasteful activity, into the prism through which to recast normative personhood... arguing for the ‘wholesome’ effects of solitude in providing space that liberates the imagination.” (Rifkin 137) By queerly expanding the definition of what can be considered “productive,” Thoreau makes it clear that the sin of the bullfrogs is not their solitude and lack of reproductive fertility. Rather, it is the self-aggrandizement and lack of inspiration that they draw from their reveries which damns them in his eyes. Thoreau’s love for solitude and reverie comes from a view of productivity that

privileges imagination and the intellectual productivity that arises from the self when separated from societal distraction. However, this view of productivity does not expand much further beyond the intellectual. The bullfrogs are seen as grotesquely stagnant because their activities do not fit within Thoreau's idea of creative and inspired intellectualism.

Such pleasurable solitude and queer reproductive imagination are at the heart of *Walden*, as Thoreau uses contradiction to redefine slippery terms and acknowledge that we live in a world that does not fit neatly into the binary distinctions we construct. Thoreau's nature is neither wholly beastly nor wholly noble. His queer love of the Other encompasses both satisfaction and frustration. He has a deep love for the mythical bottomlessness of Walden pond as well as the slippery measurements of its depth he reports to have made. Thoreau worries that we rush through life without enjoying it—he requires that his careful reader stop and let beauty inspire. However, this instruction is bogged down by an anxious moralism. If enjoyment is not tinged by creativity, it is wasteful. There is no real celebration of pleasure for pleasure's sake in Thoreau's *Walden*. For a more complete departure from the deification of industry, one does well to look to the writings of a later Transcendentalist, Walt Whitman, and his poetry in *Leaves of Grass*.

Chapter 2: *Leaves of Grass*

Queer love for nature runs wild in Whitman's free verse poetry. His voice is loving, passionate, and insatiable, and he frequently refers to an untethered self, bursting at the seams to mingle with the nature around him. The Whitman of *Leaves of Grass* cannot be held within buildings, poetic structure, or his own body. At every turn, his poetry celebrates pleasure for pleasure's sake. He has an appreciation for the reproductive fertility of nature, but pays a great deal more attention to the enjoyment that may be had from non-reproductive sexual activities—allusions to which he does not hide. Whitman frequently speaks of nudity, sexuality, and unions which are not always between man and woman. The untethered joy of Whitman's bodily environmental poetry in *Leaves of Grass* redefines the scope of love for nature and sexual pleasure.

I. Homosexual Love and the Ties of Romanticism to Pleasures of the Natural World

Whitman's queer affections extend polyamorously to man and nature, as exemplified by "When I Heard at the Close of the Day" and poem 21 of "Song of Myself." In the poem "When I heard at the Close of the Day," Whitman contrasts the supposed pleasures of esteem and influence with those of the more unfettered natural world, and of closeness to one's beloved. The speaker bemoans that when "my name had been reciev'd with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that follow'd," (line 1) showing immediately that there is some deeper pleasure than that which can be obtained from the urban world of accomplishment and accolades. The speaker moves quickly to speak of an ecstatic communion with the earth, contrasting it with the shallow carousing that had not satisfied him: "When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing bathed, laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise," (line 5). This nakedness signifies again a baring of the soul, a fulfillment brought through appreciation

of man for ocean and ocean for man. The aesthetic of the line is total — both the sensation of the cool water on skin and the optic wonder of the sunrise on the horizon are felt by the reader. It is clear that for the speaker this is a deeper fulfillment, a true joy not belonging to the social spheres of busy urbanity.

After these natural delights have been partaken in, the speaker's soul is given even more levity by the arrival of his (male) lover. There is an undoubted homosexuality to this poem, as the love of the two men takes over the verse as the highest pleasure of all:

And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up
the shores,
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering
to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping beside by me under the same cover in the
cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast — and that night I was happy
(lines 9-13)

This poem holds none of the active sexual imagery that can be found in other of Whitman's poetry, but speaks instead to a romantic sweetness of simply sleeping beside one's lover. The presence of the ocean again figures into this sweetness. The natural world is giving the speaker accolades for his accomplishment in love, which are shown to be infinitely more fulfilling than those bestowed upon him by people in the capitol. He delights in the sounds of the natural world, which embrace him as his lover embraces him in sleep. The moon is yet a third companion, lighting the face of the speaker's lover with the same light stillness as the lover's embrace. All of these pleasures are bodily but calm, loving while giving voice to an otherly affection that flourishes independent of a drive towards heterosexual reproduction. The focus again is not on how the earth and the act of loving another can result in fruitful reproduction, but rather how they can produce pleasure for pleasure's sake.

In a queer turn to romantic affection for nature, poem 21 of *Song of Myself* launches into an exclamatory ode to the earth:

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
 Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
 Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!
 Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
 Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!
 Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!
 Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-blossom'd earth!
 Smile, for your lover comes.
 Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!
 O unspeakable passionate love.

This confession of love for the earth and all the beauty and pleasure of nature is certainly impassioned, but it is much more romantic than sexual. Whitman, in the deathbed edition, alludes to “unspeakable passion,” but the line relies on a spoken ode to aesthetic beauty.

The 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* contains two more lines which define the unspeakable passion as sexuality. The lines were removed from later editions:

Thruster holding you closer as I hold close
 We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other
 (1855 version)

This addition makes the preceding lines much more overtly sexual, and alludes very strongly to a union of man and earth that is far from traditional. Whitman’s passionate love for the earth becomes a consummated marriage. He and his radiant earth “hurt each other” like a married couple, holding each other too close in desperation. The earth here is not only a giving, nurturing Mother Nature, but rather an entity that man is in a relationship with. Each gives and takes from the other and depends on the other’s wellbeing for survival. It is through this representation of the man-nature relationship that Whitman’s queer ecological sexuality most effectively

demonstrates what is at stake in a true, loving relationship with the Earth—censorship sadly left later versions of *Leaves of Grass* shorn of these lines.

Whitman's likening of this intimate man-earth relationship to a marriage ("the bridegroom and the bride") is mirrored in the contemporary ecosexual movement. Two originators of the movement, Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, have been raising awareness for environmental causes through performance art weddings to natural entities since 2008. Sprinkle and Stephens have since married the sky, sea, moon, sun, mountains, snow, rocks, and coal. In the artist's statement for their 2008 "Green Wedding to the Earth," they write:

Yes, yes, the earth is our lover! With her abundant sensual delights, breathtaking beauty, her delicious scents, tastes, and occasional temper tantrums. She's magical, mysterious, curvaceous, exciting, and unpredictable. We love to nestle in her woods, walk barefoot on her soft skin, circulate erotic energy with her, and float in her luscious waters.
(Stephens, Sprinkle 2008)

It is clear that the language of natural delights that Whitman employed in the 19th century has been found anew by the ecosexual movement. Ecosexuals in the 21st century use this erotic language literally, a project that Sprinkle and Stephens hope will "make the environmental movement more 'sexy, fun, and diverse'." (Reed 99) The work of ecosexuals is not inspired by Whitman's writing, making the close resemblance of ecosexuality's tenets to the Transcendentalist poet's celebrations of earthy sensuality all the more notable. The continuity of queer love for nature across centuries speaks to the power of this attachment, expressed by artists in vastly different periods. Ecosexuals break constructed boundaries between humans and the earth, imagining a more liberated world through such dismantling of structure. Such breaking of boundaries is likewise undertaken by Whitman, particularly through the multiple and infinite self which he constructs in *Song of Myself* to take his reader on a poetic journey through space, time, sex, and death.

