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**Rural Lesbian Subjectivities & Writing with the Nonhuman: A Feminist Dramaturgical
Practice**

Jessi Lee Clayton

PhD

Birkbeck, University of London

April 2023

Declaration:

I, Jessi Lee Clayton, confirm that the research and practice included within this thesis is my own original creative and scholarly work.

I confirm that this thesis has not previously been submitted for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

Jessi Lee Clayton

17th April 2023

Abstract:

This practice-based project seeks to address gaps in theory and practice, through my own work as a writer and performance practitioner, concerning rural lesbian subjectivities. It asks how my feminist playwriting performance practice might critically utilise ideas around the nonhuman and erotic in site-specific/sited creative writing to offer up dramaturgical forms articulating a rural lesbian experience. It explores specific lesbian feminist methods which successfully engaged rural queer and lesbian women in the 1960s and 1970s. In historicising these methods, it seeks to build a feminist framework from which new dramaturgical methodologies inclusive of rural lesbian subjectivities might be created.

It explores the shortcomings of those feminist methods regarding the historic Anglo-European relationship to land and 'nature'. It asks how critical approaches offered by Indigenous American scholars might allow new understandings of landscape and its nonhuman residents in relation to lesbian sited playwriting practice. It looks to Black Feminist understandings of the erotic in establishing alternative human relationships to land and exploring how this might be articulated in work dealing with rural lesbian subjectivities. The project then considers how sited performance in the UK privileges hetero-masculinist structures, and how an erotic and nonhuman writing methodology within a National Trust heritage site might disrupt and reform this.

The practice portion of the project will present and reflect on a sited playtext. It will dissect the ways in which my own creative writing practice was essential in attempting to address the interdisciplinary metronormative and heteronormative gaps in queer and feminist theory. It looks to feminist, queer, and lesbian writing across literature and 'nature writing' as cognate creative practices yet to be considered in queer and feminist written performance practice. In this, it offers a new dramaturgical mode which might resist dominant male discourses around the rural, site, and land and re-insert lesbian subjects into historic and future landscapes through an unsettled written performance practice.

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Abbreviations:

AWLM- American Women's Liberation Movement

BWLM- British Women's Liberation Movement

CHE - Campaign for Homosexual Equality

GLF - Gay Liberation Front

Landers - The women of the US Lesbian Lands Separatist Movement

LGBTQIA2S+- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit and community. I will also note here that in the US there has been a recent move towards placing the '2S' at the front of the acronym in order to emphasize the continued marginalisation of Indigenous peoples of the land. This is discussed in detail within the thesis.

PaR- Practice as Research

WLW - Women who Love Women

WLM - Women's Liberation Movement

ACE - Arts Council England

Acknowledgements:

This thesis has, at various times, been a labour of frustration, desperation, and hatred. Much of my time working on this project was under alien conditions of global uncertainty. In this time I suffered a great loss, physical and mental illness, instability, and grief. Being close enough to finished with this project that I could be sitting here writing acknowledgements still feels unreal to me in that sense. I still often feel that I never left 2020- that my life has been playing on a loop.

This thesis has also, though, been a labour of love, joy, and passion. Much of my time working on it was spent with people who enrich my life learning about subjects about which I care deeply. In this time I spent more hours outdoors than I have since childhood. I reconnected to parts of my past that I had pushed away for fear of hurt, not realizing how vital they were. I had to learn to evolve in new ways and under new circumstances, and that this has fundamentally shifted my worldview for the better.

It is my hope that with this submission I will feel some sense of release- some sense of completion, or maybe change. I think, as I write this, that I am still too close to it to be able to be proud or feel accomplished. Something I do feel, though, is gratitude. I have been so many versions of myself- some I liked, some I loathed, and some I did not know existed- over the past four years living alongside this labour. Some of those selves were gentle, kind, giving. Some of those selves were born of fear, loss, and rage. My loved ones met many of those selves and stood

by all of them. I am more appreciative than I could probably express. I wouldn't want to know any of my selves without you.

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I think it is appropriate, given the subject and contents of this project, to acknowledge the nonhuman relationships in my life. They have all shaped me as much as the human ones, if not more.

Sophia, my baby cat. You have been with me over a decade. Two deaths. Two states. Two countries. Two kitty organ failures. Two liver failures. I'm not usually into binaries, but there is no me without you. Moira the rescue bargain basement Labrador. You came into our lives about halfway through this project and we haven't looked back since. Thank you for waking up happier than anyone I have ever met every day. I actually don't think I could wake up without you singing as soon as my alarm goes off.

And here's to- Lady, Sam, Irish, Dakota, Izzy, Pip, Roscoe, Ellie, Scout, Louie, Titus, Blue, Thor, Muffin, Missy, Jasmine, and Domino the dogs. Grey Cloud the bird. Sara, Sarah, and Sara the rabbits. Tomtom, Wrongway, Silus, Riley, Luna, Missy, Miyu, Nano, Kilo, Moxie, Khaleesi, Black, Luna (the second), Bruce, Toulouse, Yoda, Dolly, Monroe, Mona, Sylvester, Bar Ditch and Smokey the cats. Penny, Kid, Sunny, Handy, Silky, Pete, Casper, Tuffy, Doc, Highline Dude, Charity, and Mac the horses. The finches, woodpeckers, foxes, tits, sparrows, starlings, pigeons, bats, voles, wood mice, and that one rat who visit our garden. The deer, pheasants, badgers, red squirrels, grey squirrels, and cattle who frequent the field outside our bedroom window. The frog who showed up on our doorstep during a rainstorm. The ivy that grows back no matter how well I think I've gotten the roots out. Without you, my constant and sometimes lifelong companions, I would not be on this earth we all share. Thank you sincerely, and in ways I fear I cannot learn to communicate to you in your own tongues.

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Anthony at Birkbeck for providing calm and structure in what is sometimes a frustrating transatlantic experience. And thank you, Rachel, for helping me cope with the aftermath.

Now that my acknowledgements are significantly longer than I ever wanted them to be, I will summarize with a wholehearted thank you to everyone who has come into my life in these last years. You have all my love and I give it freely.

Prologue

I come not only to mourn wildness but also to rediscover it, to track its path from there to here, to find my way through and with, and to take walks into the woods, into the streets, and into other less obvious dark and deep places of the wild. However, we must not imagine that the wild is ours to discover or rediscover; we should resist the temptation to believe that it once existed and now has gone; and we must find a way around the treacherous binary logics that set the wild in opposition to the modern, the civilized, the cultivated, and the real. And, while the wild is tethered to nature in our imaginations, or to one particular version of nature, wildness is not limited to the natural world, and it has an extensive life elsewhere too—in aesthetics, politics, theory, and desire.

- Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*¹

I got called a lesbian once. Well, I got told that the sous-chef in the kitchen of a restaurant I was working in at a Ski Resort in Colorado thought it was a shame that I liked girls. I had just moved out of my hometown of Wichita Falls, Texas for the first time to spend a winter season up in the Rocky Mountains. Wichita Falls (or just Wichita, as the locals call it, as we are so blinkered that we don't tend to even think as far out as Kansas) is a small Republican stronghold with an American

¹ Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020) p. ix.

Air Force training base and a history of high-school football rivalries and oil booms. Wichita Falls is smack bang in the intersection of the Bible Belt and Tornado Alley, making it a particular brand of culturally and environmentally hellish place. I thought that since Colorado was about to be the first state to legalise recreational cannabis it must've been open-minded. I didn't really know why I wanted it to be open minded yet, but I knew I wanted to be somewhere that didn't make me feel as 'other' as the folks in Texas tended to. I also hadn't ever seen snow stick for more than a few days before and the thought of a sparkling, sloped, soft, melting world stirred a deep sense of awe in me. I got a job waitressing at an Italian restaurant in Beaver Creek Resort (the irony of lesbians and beaver jokes would not occur to me for another five or so years after the boom of the Texan petrol station chain, Buc-ee's, whose mascot is Buc-ee the Beaver...). As soon as I got there I went and got my hair cut into one of those early 2010s pixie cuts with horrible long fringe and weird pointy sideburn-esque over-ear bits left long. Think Jenny Schecter, *The L Word* Season 2 (also lost on me for around another five years).

My first drive out of Texas:



Anyway, when my co-worker told me that the male sous-chef said it was a shame that I 'played for the other team', I immediately laughed and said that was ridiculous- that the thought hadn't ever crossed my mind. It actually hadn't, to be fair to me, at least I didn't think. It did then, though. And every single time I had refused to kiss a girl in a high school game of truth-or-dare or spin-the-bottle came rushing to the surface of my mind. I thought of the way this one woman had come out as bisexual when we were in undergraduate at my hometown university, and I had followed her immediately on every social media platform. At the time I chalked it up to the fact that all the boys at the bar made her sexuality an object of desire from the moment they discovered it. I thought about how I was the only single woman in my close friendship group, and how it was pretty much always like that since we were teens. I remembered that my first kiss had been with my best friend,

who came out as a gay man around two years later. I thought about my mother seeing an old colleague at the grocery store and whispering to my aunt 'that was the one who lived in that house with that other woman, and both their husbands were always working oil fields for months at a time, and once I went round for a drink and only one of the bedrooms looked used'. I thought about how in 6th grade I had been bullied by a boy who shoved me down the stairs and started a rumour that I was scissoring another girl in my grade who happened to be my only friend. I remembered how I was sat down in the office with him and her, and his parents and her parents and my parents as we were told that it was a disgusting rumour - a horrible thing to say about someone. I remember that he had to apologise, as did his parents, for the foul language and the perverted nature of his bullying, and how he was told that he should never ever say that about someone.

The next time I tried to move out of my hometown was in 2017. I had applied to a load of MA programmes abroad after my biological father had died unexpectedly the year before. I had been in Scotland in the summer of 2016 trying to figure out where I wanted to go next, so I missed saying goodbye. I was meant to be back in Texas just after my birthday on the 20th August and to begin applying for MA programmes. Instead I had got a call on the 16th that I was my father's next of kin and needed to give permission to move him into hospice care as his failing liver was terminal after his recent attempt to recover from alcoholism. He died as I was on the train from Inverness to Heathrow. I made sure the funeral was the day before my 24th birthday rather than on the day.

I had gone home, taken up my old waitressing job, and fallen into a deep depression. In January 2017 my cat, Sophia, got liver failure (the same thing my father had technically died from, albeit for different reasons). I quit my job, took out \$10,000 in credit cards for her surgeries, moved into my great-grandparents' derelict house in the middle of nowhere North-Texas, and tube-fed her back to health over the next four months. Somewhere within my cat-nursing alternate reality I realised I had less than half of my dead father's whole lifetime left. If our fates were somehow fucked-up and the same, I wanted to go a bit further afield than Colorado this time and find somewhere I could shake the forever feeling of un-belonging I had carried.

Sophia on the way to have the feeding tube removed from her neck:



I was accepted into an MA in London. I waited tables through the spring and summer and moved to the UK with Sophia the much-recovered cat in September. On the first day of the programme in October 2017, I realised that I had been put in all the same modules as this person who I thought was very... let's say 'cool' for now. I proceeded to try and spend time after class with this person for weeks and insisted on calling them my 'girl crush' to both my therapist and my housemates. (I know, just bear with me.) Eventually this person took me to what I now know is the Lesbian

Basement (how telling) in GAY and bought me a few £2 G&Ts. Later they kissed me whilst we were back at mine listening to the PRIDE 2017 Spotify playlist. All the things I had thought about back when that sous-chef said it was a shame I liked girls did not come bubbling up to the surface. What did was a feeling that I hadn't ever had words for, but that was the exact thing I had needed words for over the course of my entire life.

What bubbled up to the surface were all the moments that I had ever felt myself. Wholly, fully, actually, myself. The moments that I felt something of the person who was able to be in my body in the moment they kissed me. I remembered the first time I asked my Quarter Horse, Penny, for a sidestep and she gave it to me. I remembered carving open gourds with pocketknives and using them as cups to drink out of creeks in the heat of a Texan summer. I remembered crossing my arms over my chest and rolling on my side down steep hills despite the allergic hives I knew I would break out in later. I remembered nursing my cat back to life being what brought me back to life after my father's death. I remembered sitting on his grave that looked out over oil fields and trying to summon a breeze by blowing breath out through pursed lips. I remembered sleeping in the bed of a pickup truck when I got locked out and seeing what I thought must've been every star in the galaxy as I fell asleep. I remembered the herd of longhorns huddled under thin mesquite trees on the side of the highway I drove to the old house. I realised very suddenly that there were many things about the home I had rejected I wished to share with this person who was kissing me. This very much not a man person.

The view of my grandfather's field of mesquites from the back of one of his horses, *Kid*:



I realised what it was to be able to look back, even taking into consideration the fallibility of memory and rose-coloured glasses and understand that there were pieces of this self scattered in my past. They weren't in the places you would expect would help someone to understand their sexuality. They weren't in romantic, sexually intimate, or even flirtatious memories. They were scattered through the camping trips, horseback trail rides, days branding and castrating cattle. They were in the times I peeled the thick sunburnt skin off my shoulders against my mother's warnings. I found that I wanted to show this person, not my 'girl crush' but my love, the creeks and deserts and fields I was formed in. This was the first time in my adolescent and adult life that I had ever had any sort of desire to return to Texas or spend any amount of time there. This realisation,

which is still an ongoing process, was the conduit for what would become the questions I ask in this PhD. Exploring these questions of landscape, rurality, sexuality, memory, and belonging through a written performance practice seemed the intuitive way to express the importance of embodied knowledge and experience alongside theoretical and scholarly framework to produce a contribution which might further the visibility and understanding of marginalised rural queer and lesbian women and their formation of identities and orientations. It was, after all, in those wild, snotty, bleeding, windy, snowy, sweaty, red dirt desert moments that I was able to locate myself in my own topographical past. This experience of feeling to the fullest extent of my capabilities, this experience of eroticism commingling with memories of nonhuman encounters, allowed me to begin reconciling my emotions around the places I am from and the places I have found myself. My other greatest love, theatre, had not had a hand in helping me come to this realisation. It got me out of my hometown, made me feel the value of liveness, and allowed me to expand my own worldview. It did not, however, show me any reflections of my own queerness nor of how queerness might occur in rural spaces. This project is dedicated to that past self, that version of me who might have thrived had she seen some of herself on stages and in the play texts where she went for solace. May all the gay cowgirls, lesbian hillwalkers, and dyke backpackers see parts of themselves here.

Introduction

My own experience of 'coming out' or of arriving at myself, as I prefer to think of it, as detailed above, was in part due to a lack of visibility of lesbian and queer women in culture and media. It was also due to a deeply rooted perception in the US and UK of non-urban spaces as inhospitable to any subjectivities which do not conform to normative society. I was taught, by church and US countryside cultural norms, that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer people did not naturally belong outside innately immoral cities – as the book of Sodom and Gomorrah taught us in Southern Baptist bible study.² Since then I have become a queer feminist performance practitioner, focusing on working professionally as a dramaturg and playwright. My BA in Literature and Language and MA in Text and Performance helped me develop my specialities as a researcher alongside my creative and professional development. My Practice as Research is rooted in the work of the French Feminist Linguists such as Monique Wittig, Anna Livia, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Some of my previous experimental playwriting as research, for example, looked to 'The Laugh of the Medusa' to explore how the idea that women's pleasure exists outside of language might influence the shape words take on the page of a text – and how this then might influence the creation of that performance through disruption of linear phallic narrative forms.³ I have recently started experimenting more deeply with the process of writing – such as writing a scene exclusively whilst I am outdoors or using only

² *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*, Authorised King James Version, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Genesis 19:1-29.

³ Hélène, Cixous, et al. 'The Laugh of the Medusa.' *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>, [accessed 2 August 2023].

found materials in world building within a play - and how this might begin to shift the outcomes of performance practices. My own sexuality and gender, then, are always intertwined throughout my creative with the landscapes I am working in as well as the other beings in those landscapes. My creative feminist research inquiries into queer and lesbian belonging most often manifest through experimental texts that are inseparable from the landscapes and sites in which they are written or made.

This Practice as Research project challenges my childhood understandings of lesbian and queer women subjects and their relationship to rural lands. I question this transatlantic narrative of queer geographical belonging through a lesbian queer and feminist performance writing practice which seeks to engage and make visible rural lesbian subjectivities. It does this via a writing practice rooted in what I will establish as a nonhuman and erotic methodology formed through my experiments with process and form. Whilst this practice contributes to and interacts with site-specific theatre as it is widely understood within the UK theatre sector and more concretely defined later in this thesis, it also exists and reaches outside of site-specific practice. For this reason I will also use the term 'sited' or sited practice to define my own work. This shift and fluidity between site-specific and sited allows me to acknowledge the importance of site and landscape in my physical writing process as well as the site-specific performance my work speaks to when viewed from the perspective of the theatre industry. In this project, I offer a rural lesbian dramaturgical framework from which alternate queer rural identities might be re-written into performance landscape as well as into the cultural perception of rural land itself. In doing this I engage with interdisciplinary research - drawing from sexual geography, 1960s and 1970s

feminist press, Black erotic, and separatist movements, rural and site-specific theatre and performance practice and scholarship, and Indigenous scholarship on the constructedness of nature and the alternative of the nonhuman. This work has taken place, both in a disciplinary and existential sense, against a backdrop of the current climate crisis and the implications of environmental racism.

Whilst this is not the focus of my research inquiry, I do hope that an alternative way of relating to landscape and understanding belonging on land in creative performance texts is a positive offering to the theatre sector in how to approach its relationship to the climate and nature. The Texan landscape I was raised in had long been victim to the results of White European settlers disregarding Indigenous knowledge, as will be discussed later in this thesis, resulting in environmental catastrophe such as the Dust Bowl. Wichita Falls itself is surrounded by oil fields, oil pumps being a key feature of the landscape. Further, in August of 2022, as I was fully immersing myself in writing outdoors with a notepad and pen as part of my creative output for this project, I noticed the leaves in the forest I often visit had begun to turn much earlier than the years prior. I then encountered a *Guardian* article by Alys Fowler, whose *Hidden Nature* is mentioned again in a later chapter, which stated the turning was false and a symptom of climate catastrophe. In it she explains that the trees I was seeing had burnt leaves, a result of the record-breaking heat, rather than leaves turned to their hidden colours after giving their nutrients back to their trees. This shifting of meaning in the brown and crunching leaves as I walked with my notebook mirrored a shift in my own understanding of land through my Practice as Research – of more ominous. Fowler closes the article writing that ‘modern lives have swayed us to believe that we thrive only on

certainty, but we now have to sit with the uncertainty of the climate crisis. There is no single answer to it, and that is as true for our gardens and parks as it is for our society.⁴ One of the largest failings of our society regarding the climate and outdoor spaces is environmental racism and the unequal burden of the climate crisis on women and communities of colour.

According to the United Nations, a report published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2009 showed that 'people who are already most vulnerable and marginalized will also experience the greatest impacts.'⁵ For women, the UN cites the following as reasons for this impact:

Women are increasingly being seen as more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change, mainly because they represent the majority of the world's poor and are proportionally more dependent on threatened natural resources. The difference between men and women can also be seen in their differential roles, responsibilities, decision making, access to land and natural resources, opportunities and needs, which are held by both sexes. Worldwide, women have less access than men to resources such as land, credit, agricultural inputs, decision-making structures, technology, training and extension services that would enhance their capacity to adapt to climate change... Seventy per cent of the 1.3 billion people living in conditions of poverty are women. In urban areas, 40 per cent of the poorest households are headed by women. Women predominate in the world's food production (50-80 per cent), but they own less than 10 per cent of the land.⁶

On top of this, the European Central Bank commissioned a report in 2022 asking whether gender diversity in the workplace might mitigate the climate crisis. They found that even only a '1 percentage point increase in the percentage of female managers within the firm leads to a 0.5% decrease in CO2 emissions...also when controlling for institutional differences caused by more

⁴ Alys Fowler, 'The leaves are turning- but be under no illusions, this is not Autumn', *Guardian*, 31 August 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/aug/31/leaves-autumn-extreme-heat-trees-crops-nature>>, [accessed 10 July 2023].

⁵ Balgis Osman-Elasha, 'Women...In The Shadow of Climate Change', *United Nations Chronicle*, 2009, <<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/womenin-shadow-climate-change>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁶ Osman-Elasha

patriarchal and hierarchical cultures and religions' further, they found that overall workplaces with greater gender diversity in Europe 'reduced their CO2 emissions by about 5% more than firms with more male managers.'⁷

So, to think differently about the climate crisis we must – as this thesis will argue throughout – reconsider our gendered relationship to land ownership, land usage, and types of belonging on land outside of a Western patriarchal and colonial perspective. Further, according to the Princeton Student Climate Initiative's 2020 report on Racial Disparities and Climate Change, environmental racism means that '[p]eople of color are more likely to die of environmental causes, and more than half of the people who live close to hazardous waste are people of color.'⁸ Black British arts and climate scholar Leon Sealey-Huggins argues that the interconnectedness of arts, racism, and the climate crisis is underexplained in favour of a technical definition of climate change within communities of colour in the UK. He states that this narrative is failing 'to adequately address climate change [and] this failure is inseparable from the practices of racism endemic to the global social order...climate change is set to exacerbate existing disregard for Black life'⁹. In my citing Black and Indigenous feminist and ecological scholarship, then, I must also acknowledge that this scholarship is vital in understanding how to rectify the threat to life that exist as a result of environmental racism and the ongoing climate crisis. Whilst my work more directly contributes to

⁷ Yener Altunbas, Leonardo Gambacorta, Alessio Reghezza and Giulio Velliscig, 'Does gender diversity in the workplace mitigate climate change?', *European Central Bank Eurosystem Working Paper Series*, February 2022, < <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/scpwps/ecb.wp2650~3b693e6009.en.pdf>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁸ Aneesh Patnaik, Jiahn Son, Alice Feng and Crystal Ade, 'Racial Disparities and Climate Change', *Princeton Student Climate Initiative*, 15 August 2020, < <https://psci.princeton.edu/tips/2020/8/15/racial-disparities-and-climate-change>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁹ Leon Sealey-Huggins ed. Azeezat Johnson, Beth Kamunge, and Remi Joseph-Saibury, "'The Climate Crisis is a Racist Crisis": Structural Racism, Inequality and Climate Change', *The Fire Now: Anti-Racist Scholarship in Times of Explicit Racial Violence*, Google E-Book via Bloomsbury, 2018, < https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=b_80EAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA99&dq=environmental+racism+and+climate+crisis&ots=NmT-8j2Trx&sig=lz-SZaOQvTGezzQcIHxXplb8dHs#v=onepage&q=environmental%20racism%20and%20climate%20crisis&f=false>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

intersections of performance with gender and sexuality studies, I hope it also adds to the discourse around who should be at the forefront of the climate conversation within the performance sector and why.

Gender and sexuality scholar Judith Butler proposes both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of the body 'to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities.'¹⁰ This project seeks to use my own body as a playwright and theatre maker and my potential audience's body through performance to widen the cultural and historical possibilities of who might feel belonging in rural landscapes through a Practice as Research (PaR) or practice-based research process. My primary output here is the play which constitutes the final chapter of this thesis. The first four chapters explore the cultural and theoretical intersections this project stems from and in which it is urgently needed to intervene in ingrained perceptions of lesbian and rural identities.

The practice-based research I am presenting here primarily asks: What methodologies might contribute to a performance writing practice which re-inserts and makes visible rural lesbian women in a 'metronormative'¹¹ queer and feminist lineage that omitted them? How can critical concepts surrounding the nonhuman and erotic inform a dramaturgical framework which seeks to challenge persisting metronormative perceptions of land in the UK and US and articulate rural

¹⁰ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution' in *Feminist Theory Reader*, ed. by Carole McCann, Seung-kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 519–531 (p. 521).

¹¹ Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), p.37.

lesbian subjectivities? How might a sited erotic writing methodology engage with the nonhuman to disrupt metronormativity within performance practice and research? How might utilising an erotic and nonhuman methodology in a feminist written practice as research project open new modes of articulating rural lesbian subjectivities and establish alternative perspectives on landscape and queerness through sited performance practice?

To answer these questions, there are several terms which I must initially define and contextualise. These terms will be used throughout the thesis, and each will be expanded upon in later chapters, but it is important to have a grounding in them when moving through the research I am presenting as a whole. There is also some tension that arises in some terms that I have chosen to use throughout this thesis and how I have chosen to position them. For the terms to work as effectively as I would like them to, I will problematise this tension from the start. Firstly, the positioning of the term nonhuman in conjunction with a Black feminist erotic - both of which will shortly be defined in detail, for example, might carry connotations of the dehumanisation of Black and Indigenous women's bodies by white oppressors. When I speak to whiteness I speak to my own lived experience of it as a white woman from the south and to the larger social construct of whiteness my experience stems from, founded on the 'racialization of identity and the racial subordination of Blacks and Native Americans'¹² as stated by legal historian Cheryl Harris in her 1993 *Harvard Law Review* article 'Whiteness as Property'. Harris goes on to explain that '[a]lthough the systems of oppression of Blacks and Native Americans differed in form - the former involving

¹² Cheryl I Harris, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 106, no. 8, 1993, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1341787?casa_token=QJkTpA9kPAAAAAA%3AcngEXXnkvC-CLxOQuPU4UKMT5XEx3Z-nTDQe6VOWdPN1Go1ppdHXGnrCVhzRDsrltP0I8l0VxFGWX6sbuZCVMjU_KO15LQMCXKcqtobiH5f1zt6&seq=9>, [accessed 09 July 2023], p 1715.

the seizure and appropriation of labor, the latter entailing the seizure and appropriation of land - undergirding both was a racialized conception of property implemented by force and ratified by law.¹³ This same conception depended on the understanding of whiteness as a social status of superiority and innate entitlement to property rights, where '[o]nly white possession and occupation of land was validated'¹⁴. In more global terms, Steve Garner defines whiteness in and outside of the US as a social science problematic in his 2007 book *Whiteness: An Introduction* in the following list:

- 1 'White' is a marked racialised identity whose precise meanings derive from national racial regimes.
- 2 Whiteness as an identity exists only in so far as other racialised identities, such as blackness, Asianness, etc., exist.
- 3 Whiteness has been conceptualised over the century or so since it was first used, as terror, systemic supremacy, absence/invisibility, norms, cultural capital, and contingent hierarchies¹⁵

My own positionality is important, then, in that the concept of whiteness and its attached norms and hierarchies exist in direct opposition to the core concepts used in this thesis. I would even posit that whiteness, in the conceptual sense, is a cause of the types of exclusionary associations with rurality and the countryside I explore throughout this thesis. If whiteness is the exclusive entitlement to land ownership, then the landed gentry- who are discussed in depth alongside white American settlers in later chapters- exist in the context of these understandings of whiteness. Within this version of whiteness also exists specific types of oppression, such as

¹³ Harris, 'Whiteness', p 1716.

¹⁴ Harris, 'Whiteness', p. 1716

¹⁵ Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction*, (Routledge: London, 2007), p. 2.

misogynoir, which position Black women's bodies as property in line with white people's entitlement to own and possess property. As Black British feminist scholar Lisa Amanda Palmer writes:

Processes of displacement, othering and the continuing dehumanisation of Black women, whether in plain sight or out of sight, are mediated and regulated through ideological protections of and investments in White normativity and White hegemony underpinned by notions of White racial purity. It is therefore important that we name the explicit terms of this sexist racism as *misogynoir* to understand the boundaries of gendered anti-Blackness at this contemporary conjuncture.¹⁶

Within this, I acknowledge that the term nonhuman has also been used by academics outside of ecological disciplines in order to name the positioning of Black women by Whiteness. Gender Studies scholar Andrea Baldwin, for example, writes that 'women of color scholars...being presumed incompetent stems from a much deeper place, rooted in a white supremacist western episteme that constructs WOC, specifically Black women, as nonhuman.'¹⁷ Within her argument, however, Baldwin acknowledges the complexity of nonhuman as a term and value in the nonhuman itself in stating that within the 'Eurocentric positivist character of the academy...any nonhuman ways of knowing or doing, i.e. knowledge or methods articulated outside of a positivist approach, are accorded marginal curricular status'¹⁸. Black feminist philosopher and writer Sylvia Wynter that like whiteness can be understood as a social construct in service of colonialism and the Eurocentric state, human can be understood as both a 'theocentric conception' born out of Christian imperialism and/or as Man as a male political actor in the white state and in opposition

¹⁶ Lisa Amanda Palmer, "Diane Abbott, misogynoir and the politics of Black British feminism's anticolonial imperatives: 'In Britain too, it's as if we don't exist'", *The Sociological Review*, 68:3, May 2020, pp. 508-523, p. 509.

¹⁷ Andrea N. Baldwin, 'Presumed Nonhuman: Black Women Intellectuals and the Struggle for Humanity in the Academy', *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*, 22:1, 1 November 2021, pp. 11-37, p.12.

¹⁸ Baldwin, 'Presumed' p.12.

to 'women, who were their dependents.'¹⁹ Rather than try and become human in these Christian or Euro-political contexts, Wynter argues that the colonial human which accompanies colonial whiteness must be unsettled. She writes that 'one cannot "unsettle" the "coloniality of power" without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its overrepresentation.'²⁰ In building on Wynter's theories, philosopher Emily Anne Parker posits that a return to body and shift to the ecological is necessary in rejecting the concept of Man and 'human' constituted by 'cis/white/masculinity/ability/sexuality/class/nationality/geography [and] produced by a denial of its own specific bodiment, something that this body hides from itself.'²¹ On how to eliminate this version of human in order to liberate those who do not fall under its categories Parker writes the following:

"The human" and "the body" are expressions of a modern distinction between that which is political and human and transcending of the bodily (which is projected onto other bodies) and that which is precisely bodily and thus ecological. Because of this, clearly an ecological turn is necessary to counter the splitting of the political from the ecological. But to reunite the human and the ecological is for some bodies a doubling down on a violent equation that they have experienced all along²²

My use of nonhuman in defence of nonhuman ways of knowing, in offering scholarly Indigenous American ecological understandings of the nonhuman in hopes of unsettling British performance practices, and in practice as a way of writing collaboratively with site reaches towards this redescription whilst acknowledging the dehumanisation of Black and Indigenous women as a result of the current societal conceptualisations of humanness and whiteness. I will also go on to

¹⁹ p.272.

²⁰ p. 268.

²¹ Emily Anne Parker. 'The Human as Double Bind: Sylvia Wynter and the Genre of "Man."' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 32:3, 2018, pp. 439–49, p. 441.

²² Parker, 'Human', p. 442

define the nonhuman and the Black Feminist Erotic in more concretely and in relation to my creative practice in the terminology section of this chapter, and in the third chapter of the thesis.

In this initial discussion of the nonhuman/human and tensions/terms I will also acknowledge the queer nature of this project and the seemingly clashing use of binaries as a critical framework throughout this thesis. I understand on both a personal gendered level and on an intellectual level that binaries can be reductive, restrictive, and harmful. Aside from the human and nonhuman, the other main binary I use as a point of comparison in this thesis is that of the urban and rural. The aim of this framework, however, is to point out that these binaries are most often false and have been created by the societal ways of knowing and understanding them in line with a white, western, male, Christian, human hierarchy. As argued in defence of the aforementioned *l'écriture féminine*, which influenced my early career and was entering feminist discourse in France alongside the strands of feminism in the UK and US discussed in this project, there is no space in Euro-Western language to write the experience of the marginalised or of 'woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man'²³ – as Cixous writes in her influential 1975 essay coining the term, *The Laugh of the Medusa*.

José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* – another huge influence on my early queer research – argues that queerness is an ideal that is forever at the edges of our hope but not yet in our present reality.²⁴ 'Queerness' he states 'is a structuring and

²³ Hélène Cixous, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1:4, 1976, pp. 875-893, p. 875. Note: Cixous originally published in French in 1975 as referenced here, but the essay was translated into English the following year.

²⁴ José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.

educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.²⁵

There is not a word that I have discovered which encompasses what the nonhuman beings in my own life or practice mean to me. The way that whiteness and humanness are constructed in opposition to their binary others, queerness is understood in binary opposition to straightness. I offer that Muñoz chooses this term, despite some previous usage rooted in hate and discrimination, because he sees it as the most inclusive and full of potential for new understandings in a lineage of terms for alternative sexualities. I offer nonhuman as a structuring and educated mode of knowing our relationship to what we understand to be 'nature'/land/landscape/animal/organic beings that allows my writing practice to see and feel beyond accepted ways of knowing the nonhuman in the present. My practice seeks to know and perceive how the nonhuman communicates with me and other nonhuman beings in a site, and to translate that into something which can be preformed in order to create and embodied re-understanding of that site - who might belong there, and how the nonhuman has helped shape alternative subjectivities within landscapes colonially restricted to exist in comparison with the established norms. I set these binaries - rural/urban, human/nonhuman, man/woman, gay/lesbian, heteronormative/queer - in order to establish and problematise them before offering a practice which I hope works towards dismantling them and discovering new languages, frameworks and understandings.

²⁵²⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising*, p. 1.

Perhaps the most recognisable of the terms I have is 'LGBTQIA2S+'. This term is an expansion of the older 'LGBT' and 'LGBTQIA+' acronyms for the Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual community spectrum. '2S' is a shortening of '2Spirit' or 'Two-Spirit', a recently adopted term for Indigenous American 'queer' people. The term was originally proposed in 1990 by Elder Myra Laramie during the Third Annual Intertribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference in Winnipeg, Canada.²⁶ Two-spirit was translated from the Anishnaabemowin word 'niizh manidoowag' or 'two spirits' in order to capture the pre-colonial perspective that those who could see through an alternate masculine and feminine lens 'were seen as gifted and honoured in their community because they carried two spirits with them'²⁷, as stated by The Indigenous Foundation. Whilst there are over 500 Indigenous American cultures and understandings of two-spirit, many with their own terms, this is a move towards acknowledging the specific colonial oppression of queer Indigenous Americans.²⁸ Indigenous peoples were forced into government schools and made to study English language and Christianity, denying any understanding of queer identity as potentially positive within their inherited cultural context.²⁹ Explicitly including '2S' within my chosen acronym for the community to which this thesis seeks to contribute acknowledges this history as well as my own queer relationship with the Indigenous American landscape.

²⁶ Isabella Thurston, 'The History of Two-Spirit Folks', *The Indigenous Foundation*, <<https://www.theindigenousfoundation.org/articles/the-history-of-two-spirit-folks>>, [accessed 10/10/2022].

²⁷ Isabella Thurston, 'The History'.

²⁸ David Oliver, 'What does "Two-Spirit" mean? What to know about Two-Spirit indigenous LGBTQ identities', *USA Today*, (10 Dec 2021), <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2021/12/10/two-spirit-everything-know-indigenous-lgbtq-identities/6415866001/>>, [accessed 10/10/2022].

²⁹ David Oliver, 'What does "Two-Spirit" mean?'

This project is informed and inspired by my own personal experience of being from Wichita Falls, a place named for the Indigenous Caddoan Nation people the Wichitas and Taovayas. Both of these peoples were driven out of their homes and 15 miles north across the Red River by Anglo-American settlers in the 1800s.³⁰ Today if you drive those 15 miles north of Wichita, as we often did as bored teens, you will find a plethora of casinos named for Indigenous Nations - Comanche, Choctaw, Cherokee, Kiowa.³¹ My own childhood and adolescence were spent camping and hiking in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge on the weekends, a landscape again named for the Indigenous peoples which was home to military forces in the foothills meant to keep the residents of surrounding reservations under US control into the 1900s.³² The influence of these experiences is most present in the practice portion of this thesis. Further, there is a history in the American south of Anglo-Americans misappropriating Indigenous culture and claiming Indigenous heritage as a method of claiming a right to land. As written in *The Economist*, 'Southerners' Native American identity "prove" their ties to the soil, but it also allied them with a group that had taken up arms to resist federal authority.'³³ This meant that a white, post-Civil War confederate South could both lay an inherited claim to the land and project onto the Indigenous conflict with the US their own anti-Unionist sentiments.

How the Indigenous history in the American South relates to land treatment and colonial policing of queer identities in rural spaces necessitated an inclusion of Indigenous American scholars in

³⁰ Wichita County, 'Wichita County History', < <https://wichitacountytx.com/wichita-county-history/#:~:text=The%20area%20that%20became%20Wichita,middle%20of%20the%20eighteenth%20century>>, [accessed 12/13/2022].

³¹ Casino City, 'Casinos Near Border Map' :<<https://oklahoma.casinocity.com/thackerville/border-casino/map/nearest/>> , [accessed 10/09/2022].

³² Richard A. Marston and Dale K. Splinter, 'Wichita Mountains', *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <<https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=WI002>>, [accessed 10/10/2022].

³³ G.F., 'The controversies over claims to Native American ancestry', *The Economist*, (25th October 2018), <<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/10/25/the-controversies-over-claims-to-native-american-ancestry>>, [accessed on 27/10/2022].

forming my methodology. The transatlantic experience of my own queerness has led me to identify how the US and UK share a common lineage of shaping societal perceptions of land and belonging through ownership and power. It is for these reasons that the inclusion of 2S within my chosen acronym for the queer community in this project is vital. I will also acknowledge here that there are some pushes from the two-spirit community in North America to bring 2S to the front of the acronym 'to centre the experiences of those folks most marginalised by our society...Indigenous folks and specifically those that identify as Two-Spirit themselves'³⁴, as explained by researchers Arjana Palme and Carly Fleming. As this thesis is centred in the UK research environment and values the historical movement of the 'L' to the front in order to show appreciation for the lesbians who cared for gay and trans communities during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, I have chosen to use 'LGBTQIA2S+' in this instance.³⁵

Leading on from this, I will now explain my choice of terms surrounding the sexuality of my project demographic. I will use 'lesbian' first and foremost, as this is my own primary identifier and what chapter one and two of this project establish as the primary excluded subjectivity in US and UK performance practice and feminist studies. When I say 'lesbian' this is inclusive of all lesbians, such as nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, trans, he/him, and gender non-conforming lesbians. I do also occasionally refer to 'lesbian and queer' or 'queer and lesbian' women. This is because, whilst my practice submission exclusively explores rural lesbian subjectivity, the lack of visibility afforded to lesbians in culture and discourse comes to bear negatively on all LGBTQIA2S+ women. Further,

³⁴ Carly Fleming and Arjana Palme, 'Why 2SLGBTQIA+ and not LGBTQ anymore?', *everwell*, <<https://everwellcounselling.ca/blog-counselling-psychotherapy-mental-health/why-2slgbtqia-and-not-lgbtq-anymore>> [accessed 10/10/2022].

³⁵ Marie Cuffaro, 'Commemorating L Week – "Why L comes before G"', *investigo*, <<https://www.investigo.co.uk/blog/2021/02/commemorating-l-week-lgbtq+?source=google.com>>, [accessed 10/10/2022].

non-lesbian queer women in rural areas are likely to be affected similarly by the metronormative - which Jack Halberstam defines as privileging of a linear journey of the sad (typically male) queer in the country going to find themselves in the big city - narratives this project seeks to disrupt and therefore might also benefit from the project outcomes.³⁶ In the rehearsal and development period I will discuss in chapter four I specifically sought out a queer woman from the area of Texas I am from in order to gain an alternative queer perspective on my writing.

Whilst intentionally lesbian, then, the use of queer in describing the women I had in mind whilst completing the project establishes an explicit inclusivity not typically afforded to lesbians or queer women. In this, I hope to help bring 'lesbian' and lesbians into light as valuable contributors to both feminist and queer performance and research and leave the door open for other queer women's subjectivities. This is vital especially since, as performance scholar Sue-Ellen Case notes, 'the lesbian has been assigned to the role of the skeleton in the closet of feminism'³⁷. Performance scholar Sarah Mullan builds on Case's argument stating that there is an 'absence of lesbian subjectivities within queer performance scholarship'³⁸, the urgency of a project which intentionally extracts lesbians from the margins is clear. Scholars and artists such as Lynette Goddard and Mojisola Adebayo have fought to bring discussions of Black queer and lesbian representation to the forefront of UK academia and theatre in recent years.³⁹ The privileging in queer and feminist discourse of gay men as subjects, as this thesis will discuss in detail, has prevented a large shift to

³⁶ Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005)

³⁷ Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.33.

³⁸ Sarah Mullan, 'Queer Anachronisms: Reimagining Lesbian History in Performance', *Queer Dramaturgies. Contemporary Performance InterActions*, ed. by Alison Campbell and Stephen Farrier, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) pp. 244-256, p. 244

³⁹ See: Mojisola Adebayo and Lynette Goddard, *Black British Queer Plays and Practitioners: An Anthology of Afriquia Theatre*, (London: Methuen, 2022).

date. In contributing to the body of queer and lesbian performance scholarship outlined here, therefore I use lesbian as the primary term in this thesis to 'foreground gender in the consideration of non-heterosexual representations and as part of a reparative project'⁴⁰ which seeks to problematise the 'merging of gay male and lesbian experiences under the term queer'⁴¹

A key part of my seeking within this project to unravel the discursive knots associated with lesbianism created throughout feminist history, and of methodologically decentring the gay male subject from queer narratives, is engaging in what I call an erotic performance writing practice methodology. Erotic, here, is primarily grounded in the work of Black lesbian feminist scholar Audre Lorde. In her 1978 essay *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Lorde opens by defining the erotic as follows:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.⁴²

The idea of an unexpressed and unrecognized feeling deeply resonates with what I wrote in the prologue of this thesis. My experience of my own 'otherness' only became a tool with which I empowered myself after I recognised it as a resource, or as pedagogy scholar Nikki Jones writes, 'a means by which we know and orient ourselves to the world...an episteme, a critical mode

⁴⁰ Sarah Mullan, 'Lesbian Performance in London 1992-2015: Identity, Representation, and Queer Epistemologies' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2017), p. 13.

⁴¹ Mullan, 'Lesbian Performance', p. 13.

⁴² Audre Lorde, 'The Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic as Power', *Sexualities and Communication Journal*, (1978), 87–91 (87), <https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/11881_Chapter_5.pdf>.

through which we may attain excellence.⁴³ The orientation of my feelings of otherness allowed me geographically was that of a transatlantic life. It took this physical reorientation for me to realise that my sexual orientation was non-normative but also did not have to be 'other'. The erotic as a methodological tool for orienting lesbian subjectivity as valuable within performance practice and scholarship, therefore, felt intuitive.

Another important aspect of contextualising the erotic as a methodological tool within my practice-based research is clearly differentiating between the societal version of the erotic as simply sexual and the feminist version of the erotic which Lorde describes as follows:

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.⁴⁴

Whilst sexual intimacy is, of course, an important part of understanding my own queerness - it is also something I did not experience with a partner until into my mid-twenties. The erotic relationship I seek to explore in this project is one that has to do with feeling and experiencing a world in which I felt other without quite knowing why. There is some sexual eroticism in my written practice output, but it is not the key focus of my methodology. A key question within forming alternative sexual identities in rural spaces is how this might happen and what it might look like

⁴³ Thelathia "Nikki" Young, "'Uses of the Erotic' for Teaching Queer Studies," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3/4 (2012): pp. 301–305. abstract. [accessed 10 October 2022].

⁴⁴ Lorde, 'Uses', p. 88.

without other lesbian and queer women to experience it with. How might lesbian and queer women explore, feel, express, and eventually understand themselves in a rural context?

In order to discuss how rural queer and lesbian women might be brought to an equitable position in feminist and queer performance and scholarship, I must define the rural and contextualise it within the bounds I have set out for this project. The rural I am speaking to is, of course, the rural of my childhood as well as of my current residence – these being specifically the surrounds of Wichita Falls and Wichita Mountain, Texas and Oklahoma and Basildon Park, West Berkshire. It is also wider than that, though, it is the conceptualisation of rural in a majority white British and American settler colonial, theocratic, and patriarchal society which – as this thesis will continue to discuss – establishes restrictive views and ideas of who belongs in the rural and what the rural is for. To begin to establish the specifics of this rural I will begin by citing three different dictionary definitions. Firstly, the *Oxford Dictionary of Agriculture and Land Management* (2019) defines ‘rural’ as:

“of the countryside”, it is a common description of areas outside of urban developments such as cities and towns. Farmland and forest areas would normally be described as rural, and the term encompasses not just the geographic areas, but also a general description of, for example, populations, housing, development, and crime. Different countries have differing definitions of what constitutes rural, with the areas usually having lower densities of population and smaller settlements such as villages.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Will Manley, Katharine Foot, and Andrew Davis. ‘rural.’, *A Dictionary of Agriculture and Land Management*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199654406.001.0001/acref-9780199654406-e-1912> [accessed 10th December 2022].

Of this definition, the idea that rural is not just geographic but also a descriptive term for the types of domesticity in spaces is incredibly useful. Further, the idea that any area outside of an urban development might be described as rural is in line with how rurality is spoken to in this thesis. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2022) definition moves further away from rural as only a description of geographic place. The adjective definition given is:

- a. Of a person: living in the country as opposed to a town or city; engaged in country occupations; having the appearance or manners of a country person; (in early use also depreciative) lacking in elegance, refinement, or education; boorish.
- b. *gen.* Of, relating to, or characteristic of the country as opposed to a town or city; situated or occurring in the country. Opposed to *urban*.⁴⁶

Key here are both the opposition to urban and the presumed appearance and manners of someone rural. Whilst the latter part of a. tells us that those manners and appearances equate to a lack of refinement - there is no real referent for them as they precede the pejorative list. As I will argue throughout this project, as the pre-conceived notions of who belongs in rural spaces have been established through a heteronormative lineage of Anglo-Western relationships to land based on the entitlement to possession of whiteness and privileged definition of human as white/cis/heterosexual Man discussed by Emily Anne Parker. The definition in the *Oxford Dictionary of Geography* (2015) further supports this stance in citing Keith Halfacree and Michael Woods when defining the rural:

⁴⁶ 'rural, adj. and n.' *OED Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), <www.oed.com/view/Entry/168989>, [accessed 25 December 2022].

“It calls upon the connections we have long made between rural life and food, cultivation, community, nature, wild freedom, and masculine patriarchal power, and the many contradictions we have also so long associated with the rural, such as desolation, isolation, dirt and disease...” [and] “it seems that the real power in the British countryside is the very idea of rurality itself”.⁴⁷

The close pairing of freedom and masculine patriarchal power here again bring to question who might be free in rural spaces, and what they might be free to do. Even in the US where a large proportion of poverty exists, there are still strongholds of rural power held by the extremely wealthy in the form of mansions, ranches, and acreage - much like their British forefathers. Isolation is also a term which will be called upon both in my practice and in chapters three and four in relation to the rural when exploring how the nonhuman might contribute to queer joy and resilience in rural spaces. Finally, the concept of rurality as an idea which holds some power in Britain (and as I will go on to explore in chapter three, the US through its lineage of settler colonialism) might allow deeper insight into the metronormative narratives which drive miserable LGBTQIA2S+ folks out of the country and into the city to find joy. I will sometimes use ‘rural and regional’ and sometimes ‘non-urban’ in place of rural in order to call back to these varied definitions and de-centre the importance of rural as simply desolate.

The rural in relation to my thesis, then, is a primarily English and Texan rural. The social and behavioural patterns in that rural which I have found most restrictive to my own identity are also those which stem from the constructed whiteness, Christianity, and settler colonial idealism that

⁴⁷ Keith H. Halfacree ‘Talking about rurality: Social representations of the rural as expressed by residents of six English parishes’, *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 11 no. 1 (1995) pp. 1-20. and Michael Woods, *Rural Geography: Processes, Responses and Experiences in Rural Restructuring*, (London: Sage Publications, 2011) cited in Susan Mayhew, ‘rural’, *A Dictionary of Geography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199680856.001.0001/acref-9780199680856-e-2680?rskey=mEKHmq&result=1>>, [accessed 10 December 2022].

establish the norms of America, Canada, and the United States. As this project is rooted in my own lived experience of how the nonhuman in rural areas allowed me to see past the binary of a puritan rural and immoral urban, however, I chose to narrow the scope of my research to the UK and the US as I have never been to Canada. On the other side of the spectrum, it could be argued that the rural I am speaking to is specifically the Southeast of England - where I have had most of my negative experiences in relation to sexism and homophobia. I have, on the other hand, had a mostly positive experience of existing in non-urban outdoor spaces in the North of England, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, and the island of Ireland. All of those places, though, are still implicit in the aforementioned binary constructs which define our understanding of belonging in the rural. So, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs - the rural in relation to this project is somewhere that does not have easy access to an urban area with cultural resources like museums and producing theatres. It is somewhere that socioeconomic barriers would easily prevent a resident there from accessing any of these resources. It is a place where the nonhuman might more often be encountered than the human. It is a place where the masculinist and heteronormative ideals make the safety of anyone who appears to hover on the fringes or outside of it as though they probably ought not walk-through fields or down woodland footpaths alone. It is also the areas in the US where Indigenous reservations are isolated from water sources and urban commerce but surrounded by lands that are now often part of National Park systems. It is not a rural outside of the Eurocentric ideal of rural which will continue to be discussed. It is not a global or a universal rural, but rather a partially subjective and partially constructed rural which mingles with ideas of heritage, countryside, the wild-west, rambling, adventure, and sometimes fear.

This project interrogates why non-urban spaces are deemed to be spaces without immediate or obvious access to discourse or visibility regarding non-normative sexual identity formation – places where people have more regular encounters with nonhuman beings than constructed objects. Those places which are stereotyped, in my Southern American experience, as ‘nowhere’, ‘backwards’, ‘redneck’, ‘bumpkin’, ‘hillbilly’, ‘country’, ‘flyover’, etc. When I refer to lesbian or queer women in terms of the rural, I mean women who reside primarily in these spaces, or who formed a significant part of their identity in these spaces. The rural and regional which is significant here is more of a cultural quality than a rigid geographical confine based on available resources or access to services – that is to say, that even in places which have shopping malls and cinemas, or motorways and thriving high streets, there can be a sense of rurality in how difference or change is dealt with and reacted to. Scott Herring uses a similar approach to including ‘regional’ places in definitions of the in his sociological research on rurality and metronormativity, which will also be further defined in chapter two. He argues that although some of the populations he was studying were based in spaces considered urban or metropolitan by the US census (for example, southern cities such as Macon, Georgia or Montgomery, Alabama) he classified them as rural within a cultural spectrum.⁴⁸ The way in which the people in his study experienced constructed spaces, understood cultural capital, and structured their communication was more significant than the population density or the census definition.

⁴⁸ Petra Doan and Daniel P Hubbard, ‘Queering Rural Planning’ in *The Routledge Companion to Rural Planning*, ed. by Mark Scott, Nick Gallent and Menelaos Gkartzios (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

Despite the 2000 US Census definition of an urban space as anywhere there are more than 1000 per block, Herring argues that within these areas are 'performative geographic spaces that have enabled individuals or group subjects to imagine themselves as distinct from the spatial performatives of the "urban" or the "metropolitan."'49 My hometown of Wichita Falls, Texas, for example, is defined as a city but its distance from the nearest major metroplex areas and its roots in cattle-drives and oil drilling allow it to exist in a culturally rural space. Furthermore, as sociologist Amin Ghaziani demonstrates, queer women in rural spaces are less often the focus of homophobia than their male counterparts, often invisible in their masculinity when working in roles requiring manual labour and visible in their femininity only as desirable partners to heterosexual men. Ghaziani states that lesbian and queer women 'who perform masculinity in rural environments (by working hard labor or acting tough, for example) are not as stigmatized as effeminate gay men'⁵⁰. This means that the typical negative experiences gay men have with being perceived as homosexuals might not come to bear as intensely on rural lesbian lives. This also means, though, that lesbians and queer women in these spaces might have no way of perceiving one another and therefore no means of exploring multiple experiences of sexual identity formation.

Another important term to mention here in relation to the need for this research and its dealings in the rural, that will be used throughout the thesis and expanded on in depth in chapter two, is metronormativity. I have positioned metronormativity within this project as a symptom of how the

⁴⁹ Scott Herring, 'Southern Backwardness: Metronormativity and Regional Visual Culture', *American Studies*, 48:2 (2007), 37–48 (38)

⁵⁰ Ghaziani, Amin, 'Lesbian Geographies', *Contexts*, 14:1 (2015) <<https://contexts.org/articles/lesbian-geographies/>>. [accessed 13 November 2022].

US and UK relate to land. The term was originally coined by Jack Halberstam in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) in order to reveal 'the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern...sexual identities'⁵¹ It has since been used by researchers across disciplines in the US and UK in discussing 'the limitations and erasures involved in constructing the urban as the authentic space of LGBTQ lives and liberations'⁵² as described by Julie Podmore. Metronormativity, then, is the concept that queer people can only see the rural as a negative space to exist in and the urban as the only authentic space to form an identity. As a lesbian from the rural, living again in the rural, who temporarily followed a metronormative timeline, I must then question how this trajectory was established and what subjectivities might be employed to disprove and disrupt it.

Apart from LGBTQIA2S+ identities, there is an urgent need to culturally reclaim rural landscapes for multiple marginalised identities in Britain. Nature writer Anita Sethi's recent book *I Belong Here* (2021) details her experience of hiking the British countryside after experiencing racial abuse there and how her 'connection to nature is refracted through her experience as a woman of colour'⁵³, as summarised by Fiona Sturges in a 2021 *Guardian* interview. Sethi herself states that her 'journey of reclamation is one of prose as well as place, of both routes and roots.'⁵⁴

Archaeologist Eugene Costello notes the cultural and historical significance of British land to non-elite rural residents as it contains a huge amount of landscapes that 'have been largely

⁵¹ Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), p.37.

⁵² Julie A Podmore, 'Disaggregating Sexual Metronormativities: Looking Back at 'Lesbian' Urbanisms', *The Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities* ed. Gavin Brown and Kath Browne (Abingdon: Routledge, 19 May 2016), <<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613000.ch3>>, pp. 21-28, p. 21, [accessed 12 December 2022].

⁵³ Fiona Sturges, 'I Belong Here by Anita Sethi review – a healing journey', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/apr/21/i-belong-here-by-anita-sethi-review-a-healing-journey>> [accessed 21 November 2022].

⁵⁴ Sethi, *I Belong Here*, quoted by Sturges.

unaffected by mechanised agriculture, and therefore sometimes preserve extensive surface traces of pre-modern human activity, including hillforts, field boundaries, and the settlements of non-elite people.⁵⁵ Today, although an in-depth registry of landowners in the UK is lacking, we know that approximately 30% of land is the property of landed aristocracy and gentry because of the established hierarchies of conceptual whiteness and humanness which accompanies colonialism and imperialism.⁵⁶

This means that the histories of those people and the objects which hold that history aren't, and mightn't ever, be accessible to them. The working-class families who descended from those who built the ancient field boundaries have never and still do not own the land they were built upon, for instance. Even as I was finalising this thesis, a wealthy hedge fund manager won in a court case against Dartmoor National Park wherein he claimed the historic right to free roaming recreation in the park did not apply to wild camping and he should therefore be able to eject people from his land (some 4,000 acres within the National Park).⁵⁷ This project seeks to re-insert lesbian subjectivities into British landscapes and cultural memory through a sited writing practice, and thereby open space in performance to articulate more diverse rural experiences in a time when access to land for the many is being encroached upon by the landowning few.

⁵⁵ Eugene Costello, 'The Colonisation of Uplands in Medieval Britain and Ireland: Climate, Agriculture and Environmental Adaptation', *Medieval Archaeology*, 65:1, 151-179 (151).

⁵⁶ Guy Shrubsole, 'Who owns England? History of England's land ownership and how much is privately owned today', *Countryfile*, 2019, <<https://www.countryfile.com/news/who-owns-england-history-of-englands-landownership-and-how-much-is-privately-owned-today/>> [accessed 10 November 2022].

⁵⁷ Helena Horton, 'Right to wild camp in England lost in Dartmoor court case', *The Guardian*, 13 January 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/13/dartmoor-estate-landowner-alexander-darwall-court-case-right-to-camp>>, [accessed 13 January 2023].

I will engage in my performance writing practice through what I will establish throughout this thesis dissertation to be a sited erotic and nonhuman methodology. In chapters three and four I will discuss in detail my choice to call my practice 'sited' rather than 'site-specific' or 'immersive', for example. It is in part to distance my practice from the feeling of capitalist marketing and forced interactivity that often accompanies the latter two terms.⁵⁸ It is also, more importantly, an acknowledgement of the multidisciplinary nature my practice took on as it evolved through my own shifting geographical location and the ongoing changes of how humans could access space during the pandemic that lasted throughout most of my thesis journey. It is the final term I will define in this introductory chapter, though, that I feel functions as the connective tissues of this project. The 'nonhuman' as terminology and research area is something I discovered after my research had already begun. I began with an interest in what nature writing as a literary genre might have to offer performance practice dealing with rurality. As will be discussed in chapter four, it is a genre heavily dominated by men and geared towards the middle class - neither of which are a main intersection with lesbian identities. I noticed that the nature writing by women I was reading (Alys Fowler, Lucy Jones, Nan Shepherd, Joy Harjo, Zakiya Mckenzie, Jackie Kay, Anita Sethi) had different approaches to form and structure than the more traditional male writers (Robert Macfarlane & Stephen Moss). Even the title of my favourite Nan Shepherd work, *The Living Mountain* (1977) assigns a different sort of emotion to what is typically written about under the broad and loaded umbrella of 'nature'.⁵⁹ It was my selection for a book club in the Spring of 2021. I remember discussing the following excerpt:

⁵⁸ Will Gore, 'When site-specific theatre is just too vague', *The Guardian*, 9 January 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2012/jan/09/site-specific-theatre>>, [accessed 14 December 2022].

⁵⁹ Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008).

