

Que(e)rdenker*innen united

Politicizing Ecological Grief within Western Cultures of
Unsustainability through Impulses from Queer-Ecological Theory
and Practice

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Abstract

Any reading of ecological literature suggests unprecedented ecological losses due to human-induced climate changes. A pervasive emotional response to that is ecological grief. In Western cultures of unsustainability this remains largely unrecognized, which is indicative of their way of thinking and relating with Nature. According to the ecofeminist Val Plumwood it is the Master Identity (MI) at the core of Western cultures that is at fault. The MI is a set of mutually reinforcing dualisms which culturally reproduce human separation from Nature alongside other oppressions. Unless these underlying cultural assumptions are questioned and transformed, a transition towards more sustainable cultures remains impossible.

Aiming at a critique from within, looking to utilize emotional engagement with loss as an entry point for cultural transformation, the thesis at hand engages with niches already subverting the MI by creating political communities around loss, namely queer communities. To focus in on the Nature-aspect of the MI, I invited seven queer-identifying eco-activists and -artists in Berlin to participate in a creative exploration of ways of thinking, valuing, and relating with Nature, which was then unpacked through in-depth interviews. Putting this data in dialogue with ecofeminist and queer(-ecological) theory, I sought to answer the main research question, *“How can queer(-ecological) theory and practices inspire a politicized coping with ecological loss to subvert Western cultures of unsustainability?”*.

Rather than imposing a definitive cultural model, the results take inspiration from values and practices of queer worldmaking in the form of impulses. The study showed that engaging with ecological grief can serve as a base for community building. This creates a space for healing, while also facilitating a re-negotiation of dominant values and practices. Recultivating a sense of interdependency from loss can help embrace the qualitative complexity of reconnecting with Nature. Recognizing continuities and differences amongst and beyond humans enables the extension of empathy, even beyond the present time. Drawing on examples of coalitions for joint liberations from the lived experience of the participants, the reader’s imagination is sparked to question how they themselves relate with others, with Nature.

These impulses further highlight the importance of amplifying marginalized voices within Sustainability Science and society at large for cultural transformation. The combination of queer(-ecological) theory, art-based research and subjugated experiential knowledges proved to be fruitful to explore and re-imagine Western cultures of unsustainability.

Keywords: ecological grief, master identity, ecofeminism, queer ecology, art-based research, sustainability

Word count: 13.806

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“For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to ‘you’, by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.” (Butler, 2006, p. 49)

I thank

... *my family, especially my parents - for I am nowhere without you.* I truly appreciate the support you gave me throughout all my endeavours. Thank you for always believing in me.

... *the LUMES bubble - for I am confounded by you.* What a beautiful, inspiring, radical, weird in the best way, loving bunch we are. It comforts me that you are out there with me, and I cannot wait to see what we’ll do next.

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... *the participants of this study - for showing me something I had yet to know.* In a time of struggle on all sides you helped me see that transformation is not only possible, but already lived. Keep it up, I admire you.

I dedicate this thesis

... to my Mama - the strongest person I know.

... to my Opa - I will forever remember that one rainy afternoon which made us seek shelter in that cave.

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List of Abbreviations

EF	Ecofeminism
MI	Master Identity
NM	Nature Melancholy
NN	Nature Nostalgia
QE	Queer Ecology
QT	Queer Theory
SS	Sustainability Science

1 Introduction

We live in a time of immense ecological destruction, degradation, and loss at the hands of the human species. And, as Félix Guattari stated in his essay “Three Ecologies” (2000), “[i]t is not only species that are becoming extinct but also the words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity” (Guattari, 2000, p. 8). So while this loss registers with us emotionally and psychologically, individualist, capitalist Western cultures lack the space and language to process it. This ungrievability is indicative of their dominant ways of thinking and relating with Nature, and is one of many manifestations of Western cultures of unsustainability, which continue to drive socioecological¹ destruction. At their core sits what Val Plumwood (2003) called the Master Identity (MI), an interconnected set of dualisms reinforcing oppressions and exploitations of those it deems Other. Taking loss and mourning as potential moments of emotional and cultural transformation, this thesis looks towards pockets of resistance within the dominant culture, namely queer communities, which already engage in creating communities around politicized loss, and culturally subvert the MI. To gain even deeper insight into how these practices apply to our relation with Nature, queer-ecological theory, activism, and art sits at the heart of this thesis.

From this, I arrived at the following research questions (RQ):

The main RQ asks ***“How can queer(-ecological) theory and practices inspire a politicized coping with ecological loss to subvert Western cultures of unsustainability?”***. To answer this, theory and practice are put in a dialogue, focusing first on Sub-RQ1: ***“How can queer(-ecological) practices of mourning inspire emotional coping strategies for ecological loss?”***, and, building on this, answering Sub-RQ2: ***“How can queer(-ecological) values and practices of worldmaking inform new cultural practices of thinking, valuing and relating with Nature?”***.

1.1 Research purpose

Rather than delivering a new cultural model to replace the old, this thesis gives impulses, an invitation to explore with a queer lens, following Kagan’s (2017) notion of seeking sustainability: “Instead of preserving good life, the search for sustainability should be interpreted as inviting us to experiment with other lives, to open up to futures-oriented questions, and to queer these other, potential (good?) lives”

¹The choice of the term and spelling of socioecological is intentional. Considering culture limits our means of thinking and articulating, I found it to be least complicit in reproducing any divides between the social and the ecological, humans/culture and Nature. Humans are a part of Nature, but are not the only beings displaying sociality, or culture (Haraway, 2003).

(Kagan, 2017, p. 153). Looking at those who are already experimenting, queering, I set out to amplify their voices within Sustainability Science (SS), the environmental movement, and society at large.

1.2 Significance of the research project

This thesis is contributing to SS by drawing attention to a body of theory, Queer Ecologies, that has previously been marginalized in the field. Its critique of underlying cultures of thinking, valuing and relating with Nature, which influence entire societies as well as the researchers and activists situated in them, is powerful, but often very abstract. I thus put it in dialogue with queer-ecological practices of activism and art, to render it more tangible.

Furthermore, the thesis at hands points to the potential of integrating art-based methods in SS research, to facilitate the unpacking and re-imagining of highly complex cultural patterns.