II. The Infinite Self and Non-Reproductive Sensuality in Nature

“Houses and rooms are full of perfumes,” begins section two of *Song of Myself*. This singsongy, nine-syllable phrase is heavily metered, bilaterally divided with internal rhyme. It feels as though Whitman is about to launch into a limerick, cementing himself into the structure of a traditional poem type, writing of containment within the four walls of such “houses and rooms.” However, this structure is upset as quickly as it is begun, collapsing into free verse which leaves the indoors behind, despite their admitted attractiveness:

I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.
(Lines 2-3)

Whitman is in search of a more pure love, not born of man’s industry but of nature. His true admiration is for non-perfumed atmosphere, the crisp and clean air which surrounds him everywhere such walls do not exist. Whitman describes this clean, pure, simple air as an erotic object of love, its purity undiminished by contact with his body:

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me
(lines 4-7)

The atmosphere transcends boundaries, and so does Whitman— undressing allows him to “undisguise” himself, to be in pure and endless contact, to succumb to a wild, almost insatiable desire. His madness for the atmosphere to be in contact with him is a corporeal expression of this transcendence, fully locating divine nature in a sensual relation to the self.

This sensual nature is located in much of Whitman’s poetry, particularly at the end of *Children of Adam*. The poems in *Children of Adam* are largely about human sexuality and

reproduction, the pleasure that comes from strong and fertile bodies and appreciation for the aesthetic of the human form. Towards the end of this section of poetry, however, is “Spontaneous Me” — a poem which assumes the identity of Nature itself and engages in a raucous celebration of all that is physical, beautiful, and plentiful. In doing so, “Spontaneous Me” blurs the lines between reproduction and spiritual plenty, sexual climax and joyful overflow. The speaker, Nature, is given a masculine voice:

This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that all men carry,
 (Know once for all, avow'd on purpose, wherever are men like me, are our lusty lurking
 masculine poems.)
 Love-thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers, and the climbing sap,
 (lines 10-12)

The masculinity of this hidden poem is both lustful and drooping, hinting at a slippage of sterility in the overt sexuality of the poem's imagery. The speaker goes on to describe types of love and the receivers of such love, a diverse multiplicity of the biotic and abiotic, fertile and sterile, sexual and chaste:

Earth of chaste love, life that is only life after love,
 The body of my love, the body of the woman I love, the body of the man, the
 body of the earth,
 Soft forenoon airs that blow from the southwest,
 The hairy bumblebee that murmurs and hankers up and down, that gripes the
 full-grown lady-flower, curves upon her with amorous firm legs, takes his will
 of her, and holds himself tremulous and tight till he is satisfied,
 The wet woods through the early hours,
 Two sleepers at night lying close together as they sleep, one with an arm
 slanting down across and below the waist of the other,
 (lines 14-19)

The poem goes on, listing the multiplicity of these types of love until the verse is full to bursting. It becomes not the fecundity of earthly creatures that is the source of overflowing, but the verse itself, the joyful imagination from which the hearty appreciation for diverse aesthetic flows forth. By juxtaposing this imagery of chastity and sexuality, Whitman subverts a dialectic that places

them in opposition to one another. The grand enumeration of pleasures creates an order outside of traditional orders in a mingling of bodies: “The body of my love, the body of the woman I love, the body of the man, the body of the earth.” (line 15) Such a conflation of love-objects serves to redefine romantic and sexual attachment as a project which is not inherently driven by reproduction— it is genderless and even species-less, as it encompasses not only human bodies but the erotic body of the earth as well.

The poem ends in both a celebration and dismissal of the Biblical oath to “go forth and multiply:”

The great chastity of paternity, to match the great chastity of maternity,
 The oath of procreation I have sworn, my Adamic and fresh daughters,
 The greed that eats me day and night with hungry gnaw, till I saturate what shall
 produce boys to fill my place when I am through,
 The wholesome relief, repose, content,
 And this bunch pluck'd at random from myself,
 It has done its work — I toss it carelessly to fall where it may
 (lines 40-45)

The speaker draws inspiration from his deep, almost insatiable desire to procreate, to leave progeny to carry on his legacy after his death and thus achieve a form of eternal life. However, he ends on a curiously flippant note, tossing this “greed ... carelessly to fall where it may.”

There is a sense in which the drive toward sexuality has created a purpose for the speaker which can be abandoned as it is taken up, not regarded as a source of anxiety. However, there are unacknowledged stakes to the “casting off” of this reproductive responsibility that reveal a privileged male position in Whitman’s verse. In *The Erotic Whitman*, Vivian R. Pollak describes this treatment of women as a component of the poet’s paradoxical relationship to feminism and normative descriptions of gender roles. (Pollak 172) While writing that Whitman’s imagery is often subversive, Pollak also identifies a “reaffirmation of the mid-nineteenth century American cult of the mother, which celebrated maternity as any woman’s supreme destiny and which, to a

significant degree, depended on a code of silence about the unloftiness of the lives many women were living.” (Pollak 172) Such a reductive view of womanhood as motherhood is found in the above passage, with Whitman’s description of “what shall produce boys to fill my place when I am through.” (line 42) The woman becomes an absent referent within a vast and nameless reproductive entity, bearing the responsibility of fertility so that Whitman may enjoy a careless abandon. As Pollak writes that “the life of women as (Whitman) imagines it is simply less various than that of men. They contain fewer multitudes economically, intellectually, and psychologically, though on them, granted, the future of the race is said to depend.” (Pollak 192) And so the transcendent multitude of Whitman’s poetic self continues on, unaware of the heavily reduced female self he has cast as a simple vessel for his procreative anxieties and left in his wake.

Responsibilities thus discarded, the multiplicity and infinity of Whitman’s masculine self translates into a wild, branching sexuality that once again raises pleasure for pleasure’s sake above procreation. This boundless soul is found again at the end of *Song of Myself*, in poems 51 and 52, as Whitman bids a fond, transcendent hello to his reader as he passes into death. In poem 51, Whitman dismantles time, creating a futuristic space that exists outside of traditional structures:

The past and present wilt—I have fill’d them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future
(lines 1-2)

As both history and the here and now melt away, we are left in an uneasy space of new beginnings and unknowns. Whitman constructs a future space for infinite imaginings, opening up queer possibilities for non-traditional minglings as barriers dissipate. Whitman merges himself with his poem and addresses his reader directly, calling:

Listener up there! What have you to confide to me?
 Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of the evening,
 (Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)
 (lines 3-5)

Time is again subverted as the evening is characterized by a “sidle,” a blurring of the bounds between time and space. Again this queer time-space entity is transmuted by a “snuff,” up in a puff of smoke, abruptly gone. A confessional is urgently constructed between book and reader, reversing the exchange so that the reader is imparting information to the book, making the text a living and changing entity. The difficulty of this command is acknowledged in the next stanza:

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then I contradict myself,
 (I am large, I contain multitudes.)
 (lines 6-8)

There is some type of contradiction of traditional logic in the request of the book to gain information from its reader, yet the contradiction is simply accepted—a suggestion that the flaw is not in the command, but in the structural assumptions traditionally made about knowledge systems. The infinite self is the authority on this exchange. Contradiction becomes possible because of the multitudes contained within such a self.