Blizzard is the most deadly condition of these hills. It is wind that is to be feared, even more than snow itself. Of the lives that have been lost in the Cairngorms while I have been frequenting them (there have been about a dozen, excepting those who have perished in plane crashes) four were lost in blizzard. Three fell from the rock—one of these a girl. One was betrayed by the ice-hard condition of a patch of snow in May, and slipped. All these were young. Two older men have gone out, and disappeared. The body of one of these was discovered two years later. Of the four who were caught in blizzard, two died on 2 January 1928, and two on the same date in 1933. The former two spent their last night in the then disused cottage where I have since passed some of the happiest times of my life... It was days later till they found them; and one of the men who was at the finding described to me their abraded knees and knuckles. The elder of the two was still crawling, on hands and knees, when they found him fast in the drift. So quick bright things come to confusion. They committed, I suppose, an error of judgment, but I cannot judge them. For it is the risk we must all take when we accept individual responsibility for ourselves on the mountain, and until we have done that, we do not begin to know it.⁶⁰

I recall two of the men in the club feeling that this section was particularly cold. They felt Shepherd should have had more empathy in writing about the deaths she describes. I felt the opposite. My experience reading this section was a sort of serene understanding. As someone who has experienced a significant amount of death, there was a quality to Shepherd's matter-of-fact narrative that made me feel the deaths were neither good nor bad – they simply were. Around the same time I had been looking into Indigenous scholarship on the US feminist Lesbian Land Movement that will be discussed in detail in chapter one. I had also begun my practice writing and was feeling stuck in the development of character. It was at this time that the term nonhuman seemed to enter my sphere of awareness from several places at once, as though fated. I will acknowledge here that I have encountered other terms which seek to communicate the same or similar ideas that have become popular in scholarly and ecological

⁶⁰ Shepherd, pp. 92-95

discourse. In the field of international studies as described by ethics researcher Audra Mitchell, for example, 'the field of non-, more-than-, and post-human approaches... challenge mainstream ideas of "the human" or "humanity" and highlight their exclusions.'⁶¹ Further, *Europe Now Journal* ran a special research feature in 2021 titled 'Rethinking the Human in a Multispecies World' which argued in relation to non-, more-than, other-than, post, trans, and anti-human that 'this vocabulary is still unfixed, constantly evolving in meaning and content to reflect a dynamic critical intervention about what it means to be human as humanity must face various catastrophes' and that what 'these concepts all seek to do is guide us to transform our human self-consciousness around a pluralist ethos that welcomes others' ideals, voices, perspectives, and modes of experiencing the world.'⁶² In this way, I will likely continue exploring all of the terms which encompass this shift away from the Anthropocene. Within this project I have chosen the nonhuman for the reasons that will be described in the following paragraphs and chapters, but also perhaps to highlight the lack of these discussions - in relation to this deep alteration in knowing and understanding oneself - within. performance practice and the theatre sector. The 'non' of nonhuman sparked a sort of acknowledgement in me that the other terms listed above do not, an acknowledgement that the lack of this way of thinking is also reflected in my own lack of self understanding especially in relation to my gender and sexuality The relationship between the nonhuman and lesbian or queer women in the rural - and the ability of

⁶¹ Audra Mitchell, 'Nonhuman, More-Than-Human and Post-Human International Relations and International Studies', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia*, 31 January 2023, < <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-754;jsessionid=7E3D5B837F276F114D2ACF1B5EA049A3#:~:text=%E2%80%9CMore%2Dthan%2Dhuman%E2%80%9D.of%20being%20of%20the%20former.>>, [accessed 09 July 2023].

⁶² Hélène B. Ducros, 'Rethinking the Human in a Multispecies World', *Europe Now Journal*, 9 November 2021, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2021/11/07/rethinking-the-human-in-a-multispecies-world/>, [accessed on 07 July 2023].

the former to help the latter perceive the ways in which they are othered – is key to this project and to the empowerment of those women,

Further, the idea that humans might ‘have social relationships with nonhumans, who are nevertheless regarded as persons’⁶³, as stated by anthropologist Alexandre Surrallés in his study on the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is the concise understanding of how I have integrated the nonhuman into this project. Rather than a ‘nature’ which has been ingrained to be separate from us as human, I reframe the language of my research and practice and use nonhuman to interrogate how queer people might differently relate to the nonhuman in rural spaces. If the nonhuman can provide a societal relationship outside of the normative human one, then a lesbian rural experience might not be one of isolation or rejection. The term reaches past nature in that it equalises humans and all other nonhuman organisms on the planet in an actual way. Rather than imagining ourselves as part of ‘nature’, thinking in terms of the nonhuman ideologically shifts those beings into part of our human societal structures. Indigenous feminist scholar Kim Tallbear writes that thinking of nonhuman livelihood as it might be affected by human politics, economics, and culture ‘is both methodologically and ethically innovative’⁶⁴ in that it disrupts the ‘discrediting languages that would see animal gifts to humans as metaphor rather than reality.’⁶⁵ For instance, in 2017, Indigenous discourse regarding nonhuman personhood saw the ‘Whanganui [become] the first

⁶³ Alexandre Surrallés, ‘Human rights for nonhumans?’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (2017), vol. 7 no. 3, pp. 211-235, p. 212.

⁶⁴ Kim Tallbear, ‘Why Interspecies Thinking Needs Indigenous Standpoints’, *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, (18 November 2018), <<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/why-interspecies-thinking-needs-indigenous-standpoints>>, [accessed 12 November 2022].

⁶⁵ Tallbear, ‘Why’.

river in the world to be recognised as an indivisible and living being... establishing a unique legal framework rooted in the Māori worldview of the Whanganui tribes, who revere the river as a tupuna, or ancestor⁶⁶ as reported in the *Guardian*. By legally granting Whanganui personhood within the framework of Māori relationships to the nonhuman, indigenous ways of knowing disrupted the reality of existing Anglo-Western frameworks for land, rights, and belonging.

Following on from belonging, in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2005) Sara Ahmed proposes that 'if orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as "who" or "what" we inhabit spaces with.'⁶⁷ She positions the question of orientation as a spatial question in order to explore the queer relationship to objects through phenomenology. If nonhuman entities are considered persons with orientations of their own, and livelihoods they share with humans on shared landscapes, then attention to them might allow rural lesbian subjectivities to be explored outside of metronormative and male-centred narrative structures. If nonhuman entities have their own paths and trajectories then those moments where human paths intersect with theirs might provide an alternative formative experience which can then be encoded into new understandings of the landscape in which the experience occurred. If sexual orientation might be in part a comprehension of how and with whom we reside in a particular place, then sexual identity might be formed in moments of residence with nonhuman beings just as easily as with other human beings, despite metronormative conceptions of and pressures on queer identities existing solely

⁶⁶ Jeremy Lurgio, 'Saving the Whanganui, Can Personhood Rescue a River?', *The Guardian*, Nov. (2019)

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/30/saving-the-whanganui-can-personhood-rescue-a-river> [accessed 22 April 2021].

⁶⁷ Sara Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 1

in populated urban spaces. So, within this project, the nonhuman became not only an ethical and methodological framework for articulating a lesbian rural in my performance writing practice, but also a way to connect with the feminist erotic and craft an alternative dramaturgy on which to build my practice outcome.

It is important to note here the way in which I conceptualise dramaturgy and how I will use dramaturgy throughout this thesis. My understanding of dramaturgy is in part due to my education and in part due to the way I have positioned myself as and worked as a dramaturg professionally. My earliest interaction with dramaturgy was in high-school, I was around 16, and I was directing a half-hour version of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 play *No Exit* for the district school drama competition. I, of course, had to figure out a way to cut the roughly hour and a half play to a third of its original length.⁶⁸ I also needed to find a translation that worked for teens. In the midst of splicing together a few versions and furiously finding the essential bits of the story one afternoon, my drama teacher poked his head in and said something to the effect of 'you might make a good dramaturg, kid.' The word stuck with me but has shifted meaning throughout my work as a dramaturg in more conventional venues like Oxford Playhouse and more flexible spaces like The Gate (Notting Hill), and from something based in text and editing to something more live, fluid, and holistic. During my MA I was taught both dramaturgy and playwrighting by Katalin Trencsényi – the 2023 recipient of the Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding achievement in Dramaturgy, author of *Dramaturgy in the Making*, and founder of dramaturgs'netowrk, who gained her PhD in Hungary and now lectures in Finland. This is relevant as I believe there is a large

difference in how the UK and US conceptualise dramaturgy and how Europe conceptualises dramaturgy. In the former, in my professional and academic experience, dramaturgy is a text-based skill which is typically relegated to the literary or new work department of a producing theatre or employed for a production in which the main relationship is with the playwright of that production. This definition of dramaturgy, as textual and something separate from the performance and representation of that text and its subjects on stage or in performance, is highly restrictive.

I, instead, understand dramaturgy as the sort of tendons in a performance process. Dramaturgy is something that is both in the text and in the room, with the dramaturg acting as an observer and questioner who considers every possible angle of input and outcome as it relates to the vision for the project and the representative work that project is doing in its production for an audience. This observation and inquiry extend from the core structure of a play to the minute visual and contextual details gathered throughout the practice process which intentionally consider the historical, socio-political and geographical context of a project as well as the vision of the director and playwright. The guidance for working with dramaturgs on the dramaturgs' network website states:

The dramaturg approaches the performance text and the process differently than the director. They look at the project through the ideas of the director. By looking at the ideas, the material, the space informed by the director's vision we can act as a first audience and a first critic early on. Coming to the process from this angle we can help ensure that the vision of the project is realised; from the big picture to the small gestures and details. You could say that the dramaturg may function as a critical advocate for the drama text or source material as it becomes the performance text. Or that the dramaturg is the advocate for the

audience, as the informed spectator... Through sensitive observation, questioning and analysis the dramaturg brings unexpected angles, perspective, and insight to the project taking it into places and possibilities that might otherwise be missed... We may be part of the birth of the project, part of the initial idea or spark. The dramaturg could be part of the playtext selection, or be asked to work on the playtext or translation selected. They could be part of the programming team or work with the director and writer on developing a new playtext or translation.⁶⁹

The dramaturg, then, is a fluid entity whose primary concern is the message of a project and the coherence of that message in every potential aspect and outcome. I argue that this, in itself, is a concern with representation and the effects that representation will have on those who are watching it (and most especially, perhaps, those who are being represented). The erotic nonhuman dramaturgy I propose is a way of observing and inquiring during the process of shaping a creative text which might allow an alternative site-specific writing practice which acknowledges alternative representations of rural queer and lesbian women on stage. In this, an erotic nonhuman dramaturgy uses scholarly contributions to engage with the beings in site that might provide an alternative and joyful experience for queer women which goes against the narrative of the rural being inhospitable to LGBTQIA2S+ people. Dramaturgy throughout this project extends beyond a literary or narrative understanding, and into an intentional form of critical inquiry which is weaved into the creative writing process with a final representational site-specific performance to an audience in mind.

Finally, the last terms I will acknowledge in relation to their fluidity in this project and my own experience as a researcher and practitioner are theatre and performance. I consider myself most

⁶⁹ Frauke Franz, John Keefe, Hanna Slättne and Katalin Trencsényi, 'working with a dramaturg', *dramaturgs'network resources*, 2022, <<https://www.dramaturgy.co.uk/working-with-a-dramaturg>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

broadly a creative writer. Most of my writing I would consider playwrighting, though I have been told some of it is unstageable. Perhaps it is this experimental core of my writing, that experimentation which Lyn Gardner assigns to feminist playwrights, which drove me towards site and out of prosceniums and black boxes. I also write a bit for print, for screen, and academically. I find that all these forms tend to bleed into the other and coexist within my practice as a whole. Theatre feels, to me and my career, like an umbrella term used for the main discipline or industry I have built myself through. Performance feels like the places I have carved out which don't necessarily fit into the boundaries Theatre brings alongside its histories. Theatre, though, is still the thing that first made me appreciate the importance of liveness or how words might change when they are spoken just to you as an audience. Theatre as a term brings to mind certain behavioural and social connotations. It likely brings to mind Shakespeare, of course, who in his own time wrote for the common people who didn't mind being south of the river but is now lauded as the great playwright. For me it brings to mind something incredibly out of reach, something for the rich, for the cultured, for the people who could afford to be there. It brings to mind separated seating - the gods, the stalls, the places you sit so that everyone else in the theatre knows how much money you've probably spent on the ticket. It brings to mind scoping out the stalls at the National Theatre so that I could move into an empty seat during intermission and catch the second half up close. It also brings to mind the Ancient Greeks, a structure, and a specific amount of acts. Structure in general, really, is what Theatre brings to mind. Performance, on the other hand, has a very different set of connotations. Performance feels freer, and more associated with the fine arts. Performance art feels less like it needs a rehearsal with a stage

manager and a costume crew, but then, much of the work I have done at theatres has not had these things either.

In the introduction to his 1973 article 'Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance' theatre and performance scholar Richard Schechner writes that the 'phenomena called either/all "drama," "theatre," "performance" occur among all the world's peoples and date back as far as historians, archeologists, and anthropologists can go...coexistent with the human condition.'⁷⁰ In this estimation, the important thing is not the difference in the terms but the commonality of using this type of communication in human interactions. On the other side of that there are those like Marina Abramović, who calls herself the grandmother of performance art, who argue that to 'be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake: there is a black box, you pay for a ticket, and you sit in the dark and see somebody playing somebody else's life [whilst] Performance is just the opposite...It's about true reality.'⁷¹ I would argue that this is a reductive take on both sides, however, which undervalues the power of performance to be frivolous and the power of theatre to speak to reality - especially within the minds of those watching. I believe in a more interdisciplinary way of viewing these terms, whilst acknowledging their individual histories and connotations I do not necessarily find them useful in the context of this thesis. This is in part due to my own experience of them being restrictive as a practitioner. As previously mentioned, I call myself a playwright through my writing crosses boundaries because I feel this is an act of

⁷⁰ Richard Schechner, 'Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance', *The Drama Review*, 17:3, 1973, pp. 5-36, <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-drama-review-tdr/article/abs/drama-script-theatre-and-performance/BB7B0897446CB865304F96F99994BC25>>, p. 5, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁷¹ Chris Wilkinson, 'Noises off: What's the difference between performance art and theatre?', *Guardian*, 20 July 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2010/jul/20/noises-off-performance-art-theatre>>, [accessed 08 July 2023].

pushing back against what is acceptable in certain spaces. I submit my experimental texts to contests and submission windows for playwrighting, because this is where they best fit in the terms the creative sector utilises, despite the text's nature being perhaps more closely aligned with poetic or experimental performance texts. Overall, I am situating myself and my practice and research in the liminal space between theatre and performance, in the hopes that this project contributes something vital to them both in the form of a nonhuman and erotic dramaturgy which opens space for alternative representations of rural queer and lesbian women on land.

Now that I have briefly defined and grounded the main terms I will be using throughout this thesis, I will summarise the chapters to come that will expand on the ideas and questions presented in this introduction. Chapter One primarily asks what the lesbian and feminist methodologies which successfully engaged rural queer women in the height of Women's Liberation might contribute to performance writing which seeks to articulate rural lesbian subjectivities now. In seeking to answer this I will first explore how lesbian subjectivities were treated in transatlantic feminist discourse throughout the 1960s and 1970s. I will then set up the normative culture and societal attitudes towards lesbians and queer women during the time period. Finally, I will present methodological responses to this normative culture in the form of UK lesbian alternative magazine *Sappho* and the US separatist Lesbian Land Movement. This historical methodological grounding gives insight into possible dramaturgical departures from the metronormative trajectory explored in the following chapters. Chapter Two then lays out what metronormativity is in detail, and how it has been a major factor in the omission of lesbian subjects in public discourse in favour of culturally privileging gay male narratives. I then outline

the lineage of land ownership and perceptions of 'nature' established in the UK which have led to transatlantic elitist and normative views of rurality. Next I give an historic overview of how British land became 'property' in a legal sense, and its role in the establishment of settler colonialism in the US. Finally, this chapter will introduce in detail concepts surrounding the nonhuman and erotic in order to question how they might disrupt and rearticulate the metronormative history and treatment of land described in the chapter.

Immediately after the second chapter I have included an Interlude section, following on from the prologue with which I opened this thesis. In this Interlude I describe how the research carried out in the first two chapters entwined with my own life trajectory and therefore my practice. I will detail how I arrived at the version of my practice which constitutes the major contribution of this project. Chapter Three, then, will introduce the site on which my practice mainly took place. I will describe the history and context of Basildon Park, West Berkshire as both a landscape and an historic site. In this chapter, I will critically explore how the site has been recorded and viewed in both cases. I will then introduce the National Trust as an organisation born out of middle-class Victorian land reform and discuss how it has evolved into the heritage and conservation organisation it is today. In this I will also detail the modern National Trust's relationship with LGBTQIA2S+ histories within its sites and its own founding. The chapter will end with my delineation of how the erotic and nonhuman will be methodologically utilised in my practice on the site. Chapter Four will then use this nonhuman and erotic lens to critically reflect on my practice, and how it engages with the research laid out in the first two chapters. It will explore the phases of my writing, and my changing relationship with both text and site

throughout. I will include excerpts from various drafts of my practice as well as photos taken on site and with the nonhuman throughout my residence there. I will also discuss the final stage of redrafting the script, a rehearsal and development period with an actor via audio recordings and video calls, in order to explore how bringing more queer women's voices in might have altered the articulation of lesbian subjectivity. In this, I aim to enact my practical methodology within the academic portion of this thesis.

Finally, Chapter Five will consist solely of my practice contribution – the main outcome of this project. This contribution is a playtext in full. The play was written with an audio-experience in mind rather than a live performance. It follows two characters, **t** and **em**. **t** is partially autobiographical. She is a lesbian woman from North Texas, and in the text her experiences of queerness in various rural and urban environments are described through the nonhuman and erotic dramatic language I crafted over the course of this practice as research project. **em** is a reclamation and disruption of the model of lesbian period drama in that she is based on an actual woman who lived in Basildon Park. She is the voice for the performer, and acts as a temporal bridge between all the histories lesbians have been omitted from and the reality of lesbian experience in rural spaces today. Though for the purpose of this project the outcome is a text, I feel it is relevant to mention that as a final product it is meant to be performed in two parts – firstly by the actor recording the part of **t**, and secondly by the solo audience reading and performing the part of **em**. The details of this are outlined in the opening notes of the script, and these choices are discussed in Chapter Four. I hope that having this in mind whilst reading the

text, and after engaging with the research laid out here, will illustrate the wealth of possibilities this project introduces to queer and feminist performance practices.

Chapter One: Lesbian Responses to the Feminism of the 1960s and 1970s

Introduction

In order to explore what lesbian or feminist methodologies might be employed in disrupting metronormative performance practices this thesis must first look to what, if any, methods have already successfully engaged with lesbian and queer women in rural places. Specifically, this chapter will look to the late 1960s and early 1970s as a time when the intersection of the gay and women's liberation movements created a moment in which lesbian methods of outreach were forged, and to UK lesbian magazine *Sappho* and the US Lesbian Lands as key examples of queer alternative cultural sources. As stated by lesbian activist Rose Norman in her collection *Landykes of the South* (1998), prior to this period it could not be 'overstated how hard it was for lesbians to find each other'⁷² or to have access to discourse around their identities. As the 1960s moved into the 1970s a global call for civil rights by oppressed peoples allowed a visible organisation of Gay and Women's liberation movements, bringing equality to the forefront of political and cultural conversation.⁷³ Within this call for civil rights, however, queer and lesbian women were often either elided from gay conversations or dismissed as a threat to women's progress. 'Man-hating', 'radical', 'separatist', 'dyke', 'lesbian', 'butch'; 'the reason the men will never get behind the movement', 'a separate issue from both women's and gay problems' and, finally, 'the lavender menace' were all terms used to describe why lesbian women should be excluded from civil rights

⁷² Rose Norman, Merrill Mushroom, and Kate Ellison, *Landykes of the South: Women's Land Groups and Lesbian Communities in the South* (Sinister Wisdom 98), (New York, Midsummer Nights Press, 2015). e-book publication, no page numbers.

⁷³ Ronald K. Porter, 'A Rainbow in Black: The Gay Politics of the Black Panther Party', *Counterpoints*, 367 (2012) 364–375
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981419>> [Accessed 21 October 2022].

movements.⁷⁴ They were weaponised against queer and lesbian identities by the liberation movements themselves, with the moniker 'lavender menace' given by Betty Friedan to the lesbians of the National Organisation for Women being perhaps the most cutting – but also the catalyst for some spectacular retaliatory lesbian art.⁷⁵ As butch lesbian scholar, and member of Lavender Menace, Karla Jay summarises, 'there was little acceptance of lesbianism from any group on the left.'⁷⁶ Not only that, much of the activity of women's liberation movements in the UK and US was focused on towns and cities.

Accordingly, I move towards historical feminist methods which engaged rural lesbian and queer women. I aim to historicise methods of early second wave lesbian feminism used in the UK and the US to foster discourse concerning rural lesbian identity. To contextualise feminist theatre and performance practices, I look to feminist practices of discourse and identity formation for women which occurred within this heightened time of visibility and activism – a process which was transatlantic in scope. Very little feminist theatre in the 1960s and 1970s made it out of cities, moving the furthest in most cases to towns. Brighton and Manchester seemed to be the least London-centric, yet still markedly urban, places where there is documented dramaturgy of queer and feminist performance. This chapter will first give an historical overview of how lesbian and queer women's identities were discussed in feminist movements during the period of the late 1960s to early 1970s through the lens of the US and UK Women's Liberation Movement. Here I

⁷⁴ Karla Jay, 'Break This Down: Lavender Menace, Coming Out, & LGBTQ Pride' (2018), *Barnard College Online News* <<https://barnard.edu/news/karla-jay-68>> [accessed 30 October 2021].

⁷⁵ A lesbian group formed off the back of Friedan's comment and named themselves the Lavender Menace. The women interrupted the second National Conference for the Liberation of Women by revealing shirts they had made with the moniker. This was a turn in how lesbians were treated, and also in the formation of lesbian offshoots of the WLM transatlantically. See the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project for archival information and first-hand accounts. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/lavender-menace-action-at-second-congress-to-unite-women/> [accessed 20 October 2021].

⁷⁶ Jay, *Break This Down*.

specifically look to where and how lesbian identity interrupted or intersected with second wave discourse as it related to a visible articulation of queer women's sexual identity formation and experiences. My aim is to explicate the lack of autonomy queer women had concerning discussion of their own identities, sexualities, and orientations within visible and widely disseminated feminist discourse. I also briefly look to the lesbian theatre of the time as well as responses to lesbian visibility on stage and screen.⁷⁷ In this I will set the cultural stage, so to speak, to place lesbian and queer identity within a broader contextual understanding. This is necessary in order to understand the urgency and need for a specifically rural lens to be put on research concerning lesbian narratives. The fundamental lack of lesbian narratives in performance mirrored the lack of concern for lesbians within the wider Women's Liberation Movement. Lesbian and queer women were rarely the ones writing about their own experiences, which mirrored the lack of lesbian and queer women's voices within Women's Liberation discourse. Understanding why and how this was the case provides vital context for the importance of the methods employed by *Sappho* and the Lesbian Lands Movement.

After setting up the normative culture around lesbian subjectivities in feminist discourse and performance in the 1960s and 1970s I present the methodological responses in the form of *Sappho* and the Lesbian Lands Movement. I will first explore how *Sappho*, the longest running and most widely subscribed-to alternative lesbian magazine in the UK, discussed lesbian subjectivities and residences as well as how it engaged rural and regional lesbians. Unearthing

⁷⁷ Lesbian theatre has many definitions. Most of them are summarised articulately by Sarah Mullan, particularly in her PhD thesis as cited elsewhere in this chapter. Here I am referring to all the definitions given, meaning theatre for, by, about, or with lesbians. See: Sarah Mullan, 'Lesbian Performance in London 1992-2015: Identity, Representation, and Queer Epistemologies' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2017)

and considering the discourse in *Sappho* allows for an understanding of what narrative and discussion concerning lesbian identity was reaching rural lesbians and how they engaged with it. It also provides a model for something tangible which documents lesbian subjectivities as well as providing a place where queer and lesbian women might have autonomy in articulating their narratives. Next, I ask how the Lesbian Land Movement in the US functioned as a geographical and topographical catalyst for rural lesbian and queer subjectivities. In this, I attempt to unearth how these land communes allowed alternative sexual identities and orientations to be articulated and encoded through land interactions. The information gained here assists in my project of delineating a dramaturgy which might articulate rural lesbian experiences. Looking to the knowledge laid out in this chapter from my two key sources further aids in establishing a counternarrative to the metronormative treatment of lesbian subjectivities in performance practice that my own practice seeks to disrupt.

Section One: Normative Perceptions of Lesbian Subjectivities in the Feminist Movements of the 1960s and early 1970s

To fully understand the lineage of queer and lesbian women's lack of visibility it is also important to outline the journey of queer and lesbian identity as it moved across the Atlantic in the wave of rights and liberation movements that were emerging globally. Opposition to the Vietnam War and support for the Civil Rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s saw an increase radical politics and burgeoning activist groups. These movements and radical acts arose both within academia and scholarship and in wider society. As this chapter will discuss, the organisation, politics, and

practices of the American liberation movements had a strong influence on British movements. For this reason, to understand the way that lesbian identity was initially received and treated in the BWLM it is important to trace how it was treated in the AWLM.

In 1970, the RADICALESBIANS, a group formed to emphasise the importance of lesbian and queer women's issues to the wider liberation movement, released their manifesto, 'The Woman Identified Woman', beginning with an enraged definition of lesbian identity in response to the general lesbophobic attitude towards lesbians within the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) up to that point. The manifesto stated: 'a lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.'⁷⁸ . This sentiment was brought on by the homophobia, or 'heterosexism'⁷⁹ within the movement from its onset. Many of the more conservative heterosexual women involved in the WLM asserted that queer and lesbian inclusion would damage the cause. Betty Friedan, one of the most important figures to Second Wave Feminism, and one of the founders of the American Women's Liberation Movement (AWLM) and National Organisation for Women (NOW), was also one of the people to openly declare homophobia and denounce lesbian participation in the Feminist movement. In what is arguably one of the cornerstone texts of the Second Wave, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan argues that feminism and the liberation of women from domestic labour is a cure for the homosexuality 'spreading like a murky smog over the American scene'.⁸⁰ Any lesbian looking to join the movement in America would likely have known that its leader held homophobic views.

⁷⁸ RADICALESBIANS, *The Woman Identified Woman*, (Pittsburgh: Know, Inc., 1970) p.1.

⁷⁹ Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 168.

⁸⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin Books, 1963) p. 223.

Friedan subsequently coined the term 'lavender menace' in 1969 in an attempt to further separate lesbians from the Feminist movement and NOW. According to feminist researcher Annelise Orleck, Friedan had already deleted all reference to any lesbian organisations or resources from the programme of the First Congress to Unite Women that year as Friedan thought that 'lesbian and lesbian rights groups threatened NOW's standing as a serious and respectable political organization'.⁸¹ Friedan also went so far as to fire the NOW newsletter editor, Rita Mae Brown, on the basis of her identity as a lesbian.⁸² This divisive action led to many lesbian members of NOW resigning in protest. In March of the following year an article in the *New York Times* titled 'Sisterhood is Powerful', written by another NOW founder Susan Brownmiller, stated that being referred to as lesbians made those in the Women's Movement "quiver with collective rage".⁸³ In the article, Brownmiller also answered Friedan's 'lavender menace' statement by calling discussions of lesbian identity within the movement "[a] lavender herring, perhaps, but surely no clear and present danger".⁸⁴ Whilst lesbianism was contentious in the public eye, there were active lesbian members within the movement that the heterosexual members did not necessarily want to lose. Brownmiller's comments, therefore, represented an attempt to downplay the vitriol from heterosexual women surrounding discussions of lesbian issues within the core structure of the women's movement. Brownmiller also used the term "the lesbian issue",⁸⁵ which was a

⁸¹ Orleck, *Rethinking*, p. 167.

⁸² Orleck, *Rethinking*, p. 167.

⁸³ Susan Brownmiller, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1971), *The New York Times* <<https://www.nytimes.com/1970/03/15/archives/sisterhood-is-powerful-a-member-of-the-womens-liberation-movement.html>> [accessed 20 July 2020].

⁸⁴ Brownmiller, *Sisterhood is Powerful*.

⁸⁵ Brownmiller, *Sisterhood is Powerful*.

popular tactic in feminist writing at the time with which to make clear that 'lesbian issues' were not women's issues regardless of the gender identities of lesbians.⁸⁶

1970 was also an important year for feminists in the United Kingdom – to this extent, Florence Binard notes that many of the British Women's Liberation Movement (BWLM) founders consider 1970 "the start of the movement".⁸⁷ In February that year the first national BWLM conference was held in Oxford as host to over 500 participants, and in November the BWLM publicly protested against the televised Miss World pageant.⁸⁸ While the movement in the US was engaged in an internal battle against homophobia, the movement in the UK was just beginning to gain visible recognition and numbers. After political victories for women in the form of the Abortion Act (1967) and the women workers strike for equal pay at the Ford plant in Dagenham in 1968, the first national British Women's Liberation conference took place in 1970 in Skegness. At its inception the BLWM heavily borrowed inspiration, protest strategies, and even slogans directly from NOW and the AWLM.⁸⁹ The original demands of the BWLM functioned on the idea that the main cause of women's oppression "was that women tended to get married, have children and so become financially dependent on men and under their control."⁹⁰ In other words, the BWLM was founded on the premise that women's oppression, and therefore women's liberation, was a

⁸⁶ I think this research is particularly relevant and urgent within queer, lesbian, and feminist scholarship. There is a cultural understanding currently that lesbians are somehow innately transphobic when, in reality, many lesbian liberatory movements were radically inclusive due to suffering adjacent misogyny and being ostracised in adjacent ways. This is demonstrated later in this chapter in *Sappho's* own manifesto. Mainstream media over the past decade has consistently referred to trans* people seeking basic human rights as 'the transgender issue', similarly to how 'the lesbian issue' was used in the time period this chapter deals with. Acknowledging historical similarities between trans* and lesbian (and indeed, trans lesbian) subjectivities and their treatment by normative culture is vital in creating new work encompassing a breadth of queer women's experiences. See: Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

⁸⁷ Florence Binard 'The British Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s: Redefining the Personal and the Political', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, 22 (2017) p.1.

⁸⁸ Binard 'The British Women's Liberation Movement', p.1.

⁸⁹ Binard 'The British Women's Liberation Movement', p. 2.

⁹⁰ Zoë Fairbairns, *Saying What We Want: Women's Liberation and the Seven Demands* (York: Raw Nerve Books Ltd, 2002), p. 8.

primarily heterosexual concern necessitating the movement 'isolate lesbianism as a bourgeois deviation',⁹¹ essentially implying that queer and lesbian could not be anything other than white and middle class.

The visibility that accompanied the negative discourse around lesbian and queer women within the movement led to negative changes in policy directly affecting these women. On the 1st August 1971 the Nullity of Marriage Act was passed - the first law in the UK which explicitly made illegal lesbian marriage as well as gay male marriage, stating that "marriage, the parties to which are not respectively male and female, is void".⁹² Lesbian couples, therefore, had been directly and specifically legislated against in the UK for the first time.⁹³ This legislation was not discussed at the Skegness conference. Nor, despite the lesbian GLF presence at Skegness, was the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) manifesto. Published a month before the conference in September of 1971, the manifesto openly allied the GLF to the BWLM. GLF member Peter Tatchell recalls that 'it argued that LGBT people needed to embrace and ally with feminism'.⁹⁴ The manifesto also expressly stated that the GLF would "work to form a strategic alliance with the women's liberation movement".⁹⁵ It wasn't until after years of debate within grassroots alternative feminist communications that queer and lesbian identities and oppressions were given their own place

⁹¹ Beatrix Campbell, 'A Feminist Sexual Politics: Now You See It, Now You Don't', *Feminist Review*, 5:1 (1980), 1-18 (14).

⁹² Stephen Cretney, 'The Nullity of Marriage Act 1971', *The Modern Law Review*, 35:1 (1972), 57-63 (57).

⁹³ (Although in 1885 someone proposed to add an "acts of indecency by females" clause to the Sexual Offences Bill and it was rejected on the grounds that it was a subject too "disgusting and polluting" to be discussed in parliament. This does not sound dissimilar to the arguments made by the homophobic members of WLM.)

⁹⁴ Peter Tatchell, 'How the Gay Liberation Front Manifesto helped to shape me', 6 August 2013, *The Guardian*

<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/06/book-that-changed-me-peter-tatchell>> [accessed 20 November 2020].

⁹⁵ Tatchell, 'How the Gay Liberation'.

within the demands of BWLM. At the Edinburgh conference in 1974, 'an end to the discrimination against lesbians'⁹⁶ was added as an official demand.

In her 2014 study on lesbian theatre in the UK and US 'Lesbianism and Lesbian Theatre, Comparative Literature: East & West', lesbian theatre researcher Wencong Wang divides the lesbian theatre of the 1970s into three distinct groups according to target audiences: mainstream theatre targeting a general and gender non-specific audience; lesbian plays within feminist theatre targeting a woman-predominant or feminist audience; and lesbian theatre made wholly by out lesbians for a wholly lesbian audience.⁹⁷ Lesbian playwright Nina Rapi defines the latter as 'work by out lesbians which foregrounds the lesbian experience.'⁹⁸ Aside from the three groups defined by Wang and Rapi, there is also the portion of lesbian theatre that came out of gay and lesbian groups in the 1970s, such as Gay Sweatshop, meaning that unlike the categories above there were gay men with a direct hand in the creation of the performances. This is an important difference to note as though feminist and gay companies often had creative crossover via venue or artists, they also shared an interest in representing lesbian life and experience. As noted by Chris Megson in discussion with David Hare on the Gay and Lesbian agitprop theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, the collaboration within these spaces 'falls apart [due to] conflict between the male gays and the lesbian members of the group.'⁹⁹ This split, according to Megson, illuminated both

⁹⁶ Mary McIntosh, 'Sexual Pleasure Sexual Rights' (n.d.), *British Library*, <<http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/clips/sexuality-love-and-friendship/sexual-pleasure-sexual-rights/143651.html>>.

⁹⁷ Wencong Wang, 'Lesbianism and Lesbian Theatre', *Comparative Literature: East and West*, 21:1 (2014), p.118 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2014.12015466>>.

⁹⁸ Nina Rapi, 'Hide and Seek: the Search for a Lesbian Theatre Aesthetic', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 9:34, p.148 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00007739>>.

⁹⁹ I feel it is worth noting here that David Hare wrote *The Great Exhibition* in 1972, which featured a lesbian who steals the husband of a heterosexual woman whom she loved as revenge for the lover's refusal to leave him for her. Chris Megson, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970's: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London, Methuen Drama, 2012), p. 229.

the 'political priorities and experiences of oppression of each gender'¹⁰⁰ and the difference in 'aesthetic strategy, with the men embracing camp and drag, and the women agitprop and documentary.'¹⁰¹

All these factions of lesbian theatre allow insight into the way lesbian identity was represented dramaturgically and how it was treated politically and socially, albeit from an urban perspective. Additionally, unlike alternative publications, which are by nature print and therefore more easily recorded and retained for future reference, alternative theatre did not always have any tangible forms of documentation. In the first collection of lesbian plays published by Methuen, Jill Davis notes that of all the lesbian companies to exist in the 1970s, there were only seven plays concerning lesbian identity in print by 1987.¹⁰² Further, Davis states that due to the conservative cuts to arts funding, especially for queer people, in the 1980s in the UK during the HIV AIDS crisis and Section 28¹⁰³ – most lesbian theatre that did manage to form out of the liberation movements were cut short and rarely given space in reviews or critical cultural discussion.¹⁰⁴ As Davis wrote in 1987, 'when plays are not published they disappear from history and little is left to a future generation of theatre historians and practitioners.'¹⁰⁵ Rural lesbians were underrepresented in performance because there was a lack of lesbian representation as a whole.

¹⁰⁰ Megson, *Modern British Playwriting*, p. 55.

¹⁰¹ Megson, *Modern British Playwriting*, p. 55.

¹⁰² Jill Davis, 'Introduction', *Lesbian Plays: v.1* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 9.

¹⁰³ See: BBC: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/cacc0b40-c3a4-473b-86cc-11863c0b3f30>>

¹⁰⁴ Davis, 'Introduction', pp. 7–13.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, 'Introduction', p. 9.

According to Wang, lesbians only appeared within feminist work on the stages of larger venues that transferred to the mainstream, such as Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, which was originally staged at Dartington College in 1979, or when written in as an issue by male playwrights.¹⁰⁶ *Cloud Nine* is a two-act play discussing colonialism and gender roles in Britain in which gender and sexuality roles are questioned through multiple gay, lesbian, bisexual, and polyamorous relationships. The lesbian couple is, however, slotted into a heteronormative family structure, co-parenting with one of their brothers - with 'husband[s]' 'wife' and 'children' roles for the characters to play - rather than a more radical take on queer family structures. For comparison, one of the first plays by an out lesbian woman mentioned in *The Stage* was *Charlie's Baby* (1976), a story about two lesbians having a child, by Helen de Wynter at fringe venue Almost Free. It was called 'more conventionally constructed'¹⁰⁷ than other fringe theatre of the time, but it framed lesbian motherhood in a way that was focused on the ability of two very different types of queer women to resourcefully raise a child despite the legal objection to this familial structure. It told the story of a femme-lesbian who paid a man for sperm and convinced her butch partner to swap a car-maintenance course for mothercraft classes. The man in the storyline was nothing more than a sperm donor, despite the potential drive in the audience to insist on the child having a father figure - as was the primary political argument against lesbian custody at the time. As summarised by theatre scholar James M. Harding, the play 'does not deconstruct heterosexual presumptions but, rather, enforces a repressive mode of expression, a passing under duress. *Cloud Nine* makes

¹⁰⁶ Chris Megson, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970's: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), p. 121.

¹⁰⁷ F.B.D., 'More Plays in Performance: GAY PLAY', *The Stage and Television Today*, 4958 (Archive: 1959-1994: 1976), p. 10.

acceptance of gay male and lesbian desire easy because it represents these forms of desire in terms that reinforce heterosexuality.¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile, a survey of reviews of plays with lesbian characters or storylines throughout the 1970s provides insight into the types of lesbians being made visible within the theatrical domain. These included lesbian paedophilia, as in Ronald Millar's *Odd Girl Out* (1974) in which a wife indulges in a 'lesbian relationship'¹⁰⁹ with a young girl who she met at her anniversary celebration. Nicholas Salaman's *Mad Dog* (Hampstead Theatre, 1973) features a 'lesbianized daughter'¹¹⁰ who falls into the 'lesbian clutches'¹¹¹ of women builders who were working on her parent's mansion. Other lesbian characters included a woman who murders her baby in Phillip Martin's *A Tide in the Affairs of Women* (Liverpool Playhouse 1975), a couple of incestuous lesbians who appear in a character's dream in Donald Howarth's *Meanwhile Backstage in the Old Front Room* (West Yorkshire Playhouse 1975), a French prostitute who turns to lesbianism after sexual trauma with men in Terry Johnson's *Amabel*, (Bush Theatre 1979). The remaining representations range from 'deformed in mind and soul'¹¹² and 'tragic lesbian'¹¹³ to 'perverse'¹¹⁴. Even in the more positive reviews, such as of *Aisling Mhic Artain* (1977) by Eoghan O Tuairisc, lesbian identity is referred to as 'sexual deviation'¹¹⁵.

¹⁰⁸ James M. Harding, 'Cloud Cover: (Re) Dressing Desire and Comfortable Subversions in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*', *PMLA*, 113: 2 (1998), 258–72 (260) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/463364>> [accessed 3 January 2023].

¹⁰⁹ E. J., 'Plays In Performance: Brighton— "Odd Girl Out"', *The Stage and Television Today*, 4852 (Archive: 1959–1994: 1974) p. 19.

¹¹⁰ F.B.D., 'Lunchtime: Sexual Charade', *The Stage and Television Today*, 4825 (Archive: 1959–1994: 1973), p. 16.

¹¹¹ F.B.D., 'Lunchtime: Sexual Charade', p. 16.

¹¹² M. M., 'Last Dance of the Cormorants', *The Stage and Television Today*, 4718 (Archive: 1959–1994: 1971), p. 18.

¹¹³ 'Innovator Weekend at Nottingham', *The Stage and Television Today*, 4670, (Archive: 1959–1994: 1970), p. 11.

¹¹⁴ D. Blake, 'Edward Bond's bizarre fantasy in "Early Morning"', *The Stage and Television Today*, 4588, (Archive: 1959–1994: 1969), p. 13.

¹¹⁵ D. Peavoy, 'Aisling Mhic Artain', *The Stage and Television Today*, 5037, (Archive: 1959–1994: 1977), p. 17.

Plays filmed for television from the 1970s can offer further insight into the representation of lesbians, five of which were written and aired with lesbian themes as the primary concern.¹¹⁶ Only one was written by a woman, Patricia Hooker, and all participated to some extent in the stereotypical use of lesbians as a point of tragedy or contention. The main lesbian character, Anna, in Hooker's *The Golden Road* (BBC, 1973) is positioned as an antithesis to a desired domestic life and as a problem within the marriage of the other two characters. She is seen smoking in bed, interrupting the heterosexual woman, Cass, doing housework, encouraging Cass to abandon her seven-year-old daughter, drinking beer at the dinner table, and inserting herself into the heterosexual marriage of the story by intruding at her lover's mother-in-law's house. This is a clear instance of lesbian and queer women being represented as a threat to societal norms within a heteronormative society.

Lesbian representation within alternative feminist companies during the 1970s, was also lacking. Jill Davis points out that there are only two plays in *Plays By Women* (1994), Methuen's sister series to *Lesbian Plays Vol. 1 & 2* (1987 & 1989), which include a lesbian theme. This, she argues, accurately 'represents the extent of inclusion of lesbians within the mainstream of women's theatre writing.'¹¹⁷ This resulted in a fragmenting of lesbian and queer women from many feminist theatre groups. Even some women's companies who claimed to be concerned with lesbian and queer women's experiences at their outset lapsed into representations of heterosexualities. Feminist women's company Sphinx was formed in the wake of the success of The Women's Festival, an

¹¹⁶ Billy Smart, 'Armchair Theatre: *The Golden Road*' (1973): *Representing Lesbianism in the 1970s* (2013), *Spaces of Television* <<http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/spaces-of-television/2013/09/26/armchair-theatre-the-golden-road-1973-representing-lesbianism-in-the-1970s/>> [accessed 30 December 2021].

¹¹⁷ Davis, 'Introduction', p. 9.

event staged by Ed Berman, founder of Almost Free Lunchtime Theatre, out of a desire to showcase women's talents in theatre. Whilst the festival was originally meant to provide an opportunity for women to create work discussing the equal rights struggle in a non-hierarchical way, the lack of rehearsal time available resulted in a decision to use scripts, and plays were cast and directed in a traditional way. According to the V&A archives, 'the relatively "safe" nature of the eventual season resulted in a split between those involved in the festival into the Women's Company who opted to work in the conventional way, with a number of established theatre professionals in the company, and the Women's Theatre Group opting to devise their work collectively and to produce pieces for the community.'¹¹⁸ As noted in Elaine Aston's *Feminist Theatre Voices: A Collective Oral History* (1997), the 7th founding policy of the company was to 'positively discriminate in favour of Black women and Lesbians.'¹¹⁹ Despite this, there is not one mention of queer women or lesbians on Sphinx's current website, and no specific prioritisation of queer, lesbian, or black women in their recent work.¹²⁰ The group changed their name from The Women's Theatre Group to Sphinx in 1991 in what seemed a move to distance themselves from their more radical roots. Additionally, although their company policy, according to Unfinished Histories is partially to focus on sexuality, they are not cross listed as lesbian and women's theatre.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ 'Sphinx Theatre Company (formerly The Women's Theatre Group) Archive' (2015), V&A *Theatre and Performance Collections* <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/9636db15-94ff-3d5d-ac76-6b5a41bd2e40>.

¹¹⁹ Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Voices: A Collective Oral History*, (Loughborough: Loughborough UP, 1997), p.79

¹²⁰ *About* (2019), *Sphinx Theatre Company* <<https://sphinxtheatre.co.uk/about/>>.

¹²¹ See: < <https://www.unfinishedhistories.com/>>

In 1991, Sue Ellen-Case argued that queer and lesbian representation suffers from 'the closeting of lesbians for the so-called greater cause.'¹²² This 'ghosting of the lesbian subject'¹²³, as Case names it, results in lesbian identities being a passive object rather than an active subject in queer and feminist discourse. My own project in this thesis and practice-based project builds on her argument in observing that this double objectification of lesbian and queer women on stage and screen, once by heterosexism and again by homophobia, necessitates a turn to alternative sources and methods which might have successfully operated as conduits for autonomous discourse around lesbian subjectivities. Further, it demonstrates the urban-centric and metronormative skew of mainstream culture and liberation movements necessitates an intentional seeking of historical methods which engaged rural lesbian and queer women to see what differences in articulation might be needed in their case.

The alternative press during the second wave was one method of queer and lesbian women across the UK maintaining discourse on sexuality and fostering non-normative sexual identity formations. While the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* espoused no specific queer or lesbian purpose, *Sappho* magazine not only embraced this purpose but explicitly set out to disrupt London-centricity in the UK liberation movement and establish physical networks of support and solidarity for rural and regional queer and lesbian women. Meanwhile, in the US the Lesbian Land movement became a geographical method for queer and lesbian women to move towards the rural to form sexual identities outside of compulsory heterosexuality. Both examples directly

¹²² Sue-Ellen Case, 'The Power of Sex: English Plays by Women, 1958–1988,' *New Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (2009) 238–45 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00005741>> [accessed 17 November 2020].

¹²³ Case, 'The Power of Sex', p. 243.

disrupt the metronormative presumption of positive formative queer and lesbian experiences taking place exclusively on linear journeys towards the urban. This physical manifestation of alternative print advertising and networking utilised the different relationships to land in the UK and the US which will be further explored in Chapter Two, as well as the geographical reality of the US having more space in which women might reside away from normative culture. The movement used intentional independence from traditional thinking around land ownership as will be discussed in Chapter Two when choosing where to reside, and how to reside there, as a method for collaboration with the nonhuman and landscape in exploring alternative sexual subjectivities. In the next sections of this chapter, I will give an historical overview of how *Sappho* and Lesbian Lands created a space for rural lesbian and queer women in the UK and US to articulate their complex and individual experiences of alternative sexuality formation within discourse separate to the mainstream methods of liberation in the 1960s and 1970s.

Section Two: Lesbian Perspectives and Reactions in UK alternative magazine Sappho and The Lesbian Land Movement of the US

Sappho magazine was an example of alternative press and a method of writing and alternative identity formation which successfully engaged rural and regional queer women in the UK and provided them with space to feel connected without leaving their rural spaces. *Sappho* was a major vehicle for lesbian groups, events, meetings, and discussion for a readership outside of

London. It invited readers outside the city to submit writing to be published.¹²⁴ During what scholar Rachael Field referred to as 'the rejection lesbians experienced in the Women's Liberation movement in the early 1970's',¹²⁵ *Sappho* and the groups that spawned from it helped rural and regional queer and lesbian women to create and define their identities in their own words, and fight for acceptance on a wider geographical and intellectual scale outside metronormative and male queer narratives. *Sappho* was also an early participant in the queer methodological tradition of what Jack Halberstam referred to in 1998 as a tradition of 'disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods'¹²⁶ in that it straddled the line between genre in what was included, refused to limit its contributors to women who had the privilege of secondary education, and saw the product as less important than the networks and cultural knowledge produced off the back of it.

Sappho was founded in 1972 after an outcry for a platform which reached to lesbian women outside of city centres and predominantly public spaces. The founder was lesbian, socialist feminist, and journalist Jackie Forster, who had also established the short-lived 1960s lesbian publication *Arena Three*, which ended in July 1971. *Sappho* disrupted the normative culture of feminism as outlined earlier in this chapter by publishing outside of either the gay or women's Liberation movements, but remaining engaged with both, whilst discussing complex facets of lesbian identity. It also provided the only physical network of rural queer and lesbian women in the UK through *Sappho* meetups and regional groups. *Sappho* also shows how methods of

¹²⁴ Laura S., 'Archive Item of the Month: Sappho', 9 February 2012, *Glasgow Women's Library* <<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2012/02/09/archive-item-of-the-month-sappho/>> [accessed on 27 June 2020].

¹²⁵ Rachael Field 'Lesbian Tradition', *Feminist Review*, 34 (1990) 115–119 (115).

¹²⁶ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p.10.

writing and disseminating might repair stereotypes projected onto alternative subjects by others. Despite the implications of more mainstream alternative UK feminist magazine *Spare Rib's* editorial line that lesbian identity was an agitation to the BWLM during the period, *Sappho* asserted that to embrace queer and lesbian identity meant to be radically inclusive. The first cover image of *Sappho* was a pencil drawing of three naked women. Forster stated that the three figures were 'Botticelli Beauties - lesbian, bi and straight'¹²⁷ to represent who the magazine was primarily for. There were homosexual male readers as well, but from the outset *Sappho* wanted to provide an alternative culture of communication to all those in search of liberation. The aims listed in *Sappho's* inaugural issue were the following:

1. By interchange of information with homophile societies and heterosexual organisations we hope to disperse the isolation of gay ghettos.
2. To support all minority groups regardless of politics, colour or creed, who work to counteract oppression.
3. To encourage social groups everywhere to relieve the loneliness of the lesbian and to publish information about existing groups.
4. To accept articles, stories and poems etc., of non-pornographic content from all those with an intelligent interest and empathy for homophiles.¹²⁸

None of these aims sought to either force queerness or lesbianism onto heterosexual women, nor presume the superiority of lesbianism as a political choice. The BWLM was also advertised in *Sappho's* first issue, along with the announcement that they would have a gay male speaker at the first post-publication London *Sappho* meeting. In an article titled 'Courage and Conviction' in May

¹²⁷ Laura S., 'Archive Item of the Month: Sappho'

¹²⁸ 'About Sappho', *Sappho*, 1:1 (1972), 3-4.

1973, *Sappho* again communicated its thoughts on how lesbian identity should interact with other identities seeking liberation:

Let no-one put down or criticise the pansy and the stud, the drag queen and the radical femme, the transvestite and the transsexual, the GLF activist or the CHE spokesman. To dismiss those men and women as freaks, hysterics, show offs, or martyrs is as uncomprehending as it is cruel.¹²⁹

Sappho showed no signs of the hostility that was assigned to lesbians by the BWLM. Heterosexual women, gay men and trans people were not excluded from this lesbian publication. If anything, from its outset *Sappho* wanted to build representation for lesbians that was more inclusive than the exclusively white, heteronormative, middle and upper-class mainstream feminist vision.

In an interview for the Hall-Carpenter archives, Forster recalled the importance of *Sappho* in the moment it was founded. Lesbians felt a loss in connection during the gap between *Arena Three's* and *Sappho* beginning in April 1972. Forster states that she decided to publish *Sappho* because rural and regional readers, such as those 'from Devon, and... from the Isle of Wight'¹³⁰ had reached out to her. These women told Forster that they did not feel represented in the 'stirrings of feminism'¹³¹ they had witnessed and missed having a queer and lesbian specific publication for women. They did not see themselves reflected in the publications being produced by heterosexual members of BWLM and did not feel they had a platform with which to discuss their experiences as rural and regional queer and lesbian women. They outlined the requirements of

¹²⁹ 'Courage and Conviction', *Sappho*, 2:2 (1973), 4.

¹³⁰ Forster, Jackie, and Farnham, Margot, 'Jackie Forster Interviewed by Margot Farnham', 1990, *Hall-Carpenter Oral History Archive*, <<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/jackie-forster-remembers-the-founding-of-sappho>>

¹³¹ Forster, Jackie Forster remembers.

this new lesbian magazine: 'the magazine must be written about lesbians by lesbians... and a list of places where lesbians can meet or contact [each other]'¹³². This demonstrated the need for rural and regional queer and lesbian women to have tangible spaces in which they can critically discuss and form their identities and experiences.

Furthermore, the magazine's outreach goals stated that the founders didn't 'want the magazine to be London provincial. We wish it to speak for and by you in all the rich diversity possible.'¹³³

Sappho met this goal within the first two years of its publication. By the August issue of 1973 there were local groups across England in Cheshire, Cambridgeshire, Northumberland, Shropshire, Staffordshire, and Surrey, and in Scotland, Wales, and the Channel Isles.¹³⁴ These groups reveal a definite presence of rural queer and lesbian lives across the rural and regional UK. They also assert that the presence of a physical platform in which queer and lesbian women could critically discuss their lives aided in creating a vital geographical network for those women. In this, the method of an alternative, specifically lesbian and queer women's print platform which is also tied to specific geographical locations was an invaluable one - and likewise for my project in seeking new methodologies with which to articulate rural lesbian subjectivities in the present.

By the end of the magazine in 1981 there were regional groups and publications all over the country that had been 'linked to the mother'¹³⁵ as *Sappho* put it. Meetings had been added in Birmingham, Bristol, Brighton, Cornwall, Coventry, Dorset, Liverpool, Mansfield, Huddersfield,

¹³² Forster, *Jackie Forster remembers*.

¹³³ 'About *Sappho*', *Sappho*.

¹³⁴ 'The Spike', *Sappho*, 2:5 (1973), 22.

¹³⁵ 'The Spike', *Sappho*, 23.

Belfast, Warwickshire, and elsewhere. Additionally, the rural and regional activity inspired by *Sappho* brought about the formation of GRAIN, the Gay Rural Aid & Information Network in order to help establish connections for queer and lesbian women in rural areas.¹³⁶ Researcher Gavin Brown states that GRAIN wanted to acknowledge those who ‘experienced rural life in contrasting ways, finding different means of engaging with local economies and social networks, and hotly debating what it meant to be gay in rural Britain.’¹³⁷ Even after the dissolution of *Sappho*, GRAIN continued the practice of outreach fostered by publishing newsletters containing ‘names and addresses of members (and often a short description of their motivation for living in the country, details of how they made a living, as well as specific requests for information and advice).’¹³⁸ This shows the continued desire for rural queer and lesbian women to have a tangible method to share one another’s experiences, engage in debate around the queer rural, and foster tangible geographic connections.

Meanwhile, the Lesbian Land Movement in the US was a collective which aimed to cultivate queer feminist living spaces in rural areas free of men and patriarchal societal structures. The movement was at its height throughout the late 1960s into the 1980s, though some lands in the rural US still survive today. The methods utilised by the Lesbian Land movement in the US over the 1960s and 1970s to engage in alternatively gendered interactions with the nonhuman in landscapes to explore alternative sexual subjectivities are hugely valuable in forming methodologies which might encode and articulate rural lesbian subjectivities in the present. Whilst there were several

¹³⁶ ‘The Spike’, *Sappho*, 22.

¹³⁷ Brown, Gavin, ‘Rethinking the Origins of Homonormativity: The Diverse Economies of Rural Gay Life in England and Wales in the 1970s and 1980s’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 40:4 (2015).

¹³⁸ Brown, ‘Rethinking’.

different iterations of feminist rural separatist movements globally throughout women's liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, the Lesbian Land movement in the US exists in a unique space.¹³⁹ Lesbian Lands in the rural US throughout all 50 states were literally grounded upon landscapes in which women could cultivate their sexual identities away from normative society due to the vast amount of unoccupied land away from existing populations.

As summarised by Lesbian Lands researcher Catriona Sandilands, the lands were founded on the goals of:

[O]pening access to land and transforming relations of rural ownership, withdrawing land from patriarchal-capitalist production and reproduction, feminizing the landscape ideologically and physically, developing a gender-bending physical experience of nature, experiencing nature as an erotic partner, and politicizing rurality and rural lesbian identity.¹⁴⁰

Further, as described by journalist Rina Raphael after living on Lesbian Lands with some of its founders in 2019, the movement was formed to escape 'structural inequalities...gender-based economic discrimination and the lack of legal protections for gay people'¹⁴¹. These women's ability to form and discuss alternative sexual identity formation in rural places was only possible after feeling they were separated from societal inequalities in normative culture. The feeling of physical and legal safety for lesbian and queer women was also specifically important. Not having

¹³⁹ Margolis, Diane Rothbard, 'Women's Movements around the World: Cross-Cultural Comparisons', *Gender and Society*, 7:3 (1993), 379–99 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/189799>> [accessed 26 October 2022].

¹⁴⁰ Catriona Sandilands, 'Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward A Queer Ecology', *Organization & Environment*, 15:2 (2002) 131–163 (131).

¹⁴¹ Rina Raphael, *Why Doesn't Anyone Want to Live in This Perfect Place?* (2019), *New York Times* <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/24/style/womyns-land-movement-lesbian-communities.html>> [accessed 6 November 2021].

to conform in order to remain alive and unharmed, and the absence of familiar and often dangerous structures allowed them to explore new understandings of self and desire as formed in rural places with the landscape.

According to Raphael's 2019 *New York Times* article covering the struggles facing the lands left standing, there were over 150 independently functioning and self-sustaining cooperative women's lands in the 1970s.¹⁴² They typically began with women gathering enough funds and materials to rent or buy some large acreage in a rural area and build some basic structures for hygiene and sleep. They then circulated their locations and ethos via lesbian and feminist alternative press sources to attract women of varying skillsets to grow in size and self-sustainability. Women also often moved from site to site to experience different iterations of landscape and disrupt the idea that rural identities are monolithic. Like the UK, the US also had a network of lesbian alternative press through magazines such as *DYKE* (1976) and *The Furies* (1972-1973) which ranged from intellectual to essentialist separatist and ran adverts for Lesbian Lands.¹⁴³ This open advertisement of locations amongst a variety of alternative lesbian communities kept an open relationship so that women could move across sites meant that '[w]omen often felt connected across space to one another, despite different climates, histories, and living situations.'¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Raphael, *Why Doesn't Anyone*.