2 Problem formulation

2.1 Ecological loss and its emotional impacts

Any reading of ecological literature suggests we are living in an era of unprecedented ecological loss due to human-induced climate changes. The rates of biodiversity- and habitat loss are ever-increasing (Pereira et al., 2010; Rockström et al., 2009), and evidence even suggests the sixth mass extinction is under its way (MacKinnon, 2013; Morton, 2010; Rockström et al., 2009). The list goes on. This turning point in our history registers with us emotionally and psychologically as a sense of loss (Anderson, 2001) and “ecological grief - the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018, p. 275). Reactions vary depending on the proximity and acuteness of the loss experienced. While direct impacts can cause mental health issues and psychological trauma, indirect experiences of loss might register more subtly as anxiety, worry, depression, numbness, apathy, guilt and denial (Doherty & Clayton, 2011).

These emotional responses inform our behaviour in the face of a changing climate and are thus intimately linked with the responsibility we take for the causes the ecological loss. The way we grieve it

is embedded culturally and indicative of how we relate with Nature (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). As it happens ecological grief is considered “a form of ‘disenfranchised grief’” (ibid., p. 275) within Western² societies, who are historically responsible for most of ecological destruction while now bearing relatively less of the impacts of climate change (Wei et al., 2012). Western, in this case, is used critically, as a term to trace certain cultural ideas within a geographically changing area. This thesis passes no judgement on the cultures outside this area in terms of their (un)sustainability.

2.2 Nature Nostalgia in Western cultures of unsustainability

The lack of acknowledgement of ecological grief manifests itself in what Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2010) called ‘Nature Nostalgia’ (NN), which refers to the processing of ecological loss in Western late capitalist societies through its incorporation into the market. NN reproduces distorted, romanticized fantasies of a pristine, wild, untouched Nature³ (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010; Morton, 2010), which is then turned into a fetishized commodity through e.g. eco-tourism, documentaries, etc. Ironically enough, its loss turns it into even more precious commodities for the remaining time of its existence. Once consumed and lost, its replaceability/substitutability, for example through technological means, is emphasized (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010).

“[E]xperiences of environmental loss [...] are present, tangible, and everyday aspects of living in the world, both on a small and intimate scale and piled up to the level of planetary crisis. Spectacularizing them in ecotourist pilgrimage makes them palatable, but it does not make them meaningful except as part of a logic of substitution and consumption.” (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010, p. 338)

² According to Stuart Hall (1992), the West is a discursive construct used in binary opposition to the East to legitimize the former’s dominance and the latter’s colonization by implying European uniqueness and non-European inferiority. While I acknowledge the problematic history of the term, I will not refrain from using it, as it still is the best “catch-all” term for the cultures and geographic areas I am referring to.

³ Nature, here and throughout the paper, is capitalized purposefully, to underline its constructedness (Morton, 2010). While the problem formulation provides an understanding of what Nature means in Western dominant culture, within the dualisms of the Master identity, following sections will not provide a definite alternative definition, thus using it in the tradition of Queer Theory: as a useful yet problematic category resisting essentialist definition (Morton, 2007; Sandilands, 1999).

While there is an abundance of information on what is being lost, there is a lack of spaces or rituals for genuine public mourning in regards to ecological loss through which we could begin to grasp the span of what is happening (ibid.).

“In what seems to be a vicious cycle, the sale of vanishing nature might both emerge from and allow one to evade an incoherent sense of having lost something in a social context in which there is no language to express that loss, no collection of shared symbols or rituals to acknowledge the significance of that loss, and certainly no systemic recognition that that loss might be (literally) earth-shattering for many people, akin to the death of a lover, a parent, a child.” (ibid., pp. 338-339)

The ungrievability of Nature is symptomatic for socioecological relations in Western cultures of unsustainability, which Kagan (2011, 2012) mainly characterized by their worldviews and epistemological norms rooted in patriarchal traditions, consumerism, and an estrangement from Nature. At their root sits the ‘Master Identity’, which is why the next chapter is dedicated to it.

2.3 The Master Identity (MI)

2.3.1 Definition of the MI

According to the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (2003), the ‘Master Identity’ (MI) is “a legacy, a form of culture, a form of rationality, a framework for selfhood and relationship which, through this appropriation of culture, has come to shape us all” (p. 190). Due to its centrality within Western cultures, it has shaped Western structures of rights, privileges and recognition, socioecological interactions, socio-economic systems, and has thus been used to justify their patterns of accumulation and domination (ibid.). As such, this intersectional Western cultural identity is predominantly, but not exclusively, connected to and serving white, affluent, male-presenting, heterosexual persons but has also been internalized by other groups due to its cultural dominance. At its core sits an interconnected set of dualisms (Figure 1) which are binary oppositions containing a hierarchy. The dominant logic of these dualisms - called the ‘Differential Imperative’ (Rodman, 1980) - is the definition of humans in opposition to Nature. The MI gives essential, authentic, virtuous value within the human existence to all traits considered to transcend Nature (left column of Figure 1), while devaluing all traits considered shared with the more-than-human (right column of Figure 1) (Plumwood, 2003).

DOMINANT	SUBORDINATE
human	Nature (nonhuman)
culture	Nature
reason	Nature
reason	emotion (Nature)
rationality	animality (Nature)
mind	body (Nature)
civilized	primitive (Nature)
master	slave ([closer to] Nature)
freedom	necessity (Nature)
subject	object (Nature)
self	other (Nature)
male	female ([closer to] Nature)
production	reproduction, sexuality (Nature)
public	private
heterosexual	queer (unnatural)
white	non-white ([closer to] Nature)
economically empowered	impoverished (closer to Nature)

Figure 1. Set of hierarchical (dominant/subordinate), vertically interconnected and reinforcing dualisms at the heart of the Master Identity. Non-exhaustive list. Adapted from Plumwood (2003) and Gaard (1997). Own image, 2018.

2.3.2 The MI's historical development

Because the MI is so deeply entrenched in Western culture, it appears as the “natural” order of things and thus remains largely unquestioned. Yet, as Plumwood (2003) skillfully shows, the MI is a cultural construct, which, at any point, intended to privilege the master socially, culturally, politically, and economically. She traced its development over time: While a bulk of ecofeminist literature situates the “birth” of this worldview in the scientific revolution in Europe in the 16th century (see for a prominent

example: Merchant, 1980), she argued that this would not give enough credit to pre-Enlightenment rationalist traditions in Ancient Greece and the influences of Christianity (Plumwood, 2003).