Such contradictions dealt with, the request hangs in the air and waits anxiously for a reply:

I concentrate on them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.
 Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?
 Who wishes to walk with me?
 Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?
 (lines 9-12)

The poem deeply desires community with its reader, yet does not have time to wait for them as it is constantly pushed forward into a future space, an out-of-time fold that creates a barrier between poem and reader and makes communication disjointed and hurried. The disappearance

into “the next fold of the future” is death—it cannot be comprehended nor put off, and the unknown quality of it produces an anxiety even in the multiple and death-appreciative Whitman.

This disappearing act into a futuristic non-location resolves its anxiety through dissipation into transcendent compost in poem 52, which concludes *Song of Myself*. The desire to procrastinate the passing into death is identified through the accusation of a hawk passing overhead: “The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.” (line 1) Whitman is reminded of his likeness to the hawk, letting go of his anxieties that were keeping him rooted in the social, human world:

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.
(lines 2-3)

Freed of restriction to social spheres, the poem once again focuses on natural entities, emphasizing a mingling of the soul with natural entities rather than a need for communication. There is a desire to become “like the hawk” successfully realized, the untranslatability of the transcendent self taking center stage to broadcast a new type of being. Whitman celebrates a becoming of the Other, following the end of the day into a vast dusk:

The last scud of the day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow’d wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk
(lines 4-6)

These lines hold a triune sense of time- a past, present, and future. The “holding back” exists in a past, calling for a reluctant self to catch up to the dying of the day. In the same instant, a present sunset “flings” a true and triumphant self to mingle with the beloved wild. Finally, the future of being as a soul coaxes Whitman forward into his new and as-yet-unknown state. This expansion of time allows for a multiplicity of existence that is not tied to the traditional binary structure of

has-happened / has-not-yet-happened. Freed from traditional structures of time, there is finally a becoming of poet into wilderness, a jubilant departure into constant unknown of death:

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.
(lines 7-8)

The flesh becomes liquid, cast off as a river to the vastness of a larger life than the individual self. The soul departs as air, yet surreally retains a form with “white locks.” The left-behind self is also a multiplicity, structurally expressed by the syllables of the line—the soft liquid of the flowing stream is contained in “effuse” and “flesh,” while a rough and tumbling river is characterized by the hard consonants of “drift” and “jags.” This dual poetic self expands on the collapsed space-time continuum that Whitman has created to express the navigation of the unknown through death, in all of its beauty.

Then comes the famous compost of the self, a giving of the body to the earth and a rejoining of the vast and lively systems that sustain all life:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.
(lines 9-13).

This queer love for the Other in nature translates into a complete surrender of the self to natural systems. The human and natural mingle harmoniously and are not portrayed as on different levels. It is a relationship of equals, a transcendence into the pure understanding that man is part of nature. There is an unknowability in this transcendence, an acknowledgement that living humans cannot fully understand their place as a natural entity. All the same, the composted self gives to the left-behind, nourishing them as a regrowth and subsequent rebirth into the beloved and loving nonhuman nature.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
 Missing me one place search another,
 I stop somewhere waiting for you.
 (lines 14-16)

The final line of the poem slips into a loose meter, its rhythm mimicking a human heartbeat. This final corporeality contained in the structure of the poem leaves its message resonant with the human reader. The full possibility of the open invitation to find the poet in death, abandoning the heartbeat as an attachment to the body but retaining it in poetic expression, is felt. That such transcendence can only be reached posthumously is decidedly non-anthropocentric and unselfish. The self falls away in deference to a wide community of man-nature relationships. The future is imbued with joyful sacrifice. Rather than sacrificing the self heterosexually for one's children, however, this queer sacrifice privileges the continuity of all the earth's systems over the continuity of a single species.

III. Love & Compost: Whitman's Leaves in the *Calamus* Poems

The jubilant compost of Whitman's poetry represents a queer mingling of the human body with nature, creating space for a non-heterosexually reproductive queer futurity centered on a creative and soulful ecology. In the poem "Scented Herbage of my Breast," Whitman writes with longing for a proliferation of the heart and soul through the metaphor of leaves. There is a compost in his words, as his speaker describes the beauty of the death which makes such growth possible:

Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death
 ...
 You are often more bitter than I can bear, you burn and sting me,
 Yet you are beautiful to me you faint-tinged roots, you make me think of death,
 Death is beautiful from you, (what indeed is finally beautiful except death and love?)
 (line 3, lines 9-11)

This colorful verse is characteristic of Whitman in its weaving of the physical and spiritual, as well as of human and environment. The poetic soul is given a form, growing from the poet's breast as a beautiful tree with its roots in death as it reaches for life. In these lines, Whitman captures the beauty of cyclical nature in tandem with his exploration of the feeling of writing and allowing poetry to grow itself from your pen. He writes of the pain that comes from this creation, the pain of acknowledging hard truths, and unknowable beyond — the ultimate one being death. The speaker embraces death as something beautiful from the standpoint of the new life that comes from it— but not a standard, heterosexually procreative new life. This life comes not from a union of man and woman, but from a union of body and soul.

Later in this poem, Whitman's speaker describes the tree of poetry which takes root in his breast and grows upwards to embrace the world in a series of triumphant exclamations:

Grow up taller sweet leaves that I may see! Grow up out of my breast!
 Spring away from the conceal'd heart there!
 Do not fold yourself so in your pink-tinged roots timid leaves!
 Do not remain down there so ashamed, herbage of my breast!
 Come I am determin'd to unbare this broad breast of mine, I have long enough
 stifled and choked;
 (lines 17-21)

He is encouraging the poetry within him to grow from the compost of his heart, the bitterness and thoughts of death that lie there, nourished by it and unabashed. The speaker entreats the leaves growing from his breast to continue to grow up and out, to reveal his own heart to him. He longs for a nakedness, a bare breast which has long been bursting at the seams with feeling, asphyxiating him. Such nudity of soul can only be given to the poet through the writing of his poetry.

In the poem "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now In Hand," Whitman's volume of poetry addresses its reader personally, taking up the theme of its leaves which have grown so

organically from the poet's breast in "Scented Herbage of my Breast." The wording of these lines becomes more overtly sexual, as the physical leaves of the volume have been birthed from the poet's soul and are now a physical form to be touched by others, no longer with the self-pollinating imagery of the poet who merged body and soul and fostered the leaves to grow. However, this new sexuality is full of images not of procreation, but of pleasure for pleasure's sake:

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
 With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss,
 For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.
 Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,
 Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip,
 Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;
 For thus merely touching you is enough, is best,
 And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally
 (lines 19-26)

The leaves of the poetry wish only to be close to their beloved reader, in ecstatic physical contact and peaceful slumber by the side of a kindred spirit. The thrusting of the volume of poetry beneath one's clothing forms an active, penetrative sexual image, but it does not lead to a fruitful union or even to a climax. Once the leaves of the poetry come into contact with the physical and spiritual nudity of their reader, they come to a peaceful rest.