¹⁴³ Riese, 'Our Legacy: Six Lesbian Magazines From The Then Before Now' (2012), *Autostraddle* <<https://www.autostraddle.com/six-lesbian-magazines-that-changed-the-world-and-then-disappeared-140806/>> [accessed 17 December 2017].

¹⁴⁴ Katherine Schweighofer, 'A land of one's own: whiteness and indigeneity on lesbian land', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 8:4 (2018) 489–506.

As Katherine Schweighofer notes, Lesbian Lands were named originally for a political and geographic commitment to 'dedicating one's energies solely to women.'¹⁴⁵ This was due to the belief that women, although not a homogenous group, were connected in a shared oppression by patriarchal structures which meant they could not explore what it meant to exist outside of gendered definitions. They believed that being able to reside in a landscape free of structured society or culture was key to forming lives and identities outside of women's oppression and of 'womanhood' itself. Further, Schweighofer states that the Lesbian Lands were one of the only instances of feminist separatism where 'there were ongoing conversations about the power dynamics of race and class, particularly as the mostly white and middle-class membership attempted to open themselves and their movement to women of colour and women with fewer financial resources.'¹⁴⁶ The geographical refusal to participate in societal definitions of sex and gender forced the women to question societal definitions of other oppressed identity categories within a microcosm of ideological expansion.

In Sine Anahita's 2009 survey of lesbians who lived on Lesbian Lands during the 1960s and 1970s she found that over 60% were either working or poverty class.¹⁴⁷ She also found that only 16% had been brought up in rural or regional areas, with the remaining majority having grown up in urban or suburban areas.¹⁴⁸ The example of Lesbian Lands shatters the metronormative narrative of queer people having to move towards increasingly urban areas in order to have any positive experiences of non-normative identity formation. It is also interesting to note that while the AWLM

¹⁴⁵ Schweighofer, 'A land of one's own', p. 490.

¹⁴⁶ Schweighofer, 'A land of one's own', 490.

¹⁴⁷ Sine Anahita, 'Nestled into Niches: Prefigurative Communities on Lesbian Land', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 56:6 (2009), 719-737.

¹⁴⁸ Anahita, 'Nestled into Niches', 723.

was loudly and visibly middle-class, this was not the case by the height of the Lesbian Lands. Lesbian Lands, then, provide evidence of positive associations of rural spaces for lesbian and queer women, as well as evidence to suggest that restructuring relationships to land might allow a restructuring of other societally oppressive categories.

The Lesbian Lands movement was also inspired in part by the methods of exploring sexual freedom used by Black Americans in a post-Jim Crow South. Black feminists such as Angela Davis explored how Lesbian and Queer Black Women were celebrated blues musicians, ran barrelhouses in 'frequently located in wooded, remote areas',¹⁴⁹ and were amongst the first to embrace artistic practice and rural socialisation as a way to form non-normative identities outside of a white middle-class heterosexual American society. Lesbian Lands reflect this lineage of finding peaceful residence within lands typically thought of as alien to alternative identity. Scott Morgensen explains that lesbian and gay outsiders, 'despite neither originating nor remaining at these sites - [find] in rural spaces and in tales of indigeneity a self-acceptance and collective nature that also grants new belongings on settled land.'¹⁵⁰ Whilst I discuss the racialised aspects of Lesbian Lands in more detail in chapter two, this lineage is important to note here in how queer rurality was positively engaged with despite mainstream rejections of this narrative in an attempt to maintain white and heteronormative rural stereotypes.

¹⁴⁹ Nancy Unger, 'From Jook Joints to Sister Space: The Role of Nature in Lesbian Alternative Environments in the United States', in *Queer Ecologies*, ed. by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p.174.

¹⁵⁰ Scott Lauria Morgensen, 'Arrival at Home: Radical Faerie Configurations of Sexuality and Place', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 15: 1 (2009), 67-96 <muse.jhu.edu/article/255287>.

The Lesbian Lands also allowed a space in which language itself could be fluid within sexual and gender fluidity. Alternative forms of gendered words were experimented with and placed into discourse around alternative sexualities.¹⁵¹ Rather than feeling the need to articulate themselves within the terms of accepted language, these women living away from accepted culture felt they could restructure language itself. For example, some terms which surfaced here, as recently explored in Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), such as 'womon', 'wymmin', 'womyn', 'wimmin', and 'womxn' began as an attempt to distance men from aspects of womanhood and acknowledge the patriarchal gender roles associated with 'woman' or 'women'.¹⁵² Evaristo's work, whilst contemporary, is based in her own experience of these movements and her relationships with lesbian and queer women who participated in the original movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these terms remain highly controversial as they have since been reappropriated to reject trans* women, but there remains value in looking to the methods of an environment which cultivated alternative linguistic forms alongside alternative sexual subjectivities.¹⁵³ As Evaristo explores, the term womxn, specifically, for example was formed out of a desire to centre global majority women as well as genderfluidity within wider feminist rural separatism.¹⁵⁴

Akin to *Sappho*, which maintained an open editorial ethos as far as who could submit, Lesbian Lands provided a place for women to creatively explore modes of identity formation and articulation without institutional or scholarly validation. The ability to own lands on which the

¹⁵¹ Schweighofer, 'A land of one's own', 501-502.

¹⁵² Bernadine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other: A Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 2019), introduction.

¹⁵³ Abeni Jones, *Sex With An X: The Perils Of Performative Spelling* (2022), *AutoStraddle* <<https://www.autostraddle.com/sex-with-an-x-the-perils-of-performative-spelling/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

¹⁵⁴ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*

women could exist outside of society with men meant they were also able to shift their perspectives of themselves. This sat alongside the resistance of the Lesbian Lands to what Jackie Anderson describes as the majority white, heterosexual, and middle-class factions of feminism's push to be 'primarily reformist in its analyses, appealing to legal remedies and to the moral values of equity and fair play [viewing] sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism as defects in a structure that is committed to social justice'.¹⁵⁵ The women of the Lesbian Land movement, or 'landers', instead held the belief that these were 'deliberate constructions designed to benefit one group at the expense of another and to maintain the supremacy of one group over another.'¹⁵⁶ The methods of the landers in this way aimed to focus on the conception of a new societal system rather than on repairing a system they believed to be conceptually irreparable. The land was a collaborator, without whom the 'landers' had to live within the structures of a system they experienced as broken, and with whom they might have the separation from that society needed to conceive new ways of being.

Lesbian Lands, then, created what we might call a site-specific network in which lesbian subjectivities could be lived by rural lesbian and queer women without needing to be structured within the existing societal categories. Without the need to exist in spaces wherein compulsory heterosexuality must be performed to some extent for safety and acceptance, the landers could begin to rewrite how they understood their own ways of being. And indeed self-published and auto-ethnographic creative writing from the Lesbian Lands movement is vast.¹⁵⁷ Lesbian and

¹⁵⁵ Jackie Anderson, 'Separatism, Feminism, and the Betrayal of Reform' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 19:2 (1994), 437–48 (437) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174806>> [accessed 26 October 2022].

¹⁵⁶ Anderson, 'Separatism', p. 437.

¹⁵⁷ Keridwen, N. Luis., *Herlands: Exploring the Women's Land Movement in the US* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p.6.

queer women could choose to live outside of urban areas whilst still feeling they were connected to other lesbian and queer subjects. They had no need to go to shops, post offices, dinner parties, petrol stations, and so on, and therefore could exist in a space of isolation which cultivated identity formation without external heteronormative pressure. As stated by Sandilands, 'the land was a site for identity production, particularly sexual identity.'¹⁵⁸ This necessitates a re-evaluation of queer relationships to rural place and rejects the metronormative idea that alternative sexualities cannot be formed positively outside of urban cultural places. Further, as stated by queer ecology researcher Nancy Unger, Lesbian Lands offer insight into 'working examples of alternate ways of living on and with the land'¹⁵⁹ which might be utilised in a sited writing methodology such as my own, which seeks to insert alternative rural subjectivities into performance practice.

Isolation is a theme automatically and pejoratively projected onto rural and regional LGBTQIA2S+ people. It is interesting, then, that Lesbian Lands were formed from a positive association with isolation and movement towards regional and rural spaces. The isolation provided by the rural was essential to Lesbian Lands rather than a negative aspect of lesbians choosing to reside in the rural. The Lands serve as an example of what scholar Linda McCarthy refers to as the 'rural lesbian who might consider their identities as rural dwellers as important or central to their self-concept.'¹⁶⁰ This is again contrary to the widely accepted trajectory of queer people having to move out of rural spaces to have a holistic sense of self or identity and a connection to other

¹⁵⁸ Schweighofer, 'A land of one's own', 502.

¹⁵⁹ Unger, 'Jook Joints', 173.

¹⁶⁰ Linda McCarthy, 'Poppies in a Wheat Field', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39:1 (2000), 75–94 (78)

DOI: <10.1300/J082v39n01_05>.

LGBTQIA2S+ people. Elena Gambino credits the inception of the Lesbian Land movement to the urge to separate oneself from existing circumstance in an attempt to create 'conditions in which a radically new kind of audience might be called forth...practically distinct from the current institutions and discourses that shape political life in order to create space for new meanings and relationships to emerge.'¹⁶¹ My own project carries on this lineage in that it seeks to create methodologies of writing and performance which are not easily defined within current theatrical and academic terms such as 'site-specific', 'audiodrama', 'performance', in order to forge new ideas about lesbian and queer women's relationship to identity formation in rural spaces.

¹⁶¹ Elena Gambino, "'Presence in Our Own Land:' Second Wave Feminism and the Lesbian Body Politic' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2019), p. 133 <<https://hdl.handle.net/11299/209062>>.

Conclusion

With the AIDS crisis, Thatcherism, Section 28, and cuts to arts funding in the UK throughout the 80's many fringe LGBTQIA2S+ publication and performance companies were forced to shut down.¹⁶² This left a void between urban movements and more rural communities from the 1980s onwards. *Sappho*, then, is not only an archive of queer and lesbian discourse across the UK, but an historical method which might reveal opportunities to articulate rural and regional queer and lesbian women's experiences now.¹⁶³ *Sappho* provided a unique alternative space where rural and regional lesbian subjectivities could be theorised autonomously and collaboratively without necessitating a pejorative view of rural queer residence. *Sappho* used methods of alternative print allowing a reciprocal engagement with other lesbian and queer women, a physical item which could be re-read and moved with the person in possession of it and allowed a sense of visibility and orientation even for those women who reside in rural or isolated places typically seen as hostile to alternative sexualities. In the US, though some Lesbian Lands still exist, they are struggling. The cultural move away from alternative activist ways of living and an increased cultural reliance on technological connections, the original methods of radical geographical separatism practiced by Lesbian Lands remain largely unknown or unappealing to a younger generation. All these factors contribute to the occlusion of lesbian subjectivities and the loss of queer cultural sources such as the Lesbian Lands and *Sappho*.

¹⁶² Ray Malone, 'Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company' (2013), *Unfinished Histories* <<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/gay-sweatshop/>> [accessed 17 February 2020].

¹⁶³ Michael Billington, 'Margaret Thatcher casts a long shadow over theatre and the arts', 8 April 2013,, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-long-shadow-theatre>> [accessed 17 February 2020].

By following the lineage of lesbian methods of visibility and discourse through the Second Wave of feminism via *Sappho* in the UK and the Lesbian Land Movement in the US, this chapter uncovered the intersections of lesbian identity with feminism that might be meaningful to lesbian and queer women's visibility and sexual identity formation now. It also illuminated some of the ways in which lesbian identity historically stepped away from feminism and feminist performance practices to achieve autonomous constructive discourse. In historicising the lesbian feminist methods discussed in this chapter I seek to establish the framework of the new dramaturgical methodologies that my project offers. Through self-defined and structured written discourse, and an exodus into landscape and away from normative understandings of sexual identity formation, lesbian and queer feminists of the Second Wave established autonomy and positive visibility.

Sue Ellen-Case argues that '[if] the strategy in deconstructing historical traditions is a particularly feminist one, imagining subcultural delights, "real" or not, is a specifically lesbian one.'¹⁶⁴ *Sappho* and the US Lesbian Land Movement reveal rich records of lesbian relationships with both feminism and rural land - two particular instances of 'imagining subcultural delights'. In both instances women residing in or being from rural and regional areas were able to engage with, discuss, and experience alternative forms of sexual identity formation in ways the wider movements and fringe performance scenes did not allow. *Sappho* was unique as an alternative publication in that it had a readership reaching as far as rural Wales and the Highlands, published letters from readers in every issue, shipped discreetly, encouraged in person meet-ups, and listed

¹⁶⁴ Case, 'The Power of Sex', p. 243.

rural and regional lesbian and queer resources.¹⁶⁵ The Lesbian Land movement was the first and longest lasting instance of a mass move of queer people out of urban areas and into rural ones as well as an example of how rural lesbians attempted to restructure the Anglo-European settler relationship to nonhuman residents of land and the ownership of land.¹⁶⁶ These spaces allowed lesbian and queer women to form alternative sexualities alongside forming alternative relationships to systemically patriarchal aspects of their lives such as finance, home ownership, labour, and domestic partnering. They allotted urban women the opportunity to experience their bodies in spaces outside of structural compulsory heterosexuality and the male gaze. Women from rural and regional areas had the opportunity to share their experiences openly and be valued for their knowledge of land aside from this knowledge being a justification for gender nonconformity in heteronormative rural society.¹⁶⁷

Yet both these movements had their shortcomings in terms of the project of liberation. Despite the UK Women's Liberation Movement's roots in the trade union movement and class politics, Sappho failed to acknowledge class difference or race. Despite its self-proclaimed desire to restructure how Americans viewed landownership, the Lesbian Land Movement failed to acknowledge the damage settlers had done to the landscape. This is in addition to the practical problems of financial viability of alternative press and land ownership within the context of

¹⁶⁵ 'Spare Rib Map' (n.d.), *British Library*, <<https://www.bl.uk/spare-rib/map>> [accessed on 27 July 2020].

¹⁶⁶ Rachel Savage, 'Evolve or Die: the stark choice facing America's "women's lands"', 15 October 2019, *Reuters* <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-lgbt-women-idUSKBN1WU18C>> [accessed 21 October 2021].

¹⁶⁷ As is discussed elsewhere in this thesis regarding metronormativity and how it shifts cultural perspectives on rural residence, rural lesbian and queer women often faced invalidation of their sexuality and invisibility during rural residence by any differences being written off as necessary for their way of life. For example, the postwoman in Alison Bechdel's 2006 graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* whose sexuality is not questioned by the heterosexual people of the rural area due to her 'butch' uniform being a job requirement.

modern and contemporary feminism. Despite these shortcomings, though, analysing these two moments might offer some disruptive methods with which a new dramaturgical methodology might be created.

Chapter Two: How the Erotic and Nonhuman might Re-Frame Land Ownership, Cultural Understandings of Nature, and Metronormativity in the US and UK.

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined access to discourse for and the subsequent perceptions of lesbian and queer women within the Women's Liberation Movement during the 1960s and 1970s. It also explored how those perceptions informed theory, performance, and mainstream culture of the time. It then offered two examples of successful alternative discourse which engaged rural lesbians and allowed a network and setting wherein they might be able to perceive themselves. Apart from instances such as *Sappho* and Lesbian Lands, lesbians living in rural locations were referred to only in one-off articles or footnotes in what is otherwise a rich historical archive of activist discourse in the context of the Women's Liberation Movement.¹⁶⁸ Rural queer women who did not have easy access to the Gay Liberation Front, Campaign for Homosexual Equality, and Women's Liberation meetings in cities, therefore, had little opportunity for discourse outside of the two examples which reached and engaged them. Rural queer and lesbian women managed to form alternative sexual subjectivities, locate and contribute to a wider queer network, and remain in residence in rural spaces.

¹⁶⁸ 'Back to the 60s and 70s: The Alternative Press Collection', 07 March 2000, UC Santa Barbara Library <https://www.library.ucsb.edu/events-exhibitions/back-60s-and-70s-alternative-press-collection> > [accessed 24 October 2021].

This chapter outlines the patriarchal and urban-centric framing of subsequent visible queer identities. Here, I discuss how metronormative narratives have shaped and continue to shape lesbian and queer women's visibility, as well as perceptions around sexual identity and rural spaces. It also explicates how metronormative bias within scholarship and culture has caused the privileging of urban gay male perspectives to eclipse visibility or discourse for or about rural queer and lesbian women. My analysis heeds feminist scholar Rebecca Evans in her call for 'renewed attention to the complicated ways in which concepts of "gender" and "nature" have been articulated in relationship to each other'¹⁶⁹ by tracing the lineage of land, property, and nature in aspects of western intellectual discourse. In this it will discuss the nature/culture binary set out by a romanticised idea of nature as existing for humans to engage with or exploit. Finally, it will introduce concepts surrounding the nonhuman and erotic which seek to establish a theoretical framework for a practice methodology which disrupts hegemonic metronormative and masculinist narratives surrounding lesbian subjectivities.

Section One: Metronormativity and Rural Queer and Lesbian Invisibility

Metronormativity is a key concept surrounding the overarching association of urban spaces with positive queer experience within culture and social understanding. Metronormativity was coined by Jack Halberstam as a response to Kath Weston's 1995 'Get Thee to the Big City', in which Weston detailed the intricacies of what was seen as a mass queer migration to cities in North

¹⁶⁹ Rebecca Evans, 'James Tiptree Jr.: Rereading Essentialism and Ecofeminism in the 1970s.', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 3/4, 2015, pp. 223-39, p. 223.

America.¹⁷⁰ In *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* Halberstam states that metronormativity 'reveals the conflation of "urban" and "visible" in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities [and] maps a story of migration onto the coming out narrative'.¹⁷¹ Halberstam further emphasises that in line with much existing queer performance and theory, most current studies on metronormativity focus on gay male journeys of alternative sexual identity formation. Metronormativity also describes the tendency of queer narratives to follow a linear trajectory from a miserable rural to a free and joyful urban existence.¹⁷² Just as heteronormativity assumes that heterosexual relationships represent normal structures of desire, metronormativity assumes that metropolitan areas are the normal or desirable environment for queer people. Positive or complex rural experiences of non-normative sexual identity formations, therefore, are lacking within wider queer narratives.

In his 1999 book on gay and lesbian theatre, Alan Sinfield suggests that media culture including screen and stage in the twentieth century 'was a distinctively male homosexual space and that the roles of lesbians would require separate attention.'¹⁷³ LGBTQIA2S+ visibility that did and does exist into the 21st century, therefore, is not only firmly rooted in urban spaces but also in masculinist perspectives. The primacy of narratives in which gay men need to leave rural residence to find joy has made queer and lesbian women residing in the rural a casualty of representation. The failure of lesbian subjectivities, especially lesbian subjectivities rooted in

¹⁷⁰ Julie A Podmore, 'Disaggregating sexual metronormativities: Looking back at "lesbian" urbanisms' in *The Ashgate research companion to geographies of sex and sexualities*, ed. by Gavin Brown and others (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 21–16 (21).

¹⁷¹ Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), p. 36.

¹⁷² Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti Urbanism* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), and Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*.

¹⁷³ Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 1999) p. 4.

rural landscapes, to gain visibility even amongst increased cultural familiarity with feminist and gay issues is in large part due to metronormative framings of visible queer lives.

Metronormativity and a privileging of gay male subjectivities has caused a continued elision of queer women and their interactions with and in rural and regional spaces from culture and discourse.

In *Men Like That* (1999), for example, John Howard examines the metronormativity reinforced by 'linear, modernist trajectory' in which gay people move from a repressed rural or regional space to an unrestricted urban one. This metronormative visibility within culture often causes rural LGBTQIA2S+ people to internalise 'a dominating metro-chauvinistic ideology'¹⁷⁴, as found by rural scholar Katie Hogan. In addition, because metronormativity posits that urban life is inherently more valuable or superior to rural and regional life for LGBTQIA2S+ people, it prevents narratives of rural queer joy from surfacing. Despite metronormative insistence on solely validating urban queer subjectivities, evidence shows that the rural to urban queer migratory pattern is not universal, nor is there a queer consensus on urban superiority.

In the UK the definition of a rural area according to the Rural Urban Classification under DEFRA¹⁷⁵ is an area which falls 'outside of settlements with more than 10,000 resident population.'¹⁷⁶ Within this there are the following categories of rural and urban places:

¹⁷⁴ Katie Hogan, 'Decolonizing Rural Space In Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*', in *The Comics of Alison Bechdel: From the Outside In*, ed. by Janine Utell (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496825773.003.0012>> [accessed 7 October 2022].

¹⁷⁵ Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs.

¹⁷⁶ *Rural Urban Classification* (2016), DEFRA <<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/rural-urban-classification>> [accessed 20 October 2021].

Rural: Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings
Rural: Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings in a sparse setting
Rural: Village
Rural: Village in a sparse setting
Rural: Town and Fringe
Rural: Town and Fringe in a sparse setting
Urban: City and Town
Urban: City and Town in a sparse setting
Urban: Minor Conurbation
Urban: Major Conurbation¹⁷⁷

These areas are then referred to the point scale of the Rural Urban Local Authority Classification if they are too difficult to define under DEFRA's system. This local system is made up of the following classifications:

Mainly Rural (80% or more of the population resides in rural areas)
Largely Rural (Between 50% and 79% of the population resides in rural areas)
Urban with Significant Rural (Between 26% and 49% of the population resides in rural areas)
Urban City and Town
Urban with Minor Conurbation
Urban with Major Conurbation¹⁷⁸

Along these defining guidelines '17% of England's population' reside in rural areas, but when considering minor urban areas this rises to 64%.¹⁷⁹ Further, although the proportion of the population residing in urban areas of the UK has risen at a faster rate than the rural, there has been an approximately 600,000 increase in rural residents as defined above between 2011 and

¹⁷⁷ DEFRA, *Rural Urban Classification*

¹⁷⁸ DEFRA, *Rural Urban Classification*

¹⁷⁹ DEFRA, *Rural Urban Classification*

2020.¹⁸⁰ If, as the US and the UK, media and census data suggests, anywhere between 3.1 & 10 percent of the population are queer women, that means that somewhere between 18,600 and 60,000 queer women and lesbians moved to places defined as rural in the UK over the past decade.¹⁸¹ Despite this, metronormative visibility has prevented any increase in the presence of lesbian subjectivities within cultural narratives.

Queer scholars C. T. Conner and Daniel Okamura's study on LGBTQIA2S+ spatial identity formation found a pattern 'in which individuals attach their identity to a nearby gay space from which they draw their identity'¹⁸². This meant that without seeing themselves in a space already visibly associated with gay identity or sociality, the participants couldn't identify their own sexual orientations. In the study they used ethnographic data from a group of '35 gay men, 2 trans-identifying individuals, 1 heterosexual woman, and 2 lesbians'¹⁸³ to provide 'a more nuanced narrative of rural LGBT+ people'¹⁸⁴. In the light of the data, I cited above, the lesbians included in the research were not quantitatively reflective of the lesbian and queer women living in the rural UK. The claim that an existing gay space must already exist in order to form a gay sense of self, then, is a metronormative and male-biased finding.

¹⁸⁰ DEFRA, *Statistical Digest of Rural England August 2022 Edition*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1100175/07_Statistical_Digest_of_Rural_England_2022_August_edition.pdf, accessed 18/09/2022

¹⁸¹ Jo Yurcaba, 'Percentage of LGBTQ adults in U.S. has doubled over the past decade, Gallup finds', *NBC News*, 17 February 2022, <<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/percentage-lgbtq-adults-us-doubled-decade-gallup-finds-rcna16556>>, [accessed 18 August 2022]; <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualidentityuk/2020>; <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/how-many-people-lgbt/> and <https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx>

¹⁸² Conner & Okamura

¹⁸³ Conner & Okamura

¹⁸⁴ Conner & Okamura

Julie Podmore has expanded on Halberstam's definition of metronormativity by stating most literary narratives in Anglo-European cultures situate urban residence as the primary 'means by which to constitute sexual subjectivity.'¹⁸⁵ Meanwhile, in her research on queer geographies, Petra Doan argues that '[l]esbian spaces are less explicitly gendered and less visible'¹⁸⁶ due to the 'commodification of gay space by the patriarchal institutions that remain in control'¹⁸⁷. This means that metronormativity, which functions within a patriarchal societal structure, has positioned urban space as the only conduit for sexual identity formation and exploration of alternative sexual subjectivities. Emily Kazyak likewise argues that '[c]ultural narratives and popular representations of gay and lesbian sexualities are embedded in a particular geographic story.'¹⁸⁸ Applied to British culture, metronormative thinking and scholarship ensures that the geographic story of LGBTQIA2S+ identities is one based in urban settings.

Podmore's 2016 research on metronormative geography expands on her previous work in identifying lesbian spatiality and subjectivity as 'ephemeral and invisible'¹⁸⁹ within urban space. Rural Prides in the UK have increased in the past five years, and in the US organisations like Queer Appalachia and Southern Queer Resistance have gained traction with a young generation of activists in asserting the history and presence of LGBTQIA2S+ people in rural areas of the country.¹⁹⁰ Despite this, though, there is still a lack of visible queer and lesbian women in culture

¹⁸⁵ Podmore, 'Disaggregating', p. 22

¹⁸⁶ Petra Doan, 'Queers in the American City: Transgendered perceptions of urban space' in *Gender, Place, Culture*, 14:1 (2007), 57–74 (62).

¹⁸⁷ Doan, 'Queers in the American City', 62.

¹⁸⁸ Emily A. Kazyak, 'The Space and Place of Sexuality: How Rural Lesbians and Gays Narrate Identity' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Michigan, 2010), p. 1.

¹⁸⁹ Podmore, 'Disaggregating', p. 23.

¹⁹⁰ Jamie Wareham, 'What This Rural Pride Can Teach LGBTQ Events All Over The UK', *Forbes*, 1 September 2021, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiewareham/2021/09/01/what-this-rural-pride-can-teach-lgbtq-events-all-over-the-uk/>> [accessed 9 December 2021].; Minnie Bruce Pratt, 'The Queer South: Where the past is not past, and the future is now', *Scalawag Magazine*, 27 January 2020, <<https://scalawagmagazine.org/2020/01/queer-south-minnie-bruce-pratt/>> [accessed 20 December 2021].

and discourse due to metronormative associations of alternative sexualities exclusively with urban spaces. Rural research and literature which seeks to disrupt metronormative views still tends to take on a masculinist lens. Scott Herring's article "Southern Backwardness: Metronormativity and Regional Visual Culture", for example, focuses on 'white working-class males'¹⁹¹ in Alabama. Conner and Okamura claim rural LGBTQIA2S+ studies are a 'mature area of research'¹⁹², yet they omit lesbian and queer women's experiences into that maturity. Whilst vital in historicizing deeply under researched trans* histories, historian Emily Skidmore's 2017 *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* focuses on rural trans men's lives whilst failing to fully acknowledge the potential lesbian and queer subjectivities of their wives.¹⁹³ In work which does bring lesbian subjectivities into visible discourse, such as Sarah Mullan's work on contemporary lesbian performance history in the UK, the geographical grounding is exclusively urban. Even Mullan herself notes that 'critical work on lesbian performance has been subsumed within feminist performance anthologies'¹⁹⁴, is located primarily in London, and succumbs to the cultural privileging of gay male stories. J. Samaine Lockwood's adjacent research on 'queer regionalisms' in 2020 unearthed a second wave feminist interest in women's writings from 1865-1915 due to 'efforts to contest dominant ideologies of gender'¹⁹⁵ in relation to non-urban residence. Due to the pervasiveness of metronormative visibility, however, this has taken over a century to surface in any accessible way. And in the domain of popular culture, in 2014 *Stylist* reported, for example,

¹⁹¹ Herring, 'Southern Backwardness', p. 40.

¹⁹² Christopher T. Conner and Daniel Okamura, 'Queer expectations: An empirical critique of rural LGBT+ narratives', *Sexualities*, 25:8 (2021) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607211013280>>.

¹⁹³ Emily Skidmore, *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NYU Press, 2017).

¹⁹⁴ Sarah Mullan, 'Lesbian Performance in London 1992-2015: Identity, Representation, and Queer Epistemologies' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2017), permission and pdf given by author via email, [12 April 2021], p.22

¹⁹⁵ 'Queer Critical Regionalism' in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ed. by Siobhan Somerville, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 228-240.

that partially because 'gay men have a cultural history that informs pop culture, lesbians have not had similar opportunities, because women aren't given the same funding as men.'¹⁹⁶

Cherry Grove, for instance, was a lesbian section within a rural area on gay male retreat lands Fire Island.¹⁹⁷ The community was founded in New York state in the 1930s after the gay women visiting Fire Island with their gay male friends found that the 'physical environment' was essential to the resident's experiences of sexual identity formation. The residents credit the access to landscapes replete with nonhuman beings and absent of normative domestic structures with the ability to walk alone at night 'without fear of violence, harassment, or arrest', seek respite from 'incessant expectations that all women be heterosexual', and simply 'breathe the fresh air'¹⁹⁸. This problematizes a metronormative portrayal of lesbian and queer women further as it adds the element of public safety for women in urban spaces to the discourse of cultural visibility and care.

The effects of metronormative visibility and the narrative centring of gay male experiences as the only queer identity meriting attention have had a bearing on how lesbians have been portrayed in film, television, and theatre. For example, in 1990s and 2000s there were television tropes which minimised screen time for lesbian or queer women, such as 'the lesbian kiss episode',¹⁹⁹ and the

¹⁹⁶ Sophie Wilkinson, 'Are lesbians invisible because they're women?', *Stylist*, 2012, <<https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/sophie-wilkinson-asks-are-lesbians-invisible-because-they-are-women/53680>> [accessed 10 December 2022].

¹⁹⁷ Cherry Grove was a white and middle-class community. In the 1930s in New York there would have been no access to anyone without a high amount of expendable income to access this community, and much of America still had segregation alongside inbuilt structural American racism. See: Sandilands, 'Lesbian Separatist Communities' (2002); Unger, *Jook Joints* (2010). Fire Island is a dominantly gay-male holiday island. It was established as a sort of gay Hamptons. Lesbians eventually joined in their own section of the island, forming Cherry Grove. Whilst Cherry Grove has withered (excuse my pun), Fire Island is still hanging on. For a recent cultural reference see the 2021 film, *Fire Island*, which only features one lesbian character, who has exclusively gay male friends.

¹⁹⁸ Unger, 'Jook Joints', 175.

¹⁹⁹ This term was coined to describe the restrictions put on romantic contact between women on television in the US and UK throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The most recognisable instance is in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* where a lesbian couple was only allowed closed mouth kissing whilst the heterosexual characters were allowed quite graphic sex scenes. In the end the show was guilty of both tropes, as one of the lesbian characters was

so-called 'bury your gays' phenomenon. The latter has seen around 225 queer women characters introduced just to be killed off television since 1976, in most cases to propel a male story line and after only a couple of minutes on screen.²⁰⁰ Plays categorised as LGBTQIA2S+ with international recognition such as *Angels in America* (1991), *RENT* (1993), *The Laramie Project* (2000), *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* (2017), and *The Inheritance* (2019) are all primarily concerned with the experiences of queer men. Of those, *The Laramie Project* is the only example which deals with any rural themes. It is set in Laramie, Wyoming in the US and follows the true story of Matthew Shepherd's murder as a result of his sexuality. Although the play does contain a lesbian character, she is portrayed as disliking and mistrustful of Laramie even before Matthew's attack.²⁰¹ The play went on to be produced as an HBO special that won global acclaim and got a sequel ten years later, which showed the lack of progress still plaguing the town from the theatre company's perspective.²⁰² The work is based in an actual crime, but the widespread circulation of this story on an international television platform reinforces the acceptance of rural spaces as dangerous and hostile to queer people.

On screen, *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (2009-Present) has shifted the vernacular of popular culture across genders and sexualities (yas kween, shade, werk, read her, beat your face, serve.)²⁰³ British (and

shot dead leading to the other becoming evil. See: Duncan Brown, *First kiss: Buffy and the move away from LGBT+ TV tropes* (2018), *The Student* <<https://studentnewspaper.org/first-kiss-buffy-and-the-move-away-from-lgbt-tv-tropes/>>.

²⁰⁰ Riese, 'All 225 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters on TV, And How They Died' (2022), *AutoStraddle*, <<https://www.autostraddle.com/all-65-dead-lesbian-and-bisexual-characters-on-tv-and-how-they-died-312315/>> [accessed 9 September 2022].

²⁰¹ Moisés Kaufman, *The Laramie Project* (New York: Tectonic Theatre Project, 2000)

²⁰² Rob Mackie, 'The Laramie Project', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2003, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2003/jun/06/artsfeatures.dvdreviews1>> [accessed 12 October 2022].

²⁰³ Chloe Davis, 'The Language of Ballroom' (2019), *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* <<https://glreview.org/the-language-of-ballroom/>> [accessed 21 October 2021]. The terminology used by the Queens across the massive *Drag Race* franchise originates from majority black and brown ballroom culture in the 1970s to the 1990s. This is relevant as it is, again, a commonality in that trans* people have again been elided from popular knowledge. The genderqueer ball scene is rarely mentioned by Ru himself, and he drags as a white woman – further removing the trans* women who originated many of the terms he profits from. There are also many issues with the treatment of trans* people within the franchise, revealing another

later American spin-off) series *Queer as Folk* (1999-2005, & 2022) provided a transatlantic and multigenerational audience with a recent reboot to the original series.²⁰⁴ The original British version of the series followed only gay men in urban areas, and the American version followed five gay men and only one lesbian couple through their lives in the city of Pittsburgh. *Will & Grace*, which also gained a reboot and was one of America's most beloved and longest running sitcoms, featured jokes about being disgusted by lesbians despite featuring two gay male protagonists.²⁰⁵ *Love, Simon* (2018), a film about romance between two gay teen boys, made it into cinemas for young viewers, whilst there have been no cinema releases of teen lesbian stories.

Most recent cinematic lesbian narratives take the form of 'the lesbian period drama' often made by male artists and so pervasive that the trope went viral as an Saturday Night Live sketch in 2021 citing *Ammonite* (2020), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), and *The World to Come* (2020).²⁰⁶ The most recent season of Netflix's rebooted makeover-reality show *Queer Eye* gained a renewal from the network despite accusations of enforcing dangerous metronormative optics of Texas and choosing to makeover a woman who had been explicitly lesbophobic despite being kind to the Fab 5 on the show.²⁰⁷ In 2022 *The Austin Chronicle* reported that the owner of the Broken Spoke

instance of normative queer cultures disseminating ideas which abandon the most marginalised. See: Sam Levin, 'Who can be a drag queen? RuPaul's trans comments fuel calls for inclusion', *The Guardian*, 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/08/rupaul-drag-race-transgender-performers-diversity>>; Tom Faber, 'RuPaul, Pose and how the mainstream discovered voguing' (2019), *The Financial Times* <<https://www.ft.com/content/744164b2-8144-11e9-a7f0-77d3101896ec>>; Lester Fabian Braithwait, *Striking a 'Pose': A Brief History of Ball Culture* (2018), *Rolling Stone* <<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/striking-a-pose-a-brief-history-of-ball-culture-629280/>>.

²⁰⁴ Daniel D'Addario, 'Peacock's *Queer as Folk* Is a Raucous, Tonally Unsteady Ride', *Variety*, 8 June 2022, <<https://variety.com/2022/tv/reviews/queer-as-folk-peacock-reboot-review-1235284327/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

²⁰⁵ 'Husbands and Trophy Wives', *Will & Grace*, NBC, 19 October 2000.

²⁰⁶ See: Ryan Lattanzio, 'SNL' Spoofs 'Ammonite' and 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' with 'Lesbian Period Drama' Sketch — Watch', *Indie Wire*, 11 April 2021, <<https://www.indiewire.com/2021/04/snl-lesbian-period-drama-ammonite-portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire-1234629628/>>; 'Lesbian Period Drama', SNL, 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgaLIP0xmQE>>; *The Handmaiden*, dir. by Park Chan-wook (2016), *The Favourite*, dir. by Yorgos Lanthimos (2018), *The World To Come*, dir. by Mona Fastvold (2020), *Ammonite*, dir. by Francis Lee (2020), *Disobedience*, dir. by H R Kean (2020).

²⁰⁷ Emily Canas and Sina Kramer, 'Braving the Wilds: Metronormativity in Netflix's *Queer Eye*', *Loyola Marymount University Law School* <<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/honors-thesis/194/>> [accessed 10 November 2022].; Rachel Rascoe, 'Faster Than Sound: Is the Broken Spoke Too Broken' (2022), *The Austin Chronicle* <<https://www.austinchronicle.com/music/2022-01-14/faster-than-sound-is-the-broken-spoke-too-broken/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

Bar who had been featured on the show had refused to allow a uniformed military officer to kiss her same-sex partner in the bar.²⁰⁸ Researchers Emily Canas and Siena Kramer suggest that *Queer Eye* reflects and contributes to the conceptualization of the rural South as backward and inhospitable to queer folks.²⁰⁹ The most watched television shows with lesbian main characters, and the only specifically lesbian show still being produced for television, *The L Word* (2004-2009) and its sequel/reboot (2018-present), conversely subvert metronormative cultural framings. The series contains multiple plots in which queer and trans people must leave urban spaces to be both happy and queer.²¹⁰

Turning now to sociological research, Thomas Cooke and Melanie Rapiano's 2007 study on lesbian geographies found that fewer lesbian women tend to choose urban areas of residence than gay men.²¹¹ Amin Ghaziani's work adds that 'coupled women are more likely to live in rural environments'²¹². Both studies also confirm that 'lesbian geographies are located in areas with a lower median price per square foot.'²¹³ Despite the 'sexual illegibility of rural queers'²¹⁴ which is perpetuated by metronormative narratives, rural studies scholar Carly Thomsen argues that 'rural LGBTQ women are illegible *not to rural people* but to urban people'²¹⁵ in part due to how urban development has financially driven those women out of queer urban spaces and in part due to the

²⁰⁸ Rachel Roscoe, 'Faster than Sound'

²⁰⁹ Canas and Kramer, pp. 3-16.

²¹⁰ Rebecca Nicholson, 'The return of The L Word: the groundbreaking lesbian show is back', *The Guardian*, 2 December 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/dec/02/return-of-the-l-word-lesbian-show>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

²¹¹ Cooke, Thomas J., and Melanie Rapiano, 'The Migration of Partnered Gays and Lesbians between 1995 and 2000'. *Professional Geographer* 59:3 (2007), pp. 285-297.

²¹² Ghaziani, *City & Community*, p. 7

²¹³ Ghaziani, *City & Community*, p. 9

²¹⁴ Carly Thomsen, *Visibility Interrupted: Rural Queer Life and the Politics of Unbecoming*, (2021: University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis), e-book (no page numbers).

²¹⁵ Thomsen, *Visibility Interrupted*

alternative forms of queer communication used in rural spaces. In Ghaziani's 2015 study 'lesbian geographies' she found that neighbourhoods where lesbians resided typically had a higher increase in property value than neighbourhoods with only gay male or heterosexual couples.²¹⁶ She also found that even where lesbians were the first to 'initiate renewal efforts'²¹⁷ such as developing 'performance spaces, alternative or second hand bookstores, cafes, community centres, bike shops, and organic or cooperative grocery stores'²¹⁸ they were often priced out by heterosexual couples or gay male couples. In their study 'Queering Rural Planning' which applies queer theory to rural planning in the US and UK, researchers Petra L. Doan and Daniel P. Hubbard state that in their findings there was 'an implicit assumption that queer people are an urban phenomenon'²¹⁹ and that major cities carried 'greater freedom to explore sexuality and identity'²²⁰. The study also found that 'lower incomes among lesbians make it difficult to invest in houses at the same rate as gay men'²²¹ and that 'queer and lesbian women tended to seek permanent residence in more rural places after moving to urban ones.'²²²

Metronormativity, then, has not only prevented cultural visibility for lesbians but urban development and the rise in property values has also driven lower-income lesbian and queer women out of urban spaces. According to Ghaziani, this omission of lesbian subjectivities from culture and discourse has led to a belief in queer studies that 'lesbians are placeless, they lack a

²¹⁶ Amin Ghaziani, 'Lesbian Geographies', *Contexts*, 14:1 (2015) <<https://contexts.org/articles/lesbian-geographies/>> [accessed 20 September 2021].

²¹⁷ Ghaziani, 'Lesbian Geographies'.

²¹⁸ Ghaziani, 'Lesbian Geographies'.

²¹⁹ Doan and Hubbard, 'Queering Rural Planning' p2.

²²⁰ Doan and Hubbard, 'Queering Rural Planning' p2.

²²¹ Doan, 'Queers in the American City', 62.

²²² Doan, 'Queers in the American City' 62 & Doan and Hubbard, 'Queering Rural Planning'.

geographical basis, or they are without territorial aspirations.²²³ Further, as found by Cassidy Duckett, metronormative visibility prevents political and cultural development in rural areas by discouraging investment under the pretence that there is no queer presence there.²²⁴

Section Two: Land Ownership, Property, and Nature

Urbanisation is prefigured by histories of land use and property. Therefore, the argument now turns to land ownership histories. Land becoming a form of property was first constituted in 1066 during the Norman Conquest when William the Conqueror asserted complete Crown ownership.²²⁵ A majority of land historians in the UK agree that the English Common Law of Real Property 'took shape between 1153 and 1215.'²²⁶ This distinction of land as property occurs, according to historian Robert Palmer, 'when an individual's claim to a parcel of land is not dependent on his own strength or on a personal relationship: when title is protected by a bureaucratic authority according to set rules. Property derives from the state; it cannot exist prior to the state.'²²⁷ In other words, deeming land as property allows the state to benefit from property owners and those property owners cannot retain their status without state recognition of their property. This shift from shared land to property necessitated the establishment of rules around how non-landowning classes could and couldn't treat land as they had previously, leading to the ideological and legal establishment of common lands in Britain.

²²³ Amin Ghaziani, 'Cultural Archipelagos: New Directions in the Study of Sexuality and Space', *City & Community*, 18:1 (2019), 4–22 (7).

²²⁴ Cassidy C. Duckett, 'Downtowns and Diverted Dollars: How the Metronormativity Narrative Damages Rural Queer Political Organizing', *Tulane Journal of Law & Sexuality*, 30 (2021).

²²⁵ Shrubsole, 'Who owns England?'

²²⁶ Robert C. Palmer, 'The Origins of Property in England', *Law and History Review*, 3:1 (1985), 1–50 (1) <doi:10.2307/743696>.

²²⁷ Palmer, 'The Origins of Property', 7.

The National Archives explains that common land is 'land subject to rights enjoyed by one or more persons to take or use part of a piece of land or of the procedure of a piece of land which is owned by someone else'²²⁸. Common lands, though, are all technically private property despite their name. They are often 'owned by local authorities, the National Trust and other bodies for the public benefit, but not all commons offer total access to all comers.'²²⁹ There were only five historical rights of common given under Land Law in the UK which the Archives list as follows:

- of pasture: the right to graze livestock; the animals permitted, whether sheep, horses, cattle and such, were specified in each case.
- of estovers: the right to cut and take wood (but not timber), reeds, heather, bracken and the like.
- of turbary: the right to dig turf or peat for fuel.
- in the soil: the right to take sand, gravel, stone, coal and other minerals.
- of piscary: the right to take fish from ponds, streams and so on.

These rights related to natural produce, not to crops or commercial exploitation of the land. They were almost always subject to limitations on quantities (usually enough for the domestic needs of the commoner) and sometimes subject to seasonal restrictions (such as during game-breeding periods).²³⁰

In the 2021 *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, land use is defined as 'human cultural practices that alter terrestrial ecosystems for a societal purpose or purposes, including practices that reduce those alterations'²³¹. The first true implementation of property laws in accordance

²²⁸ 'Land ownership, use and rights: common lands' ([n.d.]), *The National Archives* <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/common-lands/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

²²⁹ 'Land ownership', *The National Archives*.

²³⁰ 'Land ownership', *The National Archives*.

²³¹ Erle C. Ellis, 'Land Use and Ecological Change: A 12,000-Year History', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, vol. 46 no.1, (2021), pp.1-33, p. 2.

with government-determined land use in Britain were the enclosures of the 16th century. *The Land*, a land-rights magazine, defines the enclosures as ‘the subdivision and fencing of common land into individual plots which were allocated to those people deemed to have held rights to the land enclosed.’²³² Rules surrounding use and property were put in place alongside severe consequences if they were broken. The landowners who became, and arguably remain, the most powerful social class in the UK were the ones making the rules often both on their own properties and within the government.

The landed gentry in Britain was (and is) a class of landowners who make their living from tenants residing and working on their estates. They were separate from the peerage in that they had no hereditary connection to nobility, or those who were considered upper class by blood relation to the royal line. Often, though, they were close to nobility through marriage, friendship, or business which was helpful in acquiring a country estate to begin with.²³³ The land they owned passed down through bloodline rather than will and absorbed all their tenants’ possessions, and sometimes family, alongside it.²³⁴ Women were used to expand family control and spread ownership through reproduction. According to economic historian H. J. Habakkuk, landowners would raise a dowry through mortgaging some of his land, which would then be used by the husband to buy land and form a jointure which he would mortgage until ‘two families owned an increased amount of land and had created two additional mortgages.’²³⁵

²³² Simon Fairlie, ‘A Short History of Enclosure in Britain’ (2009), *The Land* <<https://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/short-history-enclosure-britain>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

²³³ Mark Rothery, ‘The wealth of the English landed gentry, 1870-1935’, *Agricultural History Review*, 55:2 (2007), 251–268 (253).

²³⁴ H. J. Habakkuk, ‘English Landownership, 1680–1740’, *The Economic History Review*, 10:1 (1940), 2–17 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2590281>> [accessed 17 November 2022].

²³⁵ Habakkuk, ‘English Landownership’, 7.

Without any claim to aristocracy, Britain's landed gentry established a system based on the belief of biological entitlement to inherited property and wealth. Historian Mark Rothery argues that the establishment of a landed gentry in Britain as opposed to a more socialist structure of land distribution 'led the rising middle classes to emulate the aristocracy rather than challenge their status through new forms of culture and politics.'²³⁶ The expansion of property ownership through marriage, reproduction, and monetary influence came with an increased political power. This is especially the case in that landed gentry made up a majority of the British Parliament well into the 19th century and landlords still represent approximately a fifth of current MPs.²³⁷ Landowners benefited from being close to the elite, so ensured government policies on land continued to serve the elite, who then ensured the landowners remained in power and so on.

In response to the establishment of a landed gentry and subsequent enclosing and privatising of land in Britain there have been several land reform movements and several parliamentary rebuttals. The Diggers of the 17th century occupied land in protest of its enclosure during the English Civil War and circulated intellectual pamphlets on common land access.²³⁸ The "Blacks" who followed took a more aggressive approach, rebelling against the enclosure of woodland from whence they previously harvested through poaching and threats to the landowners.²³⁹ The

²³⁶ Rothery, 'The wealth of the English', p. 252.

²³⁷ Martin Williams, *Almost one in five MPs are landlords* (2017), Channel 4, <<https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/almost-one-in-five-mps-are-landlords>> [accessed 10 November 2022].

²³⁸ G. O'Hara, 'An All Over Expansion: The Politics of the Land in "Golden Age" Britain', in *Governing Post-War Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p. 131.

²³⁹ Fairlie, *A Short History*.

Waltham Black Act was passed in response in 1723 which, as stated by historian Nancy Lee Peluso, '[c]hanged forest practices, laws and enforcement included new ways to privatize commons and customarily held resources, and the rendering of some customs as transgressions against private property (in most instances only recently formalized) as capital crimes.'²⁴⁰

The Great Reform Act, or Representation of the People Act of 1832 later broadened the definition of who could vote outside of the landed gentry so that taxation could be collected more widely from the middle classes.²⁴¹ It also explicitly banned women from being counted regardless of their ownership of property for the first time, due to recorded 'occasional, although rare, instances of women voting'²⁴². In 1873 'The New Domesday Book' was commissioned to demonstrate that there were more landowners in Britain than land reformers suggested. According to historian Ellen Spring, it instead ended up 'showing that 80 percent of the land of Great Britain was owned by fewer than seven thousand persons.'²⁴³ This led to the Victorian Land Reform, led primarily by middle class socialist urban property owners living non-normative lives such as the founder of the National Trust, Octavia Hill.²⁴⁴ According to Simon Fairlie, in 1869 'out of 6,916 acres of land scheduled for enclosure, just three acres were allocated for recreation',²⁴⁵ which led to a call to change land laws from within the cities as urban residents noticed their green spaces disappearing. Conservation organisations such as the

²⁴⁰ Nancy Lee Peluso, 'Whigs and hunters: the origins of the Black Act, by E.P. Thompson', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44:1 (2017), 309–321 (310).

²⁴¹ 'The Reform Act 1832' (n.d.), *UK Parliament* <<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseofcommons/reformacts/overview/reformact1832/>> [accessed 15 November 2022].

²⁴² 'The Reform Act 1832', *UK Parliament*.

²⁴³ Eileen Spring, 'Landowners, Lawyers, and Land Law Reform in Nineteenth-Century England', *The American Journal of Legal History*, 21:1 (1977) 40–59 (50) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/844924>>, [accessed 13 December 2022].

²⁴⁴ Michael Hall, 'Queering the National Trust' (n.d.), *Society of Architectural Histories of Great Britain* <https://www.sahgb.org.uk/features/queering-the-national-trust>, [accessed 10 December 2022].

²⁴⁵ Fairlie, *A Short History*.

National Trust, Open Spaces Society, and Common Preservation Society followed this call, but ultimately still fail to make many major changes in land access outside the middle class.²⁴⁶

Only 8% of land is now legally accessible to the public in England.²⁴⁷ Out of that 8%, many forests and waterways are excluded due to contracts between the government and private corporations despite being publicly funded. In 2022 the Conservative party proposed the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act which criminalised trespassing in England and Wales in the most severe terms since The Black Act. The bill directly targeted Gypsy-Traveller and Roma communities and indirectly threatened land access for everyone residing in England and Wales based on what environmental planning researchers Samuel Burgum, Helen Jones, and Ryan Powell call an 'ongoing stigmatisation and criminalisation of nomadism which has given rise to eviction as a continuous process in which property, race, value and displacement are intertwined'²⁴⁸. The system of landownership and landed gentry in the UK perpetuates a system in which those who cannot lay claim to land are seen as placeless and therefore unvaluable.

The American colonies were established in much the same structure as that of the UK regarding property and land use. New England installed courts of nobles or gentry who would grant enclosed land to a legislature of their making to choose who would be a settler and who a

²⁴⁶ Fairlie, *A Short History*.

²⁴⁷ Helena Horton, 'People are right to trespass in fight to roam in England, says Green MP', *The Guardian*, 13 October 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/13/people-are-right-to-trespass-in-fight-for-right-to-roam-in-england-says-green-mp-caroline-lucas>> [accessed 20 October 2022].

²⁴⁸ Samuel Burgum, Helen Jones and Ryan Powell, 'Manufacturing mandates: Property, race, and the criminalisation of trespass in England and Wales', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 40:6, 1219–1236 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544211067381>>.

freeholder.²⁴⁹ In Virginia, where the main land use was growing and harvesting tobacco, colonists moved often as their farming destroyed both the human and nonhuman viability of the land being used.²⁵⁰ The new American idea of land that was forming was an individualist one which affirmed individual entitlement to land over common use.

Land under a settler-colonial system is positioned as an abundant and accessible commodity despite what or who already resides there. Indigenous studies researchers Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill argue that '[w]ithin settler colonialism, it is exploitation of land that yields supreme value'²⁵¹. Indigenous scholars across the humanities and sciences have established 'settler' as a distinct form of colonialism in that it utilises the 'logic of erasure...through persistent ongoing exclusion, segregation, marginalization and dehumanization'²⁵² in addition to colonial violence and theft. Similarly, geographers Sarah Launius and Geoffrey Alan Boyce define settler colonialism as 'an ongoing process and condition premised expressly on the devaluation of nonwhite territorial and economic relations to accomplish and stabilize white settler control over property and land.'²⁵³ Rather than taking things from the land or forcing practices onto existing nonwhite residents, settler-colonialism takes the land and expels nonwhite residents, culture, and

²⁴⁹ 'Land Policy in New England and Virginia' ([n.d.]), *Britannica* <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-colonies/Land-policy-in-New-England-and-Virginia>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

²⁵⁰ 'Virginia's Early Relations with Native Americans' ([n.d.]), *Library of Congress* <<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/colonial-settlement-1600-1763/virginia-relations-with-native-americans/>> [accessed 12 December 2022].

²⁵¹ Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill, 'Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy', *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25 no. 1, 2013, pp. 8-34, p. 12

²⁵² Lana Ray, Lloy Wylie, Ann Marie Corrado, 'Shapeshifters, systems thinking and settler colonial logic: Expanding the framework of analysis of Indigenous health equity', *Social Science & Medicine*, 300 (2022) [accessed 23 October 2022].

²⁵³ Sarah Launius and Geoffrey Alan Boyce 'More than Metaphor: Settler Colonialism, Frontier Logic, and the Continuities of Racialized Dispossession in a Southwest U.S. City', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 111:1 (2021), 157-174 (157).

traditional land uses from it, or 'accumulation by dispossession'.²⁵⁴ Where classic colonialism focuses on culture and objects, settler colonialism focuses on territory and residence.

Whilst the US doesn't have the lineage of landed gentry and restrictions on land ownership of the UK, American settler-colonial frameworks have still prevented any protected and truly common lands through a separation of land law between federal, state and local governments.²⁵⁵ Similarly, whilst primogeniture was forgone in the US constitution in favour of equal inheritance, this did not prevent inequalities based on inherited wealth.²⁵⁶ According to a 2022 *Forbes* article, '60% of the total pre-tax wealth expected to be handed down in this [decade] will come from North America. Due to favorable inheritance tax codes, U.S. heirs will be able to keep more of this wealth than if they lived elsewhere'²⁵⁷. This means that whilst settler-colonial understandings of land in America operate differently to landed class understandings in the UK, they have both resulted in societal systems of inequality. Indigenous environmental studies researchers Megan Bang and Ananda Marin state that 'constructions of nature-culture relations are linked to settler-colonialism'²⁵⁸.

Environmental geographer Jacques Pollini credits Anglo-European culture, specifically 'the Christian myth of Genesis'²⁵⁹ and 'the ideal of the Enlightenment, according to which the purpose

²⁵⁴ Launius and Boyce, 'More than Metaphor', 158.

²⁵⁵ Elizabeth B. Mensch, 'The Colonial Origins of Liberal Property Rights', *Buffalo Law Review*, 31:635 (1992), 635–735.

²⁵⁶ Richard B. Morris, 'Primogeniture and Entailed Estates in America', *Columbia Law Review*, 27:1 (1927) 24–51 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1113540>> [accessed 18 November 2022].

²⁵⁷ Katharina Buchholz, 'Inherited Wealth Concentrates Among The Ultra-Rich' (2017), *Forbes* <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/katharinabuchholz/2022/02/17/inherited-wealth-concentrates-among-the-ultra-rich-infographic/?sh=7c218e24b948>> [accessed 15 November 2022].

²⁵⁸ Megan Bang and Ananda Marin, 'Nature-culture constructs in science learning: Human/non-human agency and intentionality', *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 52:4 (2015), 530–544 (532).

²⁵⁹ Jacques Pollini, 'Bruno Latour and the Ontological Dissolution of Nature in the Social Sciences: A Critical Review', *Environmental Values*, 22:1 (2013), 25–42 (26) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23460960>> [accessed 21 November 2022].

of science is to control and domesticate nature for the benefit of humankind²⁶⁰ with the existing Western concept of nature as 'nonsocial by definition and...opposed to the cultural world.'²⁶¹ Rural studies researcher Katie Holmes reinforces the claim that the nature/culture binary is due to a 'Judeo-Christian imperative to subdue wilderness.'²⁶² In the 18th century of what Welsh feminist historian Carol MacCormack frames as 'European intellectual history', 'nature was that aspect of the world which had been revealed through scientific scrutiny to have its predictable laws, but also that which was not yet mastered.'²⁶³ Donna Haraway coined the term 'natureculture' in order to try and work through the nature/culture binary from a feminist standpoint. In her 1991 work *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* she states the following about why natureculture is necessary and how it attempts to disrupt this dichotomy:

The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized—are all in question ideologically.²⁶⁴

Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other.²⁶⁵

In defining the basic prejudices that accompany a cultural the nature/culture dichotomy MacCormack draws on Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' (1985) and the long history of questions around this dichotomy in feminist and scientific thought:

²⁶⁰ Pollini, 'Bruno Latour', 26.

²⁶¹ Pollini, 'Bruno Latour', 26.

²⁶² Katie Holmes. 'Making Masculinity: Land, Body, Image in Australia's Mallee Country', *RCC Perspectives*, 2 (2017), 39–48 (39).; Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern eds., *Nature Culture, and Gender*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980), p. 1

²⁶³ MacCormack, p. 6

²⁶⁴ Donna J Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (Routledge, New York: 1991), p.163

²⁶⁵ Haraway, *Simians*, p. 151

nature : wild
female : culture
tame : male²⁶⁶

This history has persisted into the 21st century regarding a relatively universal and accepted intellectual definition of nature and white middle-class cis het men still tend to be the ones reproducing it through art and literature. Robert Macfarlane, for example, described nature as ‘a dangerous force that confounds the order-bringing pursuits of human culture and agriculture’ in his 2007 book on UK landscapes *The Wild Places*. In exploring how ideologically pervasive the nature/culture binary remains, geography scholar Jack Goody explains ‘there has been the well-known structuralist dichotomy between nature and culture, often assumed to be transcultural, to be a feature of all or most societies. That in turn has been linked in various ways to the dichotomy male/female and other binary categories.’²⁶⁷

This dichotomy has remained present into contemporary perceptions of what nature is to human beings. Feminist ecologies researcher Astrida Neimanis defines the nature/culture binary as an ‘oppositional logic – where culture stands in for (active) masculinity and nature for (passive) femininity.’²⁶⁸ Indigenous pedagogy researchers Megan Bang and Ananda Marin state that binary ways of thinking around nature ‘manifest[s] in orientations and reasoning in a multiplicity of ways, including but not limited to a view that humans are distanced or apart from the natural

²⁶⁶ Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern eds., *Nature Culture, and Gender*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) pp. 1-16. p. 12.