In fact, Plato was one of the first philosophers to conceptualize the reason-nature-divide and using it to justify the subordination of women*⁴, slaves and Nature. His views were then picked up by early Enlightenment philosophers such as René Descartes, whose theorizations of the mind-body-division have hugely influenced European modern rationalist traditions. John Locke's works on property allowed for Nature and all persons subdued to its realm to be conceived as non-agents, facilitating annexation through colonialism. As all these views served a powerful capitalist elite - which intersects with who and what is privileged within the MI - they were incorporated in the workings of the capitalist market economy, and thus majorly influence how Nature is treated today (ibid.).

2.3.3 The MI and Nature

To establish and reproduce the power structures generated from the MI, certain strategies of oppression have emerged (Gaard, 1997; Plumwood, 2003): Through backgrounding, humans are positioned as apart from Nature, which is instrumentalized as a non-agentic, passive resource at humans' disposal with no purpose of its own (ibid.). At the same time, any dependency on biospheric processes, e.g. reproduction and subsistence, is denied. Nature just becomes an invisible backdrop to human achievements of reason and culture, while bearing their consequences, e.g. pollution, extinction (ibid.). Through radical exclusion Nature is defined as the inferior opposite to humans. The emphasis lies on differences rather than similarities (ibid.). On a similar note, incorporation establishes the master's qualities as the default: Non-human others are measured in relation to them and are defined through their lack of them. This allows for the exclusion of non-human world from moral consideration, as it does not have a subject status (ibid.). When talking about Nature, rather than capturing its diversity, it is often described in homogenizing or stereotyping ways, which facilitates the illusion of its substitutability (ibid.). Nature within the dominant culture is thus often defined in the following way:

“[N]ature is what rises up at the edges of cities and towns, or wherever else it has not been beaten back by human hands. We often put the two—natural versus unnatural—in opposition, weighing whether or not to preserve the former or make way for the latter, all the while assuming we can distinguish one from the other. This is nature by our most ordinary definition: the sum total of everything that is not us and did not spring from our imaginations.” (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 3)

⁴ I write women* with an asterix throughout this paper in order to include everyone who self-identifies as she, female, femme, woman.

2.3.4 The MI and other marginalized groups

Since the dualisms structuring the MI are also connected vertically (Figure 1), the same strategies of oppression are applied to other marginalized groups too, i.e. women*, queers, people of color, thus legitimizing sexism, heteronormativity/ queerphobia, racism and colonialism, classism, ableism etc. (Gaard, 1997; Plumwood, 2003). While women* and people of color were historically construed as closer to Nature and “the natural” in various religious, political and other public discourses, queers fall outside of that logic as enacting queerness was historically deemed “unnatural”, or “a crime against Nature” in Western societies (Gaard, 1997; Seymour, 2013). At the same time, non-reproductive sex and the erotic have been referred to as animalistic, thus once again locating it in the constructed subordinate realm of Nature (Gaard, 1997). This is one of the many paradoxical tensions the MI tries to uphold. Being aware of them puts queer, but also other marginalized perspectives into a unique position (Chen, 2012), as they

“cannot take ‘the natural’ at face value, because of how it has frequently been used against [them], but nor can they reject ‘the natural’ because of how it encompasses the threatened non-human world. Thus they must carefully explicate, negotiate, and reconfigure it” (Seymour, 2013, p. 180; change by author).

Their mutually reinforced oppressions thus provide an opportunity for joint liberation (Gaard, 1997; Hogan, 2010; Plumwood, 2003; Seymour, 2013; Wyckoff, 2014).

2.3.5 The need for a radical cultural transformation

While it may seem like a luxury to write a somewhat abstract, culturally focussed thesis in a time where urgent action is required to prevent further socioecological loss, I want to point to Meadow’s (1999) and Abson et al.’s (2017) theory on leverage points to justify its focus: Meadows (1999) named “[t]he mindset or paradigm out of which the system - its goals, power structure, rules, its culture - arises” (p. 3) as the second-most effective leverage point to change a system. This is because underlying cultures, their collectively shared norms, ways of knowing and valuing precede economy and politics (Kagan, 2011). Within cultures, Abson et al. (2017) pointed to the ways of thinking, valuing and relating with Nature as one of three deep leverage realms for a transition towards more sustainable cultures. If we continue without radically subverting the MI within Western culture, the consequences are dire:

“Since he is set on a course of devouring the other who sustains him, the story must end either with the death of the other on whom he relies, and therefore with his own death, or with the abandonment of mastery, his failure and transformation” (Plumwood, 2003, p. 195).

Therefore critiquing the basic assumptions of Western culture and its framing of and relation with Nature is crucial in order to move forward in our search for sustainability. If this step is left out, we might remain trapped within our current destructive patterns and uncritically reproduce them (ibid.).

“[T]he failure to conceive ourselves as essentially or positively in nature leads easily into a failure to commit ourselves to the care of the planet and to encourage sustainable social institutions and values which can acknowledge deeply and fully our dependence on and ties to the earth.” (ibid., p. 72)

Even well-intended efforts of SS and environmental movements often fail to do so (Miller, 2013). For this reason I seek to amplify the critical perspectives previously marginalized in those realms, which already subvert the MI: Queer-ecological theory as well as practice (Hogan, 2010). This thesis is a contribution to “crafting new cultures of nature against dominant social and ecological relations of late capitalism” (Sandilands, 2004, p. 109), tapping into the transformational momentum of loss and mourning.

2.4 Subversive impulses from Ecofeminism, Queer Theory, and Queer Ecologies

The theories I will be drawing on to dismantle the system of oppression and exploitation informed by the MI are situated in the traditions of Ecofeminism, Queer Theory and Queer Ecologies. I am aware of the existence of other powerful theories within ecocritique and ecophilosophy looking at Nature conceptualizations, but I believe these bodies of theory to be the best match because they aim at multiple liberations at the same time. “Much inspiration for new, less destructive guiding stories can be drawn from sources other than the master, from subordinated and ignored parts of western culture” (Plumwood, 2003, p. 196). By engaging in a critique from within Western culture, I also ensure that no other cultures are co-opted, while strengthening internal pockets of resistance already engaged in subversive and transformative worldmaking.

Ecofeminism (EF) was the first strand of feminist theory to introduce Nature relations as an intersectional axis of oppression (Lykke, 2004; Plumwood, 2003). It works on the premise that oppressions along different axes, such as race, class, gender, and Nature, are interconnected and mutually reinforce each other (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2013). EF used to be an essentialist tradition, aiming at the revaluation of women* and their presupposed inherent (read: essential) connection to Nature (Gaard, 1997; Sandilands, 1999), as exemplified in the common trope of Mother Nature.