The non-reproductive sexuality of these poems and the heartfelt joy with which Whitman writes of such sensual and emotional contact construct a distinctly queer mindset. José Esteban Muñoz writes of this turn away from reproduction as the reason for action in a political context, naming it "queer futurity." This argument is a turn in the queer theoretical canon, as Muñoz challenges the widely accepted theory (which he dubs "antirelationalism" (Muñoz 11)) advanced in texts such as Lee Edelman's *No Future*. *Queer Futurity* sees such antirelationalism as "a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race,

gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a single trope of difference.” (Muñoz 11) In calling for a wider scope in queer theory, Muñoz writes that “queerness is primarily about futurity and hope ... queerness is always in the horizon.” (Muñoz 11) This placement of queer theory in the not-quite-yet of our imaginations allows it a certain uncertainty and multiplicity.

Muñoz’ theoretical approach thus includes the notion of standard futurity, one centered on the “continuation of the species,” saying that “Heterosexual culture depends on a notion of the future: as the song goes, ‘the children are our future’.” (Muñoz 49) He describes queer worlds as being enacted in the present, not living with the same futurity of heterosexual culture. Muñoz points out that this distinction is constructed on a binary, which he summarily deconstructs by asking: “Can the future stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction?” (Muñoz 49) The exploration of this question is done in Muñoz’s case through the description of a present future utopia being enacted in queer spaces with a distinctly contemporary focus. However, the queer futurity that Muñoz writes of can also be seen in Whitman’s poetry. By redefining the ways in which we view productivity and pleasure, and centering it on queer sexuality, Whitman is making a move away from redoubling of the human species as the highest accomplishment of civilization, instead constructing his own queer utopia that allows for a noble sensual pleasure to be taken in the exchange of ideas and the consumption of art, portrayed as sterile sex acts. By imbuing these non-reproductive pleasures with a sense of purpose and romantic beauty, Whitman subverts heterosexual futurity, rejecting the idea that sexual pleasure is only good because it creates new generations.

IV. The Sensual Self and Love of Compost

Whitman's subject in *Leaves of Grass* expands on this sensual compost through the evocative themes of sex and death, weaving an ecological tapestry that moves from the soul, to the grass, to the self. In poem 5, Whitman romantically addresses his soul: "I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you." (line 1) He celebrates the feeling of lying without care, speaking with the soul for the sound of the "voice" rather than for a specific purpose, musing without a goal in mind. He describes an epiphany in a deeply sexual way here:

I mind how one we lay such a transparent summer morning,
 How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
 And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
 bare-stript heart,
 And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet,
 Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the
 argument of the earth
 (lines 6-9)

Whitman's choice to describe such soulful inspiration as a sex act once again departs from heterosexual ideals of reproduction. This is an asexual type of intercourse, one's own body joining with soul for the creation of transcendent knowledge. Like a plant whose disparate parts fertilize one another, Whitman describes his body as a passive agent acted upon by the soul. The offspring of this creative union of the self is a deep knowledge of the interconnected systems of life.

The next poem in this series centers around the grass, ruminating on what it is. The poem moves from birth to death, beginning with the query of a child ("A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands" (line 1)) and positing that the grass could be "itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation" (line 7) before stating "now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves." (line 12) The compost of the dead bodies is explicit in this section, queerly giving rise not to their own species but to the grass. This fertility of body sustains nature, celebrating death and decomposition. This subverts the fear of death that is at the center of the

desire to reproduce sons and daughters, to continue one's legacy through heterosexual reproduction. Whitman suggests that such a legacy may just as well be continued through communion with the dirt after death:

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death
 ...
 All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
 And to die is different from what any one supposes, and luckier
 (lines 28, 31-32)

The description of the “smallest sprout” revealing the bright complexity of earthly systems adds to this queer affection for the other-than-human, ascribing a tender smallness to natural entities that evokes a nurturing attitude. This is particularly evident in conversation with the opening portion of the poem that introduces musings upon the subject of the grass as the preoccupation of a curious human child. The vibrance of this eternal childhood through compost of the self, growing into grass, characterizes dying as a curiously “lucky” state—never an end.

Poem 7 expands on this idea that it is “lucky to die” (line 2) and fully engages the expansive, ecological self that *Leaves of Grass* repeatedly celebrates:

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contain'd
 between my hat and boots,
 ...
 I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
 I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself,
 (They do not know how immortal, but I know.)
 (lines 3, 6-8)

The Transcendent self and the composting self are one, a jubilant reunion of body and soul with the natural world, transgressing boundaries as they decay. The omniscient poetic self exists in all spheres, and is birth and death at once, conflating them so they may collapsing into oneness. He wishes to impart the grand news of immortality through communion with the earth, and the vast

fertility of non-anthropocentric possibilities. He stresses that he is human himself, not the earth speaking to a human Other. This dismantling of boundaries continues with an order to undress:

Undrape! You are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded,
I see through broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away
(lines 15-17)

The addressee is told their nudity is not a source of guilt, that they can always be seen regardless of their clothing, and so attempts to hide themselves are in vain. By banishing guilt, Whitman overturns the pervasive idea of “genitalia shame,” that one ought to hide their genitalia due to the uncleanliness of such body parts. This is tied to shame surrounding waste production—because the genitalia are both the site of excrement and reproduction, reproduction is linked to dirtiness. Whitman, however, celebrates the body’s capacity for overflow and the compost that we may become, to feed and nourish our Earth. He celebrates nudity and banishes the guilt surrounding such displays of the human body.

Poem 24 of *Song of Myself* likewise celebrates nudity and sensual pleasures, denying any shame that may be ascribed to these as Whitman describes himself with immense pride:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
(lines 1-2)

This “turbulent” identity is “eating, drinking and breeding,” enumerated one after another to emphasize the corporeal nature of this trinity. Again, the self is expanded to encompass a multiplicity. Indeed, Whitman is breaking forth from all possible containment, with a cry to dismantle doors that may lock things out and in, calling for a radical nudity of all structures:

Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!
(lines 5-6)

The “unscrewing” of such structures underlines an actionable physicality to this opening of possibility. The process of this opening up is also interesting in the emphasis it puts on process—unscrewing the locks from the doors is done first, but it is not enough to simply allow the doors to be opened. We find that they must be removed entirely, an absent barrier now signified only by the empty jamb which is left behind. Through such a dismantled world Whitman is making himself a forbidden clairvoyant to trumpet the messages of that which has been outlawed as indecent.

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.
(lines 20-22)

Physical removal of barriers plays again a role, as voices are “unveiled.” The supposed “indecent” of such obscured voices is brought to bear on the uninhibited world¹ that the poem calls for, suddenly shown to be noble rather than depraved. Whitman’s call for an unchaining of the sensual self is again linked to waste and compost, the romantic and cerebral married to physicality.

I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.
I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
(lines 24-27).

¹ It is important to point out that this “uninhibited world” which transcends boundaries, while read here as a radical profession of love, also refuses boundaries. Whitman’s poetic self is everything and everywhere, a gesture that is liberating for him but is also an extreme erasure. The expansive nature of this form acts as a colonizing force, ignoring both women and indigenous inhabitants of America. Much of Whitman’s poetry was explicitly in favor of Manifest Destiny, and his poem “Passage to India” is cited in *Virgin Land* as a notable endorsement of Westward expansion. (Smith 10) Whitman’s construction of an American poetic was by nature a settler colonial poetic.

The “delicate” touch that is taken around the bowels, the corporeal self, is likened to that which is taken around the soulful and transcendent self. Whitman entangles mind and body explicitly here, ascribing spirituality to what is presumed corporeal and once again collapsing the barrier between them as a false delineation. Sex and death are miracles to Whitman as are birth and life—he acknowledges that each leads to the other, and celebrates it as such.