²⁶⁷ Jack Goody, ‘Man and the Natural World: Reflections on History and Anthropology’, *Environment and History*, 2:3 (1996), pp. 255–69 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20723016>> [accessed 21 November 2022]

²⁶⁸ Astrida Neimanis, ‘Natural Others? On Nature, Culture and Knowledge’ in *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Mary Evans and others (London: Sage Publishing, 2014)

world...[resulting] in asymmetrical forms of reasoning and assumptions about human entitlements to and extractions from the natural world.'²⁶⁹ Indigenous American studies researcher Catorina Sandilands states that an accepted nature/culture binary asserts the 'dominance of heterosexuality over other sexualities and the elevation of (rational, disembodied) culture over (erotic, embodied) nature'²⁷⁰.

There are recent queer and feminist interdisciplinary interventions into and analysis of this damaging and narrow view of the human relationship to the more-than-human world. In his 2021 book *Wild Things* Jack Halberstam states that 'scientists and humanists invented and explored the natural world in order to challenge or validate various man-made systems of morality and to create...a system of norms.'²⁷¹ Late twentieth century scholarship interrupts these narratives: Pollini posits that 'the deconstruction of nature as an objective truth takes its roots from...postmodernism and social constructionism'.²⁷² Haraway's 'natureculture' is a methodological concept which, for experimental humanities researcher Elaine Gan, asks for a transdisciplinary restructuring of 'the boundary between nature and culture...to radically remix the arts, humanities, and the social and natural sciences'²⁷³ in order to 'model, map, perform, or story... without resorting to humancentered perspectives'.²⁷⁴

²⁶⁹ Bang and Marin, 'Nature-culture constructs', 540.

²⁷⁰ Sandilands, 'Lesbian Separatist Communities', p134.

²⁷¹ Halberstam, *Wild Things*.

²⁷² Pollini, 'Bruno Latour', p. 27.

²⁷³ Elaine Gan, 'Natureculture: Theorizing the More-Than-Human', NYU, 2019, <<https://as.nyu.edu/departments/xs/curriculum/past-semester-courses/courses-spring-2019/Nomenclature.html>>

²⁷⁴ Gan, *Natureculture*.

The lineage of how land is treated, accessed, and perceived in the Anglo-European tradition has contributed to and resulted from the nature/culture dichotomy functioning as the neutral and universally accepted understanding of the world. In Goody's exploration of the historical human relationship with nonhuman, he writes that 'the Romantic poets imbibed the view that England developed a special attitude towards nature' as well as that the typical English understanding was 'that nature was made for humanity.'²⁷⁵ This tracks with the idea that land could be used by humans to barter, profit, and gain social power. It also aligns with the American addition of the colonial belief that every man has the right to accrue land, regardless of who originally resided there.

In the Local Trust's 'Activate! Land in the hands of communities' guidebook they state the following about the treatment of land as capital and its effects on British housing and public land access in the 21st century:

This move from state to private ownership has continued, with private landlords now owning almost 40% of all former council homes from the government's Right to Buy scheme. This redistribution of land could have been equalising but over time has resulted in a new concentration of commercial ownership, with land seen as an asset to turn profit, rather than a natural resource necessary to meet people's basic needs or human rights. Land is a great investment option: according to the Valuation Office, the average price of agricultural land in England is £21,000 per hectare, while land with planning permission for housing is around £6m per hectare. This has led to an industry of multi-million-pound, land-promotion companies— modern-day 'land barons', who take on the risky and sometimes lengthy process of acquiring land and getting planning permission for it. Meanwhile, communities that live near this land are unable to use it.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Jacky Goody, 'Man and the Natural World: Reflections on History and Anthropology', *Environment and History*, 2:3 (1996), 255–69 (260) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20723016>> [accessed 21 November 2022].

²⁷⁶ Hannah Gardiner, 'Activate! Land in the hands of communities', *Local Trust*, 28 March 2019, < <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/activate-land-in-the-hands-of-communities/>>, [accessed 04 May 2022], p. 5.

The 2019 report ends by stating that although information on land and rights in the UK is 'hard to come by, but the most informed statistics [show] 69% of land in the UK is owned by 0.6% of the population... [a] third of British land is still owned by aristocrats'.²⁷⁷ Land being treated as private for-profit property still primarily benefits landowners. Modern rights of common still in effect, such as The Common Agricultural Policy, '[pays] landowners according to the area of land they farm, rather than the public goods they deliver [which] has shaped the public's access to the countryside for centuries'²⁷⁸, as summarised by Land Law researcher Guy Shrubsole.

²⁷⁷ Gardiner, 'Activate!', p.5.

²⁷⁸ Shrubsole, *Who owns England?*

Section Three: The Nonhuman and the Erotic

In their 2020 study of what defines 'country life' in the UK, rural researchers Calvin Duggan and Ester Peeren found that 'the privileging of (certain) human stories leaves unacknowledged how non-human stories contribute to configuring what the world (or a specific part of it, like the rural) is and what it is not.'²⁷⁹ They specifically note that British literature idealises versions of the rural which suit a nature/culture dichotomy and the country/city tropes which follow whilst omitting any alternative subjectivities which might rupture those misconceptions. Despite the concept of nonhuman agency being called 'controversial'²⁸⁰ and 'provocative'²⁸¹, the nonhuman has been present as an active agent throughout poetry, literature, Indigenous science, and political campaigning.²⁸²

Contrary to the typical British discourse around land and nature, in *Strangers* (2020) ecotheorist and creative writer Rebecca Tamás ties linguistic use of nonhuman to The Digger's English land reform pamphlet in 1649 which called for a 'human and nonhuman...communal, earth centred radical society'.²⁸³ Nonhuman has also been used by Anglo-European scholars in cases such as actor-network theory wherein the nonhuman is credited with agency across layers of society and culture.²⁸⁴ Historian James Paz cites 'the voice and agency that nonhuman things have across

²⁷⁹ Calvin Duggan and Esther Peeren, 'Making up the British countryside: A posthuman critique of Country Life's narratives of rural resilience and conservation', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 80 (2020) 350–359 (356).

²⁸⁰ Edwin Sayes, 'Actor–Network Theory and methodology: Just what does it mean to say that nonhumans have agency?', *Social Studies of Science*, 44:1(2014), 134–149 (134) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312713511867>>.

²⁸¹ Sayes, 'Actor–Network Theory', 134.

²⁸² Jessica Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2022).

²⁸³ Rebecca Tamás, *Strangers: Essays on the Human and Non-Human* (London: Makina Books, 2020) pp. 8-10.

²⁸⁴ Sayes, 'Actor–Network Theory'.

Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture.²⁸⁵ The 17th century calls for communality between human and nonhuman, I argue, has not shifted in a positive way. The continuation of colonialism and following of mass-scale capitalism means that the divide between human and nonhuman beings has become wider. This divide prevents those living amongst the nonhuman from seeing their social value in allowing perspectives outside of socially established norms in rural areas.

Literary scholar David Herman's work on Virginia Woolf's modernist life writing explores 'how a focus on modernist strategies for narrating nonhuman lives fits within - necessitates the development of - a new, transdisciplinary paradigm for narrative inquiry.'²⁸⁶

Meanwhile, Indigenous studies researchers Jerry Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder, and Scott Pratt write that '[in] Indigenous studies scholarship, non-human agency is taken as a given [with] emphasis on the formation of relations with particular other-than-human agents.'²⁸⁷ Filmmaker and ethnographic Indigenous researcher Sara Abbott defines the nonhuman as 'all organic and inorganic entities who are other than human, including trees, plants, insects, stones, mountains, land, and water'.²⁸⁸ Radical ecopolitics scholar Neera M. Singh describes the nonhuman as a 'non-dualistic, non-determinist vitalist'²⁸⁹ intervention into a nature/culture binary understanding of land-human relations. Further, she credits the turn to the nonhuman in recent scholarship to 'Feminist and

²⁸⁵ James Paz, *Nonhuman voices in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2017), p. 3.

²⁸⁶ David Herman, "Modernist Life Writing and Nonhuman Lives: Ecologies of experience in Virginia Woolf's *Flush*", in *Virginia Woolf: Critical and Primary Sources Volume 4*, ed. Gill Lowe (London: Bloomsbury, 2021) pp. 165–189 (167).

²⁸⁷ Jerry Lee Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder, and Scott L. Pratt, 'The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26:3–4 (2020), 331–346 (337) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419830135>>.

²⁸⁸ Sarah Abbott, 'Approaching Nonhuman Ontologies: Trees, Communication, and Qualitative Inquiry' *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27: 8-9 (2021), 1059–1071 (1061).

²⁸⁹ Neera M. Singh, 'Environmental justice, degrowth, and post-capitalist futures', *Ecological Economics*, vol. 163, 2019, pp.138-142. p. 138.

Black thinkers, Indigenous scholars, and scholar-practitioner-activists from the global South that help reconceptualize the human, human agency and accountability and offer possibilities for imagining alternate worldmaking with the many others with whom we share this world.²⁹⁰

In *Animalqueer/Queeranimal: Scatterings* (2018), Aniel Rallin asks 'if queer is about the capacity of finding pleasure in strange ways and unexpected places, what comes in the way of imagining that nonhuman animals may also have the capacity to find pleasure in unexpected ways and strange places?'²⁹¹ For the purposes of this project, I define nonhuman in line with Abbott, positioning it within primarily unbuilt and non-urban landscape, and imagining it capable of unexpected communication and collaboration. The pleasure I found in my nonhuman companions as a child and young person is the thing that I can hold in the present when I try to find the truth of my rural lesbian experience beneath the conditioning of a religious and heteronormative culture in the American South. In *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), Jack Halberstam argues that a methodology considering nonhuman or 'wild things' opens 'a terrain of alternative formulations that resist the orderly impulses of modernity ...as a merging of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and radical queer interests.'²⁹² Abbott argues for a practice methodology based in 'philosophies of plant and nonhuman knowing, and interspecies communication.'²⁹³ This exploration of the nonhuman will act as the theoretical framework for the practice-based methodology with which

²⁹⁰ Singh, pp. 139-140.

²⁹¹ Aniel Rallin, 'Animal Queer/Queeranimal: Scatterings', in *Mapping Queer Space(s) of Practice and Pedagogy* Palgrave Macmillan, ed. by Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 323.

²⁹² Halberstam, *Wild Things*, p. x.

²⁹³ Abbott, 'Approaching Nonhuman Ontologies', p. 1061.

my practice seeks to discover alternative formulations of performance through communicating and collaborating with nonhuman.

Eco-geography scholar Bram Büscher states that the recent interdisciplinary attention to nonhuman as a theoretical framework 'challenge[s] more foundational dichotomies between nature-society, subject-object, and human-nonhuman.'²⁹⁴ Further, he writes 'the non-human turn has opened up space to give voice and texture to (historically) subaltern, colonial, subjugated, and other (non-white, non-male, non-western, non-heterosexual, nonhuman and other) experiences, positionalities, and contexts.'²⁹⁵ Key to a nonhuman praxis in research is the commitment to 'write humans and nonhumans as equals in a non-hierarchical, multispecies entanglement'²⁹⁶ as stated by Indigenous practice researcher Ryan A. Koons. In describing how Alice Oswald wrote what I argue is visceral sited poetry, which sought to reframe how nonhuman-human relationships were narratively represented, Sanna Karkulehto et al write that 'through bioregional rootedness, the poet aims to resist the complacency she calls out by reconfiguring the language that is used to construct and appropriate the nonhuman.'²⁹⁷ My own playwriting/creative writing practice is positioned within this aim to reconfigure language in order to re-construct the ideas of who is entitled to access the countryside and of what rural stories are represented within site-specific performance practice in the UK.

²⁹⁴ Bram Büscher, 'The nonhuman turn: Critical reflections on alienation, entanglement and nature under capitalism', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 12:1 (2021), 54–73 (55) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206211026200>>.

²⁹⁵ Büscher, 'The nonhuman turn', 57.

²⁹⁶ Ryan A. Koons, 'Becoming Avian in the Anthropocene: Performing the Feather Dance and the Owl Dance at Pvlvcekolv', *Humanimalia*, 10:2 (2019), 95–127 (96) <<https://doi.org/10.52537/humanimalia.9503>>.

²⁹⁷ Sanna Karkulehto and others, 'From Stinking Goose-foot to Bastard Toadflax: Botanical Humour in Alice Oswald's *Weeds and Wild Flowers*' pp. 108-133 (p. 113).

Building on feminist scholar Donna Haraway's work in asserting the importance of nonhuman agency in cultural narratives, Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Karoliina Lummaa, and Essi Varis argue that 'as long as the domain of nonhumanity is carved in the negative space of humanity'²⁹⁸ the core of systemic oppression and erasure cannot be changed in literature or culture. They seek instead a methodology which 'allow[s] for tracking of the nonhuman currents in language and typography, as well as for describing the ways in which nonhuman agents are gathered or composed in and around the texts'.²⁹⁹ Environmental writing researcher Kaisa Kortekallio echoes the call in Anthropocene literature for 'opening up to the strangeness of environmental transformations rather than preserving nonhuman Nature as a harmonious and stable setting for human activity'.³⁰⁰ This view accepts that the nonhuman is neither currently understood by humans, nor can it ever be understood as a single idea or subject such as nature. This sort of non-understanding of self and state of strangeness is what often drove me to write when outdoors or amongst the nonhuman in order to capture the feelings of 'self' my interactions allowed me. I am therefore drawn to these understandings of how nonhuman might be utilised conceptually within art which deals with language.

Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua argues that the discursive restructuring in shifting from 'nature' to 'nonhuman' might 'broaden older, outmoded understandings of literacy as simply about reading

²⁹⁸ Sanna Karkulehto and others, *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2019) pp. 57–90 <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429243042>>.

²⁹⁹ Karkulehto, *Reconfiguring*, p. 8.

³⁰⁰ Kaisa Kortekallio, 'Becoming-instrument: Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*' in *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis (New York: Routledge, 2019) pp. 57–90 (p. 66) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429243042>>.

and writing printed text.³⁰¹ Further, Black feminist scholar Bibi Burger argues in defence of alternative creative writing methodologies 'aimed at exposing the situatedness of supposedly neutral western thought, and at emphasising the embodiment and social embeddedness of all knowledge.'³⁰² A nonhuman methodology might also disrupt essentialist notions of women's relationship to nature 'by emphasising that the human view of the nonhuman is always mediated by the human's positionality, and that some humans have a more intimate relationship with nonhuman objects due to their history of being dehumanised',³⁰³ as argued by Burger.

In her exploration of how Euro-American performance practice might take accountability for the colonial and humanist narratives it has historically privileged, Joanna Mansbridge offers one version of nonhuman methodology as acknowledging that 'the human is a biological animal who relinquishes its claim to sovereignty and species superiority, recognises its dependence on nonhuman life forms, and participates in the making of multispecies communities.'³⁰⁴ Further, she states that the nonhuman offers performance practice an opportunity 'to become literate in a vocabulary of images, sounds, and the patterns of nonhuman worlds, as opposed to the linear, linguistically driven narratives of realist theatre and fiction.'³⁰⁵

³⁰¹ Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, *The Seeds We Have Planted: Portraits of a Native Hawaiian Charter School* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

³⁰² Bibi Burger 'The nonhuman object in Ama Ata Aidoo's "Nowhere cool": A black feminist critique of Object-oriented Ontology', *Agenda*, 36:1 (2022) 88–99 (88).

³⁰³ Burger, 'The nonhuman object', 90.

³⁰⁴ Joanna Mansbridge, 'Dramaturgy of Extinction: Sentient Landscapes, Spectral Bodies, and Unthought Worlds in Kris Verdonck's *Conversations (at the end of the world)* and *SOMETHING (out of nothing)*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 32:2 (2022), 124–139 (125) <DOI: 10.1080/10486801.2022.2047034>.

³⁰⁵ Mansbridge, 'Dramaturgy', 137.

Audre Lorde's 'Uses of the Erotic' (1978) was a criticism of and response to the mainstream Second Wave's exclusion of black and lesbian perspectives. In the article she argues that 'erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.'³⁰⁶ Further, she argues that 'the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.'³⁰⁷ Sexuality studies have pondered the erotic and whether it is a solely sexual concept for decades, but Lorde made the concept accessible outside of Freudian and academic exclusivity. Her work on the erotic has expanded the term to be used in its indigenous iterations as well as in accessible forms such as counselling. In his essay, 'Water Always Writes in Plural', for example, Mexican poet and scholar Octavio Paz defines the erotic as 'the condition of second sight. The erotic vision is creation as well as knowledge.'³⁰⁸

Outside of academia psychologists have used concepts of the erotic which echo Lorde to help people heal their relationships in a post-Covid reality. Esther Perel, for example, has argued that 'Eroticism isn't sex; it's sexuality transformed by the human imagination.'³⁰⁹ She adds that through the erotic '[w]e can anticipate, dream, and give meaning. If sex is a collection of urges and acts, the erotic is a receptacle for our hopes, fears, expectations, and struggles.'³¹⁰

³⁰⁶ Audre Lorde, 'The Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic as Power', *Sexualities and Communication Journal*, (1978), 87–91 (88), <https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/11881_Chapter_5.pdf>.

³⁰⁷ Lorde, 'The Uses of The Erotic', 89.

³⁰⁸ Octavio Paz, 'Water Writes Always in Plural', *Diacritics*, 8:4 (1978) 41–54 (50) <https://doi.org/10.2307/464738> [accessed 20 November 2022].

³⁰⁹ Esther Perel, *Why Eroticism Should Be Part of Your Self Care Plan* ([n.d.]), <<https://www.estherperel.com/blog/eroticism-self-care-plan>> [accessed 11 December 2022].

³¹⁰ Esther Perel, 'Bringing Home the Erotic: 5 Ways to Create Meaningful Connections with Your Partner' ([n.d.]), <<https://www.estherperel.com/blog/5-ways-to-create-meaningful-connections>> [accessed 13 December 2022].

Building on Lorde's work in her research on empowering Black scholars in higher education after the murder of George Floyd by police in 2020, Noel Anderson states that employing the erotic as a methodology 'acts against the psychic consequences of masculine models of power'³¹¹. Further, she argues that reemploying Lorde's version of the erotic as a methodology of communication might hold the 'potential for lesbian eroticism and community'³¹² to become visible. When speaking to the erotic as a critical approach, bell hooks notes the importance of viewing the erotic as a 'force that enhanced our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that [can] provide epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know.'³¹³ In her 2014 study of Queer Indigenous American literature, Lisa Tatonetti states that '[t]he erotic is a theoretical concept that encompasses nonnormative gender practices and, particularly, the experience, articulation, and generative nature of desire... the erotic is both an active praxis and an analytic.'³¹⁴

In theorising an Indigenous Sovereign Erotic, Cherokee scholar Qwo-Li Driskill states that rewriting the Two-Spirit and queer experiences which were a primary target of colonial laws might generate new knowledge of existing omitted identities. Driskill calls for research to 'situate the erotic within historical memory' in acknowledgement that '[o]ur relationships with the erotic impact our larger communities, just as our communities impact our senses of the erotic.'³¹⁵

Cherokee writer Daniel Heath and Latinx researcher Tereza M. Szeghi further emphasise 'the role

³¹¹ Noel Anderson, 'Find Your Way Back: Black Colleagues Return to the Erotic', *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 21:4 (2021), 86.

³¹² Anderson 'Find Your Way Back', 99.

³¹³ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 195.

³¹⁴ Lisa Tatonetti, 'Two-Spirit Histories', *The Queerness of Native American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014) <<https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816692781.002.0007>> [accessed 20 November 2022].

³¹⁵ Qwo-Li Driskill, 'Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 16:2 (2004), 50–64.

of the erotic in linking Indigenous peoples to the vitality of their bodies and community responsibility'³¹⁶ One key understanding of the erotic within my own project, then, is as a sensory ability and critical way of knowing oneself both internally and in the world. This erotic, which is ethically neutral prior to action, 'affords both access to greater pleasure and insight into the absence of such pleasure and joy'³¹⁷ as Jessica Fields, Stephanie Johnson, Bex MacFife, Patricia Roach, and Era Steinfeld write in their work on embodied sociology. An erotic methodology of communication might then offer new ways for rural lesbian subjectivities to generate and articulate their knowledge of self. In surveying an Indigenous erotic in feminist poetry, Jennifer Andrews references the 'powerful impact of pairing eroticism with specific locales'³¹⁸. As an example she cites the poetry of Cree/Métis writer, Marilyn Dumont, who lived mostly away from Cree and Métis land so used 'the creation of erotic landscapes [to] reclaim her homelands through the depiction of ... lesbian encounters [and] insisting on the sustained vitality of the Métis people'.³¹⁹ Similarly, AfriKweer³²⁰ researcher H. Sharif "Herukhuti" Williams writes that utilising the erotic as a methodology might see that the right of marginalised subjectivities 'to experience pleasure and the erotic are re-inscribes upon our histories and beings.'³²¹ In her analysis of methods employed in poetry by Menominee lesbian Two-Spirit activist Chrystos, researcher Crystal Veronie explains that the work 'harnesses the erotic to transform her two-spirit identity

³¹⁶ Tereza M. Szeghi, 'Review of *Written by the Body: Gender Expansiveness and Indigenous Non-Cis Masculinities*, by Lisa Tatonetti', *Western American Literature*, 57:3 (2022), 309–312.

³¹⁷ Jessica Fields and others and others, 'Embodied Engagements: Body Mapping in a Sociology of Sexuality Classroom', *Teaching Sociology*, 49:3 (2021), 256–266 (258) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X211022470>.

³¹⁸ Jennifer Andrews, 'The Erotic in Contemporary Native Women's Poetry in Canada.' *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, 2:2 (2015), 134–156 (136) <muse.jhu.edu/article/635789>.

³¹⁹ Andrews, 'The Erotic', 139.

³²⁰ I acknowledge here that there are several different spellings and versions of this term and note that I have used the spelling the author used to refer to themselves.

³²¹ H. Sharif Williams, "Herukhuti", 'Introduction to Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory and Epistemology of the Erotic', *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships*, 2:4 (2016) 1–31 (26) <doi:10.1353/bsr.2016.0013>.

from nonexistent by means of rhetorical erasure to the subject of her poetry as a textual body that validates two-spirit reality.³²²

Queer performance practice researchers Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier outline the erotic in queer practice as research as being about 'sensations and the production of knowledge [and] about identity formation.'³²³ In this, practice as research is suited to a sensory methodology. Further, performance scholar Elizabeth Freeman proposes that erotohistoriography 'sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations.'³²⁴ The erotic, then, is way in which to communicate the sensations experienced with the method. In their research on the intersections of ageism and feminism, Katrien De Graeve and Sara Se Vuyst argue that utilising an embodied erotic in feminist scholarship might turn 'erotic energy into resistant discourses that can intervene to disrupt the divisions and oppressions that structure [society].'³²⁵ Black feminist and queer researcher Matty Hemming writes that in order to achieve 'equitable erotic imaginaries'³²⁶ queer discourse must 'de-prioritize white gay male eroticism and pursue analyses of a broader range of erotic scenes'³²⁷. In Greta Gaard's early ecofeminist text *Towards a Queer Ecofeminism* (1997) she states that 'Western culture's devaluation of the erotic parallels its devaluations of women and of nature; in effect, these

³²² Crystal Veronie, "'When My Hands Are Empty / I Will Be Full": Visualizing Two-Spirit Bodies in Chrystos's Not Vanishing', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 31:1 (2019) 83–114 (99) <muse.jhu.edu/article/734670>.

³²³ Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, 'Queer Practice as Research: A Fabulously Messy Business', *Theatre Research International*, 40:1 (2015), 83–87 (83).

³²⁴ Campbell and Farrier, 'Queer Practice as Research', 83-84.

³²⁵ Katrien De Graeve and Sara De Vuyst, 'Menopausal rage, erotic power and gaga feminist possibilities', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 29:3(2022), 438–453 (450).

³²⁶ Matty Hemming, 'In the Name of Love', *James Baldwin Review*, 7:1 (2021), 138–158 (138) <<https://doi.org/10.7227/JBR.7.8>> [accessed 20 November 2022].

³²⁷ Hemming, 'In the Name of Love', 138.

devaluations are mutually reinforcing.³²⁸ Gaard also posits that 'liberating the erotic requires reconceptualizing humans as equal participants in culture and in nature, able to explore the eroticism of reason and the unique rationality of the erotic.'³²⁹ If the erotic is a sensory method of understanding, it might also serve as a framework for decoding and articulating alternative relationships with the nonhuman. Utilising the nonhuman as a framework allows a rejection of the nature/culture binary and the human supremacy over nonhuman beings.

Conclusion

In her reflections on the interdependency between British perceptions of landscape and British art, historian Susan Owens states: 'Artists and writers do not just describe our landscape; they make it, too. The pictures we see and the stories we read seep deeply into our minds, forever changing the way we perceive the world around us.'³³⁰ The discursive and artistic omission of lesbians residing in rural British landscapes creates the perception that those landscapes aren't hospitable to queer and lesbian women. This perception is part of a lineage of historic Anglo-European approaches to land as property and the intellectual perpetuation of a nature/culture binary which marginalises women and leads to metronormative ideas of queer belonging.

My practice is historically grounded in the disruptive practices of *Sappho* and the Lesbian Land Movement and seeks to intervene in contemporary discourses of queer belonging and their

³²⁸ Greta Gaard, 'Toward a Queer Ecofeminism', *Hypatia*, 12:1 (1997) 114–137 (133).

³²⁹ Gaard, 'Towards a Queer Ecofeminism', 132.

³³⁰ Susan Owens, *Spirit of Place: Artists, Writers & the British Landscape* (London: Thames & Hudson: 2021), p. 7.

relationship to cultural location. This chapter has explicated how metronormative bias within scholarship and culture has caused the privileging of urban gay male perspectives to eclipse visibility for rural queer women. To understand the historical underpinnings of this bias in terms of its urban focus, it gave an overview of land, property, and gentry in the UK and how that history has spread through UK politics, class, and culture. It then explored how, through critical Indigenous perspectives found via my research on lesbian lands, British understandings of land have been recycled in American exclusions of alternative subjects from rural landscape. Finally, it introduced theories surrounding the nonhuman and the erotic which allow them to be methodologically viable in creating a queer feminist performance practice which disrupts metronormative narratives and rewrites feminist omissions of lesbian subjects from landscapes.

The nonhuman and erotic as defined in this chapter serve as the theoretical framework from which I will draw a methodology to articulate rural lesbian subjectivities in performance through a sited dramaturgical practice. In order to create a methodology which refutes both metronormative perceptions of who resides in rural landscapes there must be an intentional rejection of 'nature' as a critical term in favour of nonhuman. By positioning the nonhuman as a culturally equal agent in a performance methodology, I reject the nature/culture binary as an accepted way of understanding land in a sited practice. The erotic then becomes an aid in the comprehension and expression of the relationship between the nonhuman and myself during the sited playwriting process.

Interlude -Shifting to Practice and Finding Site



The practice portion of this project has been a fluid journey I took alongside and intertwined with the theories and concepts I have written about over the previous chapters. In my original project proposal, I planned to write a playtext and dramaturgical analysis as my practice submission. The original site was to be West Yorkshire. I had encountered a BBC article from 2012 that asked why Hebden Bridge was the ‘lesbian capital of the UK?’³³¹ At the time I was also absorbed in Sally

³³¹ Sophie Robehmed, ‘Why is Hebden Bridge the lesbian capital?’, BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16962898>, [accessed on 17. 11. 2022].

Wainwright's 2018 television series, *Gentleman Jack*, on BBC & HBO.³³² Following Suranne Jones and Sophie Rundel as Anne Lister and Anne Walker, real-life lesbian wives and outdoor adventurers from 19th century Yorkshire, *Gentleman Jack* was a jaunty period drama and a cosy and understated subversion of a genre that felt easy and needed.

I visited Hebden and Shibden Hall, Anne Lister's historic family home in 2019. Whilst there I looked into the local queer women's walking and mountain biking groups online. I considered interviewing these women to collate a text about choosing to live rurally and how the nonhuman influenced that decision and the following experience of rural sexuality. I thought that I could draw on documentary practices in creating a performance which used multiple actual alternative queer experiences to disrupt the dominant one.

I had also encountered walking methodologies in performance practice and considered integrating these into my practice. Scholars such as Deirdre Heddon proposed walking as a feminist praxis. In 2019 Suranne Jones commented on her own 'power walking' when preparing to play Anne Lister, adding to a known (fond) stereotype in the gay community that 'lesbians go fast'³³³ and 'gay people walk faster than everyone else'.³³⁴ Walking became a likely possibility for the methodology that would uproot my practice from a traditional performance space. Rather

³³² Rebecca Nicholson, 'Gentleman Jack is a True TV Marvel – Romantic, Raw, and Totally Radical', *The Guardian*, (July 2019), <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jul/08/gentleman-jack-is-a-true-tv-marvel-romantic-raw-and-totally-radical>>, [accessed 30th March 2021].

³³³ Samantha B., *Lesbian Movement and Why Gentleman Jack's Anne Lister Power Walks* (2019), *Medium* <<https://medium.com/@samantha.b./lesbian-movement-and-why-anne-lister-power-walks-fa0161f9eeab>>.

³³⁴ Josh Jackman, *Gay people walk faster than everyone else, says internet* (2019), *Pink News* <<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/04/05/gay-people-walk-faster-everyone-internet/>>;

Jennifer Ruggirello, 'Do Gay People Walk Faster Than Straight People?' (2019), *Buzzfeed* <<https://www.buzzfeed.com/watch/video/88095>>.

than just a playtext and dramaturgical analysis, I expanded my practice portion to include a walking performance. I imagined it to be a roughly 60-90 minute long loop, during which multiple performers would be walking with the audience as well as in stationary locations along the path.

In 2020, however, COVID-19 hit. The first official Anne Lister Birthday Week that was scheduled that April was cancelled in February. The event was meant to take place across Calder Valley, with events across York, Hebden Bridge, and Halifax where Anne and Ann would have lived and loved. It was organised by fans, academics such as historians Helena Whitbread and Jill Liddington, and television professionals including Sally Wainwright. The almost 1000 tickets sold out within minutes of being released online, me being one of the folks in the live queue.³³⁵ This was where I planned my meet ups with the originally proposed participants in the development of my practice. Like many researchers and practitioners at the time, I felt completely derailed when it came to the material aspects of my project.

I returned to text-based research in the hopes of waiting out the pandemic restrictions. As time wore on, though, and my upgrade date loomed closer, I realised that I needed to let go of my initial plan to base my practice in West Yorkshire. Whilst walking still seemed viable as one of the few activities allowed over the restrictions, travel was not as viable. My partner and I both lost our jobs in the larger context of mass pandemic redundancies, forcing us to move out of London. Our

³³⁵ Pat Estgate, 'Who, What, Why?' (2022), *Anne Lister Birthday Week* <<https://www.annelisterbirthdayweek.com/why-what-who>> [accessed 14 November 2022].

restricted incomes meant that even as travel restrictions lifted, the budget I needed to travel to and stay in Hebden Bridge to carry out my practical work was no longer realistic.

Moreover, like many, I had spent the past months in a small flat in London with no outdoor space. There were five of us (and two cats) in a four-bed flat just off one of the most polluted roundabouts in London.³³⁶ I was fortunate in that we had Greenwich Park and the Thames Path nearby, but despite this a stifling feeling was slowly coming over me. As I scrolled Rightmove, wondering if my partner and I would be able to afford anything within a commutable distance to London, my search area became larger and larger. Finally, I came across an ad for a strange-looking historical property that was being advertised by the National Trust.

I had been a National Trust member since moving to the UK. This was sort of an accident, as one of my earlier road-trips had taken me to the Giant's Causeway and the youth membership at the time was cheaper than paying for the parking and day pass. Their direct debit also meant that I had happily forgotten about it until I got my member's magazine in the post annually. To my (very American) understanding, though, they were nothing more than a conservation charity in need of funds to help with biodiversity and land recovery efforts. I had never been to a historic house, only having attended properties that were primarily outdoors. I hadn't realised that the National Trust were also landlords of tenanted properties, nor was I aware of the political and cultural history of the Trust in the UK.

³³⁶ 'Creekside', *Citizen Sense*, 2020, <<https://datastories-deptford.citizensense.net/creekside/>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

Meanwhile, our landlords in London had reduced our rent to the cost of their mortgage payment and agency fees when we lost our jobs. We were grateful for this, but it also revealed that they had been profiting £1100 per month on the flat for the duration of our tenancy. With this in mind, renting from a land conservation charity seemed a choice we could more easily stomach. At least, we thought, if we were being overcharged for our accommodation that excess profit would be going to something that we benefited from and needed to survive anyway. We took a train from London to Reading, then from Reading to Pangbourne, then cycled seven minutes to view the house. Neither of us had a car at the time, and the journey was frankly ridiculous, but we applied anyway. We moved into the historic gate house at the main entrance of Basildon Park in August 2020.

Since then my writing practice developed into what I now refer to as a sited writing practice which is part of an erotic nonhuman dramaturgy of performance making. Much of my time in this practice was spent trying out different way of practicing outside. By this I mean that, over the course of two or so years, I went outside every day with a pen and a notebook to sit in conversation with nonhuman beings and write. This looked different every day. Some days it was me stood outside my backdoor in a robe and slippers, testing positive for COVID and feeling rubbish, and writing a few lines as I looked at the sad, frozen, woody rosemary bush by the back door. On other days it was rambling in the twilight hours when I had the park to myself (and sometimes my partner and our dog, Moira) and taking photographs before sitting for a while with the nonhuman being that caught my attention. I took nature writing and outdoor therapy workshops. I went to site specific performances of Shakespeare in the Park at heritage locations. I

tried writing as though I was a plant, or as though I was having a conversation with the badgers in the field behind our home. It was this small but persistent work which eventually formed the creative text that I typed up. I then played with spacing and capitalisation on the digital screen in order to bring some of the space I held for these erotic experiences with the nonhuman which had drawn me to write. It was this process which led me to the creative text that I went into my R&D with, and which serves as the basis for the following chapters. Before arriving at those chapters, though, I will first describe the site in which my practice occurred in as detailed a manner possible. An understanding of Basildon Park and The National Trust as institutions as much as heritage sites is key in relating this sited practice to the dismantling of the ideological whist colonial countryside which excludes queer and lesbian (and multiply marginalised people) from belonging.

Chapter Three: Site - The National Trust and Basildon Park

Introduction

Within the critical context of lesbophobia and metronormativity explored in chapters one and two, this chapter asks how the logics of land and property continue to influence practices engaged with site in contemporary British performance and culture. Chapter Two discussed how metronormativity portrays the rural as a space 'where gay and lesbian sexualities are unclaimed, stunted, or destroyed and, in contrast, urban spaces are where those identities are constructed and made visible'³³⁷ as Emily Kazyak explains. It explored how this binary is culturally accepted despite urban spaces also being what Podmore refers to as 'sites of exclusions for young people, people of colour, lesbians and trans people.'³³⁸ It also outlined the lineage of land, property, and 'nature' in Britain and how that manifested in a nature/culture binary and in American settler-colonial logics. Finally, it introduced the nonhuman and erotic as conceptual frameworks for a writing practice as research methodology that disrupts metronormative thinking. Site-specific performance researchers Emilie Pine, Maeve Casserly and Tom Lane write that 'we define ourselves by the spaces we are comfortable entering, and that we assume, imagine, or enact as accessible to us. We also define ourselves by the kinds of space we want to access.'³³⁹ In this context, I contend that what I call 'sited' work might allow alternative enactments of narratives

³³⁷ Emily Kazyak, 'Disrupting Cultural Selves: Constructing Gay and Lesbian Identities in Rural Locales', *Qualitative Sociology*, 34 (2011), 561–581 (571).

³³⁸ Podmore, 'Disaggregating', p. 24.

³³⁹ Pine et. al., p. 23.

formed through erotic collaboration with the nonhuman to occur in spaces which aren't imagined as hospitable to lesbian and queer women.

In her study on site-specific art, Miwon Kwon (2002) investigates the ways in which contemporary site-specific work both looks back to and away from the performance work of the 1960s and 1970s:

On the one hand [t]his phenomenon indicates a return of sorts: an attempt to rehabilitate the [work] critically associated with the anti-idealist, anticommercial site-specific practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which incorporated the physical conditions of a particular location as integral to the production, presentation, and reception of art. On the other hand, it signals a desire to *distinguish* current practices from those of the past.³⁴⁰

My own project resonates with the approach Kwon outlines, looking back to lesbian identity as it moved through politics, art, and society in the 1970s in order to rehabilitate the sort of geographically fluid rural connections being made then through the Lesbian Lands and *Sappho*, as discussed in Chapter One. I also seek to distinguish my practice from those works by embracing new methodological forms in the nonhuman and erotic and seeking out a dramaturgy which disrupts linear heteronormative inheritances of landscape.

This chapter will contextualise the final site I chose for my practice as research in asking how a sited writing practice based in a heritage site might disrupt Anglo-European masculinist and metronormative perceptions of land which have occluded rural lesbian subjectivities from

³⁴⁰ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, (London: MIT Press, 2002), p. 6.

performance practice in the UK. The first section introduces the National Trust, the largest conservation charity in Europe, and discuss how it is connected to both the British relationship to land ownership discussed in Chapter Two and the perceptions of how and if LGBTQIA2S+ belong on that land. The second section grounds the site of my practice, Basildon Park, geographically, politically, and historically within the framework of its wider owner and governing body, the National Trust. In this section I will also introduce Ellen Morrison, the only woman ever to be the sole owner of Basildon Park, in order to situate her in this heritage framework before discussing her role in my playwriting practice more in depth in Chapter Four. I will use excerpts from my practice throughout these sections to demonstrate how I repurposed and queered this history both in my own residence there but also my writing of the site into the final performance text. Finally, the third section analyses three examples of site-specific performance dealing with heritage sites to position my practice within contemporary site-specific practice in the UK. I will then look to how my own practice methodology expands on existing theory surrounding rural sited performance practice and how, within this, it departs from urban understandings of human-site relationships.

My creative practice and experience as a lesbian woman from the North Texas and Oklahoma border are heavily influenced by Indigenous presence on land and in culture. My decision to utilise the nonhuman as a collaborator for this practice as research project seeks to connect UK performance practice and scholarship to international perspectives on site and landscape which consider settler-colonialist implications. By introducing and defining Basildon Park and the National Trust within the critical lens of the UK's historical relationship to land established in

Chapter Two I will establish a clear view of site before moving into a more detailed analysis of my writing practice itself in Chapter Four.

Section One: The National Trust - Queer Heritage and Queer Places

My home, my queer life, is currently based in a National Trust property. Basildon Park is both the site in which I carried out my practice as research and the site in which I have lived and experienced much of my life since August 2020. It is the first home in which I have lived with a queer partner. It is the place where we adopted our first dog. It is a house that was built in the same year the country I am from was founded. I arrived at the National Trust with open-mindedness and hope as a practitioner. I enjoyed my National Trust membership, and I liked the thought of my rent money going to an entity that protected the outdoors instead of to a wealthy individual landlord. I am still grateful for Basildon Park. I love the fields, the woods, the woodpeckers and tits and nuthatches and robins and pheasants and foxes and deer and bats and badgers and rabbits and pines and chestnuts and lemon balm and cattle and all the other residents with whom my queer family shares our lives. The National Trust's history and cultural power, though, became a key point in my research and in how I went about deciding on certain elements of sitedness within this sited practice as research. Part of my naivete in assuming the National Trust was ideologically different to any other private landowner in the UK was my American nationality - this was resolved through the National Trust's appearances in my research on land ownership and perceptions of 'nature' and the countryside in the UK.

The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty was initially incorporated as an Association not for profit in 1894.³⁴¹ According to Historic England its current status is 'a registered charity and is independent of government. It is incorporated and has powers conferred on it through Parliament by the National Trust Acts 1907. It is governed by a board of trustees.'³⁴² Prior to gaining its incorporated powers in 1907, the National Trust was founded as an offshoot of the Victorian land reform movement and the Commons Preservation Society as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. As noted by historian Melanie Hall, the core founders of the National Trust were 'Octavia Hill, the noted housing reformer; Sir Robert Hunter, honorary solicitor to the Commons Preservation Society ... and Solicitor to the Post Office, and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, an Anglican clergyman working to preserve the Lake District.'³⁴³ Hall describes their duties in that 'Hill represented the philanthropic principle, a broad outreach and public trust; Hunter represented legal acumen and reliability; while Rawnsley, the publicity man, gave a progress report of the National Trust's work to date.'³⁴⁴

Octavia Hill campaigned for working-class access to outdoor space. She was raised by socialists and worked from 14 years of age with her mother training working-class women and girls in skills to earn their own income.³⁴⁵ In 1864 she became a landlady to the working-classes which could not find housing elsewhere, implementing a new system of tenancy in the UK, and began

³⁴¹ 'Our Constitution' (n.d.), *The National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/our-constitution>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

³⁴² 'Historic England' (n.d.), *The National Trust* <<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/hpg/publicandheritagebodies/nt/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].; *The National Trust Governance Handbook*, 5th edition 2016, National Trust <<https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/governance-handbook-v5.pdf>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

³⁴³ Melanie Hall, 'The Politics of Collecting: The Early Aspirations of the National Trust, 1883–1913', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 13 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 345–357 (p. 346).

³⁴⁴ Hall, 'The Politics of Collecting', p. 354.

³⁴⁵ Hall, p. 346

campaigning for their right to access common outdoor spaces in London.³⁴⁶ For example, she conceptualised the London Green Belt and saved Parliament Hill and Hampstead Heath from urban development in her time.³⁴⁷ These beliefs that ‘the English landscape was a timelessly beautiful common possession of all classes’³⁴⁸, as summarised by Historian Matthew Kelly, were the impetus for extending her work in London to the rural alongside her colleagues Rawnsley and Hunter. This was reflected in the original 1884 aims, as recorded by the University of Liverpool Archaeology and Contemporary Society, ‘to set aside the best and most beautiful parts of Britain for the public and posterity, and to provide sitting rooms for the poor in the countryside.’³⁴⁹ I note Octavia Hill in detail here, as I will shortly return to the subject of her subjectivity and intimate life.

The National Trust, as it is now commonly known, is the second largest landowner in UK, with approximately 780 miles of coastline, 250,000 hectares of land, over 500 historic buildings, parks, and gardens, and almost a million works of art in the UK.³⁵⁰ The majority of these sites require payment for parking and entry, or possession of a National Trust membership. The cheapest membership for an adult is the 18-25 at £38.40 per year, with the individual adult being the next least costly as £76.80 per year and up to £133.80 per year for families of two adults or over £2,000 for lifetime membership options.³⁵¹ In order to vote in any National Trust elections, run for a seat, or serve as a member of the governing bodies you must be a National Trust member.³⁵² As

³⁴⁶ Hall, p. 354

³⁴⁷ A. S. Wohl, ‘Octavia Hill and The Homes of the London Poor’, *Journal of British Studies*, 10:2 (1971), 105–131 <doi:10.1086/385612>.

³⁴⁸ Matthew Kelly, *The Women Who Saved the English Countryside* (London: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 12.

³⁴⁹ ‘Preserving a National Heritage?’ (n.d.), *Archaeology & Contemporary Society* <http://pcwww.liv.ac.uk/~sinclair/algy399_site/national_trust.html> [accessed 13 October 2022].

³⁵⁰ ‘About the National Trust today’, (n.d.), *National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/about-the-national-trust-today>>, [accessed 14 October 2022].

³⁵¹ ‘Memberships’ (n.d.), *National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/membership>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

³⁵² *The National Trust Governance Handbook*.

summarised by queer heritage researcher Sean Curran, 'The National Trust could be considered a charity aimed to ease the burden of the landed gentry who could no longer afford the tax and death duties on the houses they called homes, let alone the lifestyles to which they had become accustomed.'³⁵³

In 2022 The National Trust is Europe's largest conservation charity, with over 5 million members and Britain's largest farm owner with over 1,300 tenant farmers.³⁵⁴ During the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 they made 1,767 staff cuts and became the wealthiest land charity in Europe as well, gaining £175 million pounds more than they had in 2019-2020.³⁵⁵ In a parliamentary debate in 2020 over whether there should be a government sanctioned review of the National Trust to ensure it is carrying out its duty of conservation and public service, Lord Bird (CB) commented on the approximately 5000 tenanted properties for which the Trust acts as landlord:

In places, these relationships are medieval—very much like the buildings—Victorian or Edwardian. I would like to see a change to the Acts so that we can make sure that the trust is carrying out its social duty for social justice and we do not allow a situation where the tenants are living in the past while the big landlord, the National Trust, is riding high on the hog.³⁵⁶

In 1995 George Monbiot wrote that in the whole of the book the National Trust published on its own centenary in 1994, 'the term rights is mentioned only once, while the ethics of ownership are

³⁵³ 'Queer activism begins at home: situating LGBTQ voices in National Trust historic houses' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2019), p. 65.

³⁵⁴ *The National Trust Governance Handbook*

³⁵⁵ Bendor Grosvenor, 'UK heritage charity the National Trust is ending the year richer than ever—so why all the staff cuts?', *The Art Newspaper*, 2 November 2021, <<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/11/02/national-trust-richer-than-ever>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

³⁵⁶ 'National Trust Acts: Volume 808' (2020), UK Parliament <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2020-12-03/debates/E3497C09-5706-42CC-B02A-84C0CF9EE2C6/NationalTrustActs>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

not addressed at all.³⁵⁷ The cause of this reluctance to discuss the very issues the Trust was founded on, Monbiot suggests, is that '[b]y 1940 it had fallen into the hands of the very people whose excesses it was designed to contain...[t]heir vision of Britain was a place in which the aristocracy need to be protected from intrusion by the mass, rather than the mass protected from exclusion by the aristocracy.'³⁵⁸ Almost a decade later, after the acquisition of a manor house in Northumberland in an attempt to integrate the Trust into the area, columnist Jon Henley writes that it is still seen as 'exclusive, elitist, samey, paternalistic, look-but-don't-touch, corporate, bureaucratic, over-centralised, too little imagination, too much top-down, not enough bottom-up.'³⁵⁹ And, in 2022 after the most recent AGM results, *The Economist* stated that the National Trust's 'members, a sheepish middle-class Masonry, tend not to talk about their membership much: for most, a small oak-leaf sticker in the corner of a windscreen is the only outward sign of belonging.'³⁶⁰ The current National Trust, despite its recently adopted 'for everyone, for ever'³⁶¹ strategy, seems markedly different than what it was intended to be regarding access and socialist land reform.

My practice comments on these aspects of the modern Trust through reference a story I heard from a Trust volunteer at Basildon Park. According to the story, the reason that the National Trust had to find a new farmer to graze his cattle at Basildon is that the old farmer mistreated his cows

³⁵⁷ George Monbiot, 'Whose Nation, Whose Trust?' (1995) <<https://www.monbiot.com/1995/09/27/whose-nation-whose-trust/>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

³⁵⁸ Monbiot, 'Whose Nation.'

³⁵⁹ Jon Henley, 'How the National Trust is finding its mojo', *The Guardian*, 10 February 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/feb/10/national-trust-opens-its-doors>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

³⁶⁰ 'Why is Everyone so cross about the National Trust?' (2022), *The Economist* <<https://www.economist.com/britain/2022/11/10/why-is-everyone-so-cross-about-the-national-trust>> [accessed 20 November 2022].

³⁶¹ 'For everyone, for ever: our strategy to 2025' (n.d.), *The National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/our-strategy>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

too visibly, leading to visitor complaints about animal cruelty and the gruesome sight of the cattle. Whilst I have not been able to verify the story, as the farmer has changed, I can confirm that I have reported injuries of cattle to this new and supposedly more ethical farmer that have gone unnoticed, so I can't imagine the original tale is far from truth.:

em:

the national trust makes a lot of money from cattle grazing here. the previous tenant farmer had to be moved along because he kept letting cattle rot in the field. when they died the gardeners would have to drag the carcasses through the fields using a golf buggy they imported from america to keep them hidden from the visitors until the farmer could collect and dispose of them

there were a lot of visitor complaints that the cattle were bleeding and rotting and sliced open and dripping.

the farmer was only replaced after the complaints.

the national trust wants to keep their care for nature visible. they don't want you paying to look at rotting cattle.

The lines are spoken by **em**, a character based on upper-class Ellen Morrison who was the only woman to ever possess sole ownership of Basildon Park. The direct address asking whether 'you' could pay to get into Basildon Park alongside the gore of how the cattle were treated in the parkland seeks to question the authority of those who decide who resides on certain lands and

how they are allowed to reside there – to put it another way – why must queers in rural space always be miserable, and why must people pay to enter those lands which are actively and visibly profiting off industrialised farming? Further, as I will show shortly, **em**'s lines are meant to be read by the audience/performer, the discourse of power of land ownership [and all its racialised and classed implications] is dislodged from the historical upper-class fiction of the countryside and placed into the interpretive powers of a modern feminist, lesbian and queer perspective.

The National Trust was one of the founding members of the Queer Heritage & Collections Network, which works to fund and support LGBTQIA2S+ projects and research in heritage fields. On their 'Pride & The National Trust' webpage, the Trust states its policy on support for queer staff and volunteers as follows:

As a charity whose purpose is to make nature, beauty and history accessible for everyone, Pride also helps in our ambition to make sure everyone feels welcome in everything we do. We work together with our LGBTQ+ network to champion a safe and inclusive place to work and volunteer, where we embrace how our similarities and differences make us stronger.³⁶²

The Trust's first national programme of work supporting queer heritage was the 2017 Prejudice and Pride programme which marked 50 years since the 1967 Sexual Offences Act that partially decriminalised homosexuality in England and Wales. The programme included updated interpretation on historical LGBTQIA2S+ figures connected to Trust properties, a series of talks

³⁶² 'Pride, the LGBTQ+ community and the National Trust' (2022), *The National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/pride-lgbtq-and-the-national-trust>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

and performances at various properties with queer heritage (such as Vita Sackville-West's Sissinghurst), a published guidebook created by academics alongside the National Trust's marketing and communications team, and the distribution of rainbow lanyards to Trust Staff and volunteers ahead of the Trust's first official attendance of London Pride.³⁶³ Previous Trust volunteer and queer heritage scholar Sean Curran contributed to the execution of Prejudice and Pride at the London property Sutton House. His research found that 'the programme revealed institutional homophobia and transphobia within the Trust'.³⁶⁴ The Prejudice and Pride Programme was meant to combat this 'by using these sites of nostalgia to address and confront the realities of the present, and of the synchronicities of these realities with the past.'³⁶⁵

By the end of the campaign, Prejudice and Pride events had been held at just 17 of the Trust's over 500 properties.³⁶⁶ One of those was Felbrigg Hall in Norfolk, where the Trust was accused of outing the lord of the manor Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer, who died in 1969, as gay in a documentary narrated by Stephen Fry.³⁶⁷ In support of both the Prejudice & Pride programme and the film's release, the volunteers and staff at Felbrigg were asked to wear rainbow badges and lanyards with National Trust branding. This saw the protest of 75 volunteers, who refused the Pride garb on the grounds of Ketton-Cremer having been a private man.³⁶⁸ The Trust ended up apologising to the volunteers and stating that they did not have to wear the rainbow-coloured

³⁶³ 'Pride, the LGBTQ+ community and the National Trust.'

³⁶⁴ Sean Curran, 'Queer activism begins at home: situating LGBTQ voices in National Trust historic houses' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2019), p. 4.

³⁶⁵ Curran, 'Queer Activism', p. 80.

³⁶⁶ 'Information to Journalists' (2021), *National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/information-to-journalists>> [accessed 29 April 2021].

³⁶⁷ Lucy Pasha-Robinson, "'Hundreds' of National Trust members quit in protest over gay pride campaign', *Independent*, 5 August 2017, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hundreds-of-national-trust-members-quit-in-protest-over-gay-pride-campaign-a7878131.html>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

³⁶⁸ Pasha-Robinson, "'Hundreds'".

portions of their uniforms if they did not wish to do so.³⁶⁹ The National Trust, then, has a huge amount of power gifted to it by the white middle-class narratives of conservation and Britain's heritage surrounding it, but manages to only truly serve for those who conform to it rather than 'for everyone' as it claims to.

Octavia Hill's portrait is included in the LGBT+ tour collection at the National Portrait Gallery, London.³⁷⁰ Historic England states that Hill shared a 'passionate intimacy with Sophia Jex-Blake [and] long-term companion... Harriot Yorke, who lived and worked with Hill for 30 years [and] are buried together in the churchyard at Crockham Hill'.³⁷¹ Although living arrangements between women in Victorian times were common and not often not viewed as romantic, historians such as Kristine Swenson and Catriona Blake have felt comfortable in stating that the relationships went further than the typical 'romantic friendship'.³⁷² Further, Curran states that 'in Octavia's case, a sound record'³⁷³ of the lesbian nature of her relationships exists in Jex-Blake's diaries and Hill's will for her estate to pass to Yorke upon her death. Despite this, in the *Prejudice and Pride* guidebook skates over any sexual or physical realisation of Hill's sexuality. The guidebook states that 'Hill's lack of interest in marriage and her passionate friendships with other women formed a life-path that was common among independent-minded Victorian women.'³⁷⁴

³⁶⁹ 'National Trust U-turn over LGBTQ badges at Felbrigg Hall', *BBC News*, 5 August 2017, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-40837709>> [accessed 12 December 2021].

³⁷⁰ John Singer Sargent, *Octavia Hill* (1746), *The National Portrait Gallery* <<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw03150>> [accessed 21 November 2022].

³⁷¹ 'Independent Women' ([n.d.]), *Historic England* <<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/workplaces-and-creativity/independent-women/>> [accessed 14 December 2022].

³⁷² Kristine Swenson 'Intimate Sympathy and Self-Effacement: Writing the Life of Sophia Jex-Blake', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 14:2 (1999), 222–240, <[10.1080/08989575.1999.10815220](https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.1999.10815220)>.

³⁷³ Sheldon K Goodman and Sean Curran, 'Octavia Hill', *Cemetery Club*, 18 February 2019, <<https://cemeteryclub.wordpress.com/2019/02/18/octavia-hill/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

³⁷⁴ Alison Oram and Matt Cook, *Prejudice & Pride: Celebrating LGBTQ heritage* (Swindon: The National Trust, 2017).

In asserting my own queer residence as well as the queer heritage of the Trust itself, I make an alternative gesture – I open the final act of my playtext with **em** stating that one of three National Trust founders, was a ‘dyke’. This is both an assertion of **em** as a cheeky narrator who exists across time and a reclamation of Octavia Hill and The National Trust through employment of a reclaimed term. As discussed previously, Hill’s sexuality is a matter of historical debate wherein scholars are hesitant to be definitive. As also previously discussed, there has been a movement in cinema and television to take historical figures whose sexuality is undocumented - such as Mary Anning- and allow them to be queer in the same ways they have been presumed heterosexual. This immediate characterisation of Hill as ‘dyke’, a term I myself use and feel closeness to, is both my own creative defiance towards that scholarly hesitancy and **em**’s defiant characterisation as someone who refuses to conform to the time she lived and is briefly recorded in.

I also bring the historical character into a modern cultural framework by writing lines for her which directly reference the discourse around critical race studies in the UK. Further, I queer the religious lineage as it relates to the ‘divine right’ within the British monarchy by making **em** comment negatively on Christianity despite the real Ellen Morrison’s likely religious affiliations based on her social status and time period:

part three

em:

Did you know that the National Trust was founded by a dyke? A lesbian.

Not only a gay woman, but also an activist in support of land access for the working classes. A bit religious for my taste, personally. God's intent and all that, but I guess it is a means to an end (or is it if it didn't work and you are listening to this thing written with Basildon Park and made of the dirt of it, but couldn't get to or afford to actually be in the park even if you wanted to be given dirty looks by some folks who think critical race theory is a personal threat?) Anyway.

The remainder of **em's** lines from the above excerpt encourage the audience/performer to google 'what lesbian founded the National Trust'. The playtext does not include Hill's name and instead only refers to her position of power as founder and her lesbian subjectivity to enable a different way of knowing women's queerness on heritage-associated lands in the UK:

You are walking on some really very queer land.

Lesbian leaves, those.

Why don't you grab some lesbian leaves to crumble in your hands whilst you think about googling what lesbian founded the National Trust. Save it.

They haven't put it on a leaflet or anything. You'll just have to crumple some lesbian leaves instead.

Any you want. Fallen. Attached. I wouldn't personally recommend holly or certain ferns, they can be razor sharp, but if that's what you're into then you go right ahead.

At the 2022 Annual General Meeting for the National Trust a members' resolution was proposed that the meeting 'deplores participation by the National Trust in gay pride parades as divisive and an unaccountable waste of members' subscriptions.'³⁷⁵ The Board of Trustees responded with the following:

We support Pride alongside many other events each year including Black History Month, Mental Health Awareness Week and others. The National Trust's role is to protect and promote everyone's heritage, of which LGBTQ+ history is an important part.

We do not believe that taking part in any of the cultural celebrations we support is divisive, in fact we see these events as an opportunity to bring people together.

This resolution runs counter to our ethos.