These essentialist notions have since been addressed through the integration of Queer Theory (QT). By definition, QT is anti-essentialist. While QT acknowledges differences, it remains critical towards categorizations/distinctions, blurring their definitions to avoid exclusive, oppressive and homogenizing differentiations (Doak, 2016). “[T]he real task of liberation is not equal participation or absorption in such a male dominant culture, but rather subversion, resistance and replacement” (Plumwood, 2003, p. 33). A valuable contribution to this project was Greta Gaard’s essay “Towards a Queer Ecofeminism” (1997), in which she not only added sexuality as another axis of oppression, but also began to question the dualisms comprising the axes, thus transcending feminisms of uncritical reversal and uncritical equality⁵ (Doak, 2016; Gaard, 1997; Mortimer-Sandilands, n.d.).

The interdisciplinary field of Queer Ecologies (QE), which only emerged over the last two decades, has been continuing on this pathway, by drawing on EF and QT, as well as Environmental Justice theory (Doak, 2016; Mortimer-Sandilands, n.d.; Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010; Morton, 2010). QE is critically questioning how discourses of the constructed categories of sex and Nature have informed each other throughout history, and what implications this had for marginalized communities (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010). Acknowledging their constructedness and debunking the process of their naturalization within culture alludes to the possibility of change (Seymour, 2013) makes QE a liberatory framework: It opens up the space to reimagine the rigid, oppressive structures and ideologies Western cultures are built on and present as “natural” (Doak, 2016; Hogan, 2010). In line with that, this thesis will from now on use Nature as a critical concept resisting definition, in order to queer the fixed way it is defined within the MI (Morton, 2007; Sandilands, 1999).

All of the above mentioned bodies of theory aim at creating overlapping coalition spaces for different movements subverting the MI, which are necessary for true liberation (Gaard, 1997), and share close ties to activism for their theory-building (Doak, 2016; Seymour, 2013). “Without a perspective that is at once ecological and queer, we cannot intervene in some of the most pressing intellectual and political conflicts of the contemporary era; we cannot adequately address oppression, especially interrelated oppressions” (Seymour, 2013, p. 17).

⁵ Uncritical reversal means not questioning the categories and the essentialist notions they contain (e.g. male/masculine-female/feminine), but aiming at reversing the hierarchy of valorization (e.g. feminine values are more valuable than masculine ones). Uncritical equality refers to not questioning the categories and the essentialist notions they contain, but claiming that both sides of the dualism are of equal worth (Plumwood, 2003).

3 The study

3.1 Ontology

As the previous section announced, I mainly draw on postmodernist, poststructuralist, queer and feminist theory, the latter two of which aim for emancipation and social transformation (Hesse-Biber, 2012). This study is thus situated within the critical strand of social theory, since its aim is to illuminate how discourses and the power structures upholding them shape our social realities. In the tradition of critical theory, it furthermore wants to challenge binary and essentialist thinking, and destabilize culturally dominant, normalized views by drawing on the knowledge of subjugated subjects (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

3.2 Feminist epistemologies

3.2.1 Standpoint Theory

As alluded to in the previous paragraph, the point of departure for feminist research and problem formulation often lies in the lived experiences of marginalized groups, traditionally women*, as they are believed to have a more complete, less distorted insight into social reality due to their oppression (“epistemic privileging”)(Doucet and Mauthner, 2006; Harding, 1991 & 1993; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Like EF, Standpoint Theory has since adopted a less essentialist perspective, taking intersecting oppressions into account (ibid.).

In this study, I approached self-identified queer people who are engaged in ecological activism and/or art. While being aware that queer communities do not possess an essential or innate connection to Nature or environmentalism, that necessarily subverts the MI, I do think it safe to draw on certain subversive tendencies within these groups based on their marginalized situatedness in society. For one, “[t]heir life-choices and historical positioning often compel a deeper discomfort with dualistic structures and foster deeper questioning of a dualised culture” (Plumwood, 2003, pp. 36-37). Social performances and experiences of gender and sexuality (rather than coherent identities) (Seymour, 2013) - though never unproblematic at base - can be a source of empowerment and connection, an opportunity to create spaces for subversive and liberatory culture (Plumwood, 2003). In these spaces the essentialist traits the master attached to the subordinated can be discussed and their worth reclaimed, detached

from physicality (Gaard, 1997). For example, practices of emotional support - in the dominant culture ascribed to women* and femininity - can be cultivated and elevated regardless of gender identity. Even though I interview individuals, it is their embeddedness in these spaces, the values, practices, and perspectives that come with that, which I believe to be valuable for this exploration of alternatives (Seymour, 2013). Looking at patterns that connect them rather than focus on their individual views allows me to detach from their individual identities and access shared values and practices, in which everyone - regardless of their own situatedness - can engage.

Moving beyond the question of what their subjugated knowledge can do for this study, I also want to address what this study can do for them: Amplifying the voices of queer eco-activists and -artists hopefully strengthens their potential to add to a unifying politics within the environmental movement and reconcile their previously neglected if not oppressed role it, and the socioecological theories it is inform by (Hogan, 2010; Seymour, 2013).

3.2.2 Situated Knowledges

Another important feminist epistemological practice is situating oneself as a researcher, as knowledge is always “partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational” (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 9). This allows the researcher as well as the reader to critically and responsibly reflect upon the knowledge produced and presented (Haraway, 1988).

I was socialized within Western culture, am legibly white and female, queer, and engage in eco-activism and -art myself. This allowed me special access to the knowledge I was seeking, but can also create a bias throughout the research: On the one hand by potentially reproducing the dominant cultures I aim to critique, as culture limits our means of thinking and articulating thought (Goltz. et al., 2015; Jasper, 1997); on the other hand by favouring the knowledge of the group I feel belonging to. By employing self-reflexivity I hope to remedy that.

3.3 Methodology and data collection

In line with the research problem, my ontology, and epistemology, I chose to employ a qualitative, exploratory methodology to access experiential knowledge within this under-researched area (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

3.3.1 Study site and sample

As I was seeking queer-identifying participants for my study, I decided to conduct my research in Berlin, Germany, the queer capital of Europe and a place I was already familiar with, thus a place with an easily accessible community. To find participants I joined multiple Facebook groups, such as Queer Feminist Berlin and Queer Exchange Berlin, where I posted an announcement seeking interview partners (Appendix A). Some of the participants then messaged me directly, others I found through snowball sampling, an appropriate method of sampling when participants for a study are difficult to locate (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The sample consists of seven participants in total, and is diverse in terms of gender-expressions, age, places of residency and origin, and engagements in ecological activism and/or art (Appendix B). I decided to combine art-based research with semi-structured in-depth interviews, to acquire a rich variety of data albeit the small sample.