In poem 49, he addresses the corpse with this deference, linking it to sensual pleasures of the natural world.

And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me,
I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing,
I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish'd breasts of melons.
(lines 6-8)

This “manure” that Whitman acknowledges the corpse as is still “good,” a queering of the connotations of dead bodies and excrement. The poet is not offended by these composted subjects, as they bring to mind for him the divine in nature. From the dirt rises sweet, white roses, an image of purity and life that contrasts the decaying compost they take their life from. By their side grows a sensual representation of the human body, “leafy lips” and the “polish’d breasts of melons.” (line 8) The allure of these anthropomorphized fruits contrasts with the implied purity of the white roses that spring from the same manure. By juxtaposing these elements, Whitman emphasizes the necessary ecological mingling of what is seen as grotesque with what is held up as beautiful while conflating what is regarded as pure with what is overtly sexual. He reasons that because the grotesque gives rise to the beautiful, it cannot be regarded as offensive. Whitman’s commitment to honoring the compost as an aesthetic in itself, and naming death as inoffensive as birth, results in a fully radical category of the “natural.” The final opposition of human versus nature is undone, as the natural is humanized and the human is naturalized.

The unscientific, indeed unlikely, compost of Whitman's nature poems are subversive in their cooptation of the "natural." This is, again, a powerful move against normative heterosexuality. As Greta Gaard writes in *Toward a Queer Ecofeminism*: "Arguments from 'nature', as feminist philosophers of science have repeatedly argued, are frequently used to justify social norms rather than to find out anything new about nature." (Gaard 29) By subverting the idea that nature is heterosexually driven, each species striving only for the continuation of itself, Whitman creates an alternative naturalism that questions anthropocentric doctrines. Through this creation of a naturalized queer futurity, his poetry engages a space for radical love for nature and subverts heterosexuality by redefining what it means to be reproductive and virtuous. Whitman's project imbues pleasure for pleasure's sake with nobility and romanticizes sensual connections to nature, allowing for a new sociality that subverts heterosexual norms and celebrates nature deeply.

The non-reproductive pleasure that Whitman links with nature imagery can likewise be found in the work of Emily Dickinson. Although Dickinson is not written about as a sensual or ecological poet as often as Whitman is, signifiers of the environment and eroticism are found in many of her poems. Furthermore, one finds that the two realms are combined in many of the ways that have been previously discussed, making her work ripe for queer ecological readings. Through these readings, we can find yet another re-figuring of productivity, re-productivity, and virtue— this time from a female perspective.

Chapter 3: Emily Dickinson

There has been a great deal of scholarly debate about the meaning of Dickinson's poetry that centers around a biographical argument over who Dickinson was as a person. This argument is divided between the view of Dickinson as a secluded, despairing hermit, and that of Dickinson as a pining lover who can conceive of, and indeed often writes about, sexual passion². The former view typically centers the object of Dickinson's affections as a mystery man, referred to as the "Master." The latter view is largely centered around the idea of Dickinson as a lesbian, best exemplified in the collection *Open Me Carefully* edited by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith. This collection contains Dickinson's letters to her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson, detailing the passionate and loving professions which passed between the two. The approach of delving into the personal life of a long-dead literary figure to cast her in a contemporary social role can be problematic—not least of the risks one runs being the reading of all Dickinson's poetry as autobiographical. However, if one puts speculation about the poet's personal life aside and takes a textual approach, opening readings of her famous poems to homoerotic interpretations, the potential is great. More specifically, it can be shown that Dickinson's nature imagery contains queer economies of scale and appreciation for specifically female beauty that push against phallogocentric discourse about nature and the female reproductive system.

"The Pea That Duty Locks" offers a good example of a textual approach to this problem. In this paper, Bennett focuses on gendered metaphors that Dickinson uses in her poetry, writing that "For Dickinson, the dangerous aspects of sexual power lay with the male—the power to devour, scorch, and awe. The sweetness and balm (the healing) of sexuality, as well as its abundant pleasures, lay in women." (Bennet 1990, 112) The problem here is not coming from a

² See critics such as Faris, Jones, and Whicher

space of dogged insistence upon Dickinson's sexual identity. We will never truly know what Dickinson's erotic attachments were, though it is far too easy to fall into the trap of speculation that constructs an identity for her out of her surviving poems and correspondence. Nonetheless, by failing to consider the potential for the homoerotic in Dickinson's work, scholars are missing what is seen by many as powerful key to understanding her enigmatic writing. Additionally, it seems that the issue of ascribing sexual identity to writers only comes out when it concerns queer readings of such texts. Straight readings of classical texts are simply accepted due to the heteronormative gaze of history. Naysayers would do well to remember that queer identities are not a modern invention in themselves—it is only the language we use to describe them that one must be careful about.

I. Dickinson and the Queer Ecological Imagination: Sensual Nature Imagery

Dickinson's poetry is known for its ambiguity and complex metaphors. Her poems that are most rife with sexual imagery center their metaphors on the natural world. Erotic objects take on forms such as flowers, bees, dew, pearls, berries, peas, pebbles, and nuts (Bennett 1990, 113). Lesbian-feminist scholars have called these nature metaphors a form of encoding, a way for writers to disguise homosexual themes in their work to make them more "acceptable" to mainstream readers (Comment 63). But why nature? There is more depth in Dickinson's choice to center her sensual poetry in the natural world than simple encoding. The fact that the natural world operates as a stand-in for otherwise "improper" representations of human sexuality certainly deserves attention.³ When Dickinson's queer poetic attachments take their roots in

³ Take, for example, O'Keefe's famously yonic flower paintings

natural beauty, she is locating affection for what is the “same” to her (in terms of gender) in a metaphoric “Other.”

In “Come slowly—Eden!” Dickinson writes of a beautiful Eden of unknown and intoxicating flowers. The experience that delivers Eden to the poem’s speaker is notably oral, centering on lips that are “unused” to the flowers. These lips are acting “as” the bee, effectively positioning the pollinator as a mediating element between narrator and flower and juxtaposing a feminine human anatomy with an insectile figure:

Come slowly—Eden!
Lips unused to Thee—
Bashful—sip thy Jessamines—
As the fainting Bee—
(lines 1-4)

Her characteristically halting lines of meter evoke the stumbling bashfulness of her bee, visiting a flower for the first time. Interestingly, he reaches the flower “late,” suggesting a delayed fertility out of sync with the rest of society. This tentative bee, approaching the flower, begins timidly to “sip” from the flower’s nectar. The bee then becomes lost in the flower’s beauty:

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums—
Counts his nectars—
Enters — and is lost in Balms.
(lines 5-8)

The poem’s subjects are heterosexual, a male bee entering a female flower. However, Bennett points out that the emphasis of this poem and others like it are centered on the intoxicating beauty of female sexuality, rather than celebrating the male lover as desirable (Bennett 1990, 111). It is through the sensual symbolism of a bee pollinating a nectar-filled and lushly petaled jessamine flower that Dickinson is able to express a deep appreciation for female sexuality without restraint.