We recommend members vote against the resolution³⁷⁶

Although 78, 807 members won the majority in not carrying, 43, 569 members voted in support of the resolution despite the Board's statement of position.³⁷⁷ Those in support are already retaliating, with accusations that the Trust has rigged the AGM voting system and therefore the votes should be invalidated.³⁷⁸ Siting my writing practice as research in Basildon Park is a direct intervention into the persistent metronormative and lesbophobic cultural associations with rural land in the UK. The National Trust is an institution entangled with the racialised, gendered, classed, and heteronormative cultural lineage of the British relationship to land. Queering this

³⁷⁵ Members' resolution about participation in Pride events (2022), National Trust <<https://documents.nationaltrust.org.uk/story/agm-booklet-2022/page/6/1>> [accessed 10 November 2022]

³⁷⁶ 'Members' Resolution', National Trust.

³⁷⁷ 'Members' Resolution', National Trust.

³⁷⁸ Robert Booth, 'Right-leaning group fails to wrest control of National Trust', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/06/right-leaning-group-fails-to-wrest-control-of-national-trust-from-political-takeover>> [accessed 21 November 2022].

institution through sited performance practice might begin to untangle and make visible the stories of marginalised alternative rural subjectivities.

Section Two: Basildon Park and House - Strange Histories and Tense Present

Basildon Park is a pay-for-entry National Trust property located in the affluent and majority-white county of West Berkshire in the southeast of England.³⁷⁹ For non-National Trust members the entry rates are £15 per adult and £7.50 per child for day entry. According to Curran, 'country houses were a relatively late concern for [the Trust]. Their portfolio of crumbling piles began to grow in the late 1930s following a change in the law that allowed ownership of houses to be transferred to the Trust while the former owners remained as tenants.'³⁸⁰ So, the National Trust became a way to enable cash-poor landowners to retain private access to estates which had restrictions for the public. Such was the case with the last individual owners of Basildon Park, the Iliffes, who lived in an apartment in the manor house until their deaths in the 1980s.³⁸¹

According to commons researcher Dick Greenway, the landscape on which Basildon Park is located has been inhabited by humans since the 'Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods'.³⁸² The Domesday book shows that in 1086 there was a population of 56 households including 28 villagers, 15 cottagers, and 13 slaves, which places it in the largest 20% of recorded settlements at the time.³⁸³ It has also always been a seat of political bargaining and social hierarchy climbing. The woodlands on what is now Basildon Park were the topic of a large legal

³⁷⁹ 'Population and Demographics', *West Berkshire Council*, 2021, <<https://westberkshire.berkshireobservatory.co.uk/population/#/view-report/7b359e1a998a4d1189294ef4d2383cda/...iaFirstFeature>> [accessed 13 February 2022]

and *Berkshire average salary comparison* (2022), *Plumplot* <<https://www.plumplot.co.uk/Berkshire-salary-and-unemployment.html>> [accessed 13 December 2022].

³⁸⁰ Curran, 'Queer Activism', p. 65.

³⁸¹ *The History of Basildon Park* ([n.d.]), *National Trust* <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/oxfordshire-buckinghamshire-berkshire/basildon-park/history-of-basildon-park>> [accessed 12 March 2022].

³⁸² Dick Greenway, 'The Commons of Ashampstead, Berkshire. From pasture woodland, via deer park and common to cultural severance – a case study' in *The End of Tradition?* ed. by Ian D. Rotherham, Mauro Agnoletti, and Christine Handley (Sheffield: Wildtrack Publishing, 2014) pp. 63–64.

³⁸³ 'Land of King William' ([n.d.]), *Open Domesday* <<https://opendomesday.org/place/SU6078/basildon/>> [accessed 12 March 2022].

dispute, the first on record for the area. In 1245 a labourer approached the Reading court with complaints of a new fence which prevented him from harvesting wood from the forest where 'he claimed right of common pasture.'³⁸⁴ The new landowners, appointed by King Henry III, claimed they were only sectioning off the land as the monarch saw fit.³⁸⁵ From this point the land was passed from hand to hand by Earls and Kings into the 18th century. The land was deemed valuable as it had direct access to the Thames and proximity to both London and Oxford.³⁸⁶

In the section of the playtext in which **em** is discussing the lesbian founder of the Trust, she mentions the modern addition of the railway to the land directly in front of the entry gates where I resided throughout my practice. The perceived value of the land's proximity to both London and Oxford has gained an element of irony in that the railway which connects the two cities skips over the parkland entirely. It is a 45 minute walk to the nearest station in Pangbourne, and the train to Reading where you can connect to trains to either London Paddington or Didcot to switch for Oxford will cost a minimum of £14.95 with a railcard as of 2022. The river is also now blocked from the parkland by the railway, with direct access being completely shut off - requiring that you either walk along a 60 mph A-road with no pavement, or back on yourself by about 15 minutes to get to the towpath from Lower Basildon Village churchyard. Both Oxford and London are cities with historical connotations and the site I chose sits between them, with a direct eyeline via the modern railways to the people who will soon or have been residing in those urban spaces, yet it is isolated within its own valley. **em**'s words call into question where the real value of the land might exist:

³⁸⁴ Greenway, 'The Commons of Ashampstead,' p. 65.

³⁸⁵ Greenway, 'The Commons of Ashampstead,' p. 65.

³⁸⁶ 'Parishes: Basildon', in *A History of the County of Berkshire: Volume 3*, ed. by P H Ditchfield and William Page (London: Victoria County History, 1923), pp. 457-463 <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/berks/vol3/pp457-463>> [accessed 9 August 2021].

now, if you stand at the front gates for more than 5 minutes and look towards the river you can see the trains running between oxford and london. they are close enough to see faces if you really pay attention.

If you stand at the front gates and don't pay attention to the trains, or stand anywhere in the park with your hands in the grass and your eyes closed, you might be able to sense a bit of what you're connected to.

Although my practice moved away from Basildon House itself as it embraced a nonhuman and erotic writing methodology in the grounds, the house is relatively visually inescapable when you are on the parkland. The first estate house on Basildon was likely a Tudor house near where the current house stands, but there are no remains of the building today.³⁸⁷ In the 1680s, the parkland started to take shape through human aesthetic intervention so that the mansion would be perfectly framed to look larger-than life and grander than it was from every angle of the surrounding landscape. The Fane family, benefactors of the Countess Dowager of Bath, heavily altered the landscape via levelling and planting.³⁸⁸ Historic England's record states 'the second and last Viscount Fane, may have been responsible for planting some of the trees [still] in the park, together with the building of the gothick lodges on the west and south drives'.³⁸⁹ Basildon House and Park as it stands today was built for Frances Sykes in the late 1770s. Sykes bought the land

³⁸⁷ 'Basildon Park', ([n.d.]), *Historic England* <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1000581?section=official-list-entry>>. [accessed on 10 October 2022].

³⁸⁸ 'Basildon Park', *Historic England*.

³⁸⁹ 'Basildon Park', *Historic England*.

from the last of the Fanes due to his desire to be in Berkshire for its prime location and association with the colonial elite.

As a guide to the history of the house by conservators for VIPA UK states, 'this area of Berkshire was home to so many of the newly rich returned from India.'³⁹⁰ Sykes raised a fortune in the East India Company, profiting from Bengali trade and his colonial role as Governor of Kasimbazar before purchasing the land in 1771.³⁹¹ In their study on ivory furniture in East India Company funded historic homes, Basildon and Sezincote, historians Margot Finn and Kate Smith write that '[b]oth sites have EIC narratives to reclaim and explore, making them productive examples of the recirculation of meaning'³⁹². Finn and Smith go on to state that the Sykes family finally lost control of the estate management when the line of inheritance saw Basildon in the hands of Sykes' four-year-old grandson until it was advertised for sale in 1829.³⁹³

In 1838 the estate was bought by the textile manufacturer, art collector, and radical Whig MP James Morrison.³⁹⁴ The Morrison family were the first to own the house who were not directly tied to East India Company finances.³⁹⁵ The Morrisons were a non-traditional family in that all eleven adult children lived at Basildon, and by James Morrison's retirement to the park from his role in parliament in 1847, none were married.³⁹⁶ The family also travelled extensively, and encouraged

³⁹⁰ 'Basildon Park', ([n.d.]), VIPA UK <<http://vipauk.org/enter/muse/se/s28.html#>> [accessed 13 October 2022].

³⁹¹ 'The History of Basildon Park', ([n.d.]), National Trust <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/oxfordshire-buckinghamshire-berkshire/basildon-park/history-of-basildon-park>> [accessed 12 March 2022].

³⁹² Margot Finn and Kate Smith, *The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857* (London: UCL Press, 2018) pp. 119–121 <<https://www.ucldigitalpress.co.uk/Book/Article/39/64/2816/>> [accessed 10 November 2022].

³⁹³ Finn and Smith, *The East India Company*.

³⁹⁴ Finn and Smith, *The East India Company*.

³⁹⁵ Caroline Dakers, 'Basildon: "What a Casket to Enclose Pictorial Gems"' in *A Genius for Money* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 182–94 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nq4zg.20>> [accessed 25 November 2022].

³⁹⁶ Dakers, 'What a Casket'.

the women to go on individual travels if they desired despite the contrary gendered expectations of the time.³⁹⁷

In her biography of the Morrison family, historian Caroline Dakers notes that they are relatively obscure despite having been so wealthy and in possession of vast amounts of property. Along with Basildon, they owned land in Yorkshire, Kent, and as far afield as the US.³⁹⁸ Dakers argues that the family's origins have much to do with their class origins. James was an orphan of inn workers who moved to London after his parents' deaths at 14 to become a haberdasher. Although he swiftly became the wealthiest merchant millionaire of the time, according to Dakers 'the Morrison name has no resonance. James Morrison's wealth creation was in part because of the industrial revolution and the explosion in cheap textiles, but he was neither a manufacturer nor an inventor'.³⁹⁹ Charles Morrison, who inherited Basildon from his father, became what Dakers calls 'the richest commoner of his own generation'.⁴⁰⁰ He managed to increase his wealth by more than fourteen times before his death, at which point he passed the estate on to his last surviving sister, Ellen. Ellen Morrison, who is key to the practice portion of this project, was the only woman to ever wholly own Basildon Park. She was also the last member of the Morrison family to live there, and the only person for which Basildon was a primary residence until after the second World War.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁷ Dakers, 'What a Casket'.

³⁹⁸ 'A Model Millionaire: Extract from *A Genius for Money*' by Caroline Dakers, *Yale Books Blog*, 8 February 2012, <<https://yalebooksblog.co.uk/2012/02/08/a-model-millionaire-extract-from-a-genius-for-money-by-caroline-dakers/>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

³⁹⁹ Dakers, 'A Model Millionaire'.

⁴⁰⁰ Dakers, 'A Model Millionaire'.

⁴⁰¹ 'The History of Basildon Park', *National Trust*.

Whilst being passed between the hands of property developers in the first three decades of the 20th century, Basildon was inhabited and managed during the first World War by the Women's Land Army whilst it served as both a convalescent home for soldiers and a training centre for those who were disabled fighting to learn new skills.⁴⁰² Over the course of the second World War Basildon was requisitioned by the military for use as an American army base and prisoner of war camp for German and Italian soldiers, whose lodging remains can still be seen throughout the parkland.⁴⁰³ In 1952 Basildon was purchased by local estate owners, the Iliffes, who aimed to restore it to the Morrison family's vision. Lady Illife was the descendent of sugar plantation slave owners in Mauritius, where she was born on her family's 5,000 acres of colonised land.⁴⁰⁴ When the plantation failed following the abolition of slavery, the family moved to England with the goal of 'assimilation into the English aristocracy.'⁴⁰⁵ Lord Langton Iliffe was the son of the 1st Lord Edward Illife, a conservative member of parliament, deputy chairman of Allied Newspapers Limited, and owner of multiple newspapers including the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, *Cambridge Daily News*, *Birmingham Post*, *Birmingham Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*.⁴⁰⁶ Langton was the vice-chairman of the *Birmingham Post*, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, and *Cambridge Daily News* before assuming the lordship on his father's death in 1960.⁴⁰⁷ The Iliffes never had children, and bequeathed Basildon Park to the National Trust in 1978.

⁴⁰² 'The History of Basildon Park', *National Trust*.

⁴⁰³ 'The History of Basildon Park', *National Trust*.

⁴⁰⁴ 'Berkshire's first lady of fashion' (2019), *The Beyonder*, <<https://thebeyonder.co.uk/2019/08/24/berkshires-first-lady-of-fashion/>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

⁴⁰⁵ 'Berkshire's first lady', *The Beyonder*.

⁴⁰⁶ Bassano Ltd, *Edward Iliffe, 1st Baron Iliffe* (1929), *The National Portrait Gallery* <<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw113636/Edward-Mauger-Iliffe-1st-Baron-Iliffe>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

⁴⁰⁷ Bassano Ltd, *Edward Iliffe, 2nd Baron Iliffe* (1944), *The National Portrait Gallery* <<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw182981/Edward-Langton-Iliffe-2nd-Baron-Iliffe>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

As mentioned in the previous section, Ellen was the longest living daughter of James Morrison and the only woman to ever solely own Basildon Park. She lived in the house from her youth and inhabited it alone for the majority of her adult life as her brother Charles was often abroad or at his other estates. According to historians Margot Finn and Katie Smith, upon Charles' death Ellen occupied Basildon alone, unmarried, and childless until her own death.⁴⁰⁸ As I have discovered throughout my work on this project, Ellen is little mentioned and often forgotten.

Owing to the lack of personal archives or recorded information about the Morrisons, there is little other actual evidence of Ellen's life. Most published information about her is contained in the obituaries of her family and herself. Ellen's death in 1909 at 75 was printed in papers across the Berkshire, Reading, and Oxford counties. The *Farringdon Advertiser and Vale of the White Horse Gazette* printed a piece called 'Death of an Heiress' in which they wrote 'Miss Ellen Morrison, the sister to whom the late Charles Morrison, the multi-millionaire, left legacy valued about £1.900,000, has died at Basildon Park, near Reading, just a week after her sister-in-law, Mrs, Frank Morrison'.⁴⁰⁹ The *Berks and Oxon Adviser* also tells us her funeral was at the Basildon Churchyard by the Thames on Christmas Day 1909.

In Finn and Smith's historical summary of Basildon they erase Ellen's ownership completely. Their text states that 'in 1857 the house passed to his eldest son Charles and was inhabited by Charles's

⁴⁰⁸ Finn and Smith, *The East India Company*.; It is also worth noting here and will be mentioned again in a later section that although Finn and Smith mention Ellen's residency in the house, they omit her ownership of it.

⁴⁰⁹ 'Farringdon Advertiser and Vale of the White Horse Gazette' (1912), *The British Newspaper Archive* <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001231/19121005/110/0005>>.

sister Ellen. On Charles's death in 1909 the house passed to his son Archie.⁴¹⁰ Similarly, until 2021 when I changed the information myself during my tenure as a Trust employee after finding her mentioned in a Volunteer Information Folder which was shoved into a dusty locker above the gift shop, Ellen was not mentioned anywhere on the Basildon Park official webpages. Though the Morrisons attempted to keep relatively thorough estate records, 'personal data are missing.'⁴¹¹ According to the Fonthill Estate Archives, any records of the Morrison's lives 'were probably destroyed when Basildon was sold in the 1920s to the Iliffes'⁴¹² Further, for anyone seeking information on who might have worked in the house during Ellen's time there, Fonthill writes 'the survival of personnel records is very patchy indeed and little of any consistent regularity exists from before 1920.'⁴¹³ Dakers has recovered some letters and diaries from the family, tucked away in odd places amongst their possessions and discovered in the 2010s as Dakers was assisting in building the Morrison Archive, but they are in no way substantial.⁴¹⁴

Dakers transcribed the following from a letter written by Ellen & Charles' sister in law, Mabel, about Ellen; 'for I see how lonely she will be some day, & I would have done every & anything to make her happy if she would have cared to pay us visits but no, she never would.'⁴¹⁵ Dakers also found that Ellen often wrote on behalf of other members of the family, especially in situations where a firm but nuanced approach needed to be taken. For example, after Mabel's father visited the family to inquire as to why they would not see his daughter despite her marrying their brother,

⁴¹⁰ Finn and Smith, *The East India Company*.

⁴¹¹ Dakers, *A Model Millionaire*.

⁴¹² 'History' ([n.d.]), *Fonthill Estate* <<https://fonthill.co.uk/history/>> [accessed 20 November 2022].

⁴¹³ 'History', *Fonthill Estate*.

⁴¹⁴ Dakers, *'A Model Millionaire'*.

⁴¹⁵ Dakers, *'A Model Millionaire'*.

Alfred, Ellen was tasked with writing an excuse which still sounded amiable. She wrote: 'We have not asked her to come & see us here because we live very quietly & Alfred is not fond of staying at Basildon, but I dare say some day he will bring her down to us himself.'⁴¹⁶

In dramatizing the lives of real historical rural queer British women Nina and Mary, rural site-specific practitioner and researcher Timothy Allsop 'made a feature of the historical gaps – playing around with the assumptions we might make about characters and then offering alternative possibilities.'⁴¹⁷ Film Director Francis Lee has been recently notable for his work on *God's Own Country* (2017) and *Ammonite* (2020), both films exploring rural queer experiences. In Lee's *Ammonite* historical figure Mary Anning is portrayed as a lesbian within a fictional narrative despite there being no explicit record of her having been a lesbian in life. After backlash Lee defended the choice to media outlets, stating he didn't understand why 'historical figures are presumed straight until proven otherwise'⁴¹⁸. He further argued against having to provide evidence when narratively queering an historical figure. Although his work does technically play into the previously mentioned trope of historical fiction by men being the predominant cultural lesbian representation, Lee's disruption of heteronormative expectations here is valuable.

I took some inspiration from these approaches in writing **em's** voice. The forwardness Ellen showed in communicating on behalf of her family's true desires, as shown in the above quote, was

⁴¹⁶ Dakers, *A Genius for Money*.

⁴¹⁷ Timothy Allsop quoted in interview by Tom Woodhouse, 'Queer Rural Connections: Queer History and Belonging in the Countryside', *The Museum of English Rural Life*, 25 February 2021, <<https://merl.reading.ac.uk/blog/2021/02/queer-rural-connections/>>, [accessed 02 February 2022].

⁴¹⁸ Ryan Gilbey, 'Why are historical figures presumed straight? Francis Lee on causing outrage with *Ammonite*', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/mar/23/why-historical-figures-presumed-straight-kate-winslet-francis-lee-outrage-ammonite>> [accessed 20 April 2021].

what initially pulled me towards her character being the one which primarily spoke to the audience. As the practice evolved through my writing with the site, as will be explored in the next chapter, the audience became an individual audience member as opposed to the traditional audience of multiple patrons, as well as the only physically present 'performer'. Ellen Morrison's Implementation of boundaries in this specific instance bled into how I heard **em** and positioned her within my practice as research. In the final version of my practice **em** is both the only character to communicate directly with the audience/performer and the only character who is not heard. She delivers directions, whilst also bluntly acknowledging that she cannot be there to ensure they are followed as in this section of **em**'s lines:

I can't hear you.

I'm not saying no one can see and hear you. I'm not even saying that no one you hear in this recording can't see or hear you. I don't think the person who wrote this can see or hear you. Some of the important beings who are in this... thought/moment/sense we are in together... they can hear and see you always.

But importantly, I am the one you need to be listening to. Everyone else you need to be feeling.

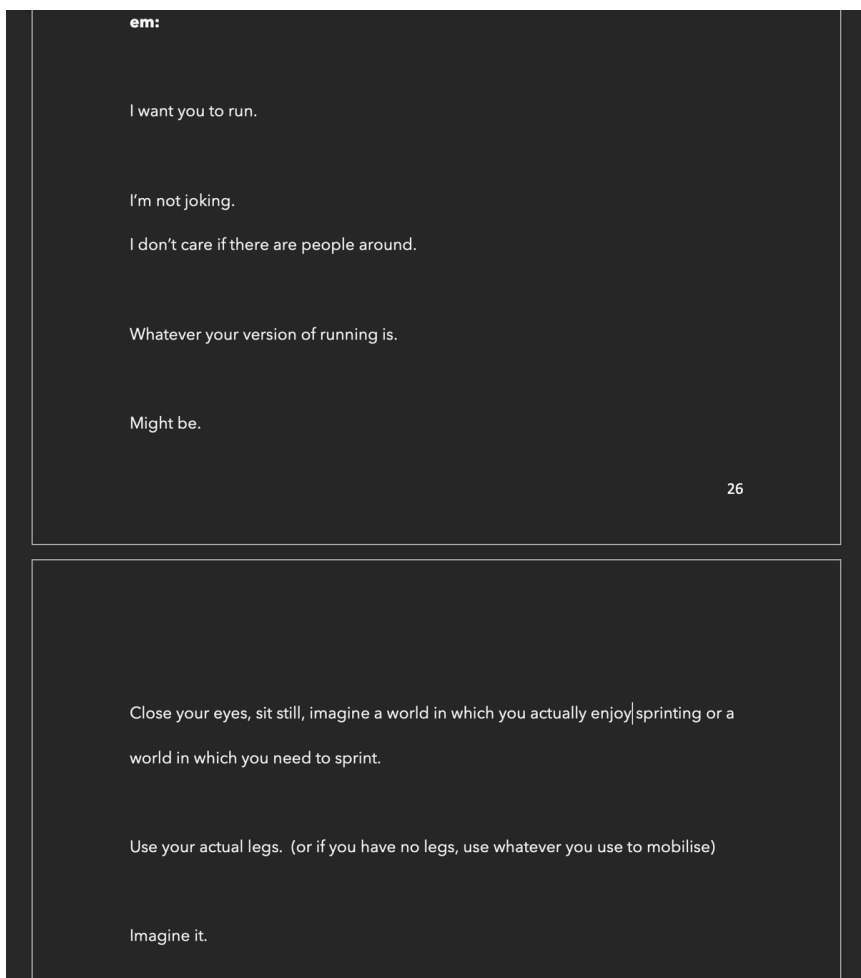
But me, I can't see or hear you. I have no way of knowing if you are listening as you should be. No way of knowing if you are *doing* as I'd like you to be. I just have to hope you are at least *being*.

I get the shit|bit, really.

STICK YOUR HANDS INTO THE MUD.

Further, the audience's role is not only to perform her directions, but also to embody her. **em** is not recorded but is present in the zine-style script given to the audience/performer alongside the audio. They must read her lines when each portion of the audio containing the other character's lines stop, as well as decide whether and how to feel and embody the actions she is asking them to do through their own embodied reading of her. This both queers Ellen Morrison in line with Lee's argument about refusing to assume historical figures with no explicit sexual identity are innately heterosexual. It also opens the actual historical traits of Ellen Morrison to new interpretations through live and modern queer erotic embodiment of a reimagined historical

fiction by multiple queer people [audience/performers], where Allsop's approach is limited to a single iteration of the performance text questioning assumptions made only by the theatre makers. I also attempted to reconsider access to land from the perspective of physical access to navigating landscape, disrupting the elitist perception of National Trust properties:



When considering all the classed, racialised, and gendered aspects of inserting Ellen into the fabric of my play as a character I felt it was not the correct choice to present her as an unproblematic, queer, fictionalised version of the actual woman Ellen Morrison. I had tried to draft some scenes with her as her in this sense and disliked them all. None of them were allowing me to

do anything new with the structure of the play itself, and the act of writing her voice felt false and forced. Whilst I will discuss the writing practice as research process that shaped the final text and form of my writing practice in the following chapter, it is worth noting here the evolution from Ellen Morrison to **em** that took place over the course of my own research troubling my relationship to the National Trust and Basildon Park.

This knowledge of site influenced the choices I made when employing my writing methodology alongside the growing relationship I had with the nonhuman residents of the site. The relationship that my practice had to site was fluid, multifaceted, and in some ways symbiotic. My writing benefited from my attempts to communicate with the nonhuman through the erotic. Some nonhuman residents of the park, such as the wild birds, bees, and deer who take refuge in our garden from human hunters, nonhuman predators, and the cold, have thrived alongside and because of our residence in this site. In writing Ellen Morrison I was inserting historical fiction about a white upper-class landowner into a fantasy exploration of queer women and rural lands creating one another.

By instead writing **em**, giving her contemporary cultural knowledge, and subverting her class with profanity, blasphemy, and randomised capitalisation, and only having her be read by the audience/performer rather than heard – I sought to unsettle the classed and racialised aspects of Ellen Morrison as the owner of a house with direct ties to both British colonialism and North American capitalism. Further, I hoped that giving the audience/performer the part of **em** rather than recording her with an actor would take the power to give anyone an order about how they

should behave or reside on land from Ellen and give it back to my intended queer and lesbian audience. In this I also realised that the sited nature of my practice was the site-specific practice writing as research methodology I had found in the nonhuman and erotic, not a character who historically lived in the site or an audience/performer present on a site which is associated with marginalising my intended audience.

Section Three: Sited/Site-Specific - Forming a Disruptive Dramaturgy with the Nonhuman and the Erotic.

Now that I have defined and contextualised the site in which my practice is grounded, I will move into how it is situated within site-specific performance practices. First I will discuss the friction in discourse on what sited and site-specific work means to UK theatre makers and performance artists. This is to demonstrate that my project departs from typical uses and methods of site-specific performance in the UK and instead opens possibilities in sited performance for alternative understandings of site and a practice-based relationship to it. I will then analyse a selection of three contemporary site-specific British performance work dealing with heritage sites which reinforce or fail to question the culturally reenforced metronormative, masculinist, or lesbophobic perceptions of land discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis. I will finally present alternative sited and site-specific work by Indigenous and transnational artists which more closely align with my own practice as research aims, whilst unearthing their lack of attention to rural alternative subjectivities, in order to clearly define where my practice contributes to international queer, feminist, and rural sited performance practice and research.

Andy Field writes that performances have taken place outside purpose-built theatre spaces for most of human history, but 'in the early 1980s a term began to be used by certain theatre groups...as an attempt to describe their own particular performance practices and their

relationship to the local environment.⁴¹⁹ The initial meaning of the term site-specific signalled a performance practice in which the 'layers of the site would be carefully peeled back through a performance that was not an imposition upon the location but sprung forth from it.'⁴²⁰ By the 1990s, Field recalls, the meaning had had expanded to connote any show not taking place in a traditional space which could then be placed in opposition to more 'legitimate' drama.⁴²¹

Contemporary performance scholar Bertie Ferdman wrote in 2013 that site-specific had 'become usurped into mainstream marketing lingo: a promotional catchword and trendy signifier for innovation and pseudo-alternative experiences that promise to jolt audiences'⁴²². Similarly site-specific practitioner Phil Smith notes that most site-specific theatre in Britain, especially that which is critically considered, is not narratively specific to site. Many of these performances, by companies such as Changeling Theatre, Punchdrunk, Rift, Dante or Die, and Stockroom (Out of Joint) 'can consist of existing plays, often with naturalistic dialogue, linear narratives, and psychological characterisations'²⁸, despite their claims to be radical in form. The performances, although adapted to various degrees for their sites participate in traditional modes of performance making.

My practice differs from these popular contemporary UK site-specific performance practices in several ways, some of which have been demonstrated in the excerpts included in this chapter.

⁴¹⁹ Andy Field, "Site-specific theatre"? Please be more specific', *The Guardian*, 6 Feb 2008, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2008/feb/06/sitespecifictheatrepleasebe>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

⁴²⁰ Field, "Site-specific theatre"?

⁴²¹ Field, "Site-specific theatre"?

⁴²² Bertie Ferdman, 'A New Journey Through Other Spaces: Contemporary Performance Beyond "Site Specific"', *Theatre*, 43:2 (2013), 4–25 (5).

Firstly, I have rejected a linear narrative in favour of an exploratory script woven from the outcome of my writing practice outdoors in the landscape of Basildon Park into a transnational temporal lesbian memoir of sexual identity formation in the rural. It has sprung forth from the site of Basildon Park in that the nonhuman of the park was integral to my writing practice, as will be discussed in chapter four. It is in opposition to 'legitimate' drama not in that it questions the legitimacy of a performance venue, but rather in that it questions the legitimacy of feeling available to a marginalised audience in a traditional performance space in relation to narratives which are exclusionary to queer and lesbian women in both content and form.

Several fractured terms have surfaced over the past three decades to describe theatrical performances that address sites outside of dedicated theatre spaces. Melanie Kloetzel, for instance, defines 'site-adaptive' performance as that which confronts the 'unchangeable nature'⁴²³ of site by making every other performance element mobile or adaptable. Other examples include 'site-responsive'⁴²⁴ in which the performance and performers respond to the site, 'site-sympathetic'⁴²⁵ wherein the performance does not necessarily narratively respond to or engage in the site, but the design considers architectural and topographical elements, and 'site-based'⁴²⁶ which is proposed as an alternative umbrella term encompassing a performance that has contact with any non-traditional site during any point in its creation or conception. Theatre practitioner Sophie Jump writes that in 1994, whilst performing with her company the Seven Sisters Group,

⁴²³ Melanie Kloetzel, 'Performing Versatility in a Neoliberal Age: Site-Adaptive Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 29:3 (2019) 256–274 (257).

⁴²⁴ 'About The Company' ([n.d.]), *The Company* <<https://www.thecompanyuk.com/about-1>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

⁴²⁵ Peter Higgin, 'A Punchdrunk approach to making theatre' (2017), *British Library* <<https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/a-punchdrunk-approach-to-making-theatre>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

⁴²⁶ Penelope Cole, 'Site-Based Theatre: The Beginning', *Theatre History Studies*, 38 (2019), 91-103 <[doi:10.1353/ths.2019.0005](https://doi.org/10.1353/ths.2019.0005)>.

they understood site-specific to mean 'that the work is created in the site and for the site, and could not be moved to another location because it is so enmeshed in that particular place.'⁴²⁷ Jump goes on to state, however, that her personal definition has shifted in recent years to include offshoots which focus on immersion, responsiveness, or mobility and might span multiple sites.⁴²⁸ Site-specific work, she writes, became more 'about the outcome of that performance - how the audience's attention was focused onto their environment'¹⁵. Reaching past its ability to make someone question site, in 2000 Nick Kaye stated that 'site-specific art frequently works to *trouble* the oppositions between the site and the work'.⁴²⁹ Kaye further states that that this troubling means that 'the site functions as a text perpetually in the process of being written and being read, [...so] the site-specific work's very attempt to establish its place will be subject to the process of slippage'.⁴³⁰ And in 2002 Fiona Wilkie conducted a survey of 44 practitioners and collectives across the UK in order to define what a site-specific practice was to British practitioners.⁴³¹ She found that the performance only ever taking place in a single site that was not a traditional theatre space was the most important commonality overall.⁴³² In her 2015 follow up, in line with Jump's comments, Wilkie found that practitioners had shifted away from pure single site-based praxis and towards a process and relationship-based understanding of sited work.⁴³³ She writes that even a just a 'sited conversation [allows] questions of flow, ecology, urbanism and encounter in relation to performance.'⁴³⁴

⁴²⁷ Sophie Jump, 'One hundred and ninety-two thousand, two hundred and forty-eight steps: curating the Site Specific Performance Festival at PQ 2019', *Theatre and Performance Design*, vol. 6 no. 1-2, pp. 69-80, p. 70.

⁴²⁸ Jump, p. 70

⁴²⁹ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), p. 11.

⁴³⁰ Kaye, *Site-Specific Art*, p. 11.

⁴³¹ Fiona Wilkie, 'Sited Conversations', in *Moving Sites: Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance*, ed. by Victoria Hunter, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 41 and p. 159.

⁴³² Wilkie, 'Sited Conversations', p. 41 and p. 159.

⁴³³ Wilkie, 'Sited Conversations', p. 41.

⁴³⁴ Wilkie, 'Sited Conversations', p. 40.

In this context, how do theatre makers approach sites, and to what end? Writing on site-specific dramaturgy, Jen Harvie proposes that performances might aid in 'remembering and constituting identities that are significantly determined by their materiality'⁴³⁵. Further, she argues that such dramaturgy provides 'narratives or performances of events and times that are understood to define an identity or community.'⁴³⁶ Site-specific performance, she argues, can constitute, materialise, and define identities in relation to sites or communities. Furthermore, Penelope Cole writes that site-specific performance exists both outside of traditional theatre spaces as well as 'outside of the customary conventions of behaviour and interaction found within those established venues.'⁴³⁷

My practice is intentionally difficult to identify with one single term such as 'site-responsive' or 'site-based'. Instead, I engage in a sited dramaturgy of the erotic and nonhuman, as discussed in the introductory chapter, which troubles those definitions. All the definitions of site-specific as a term or practice included in this section have overlapping ideas or similarities. Regarding this project, and in speaking to my own practice, I have decided to simplify and clarify by using 'sited'. Rather than (or perhaps inclusive of) 'specific', 'based', 'responsive', 'sympathetic', or 'reactive' the relationship of my practice to site just, *is*. My practice is sited in that it did not begin until I arrived at the site. I did not set out to find a site. I did not set out to make a site-specific performance. I did not seek a site for my practice to take root in. I arrived there anyway, though, and so a sited

⁴³⁵ Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 42.

⁴³⁶ Harvie, *Staging the UK*, p. 41.

⁴³⁷ Cole, 'Site-Based Theatre', p. 91.

practice it became. And in that realisation, I also realised that the ways in which I could attend to the audience and to concerns around rurality, visibility, and land use shifted.

My writing practice is rooted in the site of Basildon Park for its making, in both my current place of residence, Basildon Park and my hometown and residence of 24 years, Wichita Falls, Texas for its topographical narrative layering, and in whichever site the audience/performer might choose to experience the audio in for the performance. By grounding my dramaturgical practice in three separate sites, I disrupt the metronormative and hetero-masculinist lineages and histories of my two writing practice sites (Basildon Park and Texas) and add the memory of embodying rural lesbian subjectivity to the site in which the performance takes place. This diversion from rigid or reductive definitions into an expansive and transformative queer, lesbian, feminist, and erotic practice with the nonhuman is why I refer to my practice as a sited writing practice, rather than a site-specific performance practice. I have included the following note in the opening of my final practice text which briefly explains this for any future makers who might use the script for their own audio-performance to encourage the use of sited work to disrupt negative perceptions of queer bodies on land:

the piece was written in collaboration with the nonhuman residents of basildon park in west berkshire whilst the writer was also resident there. although it is textually sited, it is meant to be experienced in the site where the audience/performer is the most comfortable in their body. the piece should be experienced outdoors. the specific location is the choice of the audience. they should choose a site which holds some sense of nostalgia, safety, familiarity, intimacy, joy, love, cosiness, or happiness for them personally. the location should also be somewhere they might feel comfortable moving or acting strangely. there are no other site specifications. go wild.

sited heritage

Site-specific researchers Joanne Tompkins and Sacha Craddock theorise that the cultural memory of site-specific performance held in heritage sites holds a level of nostalgia and therefore potential for emotional connection, or 'ready-made atmosphere'.⁴³⁸ That atmosphere and what it communicates to an audience, however, is still heavily dependent on how a practitioner chooses to approach site in their practice. Phil Smith held three site specific performances across three years at the 18th century building A la Ronde, a National Trust property built by and for two women he and the Trust describe as 'spinster cousins'⁴³⁹ - the Paraminters. The Paraminter cousins were both unmarried all their lives, much like Ellen Morrison, and decided to build an unusual home together in which they could store collected material which represented the joy

⁴³⁸ Joanne Tompkins, 'Theatre's Heterotopia and the Site-Specific Production of "Suitcase"', *TDR*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (2012), pp. 101-112 (p. 102).

⁴³⁹ National Trust, *A La Ronde The Sixteen Sided House* (2022) <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/a-la-ronde/features/a-la-ronde-the-sixteen-sided-house>> [accessed 9 February 2022]

they found in their non-traditional lives. The cousins also dictated in their will that the inheritance of A La Ronde should only ever be passed to an unmarried woman.⁴⁴⁰

Whilst the Parminter cousins built the house to reflect the nonhuman objects they collected from landscapes they travelled together, the only eventual male owner, Oswald Reichel, wanted the house and grounds to be rid of any unusual or custom features. He was allowed to own the home despite the women's 'will that it should only pass to unmarried female relatives'⁴⁴¹ He destroyed the interior of the home as the cousins had intended it. He darkened the interior, where the cousins had originally kept light in all eight sides and installed 16 windows under which they could sit and follow the sun.⁴⁴² He took down the hand-gathered décor of found objects, shells, feathers, stones, that the cousins had gathered on their trip across Europe.

Smith's performances, *Foray* (2007), *A Man About The House* (2008) and *Gardens Always Mean Something Else* (2009) all featured the same characters and narrative structure, but with each giving a tour of a different part of the property - the interior, formal gardens, and grounds respectively. In all three performances Smith explored why and how the Parminter cousins built the unusual home through what he calls 'mythogeography'⁴⁴³. According to Smith this is a site-specific method which emphasizes 'resistance to the commercial and bureaucratic

⁴⁴⁰ 'A La Ronde', *BBC Legacies Devon*, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/heritage/england/devon/article_1.shtml> [accessed 19 February 2022].

⁴⁴¹ 'A woman's touch in a man's world', *BBC Legacies Devon*, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/heritage/england/devon/article_1.shtml> [accessed 19 February 2022].

⁴⁴² 'A woman's touch', *BBC*.

⁴⁴³ Phil Smith, "'Gardens always mean something else': turning knotty performance and paranoid research on their head at A la Ronde', *Cultural Geographies*, 18: 4 (2011) 537–546 (537).

homogenization of space and celebrates the multiple meanings of specific sites.⁴⁴⁴ Smith's performance focussed on Reichel's use and remodelling of the gardens. As these spaces had been remade, maintained, and recorded by men, Smith sought to see the different perspectives of the space through their eyes. For example, an area of raised grass was recorded by one gardener as 'earthen hill'⁴⁴⁵ and another as a 'Regency viewing platform'. By casting two actors in the subsequent performance as the Parminter cousins but placing them in the National Trust gardens as Reichel would have remade them, Smith asserts that he is 'assembling or re-making ... alternative meanings and multiple viewpoints of the site.'⁴⁴⁶ Though Smith describes these heritage plays as 'feminist',⁴⁴⁷ Reichel is their main character. Smith states that his privileging of Reichel's connection to the home represented an 'assembling or re-making ... alternative meanings and multiple viewpoints of the site.'⁴⁴⁸ It also gave space to the voice of an historical figure who acted against the will of his relatives, erasing their non-normative lives from the rural Exmouth landscape they had made into a home for themselves and other unmarried women.

Robert Wilson's *Walking* was a 2012 site-specific walk with installations and varied levels of interaction or meditation set along the Norfolk Coast in view of 18th century heritage site, the Holkam Estate. Wilson chose the location, according to *Guardian* critic Patrick Barkham, because it reminded Wilson of his home landscape of Waco, Texas.⁴⁴⁹ In a text about Wilson's *Walking*, Louise Owen quotes the performance's publicity, which 'invited audiences to "escape the

⁴⁴⁴ Smith, 'Gardens always mean something else', 537.

⁴⁴⁵ Smith, 'Gardens always mean something else', 546.

⁴⁴⁶ Smith, 'Gardens always mean something else', 546.

⁴⁴⁷ Smith, 'Gardens always mean something else', 546.

⁴⁴⁸ Smith, 'Gardens always mean something else', 546.

⁴⁴⁹ Patrick Barkham, 'Robert Wilson takes a walk with angels in Norfolk', *The Guardian*, 22 August 2012,

<<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/aug/22/robert-wilson-walking-angels-norfolk>> [accessed 15 February 2022].

pressures of modern-day living this summer as the stunning landscape of the north Norfolk coastline becomes the stage for an extraordinary outdoor adventure".⁴⁵⁰ This positioning of Wilson's work reinforces the idea of the rural and its landscapes as stagnant objects. It also retains the sense of theatre as something that is normally indoor and in the urban, which positions rural and site-specific theatre as an 'escape' or something 'extraordinary'. Owen goes on to write that *Walking* 'was not interested in producing unmediated communion between "nature" and people.'⁴⁵¹ The play engaged with a 'linear dramaturgy containing two acts and an interval.'⁴⁵² This is the linearity that I argue exists as a form of metronormative representation within site-specific dramaturgy that my practice offers an alternative to. There is a lack of holistic dramaturgical engagement with the site which aligns itself with the settler colonial and patriarchal attitude towards nature discussed in this thesis.

During the interval the audience were given 'vinyl-covered cuboid seats'⁴⁵³ on which to eat their snacks and consume bottled water. Rather than facilitating a connection to the landscape whilst processing the work they've participated in, *Walking* ironically placed 'modern day living'⁴⁵⁴ into the landscape, thus physically separating the audience from it. The participants were not encouraged to engage with the landscape on a creative nor an environmentally conscious level, as suggested by the use of bottled water. Further, by offering seats covered in a man-made and

⁴⁵⁰ Louise Owen, 'Robert Wilson, *Walking* (Holkham Estate, 2012), *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 23:4 (2013), 568-573.

⁴⁵¹ Owen, 'Robert Wilson', p. 571.

⁴⁵² Owen, 'Robert Wilson', p. 571.

⁴⁵³ Owen, 'Robert Wilson', 570.

⁴⁵⁴ Owen, 'Robert Wilson', 570.

likely non-sustainable material Wilson facilitates a further separation from the landscape and the audience.

Walking falls into the trap of approaching site through the lens of what would be appropriate or desired in a traditional theatre space. This defeats the potential for site to be a disruptive force within a non-traditional praxis. By dictating that the audience/performer experience my practice piece I am refusing the exclusivity of legitimate drama reserved for performance which treats site as another industry material rather than a potential teacher and collaborator.

In the 2019 Heritage Award Winning Production *Our House: Shout Out Loud* English Heritage and the National Youth Theatre collaborated to 'to create a new immersive promenade performance'⁴⁵⁵ in which they devised a script detailing the lives of Edward II, Henry VIII, and fictional queer servants in the 1930s within the space. Eltham Palace is now owned by English Heritage but has history dating back to the medieval times.⁴⁵⁶ It was first owned by the half-brother of William the Conqueror and continued to be a favourite home of the ruling class for hundreds of years.⁴⁵⁷ Like Basildon, Eltham enclosed large swathes of previously common lands to create a 'Great Park' which was over 1,300 acres.⁴⁵⁸ Eltham fell into disrepair in the 1600s and was used as farmland until the crown began restorations in the late 18th century. In 1933 millionaire couple Stephen and Virginia Courtauld leased Eltham from the Crown for a 99-year

⁴⁵⁵ 'Our House', *Shout Out Loud*, 2021, <<https://www.shoutoutloud.org.uk/project/our-house/>> [accessed 29 April 2021].

⁴⁵⁶ 'Eltham Palace and Gardens' ([n.d.]), *Visit Greenwich* <<https://www.visitgreenwich.org.uk/things-to-do/eltham-palace-and-gardens-p1372121>>, [accessed 10 October 2022].

⁴⁵⁷ 'History of Eltham Palace and Gardens' ([n.d.]), *English Heritage* <<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/eltham-palace-and-gardens/history/>>, [accessed 10 October 2022].

⁴⁵⁸ 'History of Eltham Palace', *English Heritage*.

term as their 'semi-rural property within easy reach of London.'⁴⁵⁹ English Heritage took control of the property after the Courtauld's 99-year term expired.

For *Our House* Eltham was a source for historical material to respond to. The actors were given items, rooms, or historical figures from the palace to 'take inspiration from those... whose stories have gone untold or have even been lost entirely'⁴⁶⁰ The company devised the script along with writer, Benjamin Salmon, based on group improvisation exercises drawn out of the prompts found on site. These devised scenes were used to create the final performance of 'eight short scenes exploring the supposed romance between King Edward II and his favourite, Piers Gaveston, Henry VIII's upbringing at the Palace with his sisters, and working-class queer stories from the 1930s when Eltham Palace was known for high-society parties.'⁴⁶¹ On the empowering sensation of playing the wife of the queer King Edward II, an actor from the company stated; 'I'm a black Asian queer woman and I've got to play a powerful...white famous homophobic queen.'⁴⁶²

Although the performance gave both queer kings an ending with their lovers it failed to criticise power relations in their own time. The performance's only scene featuring a lesbian couple showed them being caught kissing, with one of the women being fired from her position in the house. Although the actors returned to the performance in costume for the celebratory dance at the end, the couple's storyline within the performance was never resolved. By only responding to the site as it exists in present, rather than using performance as a method and an opportunity to

⁴⁵⁹ 'History of Eltham Palace', *English Heritage*.

⁴⁶⁰ 'Our House', *Shout Out Loud*.

⁴⁶¹ 'Our House', *Shout Out Loud*.

⁴⁶² 'Our House', *Shout Out Loud*.

understand the site in new ways, societal structures of privilege were narratively perpetuated. By instead seeking new ways of knowing rural landscapes through an erotic collaboration with the nonhuman of heritage sites, and decentring that collaborative writing practice from urban space, my practice reaches towards more expansive iterations of sited performance.

Rural performance researcher and practitioner Timothy Allsop posits that applying a queer lens to site-specific practice by always presuming there are and were queer people in rural spaces 'makes us question our assumptions that the rural space has always been a straight space. It also allows us rural queers to feel more rooted in our rural surroundings - to feel as though we can belong.'⁴⁶³ Or as Deirdre Heddon argues, sites 'like the bodies located in them, are embedded within, and produced by historical, cultural, and political vectors'⁴⁶⁴ In choosing a sited writing project for practice as research, then, I am also using performance practice to question what assumptions site-specific practice makes about site - especially rural site and landscape. What productions of body and site might allow new understandings and articulations of rural lesbian subjectivity in performance practice?

In her study *Moving Beyond Inscription to Incorporation* (2015), movement scholar Sandra Reeve states that a 'well-rehearsed objection to [rural] site-specific... performance is that it tends to seek to impose a perspective, an interpretation on a landscape, to treat the outdoors as a backdrop to

⁴⁶³ Timothy Allsop 'Queer Rural Connections.', *MERL Blog*, 22 February 2021, < <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/blog/2021/02/queer-rural-connections/> >, [accessed 13 December 2022]

⁴⁶⁴ Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p.12.

the real performance and to convince an audience of a chosen way of seeing it.⁴⁶⁵ My practice, however, differs on several accounts. Firstly, it rejects Basildon Park as the backdrop for the 'real performance' and therefore necessitates the audience's seeing it how they choose. Further, whilst I do impose a rural lesbian perspective borne of my own experience onto the narrative it is not imposed onto the site itself in the performance and is only imposed into the script. This erotic and autoethnographic approach to articulating rural lesbian subjectivity through my own relationship writing with the nonhuman on site also disrupts what walking performance scholars Deirdre Heddon and Cathy Turner state of rural UK performance practice. They write that sited rural performance in Britain is deeply masculinist and 'framed by two enduring historical discourses: the Romantics and Naturalists, romping through rural locations and the avant-gardists, drifting through the spectacular urban streets of capitalism.'⁴⁶⁶

Victoria Hunter's introduction to her book's section on rural site-specific performance positions practice in rural environments as that which 'might facilitate the development and articulation of environmental knowledge.'⁴⁶⁷ Hunter goes on to write that implementing an intentional attention to the outdoor environment in sited work might begin to dislodge 'concepts loaded with connotations (i.e. romanticism, abandonment, escapism), misconceptions (i.e. wilderness, nature/natural, accessibility) and socio-economic implications'⁴⁶⁸ from performance practices. By utilising my own transnational experience as a narrative tool in my practice to tie in the Indigenous

⁴⁶⁵ Sandra Reeve, 'Moving Beyond Inscription to Incorporation: The four dynamics of movement in site-specific performance' in *Moving Sites: Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance*, ed. by Victoria Hunter, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 310.

⁴⁶⁶ Dierdre Heddon and Cathy Turner, 'Walking Women: Shifting the Tales and Scales of Mobility', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22:2 (2012) p. 235.

⁴⁶⁷ Victoria Hunter *Moving Sites: Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 293.

⁴⁶⁸ Hunter, *Moving Sites*, p. 293.

American theoretical lens through which I framed my methodological approach to the nonhuman my practice builds on Hunter's hopes for sited rural practice. I build on her facilitation of developing and articulating environmental knowledge towards a new written understanding of environment as landscape and of its nonhuman residents as collaborators with which performance practice might rewrite misconceptions about rural site with lesbian and queer perspective.

Hunter, however, also defines her own site-specific coastal work in which she chooses a point on the coastline at West Wittering Beach to perform a contemporary solo dance for a day as spectators pass, as 'entering and engaging with landscape, however, we inevitably capture and absorb something of its essence and re-connect with an essential mode of being-in-the-world'⁴⁶⁹. Whilst her writing seeks to disrupt masculinist rural connotations, the language she uses here in describing her own rural practice ('entering' 'capturing' 'absorbing') subscribes to a traditional male, heteronormative, and linear structure of conquering sites considered 'wild' or rural. This language re-enacts modes of practice which might produce the same outcome as theatre in traditional spaces, communicating normative experiences. I am linguistically shifting my research and practice away from accepted Anglo-European ways of describing and relating to site. Instead, in reaching towards terms influenced by Indigenous scholarship such as the nonhuman, I am contributing an analytical lens as well as a dramaturgical practice which might better establish and articulate rural lesbian relationships to rural site.

⁴⁶⁹ Hunter, *Moving Sites*, p. 293.

Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman of site-specific performance collective *WalkingLab* agree that rural site-specific performance shifts perceptions of landscape because it 'posits humans and non-humans as enmeshed with each other in a messy, shifting ontology.'¹² Springgay and Truman go on to state that in site-specific praxis, utilising 'feminist, queer, and trans theories that emphasize movements and affect [creates] vital, sensory, material, and ephemeral intensities beyond the logics of representation'¹⁰. In my sited writing practice I use not only feminist and queer theories, but I also look to Indigenous American theory not only to go beyond logics of representation, but to alter the logic by implementing different ways of knowing site through sensory and material intensities experienced with site throughout the making process. The messy and shifting ontology the human and nonhuman share on landscape is uprooted from British understandings of land and residence on land through this engagement with a Black feminist erotic and an Indigenous American nonhuman in my writing practice as research methodology. Further, site-specific trans* performer and researcher Adar Kamholtz-Roberts wrote in their work on rural site-specific performance that '[the] more unconscious assumptions, attachments, and realities we have associated with a space, the more material site-specificity has to work with and uncover.'⁴⁷⁰ In seeking to collaborate with the nonhuman of the site, rather than respond to or be inspired by it, my sited practice seeks alternative ways of understanding those unconscious assumptions and attachments in order to dismantle them and rewrite them with queer subjectivity.

⁴⁷⁰ Adar Kamholtz-Roberts, 'Touching Queerness: Performing Utopia in a Public Bathroom', *Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 11 (2021) 20-43.

Site-specific work focusing on urban space tends also to position site as an objective element. In her work on site-specific dance in techno clubs Brigitte Biehl-Missal uses a dance performance at the Berghain in Berlin to assert the importance of site-specific work allowing artists to see 'moving body in the static space, and [introduce] dance theory to organisational research in order to enhance our understanding of how people move in response to a space.'⁴⁷¹ She then goes on to agree with director Peter Brook in arguing that sites are 'vivified and acculturated by the human bodies that inhabit them'⁴⁷² Especially in the cases of outdoor sited performance, though, a site is already alive. My sited writing methodology is grounded instead in the belief that the nonhuman is just as full of the cues and intricacies we humans might understand as culture, even (and maybe especially in the case of nonhuman animals) when humans are not in a that space. Site, particularly rural outdoor site, is full of movement, of light moving through glass or leaves, of dust mites swimming in air, of photosynthesis and underground nutrient transfers. Even in a human-made space, the earth is constantly in motion. By stating that spaces or sites need to be 'brought to life', Biehl-Missal states that they are not living to begin with. This human-centric approach to site privileges urban space and leaves little room to explore how we as audience members might ourselves be vivified by rural spaces. My practice departs from this through its grounding in the rural and my privileging of the nonhuman of the site in the writing process.

Conclusion

⁴⁷¹ Brigitte Biehl-Missal, 'Filling the "empty space": Site-specific dance in a techno club', *Culture and Organization*, 25:1 (2019) 16–31 (16).

⁴⁷² Biehl-Missal, 'Filling the "empty space"', 17.

The separation between audience and site, tendency to use site as a springboard for devised responses, and privileging of male perspectives in the lineage of perspectives on rural land and belonging in the UK call for an alternative conceptual and practical response. As demonstrated in my discussions of Smith, Wilson, and Shout Out Loud in the first section of this chapter, contemporary sited heritage performances and their accompanying lack of attention to wider connotations of rural sited performance in the UK prevents any alteration in the audience's ways of knowing the site and, therefore, any shifts in the narratives they associate with it once the performance has moved on. This means that no new forms of narrative nor representation are being created within those sites. Instead, transient stories are being told that sit on top or fit into the shape of site rather than making a structural change to its embodied memory. By instead practicing a holistic dramaturgical approach to site specific performance which engages with the nonhuman residents of landscape and site, traditional narratives might be reconstructed to open up possibilities in discourse concerning marginalised queer and lesbian women's identities.

By expanding on the notion that nonhuman inhabitants of site might be the purveyors of meaning within them, we might then be able to move past the idea that a site is ever 'specific' in the way practitioners conceive it. The fluidity, movement, and activity of nonhuman elements within a site prevent it from ever being a site experienced as the same across multiple times by multiple audiences/performers. Perhaps, then, a work which collaborates with a site during the process of making by only writing outdoors and when immersed in the site, as will be expanded on in the following chapter, remains 'sited' in that the site has had a hand in the work's creation regardless of if the audience/performer ever actually sets foot in the site. Further, if the site (through its

nonhuman elements) has influenced the making of the work then allowing the site to be fluid by way of the work's dissemination allow for shifting perceptions of that site through the act of the performance.

In my practice I aim to look back to lesbian subjectivities articulated within the feminist movements of the early 1970s to rehabilitate the sort of rural visibility and discourse they created. I also seek to distinguish my practice from site-specific works that maintain a surface relationship to site through response and devising by utilising a nonhuman and erotic methodology throughout my approach to site, beginning with my writing practice, as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Utilising this positioning dramaturgically for a site-specific performance might articulate and encourage participants to alter their beliefs (and belief-based actions) about the site (and its nonhuman components) as well as their way of relating to a site. It might also, as site-specific artist Tiffany Beam states, shift 'viewers towards critical Indigenous land knowledges and away from human exceptionalism'⁴⁷³ and thereby alter their views of exceptionalism with regard who belongs on that land/site.

This chapter introduced the National Trust as a heritage institution, as well as the governing body of the site my practice is based in, within the context of LGBTQIA2S+ history and the history of British land ownership and access. It then introduced Basildon Park and its long, fraught, colonial journey to becoming a National Trust property and my place of residence and practice. It

⁴⁷³ Tiffany Beam, 'Dwelling With/in Water, Women & Performance', *A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 30:1 (2020), 113–115.

provided a brief biography of Ellen Morrison - brief, given the paucity of available materials on her life - before positioning her within my practice in preparation for more in-depth discussion of her role in chapter four. In the final section of this chapter I discussed in more detail three sited heritage performances which provide positionality in what my practice contributes to the urban-centric and masculinist landscape, before ending with a discussion of how theory surrounding rural site-specific practice emphasises my practice's potential in disrupting metronormative narratives. Chapter four will detail how I translated my erotic and nonhuman methods into a sited writing practice which refuses privilege traditional forms in the hopes of disrupting how alternative subjectivities are viewed and known in relation to land. It will discuss how each stage of my practice as research serves to question land, heritage, and performance relationships and prompts critical inquiry into how marginalised rural subjectivities have been erased from Britain's cultural landscape. By collaborating with landscape during the process of creating on a sensorial level which does not give primacy to the human experience of site, but rather the relationships between human and nonhuman, I am engaging in a sited writing practice.

Chapter Four: Writing With Nonhuman Through the Erotic

Introduction

All that you touch, You Change. All that you Change, Changes You. The only lasting truth is Change.

- Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*⁴⁷⁴

In the previous chapter I introduced the sited elements of this practice, defined them within a heritage context in view of the feminist and Anglo-European relationships to land explored in chapters one and two. I also questioned how LGBTQIA2S+ identities have intersected with the National Trust and Basildon Park. Finally, I situated my practice within a series of site-specific works in heritage buildings and landscapes as well as in concepts surrounding rural sited performance to expose how this project makes a necessary response to the metronormative and masculinist lineage of British relationships to site and the resulting cultural elision of alternative lesbian subjectivities. Basildon Park and the National Trust both have histories troubled with colonialism and class privilege. By extracting the most atypical owner of Basildon Park in Ellen Morrison and imagining her as a vessel for the erotic within my narrative, my practice begins to re-trouble those sited histories with new embodied perspectives.

⁴⁷⁴ Sadie Trombetta, 'Inspiring Octavia Butler Quotes, In Honor Of Her Birthday' (2017), *Bustle*, <<https://www.bustle.com/p/15-inspiring-octavia-butler-quotes-in-honor-of-the-sci-fi-queens-birthday-66026>> [accessed 10 April 2022].

In this chapter, the final before my practice outcome playtext itself, I will rearticulate the journey of my writing practice over the past four years. This chapter will be in part a chronological journey, written as closely to how I felt and experienced the practice methodology as possible. I will begin where the interlude to this section of the thesis left off, shortly after I took up permanent residence in Basildon Park. I will then write through my practice choices whilst reflecting on how my theoretical work informed this methodological development. In this reflection I will include photos of my own writing throughout the practice as research process. I will first discuss how I moved away from the choice to include all historically grounded characters in the play and towards an alternative understanding of site. I then take time to discuss how I began to move my practice outdoors and re-evaluate the modes in which I might articulate erotic connections to site through language. In arriving at my methodological experiments writing with the nonhuman, I will introduce some influential literature which guided me creatively as I looked to Black lesbian feminist and Indigenous scholars in guiding me ideologically and theoretically. Namely, I will discuss how engaging with 'nature writing' during key moments in my practice allowed me to play with the structure of performance text and push past the rigidity of a traditional linear dramatic text.