3.3.2 Art-based research in Sustainability Science

Art-based research, a term coined by Eisner (Barone & Eisner, 2012) in the 1970s within educational research, refers to the inclusion of various artistic practices such as poetry and literature into the research process, thus blurring the boundaries between art and science to create a truly transdisciplinary practice.

Sacha Kagan (2017), a firm advocate for an artistic turn in sustainability, describes its advantages as very much overlapping with SS's core values and practices: Art allows us to embrace and depict complexity (Kagan, 2012), which plays a key role in SS (Miller, 2013; Spangenberg, 2011). SS's focus lies on the process, the emergent, the uncertain and intangible (Kagan, 2012; Kagan, 2015; Spangenberg, 2011), which art allows us to access. Furthermore, tapping into emotions, the associative and subconscious, art enables us to subvert fixed mental schemes and experiment with unconventional alternatives by fostering imaginative competencies (Kagan, 2012; Kagan, 2015; Muñoz, 2009) - competencies much needed in the normative field of SS oriented towards urgent action (Clark & Dickson, 2003; Spangenberg, 2011). Both Kagan (2015) and Hawkins (2015) argue, that these creative competencies also serve to build collective resilience and empowerment.

Because all of the above mentioned advantages of artistic practice match my research aim to explore subversive impulses within Western cultures, I decided to include a process that supports "de-normalizing and de-naturalizing aesthetic experiences" (Kagan, 2017, p. 155) in my research. I invited the participants of this study to an individual creative reflection, guided by a set of questions (Appendix

C) but free in the choice of artistic method, in the week leading up to the interview. Artists were given the option of drawing on existing pieces for their reflection. The products of this reflection (Appendix D) then served as the entry point to the interviews I conducted with the participants.

3.3.3 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

Since the topic I am looking into is very much under-researched, especially within SS, I chose to conduct in-depth interviews. They take individuals as the point of departure for the enquiry, who possess unique, important and deep knowledge about the social world they are situated in (Haraway, 1988; Hesse-Biber, 2017) – a knowledge I could tap into by engaging in long conversations with them as the experts.

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I had prepared an interview guide (Appendix E) with certain topics of interest and specific questions derived from the literature review, but the format still allowed me to adapt to the natural flow of the conversation, leaving ample space for the participants to bring up their own interests and associations with the topic (Hesse-Biber, 2017). To try out this strategy, one pilot interview was conducted. Subsequently, I held seven in-depth interviews in February and March 2018. In terms of ethical considerations, all participants agreed to being recorded, were able to ask questions throughout the interview and will receive a copy of this thesis.

3.4 Data analysis

For the analysis, I mostly worked deductively (Hesse-Biber, 2017): I developed categories from the theory to code and organize the data while remaining open to emergent patterns from it (Appendix F). This way I could keep a tight link between theory and practice, using the latter to confirm and augment the former. The analysis section is structured according to these categories.

Since the participants explained their thoughts behind the creative reflection pieces (Appendix B & D) to me in the interview, I only analyzed their text pieces with the same categories: a literary text, a poem and two reflections on existing art pieces. I did not analyse the painted, drawn, crocheted pieces and the three video documentations of existing art pieces separately, as this would have gone beyond the scope of my study.

3.5 Limitations of the study

While I tried to keep the sample of participants as diverse as possible, interviewing seven people mainly allowed me to gather deep knowledge, which may not translate to larger populations (Goltz et al., 2015). It is important to keep in mind who is not present, who did not get to share their voices (ibid.). I counter this limitation by complementing my empirical data with relevant theory. “The abstractions of theory work make sense of the situated, contextual, and embodied experiences of the personal. The personal, in turn, dialogues with the theory. They frustrate and challenge each other” (ibid., p. 13).

Using an art-based method provided the participants with space for deeper reflection, in which the classic researcher-participant hierarchy was not present (Halliday, 2000) and which allowed them to arrive at the interview with ideas they could develop further. However, the scope of this thesis did not allow me to analyze the non-text material separately. Thus some of the subconscious elements embedded in the pieces might have been left uncovered, but could be subject to further research.

4 Analysis and results

In the following section I will answer the primary research question ***“How can queer(-ecological) theory and practices inspire a politicized coping with ecological loss to subvert Western cultures of unsustainability?”***. Considering the traditionally close exchange between theory and practice in queer-feminist approaches (Doak, 2016; Seymour, 2013) I am presenting the two together and interwoven, asking, like Goltz et al. (2015), “What happens if we hold up the abstractions and the interventions of queer theory to the scrutiny and experience of our daily lives?” (p. 1). This notion of bringing together queer thinkers is also reflected in the title of this thesis - *Que(e)rdenker*innen united*. For the readers who are unfamiliar with the beautiful German language, “Querdenker” translates to a person who thinks differently, or literally: diagonally.

While the MI and its strategies have been described succinctly by Val Plumwood (2003), possible alternatives drawn from subversive cultural spaces remain suggestive and non-exhausted. Thus, this study is an exploration which started in the realm of theory, and is combining the findings with examples of values and the practices they inform from the queer eco-activists and -artists I interviewed.

Throughout this section, I use exclusively gender neutral pronouns (they, them, their), to increase anonymity but also draw attention to gender neutral language. I also decided not to use the participants' initials after direct citations, in order to protect the anonymity of the artists I interviewed, as I have to credit their original artwork with their full names.

4.1 Queer(-ecological) practices of mourning

I first want to tend to Sub-RQ 1: *“How can queer(-ecological) practices of mourning inspire emotional coping strategies for ecological loss?”*. This section will explain how engaging emotionally in practices of mourning, especially on a community level, can have politicizing effects paving the way for cultural transformation.