H. Jordan Landry places Dickinson's nature metaphor in the context of the Puritanism that pervaded her world, reading it into a religious narrative of the converted Christian that the poet would have been all too familiar with: "Dickinson splices the discourse on conversion together with the simplest of zoological knowledge — that bees pollinate and that birds fly. Through the use of bird and bee imagery, Dickinson images anew the erotic triangle of male minister-Christ-congregant underlying Puritan discourse." (Landry 42) This reading of Dickinson as rewriting patriarchal Christian tradition through sensual nature imagery forges a crucial link between her poetry and queer theory. It is in line with the most widely accepted ideas about Dickinson's life and motivations, namely that her worldview was greatly influenced by Puritan discourse and that much of her poetry is motivated by a desire to manufacture female agency in the face of male power. By refiguring Dickinson's imagery through these motivations into a sophisticated expression of affections that lie outside of the heteronormative and reproductively oriented, Landry takes the birds and bees of her poetry to new heights.

In "Come show thy Durham Breast," desire imagery centers itself on a robin. The speaker in this poem is anxious that the robin give itself to her, for she has the most love for the songbird:

Come show thy Durham Breast
To her who loves thee best,
Delicious Robin —
(lines 1-3)

The expression of desire from a female speaker is significant, as it places romantic agency in the hands of the woman. This queering of traditional heteronormative gender roles jumps out at the reader, particularly because of the desire of the female lover to see the robin's breast and the description of the object of her affection as "delicious." So forward an advance of female erotic desire is a departure from the norm of romance discourse. The female speaker seems to self-

consciously rescind her demand to possess her beloved in the next lines, making a more modest request that seems to anticipate her feelings going unrequited:

And if it be not me
 At least within my Tree
 Do the avowing —
 (lines 4-6)

It is in this curious request that the speaker signals her intent to be present at her beloved's wedding regardless of participation in the ceremony. She wishes to be close to her robin even if they cannot be wed to one another.

The voyeurism in the opening lines of the poem thus switches from a possession of the beloved through the baring of their breast to an existence on the fringe of the robin's relationship with another. With this shift comes imagery of closeness and flight, conflated with smallness and largeness for a curious economy of scale.

Thy Nuptial so minute
 Perhaps is more astute
 Than vaster suing —
 For to soar away
 Is our propensity
 The Day ensuing—
 (lines 7-12)

The "minute" nuptials seem to suggest a small ceremony, but not for the sake of intimacy. Rather, the speaker seems to believe that a large ceremony would cause her robin to take flight from her betrothal as the wedding date drew close. The birdlike soaring of her beloved is described with a collective "our," suggesting that the robin and the speaker are one and the same, birds of a feather. The speaker belies her relation to the beloved as a sameness, two birds not meant for the confines of their society yet who must make do nonetheless. There is a homoerotic affection here, the sameness that passes between the lover and beloved located in their identity as birds and transcending past the denial of their union in marriage. The speaker suggests that

though she and her beloved will never be together formally, they may share their innermost thoughts and feelings through their symmetry.

Landry also places these bird and bee poems historically, finding the metaphors which mirror them in Dickinson's correspondence with her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson. "Reading these bee and bird poems against the letters to Susan reveals the way the poems repeat the predominant images of those early letters to Susan — regulation of the self that threatens it, bee and bird imagery as alternative bodily forms, and the 'I's desire to become another kind of body." (Landry 50) This context is useful because it shows the full possibility of these queer attachments through a textual comparison, charting the evolution of Dickinson's work in relation to the development of her self as expressed through intimate communications. The "self" in correspondence becomes a character and component of the text, demanding presence in analysis.

II: The Queer Historical Context of Emily Dickinson's Correspondences with Susan Huntington Dickinson

Textual evidence necessarily takes on a biographical note when considering poems sent as correspondence. The debate on how one might read them closely mirrors the debate around applying queer theory to her published poems. Theorists cautioning against homoerotic readings of this correspondence cite the tradition of romantic friendship in 19th century social relations. (Comment 63-64) This discourse of deep, passionate love amongst friends of the same sex was certainly a concept Dickinson was familiar with, and a tradition her letters to Susan participated in. However, Dickinson's experience and identification with romantic friendship discourse was also a symptom of the frame of her worldview. She could name and participate in romantic friendship as a concept because of its acceptability and familiarity. Theorists in the present day

read symbols of queer attachment and homoeroticism into these correspondences not because they are suggesting Dickinson's full knowledge of and erotic participation in these symbols, but because they are there for a modern reader. The argument that follows states that whether or not Dickinson was aware of the eroticism of her writings, the affections she expresses for Susie bear the markings of a queer literary tradition. To ignore these signs because such language for them did not exist at the time is to ignore the multiplicity of historical possibility, reading the sanitized heteronormativity of dominant discourse onto individuals of the era.

Landry writes of Susan Huntington Dickinson as Emily Dickinson's muse of sorts, stating that "Dickinson ... repeatedly casts Sue as her rogue-muse who inspires her to thought outside the conventional and the Puritan." (Landry 46) Such a departure from Puritan discourse can be seen as associated with Susan in the poem "Susan Knows:"

Susan knows
 She is a Siren —
 and that at a word from her,
 Emily would
 forfeit Righteousness —
 (lines 1-5)

The characterization of Susan as a tempting "Siren" signals a departure from the dominant discourse, making it all the more appropriate for readers to keep an eye out for symbols of transgression. Emily's profession that she would "forfeit Righteousness" at "a word" from this siren further emphasizes this transgression of Puritan ideology as well as a deep and unquestioning devotion to Susan.

This devotion also comes through in "Her breast is fit for pearls,"⁴ a letter-poem in which Dickinson imagines herself as a bird abiding within Susan's heart:

⁴ *Open me Carefully* provides historical background for this poem, which may be helpful to reference: "This poem ... (is) written in pencil, in Emily's rough-draft hand. 'Sue' was carefully

Her breast is fit for pearls,
 But I was not a “Diver”—
 Her brow is fit for thrones
 But I have not a crest,
 Her heart is fit for home—
 I — a Sparrow — build there
 Sweet of twigs and twine
 My perennial nest.

The transformation of poet to sparrow occurs out of necessity, finding a place for the self within Susan’s life that fits her abilities. She laments the ways in which she was unfit for Susan’s glory, unable to give her what she deserved in the form of precious pearls and a regal crown. Dickinson cites in particular a desire to give Susan a “crest,” perhaps referring to a family name that could be imparted through marriage. However, she finds in Susan a sweet home, which she transfigures herself into a robin to inhabit. By nesting herself gently in Susan’s heart, Dickinson secures her place within her beloved’s life with her own simple tools of “twigs and twine.” The poet must “build” her home there, a laborious effort that invokes a certain industry and continual work undertaken by the poet, continually insistent on earning her place in her dear friend’s heart. Nevertheless, this cohabitation achieves intimacy and permanence in their relationship, despite the presence of others who Dickinson sees as more suitable to Susan as they can give her the gifts which she is “fit” for.

erased from the verso. In Mabel Loomis Todd’s 1894 edition of *Letters*, she placed this poem in the Samuel Bowles correspondence, suggesting that Emily had sent ‘Her breast is fit for pearl’ to Samuel in honor of his wife, Mary. Loomis Todd may well have been attempting to make Emily’s correspondence with Mary Bowles look more extensive, since Dickinson wrote the Bowles few joint letters. By falsely attributing the poem. Loomis Todd accomplished two objectives: she disguised a love poem to Susan, and she made Emily’s correspondence to Bowles (with whom she is said to have been in love) appear more inclusive of his wife.” (Hart & Smith, 91)