I will then move towards looking at how a feminist erotic practice led me closer to the nonhuman. I will also discuss how my own Texan background surfaced. In attempting to know landscape in alternative ways (and know my alternative self in relation to landscape) I realised that many of the erotic memories I held in which I knew myself holistically - my lesbian-ness and my rurality - were

topographically connected to the landscape where I had grown up. I will then discuss how the final characters and structure were formed in response to the written research outcomes of my erotic and nonhuman methodology. Finally, I will end by describing how I envisioned the text being enacted through an individual audio-performance wherein one character is recorded and played to an audience/performer who will read and embody the other character in the audience's chosen solo-site. In this, I demonstrate how sited writing which engages in a nonhuman and erotic dramaturgical methodology might offer a performance practice which rejects lesbophobic, metronormative and masculinist cultural traditions and asserts new ways of articulating rural lesbian subjectivities and relationship to landscape and site.

late autumn 2020



abandoning human history

But, as we will see, the wild does not simply name a space of nonhuman animality that must submit to human control; it also questions the hierarchies of being that have been designed to mark and patrol the boundaries between the human and everything else.

- Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*⁴⁷⁵

In the previous chapter I discussed various approaches to site taken by practitioners. Phil Smith writes that 'site...is a kind of container for what is important...it says that space accrues its meaning through its use by humans'²⁷. Similarly, site-specific dancer and researcher Brigitte Biehl-Missal asserts that sites are only 'vivified and acculturated by the human bodies that inhabit them'.⁴⁷⁶ As discussed throughout the previous chapters of this thesis, I have found that the restrictive nature of how land and who resides on it are perceived is in part due to the primacy of a human perspective in how landscape is imagined by Anglo-European culture. In my playtext, which is the primary practice submission of this project, I aimed to move away from this perspective. Although the heritage nature of the site I chose initially drew me towards creating conventional, literal, characters, this never felt quite right.

⁴⁷⁵ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, p. ix.

⁴⁷⁶ Biehl-Missal, 'Filling the "empty space"', 17.

The more I read on the history of land ownership across the UK and the US, the more I felt that a historical fiction approach would not do justice to the playwriting methodologies I was crafting. Further, in engaging an erotic writing methodology I was engaging *with* the nonhuman residents of the park - not with the human history there. In writing through feeling, allowing myself to wander through the parklands and write in spurts when I felt moved to do so, my subject was most often sensation, or a memory tied to some sort of topography in my past. As I became more submersed in this methodology, I grew further away from the characters I had invented in those earlier drafts.

Once I knew that Basildon Park would be the site in which my practice was based, I began researching the area for any relevant information around feminist or queer ties. This seemed like a logical place to begin gathering dramaturgical information. As my original plan was to interview queer and lesbian residents of Hebden Bridge about their relationship to the landscape and its nonhuman residents, finding out if there were queer or lesbian women residing near Basildon Park or the surrounding county of West Berkshire. My first findings were the history of Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp and the Women's Land Army.

The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp began when a group of Welsh feminists marched to Berkshire from Cardiff in protest of the nuclear missiles being held at the RAF Greenham Common Airbase.⁴⁷⁷ They set up a camp which eventually became the largest women's

⁴⁷⁷ Glasgow Women's Library, *The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp* (2018), <<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2021/08/18/the-greenham-common-womens-peace-camp/>> [accessed 10 November 2022].

demonstration since the suffrage movement, hosting upwards of 70,000 people over 19 years.⁴⁷⁸ They carried out activist demonstrations such as Embrace the Base, where 30,000 women linked arms and surrounded the nine-mile perimeter of the base in December 1982.⁴⁷⁹ There were also lesbian and queer women's communities within the camp which women credit with helping them to discover their sexualities and 'come out as lesbians.'⁴⁸⁰ Greenham Common is around 15 miles from Basildon Park, which is relatively near in terms of neighbouring rural villages or towns.

The next thing I came across was the group of 60 women from the Women's Land Army, as mentioned previously, that were stationed at Basildon Park during the first World War.⁴⁸¹ In 1945 Vita Sackville-West published an edited anthology of poetry from the Women's Land Army. According to feminist war historian Geraldine Roberts-Stone themes which surfaced through the poem's 'references to the surrounding countryside include sexual liberation, forbidden lesbian desire, gaining a sense of personal freedom and empowerment through work, and criticism of imperialism.'⁴⁸²

And, finally, I met Ellen Morrison. I had picked up a part time job working at Basildon Park at Visitor Reception. The volunteer and staff break room was a little attic above the shop, full of unwanted furniture from the mansion and lockers stuffed full of old files, hi-vis vests, and

⁴⁷⁸ Alexandra Topping, 'We owe them a huge amount': march to honour Greenham Common women' (2021), *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/aug/22/march-honour-greenham-common-women-40th-anniversary-peace-camp-us-nuclear-weapons-protest>> [accessed 20 August 2022].

⁴⁷⁹ Glasgow Women's Library, *The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp*.

⁴⁸⁰ Rachel Savage, 'A time of coming out': Greenham lesbians reflect on UK peace camp' (n.d.), *Gay Times* <<https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/a-time-of-coming-out-greenham-lesbians-reflect-on-uk-peace-camp/>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

⁴⁸¹ 'The History of Basildon Park', *National Trust*.

⁴⁸² Geraldine Roberts-Stone, 'Women's Land Army poetry: an appreciation of subversive voices' (n.d.), *The Women's Land Army*, <<https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/womens-land-army-poetry-an-appreciation-of-subversive-voices/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

notebooks. On a break one day I was sifting through the folders of volunteer materials and came across a yellowed piece of paper listing all the owners of Basildon Park. This was the first time I had seen Ellen's name. I found it curious that she had no biography, and that she had owned the house for such a short amount of time and resided there alone. As discussed in the previous chapter, there is no accessible record of Ellen's life past that she was unmarried, had no children, travelled alone and often, and lived in Basildon Park for most of her life.

These three points are where I attempted to develop characters and began the writing process in earnest. I was always writing whilst I was in the park. Stopping on walks to take notes on my phone. Taking out a notebook and pen to sit on one of the trees in the field. But these weren't necessarily for the final practice product. Or at least, I thought that at the time. I will revisit these early journals later. For now, though, I thought I had found a way to tie the Lesbian Land movement, and therefore my own rural American positionality, into my practice via Greenham Common. I thought the Women's Land Army could be the historic tie to Basildon Park itself which made visible the non-elite who had lived with, worked with, and more than likely loved each other here.

Finally, I thought that Ellen could be the part of the practice which was fluid. She was the fragment of someone who both benefited from the systems of land ownership and hierarchical relationships with the nonhuman. She was also partially omitted by that system, relegated in history to be the unmarried and childless sister and daughter of two extremely wealthy men. I

thought that I could rewrite her into the history of the park whilst also queering her in positioning her as the conduit for communicating with the landscape in dramatic writing.

It is from this that I began to write some early drafts of scenes. The working title of this version of the play was *Queers On Land*. The concept I started working from was that I would create three fictional narratives taking place in 1915, 1990, and 2020. Ellen, meanwhile, would live both inside and outside her own time period, shifting between the three others as the audience's companion of sorts. These four storylines would all have explicitly lesbian, queer, or sapphic characters.

I have included a few excerpts of early scene drafts below:

CLARA

34. LESBIAN WOMAN. SHE IS A NURSE IN THE ARMY WHO HAS BEEN STATIONED AT BASILDON CONVALESCENT STATION. MARRIED TO GREGORY. AVID GARDENER AND BEEKEEPER.

GREGORY

40. GAY MAN. MARRIED TO CLARA. HE IS A DOCTOR SERVING IN THE ARMY AND HAS MANAGED TO GET HOUSING WITH HIS WIFE, AN ARMY NURSE

CLARA AND GREGORY HAVE KNOWN EACH OTHER SINCE CHILDHOOD. THEY GREW UP ON NEIGHBOURING FARMS. THEY WERE INCREDIBLY LUCKY IN THAT THEY WERE BOTH QUEER AND BOTH WANTED A QUEER LIFE. THEY MARRIED KNOWING THAT IT WAS A FREEDOM TO THEM AS QUEER PEOPLE. THIS IS THEIR FIRST HOME TOGETHER WITH THEIR CAREERS. IT IS A GREAT JOY IN THE MIDST OF INTERNATIONAL TURMOIL.

SEBASTIAN

20 SEBASTIAN IS A YOUNG GAY MAN WHO HAS BEEN SENT TO BASILDON FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT AND RECOVERY.

LUTHER

24 GAY MAN,. LUTHER IS ONE OF THE FEW TENNESSEANS WHO WAS SENT TO FIGHT IN THE WAR. HE IS ALSO AT BASILDON FOR INJURIES.

FINN (FRANCES)

37. FINN IS A LOCAL TEACHER. SHE HAS BEEN CLARA'S LONG-TERM PARTNER FOR 11 YEARS.

Episode 2:

INT: ANOTHER HOUSE THE SAME AS CLAIRE AND GREGG'S. THIS ONE IS HOUSING INJURED SOLDIERS.

SEBASTIAN

20 SEBASTIAN IS A YOUNG GAY MAN WHO HAS BEEN SENT TO BASILDON FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT AND RECOVERY.

LUTHER

24 GAY MAN,. LUTHER IS ONE OF THE FEW TENNESSEANS WHO WAS SENT TO FIGHT IN THE WAR. HE IS ALSO AT BASILDON FOR INJURIES.

door swings open and slams against wall, the same noise as the previous scene. they must've all been built the same.

L: Don't look too much different from my mama and daddy's place in all honesty. More birch here. More hills. Less mountains. House, though, she's just 'bout the same. Four walls and a roof'll do me just fine I imagine. you mind me takin' bottom bunk? I never liked heights. don't make a lotta sense, kid growin' up in mountains don't like height, but here I am. The Smokies, man, there's some real mountains. don't miss bein' on 'em but I sure do miss lookin' at 'em...

you alright, bud? I can take the top if you ain't keen on it, no skin offa my nose.

S: what, ah... no I'll take top. I just, ah, I haven't been here in a long time.

L: you from 'round here then?

S: sorta, from just a few villages up. used to come here as a kid with my gran.

L: yeah, looks like the sorta place for a nice family day out. shoot some rabbits for some camp stew. I recon they're tasty here if the size of 'em means anything. My nana makes a mean rabbit stew, but ours are a little more sinewy than y'all's what I can tell just Lookin at 'em if ya take my meanin'

S: ah, sure.

L: anyway, how's about I help you get them bags in then?

S: i've got it, thanks, pal.

L: pal! dang. we're gonna get along yet, Seb. less convalescence and more vacation. you'll see. it's all about mindset, pal. Not a circumstance my mind didn't get me out of yet.

the sound of the door closing. Luther's been talking to himself.

L: he'll work it out... we always do

Episode 6:

a door creaks open and bangs against the wall.

Clara speaks.

C: be careful! you're going to damage it before we even get inside.

Finn appears from around the door, no one says anything.

F: don't worry, ~~shugs~~, I don't think any harm was done.

C: Finn! Frances, what are you doing here? I didn't even pick up the key until this morning. How?

F: What can I say, I have friends in high places around here.

Gregory speaks up for the first time. He clears his throat first, in a way that almost asks **Clara** and **Finn's** permission to speak. There is a pause after, and no objections and so he proceeds.

G: Who, the cattle?

F: The horses, Gregory, thank you very much. I'm on the plows now.

G: long way up from catching rats, I'll give you that Finny.

F: oh as if you've anything to give anyone ~~Greggo~~.

C: you two, get a room, honestly.

all three laugh and embrace

the sound of all the air being violently sucked out of the room happens again. over the vacuum.

Mary:

I feel safer here. I feel safer here than I feel anywhere else in the world.

the sound comes back. domestic sounds, water being poured into a basin, a fire being started, humming of tunes to songs that don't exist.

C to Audience: Finn is sat in the chair in front of the fire. I sit at their feet with my arm draped across her leg. She keeps that middle finger twirling round the soft hairs on the back of my neck.

F to C: you'll have to come down to the school. we actually have an impressive library considering. I need your suggestions on my curriculum anyway, you know how I like your input.

C: Finn, is that sarcasm? My input is valuable but if you don't think so I can always

C to Audience: they pull me back into them as I shift away. they know it's a joke, but she also knows I want them to take the opportunity to touch me again. finn never disappoints me...well, hasn't yet.

F to C: Clara, if I were using sarcasm as a weapon against you, you would know it. I'm much too witty to be unclear.

Clara says this snidely, mockingly, but still sweetly.

C: 'much too witty to be unclear' ... you're absolutely ridiculous, you know?

F: I know.

the sound goes again

Mary speaks

short, deep, familiar. like escaping home and running back towards it all at the same time.

the sound returns

F: I love you

C: And I love you.

the sound goes again

Mary speaks

short, deep, familiar...

home

Episode 10:

the sound of the bumblebees comes back in. it is softer this time, a nice slow fade. it never gets too loud.

EXT: THE FRONT LAWN OF BASILDON OVERLOOKING THE CHILTERN HILLS AND THE THAMES.

Mary and Ellen are having a picnic.

Mary to Audience:

I always felt like I was trespassing up here. like nobody like me had any business being able to look at this much of the world all at once. that big, ridiculous, obnoxious house behind me.

sometimes I think the only reason I didn't burn it down was because she lived in it.

E to M: Five foot three Mary! I swear to you.

M: that doesn't mean I'm letting you use me as...

E: ...oh, come on Mary, please!? She's my best girl and it can't be any scarier than those American things you're always on about.

she was letting the bees glide across their dress. I think sometimes they wore flower print to attract them to her. they soothed them, I think.

M: Excuse you, Ellie, I allow you a lot, but I will not allow you to refer to Buffalo Bill's Wild West as something that I 'am always going on about'.

E: I didn't say you were *going* on about it...

M: there is no way. the answer is no.

E: oh my love, please, I wouldn't ever put you at risk. you know I wouldn't. you're too precious to me.

oh my love.. got me every time. she had this way about her. the way the tone of her voice shifted just as she was about to touch me.

M: can you even imagine how badly you'd feel if I died from a hoof to the head?

she smiled then, we shared a dark sense of humour that did suit most people.

E: I can't and I won't have to because not only would Her Majesty never let that happen but...

she was tracing the lines on my hand with a blade of grass, following along the veins of my wrists, up my arms, across my collarbone and just as she said...

E: I would *never* let that happen. not to you, my love.

her lips landed in my clavicle and didn't break loose from my skin until she arrived at my mouth.

I wasn't trespassing anymore.

It didn't matter that the house was too big to be useful to anyone.

it didn't even matter that she lived in it.

long. deep. familiar.

she always brought me home.

I still wasn't going to let her jump her horse over me, I might love her but that doesn't mean she isn't an insane posh woman.

The air gets sucked out of the room sound happens again.

QUEERS ON LAND.

EPISODE 3.

silence.

Mary speaks. Her voice appears in italics throughout the episode and is only heard by the audience and not the other characters.

bees. all you could ever hear there were the bees.

the sound of bees cuts in loudly, forcefully, overwhelmingly. it should be at least three times louder than what is appropriate for the set volume of any level on a pair of headphones.

a sharp intake of breath, just barely louder than the bees

silence

sometimes they were the sweet ones. the fat, lazy, drowsy ones crawling across grass blades too weak to hold their heavy bodies. they hummed with the steam trains as they... moseyed on past...

the sound of bees returns, but now is a low hum. the happy, fat, lazy, drowsy crawling hum of a bumblebee just realising her flowers have decided to bloom.

the voice speaks, just slightly more softly than the hum of the bees

she would let them glide between her fingers sometimes, smiling down at them. her mouth never closed when she was happy. she would stop in the sun and squat down to the bee's level. she'd sing to it. something stupid, some silly song that wasn't real, and she would coo at it like it was a stray kitten.

the sound of the bees sharply changes. the tone is no longer an easy-going one. the buzz is angrier, higher pitched, threatening.

the voice returns, sounding slightly fearful. she is still only just quieter than the sound of the bees.

those fuckers, though. i can't stand them. I never could. I know you're supposed to encourage pollinators, but they make me want to crawl out of my flesh. the sound of them. that tone. it is horrible and grating and everything primal in me is telling me to get the fuck out of there before I get eaten alive or not realise that I've been allergic all along and they just keep you from hearing the things that you want to hear because they are SO FUCKING LOUD

the bees and the voice become louder on these last three words. so equally loud that they drown each other out completely.

silence

the bees were all you could hear there, really. if you could hear anything else I feel I'd remember anything else. they're very loud. you'll see the bones soon, anyway. you'll like them I'm sure. people like that sort of thing, don't they? shouldn't they? you will. she loved the bees. i do remember that she loved the bees.

a noise that is all the sound getting sucked out of the room. the hot absence of sound. nothing at all.

In her practice-based thesis, lesbian playwright Clare Duffy asked whether the previous 'conventional form [she] had chosen could have been instrumental in generating (hetero) normative readings.'⁴⁸³ I began, at this stage, to question whether my choice of conventional characters and dialogue would have the same effect. By choosing to insert fictional queer subjectivity into a conventional historical framework through conventional human characters, I was only using the nonhuman as a starting point for human response as does much British sited performance. Further, by writing conventional romantic storylines for those characters I was not pushing past the sexual definition of the erotic 'fashioned within the context of male models of power'⁴⁸⁴ Lorde condemns within the playtext itself, despite how I was engaging with the nonhuman in my own writing process.

These realisations forced me to revisit some of my earlier creative work. Alongside reading Indigenous American scholarship on sited performance and perceptions of the landscape and nonhuman, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, I also re-read my own past creative writing. This allowed me to reconnect to the type of feminist (un)structure I had utilised previously and begin to rebuild that disruptive form within the framework of a new nonhuman and erotic writing methodology. In addition to challenging the linear journey dictated by metronormative narratives as discussed in this thesis, my earlier research and writing sought to disrupt the phallogentricity of popular British drama.

⁴⁸³ Clare Duffy, 'Applying queer theory about time and place to playwriting' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2012), p. 13, <<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/3817/1/2012duffyphd.pdf>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁴⁸⁴ Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', p. 88

My choice to refuse 'nature' and instead name the nonhuman, land and landscape was based in the Indigenous scholarship I encountered in my work on the Lesbian Land Movement, but it also had threads in my longstanding interests in language. The concepts surrounding a 'plot of rise, peak, and fall [a] heterosexual economy of narrative and of erotics'⁴⁸⁵, as defined by feminist scholar Antje Schaum Anderson, influenced how I shaped some of my previous playtexts. Additionally, the ideas of French feminist theorists Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray around language contributed to my MA research and the development of my professional writing practice. I realised after revisiting these texts and beginning to read Indigenous criticism alongside a Black feminist lesbian erotic, that the historical gaps were not where I wanted to position my practice. This project asks what new dramaturgical methods might articulate lesbian and queer women's experiences in rural and regional landscapes, and therefore does not look to exclusively encode and articulate historical human lives.

Rather than dramatising scenes from a fictional human life as I had been:

⁴⁸⁵ Antje Schaum Anderson, 'Gendered Pleasure, Gendered Plot: Defloration as Climax in "Clarissa" and "Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure"', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 25:2 (1995), 108–138 (108).

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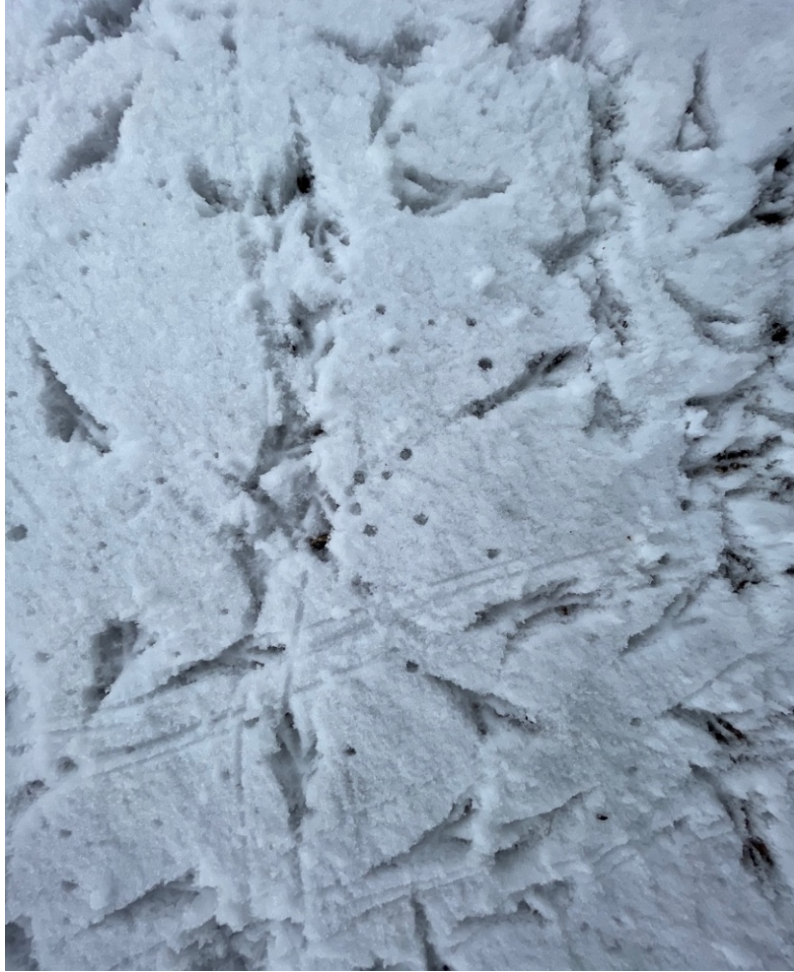
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a noise that is all the sound getting sucked out of the room. the hot absence of sound. nothing at all.

I aim to articulate experiences of identity formation which occur with nonhuman in rural and regional landscapes. **em**, then, became a point from which the inarticulation of these things might be reversed. The solidarity I originally felt with her was that I could find very little about who she was, how she felt about her identity, or how she might have become that person. Her non-normative existence made me form an attachment to her from which I tried to insert her in a formulaic way into a project which seeks to unsettle form. Ellen, instead, serves as a second skin for the audience to wear so that they might be protected by her historical privilege and fictional present whilst exploring their own internal feelings. In the final iteration of my practice I realised that the way to allow the methods of *Sappho* and the Lesbian Land Movement, the ability for those women to write their identities as they were forming, to heighten the performance practice I was using to make visible these articulations was to allow the audience/performer to step into the privilege of Ellen's position and the disruptive qualities I had written into **em**. Where the Lands and their names were the symbols for the lesbians who lived in them, and *Sappho* was an institution and vehicle as much as a magazine for rural and regional women in the UK, Ellen could be the framework, as it were, which might hold together the expanse of rural queer and lesbian subjectivities being re-remembered as the play is experienced anew each time.

winter 2020 to 2021





moving outdoors

With woodland cover and sunlight

In rhythm with rain, in motion with moon

- Zakiya Mckenzie, 'The Fern Ticket I'⁴⁸⁶

As summarised by feminist theorist Andrea Nye, Cixous believed 'semantic structure is not an a priori grid of plus and minus semantic components but mimics the human institution of the male/female couple... these contrasts are kept in place only with violence, as in the contrast between rich/poor, master/slave, or civilized/primitive.'⁴⁸⁷ By re-engaging in a rupture of

⁴⁸⁶ Zakiya Mckenzie, 'The Fern Ticket' ([n.d.]), *Forestry England* <<https://www.forestryengland.uk/the-fern-ticket-i-zakiya-mckenzie>> [accessed 10 July 2022].

⁴⁸⁷ Andrea Nye, 'French Feminism and Philosophy of Language,' *Noûs*, 20:1 (1986), 45–51 (46) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2215279>> [accessed 29 November 2022].

conventional semantic structure within my own creative writing, I realised, I might succeed in using my new methodology to disrupt the nature/culture binary which feeds in to the perception of the rural as a hetero-traditional space. In order to do this, though, I needed to embody that disruption by physically residing the outdoor rural space during my writing practice.

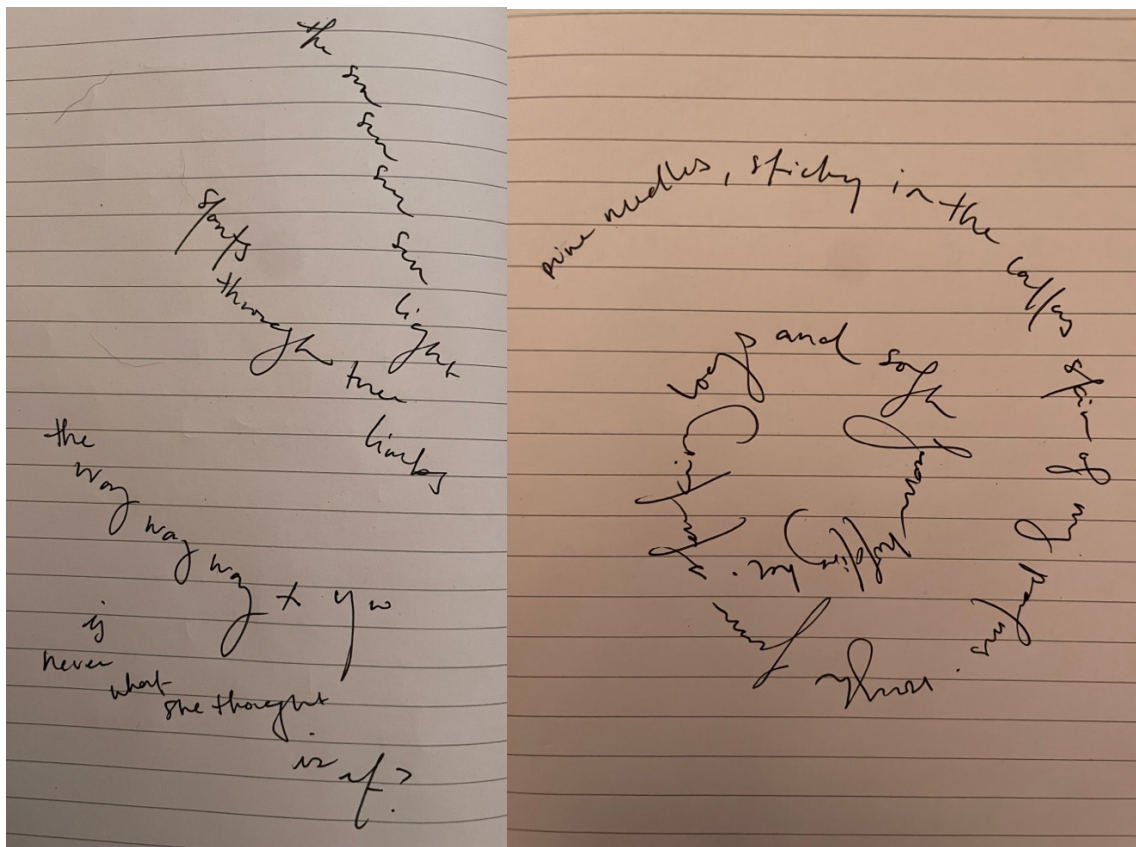
It was in this moment of reflection during the late summer of 2020 that I decided to abandon the historical aspects of my practice altogether and begin again from the starting point of my new relationship with the nonhuman of Basildon Park. In a literal sense, my writing moved completely outdoors. Whilst I had previously been walking through the parkland with journals, I was doing the majority of my actual writing on a computer indoors. Further, I was using historical research as base points for character development.

The emotional and experiential quality of my writing shifted immensely when I moved my writing practice outdoors. In building on the works of Mesoamerican Indigenous writer Gloria Anzalgúa and queer scholar José Muñoz, Latinx Indigenous researcher Felicity Amaya Schaeffer contemplates the idea that we might see 'glimpses of other worlds through gestures, affect, nature, and fleeting moments'⁴⁸⁸. Schaeffer goes on to write that 'embodied forces...when engaged, draw us into a cosmic (rather than human) time and space [where] a gust of wind can remind us of ancient knowledges [and] acknowledges the multiple presences that inhabit the land we stand on'⁴⁸⁹. In this new period of my practice I positioned the erotic as an embodied force

⁴⁸⁸ Felicity Amaya Schaeffer, 'Spirit Matters: Gloria Anzaldúa's Cosmic Becoming across Human/Nonhuman Borderlands', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43:4 (2018), 1005–1029 (1006).

⁴⁸⁹ Schaeffer, 'Spirit Matters', p. 1006.

through which I might be drawn into a nonhuman relationality in order to access the embodied knowledge of self I had experienced in rural landscapes elsewhere, and in particular the Texan landscape of my upbringing. The early results of this erotic, or feeling, collaboration with the nonhuman manifested in short bursts of text. They often began from a moment I shared with the nonhuman and almost always related back to my queerness in some way. The following examples are from a mid-morning walk on 9th September 2020:



I recall feeling my way along a tightly gathered group of trees in the woodland on the south-eastern corner of the parkland. The trees there always cast what feels like millions of small moving

⁴⁹⁰ The text in the first image reads 'the sun sun sun sun light slants through the tree limbs the way way way to you is never what she thought is it?' The text in the second image reads 'pine needles, sticky in the callous skin of my palms. rough from stacking logs and soft from holding her.'

shadows. Once I had spent time with the visual sensation of the light through the leaves, I transitioned to touch and allowed my hands to guide me slowly through the trunks until I felt I had allowed myself to trust in the sensation. The second page was written after coming to the wall at the edge of the woodland. I continued this method of erotic written communication with the nonhuman for several weeks as I carried out research on sexual geographies and ways of culturally understanding landscapes in the UK.

spring 2021



nonhuman character

It's a connected partnership worldview that is not about domination or self-centeredness or anthropocentrism, but rather about collaboration and unification across human groups, animal species, plant species, waterways, mountains, everything that's alive. It's about a sentient Earth.

- Darcia Narvaez on Indigenous Kinship⁴⁹¹

As I was working through this stage of my writing practice my first instinct was to give the nonhuman primary subjectivity in the play to subvert the objectivity of site in site-specific performance practices. Rather than hearing the experiences of the human characters through their own voices, the audience/performer would only hear the nonhuman's observations of them. I decided that the only speaking character of the play would, in fact, be the nonhuman. This one-being script would be recorded by an actor with my direction. The other characters, at this point still a version of Ellen Morrison and her lover, would only exist as the nonhuman witnessed and described them.

As I have never enjoyed naming my plays or my characters, I simply named this character '**nonh**'. I thought that this way of thinking about residence and queer belonging in rural landscapes was a

⁴⁹¹ Zakrzewski, Vicki, 'Can the Indigenous Worldview Build a Better Future? Interview with Wahinkpe Topa and Darcia Narvaez' (2022), *Greater Good Magazine*, <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/can_the_indigenous_worldview_build_a_better_future> [accessed 1 December 2022].

new enough contribution to UK performance scholarship that perhaps it being on the nose would be a useful informative tool for the audience/performer. Especially as, at this time, I still imagined that I was primarily writing this play for an audience of varied sexual orientations and identity intersections. Whilst I wanted it to be enjoyable for any queer or lesbian women who might experience it, I also intended it to be a way of inserting queer womanhood into a heteronormative audience's perception of rural landscapes.

In this version of the playtext I was also still writing as though the audience/performer would be on site at Basildon Park. I had mapped a loop walk for them to follow and planned on uploading a GPX file with the audio to a website with images of the site in a *Sappho*-style zine design. The audience/performer would be at the site that **nonh** was describing whilst listening to the accompanying section. The lack of actors meant the audience/performer would be guided there by **nonh** and would only be able to see and interact with the nonhuman of the site as they listened to the description of the two lesbian women's experiences there. I have included a sample excerpt from this version below:

nonh:

*they're practically gripping on to each other's hands at this point - but mostly I can feel their nails digging into the dirt of my flesh.
that bit there
beneath your feet
just under the oak about three inches from the knob in the trunk below where children carve their names in us over summertime.
I mean, honestly if I didn't know any better, I would think they had something a little more intimate than hand holding going on behind closed doors-
or behind tall cacti maybe - longing
damn*

*so much pressure on the soil from them both
loving
their bodies too, now, on top of one another.
but maybe for now I don't know better. Maybe you do. But I doubt it. Why
would you know anything about the desert? Speaking of, keep an eye out for
diamondbacks. They'll take a chunk right out of your ankle and leave you
nothing but venom and a nice snakeskin for your fireplace if you're a fast
enough shot. don't worry about that though, none should be out today. too
hot. even the good ol' boys won't be out today.
their fangs would melt in this heat.
they're melting into this heat
or this wet
is it raining? if it's raining you really should watch for lightning under this old
oak, you know. maybe it is time we move on.*

As I worked through this stage in my writing methodology it occurred to me that I was engaging in precisely what I sought to avoid bringing by using a critical Indigenous lens in the theoretical framework of my methodology. Writing through an erotic collaboration with the nonhuman was meant to invoke an alternate way of understanding landscape in the UK. By making the nonhuman a subject within the play itself and bringing it to performance through the voice of a human actor, meant I was giving a human voice to that which I was arguing could be more than human, in that it could push performance writing past the accepted ways of communicating alternative sexualities in non-urban space. When I pivoted and positioned the nonhuman as a subject in the *process* of my writing, rather than the narrative, the way in which the erotic and nonhuman blended into a sited writing methodology became more fluid.

Upon reflecting upon what I wanted my practice to communicate in the wider context of this project, I realised that my tangible/physical/sensory/erotic relationship to the nonhuman of my rural spaces is how I orientate myself, and how I find my bearings - even when they are antithetical

to accepted cultural perceptions of those landscapes. I originally thought that to ask the question of how the nonhuman can come to bear on a performance practice which disrupts metronormative narratives, I must make the nonhuman the bearer of the narrative. Upon delving more deeply into the erotic as a sensory method of communication with beings other than myself, though, I found that following my erotic relationship with the nonhuman in Basildon Park was more fruitful.

summer 2021



'nature writing'

Coming back to the place you know: particular trees, the same grass, the ground you have known all your life - this is in the air. This is in the cloud. This is what the eyes follow, long after there is anything to see.

- Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, *The Grassling*⁴⁹²

Recipient of the Forestry Commission's 2019 nature writing residency Tiffany Francis stated that her work with the genre was urgent due to 'the canon of historic nature writing [being] overwhelmingly male.'⁴⁹³ Over the course of writing outdoors and seeking to make the nonhuman a collaborator in my writing, I sought out nature writing by women. I found that what Francis stated was true. In every 'nature' section of every bookshop I entered, the shelves were overwhelmingly stocked with white male authors. Women were rarely the ones whose books were staff picks, placed on featured tables, or turned out so that the entire cover was visible on the shelf. I made it my mission to buy any 'nature' texts I came across written by women and found reading them both inspiring and comforting. The language and structures used by these women were varied and informative. Seeking out 'nature writers' in this stage of my practice proved key in

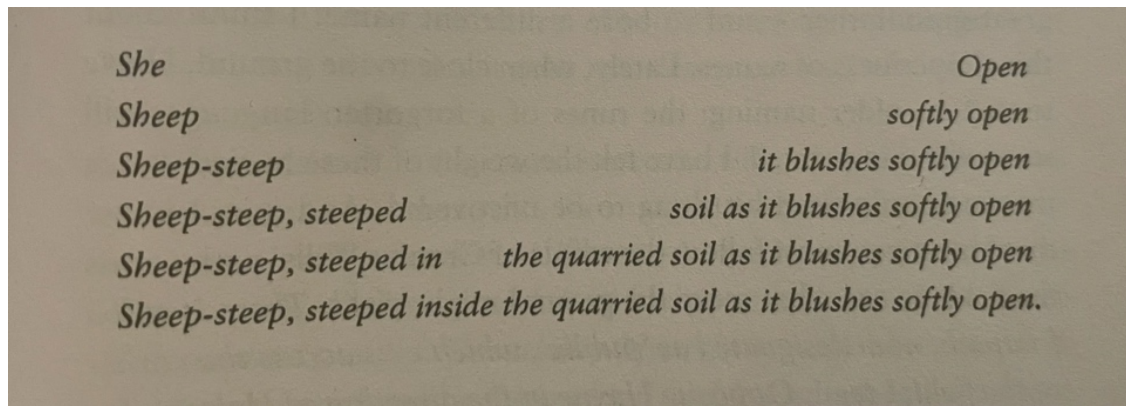
⁴⁹² Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, *The Grassling*, (London: Penguin Books, 2020), p. 1.

⁴⁹³ Patrick Barkham, 'Enchanted Forests: the women shaking up nature writing', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/11/women-nature-writing-forestry-commission-writers-in-residence>> [accessed 12 March 2021].

forming my methodology of erotic connection with the nonhuman throughout my written practice.

In Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling*, she traces the lineage of her dying father's connection to his farmland in Devon whilst also balancing how her maternal Kenyan heritage factors into her belonging. Burnett describes the book as a 'geological memoir'⁴⁹⁴ in which she creates an historical dictionary of the soil in Devon intertwined with a fictional imagining of herself being born as a nonhuman grassling from that same soil. The sections in which Burnett imagines herself as this grassling provided me with an example of voicing the nonhuman within an autobiographical context, but outside of traditional forms. In the following excerpt Burnett refers to her grassling-self as 'it' and utilises font size and italics to demarcate what is internal thought and what is a mapping of her movements on the landscape:

⁴⁹⁴ PD Smith, 'The Grassling by Elizabeth-Jane Burnett review – a geological memoir', *The Guardian*, 21 March 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/21/the-grassling-by-elizabeth-jane-burnett-review>> [accessed 20 October 2021].



In my final playtext I similarly utilised shapes of the text on the page to mirror how I felt when sharing the initial erotic moment with the nonhuman in Basildon Park which inspired the section. Much like in the earlier sections of freewriting I provided in this chapter, the physical shapes of the text on the page, and the spacing of the words, reflect a multisensory experience which occurred during the writing. My experiments with spacing stem from my research and previous practice rooted in French feminist theory as well as the moments during my writing with the nonhuman when I simply stopped to feel. Much of my early freewriting had similar gaps in spacing or consisted of writing fragments across several pages. I felt this was important to the way in which I experienced sensation and how that sensation brought about reflections of my own embodied experiences of sexuality. These moments were translated into **t** in order to distance them from my singular experience whilst rooting them in both my own settled home landscape and the colonially implicated heritage site of Basildon Park so that the audience/performer might also engage in new ways of distancing and rooting in self and site. In the final pages of the script, for

⁴⁹⁶ Burnett, *The Grassling*, p. 105.

example, the text is tapered towards the bottom of **t**'s final line to mirror the feeling of letting the human self blend into a nonhuman way of knowing, feeling, and sensing self:

i found softness. i found hills and rivers and dales and wet frozen air.

if i had no softness I would crack, i would scrape and bleed and become raw on the way down to a lesser version of myself. that clean, horrible, human version of myself.

so i slowly let my softness become

i let my mind trace my body from the inside out

i allowed a reckoning when it was needed, but nothing was ever shaved and forced and broken so nothing was ever too rigid to blend. i am golden, and light, and warmth, and softness.

i am the clouds over a desert sky and the creek running through red dirt. i am the moist middle of a cactus and the slick warmth of splitting open aloe vera leaves. i am the hills and the bends in the river.

i am the nettles and dock leaves. i am the dyke and their lover and her softness and

i have let the dirt teach me how to touch in ways that i was told were meant to be forgotten.

Lesbian writer and horticulturist Alys Fowler, in her memoir *Hidden Nature: A Voyage of Discovery* (2017), traces the Birmingham canals alongside the epiphanies of her sexuality. In this hybrid memoir, history of British waterways, and 'nature writing' book she keeps time through the

changing wildlife along the canal.⁴⁹⁷ The changes she witnesses as she uses the canals to escape her failing relationship with her ill husband illuminate to her the changes she must make to fully realise her sense of self. As she kayaks the waterways and studies the nonhuman within them, she comes to terms with her lesbian identity and that it means she must divorce her husband despite his illness. Additionally, Fowler directly writes about the nonhuman residents along the canal and questions how they might help humans to understand the fluidity of sexuality outside of human societal norms. Alice O'Keefe describes the effect of Fowler's exploration of sexual identity through 'nature writing' as follows: as in the following excerpt:

She notices the brambles on the bank, and how they change their sexuality; mosses tell her how to colonise new ground. One day, on a cacophonous stretch of water directly beneath the M5, she howls and howls until, at long last, she feels free.⁴⁹⁸

Similarly, in the first section of my practice script wherein **em** directs the audience/performer to do something, I attempt to invoke the feeling of this parallel change. Further, I aim to mirror the experience of trying to escape the otherness that can be experienced before the realisation of queerness in oneself as an adult:

⁴⁹⁷ Alys Fowler, *Hidden Nature: A Voyage of Discovery*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017).

⁴⁹⁸ Alys O' Keefe, 'Hidden Nature by Alys Fowler review – a life crisis on the canals', *The Guardian*, 1 April 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/01/hidden-nature-by-aly-fowler-review>> [accessed 13 April 2021].

Fine, a blackberry then. A ripe one. Take it and crush it between your fingers.

Not the season? You're not trying.

Moss. Lichen. Slime trailing behind one of those big black slugs. Something wet, something slippery. Just try and hold on to it, any of it. See what it is like to try and keep something held tightly even when it keeps escaping through your skin.

The instruction to touch something slick or wet is not only to initiate a specific tactile relationship with the nonhuman environment the audience/performer has chosen, but also to highlight the fluidity of knowledge. As Fowler was discovering a new way of understanding her desire and fulfilment through spending time with the changing waterways, I encourage the audience/performer to know these objects – blackberry, moss, slime – in a new textural way. In this I also hope to make clear why the audience/performer has been asked to take an active role in the audio-performance.

Encountering Burnett and Fowler's works whilst immersing myself in 'nature writing' helped me to unlock how I wanted to articulate my queer relationship with the nonhuman through my writing practice. First, I would revisit the shape of the physical text itself. I would allow myself to play with visual form when rewriting lesbian subjectivities onto rural landscapes, echoing the material qualities of feminist press. Further, I would experiment with the fluid qualities of experiencing the nonhuman by asking the audience/performer to partake in an erotic multisensory experience on with landscape. Rather than moulding the nonhuman into a main character in a traditional

narrative, my erotic writing methodology with the nonhuman would result in a dramaturgy of feeling and sensing the narrative through a nonhuman sited writing practice.

summer to autumn 2021



remembering texas

The erotic fights against asceticism by moving inward toward feeling.

Noel Anderson⁴⁹⁹

Lesbian artist and writer Pamela Petro's *The Long Field* (2021) similarly traces how her relationship to rural landscape allowed her to know her queerness and adopt a lesbian subjectivity. Petro, though, is an American and the 'mixture of memoir, travelogue and meditation on the meaning of hiraeth and memory'⁵⁰⁰ also explores how the move from her East Coast US childhood to the Welsh countryside as an adult initiated this shift in understanding self. She describes the way discovering the Welsh landscape allowed her to re-learn her 'own sedimentary layers'⁵⁰¹ through topographical memory and anecdote. Petro's work situates the nonhuman as both mirror and teacher, in that in looking to the different types of metaphorical looking glass we might learn something about how we understand ourselves.

The idea of meeting new nonhuman beings as an adult as an impetus to re-examine memories within known landscapes resonated within me. I was originally taking the idea of situating the

⁴⁹⁹ Anderson, 'Find Your Way Back', 260.

⁵⁰⁰ Jon Gower, 'Review: The Long Field is a rich meditation on the meaning of hiraeth and memory' (2021), *Nation Cymru* <<https://nation.cymru/culture/review-the-long-field-is-a-rich-meditation-on-the-meaning-of-hiraeth-and-memory/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

⁵⁰¹ Gower, *The Long Field*.

nonhuman as subject literally, making the nonhuman a single character in the narrative of my practice play. In line with Fowler and Petro, though, when I instead positioned the nonhuman as multiple individual subjects within my writing practice (rather than the play itself) – each with something unique to teach me through their own methods of communication – I found that writing felt much more intuitive I felt more able to translate the feelings and sensory experiences I had whilst writing outdoors. I felt that engaging in erotic and full experiences led to images which I could translate into scenes on the page. It was at this stage that **nonh** was retired and my nonhuman writing methodology shifted into an erotic methodology of experiencing and writing collaboratively with the nonhuman.

In abandoning this traditional understanding of subject, one which I wasn't aware I was hanging on to until delving into Indigenous scholarship alongside the history of British land ownership and 'nature writing', I was able to see where my own topographical memories surfaced. It was at this stage that my own transatlantic relationship with rural landscapes (and how that relates to my sexual understanding of self) began to emerge. In my writing I began to see the ways that learning the British landscape allowed me to re-learn my own memories of experiencing alternative identity-formation in rural landscapes. I realised that rather than solely focusing on British land and site, in order to feel authentically as Lorde suggests, this project must also consider the landscape on which I was born and grew.

Much like Petro's experience, this allowed me to begin understanding how the nonhuman had helped me to experience myself outside of a compulsory heterosexual and masculinist society. It

was this (my own) experience which was disruptive, and which initially interested me in disproving harmful metronormative and masculinist cultural understandings of queer and lesbian women and rurality. The excerpt from the final script below was from this stage of writing, where I described the how the change in horizon allowed me to re-learn my own perception of self through an erotic writing practice with the nonhuman:

the fuzzy, swimming quality of the sort-of-not-horizon
here caught at the corners of my perception and drew it
inwards like i had never known it to be drawn.

maybe the exposure back there, the total and complete lack of
shelter in the never-ending-forever-horizons there was too
frightening for me to begin to undress myself in.

Science writer Lucy Jones takes issue with 'nature writer' as a category, as she states that 'nature' is 'one of the most problematic words, because we use it kind of unthinkingly to describe the outdoor world or the living world. But it's very hard to pin down or kind of really define what we mean when we say nature.'⁵⁰² Jones' work in this case immediately lent itself to my attempt to disrupt understandings of 'nature' and land through a writing practice. I took an online 'nature writing' workshop with Jones whilst in this stage of finding new ways of writing alongside the

⁵⁰² Alice Bloch and Samira Shackle, 'Why our minds need the wild w/Lucy Jones', *New Humanist*, 28 September 2021, <<https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5864/why-our-minds-need-the-wild-wlucy-jones>> [accessed 28 October 2022].

nonhuman in my practice. As an icebreaker, Jones had us free write a list of words or images that surfaced when we thought of wilderness or the outdoors. My list was as follows:

Scissortail
Mesquite trees
Horses
Longhorns
Red Dirt
Prickly Pear Cactus

Jones then described her methodology of 'radical noticing'⁵⁰³ or viewing 'nature' as a piece of theatre and 'nature writing' as the performance analysis.⁵⁰⁴ In this she asks herself to 'open her consciousness'⁵⁰⁵ to possible intentions and languages being used dramaturgically amongst the nonhuman. With this in mind, we were instructed to write a sample of 'nature writing' based on something we felt emotionally connected to in our initial lists. The following is my writing sample:

⁵⁰³ Lucy Jones, 'Nature writing: An online creative workshop', *Guardian Masterclasses*, 11 June 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-masterclasses/2020/jun/11/nature-writing-an-online-creative-workshop-creativity-lifestyle-lucy-jones>>.

⁵⁰⁴ Lucy Jones, 'Nature writing'.

⁵⁰⁵ Lucy Jones, 'Nature writing'.

The engine coughs on, the
 sound
 carried
 by the southerly wind.
 With it comes the sweet and
 scent of sugar

oats made sickly by
 the heat carried on that gulf
 breeze. This tells me that my
 girl is here, she always adds an
 extra lump of sweet feed

when the old man has his back turned.

The rusty creature has stopped its coughing now and is grumbling its way towards
 our stable block. With its sound the grasshoppers,

panicked,

spring away from the rolling rubber lest they be caught in the
 rotation. Some make it, I hear, their plump summer bodies
 weighing down thick blades of grass and creating a chorus of rough

"shhhhhhh".

Others don't, though, as the gentle song of scraping blades rubbed
 together is marked by the

"chh"

of dry wings and
 jointed legs crunching under a
 great weight.

I forget the grasshopper's plight as their song is cut out by Pete's shill whine. I look
 towards it as the others down the line take their cue, joining
 one

after

another

with stomps and snorts thrown in for extra effect.

My girl is wearing metal rods from the bottom of her ears today,
 something for me to chew on when I don't like the direction she
 brushes my coat in.

The sun has seared through last night's storm clouds now and it
 reflects off them, making her a

beacon

like the front of

the giant rusty beast that roars in lines across the road. I hope my girl doesn't make me ride across its tracks
 today, the rainstorms always stir things up and make the tang of metal too harsh in my nostrils to sense anything
 else.

This piece was from the perspective of my childhood horse. My mother won her for me in an auction after the couple who owned her died in a motorcycle accident. She cost \$20, I wouldn't be able to ride her for 2 years as she was so young, and we had to keep her at a friend's since we

couldn't afford stabling - but Penny was my closest companion for most of my adolescence and young adulthood:









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sition, though, patients have the age range the drug is approved for. So far, mostly ac- clinic has offered the option since June, with about four or five people a week asking him about the vaccine.

months the facility has offered the vaccine. "We've had close to 10. For us, 10 is very few," she said. "It's new. It takes a little bit

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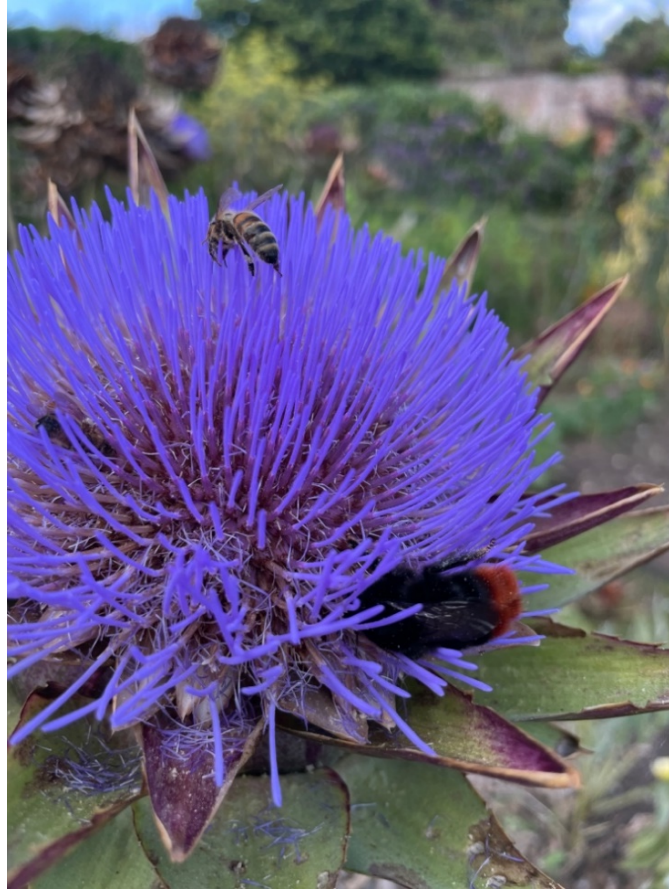
Torin Halsey/Times Record News

Jessi Clayton and her horse, Penny, put on a demonstration Wednesday morning for students from Crockett Elementary School at the J.S. Bridwell Agricultural Center. The demonstration was part of an educational Ag

Fair presented by the Wichita Falls Independent School District and the Wichita County Extension Agency. About 900 fifth-graders learned the importance of dairy production, soil conservation, ranching and farming.

This memory surfaced so unexpectedly, and so clearly, whilst engaging my methodology in the context of a 'nature writing' workshop that I knew I needed to allow the Texan autobiographical elements of this piece to surface more explicitly. In this, my erotic and nonhuman writing methodology became autoethnographic in its aim to disrupt metronormative performance practice and research. Further, bringing Texas into the creative process strengthened my initial inclination to look towards Indigenous scholarship within my theoretical framework an in disrupting metronormative and Anglo-European relationships to land.

autumn 2021



collaboration with nonhuman - feeling, topography & memory

In her book *Losing Eden: Why Our Minds Need the Wild* (2020), Jones states that the sense of awe humans experience in the outdoors is literally essential to survival.⁵⁰⁶ For example, fractal patterns in nonhuman beings are essentially a language in which they communicate with the human mind.⁵⁰⁷ Fractal patterns are patterns which repeat in various sizes and occur in almost every organic nonhuman being – leaves, wings, petals, snowflakes. In what Jones defines as ‘effortless attention’⁵⁰⁸, the human brain partakes in ‘attention restoration’⁵⁰⁹ through interacting with nonhuman beings in landscape. Jones writes that when the human eye observes fractal patterns in the outdoors, the brain releases dopamine and serotonin.⁵¹⁰ The eyes naturally focus on these patterns, and they communicate hormonally and subconsciously with the human body. I found that in allowing the erotic to make the effortless attention Jones described more intentional, my attention to my own embodied feeling was restored. I was able to layer my topographical memories of Texas onto the site of Basildon Park through my writing practice on land.

In the workshop I attended, Jones discussed using the length and style of words to mirror the physicality of the nonhuman being you are writing about. In my final play I use spacing similarly, to mirror the processing time of the character and to leave space in which those non-written aspects of experience might expand. The following excerpt from my final practice text demonstrates an

⁵⁰⁶ Lucy Jones, *Losing Eden: Why Our Minds Need the Wild* (London: Penguin Books, 2020) p. 127.

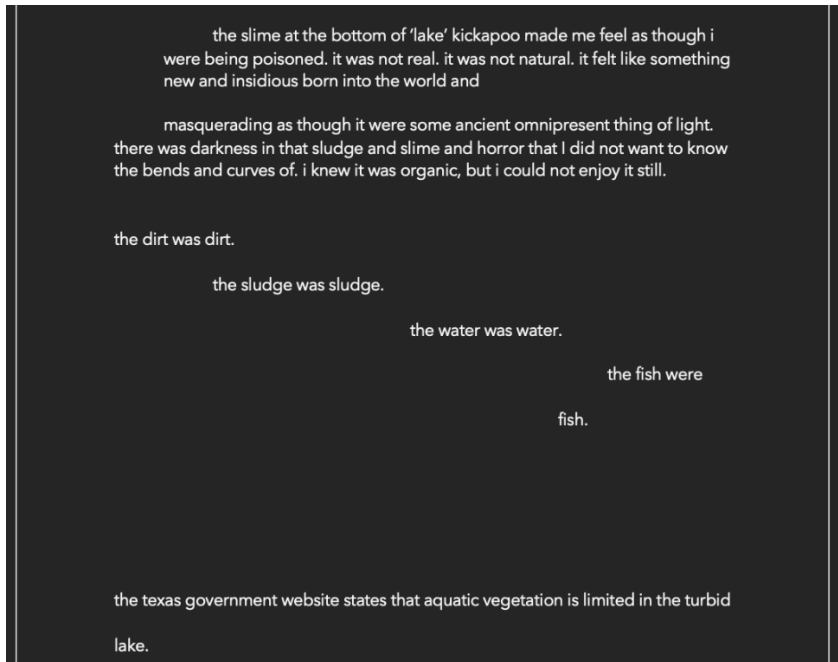
⁵⁰⁷ Jones, *Losing Eden*, p. 127.

⁵⁰⁸ Bloch and Shackle, ‘Why our minds need the wild.’

⁵⁰⁹ Bloch and Shackle, ‘Why our minds need the wild.’

⁵¹⁰ Lucy Jones, ‘Soothing spaces: nature and our mental health’ (2020), *The Countryside Charity*, <<https://www.cpre.org.uk/stories/soothing-spaces/>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

outcome of my use of an erotic effortlessness of attention whilst writing in Basildon Park alongside a radical noticing of the nonhuman and what it might be communicating to me about myself:



Instead of looking outward to the aesthetics of historical queer women on a landscape in which they already existed, I realised that my practice should be focused on my own inner feelings. I had been reaching outwards to fill the gap of lived experience left when I moved my practice from working with communities in West Yorkshire to being written through a collaboration with only myself and the landscape of Basildon Park. It is in this, the almost meditative time I spent with the nonhuman residents of the landscape whilst writing, that I would find disruptive dramaturgical forms. Further, my own inner feelings were forever painted in shades of my memories in Texan landscapes. The knowledge I gained through my writing with the nonhuman in this practice illuminated threads of the Texan nonhuman which shaped how I see myself. The duality of rural landscape in which I formed and wrote my own queer identity was increasingly visible throughout

the writing process. In the summer even my tattoos stared back at me with a transnational knowledge. On one leg Anne Lister's historic Yorkshire home, Shibden Hall stared up at me.⁵¹¹ On the other: the faded stick-and-poke of a cowboy boot surrounded by 'howdy y'all' my partner gave me in the COVID-19 lockdowns during a moment of nostalgia which occurred as I was engaged in my writing methodology. These elements all contributed to how I re-understood my own relationship to my body, my sexual orientation, and the landscapes I resided in at different points in my queerness:



My childhood horse, the red-dirt creeks in which I dipped dirty toes and for which I learned the Indigenous names from my great-grandmother, the specific reds and blacks and blues of

⁵¹¹ Tattoo artist: Martha Smith, see <https://marthasmithtattoo.com/>.

wildflowers, the woodland walks around Halifax, the pink mist that rises from the Thames in Pangbourne during an early winter golden hour - these were all parts of my memories which I could look back on and feel whole. The bible classes and school dances which made me feel othered and unfinished were not what I thought of as me. Those parts of myself with the nonhuman, though, are the same parts which light up with awe when I am, as Audre Lorde puts it in describing the erotic, 'moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.'⁵¹² My own experiences with landscape were certainly being re-understood through this new writing methodology. I realised that the alternative narrative form was also that of my memories as an alternative sexual subject growing up on a rural landscape. This paralleled my journey of not discovering my own sexuality until being separate from that land and seeing it through the lens of the new landscape in the UK in my mid-twenties.

⁵¹² Lorde, 'The Uses of The Erotic', 90.

autumn to winter 2021



re-encountering queer science fiction

Star Trek was an attempt to say humanity will reach maturity and wisdom on the day that it begins not just to tolerate but take a special delight in differences in ideas and differences in lifeforms.