Let's begin with a short recap of practices of mourning ecological loss within the dominant culture, drawing on examples from the interviews. As described in the problem formulation, it deals with ecological loss in two manners: consumption motivated by Nature Nostalgia and substitution. Several of the participants brought up examples of how they experience this in their everyday lives but also in their activism and through their art. While not referring to Nature consumption specifically, one of them commented on the emotional void that is caused by individualistic capitalist culture, filled and fuelled by consumerism, which aggravates social separations as well as continuously exploits ecological resources. Another interviewee brought up an example of substitution, referring to an article they had read about the extinction of bees, to which one company reacted by investing millions in the development of drone bees - “This has to be a joke. [...] ‘You would rather show off your intellectual powers in the way of inventing something that we already have instead of fixing the environmental destruction of what we’re already given.’” Related to this problem, a participant mentioned the difficulty of raising awareness for decreasing soil quality, since environmental NGOs have an easier time collecting donations marketing the loss of pandas (nostalgic-cute?!) than microorganisms (not so cute?!). The theme of nostalgia also came up in one of the interviewee's performances, “If You Ask Me What I Want, I'll Tell You. I want Everything.” (2017), in which they were talking about what the weather used to be like before alterations due to climate change became noticeable, while getting the current weather pattern of Berlin tattooed on their skin (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot from the video documentation of the performance piece “If You Ask Me What, I Want I’ll Tell You. I Want Everything.” (2017) by Rosenfeld. The images show Rosenfeld in conversation with a tattoo artist, musing on how we can see climate change, as the current weather pattern of Berlin is tattooed on their thigh. Rosenfeld, 2017.

The dominant culture does not allow for emotional vulnerability when it comes to ecological loss: As one participant says, “from a Western perspective that’s such a strange thing to feel emotionally attached to the environment.” For this reason, a lot of people still react to ecological loss with denial, instead of engaging deeper with underlying emotions of grief (Doherty & Clayton, 2011), as there is no space or language for it to unfold (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010). What can be grieved reflects the demarcations of our value systems (ibid.). Butler (2006) called this the ‘differential allocation of grievability’ (p. XIV), meaning that certain subjects are culturally more grievable than others. So “how does one grieve in a context in which the significance, the density, and even the existence of loss is unrecognized?” (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010, p. 339).

In the next section, I draw inspiration from practices of queer mourning to answer this question. Ultimately I argue for a “political, embodied understanding of death and mourning that is missing from the romantic portrayals of loss and salvation emphasized in the contemporary environmental spectacle” (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010, p. 334), as captured in Mortimer-Sandilands concept of ‘Nature Melancholy’.

4.1.1 Queer mourning and Nature Melancholy

In her essay “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies” Mortimer-Sandilands (2010) suggests that we move away from nostalgia, a sort of escapism, towards melancholic ways of grieving. Early Freudian theory suggests that successful mourning is indicated by the substitution of the object of loss with another, while melancholy was described as the inability to let go of the lost (ibid.; Butler, 2006). However, his

later theories frame melancholy as the incorporation of what is lost as an essential part of mourning (ibid.).

This process implies the acceptance that what we have lost may have changed us forever, thus illuminating the transformative potential of loss (ibid.). Loss reveals something significant about the way we relate to and depend on others (ibid.). There is no language to answer what I am without you, for we have both been shaped through our relationality, a bond that cannot be dissected or broken. Because incorporated, it changes our understanding of the present, leaving us more vulnerable but also more susceptible to the vulnerability of others (Butler, 2006; Holman-Jones & Adams, 2013).

To a certain extent, queer and other marginalized communities have better access to this kind of language, as they tend to be more vulnerable and exposed to violence due to the social and political situatedness of their bodies. The latter often results in a lack of recognition, also in times of loss (Butler, 2006), examples being the public ungrievability of queer HIV-Aids deaths in the 1980s and 90s, or the deaths fuelling the Black Lives Matter movement in the 2010s.

Both Butler (2006) and Mortimer-Sandilands (2010) argue that queer melancholy is not only a psychic but also potentially a political response in a system that does not allow for them to grieve. The preservation of the lost through acts of witnessing and remembering becomes a productive response because it actively negotiates what is grievable. According to Butler (2006), loss and mourning, the realization of our own vulnerability and interconnectedness, but also complicitness and responsibility, can form the basis for political communities and resistance.

Taking these teachings from queer communities, Mortimer-Sandilands draws parallels to the concept of 'Nature Melancholy' (NM),

“a condition of melancholia, a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically ‘ungrievable’ within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief” (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010, p. 333).

Rather than continuing down the road of indifference and escapism, NM invites us to engage meaningfully, emotionally and responsibly with those pervasive ecological losses and our complacency and vulnerability within them (ibid.).

The participants of this study showed evolved capacities to engage emotionally with ecological loss. A lot of them distinguished between indirect and direct experiences of loss. A central question running through the previously mentioned performance is “How can we see climate change happening? Even

though we know it's happening, how can we see it and feel it and sense it every second, in every cell, every moment", what is the physicality of climate change in the regions less drastically affected by it? Accounts from more vulnerable regions leave them "infatuated" and "obsessed", yet "disconnected". Another interviewee, who draws parallels between witnessing violence against queer people and ecological destruction, explains:

"I watch the news or read the newspapers, but I still don't see the destruction, I don't have it here in my face as much as a lot of other people in the world have, [...] so I try to constantly have it very present, not to make myself guilty but to have it present that this is still going on, such as every form of abuse or persecution of people [...]. So I think it's a balance of keeping that pain and hopelessness present, because it's real, and at the same time [...] still feeling like I have a purpose or that I do something".

Several other interviewees describe similar feelings of resignation, frustration, existential dread or a "sense of loss for humanity and the world", which they also channel into their activism and art, through which they renegotiate what is grievable. Another participant confirms this with an account of a direct experience of loss:

"I went scuba diving in a dead coral reef, which used to be until [...] a year before that, one of the healthiest, most intact coral reefs of the world. When I went diving there, 90 per cent of the corals were dead. [...] I was under water, crying in my mask. And so it makes me incredibly sad, it makes me angry but it also makes me fight."

As I have alluded to in the problem formulation, constantly engaging with this pain can also impact mental health. One interviewee reveals: "as someone who suffered a lot from light depression and anxiety, largely influenced by [...] environmental loss, what do we do when there's no planet to live on [...] - it can feel very daunting, like there's no point. The system is so much bigger and established". Burn-out is also mentioned as a common issue amongst both queer rights- and eco-activists. One of the participants, having been radicalized in the HIV/Aids-activist movement of the 1980s and 90s, draws parallels to the emotionality of engaging in ecological activism: The emotional labour embodied by the activists can negatively affect their work, their desires, sometimes to the extent of quitting the activism they have dedicated their lives to. To avoid this from happening, some of the participants mention self-care on an individual level, but also the importance of learning "how to connect communities and how to connect as a community, how to build sustainable activism".