Such gift-giving is also present in “I send two Sunsets—,” again centered on an opposition between Dickinson and an Other that can give great gifts to Susan. The Other in this poem is explicitly male:

I send two Sunsets —
 Day and I — in com —
 petition — ran —
 I finished Two, and
 several Stars
 While He — was making
 One —
 His own is ampler —
 but as I
 Was saying to a friend —
 Mine — is the more
 Convenient
 To Carry in the Hand ,

Emily—

The sending of “two Sunsets” as a gift sets the poem immediately into a fantastical world, where natural entities may be fabricated by human hands and sent along in the post. This fantasy is continued with the introduction of a competition between the poet and the “Day.” The day is characterised as male, and is notably attributed with largeness. This signals a move to a queer economy of scale, as is set up in many of her other poems. Such an economy of scale can be read as an allusion to the small and sexually powerful clitoris, as suggested in “The Pea that Duty Locks.” (Bennett 1990) Dickinson writes that in her competition with the day, she created a pair of small sunsets and some stars to send along to Susan, while he created only one “ample” sunset. Dickinson maintains the superiority of her collection of trinkets, as they are “more convenient to carry.”

By glorifying smallness and equating it with femininity, Dickinson creates an empowering space for herself within the poem. She emphasizes the differences between herself

and the male Other in this space, but does not cede to the value judgement that patriarchal society places on this difference. Rather, she flips the script, valuing the convenient intimacy that her gift offers Susan, as it can be held within her hand. This reading expands the queer possibilities of Dickinson's writing and locates it within a sexually empowering discourse of femininity that does not derive its values from masculine, phallogocentric structures.

III. "Clit Lit": Sexual Imagery and Smallness in Dickinson's Poetry

Images of small, round objects abound in Dickinson's poetry, and are easily likened to the shape and size of the clitoris (Bennett 1990, 113). On this reading, feminist scholars who are frustrated at Dickinson's insistence on characterising the poetic self as small and label such imagery as belittling and infantilizing could in fact be subscribing to a masculine dialectic that categorizes "small" as a pejorative term (Bennett 1993, 254).

In her paper "Critical Clitorectomy: Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory," Paula Bennett reflects on her earlier interpretations of Dickinson's poetry through the wider historical context of both feminist and decidedly anti-feminist psychoanalytic theory. Bennett confesses that initially she had been afraid to publish previous writings about clitoral imagery in Dickinson's work to a wide audience, as she was "suspicious of... (her) own motivations" (Bennett 1993, 236) in writing it. Her reluctance to publish literary criticism that champions a female-centered sexuality reflects a wider issue—the privileging in academia, and particularly in psychoanalytic theory, of masculine and phallogocentric discourses. Bennett identifies the consequences of such singularity of experience amongst the "most notable" psychoanalysts, namely Freud and Lacan. She points out that the influence of these male theorists has been so pervasive to the field of psychoanalytic theory that even feminist scholars attempting to re-center female sexuality within the field have minimized the importance of the

clitoris, instead privileging the vagina as male psychoanalysts do—a symptom of their limited worldview.

Bennett asserts throughout her essay that the importance of the clitoris as expressed in female-authored literature is diminished through readings that apply theory from a male-dominated tradition. She writes that “clitoral symbols — that is, symbols of small but precious objects — are ubiquitous in nineteenth-century American women’s writing.” (Bennett 1993, 237) That this ‘clit lit’ (as I would like to refer to it) can be both ubiquitous and undiscussed points directly to this historical problem. Citing the work of Spivak, Bennett locates female sexual erasure, misogyny, and heteronormativity within one sphere when she writes that the erasure of clitoral importance is an instrument of female oppression and a symptom of the “‘uterine social organization’ (183) of the family and the state.” (Bennet 1993, 239) This power structure casts women in the role of mothers, caregivers, and wives and necessarily denies them sexual agency. In order to do so, it must ignore both the clitoris and the female orgasm as such. However, by focusing on images of small, round objects and searching for the “Language of the Flowers” that was once a widely accepted discourse of sexuality and erotic desire (Bennett 1993, 241)⁵, one can find a wealth of new meaning and possibilities in Dickinson’s poetry.

One poem which bears particularly evocative symbols of queer, nonreproductive clitoral pleasure is “To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee.” The short poem winks at its reader as it playfully reaches its conclusions about the possibilities of solitude:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
 One clover, and a bee,
 And revery.
 The revery alone will do,
 If bees are few.

⁵ Later dismissed as “feminine and sentimental” by modernist male writers (Bennett 1993, 241-242)

We find at the singsongy end of this small poem that the bee has all but disappeared, and the generations of baby clovers which may have begotten a vast and mighty prairie have gone with him. The clover is left standing alone, small and round, in reverie with itself and quite happy in its bee-less state. With the idea of the clitoris as the seat of female sexuality and power in mind, this poem is quite easily read as a celebration of the possibilities of solitude — for “reveries” about sexual encounters which serve the clover quite well in the absence of a pollinating bee. This image of female masturbation pushes back against the uterus-centric societal structure that labelled Dickinson pejoratively a hermit and “old maid,” decrying childless women. The anti-reproductive role of the clitoris in female masturbation is a particular locus of male anxiety over female sexual autonomy, so the celebration of such symbols serves to raise feminine power and self-sufficiency to prominence.

Dickinson’s metaphor rejects the reproductive symbolism of a bee’s pollination again in “‘Twould ease — a Butterfly —.” In the outset of the poem, the speaker says that her position, presumably as a flower, would bring joy to a butterfly or bee come to pollinate. However, her addressee is neither. She then goes on to say:

But, Blossom, were I,
I would rather be
Thy moment
Than a Bee’s Eternity —
(lines 5-8)

The speaker assumes the identity of a blossom, about to burst forth into flower but not yet opened for a bee to enter. In this hypothetical temporal space, she says that she would rather be a moment for the non-bee other than eternity for a bee. This statement uses the image of a flower bud, small and round and closed off as a site of reproductive possibility. The stanza centers on a

queer temporality, a speaker who would rather sacrifice her own continuity in future generations (“a Bee’s Eternity”) than give herself to the other-than-beloved.

The speaker goes on to say that she is content to “Fade ... unto Divinity,” signaling a self-sacrifice in which she cedes self for the beloved Other. This sacrifice is complete as the poem comes to a close, the speaker’s death drawing a final, female attention:

And Dying – Lifetime
 Ample as the Eye —
 Her least attention raised on me
 (lines 12-14)

The beloved’s liveliness is wide and all-encompassing, turning her gaze to the finality of the loving speaker’s sacrifice. The finality of the death and minimal outcome of the sacrifice signals an insignificance of passing, a lack of mark left on the world. However, the solitude of this passing is suggested as better than a life disingenuously lived. The speaker would rather have a non-reproductive moment of true understanding with her beloved than a legacy of offspring. In this sacrifice of reproductive possibility for the sake of love there is a radical selflessness, a lack of regard for ideology that privileges reproduction both as a continuation of the species and as a form of immortality for parents. In this poem, regard is the afterlife, an imaginative space occupied by the dying in perpetuity. Though the moment of regard is fleeting, the “legacy” of the speaker becomes love and truth that could not be obtained in life.