- Gene Roddenberry⁵¹³

I had finally, in roughly late spring 2021, arrived at a place where I felt I had worked out how best to use my methodology in practice. The relationship between my theoretical framework and creative practice as research had become naturally reciprocal, with the two halves feeding into each other even when I did not realise it. I had settled into a symbiosis of practice as research and compiled a wealth of handwritten journals, iPhone notes, and voice memos from which to begin working on my primary practice element, the playtext. In this section the chapter I will discuss how I formed the play itself - found my characters, developed their voices and narratives, and decided on structure and style within the context of my theoretical framework and the question of how performance practice might privilege rural lesbian subjectivities and disrupt metronormative and lesbophobic inherited perceptions of land and belonging in the UK. At this point in my practice writing I had all my thematic and methodological elements in place. The structure, characters, and narrative were the next stage of the practice as research process. I felt, therefore, that returning to a medium where I often find myself enraptured by character and structure was appropriate.

⁵¹³ Gene Roddenberry quoted by Robb Pearlman in *Star Trek: Starfleet is... Celebrating the Federation's Ideals*, (Dallas, SmartPop Publishing, 2014)

In a similar manner to how I was drawn to 'nature writing' and Indigenous scholarship whilst seeking out disruptive methods privileging alternative perspectives, I found myself seeking out modes of representation which made me feel empowered in my sexuality whilst beginning to find the final forms of my characters, **t** and **em**. I began re-watching television shows I enjoy with queer and lesbian women characters which connected to some element of my writing methodology I had just unlocked. I feel it relevant to mention, as television has had a strong influence on this project from its outset. As I wrote in the interlude leading into the second half of this thesis, the original concept for my practice element was inspired by Sally Wainwright's *Gentleman Jack* (2019-2022). My love of television has also always led me to push past stereotypical boundaries of writing for stage in my own work by considering nothing as innately unstageable. *Sense8* (2015-2018) ends with an interracial marriage between a trans* and cis lesbian couple.

All the series I turned to felt relevant even past their queerness, though I couldn't quite identify why at first. *Wyonna Earp* (2016-2021) is based on the idea that wild-west legend Wyatt Earp passed down a curse to his relatives which meant they had to protect their homestead from all the criminals he killed in his lifetime.⁵¹⁴ The series features a lesbian and bisexual woman, Nichole and Waverly, in a happy long-term relationship in a small ranching town in rural Canada. *Dickinson* (2019-2021) is a fictionalisation of Emily Dickinson's life with an ameliorative emphasis on both her romantic relationship with her sister-in-law and friend, Susan Gilbert, and her connection to the

⁵¹⁴ Emily Andras, *Wyonna Earp* (2016–2021), <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4878326/>>.

nonhuman residents of the landscape around rural Amherst, Massachusetts.⁵¹⁵ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) features a lesbian character, Willow, who is in a happy relationship with a man before coming out as a lesbian and dating a woman. These examples obviously share a (mostly - see: Tara's death in *Buffy*) joyful articulation of queer and lesbian women's subjectivities. A few of them also share a rural or suburban setting. These obvious connections to my project, though, are not what inspired me most in crafting my characters and narrative form. All these examples also exist within the realm of science fiction.

⁵¹⁵ Alena Smith, *Dickinson* (2016), <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8518136/>>.

winter 2021



science fiction methods for an erotic & nonhuman writing methodology

The genre of science fiction has previously been discussed as a literary realm in which disruption and reclamation might take place by scholars and critics. As described by scholar Phyllis M. Betz, 'the typical fantasy fiction plotline, especially in science fiction and fantasy novels, deals with the clash of gender expectations and the reality of the particular setting.'⁵¹⁶ On this basic level, then, science fiction lends itself to a sited practice. Betz expands on the intimate relationship of sci-fi to site in the 'common practice [of] highly detailed descriptions of geography, often having maps included as frontispieces to the novel.'⁵¹⁷

Basildon Park is, in effect, the frontispiece to my play and the concern with a grounding in setting carries over into my practice. Along with the audio files, in a final performance of my play the audience/performer would receive **em's** lines in a *Sappho*-esque zine format with detailed photos, maps, and descriptions of Basildon Park intercut with and ghosted by images of Texan landscapes. The notes on the text and performance also directly state the sited nature of my writing and name Basildon Park for any artists who might later re-produce the script. My writing expands literary science fiction, though, by placing the geography or landscape as the key element in conceptualising the language of the narrative rather than as only an important but peripheral to the narrative.

⁵¹⁶ Phyllis M. Betz, *The Lesbian Fantastic: A Critical Study of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Paranormal and Gothic Writings* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2011), p. 12.

⁵¹⁷ Betz, *The Lesbian Fantastic*, p. 13.

Notes on text:

em has been essentially forgotten about or omitted from history and the current national trust interpretation for visitors to basildon park. she was once ellen morrison the last of the morrison family to own the park, she was never married and never had children, but other than that and her death we know nothing about her.

Notes on performance:

the piece was written in collaboration with the nonhuman residents of basildon park in west berkshire whilst the writer was also resident there. although it is

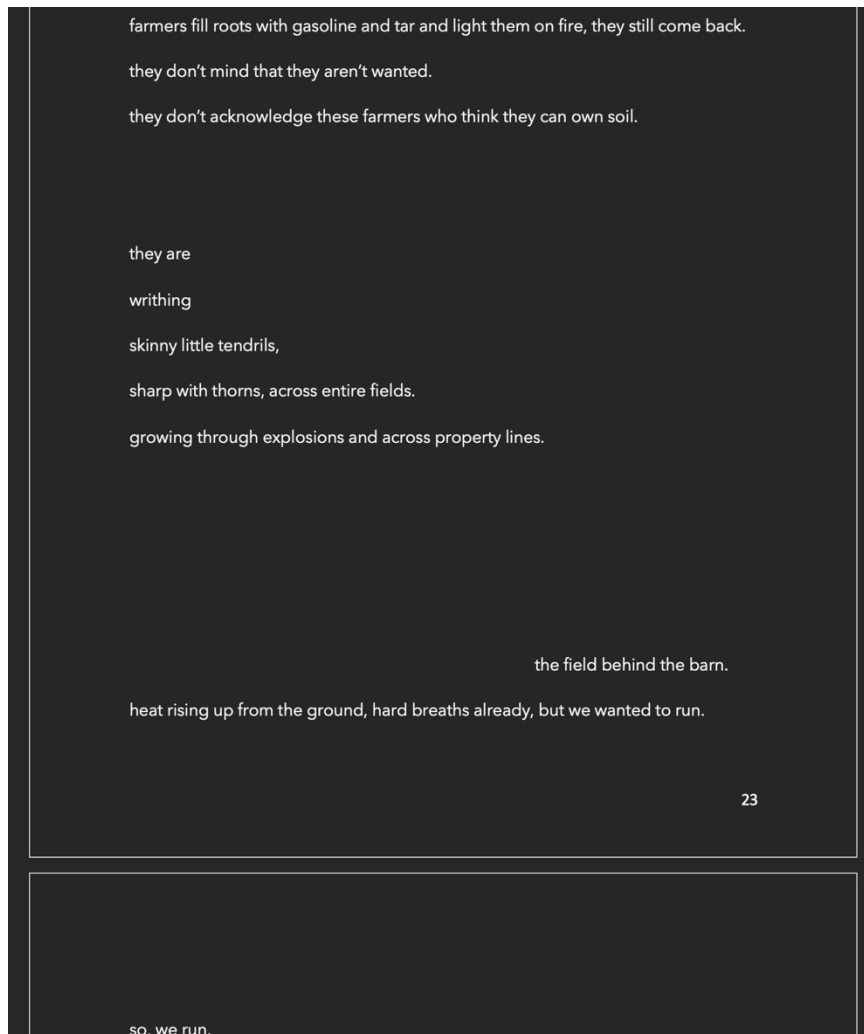
Recent science fiction television has been more explicit in its capacity to act as a conduit for alternative subjectivities to be explored without the restraints of heteronormative, racist, and masculinist societal systems of power and understanding in human reality. Television and popular culture researcher Valerie Estelle Frankel writes that 'current science fiction and fantasy shows are shattering boundaries and, if not being perfect, at least breaking down barriers in pursuit of a new feminist truth.'⁵¹⁸ Scholar James M. Elrod further posits that science fiction provides potential for 'various forms of enacted resistance in which bodies and inter-subjectivities of queer people and people of colour become literal sources of power.'⁵¹⁹ In revisiting this aspect of science fiction, I

⁵¹⁸ Valerie Estelle Frankel (ed.), 'Introduction', *Fourth Wave Feminism in Science Fiction and Fantasy: Volume 2 Essays on Television Representations, 2013–2019* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2020), pp. 1-19 p. 14).

⁵¹⁹ James M. Elrod, "'I am also a we": The Interconnected, Intersectional Superheroes of Netflix's *Sense8*' in *Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1:1 (2019), 47–57 (47).

realised that I wanted **t** to be a source of power in her ability to communicate about her relationship to her alternative sexual identity and her relationship with her rural landscape.

For instance, in this excerpt **t** is able to resist the traditional methods the local farmers use to kill mesquite trees through her acknowledgement of the trees' positionality. Further, she leaves behind the constraints of those methods by communicating with her horse and acting on their shared desire to experience an embodied action together:



Rather than a typical linear coming-out story, the play would be an origin story – another nod to the science fiction stories which inspired the way in which I crafted my text. A linguistic journey in which **t** must decipher which elements of her identity formation were genuine – erotic – in feeling and which were driven by the compulsory heterosexuality, lesbophobia, and metronormativity presented to her in the Bible Belt of the American South. By the end, though, she realises that speaking with and through the nonhuman elements of the landscape allows her to savour parts of her past that still resonate with who she becomes. Through her power of erotic connection to the nonhuman, **t** is able to enact a resistance to the culturally damaging elements of her past whilst speaking her new understanding of self through the language she has built with the nonhuman throughout the course of the play. Further, giving the role of **em** to the audience/performer transforms their body into the source of power in the play in that **em** is the only one to dictate any action for the audience/performer.

In some of **t**'s final lines she is able to articulate the journey she has been on through her own language of understanding. Through this power she also blends elements that would normally be accepted as either good or bad such as the feeling of fitting perfectly whilst smelling of horse shit. It is through her power, this new way of knowing and articulating, that **t** is finally able to embrace her experiences in rural Texas as part of her whole alternative sexual identity:

i ran away from the
heat and
the salt of the desert

and away from the storm of my family.
the pull I felt,
i realise now,
was that of reflection and refraction.

i needed to breathe this air in order to understand how critical that air was to my
becoming.
i needed to feel the glorious chill of this water and this silt between my toes
so that i could admit that i
need the encompassing heat of that sun above and that red dirt below.

slowly, whilst deep in the throes of discovery and new dirt and new plant and new
life. i began to understand myself.

i began to understand all the versions of who i was and could be. would be.

i began to see that it
was not me who could not fit
there.

i fit there perfectly when it was me and the
land. when i was flying and listening and i had no
skin and i smelt of horse shit and my face had
hundreds of cuts from mesquite trees.

Questioning accepted modes of understanding and communication is also in line with science fiction writing practice. In *Sense8*, for example, the main characters all speak in different languages and reside in varying landscapes across the world. The narrative focuses on a group of people called sensates who share a link to one another which allows them 'to go anywhere one or more members of their cluster is/are and walk and talk with them, or help them, or become

them'.⁵²⁰ Although they cannot understand each other's spoken language, the sci-fi powered empathetic connection they share allows them to understand each other in an alternative way. When they are in their interconnected sensate world they engage new ways of knowing how to articulate and communicate through shared embodiment, feeling, and emotion.

Lorde's erotic is my 'sensate' connection to the nonhuman. The erotic serves as a link to nonhuman beings which allowed me to feel alternative ways of feeling and understanding my own identity through a written practice. In performance, my practice seeks to lend some of this new methodology of feeling and knowing to the audience/performer through their experience of hearing **t**'s journey in this erotic language whilst embodying **em** and enacting the actions of the play. Further, by **em**'s instructions referencing the landscape of Basildon Park I encourage the audience/performer to re-imagine their own landscape and translate her words into their own version of embodiment:

⁵²⁰ Douglas Robinson & Svetlana Ilinskaya, 'Queering the popular utopia through translingual science fiction: *Sense8* as cultural translation', *Perspectives* (2022), p.2 <[10.1080/0907676X.2022.2043396](https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2022.2043396)> .

doesn't matter.

find some water now.

there are troughs if it is summer

there are mud puddles in autumn and winter

if it is spring just take your hood off and look to the sky every 25 minutes or so and

there should be water pouring onto your face.

the river is just there. you can make it to her in 10 minutes if you really try.

take a break with it, the water.

let it be your friend in that it will allow me to leave you alone for a moment.

Finally, the utopian elements of science fiction, in that it allows us to dream of blank-slates and new realities, call to mind José Esteban Muñoz's queer utopian idea of 'rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.'⁵²¹ By siting my writing in Basildon Park and layering in topographical memories of Texas, then isolating the audience/performer both in asking them to experience the work alone and in the audio nature of the work, I reject the 'here and now'. The concrete possibility for another world is fused into the parallel existence of two queer women in the same site, over a century apart, and the changes in how they relate to their landscape and their sexuality. **t** is the potentiality of new ways of knowing and **em** is the concrete tether which might lead this actual world to question whether perceptions of and access to land should change.

⁵²¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), p.1
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg4nr>> [accessed 14 December 2022].

dug up to fill with stolen water and stolen
fish to be caught and eaten by our thieving
mouths.

the lake was made in 1945 when the waters from the little wichita and kickapoo
creek were impounded to create a fishing reservoir. the lake was named kickapoo
after the kickapoo or kiikaaopa people. The kiikaaopa settled in texas after being
invited by the spanish to prevent the british after being driven from the great lakes
by the french. they learned the waters. they understood her rising and falling. they
listened. The kiikaaopa people were offered land grants by the first so-called-
president of the so-called-republic of texas before being driven out of the so-
called-republic of texas through violence by its second so-called-president.

about a hundred years later

some

so-called-american

people decided they needed more water to use all at once,

35

and wanted more places to fish, and wanted their great grandsons to
have places to piss|

and pour coors light into and untie bikini tops. they called it lake
kickapoo after the kiikaaopa people.

my first father told me there were ancient catfish the size of boxcars at the
bottom waiting to eat my legs.

winter to spring 2022





erotic details and the grit (polishing) of a nonhuman playtext

In late 2021 I was at a stage in my practice where I knew my characters; **t**, the felt, disembodied, experimental, autoethnographic, liminal mycelial, nonhuman, utopian, rural texan lesbian and **em**, the embodied, displaced, reclaimed, repurposed, cheeky guide to land ownership and Basildon Park. I also understood the ways in which an autoethnographic element had to exist in a writing practice rooted in sensation, feeling, and internal knowledge as it is enacted in landscape. I knew I wanted **t** and **em** to have vastly different styles of communication both on page and in whatever the final version of a performance might look like. I had begun taking sections of the outdoor freewriting I had done over the past year and moulding them into the voice of **t. em**, on the other hand, remained in conversation with my imagined audience/performer. As the conversation

developed - about Basildon, and what **t** was going through, and why these monologues were interwoven - I began to see that my intended audience was one of people who had also been omitted from rural narratives due to their alternative identity.

This final closing of the possibility I was writing for an audience to educate them in some way felt in alignment with a methodology privileging alternative perspectives on normative perceptions of land. Though people who are not lesbian or queer women can, of course, experience the production they were no longer in my mind as a playwright. The rhythms between **t** and **em** fell into a queer pace that made writing feel as though I were binge-watching one of the previously mentioned joyfully queer series. I was still writing outdoors, using my phone or tablet to transcribe journals or copy-paste text notes as I found the words which seemed they belonged to each of my characters. I arrived, finally, at a point where I wanted to begin implementing my methodology on a finer scale within the text. I returned to some of my earlier theoretical work in looking at the omission of lesbian identity from pastoral lineages of land in Britain in order to re-assert the question of how I might disrupt this in a sited writing practice.

I first returned to the methods of Black feminist playwright and director debbie tucker green has been a large influence on my choices around capitalisation and how they relate to the articulation of my methodology in practice. In her first interview with the media in over six years in 2021, tucker green stated that in her writing "'it's not like, the title, *then* the person, 'Debbie',

and *then* the story. It's all ... on a level."⁵²² As bell hooks before her, she refuses capitalisation in her writing practice as a way of 'balancing disparate elements on a single plane.'⁵²³ My choice in what to capitalise within my practice playtext builds on tucker green's idea by using capitalisation to call land-related hierarchies into question within a rural and lesbian context. Whilst my own notes on the text, as well as all of **t**'s lines are lower-case, **em**'s lines vary. And, importantly, I made the decision to have the audience/performer read **em**'s part rather than hear it (as will be further discussed later in this chapter). This means that the choices in how her lines are capitalised is visible, if subconscious, to the audience/performer. In her first lines of the play I have used standard capitalisation in order to establish that she would have been a privileged and relatively conforming member of historical society as Ellen Morrison:

⁵²² Ellen E Jones, *debbie tucker green: 'I'm still hustling the same hustle. You're fighting to get your stuff made* (2021) in *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/oct/14/debbie-tucker-green-sometimes-it-feels-a-little-trite-a-little-rat-tat-tat-to-say-your-film-is-activism>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

⁵²³ Jones, *debbie tucker green*.

em:

Hiya.

Nice day isn't it?

No the likelihood of that is probably very low assuming you are in the UK.

Maybe, if it is June and the rain has stopped but the heat hasn't come yet.

Anyway, settle in, shall we?

Are you ready? There isn't really anything specific to be ready for. I can't see you. (*I*

died in 1909, or 1910, they didn't care enough to decide which, so would be a bit

weird if I could see you really, wouldn't it?)

10

I can't hear you.

I'm not saying no one can see and hear you. I'm not even saying that no one you hear in this recording can't see or hear you. I don't think the person who wrote this can see or hear you. Some of the important beings who are in this...

thought/moment/sense we are in together... they can hear and see you always.

But importantly, I am the one you need to be listening to. Everyone else you need to be feeling.

Later in the play **em, t**, and the audience/performer begin to flow into one another more fluidly as the audience/performer would have been reading or embodying **em**'s sections for 50 pages. In these sections **em** sometimes has no capitalisation at all, or has varying capitalisation based on

whether what she is speaking about has ties to her position of class privilege as the historical woman Ellen as is demonstrated in the contrast between the following two excerpts of **em**'s lines:

em:

you need to find a dead thing now.

nothing dies in a place where nothing lives, that is the tricky bit.

trees we called alive we now call dead but there are beings crawling and thriving inside them still.

be gentle when you find one. home to lots of things, dead trees. hosts to whole worlds.

they're everywhere.

we've had to cull recently.

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the man made/re made/nature/forests are infected.

makes one question if you can ever truly force something to remake itself without its original self reaching back through eventually.

em:

Who has made their home in you today? Who has taken up residence in the fibres
of your denim whilst you've been sat on the earth for the last bit of feeling?

As long as we've not driven them out, there are beings everywhere.

Has a tiny spider slept in your fringe whilst you've been breathing?

Has some small lichen been caressing the nape of your neck?

Has the sound of the shooting school 400 yards west of us and the high-speed-rail
400 yards east made the black birds flock to the quiet wet rhythm of your
breathing whilst you were running in your head?

green uses 'complex patterns of overlapping, interrupting dialogue'⁵²⁴ to dramatize the continued effects of colonial violence in the present. I use two continuous, interweaving, and fluid monologues to suggest the continuous interweaving of lesbian subjectivities with rural landscapes. The disruptive nature of my work within site leaves space for other alternative subjectivities to engage in an erotic and nonhuman methodology of rewriting themselves through performance practice. Where the capitalisation I use for **em** varies with her positionality, **t** is always outside of the understanding of a human/nonhuman hierarchy so is always written in lower-case. When this method is deployed in moments where **t** is blending her human and nonhuman relationships it serves to eliminate any textual separation of her perception:

⁵²⁴ Jones, *debbie tucker green*.

these seasons of my rearing moulded me. my family carved the small lines that have started to appear beside my eyes and mouth. the silver, showing early in my hair, is a gift from them. my scars remain from times they have tested me. i am all earth and sky and fire; the hazel greens, golds, and reds of my eyes. the streaks of grey come and go like the moon waning and waxing around my irises. there is no water in me, no rivers or oceans in my direct lineage.

there is no trace of cool waters in my blood. the sort of harshness that is my family is not the harshness of sea or of currents. a beating down of the sun on my skin. A relief that only comes with the moon. the moon who always gives way to the sky. the sky who whips up her clouds around me and sends shrill winds through my eardrums until she drives me to the point of pounding my fists into the red dirt. the red dirt who absorbs some shock but who never gives way to grief. no, my family gets no relief nor gives it freely.

my sort were ripped out of only those extremes, those deep aboves and belows of this place. this place is where i was made. this place is what i am made of.

Another source for the final structural choices I made in my practice text was stream-of-consciousness writing. This method has been used in women's writing in order to express both 'fluidity and constraint'⁵²⁵, as feminist scholar Gina Wisker writes. The works of Virginia Woolf and Eimear McBride are directly influential to my choice to reduce my practice play to two characters with **t** communicating almost exclusively in stream-of-consciousness or a heightened and poetic style of language. In order to slightly depart from and add a lesbian lens to this feminist literary

⁵²⁵ Wisker, Gina. "I Am Not That Girl": Disturbance, Creativity, Play, Echoes, Liminality, Self-Reflection and Stream of Consciousness in Eimear McBride's *a Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* *Hecate*, vol. 41:1/2 (2016) 57-77 <<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/ielapa.325386021307543>>.

heritage, though, this choice seeks to express the fluidity and joy that might be found by rural lesbian women in forging erotic connections to self and the nonhuman. By insisting on including the pure and indescribable feeling of finding peace with the nonhuman in rural landscape I am linguistically rejecting the metronormative view that queer identities can only suffer in rural places through **t**:

t:

sometimes, as a child,

i would fly over ditches.

running full speed. nostrils flaring and sucking in gallons and gallons. sweat
dripping down flanks. flies caught in eyes and teeth. RELEASE.

and then i would fly.

she would fly.

we would fly.

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horse snot has a distinct texture after the horse has flown through sky speckled
with red texas dust.

i was not the daughter of the bible belt and tornado alley.

i was and am and will be moon and red dirt and hot sun and flat sky.

but i am also softness.

i am all soft warmth and snug
curve and long lines. i am a pillow of
moisture that cradles things more
round and more soft and more
curved than i am on the outside. my
thoughts are all long lines and
subtle edges. all soft clouds -
colliding and rising and bursting -
releasing warm showers and
covering the expanse of my squishy
wrinkly pristine body with the tiniest
shocks.

Whilst looking to visual inspiration for alternative dramaturgical structures I re-encountered Ingrid Pollard. In an interview with art magazine, *Elephant*, Pollard states that 'there's a very specific way of viewing the rural, with land ownership, and the colonial aspect of Britain'⁵²⁶ that her work seeks

⁵²⁶ Louise Benson, *Ingrid Pollard on Why She Had to Fight For Black Representation* (2020), *Elephant* <<https://elephant.art/ingrid-pollard-fight-black-representation-glasgow-international-womens-library-lesbian-archive-photography-rural-landscape-britishness-07022020/>> [accessed 10 August 2022].

to rupture. In an interview with the *Guardian* in March 2022 after moving from London to remote Northumberland, Pollard expressed that her 1987 work *pastoral interlude* (pictured below) had been misinterpreted by those who saw her 'as a stranger in an unfamiliar landscape.'⁵²⁷ The work, including the piece pictured above, features photos of Black people in rural British landscapes alongside statements which trouble topographical English memory. The piece was intended to make visible the sort of person who 'both inhabits and objects to aspects of English identity'⁵²⁸. The opposition between the photo and the text allows a fissure in perceptions of who might reside in landscape, and how they might belong there. Another recent example of this type of inquiry into how we perceive the outdoors and who has access to is Black American cultural geographer, performance artist, and environmentalist Carolyn Finney's *Black Faces White Spaces*. In it she writes that 'we have collectively come to understand/see/envision the environmental debate as shaped and inhabited primarily by white people. And our ability to imagine others is coloured by the narratives, images, and meanings we've come to hold as truths in relation to the environment.'⁵²⁹ This imagining, stifled by settler colonial constructs of whiteness in relation to the countryside and the outdoors, is what I argue must be re-imagined. Like Finney, I believe that performance practices have the ability to begin to plant different narratives which might grow into alternative truths of who is entitled to exist freely in the outdoors, and how they are allowed to exist there. I posit that the catalyst of these new imaginings must be new structures in the performance writing which are the engine delivering new narratives.

⁵²⁷ Ashish Ghadiali, "People want me to say I'm alienated": Ingrid Pollard on the myths of art, race and landscape (2022), *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/mar/20/ingrid-pollard-myths-art-race-landscape-photography-interview-mk-gallery>> [accessed 08 August 2022].

⁵²⁸ Ghadiali, "People want me to say I'm alienated".

⁵²⁹ Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, (North Carolina UP, Chapel Hill), 2014, p. xii.



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Whilst my practice is not directly correlated to Pollard's practice and its interrogation of racialisation and visibility, I attempt to channel some of the disruptive elements Pollard creatively weaves into a rural that is her own despite traditional perceptions that tell her otherwise. I look to her work for inspiration in re-writing what the British rural might be for those who are not historically seen or nurtured within it by cultural artefacts and encoding. By displacing the audio-performance from Basildon Park and allowing the audience/performer to enact **em** in a landscape

⁵³⁰ Ingrid Pollard, *Pastoral Interlude*, 1987, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

of their choosing I attempt a troubling through performance. My practice, then, becomes a series of troublings; the Texan landscape and memories layered onto my own collaboration with the nonhuman in Basildon park, the experimental voice of **t** coupled with the more human voice of **em**, and the site of the writing being mapped on to the site of the performance by the audience/performer's embodiment of **em**. It also disrupts the geography of a sited piece, bringing into question how the audience/performer relates to their typical environments rather than expecting them to change their typical perspectives whilst residing in an unfamiliar site.

In a sited performance practice which asks the audience to participate in an embodied way access and safety must be considered in the choice of site and ability must be considered within the writing itself. By transforming Ellen Morrison into **em** through my writing methodology, I have attempted to rectify her erasure from Basildon's history as an unconventional woman. In deciding to give her lines to the audience/performer to read rather than have them recorded by an actor during an R&D process, like **t**, I problematise the privilege she held as a wealthy, white landowner and refuse to give her that same privilege in the play. **em** is the only character who gives directions to the audience/performer. Rather than have a character based on a landowner tell the audience/performer what to do, I reverse the hierarchy by having them read those directions themselves in their embodiment of **em** and allowing them to both choose the land on which they experience the piece. Placing the audience/performer in a position of power through **em** invites inquiry into the power dynamics of contemporary land ownership. Further, questioning land ownership in Britain through the inclusion of Ellen Morrison as **em** parallel to the autobiographical

Texan brings into question colonial effects on Indigenous lands as a non-indigenous person, and where queerness and belonging fits into that.

summer and autumn 2022



imagining beyond the text

Although the practice element of this thesis submission is the playtext of which the entirety of chapter 5 consists, I wanted to imagine a holistic dramaturgical approach to my performance practice as research. Rather than end my practice with the written text, I wanted to implement further uses of my erotic and nonhuman methodology through a rehearsal and development process. Firstly, as I encountered the tangled threads of safety, accessibility, and re-enacting cultural memory onto different sites as described in previous sections of this chapter, I decided quite early on that it would be an audio piece. The decision to problematise and reframe the definition of site within the project, as discussed in chapter three, manifested in the decision not to have the performance take place at Basildon Park (the only exception being if the audience/performer decided Basildon Park was where they wished to place themselves) as dictated in the location section of the notes on the text.

Another decision that occurred later in the timeline, and the most major one that occurred as a direct result of the R&D process was not having **em** recorded by an actor, therefore breaking up the play into multiple audio files with sections of reading and enacting for the audience/performer to do at their own pace in between **t**'s pre-recorded sections. Whilst experimental and unconventional, I believe that this adds a texturally messy element to the performance which destabilises the accepted modes of perceived behaviour on rural landscapes via the destabilisation of expected behaviour and material circumstance in performance. The initial impetus for arriving at this, though, was a persistent unease in rehearsing and recording **em**'s lines with my actor.

I asked my close friend who is a professional actor in Texas, a bisexual woman, and an academic to record the audio for me to listen to as I was writing. This way I could make some textual shifts based on the R&D experience. I wanted the actor to be queer so that the piece was literally inserting a queer woman's voice into the landscapes where it might be listened to, and I also wanted them to know the remembered landscape better than they knew the site I wrote in so that both topographical elements of the play might be equally visceral in a performance outcome. KT, who grew up a couple of blocks away from my childhood home, graciously agreed. We organised a six-week rehearsal and recording schedule of online sessions. I wanted to use our meetings to read through the text and discuss it as queer women, theatre makers, and academics. I recorded the calls and used some of the conversations we had around the script lead edits. I decided I would edit the text up to the last week of the schedule before doing any final sample recordings. I directed KT to record the lines alone, without me present, working off the discussions we were having and the notes I gave on previous audio clips she sent beforehand. For the first few weeks I also asked that she record outdoors in places that made her feel connected to the landscape, her own sexual identity, and the text.

In one of our conversations KT noted that she thought doing an audio play would be less emotionally intense than a stage show, but that as she recorded the piece she found the opposite was true. She commented on the intimate feeling of speaking into someone's ear she experienced whilst recording in an open truck bed on a windy night. I wanted to capture this intimacy, of just one person speaking into another's ear, in my imagined performance. I had originally had KT record **em**'s lines in several different accents and tones - none of them working. We had the idea

that **t** had fallen into the mycelial network and travelled from mushroom to mushroom until she accidentally arrived at Basildon Park where she started hearing echoes of a human voice in the forests. The voice was **em**, but just the essence of her left behind. The ending of that version was that **em** was revealed to be **t** but speaking in human language whereas **t** as herself could only speak via her communicative erotic link to the nonhuman.

Then, one day in early 2022 I listened to a series of KT's recordings with the sound of Texan wildlife chattering in the background of the low-quality phone audio - and I saw all the potential of the play in front of me. It was then I began to piece together all the methodological reasons described in this chapter for giving the role of **em** to the audience/performer rather than recording her. I would pause, rewind, and listen again to parts of the recordings I particularly enjoyed. I realised that anyone was likely to do this, but that it was part of the erotic experience I was asking them to engage in, so I should embrace it. I gave the audience/performer the space to pause and experience the entire play at their own pace, in their own space, in their own way. In **em**'s opening lines I even caveat that, of course, no one can see or hear the performance to make sure the audience/performer is trying their best to engage in the whole experience. The one aspect of the performance, though, that I emphasise in the text and hope the audience/performer will not take lightly is to be in a space inhabited by other nonhuman residents in which they feel safe and able to access a deeper type of feeling. This is accessible in that even if they are bedbound, so long as they have an open window through which they can feel the breeze, or a glass from which they can feel water pass through their lips, they can engage with the methodology of the piece.

I am pushing the boundaries of what site-specific performance practice can be in both insisting on the importance of site and how we perceive it whilst also evoking questions around why we have certain pre-conceived (metronormative, colonial, and masculinist) notions of what site can or cannot be and to whom. By not requiring any physical attendance to the grounds or house of Basildon Park, I am not enacting embodied remembering upon a single site but on two and a third ever-changing as it is re-chosen and re-experienced. I am not asking a landscape to be changed or witnessed. Rather, I am isolating the sited aspect of the project before multiplying it through memory and choice to rewrite the perceptions of who might reside in the tri-landscape of Basildon Park, North Texas, and the audience/performer's chosen site. In shifting choice of performance site onto the audience/performer, I hope to encourage an *embodied* and *sensorial* relationship, rather than an *intellectual* or *affective* one.

autumn 2022



imagining queer safety in sited performance

Janet Cardiff utilises audiowalks in her urban site-specific work in order to encourage 'self-motivated, multi-sensory engagement with the city scape that the amalgamation of actor /participant /audience-member experiences'⁵³¹ According to Joanne Tompkins, Cardiff's piece *The Missing Voice*, (1999) with George Bures Miller, functions on the conflict between what is being said and what is being seen. By instructing the audience to walk around London following the voice of a woman instructing the police to chase a criminal, Cardiff wants them to engage in heightened stakes of participating in a crime that don't necessarily exist. Asking audience/performers to go into the city alone and engage with the piece on a sensory level, though, does not consider the safety of those who might be marginalised in the city. Some of the pubs, for example, a visibly queer (or any) woman alone might not want to enter. Whilst the temporal element of the work is interesting in that it is continuously evolving as London changes, it fails to consider what these changes to site might mean to the audience/performer's ability to safely participate. Analysing this work in that regard led me in part to my choice to dislodge the performance itself from site.

During my residence at Basildon Park and frequenting the local villages, towns, and countryside, myself and my partner have been subject to several instances of homophobic treatment. This has

⁵³¹ Joanne Tompkins, 'The "Place" and Practice of Site-Specific Theatre and Performance', in *Performing Site Specific Theatre: Politics, Place Practice*, ed. by Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1–17 (p. 11).

most often happened either within the park grounds and involved National Trust staff, members, and volunteers or it happened in the nearest village with train and bus services. Some more passive - people asking us if we are sisters when we are holding hands at a coffee shop. Some more aggressive - like a lost and flustered National Trust member stood in the driveway of our home (the historic gatehouse of Basildon Park, physically attached to the main gates which are still in use by the National Trust staff to signal opening hours) yelling 'oh, you're together then, couple of dykes, of course you are, fat cow' through our window because he thought we had locked the main visitor gates to the park, preventing him from catching his bus. Questions of accessibility, safety, and autonomy therefore arise in creating a performance which necessitates any participant to be in a landscape that I have chosen for them. In making the choice for this to be a sort-of solo performance, in that the individual is to be alone whilst experiencing/enacting, I have reduced the safety that comes in numbers for marginalised bodies on privately owned land in the UK.

In December 2021 the *Guardian* reported that '[r]ecorded homophobic hate crimes soared in [the COVID-19] pandemic'⁵³². In October 2022 *BBC News* reported that within the 26% rise in all types of hate crime reported in England and Wales in the year to March 2022 '[h]ate crimes targeting people's sexual orientation also increased - by 42%'⁵³³. My own experiences when viewed in the context of a wider societal increase in anti-queer sentiment brought questions of audience safety to the forefront of my practice. In implementing this erotic methodology and asking the audience/performer to also engage in this deep practice of feeling, my work necessitates safety. I

⁵³² Léonie Chao-Fong, *Recorded homophobic hate crimes soared in pandemic, figures show* (2021), *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/03/recorded-homophobic-hate-crimes-soared-in-pandemic-figures-show>> [accessed 21 April 2022].

⁵³³ Ashitha Nagesh, *Hate crimes recorded by police up by more than a quarter* (2022), *BBC News* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-63157965>> [accessed 13 December 2022].

knew that the piece needed to be experienced alone but in solitude comes danger for marginalised people. Whilst there are implications around increased visibility in removing the performance from the site, I decided that the potential for harm was too high.

If the audio-performance was to be experienced by the audience/performer at Basildon Park, I was asking an intended queer and lesbian audience to; arrive at an unfamiliar heritage site 45 minutes away from public transport with no option for a ride-app such as Uber, either pay for a day entry pass, National Trust membership, or trespass, wear headphones whilst walking around the site alone and engage in a sensory level of participation in the piece through their role as audience/performer with **em**, was too high. If my white and relatively gender-conforming presentation afforded me as much abuse as it had at Basildon, I could not ethically nor morally write a piece dictating audiences whose 'perceived or claimed social identities'⁵³⁴ I did not know be present at Basildon Park. Aside from my own experiences and the fraught relationship between the National Trust, colonial history, and LGBTQIA2S+ identities as discussed in chapter three; the current rates of abuse towards marginalised people in public spaces pose a direct risk. This is especially true in the case of intersections of class, race, sex, gender, sexual-orientation, and disability.⁵³⁵

⁵³⁴ Eurocentralasian Lesbian* Community, *Lesbophobia: An Intersectional Form of Violence* (2021), p. 5, <<https://europeanlesbianconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Lesbophobia-3.pdf>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

⁵³⁵ Nagesh, *Hate crimes*.

early winter 2022



imagining intersectional access to sited practice

Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as a concept with which to understand the particular oppression faced by Black women in the space between race and gender. As described by the Eurocentralasian Lesbian* Community (EL*C) in their study *Lesbophobia: An Intersectional Form of Violence*, intersectionality has now become a point of analysis from which scholars might 'identify and analyze forms of oppressions based on the interlocking of different social identities.'⁵³⁶As this practice aims to expand the ways in which various lesbian subjects are encoded and perceived in rural landscape, it requires an intersectional dramaturgical approach which considers multiple meanings of access and safety in how the play might be executed as a performance.

Further, in turning now to the embodied effects of site-specific performances in different modes, in her research on site-specific eco-performance Marija Griniuk writes that the 'idea of a site-specific participatory performance and its meaning is not vastly different from the notion of a theatrical production being site-specific. The action on stage is greatly influenced by the audience, which is a concrete feature of the site.'⁵³⁷ Penelope Cole highlights the potential of sited work to reach past the intellectual communal experience expected for audiences in

⁵³⁶ Eurocentralasian Lesbian* Community, *Lesbophobia*, p. 5.

⁵³⁷ Marija Griniuk, *Participatory Site-Specific Performance to Discuss Climate Change and Water Pollution (2021)*, *Pivot 2021*, p. 449 <<https://doi.org/10.21606/pluriversal.2021.0043>>.

traditional theatre spaces and into 'unorthodox audience and performer relationships plac[ing] the body of the spectator in a much closer, physical relationship...within the theatrical action itself, thereby also privileging the experience of the body in these interactions.'⁵³⁸ However, these accounts leave aside the question of able-bodiedness that may or may not be assumed in certain varieties of site-specific work whereas the question of ablebodiedness was forefront in my mind - especially as I don't think that I could have physically achieved the amount of running **em** asks for in one section of the play. In considering the materials in this section, I edited the section to reflect access and also assert that the lesbian experience of rurality is a heterogenous one inclusive of all abilities:

⁵³⁸ Cole, 'Site-Based Theatre', p. 94.

em:

I want you to run.

I'm not joking.

I don't care if there are people around.

Whatever your version of running is.

Might be.

26

Close your eyes, sit still, imagine a world in which you actually enjoy sprinting or a world in which you need to sprint.

Use your actual legs. (or if you have no legs, use whatever you use to mobilise)

Imagine it.

Run sitting down.

Run with your hands pressed into bark.

Run backwards.

Writing with Rand Harmon, Penelope Cole argues that 'the emphasis on a visceral experience embedded in site-based work often assumes a certain type of viewing body and that the viewer

can, and will, be mobile, regardless of the topography of the site.⁵³⁹ In exploring how belonging can be altered in space through performance, researcher Ketu H. Katrak states that outdoor sited work is 'remarkably different from the confined spaces of indoor theaters where audience responses are controlled by the walled space itself.'⁵⁴⁰ Sited performance practice may alleviate the inbuilt social and physical access barriers of a traditional theatre space, but may pose other access barriers. .

In approaching how to make sited practice more accessible, yet still more sensorial and embodied than a traditional audience experience, as quoted by Aviles-Rodriguez in 'Ethics and Site-Based Theatre', site-specific researcher Erin B. Mee states that 'what we need to think of is... how to explore further and extend the audience experience to include the five senses. Perhaps if we think of this as an opportunity to further explore multimodal experiences, then site-based work would be more open to more people.'⁵⁴¹ Building on the idea that an openness might accompany rejecting walls and engaging multiple senses, Harmon and Cole state that '[b]y erasing the perceived safety of the theatrical auditorium, site-based works force a range of proxemic relationships that confront issues of cultural difference, inclusion, exclusion, physical agency, hierarchy, and entitlement, among others.'⁵⁴²

⁵³⁹ Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez and others, 'Ethics and Site-Based Theatre: A Curated Discussion', *Theatre History Studies*, 38 (2019) 166–195 (166).

⁵⁴⁰ Katrak, Ketu H. 'Jay Pather Reimagining Site-Specific Cartographies of Belonging', *Dance Research Journal*, 50: 2 (2018), 31–44 (37) <doi:10.1017/S0149767718000219>.

⁵⁴¹ Aviles-Rodriguez, 'Ethics and Site-Based Theatre', p. 179.

⁵⁴² Aviles-Rodriguez, 'Ethics and Site-Based Theatre', p. 166

There are a range of other effects that attend site-specific performance in audience members' encounter with it. Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir writes that although an artist might 'be conscious about the site's potential, [they] have no idea of what the guests bring to the work and how the encounters between the different agents will unfold.'⁵⁴³ Further, public art scholar Shana Macdonald posits that site-specific practice which 'moves away from spectacle and underscores the multi-layered relationships that audiences may hold to a place... opens audiences up to provisional and contingent sites of community formation [and] adds additional associations to that place for participants.'⁵⁴⁴ Reeve asks how 'site-specific performers [can] shift the audience's habitual expectation and experience of a particular site as a backdrop to activity towards an experience of finding themselves incorporated within the site?'⁵⁴⁵ Frances Barbe and Renée Newman state that in all site-specific performance where the piece is 'tasking the audience as a co-participant...the logistics of audience agency and choice is really important.'⁵⁴⁶ In my own work, I have borne this in mind. Providing the audience a multisensory performance, over which they can exercise choice in how and when they will engage their senses, might allow for a shift in perspective, a rupture in masculinist and metronormative ways of understanding site, and also afford greater accessibility. In this approach I have also left distance between performance and site which the audience might use to consider the oppositions between their perceptions of belonging on land and their feelings of belonging whilst in landscape.

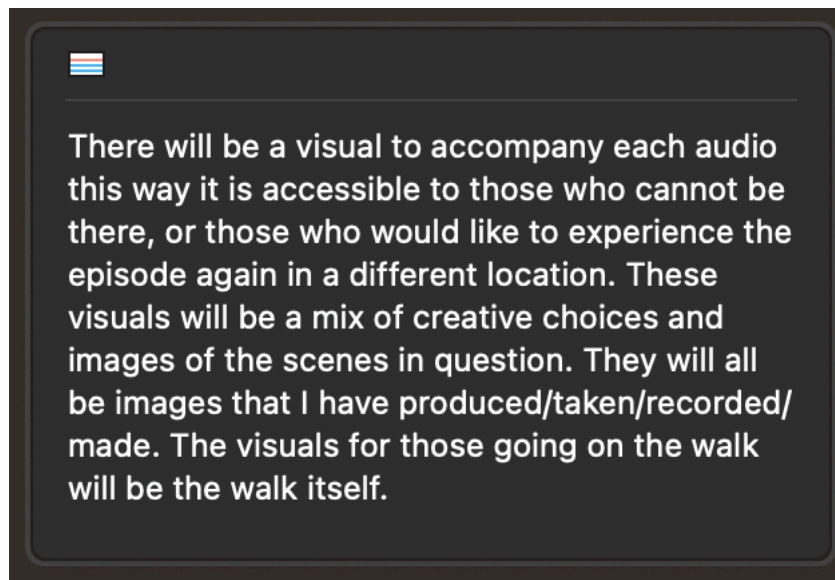
⁵⁴³ Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir, 'How Little is Enough? Porous & Embracing Dramaturgy for Transformative Encounters', *Journal of Embodied Research* 5:1 (2020) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.8546>>.

⁵⁴⁴ Shana Macdonald, 'The Psychogeographies of Site-Specific Art', *Media Theory*, 2:1 (2018), 204–221 (206) <hal-01870463>.

⁵⁴⁵ Reeve, 'Moving Beyond Inscription', p. 310.

⁵⁴⁶ Frances Barbe and Renée Newman, 'Essai', *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 9:2 (2018) 274–282 (275–6).

Lastly, whilst writing this chapter and revisiting my early practice, I encountered the following note to self which accompanied one of the earlier drafts of the play mentioned in the first section of this chapter:



Thinking differently around site was a part of this process from its earliest iterations. Thinking widely about who might not be able to access Basildon Park, and how to make this performance practice inclusive of them, was always a part of this process. My cyclical journey as a practitioner in this regard reminded me that the changes I wish to make are primarily concerned with how we articulate, disseminate, and perceive rural lesbian subjectivity. Even if no audience ever set foot in Basildon Park, as long as my performance practice has altered the way they perceive who might be able to inhabit such a place (a working-class lesbian from Texas living on the grounds of an 18th century manor house and parkland owned by the National Trust), it has disrupted the metronormative culture ingrained by generational perceptions of rurality and land in the UK and US.

Conclusion

As Dolan and Hubbard write, 'deconstructing the binary spatial frame allows a much more nuanced understanding of the ways in which queer people actually experience rural and urban spaces.'⁵⁴⁷ By placing the audience member as a lone individual/performer experiencing the landscape through queer and nonhuman sensations and an erotic nonhuman conceptualisation of dramaturgy the audience/performer becomes a part of a new historical consciousness which takes a rural queer and lesbian perspective into account. In having the audience/performer embody **em**, I have them embody the cultural possibility that lesbian subjectivities have and will always exist in rural spaces. I present the historical possibility of lesbian subjectivities as periodically visible and perpetually entwined in the nonhuman residents of rural landscapes. Rather than seeking to only 'enact a spatial history'⁵⁴⁸ by placing alternative subjectivities into a space, as Jen Harvie describes, I seek to *create* a spatial history by queering three sites via the performance of this sited writing practice. In doing so this practice as research might open veins of new understanding in how we relate to and perceive land and, therefore, who might reside in landscape.

⁵⁴⁷ Doan and Hubbard, 'Queering Rural Planning' p2. *

⁵⁴⁸ Harvie, *Staging the UK*, p. 42.

Placing the audience/performer into the version of Ellen I have created through this erotic writing practice with the nonhuman in Basildon Park, then removing Ellen from the site and allowing the audience/actor control over where they enact this lesbian spatial narrative, does what Bertie Ferdman asks of contemporary site-specific practice in 'question[ing] theatrical form by... mapping new practices for audience/actor landscapes'⁵⁴⁹ Furthermore, queer performance scholar Nadia Ellis states that 'theorizing performance means attuning to the subtleties, elisions, and elusiveness of what is often taken to be essential: our embodiment, our emplacement'.⁵⁵⁰ I argue that asking the audience member to take up the mantle of embodiment in a space of their choosing in which they feel able to be fully present in their body, the metronormative gaze is at least temporarily ruptured. In addition, by placing the audience/performer within the narrative of the nonhuman perspective (which might not match their own perception of the site they are in) my practice seeks to expose the 'elisions' that keep rural queer and lesbian women from being visible in rural performance and scholarship. The audience/performer (and here the rural queer lesbian) is not made to embody a character that moves through a linear coming out story, or a trauma around her queerness, or an improvised response to the nonhuman in the rural site of the performance.

I would further argue that maintaining the transatlanticism of this project with the inclusion of an auto ethnographic Texan rural in the performance, contributes to what performance scholar Joanne Tompkins referred to, following Foucault, as the study of 'heterotopias'⁵⁵¹ in her 2014

⁵⁴⁹ Ferdman, 'A New Journey', p. 6.

⁵⁵⁰ Nadia Ellis, 'Trace a Vanishing or Queer Performance Study', *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 156.

⁵⁵¹ Tompkins, 'Theatre's Heterotopia', p. 1.

book on space in performance *Theatre's Heterotopias*. She states that a heterotopia 'is a location that, when apparent in a performance, reflects or comments on a site in the actual world.' Texas, then, serves as a heterotopia within my practice in that it appears within a performance practice which also comments on the site of Basildon Park. Rather than only commenting on a site, however, I am also using it to reflect on the visibility of rural queer and lesbian through a sensorial connection to multiple rurals. Rather than Basildon Park being the site of the performance, it is the site of the writing practice. This means that it is apparent in the performance, but comments on yet another site in the 'actual world' after having been commented on by the appearance of a working-class Texan rural. In effect, the multiple geographies apparent in the play allow the single site it was created in to reflect and comment on lesbian and queer women's experiences across rural and regional spaces without a homogenous or monolithic assumption about those experiences. An audio drama that is sited in its creation and narrative form but untethered from that site in its sharing and execution also removes the queer woman as an objectified and sexualised body in a site that engages in cultural hierarchies of land ownership and exclusive perceptions of who might access land. Simultaneously, having the audience/performer engage in sited enactment in a landscape of their choosing rewrites lesbian subjectivities into at least three sites - Texas, Basildon Park, and the chosen performance landscape.

Chapter Five: Practice

dirt

a sited text for performance

by: jessi lee clayton

notes on accessibility:

this text was written by someone with access needs, and therefore it is important that the text and any produced version of it is as accessible as possible.

there are several moments in the text where the audience/performer is asked to do various physical activities such as running or jumping. if these instructions aren't physically accessible to the audience/performer then they should instead engage in an alternative action which embodies the sense they have of the scene. i.e. instead of running when told to run they might instead walk, wheel, shift back & forth in their seat, close their eyes & imagine running, vocalise running, breathe as though they are running, etc.

whilst the piece is preferably experienced in a rural outdoor setting, it can be experienced in any outdoor space, or even a space that there can be some awareness of nonhuman beings around the audience/performer. this could look like a balcony, a chair next to an open window, a bed with a plant on the bedside table and an audio track of outdoor sounds playing on a separate speaker, a living room with a video of forests playing on loop on the television screen, etc. the most important thing is safety, intimacy, and an awareness that humans are not the only nor primary beings on this planet.

there are also some mentions of sexual violence, homophobia, sexism, and racism in the text. the text was written by a white queer/lesbian woman from Texas and speaks specifically to the historical environmental racism experienced by indigenous and peoples of colour at the hands of white settlers. these themes are also evocative of the current climate crisis, and therefore might bring up some environmental anxieties.

if at any time the audience/performer becomes upset or overwhelmed by these topics, they are welcome to stop the recording and return later or skip that part completely. safety and mental wellness are always more important than a creative experiment.

notes on the performance:

this sited writing practice is intended as a text for performance. The text should be recorded as an audio by actors as instructed in these notes and given to an individual as the audience. The piece is written for queer women with some connection to the rural, but I hope anyone who reads, or listens might gain something new from it.

the piece should be experienced alone. the audio was recorded by the actor alone, with the intention of speaking to the audience member only.

the piece was written in collaboration with the nonhuman residents of basildon park in west berkshire whilst the writer was also resident there. although it is textually sited, it is meant to be experienced in the site where the audience/performer is the most comfortable in their body. the piece should be experienced outdoors. the specific location is the choice of the audience. they should choose a site which holds some sense of nostalgia, safety, familiarity, intimacy, joy, love, cosiness, or happiness for them personally. the location should also be somewhere they might feel comfortable moving or acting strangely. there are no other site specifications. go wild.

*the audience/performer will hear the part of **t** and read the part of **em**.
there will be a script provided alongside the audio containing **em**'s lines. the
audience/performer is not performing as **em**, but rather reading her and
performing what she asks through the text. the text will have timestamps of when
they should pause the audio to read each section. the performer/reader/audience
can perform or not perform their part as they see fit. they can re-perform the piece
as many times and in as many sites as they wish.*

notes on the text:

*the spacing is less a suggestion of pace and more a suggestion of how much
language cannot encapsulate the feeling of learning and unlearning oneself. i
realise this is vague and probably irritating, but i hope it gives some creative food
for thought.*

***t** is formed of freewriting sessions with the nonhuman around the site of the walk,
focused of queerness, lesbian identity, and belonging. **t** is a manifestation of
learning, walking, listening, and trying to unlearn humanity as a queer woman
between landscapes and identities. **t** is also a piece of the writer's texan past, and
the ways in which that past landscape forged her.*

em has been essentially forgotten about or omitted from history and the current national trust. she was once ellen morrison the last of the morrison family to own the park, she was never married and never had children, but other than that and her death we know nothing about her.

em has been transformed into an inarguable, tangible, fixed point from which this performance is tied to the site in which it was originally written, and to the non-normative, queer, and lesbian women who live, walk, and exist there and in all rural spaces. **em** omnipresent. she is the vessel from which the mistakes of her own landed class might spill and make room for new ways of knowing and seeing land and its residents. she knows **t**'s journey well.

part one

t:

and the pain that i felt was insurmountable.

it expanded in my veins.

it pressurised every

last

nerve

and ran through me in every direction.

and it wasn't only pain,

it was also rage.

it was a rage at everyone and everything

that i had ever

come into contact with.

pain and rage

and spillage and

blood

and

every shitting thing that living

- that being made to live -

asks of me.

beings

all just pulled here,

out of thin air

or

star dust

or

whatever silly thing the beings that do the making choose to believe in. pulled
against our will, shitting and dribbling onto earth.

mammals...

have this horrible fucking thing about them when they're born.

the shine.

the simultaneous crust and

slime

the screaming into this world

without awareness

without regard for anything around,

the lack of urgency to live,

the forcefulness of want to stay in the non-living space we were in previously.

to somehow move through the living and arrive at just being, for want of having

not been

the layers of stuff being sluffed off of skin whilst desperately trying to un-live, to be

and not be.

anyway,

it's all non-consensual.

like most things that come after.

why wouldn't i have this horrible,

mind-splitting,
unalterable pain?

surely after all that,
and all the after.

all the doing and the meeting and the buying and the smiling and the nodding
and shaking and going and calling back and just one more email and which-man-
in-public-is-going-to-let-their-eyes-linger-on-my-croch-for-too-long-today and the
headphones listening to nothing and fuck the headphones broke and paying and
going and ...

fuck.

so furious.

so much pain all the goddamn time. every ounce of living.

insufferable.

how do i make it sufferable?

how do i go on with it

with getting to be

but not with the 'living' parts.

i mean in like, this isn't fucking working for me but there is so much awe in the world but i don't feel i'm allowed it here

living in this space between being and not being.

em:

Hiya.

Nice day isn't it?

No the likelihood of that is probably very low assuming you are in the UK.

Maybe, if it is June and the rain has stopped but the heat hasn't come yet.

Anyway, settle in, shall we?

Are you ready? There isn't really anything specific to be ready for. I can't see you. (*I died in 1909, or 1910, they didn't care enough to decide which, so would be a bit weird if I could see you really, wouldn't it?*)

I can't hear you.

I'm not saying no one can see and hear you. I'm not even saying that no one you hear in this recording can't see or hear you. I don't think the person who wrote this can see or hear you. Some of the important beings who are in this... thought/moment/sense we are in together... they can hear and see you always.

But importantly, I am the one you need to be listening to. Everyone else you need to be feeling.

But me, I can't see or hear you. I have no way of knowing if you are listening as you should be. No way of knowing if you are *doing* as I'd like you to be. I just have to hope you are at least *being*.

I get the shit bit, really.

STICK YOUR HANDS INTO THE MUD.

A dry week?

No mud yet?

Fine, a blackberry then. A ripe one. Take it and crush it between your fingers.

Not the season? You're not trying.

Moss. Lichen. Slime trailing behind one of those big black slugs. Something wet, something slippery. Just try and hold on to it, any of it. See what it is like to try and keep something held tightly even when it keeps escaping through your skin.

See. No clue. No Idea if you have done any of those things.

How you might've done any of those things.

So have fun with it, or at least FEEL it.

t:

walking, days and days of

walking.

breathing,

some of the days.

fresh wet air
filling lungs

and boots

and teaching

what cold

feels like all over again.

an understanding of change and

damp.

a non-threatening ever present moisture hung in the air.

so different to the rain that meant storm

storm that meant cattle flying through air.

em:

the national trust makes a lot of money from cattle grazing here. the previous tenant farmer had to be moved along because he kept letting cattle rot in the field. when they died the gardeners would have to drag the carcasses through the fields using a golf buggy they imported from america to keep them hidden from the visitors until the farmer could collect and dispose of them

there were a lot of visitor complaints that the cattle were bleeding and rotting and sliced open and dripping.

the farmer was only replaced after the complaints.

the national trust wants to keep their care for nature visible. they don't want you paying to look at rotting cattle.

the rotting cattle are kept in a different field three miles south of here now. their carcasses haven't had to be pulled by a gardener in a golf buggy in ages.

t:

learning to walk into rain and not have to look for ditches.

not many ditches here anyway. not enough space to dig them on every side of

every road.

there were ditches everywhere. it was called 'tornado alley' because so many tornadoes touched down there. the town was the spot where the bible belt and tornado alley overlapped.

that always made me wonder.

em:

basildon park used to be connected to the villages on either side. before the train line was put in you could walk to the thames in five minutes from the front gates.

now you have to walk down to the old church, down the a road, take a right, over the railway bridge.

now, if you stand at the front gates for more than 5 minutes and look towards the river you can see the trains running between oxford and london. they are close enough to see faces if you really pay attention.

If you stand at the front gates and don't pay attention to the trains, or stand anywhere in the park with your hands in the grass and your eyes closed, you might be able to sense a bit of what you're connected to.

t:

i can hide in a ditch and a tornado will jump right over me.

i don't know if that is really true. i've been told it all my life.

told to fear the storms.

find a ditch.

pull into the ditch.

don't get out of my car. the rubber of my tyres grounds me.

won't get struck by lightning that way.

get out of the car if you can see a funnel.

get down low.

foetal position.

hands interlaced behind my head to protect the important bit of my spine where it connects to my head.

i don't have to look for ditches here,

much less think about what to do when i find one. this isn't tornado alley. no one seems to be much afraid of rain.

well, they couldn't be.

sometimes i enjoy looking for ditches anyway because sometimes it feels nice to know i have a hiding place.

em:

Lots of ditches here, funnily enough.

Man-made, most of them.

Just after my time. You're seeing landscapes I never saw - that have been superimposed onto a landscape that I've walked over many times more than you ever will - so whose ditches are they, really?