4.1.2 Community building as a result of politicized loss

In line with Butler's (2006) theory on queer mourning, Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) suggest that

"grief and mourning have 'we-creating' capacities, exposing our known, unknown and unacknowledged connections to others, and allowing for opportunities to reach across differences to connect with others. In this light, grief and mourning can also question fundamental assumptions about what we choose to value." (p. 276)

Several of the participants emphasized the importance of finding a local community to tackle complex global issues. Feeling connected in the struggle, especially through collective action, can cause a "feeling of infinite possibility which is amazing because we also need those moments to keep going and to keep sustaining and existing, we need to feel that solidarity and that support", thus increasing the resilience of the community (Jasper, 1997).

When it comes to building communities for remembering, healing and spurring transformational action, the participants' experiences within queer communities can serve as an inspiration for the kind of communities we want to build around ecological loss - especially when it comes to resisting the MI. In a poem one of the participants wrote for the creative reflection exercise, they say:

"The queers and their allies have always
fostered a generosity and harmony,
stirring it like life's blood even in
upheaval and mental illness and death
and the daily difficulties of existing,
giving each other gifts of lavender honey
and homemade limoncello with sugared rinds,
and curling up in a Yosemite cabin to talk
about how to stop the white cis-men in politics
who want to make sure the ship goes down
if the storm approaching is not championing
patriarchy on its waves."

Another literary contribution reads:

"Collectively queers are healers, unifiers, and bring calm to a violent species. They defy binaries as understood by Western culture. As with many indigenous cultures, I see queerness as a sort of glue that holds society together, whereas it serves no direct reproductive or dominating function, it

enriches life around us. Queerness breathes life into culture and creates crossroads and intersections.”

Connecting over common oppressions such as a lack of visibility or representation, eradication of stories, or parting with biological families, queer communities create a space for healing in solidarity. Most participants experienced both oppression and communal healing. One of the participants said that, in addition to healing, moving in queer spaces also “changed the way that I saw social justice but also personal intimacy between people, because I think in the queer community there’s a different understanding of emotional labour or friendship or intimacy or support even.” This is not to idealize queer communities or to say that this only happens within them, but to draw inspiration from the participants’ experiences.

As an example of how the experience of healing and support can be extended to the more-than-human world through NM, I want to draw on one of the participant’s gardening project. Co-created with Nature, the “Impossible Forest” (2016, Figure 3), is “a meditation on decay and blossoming”. In their creative reflection, they shared the following intimate story:

“My father passed away this past summer in the States. Throughout the process of him dying, I could feel this garden supporting me. I could feel it growing, caring for itself and for me. I could sit in it, 6,500km away, and have it hold me. I could relate to it as an anchor, like I did my father. After two months of being away in the middle of the summer, I returned to a wild meadow of flowers. The parts of the garden which previously were difficult to maintain life, suddenly became hotspots of activity. I was relieved, astonished and really moved.”



Figure 3. The Impossible Forest (2016) - a community gardening project by Grading. “I wanted to create a practice, a process, a space that helped me to understand and really meet Nature on all levels, seen and unseen. I wanted to share this practice process etc. with other people and other beings. Its [sic] like a studio for me. An island. A bridge. A friend. A partner. An offer. A sanctuary. A school. [...] I work in it, with it, I share it. That is what I do with the garden: I practice co-creating with Nature.” Grading, 2016.

Image retrieved online 11 May 2018 from: <https://inquilines.com/2016/06/07/impossible-forest/>

4.2 Queer(-ecological) relational values and practices of worldmaking

The previous section addressed the emotionality of ecological loss: once accepted, it can be a source of community building, healing and an important step to politicize our relation with Nature, as fundamental relational values are exposed. The next question thus asks *“How can queer(-ecological) values and practices of worldmaking inform new cultural practices of thinking, valuing and relating with Nature?”*, to further explore how to translate emotional engagement into cultural transformation (Teed, 2015).

First, let’s review again some of the aspects of the dominant culture and MI, as pointed out by the participants; for example, criticizing the instrumentalization of Nature: the “capitalist approach, ‘What do we get out of it?’ It’s just so exhausting, so limiting [...] also in regards to the language”; backgrounding:

“Nature is a system that we take for granted, that is actually so much bigger than us, that we’re afraid of, that we also need and want and depend on, without getting a whole engagement. Like, what is it to be fully engaged with an ecological existence?”;

the connection between detachment and responsibility:

“[T]he people that are most responsible for the destruction are the least connected to the natural world, and maybe they even realize this subconsciously or they have this dread or guilt that they have totally detached from what they actually do in their life”;

the homogenization of Nature: “I think it’s also one of those white, middle-class, urban arrogance aspects of saying ‘It’s very nice with Nature’ and you refer to some vague park and everything is supposed to be very fixed [...], it still has to be controllable”; the recognition that one is not immune to these patterns:

“And it’s hard to not be a slave to it, or to not come in and dominate it. I only have two days in the whole month, where I’m back in the garden. Am I really going to sit for two hours and meditate and have this conversation? Yes, actually it’s more important to do it than to go in and just rip everything out.”

The following section continues to explore ways out of the dominant culture beyond mourning. “It is not that mourning is the goal of politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose the keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (Butler, 2006, p. XVIII-XIX). Through mourning, we can interrogate underlying cultural patterns of relating to each other and with Nature:

“[M]elancholia suggests a non-normalizing relationship to the past and the world, in which the recognition of the identificatory persistence of loss in the present - loss as self, the fact that we are constituted by prohibition, power, and violence - is central to our ethical and political relationships with others” (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010, p. 341).

4.2.1 Definition of queer worldmaking

As I have alluded to in the methodology section, queer-identifying persons amongst other oppressed groups, have a non-normalizing relationship to the world, which is why I am drawing on “[q]ueer and communal worldmaking practices” (Goltz et al., 2015, p. 10) and values as a subversive alternative to the MI. I want to trouble its foundations by giving impulses towards different ways of relating, rather than impose a complete alternative cultural model.