IV: “I heard a Fly buzz— when I died—”: Corporeality & Insignificance of Death

Dickinson’s embrace of death as a possibility is notable in many of her best-known poems. She approaches the subject calmly, exploring it as a spiritual passing. This lack of death anxiety is linked with childlessness in “‘Twould ease — a Butterfly —,” demonstrating a queer conception of legacy that does not require progeny, similar to Walt Whitman’s poetry on death.

Dickinson's attitude towards death and dying also pushes back against anthropocentric narratives that privilege the soul over the body, painting humankind as above the natural world and bound only for heaven. This position is clear in "I heard a Fly buzz — when I died —":

I heard a Fly buzz — when I died —
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air —
 Between the Heaves of Storm —
 (lines 1-4)

Dickinson begins this poem with the presence of a fly, immediately followed by the occasion of the speaker's own death. This powerful first line juxtaposes a supposedly trivial moment (a fly buzzing) with the large and weighty occurrence of a human's passing. By putting these two moments together, Dickinson collapses the gap between human and nature, setting the rest of the poem as an open space for exploration of the overlap between the two — namely what we choose to treat with reverence and what we choose to dismiss.

Dickinson paints a picture of such reverence by next moving to describe the stillness of the air in the hushed room. The air's stillness is described as like the air between two large storms, when the whole world seems to be holding its breath, nothing daring to venture from its shelter. However, this described stillness is shown by the very first line to be false. The imagined reverence of the still room is a purely human experience, having gravity only for the dying and her loved ones. The fly, a third party witness to the deathbed, is unmoved by the occurrence.

The poem continues with a description of the solemnity of the deathbed, alluding to the expected religious transcendence of the speaker's soul:

The Eyes around — had wrung them dry —
 And Breaths were gathering firm
 For that last Onset — when the King
 Be witnessed — in the Room —
 (lines 5-8)

The tearful eyes of loved ones watch as the speaker takes her final breaths, and the moment of death becomes a coming of the King, or God. The suggested holiness of this moment is felt through the stanza, as well as the heavy silence of anticipation. The fly is all but forgotten as the speaker goes on to emphasize the legal proceedings of death, preoccupying the reader with these formalities:

I willed my Keepsakes — Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable — and then it was
 There interposed a Fly —
 (lines 9-12)

The reappearance of the fly disrupts the ordered world of human commitments and materiality, creating a dissonance between the supposed grandeur of human systems and the smallness of the insect. The fly's interposition into the scene also creates a queer economy of scale that gives credence to that which is small, emphasizing the fly as an actor which draws attention to an issue far greater than the "assignable portions" of a human life coming to a close. The reminder the fly imparts is that of corporeality and connection with nature, which materiality distracts us from. It is also a reminder of the compost of the body, as flies are participants in the first stages of decomposition. The attention given the small fly acknowledges the ecology of what is to come, a bodily death which no amount of spiritual practice or focus on material possessions can ultimately distract from. The speaker's focus is constantly shifting to her corpse, the ultimate end of death that connects her to the earth as she joins it in a final compost of the self.

Finally, the death of the speaker comes and is centered by the image of the fly, which seems to guide her from this life to the next. Materiality, grandeur, and human attachments fall away to privilege the presence of the tiny creature. It is as though this were the "King" (line 7) whom the hushed mourners were waiting to bear witness to:

With Blue— uncertain stumbling Buzz
 Between the light— and me—
 And then the Windows failed— and then
 I could not see to see—

The speaker is fixated on the fly as she passes from life and sight. The “uncertain stumbling” of the fly’s buzzing signals an unknown, a guide without authority. As she follows this intermediary between her and the light, the windows “fail.” This dissolving of a boundary between the interior and exterior worlds of civilization and the wild, already transgressed by the small fly, leads her finally into death.

The quiet acceptance of the fading life that this fly facilitates pushes back against death anxiety, offering an alternative to what Dickinson points out as a curious pomp and circumstance around death through her description of the room’s heavy silence and onerous legal proceedings. The simplicity, ecology, and corporeality of this representation stands in stark contrast with what dominant ideology views as a spiritual and deeply human event. This lack of anxiety can be linked with the non-reproductive sensibility described in “’Twould Ease— A Butterfly—.” The drive of this poem is towards communion with the earth through death, and thus ascribes insignificance to the individual human life, putting this life on the same level as the life of a fly. The speaker’s legacy lies in the compost of her body, as it transcends the boundary between what is indoors and what is outdoors, dissolving the window of stuffy anthropocentrism to follow an insect into the afterlife.

This transcendence of boundaries is found in much of Dickinson’s work, though biographical preoccupations within textual analysis would have her confined to her bedroom. The ecological transfigurations that allow the poet to pass through windows, walk through clover-fields, and assume the form of a nesting robin create a rather different positionality. Dickinson’s forays into sensuality and identification with nature locate her within a queer

ecological canon alongside Thoreau and Whitman, lending a feminine voice that disrupts their masculine worldview. Dickinson's preoccupation with smallness, intimacy, and fantasy gives her work a unique tone. By reading her alongside these male "nature writers," one finds new ways to read nature that dismantles the value judgements of a patriarchal mindset, pushing against normative power structures in the same way that Whitman and Thoreau question binary thought and heteronormativity.

Conclusion

The contemporary work of re-imagining nature outside of a heteronormative lens is found in different forms in 19th century literature. Transcendentalists such as Thoreau, Whitman, and Dickinson express queer love for nature in their work, expressing erotic attachments to the environment that are not inherently driven by reproduction. This non-reproductive way of being in the world results for all three in a transcendent alleviation of death anxiety through appreciation for the continuity of compost. The non-anthropocentric corporeal self that arises from such compost serves to refigure the category of the “natural,” blending it with the category of human. Thoreau does this work primarily through his contradiction, identifying slippage in the signifier / signified of the natural world. Whitman engages in a more overtly sexual nature imagery, celebrating pleasure for pleasure’s sake. Dickinson’s gendered nature metaphors, her generation of a queer economy of scale, and transfiguration of the poetic self into non-human bodies add a feminine voice to this Transcendental queer ecology. All three construct a paradoxically transcendent compost, celebrating the ecology of the self and the departure from cultural commitments that comes with a melding of body and earth as they defy heterosexual reproduction as the only means to immortality.

Connecting this 19th century movement with contemporary discourse points out an irony in dominant discourse: that heteronormativity is often seen as an “originary point” that is only just now being departed from. This conception ignores that heteronormativity is itself a construction, rather than a given. Although this view was a powerful hegemonic structure of the period that Transcendentalists wrote in, it was not the only point of reference for writers of the period.

The queer commitments of 19th century writers point to the expansive possibilities of viewing classic texts through a lens that does not assume they fully participated in the dominant

discourse of their time. By allowing these texts to be radical and subversive beyond what we have previously assumed, we can find greater meaning in them and increase our understanding of the queer possibilities of history. Through a study of queer attachments to nature in Transcendental literature, one can discover more language for expressing these commitments in the present day. This melding of spiritual and corporeal love for the other-than-human voices a reason for being that places the self in constant mingling with the universe. The longing for such non-reproductive transcendence is echoed by contemporary theorists searching for a queer ecology and futurity, and demonstrates ways that the powerful hegemonic structure of heterosexuality has been broken out of by writers again and again.

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