It was the local men with nothing better to do. Needed places to hide their tanks and weapons during the wars. Dug deep twisted spikes into the roots of the birches. You'll see. The rangers try to get all the pieces out but there is too much metal. The badger settes have taken some of it.

Birch trees have shallow roots, you see, and if you overly trod on them or impact them, they will eventually weaken, become hollow more quickly than they ought to, and die.

The hollows are easy to step into. They can be deeper than you would expect. Many even break a few little legs and ankles before they rot away and become homes for other beings.

I never had to see it, no one was there to disturb them when I was here.

Servants, maybe the locals if my family were feeling particularly benevolent, but mostly we kept the grounds closed. They have the river and the hills across it, don't they?

But you will see it now, the death of the birches. The ditches the men dug into the ground for paranoia's sake. I wouldn't have allowed it, but I was at least three years dead.

I'm sure the forest will have taken them back, the way it took back the chalklands when they planted over them.

Anyway, when you see a ditch why don't you go and stand in it.

right at the bottom. Careful on the way down.

Follow a deer path if you can. As to not further disrupt the Birch.

Stand in the bottom and see how it feels to be in the false belly of earth. Looking from a viewpoint that was forced in. Listen to the quality of sound from beneath the natural stopping point of sky to ground and ask yourself if it all feels safe and normal from down there.

t:

sometimes, as a child,

i would fly over ditches.

running full speed. nostrils flaring and sucking in gallons and gallons. sweat dripping down flanks. flies caught in eyes and teeth. RELEASE.

and then i would fly.

she would fly.

we would fly.

horse snot has a distinct texture after the horse has flown through sky speckled with red texas dust.

as she puffs out it slings onto my jeans and as i reach down to rub it off i can feel the specks of dirt and gravel that are whole, encased in the slime. i rub some

between my fingertips. mucous extracting foreign bodies as it is meant to do.
trapping little worlds as they're inhaled and flinging them on to form into
something else.

we once flew through mesquite trees. thin and angry

things.

farmers fill roots with gasoline and tar and light them on fire, they still come back.

they don't mind that they aren't wanted.

they don't acknowledge these farmers who think they can own soil.

they are

writhing

skinny little tendrils,

sharp with thorns, across entire fields.

growing through explosions and across property lines.

the field behind the barn.

heat rising up from the ground, hard breaths already, but we wanted to run.

so, we run.

we fly over ditches and fallen logs and old tractor pieces long
forgotten about in a page of my grandfather's memory. i stop
listening to her and she feels it and she doesn't understand.

i am still flying,

hung somewhere in the air over an abandoned John Deere transmission.

i have a view of what life might be like if i were suspended in it,

if i were to just stop above it and let my skin peel away
from my body and wrap itself around the wind and leave.

i stopped listening

and she flew straight through the thick of thin mesquites.

i was drug back to earth by the slices of red and pain and sting across my face and
neck and chest.

by the time i started listening again i only had one foot in one stirrup and one of
my reins had been taken by a mesquite branch.

i was dragging.

i was being pulled across hot dirt and snake territory.

the dust staunched the bleeding on my face, at least.

she stopped.

i apologised.

she rubbed her sweet dirt snot into my belly.

we walked back through the mesquites and found the torn bit of rein leather.

i didn't need to lead her.

we were listening again.

part two

em:

I want you to run.

I'm not joking.

I don't care if there are people around.

Whatever your version of running is.

Might be.

Close your eyes, sit still, imagine a world in which you actually enjoy sprinting or a world in which you need to sprint.

Use your actual legs. (or if you have no legs, use whatever you use to mobilise)

Imagine it.

Run sitting down.

Run with your hands pressed into bark.

Run backwards.

Run faster than you've ever run in some story in your head whilst walking as you've been this whole time.

Run as you sit cross-legged with your hands at your breastbone and collarbone as you've been this whole time.

Whatever forces you to breathe. REALLY REALLY BREATHE. Like a horse. Nostrils open. They drip for ages afterwards. Actual exertion. Breathe like you haven't been breathing this whole time.

Backwards, forwards, slowly, quickly.

You just run. Just breathe, just try without trying to suck bugs and dirt and air into your nose and mouth.

Swallow don't spit. I'm not joking. Take it in. Biodiversity. Beings creeping in through your respiratory system to breed and grow and thrive and blend and mix inside you.

I'll countdown for you if you'd like to do it now.

I know we have talked about how I can't see you. I can't hear you.

But you do have to do it.

You'll never feel if you don't.

You'll never feel what she is saying.

You'll never feel *how* she is being.

I know it is frustrating.

5

4

t:

the rhythms here are different.

everything is softer and brighter.

looking into the distance, if i can see any distance, is like looking through an old green glass bottle - straight into some of those horrible fluorescent led headlights. it's stunning, and colourful, and just a little bit irritating.

like i can't quite get the whole picture.

i love it.

i love how it makes me

miss the wide sky and the

crisp

cut

line of earth beneath cloud. i love how it makes me see myself in places i left a long time ago. places i never thought i could be. places that felt hard to slot myself into.

the fuzzy, swimming quality of the sort-of-not-horizon

here caught at the corners of my perception and drew it

inwards like i had never known it to be drawn.

maybe the exposure back there, the total and complete lack of

shelter in the never-ending-forever-horizons there was too

frightening for me to begin to undress myself in.

here, the soft edges, the glimpses through trees, the rolling and folding back in on itself gave me the softness i needed.

em:

3

2

1

RUN

T:

FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK
FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK
FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK

i hate this.

the feeling of slime and sludge in my toes.

the feeling of stick and ooze and slush.

this river was a natural one.

you can see her bend from the top of the hill behind the house where my lover

and i became.

this river flowed this way of its own volition.

i *wanted* to understand her.

em:

Keep breathing.

You can stop running, don't stop the breathing though. It's good for you.

Doctors often told women like me - unmarried, no children, a bit *queer* - that we needed to take some fresh air.

They had it wrong, though. It isn't the air that helps women like me. It is the small worlds that we inhale when we really run - really suck the wind into our

brains. It is the space that taking in being through air creates. It is the countless ways of knowing that come with breathing out of the gaze of anyone who has ever asked us to breathe.

t:

i wanted to get to know her, to see her, to
know her bends and the levels of
currents in her belly and the places where
she split
around those strange small islands i had
never seen
before.

every time i try to wade in, though, all i can feel is

stick
slime
sludge
ooze

and then my first father's voice

ANCIENT, THOSE BOXCAR CATFISH. BEEN DOWN THERE HUNDERD'S A YEARS.

OLD AS SHIT. THEY'LL GET YER LEGS YOU GET DEEP ENOUGH.

but, first father,

nothing could be ancient in a lake made by man's hands

in man's shape

with man's fish put in after man has filled the hole with stolen water. stolen

ground

dug up to fill with stolen water and stolen

fish to be caught and eaten by our thieving

mouths.

the lake was made in 1945 when the waters from the little wichita and kickapoo creek were impounded to create a fishing reservoir. the lake was named kickapoo after the kickapoo or kiikaaopa people. The kiikaaopa settled in texas after being invited by the spanish to prevent the british after being driven from the great lakes by the french. they learned the waters. they understood her rising and falling. they listened. The kiikaaopa people were offered land grants by the first so-called-president of the so-called-republic of texas before being driven out of the so-called-republic of texas through violence by its second so-called-president.

about a hundred years later

some

so-called-american

people decided they needed more water to use all at once,

and wanted more places to fish, and wanted their great grand-sons

to have places to piss

and pour coors light into and untie bikini tops. they called it lake

kickapoo after the kiikaaopa people.

my first father told me there were ancient catfish the size of boxcars at the

bottom waiting to eat my legs.

the lake was ancient

the way that the country was the best

the way that the land belonged to us

the way that i wanted a husband and two kids and a fence and an suv with third row seating and one of those little stick figure families with a jesus fish on the back.

the way pouring gasoline into a tree root and lighting it on fire was reasonable land management.

the way that farrier said the only way for my horse to stand still was stabbing hard into her belly with the sharp end of a hoof-file.

the way...

em:

I'm sure my father would be rolling in his grave if he knew that Basildon passed to me. Most days I couldn't be bothered to be here. I spent my time in the Islay estate if I could help it. Far too north for any of them to be bothered to go with their social lives.

The perfect place to 'take' the sea air.

It's all very lesbian-period-drama, isn't it?

When I was at Basildon I had to make due with the Thames.

The slime of the river would still be between my toes when I walked up to my room in the house. I know someone will have come along behind me and cleaned it up, but I always liked the thought of bringing a bit of the river, and the sea that starts her somewhere along the way, back home with me.

A tangible mark that despite what anyone might say, I know I am never alone. I carry the riverbed with me.

t:

the slime at the bottom of 'lake' kickapoo made me feel as though i were being poisoned. it was not real. it was not natural. it felt like something new and insidious born into the world and

masquerading as though it were some ancient omnipresent thing of light. there was darkness in that sludge and slime and horror that I did not want to know the bends and curves of. i knew it was organic, but i could not enjoy it still.

the dirt was dirt.

the sludge was sludge.

the water was water.

the fish were
fish.

the texas government website states that aquatic vegetation is limited in the turbid
lake.

em:

Who has made their home in you today? Who has taken up residence in the fibres
of your denim whilst you've been sat on the earth for the last bit of feeling?

As long as we've not driven them out, there are beings everywhere.

Has a tiny spider slept in your fringe whilst you've been breathing?

Has some small lichen been caressing the nape of your neck?

Has the sound of the shooting school 400 yards west of us and the high-speed-rail 400 yards east made the black birds flock to the quiet wet rhythm of your breathing whilst you were running in your head?

t:

in 2018 the towns surrounding lake kickapoo and another nearby manmade lake (arrowhead...) were warned of a brain eating amoeba, *naegleria fowleri*, after a 29-year-old man died of primary amoebic meningoencephalitis due to the amoeba entering his brain through the sinus cavity.

the amoeba, just as natural as anything else, are the only thing that can really survive there.

they have to restock fish annually.

aquatic vegetation cannot be sustained in the turbid water.

so there was something natural, inside something unnatural, which was made of something natural, which killed humans

the sludge didn't feel right.

i hated it between my toes.

i wished the ancient boxcar catfish were real.

maybe they would have made the water feel less wrong.

em:

If you squint and hold your breath and tilt your ear so that you can hear beneath the winds can you feel her? Can you wait for a train to pass and tilt your head so you can see just past the tracks? Can you imagine what it would have been like to see the deer running down the hill into the sunrise to the banks through the mist every morning?

Sometimes, when I lived here on my own, I would ask my lover if she would come up from the groundskeepers' house at the back wall and wake me before the sun. She would lace her fingers with mine and we would sit on the ledge of my window and run with the deer down to the river. Sometimes we would even dip our toes in after we warmed each other with our bodies and see what being we could exchange between our tongues.

t:

i tried with the thames.

when my lover and i moved into the park above the river

after the river taught me of lovers

our neighbours had told us that we were in the part of the river
before the sewage

the park marked the last clean water before you made it to the plant

i felt how old she was. this river.

i could see her from the field in the parkland above our home.

the fear was different in that way, at least.

fear isn't quite right, but for the sake of learning.

of understanding.

the words can't always hold but i must move along with them or risk being stuck
beneath them, never seeing rivers again.

i felt it, and I wanted to know more of it.

it made me want to know more of myself.

i jumped into the river twice that day.

walked back out via the bank where i felt the sludge between my toes.

it didn't feel like poison here.

i didn't feel afraid.

i knew she had been domesticated, used, utilised, altered by human.

but the currents.

the strange little islands.

the herons looking down at me disapprovingly. the aquatic vegetation stroking my thighs and caressing my ankles and tickling my toes as they kicked in the water.

the boys in the lie that is lake kickapoo were thousands
of miles away, pulling someone else's bikini strings, drinking
shitty beer underage.

em:

have you had some water?

tea?

How old do you think the oldest body of water in the UK is? Have you ever been for a swim in a manmade lake?

when you ran today - at any point did you feel like you were running from someone? who?

no? have you ever felt like you might need to run from someone?

...

doesn't matter.

find some water now.

there are troughs if it is summer

there are mud puddles in autumn and winter

if it is spring just take your hood off and look to the sky every 25 minutes or so and

there should be water pouring onto your face.

the river is just there. you can make it to her in 10 minutes if you really try.

take a break with it, the water.

let it be your friend in that it will allow me to leave you alone for a moment.

if it is raining, well, all the better for you. there is nothing quite like being soaked.

t:

thirty thousand threads attached to the surface, pulling my peach fuzz arms and thighs and chest and back. sometimes, if i stop moving for long enough - stop consuming - stop producing - i can feel the space those threads create. i breathe with the wind. i summon her to come if she isn't already there. just the way my mother's old friend - the witch who saw auras and rode a great white mule and wore assless chaps - taught me on trail rides.

my aura is purple - my least favourite colour -
and all I have to do is close my eyes and

inhale
the wind's
name
before
exhaling
her into
existence.

it has never not worked.

i
exhale
and her

breath

reaches

into my

skin.

she exists in the layer left open by the threads pulling the top away from the muscle. i used to only be able to feel her this way when i was stoned, too many hits of a joint (or just the right amount) and everything stood still.

i've learned to stand still by myself now - sometimes. if i tell all the threads to fuck off for long enough, plant my feet in something moveable. barefoot and toes in grass or mud or slime.

i exhale
and she will
come to me,

and i stop and
let the threads
pull the top
layer of my skin
away from my
body. i open my
mouth and i let
her inside, i let
her find her way
between my
musculature and
my skeletal
system. i let her
wrap herself
around my
vessels and for a
moment i visit
all thirty
thousand of my
lives at once,
and i know that
all of them are
fine. some
great, some
better, some
long and some
short.

she wraps me in the smells of burnt-out semi-truck tyres and cowpats and diesel
and wet saddle pads and a rotted den of dead baby rats whose mother
abandoned them when people moved in.

i know that all of these things are all of the things I am meant for and not meant
for.

and then she is gone, and the smells aren't quite
right and the strings on my right arm become more and
more taught until I think maybe that is where I should
go, and I follow.

you'd think that these threads would be enough. you'd think that the pulling and
the thirty thousand directions and the insatiable cycle of doubt and belonging and
doubt and belonging and doubt and belonging and doubt and belonging would
be so apparent on

my face,

on my skin,

in my breath, that the terrors of the world
that exist unattached to them would leave me be.

em:

you need to find a dead thing now.

nothing dies in a place where nothing lives, that is the tricky bit.

trees we called alive we now call dead but there are beings crawling and thriving inside them still.

be gentle when you find one. home to lots of things, dead trees. hosts to whole worlds.

they're everywhere.

we've had to cull recently.

the man made/re made/nature/forests are infected.

makes one question if you can ever truly force something to remake itself without its original self reaching back through eventually.

t:

if i lie on the dead tree in the field outside the stone walls where my lover
and i sleep and let her hold me as the sun sets i can look through her living kin and
see a thriving city. not a city like the ones where i was only seen as other living
things saw me. a city where everything inhabiting it is so very busy *being*.

hundreds of them.

thousands of them.

bustling. *being*.

constant movement swimming in sunbeams and gliding on leaves.

... in a much different way. less judgement here. more myself. more feeling actual
fucking feelings.

the gore and rot and stink of the city remains, in some sense.

the parkland covered in cadbury chocolate sponsored trails, den building stations of plastic milk cartons, and bee hotels that have never been fit for a bee made for middle-class white children of middle-class white heterosexual people to take photos with. the legacy of the people who lived in this house. the scars in the ancient chalklands. the clumps of false forest arranged throughout the fields so that the house looks its best from every angle.

but if i focus on the dead things. the trees. leaves becoming mulch. seed heads feeding colonies of young birds. pockets and corners off the trail, delicately found, in the early and late hours when it is not tainted here by the human judgement - even if by the human hand.

cultivated and domesticated and constructed as are the scrapers, but always living and oozing and reaching away from our grip and creating buzzing of their own.

part three

em:

Did you know that the National Trust was founded by a dyke? A lesbian.

Not only a gay woman, but also an activist in support of land access for the working classes. A bit religious for my taste, personally. God's intent and all that, but I guess it is a means to an end (or is it if it didn't work and you are listening to this thing written with Basildon Park and made of the dirt of it, but couldn't get to or afford to actually be in the park even if you wanted to be given dirty looks by some folks who think critical race theory is a personal threat?) Anyway.

This house, my house, technically, if you ignore some timelines and really lean in to some loopholes, is sort of owned by a lesbian advocate of the working classes.

You are walking on some really very queer land.

Lesbian leaves, those.

Why don't you grab some lesbian leaves to crumble in your hands whilst you think about googling what lesbian founded the National Trust. Save it.

They haven't put it on a leaflet or anything. You'll just have to crumple some lesbian leaves instead.

Any you want. Fallen. Attached. I wouldn't personally recommend holly or certain ferns, they can be razor sharp, but if that's what you're in to then you go right ahead.

t:

it feels strange, not having a home.

grains of places

i called home once bury themselves into my feet. they cling on to the callous edges of my heels inside my dykey hiking sandals. i once burnt the soles of my feet walking barefoot through the dirt of my grandparent's front yard and across the sandy driveway. i wanted to feel the heat of texas sun in my flesh before crossing an ocean to the place i forged a home of when my first home felt too much.

there were years that I thought i had made a home within myself. i had run and run and run and run and finally arrived inside of my own head to a sort of peace. i thought that was the end. as long as I had that place, that peace inside my skull, that home i made of conversations with myself over years and years, that i could be content anywhere.

happiness is not dictated by place, but by instinct and intention,

i told myself.

it was not myself though. i did not know myself until i knew what it was to not use words, not be a human, not listen, but only listen when no one is speaking.

when i did these things and came to this place i found i felt grounded in these islands. i felt the wet and green and infinite looping coastlines, the actual shape of them, helped me see myself more clearly. somehow.

i am still finding, unfinding,

seeing myself and learning new way of speaking to her.

home is shifting, moving, shining. home is being covered and uncovered and blown away in windstorms when you least expect it. home is sharp pieces that get washed up and take time to be ground down to a soft edge. home clings to you, and you find bits of her in crevices of skin weeks after leaving.

it is a strange feeling, not having a home.

or maybe not being a home.

of allowing home to be the things you see about yourself when you allow the idea of home to be an idea. the idea of you to be an idea. when home is what is beneath the ideas and the being.

it is a pungent mixture of excitement and loneliness that puts me in a constant,
muddy, high. this discovering.

tears swell in my eyes for thrill or awe just as quickly as for grief of not belonging.

the home that i don't mind not belonging in seems to be coming home to the rain
and the cold and the heat and the earth and the sky and the shit and the smells
and the wet.

belonging in these things is not comfortable.

but it is not me that does not fit.

i have no desire to be in those places where i am not told belonging is even
something that could exist.

and so I shed the callused skin i have worn for so long against the expectations in
my mother's smile.

i take a step.

the niceties of my home tongue become thick and sticky in my mouth.

local honey coating the "yes ma'am" and "yessir" to give them their twang.

i take a step.

my lips yearned to shape vowels in ways of my father and his. i don't need those

here though.

i step and i step and i step until i cannot hear nor smell nor touch anything human

that was not myself.

i start to learn a new language. i see in different colours.

i come to know the ways in which i love and the ways in which i want to be loved.

the rain and mud and scrapes and sore ankles bring this to me.

em:

I came out - no not that way the 1800's way - to the queen once.

It came to nothing, that season. and all the seasons after.

I never married.

I never had a child.

I am not mentioned in any tours.

I tended the gardens here. I walked everywhere you have walked. I have breathed this air.

I owned this place. One year. But still. Turn of the 20th century and a woman, unmarried, childless, owning a place like this.

No wonder it went to the war after. no one would want that tarnished legacy.

first lesbians now this?

but what is ownership anyway?

who owns land?

why does anyone own land?

make sure you're out of the parkland by 5pm Summer and 4pm Winter.

No right to roam here.

No rights on land.

Or lands should have the only rights?

take the next few rights you can.

why not.

don't get hit by a car. or a pheasant.

(those pheasants are shipped here from abroad to be shot at. fun fact.)

t:

my mother was the bloodied sky and my father
was the cracked red dirt beneath her. my grandmother,
the moon, gave me direction. my grandfather, the sun,
pushed me forward with steady heat on my back.

my freckles were given to me by the sun. as they surface every spring, though, i
begin to more closely resemble my father. The flecks of red dirt begin to shower
down my spine, across my broad shoulders, and over the roundness of my cheeks.
as I walk across his surface, i see the ways in which he can be soft mirrored on my
skin.

my hair is made of wisps, like the clouds my mother sky
scatters after storms. they reach across her in tendrils during the
summer months as my fringe whips across my forehead in thin, sticky
lines.

by autumn the moon visits more. she reminds me that time needs taking for
sowing and harvest. she stays above me as the evenings grow cooler and sings me
the stories of ancestors, long dead, who looked upon her surface for guidance
too.

in winter, though, comfort can come from none of them alone.
the sun moves too far away for his heat to drive me out and forward.
my mother's winds grow harsh and the tendrils of hair begin to whip
and sting my eyes. my father below me grows cold and hard. no
matter how i try and nourish him he will no longer soften under my
feet. my grandmother moon is steadfast as ever, but her silver eyes
seem never to leave the sky as i long for the cold to leave my bones
and the darkness to shirk itself off the earth.

these seasons of my rearing moulded me. my family carved the small lines that
have started to appear beside my eyes and mouth. the silver, showing early in my
hair, is a gift from them. my scars remain from times they have tested me. i am all
earth and sky and fire; the hazel greens, golds, and reds of my eyes. the streaks of
grey come and go like the moon waning and waxing around my irises. there is no
water in me, no rivers or oceans in my direct lineage.

there is no trace of cool waters in my blood. the sort of harshness that is my family is not the harshness of sea or of currents. a beating down of the sun on my skin. A relief that only comes with the moon. the moon who always gives way to the sky. the sky who whips up her clouds around me and sends shrill winds through my eardrums until she drives me to the point of pounding my fists into the red dirt. the red dirt who absorbs some shock but who never gives way to grief. no, my family gets no relief nor gives it freely.

my sort were ripped out of only those extremes, those deep aboves and belows of this place. this place is where i was made. this place is what i am made of.

but here?

here I can't breathe. here the water is cutting into my skin with sharp chill. here is where i first learned to breathe on my own but the cold still shocks my lungs. i have to force it. breathing here is a conscious effort.

maybe this is why i had to know myself better here.

em:

Have you ever been gotten by stinging nettles? They aren't exactly dangerous, but they aren't exactly pleasant.

Did you know that there have been multiple women shot to death for hiking whilst lesbian? They were ruled as hate crimes against lesbians in court, anyway.

If you aren't British, nettles are something you either have to be warned about or run into on your own.

Don't worry, I am not going to ask you to go and touch some nettles. That would be...

I mean. You could, though. Discomfort isn't always bad.

Maybe the sensation would shock you into some sort of understanding what is going on.

Sometimes it is the only way to understand what is really going on.

t:

the nettles have stung the skin of my legs so thoroughly that they are only itchy hunks of meat in the river below me.

em:

If all landowners are bastards and I am a woman and today is 1909 and I own this park but I am a woman but i am wealthy but i am unmarried and elderly but i have never had children but i am white but i am living in this house built on the back of trading company money but it isn't 1909 and now the land is owned by a body owning on behalf of many bodies but not exactly the bodies that the lesbian working class activist intended....

well what does that make you? here? now?

should you be here?

but who's to say who should be here?

but i once must've said who should be here.

but if no one remembers i was ever here does that matter?

have you spent your time with the dead yet?

Whilst sat on your dead tree of choice have you thought about what dead have been here, which ones you can see, which you've seen today, which are missing, which are buried in the rubble of the ditches those silly men never needed to dig?

t:

i often find it difficult to remember who raised me; the land or my family. i get confused about which is which. they were both integral, i know that much. when family is absent in my memory the land is always there. or is it that the land is always the taste on my tongue when i remember my first and second father and the wet

damp mud is in my ear when i remember
my two mothers? it all gets conflated now
that i am not in hiding. now that i am
allowed to feel, to breathe, to remember -
i can dig through those things that i sealed
away beneath layers of clay. i peel away
parts of me, woman loving self loving sex
loving touch loving her loving they loving
parts of me, i peel these parts out of the
careful earthen homes i made for them in
the layers of my fat and blood and muscle.

i ran away from the
heat and
the salt of the desert

and away from the storm of my family.
the pull i felt,
i realise now,
was that of reflection and refraction.

i needed to breathe this air in order to understand how critical that air was to my
becoming.
i needed to feel the glorious chill of this water and this silt between my toes
so that i could admit that i
need the encompassing heat of that sun above and that red dirt below.

slowly, whilst deep in the throes of discovery and new dirt and new plant and new life. i began to understand myself.

i began to understand all the versions of who i was and could be. would be.

i began to see that it
was not me who could not fit
there.

i fit there perfectly when it was me and the
land. when i was flying and listening and i had no
skin and i smelt of horse shit and my face had
hundreds of cuts from mesquite trees.

i was not the lies of the men at the lie of a lake.

i was not the daughter of the bible belt and tornado alley.

i was and am and will be moon and red dirt and hot sun and flat sky.

but i am also softness.

i am all soft warmth and snug
curve and long lines. i am a pillow of
moisture that cradles things more
round and more soft and more
curved than i am on the outside. my
thoughts are all long lines and
subtle edges. all soft clouds -
colliding and rising and bursting -
releasing warm showers and
covering the expanse of my squishy
wrinkly pristine body with the tiniest
shocks.

i found softness. i found hills and rivers and dales and wet frozen air.

if i had no softness I would crack, i would scrape and bleed and become raw on
the way down to a lesser version of myself. that clean, horrible, human version of
myself.

so i slowly let my softness become

i let my mind trace my body from
the inside out

i allowed a reckoning when it
was needed, but nothing was ever

shaved and forced and broken so
nothing was ever too rigid to blend.
i am golden, and light, and warmth,
and softness.

i am the clouds over a
desert sky and the creek
running through red dirt. i am
the moist middle of a cactus
and the slick warmth of
splitting open aloe vera
leaves. i am the hills and the
bends in the river.

i am the nettles
and dock leaves. i am
the dyke and their
lover and her softness
and

i have let
the dirt teach
me how to
touch in ways
that i was told
were meant to
be forgotten.

em:

You have touched this place as they have touched this place as i have touched this
place as she has touched this place.

this place has taught queer lovers.

this land has taught lesbian longing.

it has been altered and owned and dug up and replanted and sold and taken and
bled on and rolled in and it has altered back.

Conclusion

We are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering. Memories offer us a world where there is no death, where we are sustained by rituals of regard and recollection.

Living away from my native place, I become more consciously Kentuckian than I was when I lived at home. This is what the experience of exile can do, change your mind, utterly transform one's perception of the world of home. The differences in geographical location imprinted on my psyche and habits of being became more evident away from home.

When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so. As a child I loved playing in dirt, in that rich Kentucky soil, that was a source of life.

- bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*⁵⁵²

I opened this thesis with a prologue detailing my own journey of finding queerness and connection to the rural spaces I love. In the interlude before delving into the specifics of my practice output, I followed my journey from London back to the rural in the form of Basildon Park. It is not lost on me that my own trajectory here has been, in effect, metronormative. I came from a rural space where I felt othered, moved to an urban space where I found my own queerness

⁵⁵² bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), ebook format, no pages.

and my first queer love. I did, though, take the journey back to the rural. I cannot, now, see myself primarily residing in urban sprawl. Like Ingrid Pollard, I find the offerings of the countryside to be worth the sacrifices of leaving the urban despite my marginalisations and the perceptions which say they do not belong in the countryside. There is conflict here – between my own story and the story this thesis sets out to tell. The former is one of my own realisations of queerness only after moving to a city and leaving my rural home. The latter is of how painful this was, and how I wish that things had been made different before my own journey. Within this conflict, though, is the reason that I feel this thesis is so important, so needed. If I had seen and heard stories of lesbian lives lived in rural space, if I had witnessed lesbian love in the open alongside the churchgoers and traditional families, maybe I would have found the deepest and most feeling parts of myself a bit sooner. If I had seen on maps the evidence of those ‘othered’ folks and their journeys – the way I now know every time I look at an Ordnance Survey map that Alys Fowler paddled those Birmingham canals and Anne Lister walked those Yorkshire Dales – maybe I would have struck out sooner.⁵⁵³ If I had heard the nonhuman life around me valued as kin, spoken to as equal, and honoured as friends and teachers, maybe I wouldn’t have felt so strange for only wanting to

⁵⁵³ Alys Fowler, *Hidden Nature: A Voyage of Discovery*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017). & Samantha B., ‘Lesbian Movement and Why Gentleman Jack’s Anne Lister Power Walks’, *Medium*, 12 June 2019, <<https://medium.com/@samantha.b./lesbian-movement-and-why-anne-lister-power-walks-fa0161f9eeab>>. [accessed 10 October 2022].

bury my nose in my horse's mane and dig my nails into the red dirt when I felt there was nothing else to turn to.

It is my deepest hope that this project, and any work that might come after it, can provide that for other lesbian and queer women who feel both connected to and othered from their rural spaces. I hope that analysing the lineage of how the UK and US relate to land, and how that lineage has created exclusive perceptions around the rural, will create cracks in which new perceptions might form. I hope that revisiting moments within feminist history where rural lesbians were valued and engaged might allow new feminisms to listen to fringes and embrace new narrative trajectories. I hope that unearthing queer histories within cultural institutions like The National Trust will encourage cultural scholars to dig even deeper into that rich and varied soil so that all those who are in the fabric of the rural might come to mind alongside it. And, finally, I hope that conducting this research and practice through the lens of theatre and performance will hone what I believe to be one of the disciplines most capable of effecting social change into altering the ingrained misogyny and lesbophobia present in thinking about rurality. Every time the practice outcome of this project is read or heard in a new location - every time a queer woman relates erotically to the nonhuman in her rural and learns something about how she might relate to the world differently than how she has been told she must - ruptures will be made in the

metronormative narratives of our social fabric. I hope that the next young rural queer person, taught only to dream of the big city, who turns to theatre when they are lost might find themselves amongst the fields and streams and dirt on stage more easily than I did.

I know that these hopes will not be quickly met, but one contribution I am making with this thesis is a starting point for new threads of interdisciplinary performance work. My choice to keep this project grounded in performance practice – specifically disruptive feminist performance writing – is an intentional one motivated both by my belief in the arts and in the potential for performance practices to shift social practices. In a 2007 *Guardian* article critic Lyn Gardner writes ‘that it is women who are often in the forefront of experiments in form and style in British theatre... [these] writers often put realism, surrealism and poetry in the blender and come up with something refreshingly new in which the internal and unconscious is unexpectedly exposed.’⁵⁵⁴ Alice Birch’s 2017 *Anatomy of a Suicide*, which the *Guardian* called ‘radically experimental’ in its alternative narrative take on women’s inherited trauma, was one of my early inspirations to write outside of a traditional linear play.⁵⁵⁵ Similarly, Eimear McBride’s 2013 *Novel*

⁵⁵⁴ Lyn Gardner, ‘Why are experiments in form a female trait?’, *Guardian*, 15 March 2007, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/mar/15/whyareexperimentsinformafemaletrait>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁵⁵⁵ Michael Billington, ‘Anatomy of a Suicide review – a startling study of mothers and daughters’, *Guardian*, 12 June 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/12/anatomy-of-a-suicide-review-royal-court-alice-birch-katie-mitchell>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

A Girl is a Half-formed Thing and its stage adaptation by Annie Ryan – both a sort of stream-of-consciousness experiment in class and religious trauma – was a view into how feminist literature and alternative forms of performance writing might inform one another. In a 2016 *Guardian* interview Ryan states she ‘really felt it was performable [she] didn’t know if it was stageable, but [she] knew it was something that could be spoken.’⁵⁵⁶ In the same interview McBride describes her drama-school informed process of writing the novel as ‘about trying to do method writing rather than method acting, trying to draw in all the disparate experiences of the body and the mind and make the language express them simultaneously.’⁵⁵⁷

In my own practice I suppose I attempted to take all the disparate elements of my human relationship to those nonhuman beings with help to make me and make the language express them in a way which can be both experienced and performed. Rather than the character, though, my main collaborator is site and rather than taking performance skills into a novel, I seek to expand performance writing outside of disciplinary boundaries. debbie tucker green was also a formative example in my own development of someone who demonstrated performance writing could be disruptive in its written form. As put by performance scholar Lisa Mullen, ‘tucker green’s approach to the radical politics and aesthetics

⁵⁵⁶ Sarah Crompton, ‘Girl, uninterrupted: staging Eimear McBride’s chaotic masterpiece’, *Guardian*, 13 February 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/13/a-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing-eimear-mcbride-theatre-young-vic>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁵⁵⁷ Crompton, ‘Girl’

of silence has developed through her cross-disciplinary practice, as she has experimented with how to frame [narratives]⁵⁵⁸ Of course, in Gardner's article on experimental form, she also writes 'that when women experiment in form they are more likely to be shot down by critics and told that they don't know how to structure a play properly.'⁵⁵⁹ Seeking some refuge from playwriting by seeking interdisciplinary writing practices, as tucker green has done with her filmmaking, can be freeing for women in performance writing - much in the way that the land movement and alternative publications were freeing for second wave feminist artists and scholars. This project is as much experimental feminist performance writing, then, as it is an interdisciplinary scholarly blender of nature writing, playwriting, and inquiry into land and sexuality.

Throughout this project I weaved threads of geography, Indigenous scholarship, nature writing, sociology, ecologies, television and film, and rural studies together to reach past what performance studies has offered rural lesbian and queer women. I did this despite the omission of lesbian and queer women from much of performance practice and research, because I believe that performance studies are vital to shifting perceptions of marginalised and oppressed people. I also believe they are vital to marginalised and oppressed people in that performance

⁵⁵⁸ Lisa Mullen, 'Pregnancy, silence, and cinematic apocalypse in debbie tucker green's second coming(2015) and ear for eye(2018/2021)', *Routledge Open Access*, 12 December 2022, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2214111?needAccess=true&role=button>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁵⁵⁹ Gardner, 'Why'

might provide them refuge, reflection, solidarity, or some other erotic awakening.

This thesis has contextualised and illustrated the need for attention to lesbian subjectivities and the way they are perceived alongside rural spaces in performance. It has also demonstrated the potential in crossing disciplinary boundaries when cultivating disruptive practice methodologies in performance writing and dramaturgy.

The first question I sought to answer when initiating this practice-based research project was what methodologies might contribute to a performance writing practice which makes visible rural lesbians in a metronormative queer and feminist lineage that omitted them? In Chapter One I identified two examples of disruptive feminist and lesbian practices which developed in response to a normative culture which occluded lesbian identities and successfully engaged rural lesbian and queer women. UK lesbian alternative magazine, *Sappho*, and the US separatist Lesbian Land Movement are valuable resources which helped me to begin imagining what sorts of alternative practices might engage with and articulate rural lesbian subjectivities now. In order to establish the normative culture surrounding *Sappho* and Lesbian Lands, Chapter One also laid out the transatlantic history of discourse surrounding lesbians in the Women's Liberation Movement during the 1960s and 1970s. Further, it established the queer and feminist lineage of lesbian omission in both stage and screen performance and

discussed the negative tropes and perceptions of lesbians which permeated culture. Within this I discussed the lack of control lesbian and queer women had over their own narrative in mainstream understandings of the time. In the case of *Sappho*, I identified the unique quality that it bore in its predication on in-person meeting networks. This requirement meant that not only was a resource being provided by lesbian and queer women that could be transported to lesbian and queer women in the furthest reaches of the UK, but there was also knowledge that lesbian subjectivities were visible and accessible in unexpected spaces - allowing women to understand themselves more deeply without having to take up urban residence. In the case of the Lesbian Land Movement, I identified instances of geographical disruption to a capitalist and patriarchal lineage of settler colonial land ownership through the creation of cooperative pockets of hypervisibility and altered land-human relationships. This research provided examples of methodologies which re-inserted rural lesbian experiences and countered the metronormative narratives identified in the historical portion of the chapter. The material gathered from *Sappho* and the Lesbian Land Movement contributed to the eventual erotic and nonhuman methodological framework I employ in my practice.

In Chapter Two I went on to ask how critical concepts surrounding the nonhuman and erotic might inform a dramaturgical framework which seeks to challenge

persisting metronormative perceptions of land in the UK and US, and which seeks to articulate rural lesbian subjectivities? This question partly stemmed from a suspicion around the cultural associations with 'nature' and the countryside in the US and UK which arose during my residence in Basildon Park and my encounters with Indigenous American criticisms of the Lesbian Lands. It also arose from my interest in Audre Lorde's notions of accessing inner knowledge through the erotic, and in utilising that version of the erotic to expand human modes of connecting and understanding with things outside of normative human modes. I first traced the metronormative bias which accompanied the continued privileging of white, middle-class gay male or heterosexual women's visibility across UK and US culture. I then defined metronormativity in detail as a key concept with which to understand the specific omission of rural lesbian subjectivities through a presumed necessary migration from hostile rural to accepting urban within a masculinist coming out narrative. Next, I contextualised the rural as both a geographical and cultural space which is an integral part of many lesbian women's identities - especially in the cases of working class or other multiply marginalised lesbian and queer women. I went on to tie in threads of queer geography and rural studies in establishing a clear presence of lesbian and queer women in the rural UK who are not represented in the current literature on queer rural nor feminist performance. Following on from this I overviewed the history of land ownership and property in the UK and demonstrated how it has contributed to

both settler colonialist culture in the US and the misogynist nature/culture binary. Finally, I introduced theories surrounding the nonhuman and the erotic as frameworks for a dramaturgical approach which can both challenge metronormative masculinist narratives and cultivate a writing practice and dramaturgical process which articulates rural lesbian subjectivities in new feminist and queer modes.

At this point in the thesis I had established my primary historical and theoretical grounding. I had also found myself several months deep in a pandemic (as we all did). Performance and academia both fundamentally shifted. Access to archives and in-person events disappeared. Digital platforms became the norm for research, communication, and theatre. What had once been a city of excitement and opportunity became a suffocating, overpriced, overpopulated box with no access to fresh air save the window that overlooked one of the busiest roundabouts in Deptford. I went through an entire 12 session counselling programme without ever meeting my therapist in person. Visibility, articulation, representation, and connection all took on different connotations in my life and in my work. In the Interlude of this thesis I narrate my own journey of leaving London to live with my partner in the countryside. I found new modes of connection and relation with my partner and our new surroundings over this sustained period of isolation and research. It was in this period that I intuitively returned to reading

nature writing, science fiction, and fantasy – all genres which can place the nonhuman into personhood. They are all also grounded in their own world – a detailed collection of spaces hosting alternative stories of living and experiencing. Space, place, world – site, in other words, arose as the element around which I needed to shift my orientation in order to unearth new queer ways of relating to land and the rural in my performance practice as research.

Delving into the practice portion of this thesis process, I asked how a sited erotic writing methodology could engage with the nonhuman as a collaborator in a performance practice which seeks to rupture metronormative and masculinist narratives whilst articulating rural lesbian experiences. To answer this, I first identified and critically overviewed the site of my writing practice, the National Trust property Basildon Park in West Berkshire, South of England. In Chapter Three I explored Basildon's history through the lens of my research on land ownership in Chapter Two to frame it within its colonial and gentrified past. I introduced the sole woman to ever be the owner of Basildon Park, Ellen Morrison. I also went into discourse around the formation of The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty- the current owner of Basildon Park, my current landlord, the second largest private landowner in the UK, and the largest land conservation in Europe. Within this discussion I established the Trust's own mishandling of LGBTQIA2S+ histories and interpretation as well as their specific

omission of lesbian narratives, such as in the case of founder Octavia Hill. With this grounding I moved on to illustrate through excerpts of my practice text and accompanying analysis how Basildon and Ellen Morrison could be fictionalised within my erotic writing practice as a way of confronting the damage the National Trust has done to perceptions of belonging towards LGBTQIA2S+ people on rural lands. Finally, I defined site within my own practice and examined a selection of cognate sited performance in the UK in order to demonstrate why a sited practice which thinks differently about site is urgently needed. Within this I identified how sited heritage performance has failed to escape masculinist, heteronormative, and classist structures. I also discussed how, despite calls from innovative feminist sited practitioners such as Deirdre Heddon, rural sited work in the UK remains a steadfast upholder of the nature/culture binary and heteronormative masculinist romantic ideas about countryside.⁵⁶⁰ I conclude by illustrating how international and urban sited work comes closer to engaging in an erotic method of connecting with site, but remains stuck in a transactional relationship which privileges human ways of existing and frames site as something for humans to respond to. Chapter Three, therefore, established that by acknowledging that, through the nonhuman, site (land) creates its own meaning. Further, that allowing ourselves to connect with the nonhuman via the erotic we might instead collaborate with site in writing

⁵⁶⁰ Dierdre Heddon and Cathy Turner, 'Walking Women: Shifting the Tales and Scales of Mobility', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22:2 (2012) p. 235.

a performance piece which refuses the boundaries of metronormativity and linearity typical to sited work.

My final research chapter, Chapter Four, served as an in-depth insight into how I implemented the dramaturgical framework crafted from the work of the first three chapters in writing the main output of this thesis - my creative text, *dirt*. This chapter outlined four years of creative practice that occurred alongside and entwined with the research and realities of 2019-2023 through a chronological analysis of drafts and excerpts of the final text. I introduce the nature writers, rural artists, and personal moments of my life in Basildon Park which emerged as I engaged in this erotic writing collaboration with the nonhuman of Basildon Park. I incorporated photos I had taken throughout August 2020-January 2023, my time living on site whilst completing this project, in order to establish a visual reference to the collaborator ahead of presenting the text as a whole. This chapter included discussion of how my own Texan background re-surfaced as I interrogated my relationship to my own lesbian identity within rural spaces. I attempted to articulate the conflict of my own journey being the thing that necessitates my creative output in itself; although I had to arrive in London in order to feel the queerness in myself, I arrived back in the rural to be at peace with it. Chapter Four describes the ways in which I used that conflict to shape the form of the text itself and allowed the nonhuman to guide the theme and direction of the text by writing

alongside it in moments that I felt that conflict bubbling in myself. In this way, I demonstrated my own uses of the erotic as a sited dramaturgical methodology. The final, and what I feel is the most important question I asked with this project was whether utilising an erotic and nonhuman methodology in a feminist written practice as research project might open new modes of articulating rural lesbian subjectivities and establish alternative perspectives on landscape and queerness through sited performance practice? I believe that alongside the reflective work I did in chapter Chapter Four, the creative output that makes up Chapter Five show that the new framework of an erotic and nonhuman dramaturgy I offer through my practice could open space for rural lesbian experiences in performance practice through new and multidisciplinary forms.

Should my creative output go on to have another life, I could see it being recorded by a queer team of audio drama creatives and distributed via digital download. If I allow myself to think past disciplinary boundaries, I imagine the download coming with an accompanying *Sappho* style zine and an Ordnance Survey map of Basildon Park that can be overlaid onto wherever the audience/performer wants to be. I imagine a website, like *Queering The Map* where anyone can drop a pin and add queer history, but all the pins are in little green and brown and wild spaces on the map.⁵⁶¹ A dusting of sapphic snow over

⁵⁶¹ See: <<https://www.queeringthemap.com/>>, [accessed on 01/01/2023].

the lush and precious countryside of the UK – a visual moment of recognition that rural spaces can be ones of fulfilment and joy for lesbian and queer women, especially if we allow ourselves to think of the nonhuman we share residence with as sources of erotic connection and better understanding of our own orientation in the world. I hope that the research I have presented here might sit in gratitude of the lesbian and feminist lineage established by those such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde whilst also inviting further urgent inquiry into lesbian subjectivities within rural, queer, feminist, and performance studies.

I would also seek, in this work's next life, to engage more explicitly and intentionally with the ongoing and ever-worsening climate crisis, for which feminist of colour are once again at the forefront of discourse. There is a move in the UK towards engaging with the climate crisis on a performance industry-wide scale. The National Theatre, for example, are soon to host what they call a 'sector-wide conversation about making theatre in the context of a climate crisis'⁵⁶² in September of 2023. The meeting, however, is only open to those who are already Directors or Artistic Directors in the UK. In 2021 The Women in Theatre Forum published a report on gender inequality in the UK theatre sector in order to highlight that there were zero leadership positions on the Covid-spawned Cultural

⁵⁶² The National Theatre, *Making Theatre in a Time of Climate Crisis*, <<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-us/sustainability/making-theatre-climate-crisis/>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

Renewal Taskforce. In their report they found only 36% of Artistic Directors were women at the time.⁵⁶³

Since then Orange Tree Theatre, Donmar Warehouse, and the Royal Court have all appointed white men as their Artistic Directors. Further, King's Head Theatre and the RSC have added women to the count – alongside their male co-Artistic Director counterparts. The National Theatre are also currently recruiting a new Artistic Director with the new role holder being announced at the end of 2023.⁵⁶⁴

Regarding freelance Directors, Stage Directors UK published a 2020 report on gender inequality in 40 Arts Council England funded producing houses. It found that despite a UK Theatre workforce made up of 56% women, the majority of what they called 'big hitters', including Almeida, Young Vic, Oldham, Sheffield, Bristol Old Vic, and Liverpool Everyman ranged between a 71% and 100% rate of employment of male directors.⁵⁶⁵ Further, in 2019 *The Stage* found that only 7 out of 51, or roughly 10%, Artistic Director roles it surveyed in the industry were held

⁵⁶³ Arifa Akbar, 'UK report reveals "disgraceful" gender inequality in the arts', *The Guardian*, 13 Jan 2021, < <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jan/13/uk-report-reveals-disgraceful-gender-inequality-in-the-arts>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁵⁶⁴ See: The RSC, < <https://www.rsc.org.uk/news/new-co-artistic-directors-announced>>; Donmar Warehouse, < <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/jun/07/donmar-warehouse-appoints-tim-sheader-artistic-director-london>>, King's Head Theatre, < <https://kingsheadtheatre.com/news-blog/mark-ravenhill-and-hannah-price-appointed-as-new-artistic-directors-of-the-kings-head-theatre>>; Royal Court, < <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/jul/20/royal-court-theatre-appoints-new-dioramas-david-byrne-as-artistic-director>>, Orange Tree Theatre, < <https://orangetreetheatre.co.uk/about/news/tom-littler-appointed-as-next-artistic-director>>, The National Theatre, < <https://www.timeout.com/london/news/rufus-norris-is-stepping-down-as-artistic-director-of-the-national-theatre-061523>>.

⁵⁶⁵ Stage Directors UK, *Gender Split of directors in NPOS*, 2020, < <https://stagedirectorsuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/GenderSplitReport-2-002.pdf>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

by people of colour.⁵⁶⁶ This low number reflects the sentiment of co-founder of Black Theatre company Talawa, Yvonne Brewster, in *The Guardian* that despite pushing back against a racist and sexist industry since the 1980s she is still keen to see much needed lasting change.⁵⁶⁷ This was echoed by the open letter from Black, Asian & Ethnically diverse Directors & Artistic Directors to the Secretary of State for Culture emphasising the importance of fighting for cultural and racial representation in the industry despite the negative impact of the pandemic. The letter acknowledged the unique intersections of marginalisation felt by these artists and 'catalysed by the revelations of the racial disparity in the health crisis [called] on the government and the sector to ensure the progress [Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority Artists] have collectively made does not fall by the way-side.'⁵⁶⁸

On top of women and people of colour being disproportionately underrepresented in leadership and directing roles in the UK theatre sector, research also shows, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis with the reports from the UN and EU, that they are disproportionately negatively effected by the

⁵⁶⁶ Sophie Thomas, 'Black British theatre artists you should know', *London Theatre*, 24 April 2023, < <https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/theatre-news/news/black-british-theatre-artists-you-should-know>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁵⁶⁷ Pauline Walker, 'One giant leap: why we are witnessing a brave new world for Black British theatre', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2022, < <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jul/04/black-british-theatre-talawa-nouveau-riche-tiata-fahodzi>> and Paula Akpan, 'A white artistic director pretended to be black-it would be laughable if the consequences weren't so damaging', *Independent*, 04 November 2018, < <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/anthony-ekundayo-lennon-black-theatre-arts-council-england-theatre-rachel-dolezal-transracial-a8616851.html>>, [accessed 07 July 2023].

⁵⁶⁸ Young Vic London, *AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CULTURE SECRETARY FROM BLACK, ASIAN & ETHNICALLY DIVERSE THEATRE ARTISTIC DIRECTORS AND CULTURAL LEADERS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTING REPRESENTATION IN THE SECTOR*, 28 May 2020, < <https://www.youngvic.org/blog/open-letter-from-black-asian-ethnically-diverse-theatre-artistic-directors>>, [accessed on 07 July 2023].

climate crisis. Women and Black, Asian, and Indigenous people of colour disproportionately bear the negative outcomes of climate collapse due to their lack of resources, land ownership, and decision making abilities in global society.⁵⁶⁹ The National Theatre's 2023 proposal that they are to host a 'sector-wide conversation' that is 'open to all' is, then, recontextualised. They claim that the event is dedicated to discussing the 'collective challenge and responsibility faced when planning productions with the green agenda at their heart [and] interrogate how they, as the leaders of productions made across the nations, can guide their teams to make these standards work' When we consider that this is a meeting of Directors and Artistic Directors alongside the reports of staggering race and gender disparity within those roles in favour of White men in the UK - the meeting seems much less sector-wide and collective.⁵⁷⁰ When we also consider the data that women and communities of colour are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis and are also statistically better equipped to solve it in a leadership setting than their White male counterparts, it brings to question who these meetings serve and what progress they will make. If the majority of challenge and responsibility is placed on those who are disproportionately underrepresented in those who are included in the meeting - how can it lead to the sort of change that is need?

⁵⁶⁹ Altunbus et al, 'Gender Diversity'

⁵⁷⁰ National Theatre, *Making Theatre in a Time of Climate Crisis*

This thesis argues that perhaps a more sustainable solution is looking to the social and environmental knowledge of marginalised women. Through the process of sited writing which considers alternate ways of viewing the human and non-human relationship, performance practices might establish new cultural understandings of land in the Western world which contradict the oppressive settler-colonial model. The climate crisis was an ever-present backdrop to my sited practice for this project, and I hope that this project contributes to the climate dialogue within the performance sector. The people I pay homage to and represent in my work are those we vitally need leading the sector towards an anti-racist, feminist, queer, and climate-positive future. I hope, also, that this project specifically brings Indigenous American scholarship into closer conversation with UK performance studies.

Though I have not included as wide a range of scholarship by Indigenous American scholars as I am sure are relevant to the disciplines I have crossed in this thesis, I have attempted to acknowledge where the land and my own memories are tied to Indigenous American histories and culture. I have also tried to illustrate the direct lineages of UK colonialism to US settler colonialism and how they are both implicit in the perpetuation that marginalised folks cannot 'naturally' or happily reside in rural spaces. Meanwhile, every year (save 2020) since I moved to London in 2017, The Southbank Centre has hired an event company owned by

two white, British, Oxford University graduates to install their 'Circus Bar...housed in several magnificent tipis'⁵⁷¹. This is, despite the fact, that there have been calls from Indigenous Americans such as Shoshone-Bannock journalist Mark Trahant to stop 'supporting insulting imagery and labels'⁵⁷² such as the use of tipis, which are sacred dwellings to many nations such as the Sioux and Muscogee Creek who were forced by British colonisers to cease using tipis in traditional manners for fear of large Indigenous gatherings.⁵⁷³

Like how lesbian subjectivities have been omitted or contorted for performance in favour of masculinist British traditions, Indigenous Americans have been misrepresented or ignored in favour of more familiar issues within the British theatre and performance context. Black American playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' 2014 Obie-winning play, *An Octoroon*, for example had a 2017 UK transfer in which it went on at the Orange Tree before transferring to The National Theatre.⁵⁷⁴ The play analysed the politics of blackface and colourism via adaptation of Irish playwright Dion Boucicault's play of the same title spliced with the present through a fourth wall breaking multi-temporal dramaturgy. Whilst the

⁵⁷¹ Peppermint's Festive Pop-Ups at Southbank Centre', *peppermint*, 20 December 2018, <

<https://www.peppermintbars.co.uk/peppermints-festive-pop-ups-at-southbank-centre/>>, [accessed 17 August 2022].

⁵⁷² Mark Trahant, 'Native American imagery is all around us, while the people are often forgotten', *National Geographic*, December 2018, < <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/indigenous-peoples-day-cultural-appropriation>>, [accessed 10 December 2022].

⁵⁷³ Tiffany Smith, 'Quit Playing Indian: Unearthing Indigenous Historical Trauma around Halloween', *NASPA*, 23 October 2020, < <https://www.naspa.org/blog/quit-playing-indian-unearthing-indigenous-historical-trauma-around-halloween>>, [accessed 10 March 2021].

⁵⁷⁴ Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon*, (Nick Hern Books, London), 2017.

play contains invaluable commentary on blackness in the US alongside inventive structure, it also features a white man donning red-face and an Indigenous American headdress. The person cast as the Indigenous American character in the National Theatre's version of the show, Alistair Toovey, is a South Asian man from Oxford. There were no Indigenous Americans in the creative team, despite the use of the sacred symbol of a headdress.⁵⁷⁵ Michael Billington's four-star *Guardian* review even mentions that 'in the case of a Native American, redface in order to reinforce a key point: that, while Boucicault's original was progressive in its anti-slavery message, it also traded on racial stereotypes that are still deeply embedded in today's consciousness.'⁵⁷⁶

The irony that those racial stereotypes of the original 1860s play are still present in the lack of acknowledgement or care for the use of sacred Indigenous symbols without Indigenous consultation or presence, and the use of the now out of touch term 'Native American' rather than 'Indigenous American' to acknowledge their original residence in what is now recognised as North America, seems lost on the majority of the UK despite the UK's major responsibility for the European Genocide of between 55-100 million and enslavement of over 5 million

⁵⁷⁵ See: <<https://orangetreetheatre.co.uk/whats-on/an-octoroon#cast-creatives>>

⁵⁷⁶ Michael Billington, 'An Octoroon review- blackface meets whiteface in quicksilver drama', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/may/26/an-octoroon-review-orange-tree-richmond-branden-jacobs-jenkins>>, [accessed 10 December 2022].

Indigenous American peoples from the 1400s to the twentieth century.⁵⁷⁷ When I saw the production during its run at the National Theatre I went with two British people and a Canadian. When we got a drink afterwards I remember me and my Canadian friend immediately saying that we had very mixed feelings about the production despite all the positive reviews and transfer, and that we were shocked no one had picked it up. We even went back in to buy a programme so that we could double-check the cast and creatives list. Neither of the two British people we attended with had clocked the issues we had with the Indigenous representation and lack of Indigenous input. Turtle Island might not be my Indigenous land, but it is the land that helped me understand myself and learn to feel as deeply as I am capable of. Although Indigenous scholarship was a small portion of this project as a whole, it was key in my understanding of the nonhuman and in my utilising it alongside the erotic in order to re-insert rural lesbian subjectivities into a metronormative and masculinist lineage of feminist, queer, and sited performance practice in the UK. It is my hope, therefore, that this project might inspire further research on rural lesbian subjectivities in performance - but also further the value of Indigenous American scholarship by Indigenous American scholars - in helping

⁵⁷⁷ See: David Michael Smith, 'Counting the Dead: Estimating the Loss of Life in the Indigenous Holocaust, 1492-Present', *Southeastern Oklahoma State University 2017 Native American Symposium*, November 2017, < <https://www.se.edu/native-american/wp-content/uploads/sites/49/2019/09/A-NAS-2017-Proceedings-Smith.pdf>>; Brown University, 'Colonial enslavement of Native Americans included those who surrendered, too', *News From Brown*, 15 February 2017, < <https://www.brown.edu/news/2017-02-15/enslavement>>; and Lauren Kent, 'European colonizers killed so many Native Americans that it changed the global climate, researchers say', *CNN*, 2 February 2019, < <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/01/world/european-colonization-climate-change-trnd/index.html>>, [all accessed 01 August 2023].

to truly disrupt the ingrained ways of thinking that keep marginalised folks from seeing themselves as other.

And, in the end, it is my hope that whoever might stumble upon this thesis project might take a deep breath

in...

one

two

three

and a

s l o w

breath out

two

three...

...and think of the nonhuman connection that made them feel the most deeply themselves. I hope that they might be able to feel that in every talk they have with the nonhuman after reading this, and that they might cherish this new language more and more each time. I hope that a renewed perspective - an erotic awakening of fresh form and possibility - will carry them on to feel pleasure and belonging in spaces and creatures which have helped to forge them in this life.

Epilogue:

and a blue roan horse appeared in the corner of her eye

and it kept appearing.

in every corner of her eye in every field after that first one

even the fields where she had made sure she shut the gate behind her.

she begins to hover during the first few paces in each field.

willing her mind to shift and show her something different. some confirmation that

the blue roan horse that kept appearing in the corner of her eye at the start of every

field she entered wasn't a reality.

no.

it appeared.

and appeared.

and appeared.

and appeared.

this carried on for several days

and weeks

and months

and years

in every first corner of every field she walked through across the surface of the globe.

the blue roan horse became her token. her touchstone. her peace within a life that was oftentimes not very peaceful due to her

not being so much

like other people.

she was no different from the blue roan horse. catching at the corners of their eyes.

she and the horse were the same and she saw herself mirrored in the land through the lens that was the horse. when old farmers and posh walkers and cockapoo owners and mummies and daddies looked her up, down and sideways - when they tutted and scoffed and wondered how she could be in sandals in this weather...

she looked to the corner of her eye and put her breath in rhythm with the gait of the blue roan horse.

and she felt a different, a more solid, dirt beneath her. she was steadied.

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