“Worldmaking is not a construction of a new model, a definitive alternative, or a substitute. The notion of queer worldmaking, as a term, a project, and a landscape of promise/potential works to define a broad range of queer impulses [...]. Worldmaking seeks an elsewhere, a disruption, and a rejection of legitimized and routinized conventions of normativity.” (Goltz et al., 2015, p. 12)

Looking at queerness this way implies that it is more than an identity based on sexuality or gender expression, even though some identify themselves as such (Copes & Mitchell, 2015). Queering as a modality is also a “doing for and toward the future” (Muñoz, 2010, p. 1), a dynamic, never completed process resisting definition (Doak, 2016; Goltz et al., 2015) and “challenging normative knowledges, identities, behaviors, and spaces thereby unsettling power relations and taken-for-granted assumptions” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 156). As such, queering is available to everyone. “From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality” (Muñoz, 2010, p. 209).

These ways of describing and living queerness were very much reflected in the participants’ statements: All of them agreed, that queerness does not have a fixed definition. On a personal level, the way they defined their identity changed over the course of their lives, one of them calling it a “constant reorganization of personhood”. A definition that particularly spoke to me is the following:

“queerness is about how you touch the world and how it touches you back. And I think that that’s very indicative of this sense of queerness has never been about sexuality or identity in this concrete way for me, it’s really about how we choose to live.”

Another participant specified not sharing heteronormative values of living. More idealistically spoken about queer worldmaking, "it's the essence of culture, of what it is to be human. It's where we learn to interact with each other." Following from this notion, the same participant wrote in their literary reflection: "We seek less to dominate, to differentiate, and more to connect, to enable. Queer folk give life to humanity. Without queers, there is no understanding or connection between genders."

Another interviewee made a similar remark:

"[I]f you look at violence in the world, [...] it always is the result of usually a very masculine clash of.. violence sort of happens on the extremes of when people are disconnected from each other and don't understand each other and if there's a sort of third way or third identity then it's based on mutual understanding, understanding of the other, to dis-other, to not separate one from another."

While marginalized groups have an epistemic advantage to this way of interacting, a queer perspective is available to everyone, regardless of their identity. The burden of connecting and enabling should not lie solely with them.

4.2.2 Understanding and living interdependency and -connectedness as a result of loss

Tapping into this ability to connect, which might follow from the communities built around a collective processing of ecological loss, our mutual interdependency and -connectedness becomes apparent (Butler, 2006). Extending this to the more-than-human world, we realize that our thriving is essentially but not instrumentally linked, as the MI suggests (Plumwood, 2003). At base, this is reflected in the acceptance that humans are part of Nature and fundamentally dependent on it (ibid.) - a notion all participants recognized. For example, one of them said:

"[W]e can't live without Nature, we are a part of Nature, we are not beyond it, we are not above it, we are not apart from it. We try to manipulate it as much as possible but that's actually also what animals do in their possibilities, [...] and I think to a certain degree that's ok. But not at the point where you see yourself above Nature – then in my opinion it's not ok anymore."

Another participant applied this idea to the ocean specifically:

"I guess connected to it is not strong enough of the thought, it's just being part of that system. Not to try to dominate over it. And yeah, maybe being in the ocean, anyone who has lived near the ocean, you're taught to never turn your back on the ocean, because there's no way you could ever dominate it. And here on land, I guess we sort of fool ourselves into thinking that we could dominate over Nature but the oceans do what they want".

4.2.3 Extending agency to the more-than-human world

From recognizing this interconnectedness and interdependence follows the extension of agency to Nature, another step to redeem what has been othered by the MI. “A deeper resolution of these dualisms would involve extending concepts of autonomy, agency and creativity to those who have been denied them” (Plumwood, 2003, p. 124) within the MI. Doing so allows for ethical consideration of the more-than-human world (ibid.). It also elevates Nature from the status as background, acknowledging its value in and for itself (ibid.; Morton, 2010).

“[W]e can as humans indeed recognise ourselves in nature, and not only as we do when it has been colonised, commodified and domesticated, made into a mirror which reflects back only our own species’ images and our own needs. We can instead recognise in the myriad forms of nature other beings - earth others - whose needs, goals and purposes must, like our own, be acknowledged and respected.” (Plumwood, 2003, p. 137)

It allows us to leave behind perceptions of powerlessness within the system and rediscover ourselves as political agents. “Retrieving a sense of other beings in nature as diverse, richly relational individuals and as originative, intentional agents is also part of retrieving such a conception for ourselves in our social systems” (ibid., p. 119).

I want to illustrate this theory with two anecdotes from the participants’ original artwork.

The first one I want to draw on is one of the participants’ movement and performance pieces, “YEW” (2018, Figure 4). In it, they tried to bring Nature into the studio by being with certain plants in preparation for the performance:

“[W]e worked with these plants as partners and we sat with these plants every day” - “the challenge with that was to learn to approach another, and in this case a plant or a tree, with no desire, with no want to help, to heal, to fix or to be helped or healed or fixed or to gain knowledge or information or anything like that. Actually to sit with something and to do nothing, just to sit there. And from there then everything came. And so much more than if you have this mind that is directing something, because there’s no chance that you can hear and there’s no room for them.”

For the day of the performance they even wrote the plants’ latin names on the theater announcement board to acknowledge their agency and contribution, but the backlash was immediate: Their names were taken down several times. Similar disagreements happened before the show, when the curator suggested to fill the whole room with plants:

“[F]or me that’s such a nightmare and typical and abusive and [...] I’ve seen what happens to those plants, [...] maybe they give some away but for the most part they get trashed or tossed; and it hurts me every time; and also what does it mean to represent Nature? Why do we need to represent Nature in a theater, also when we are Nature? [...] And always then you have this plant sitting in the audience to say ‘This piece is related to Nature’ and I could puke every time [...] because it’s abusive, it’s colonizing, it’s representative”.



Figure 4. Screenshots from the video documentation of the movement and performance piece “YEW” (2018) by Beech, Clover, Echivarea, Fern, Gradinger, Oak, Moss, Mugwort, Schubot, Stinging Nettle, Yew. The picture on the left shows Gradinger attaching electrones to Fern, in order to show the audience how the music for the entire piece was generated: Electrical impulses the plant gives out were converted into sounds of musical instruments. The picture on the right shows Gradinger dancing with Schubot; their movements were inspired by engaging with the plants. Tanzforum Berlin, 2018.

The other artist I had the pleasure to interview created a piece which beautifully shows the interconnection between the agency and grievability of queers and Nature. Titled “Companions” (2017), the piece is comprised of two films to be shown together: One is Luther Price’s film “Sodom” (1989), which shows gay porn from the 1970s, treated with chemical fluids to induce the decay of the bodies on display - a thematization of the HIV/Aids-crisis of the 80s in which queer deaths remained largely unrecognized. In response to it, they made a film titled “Fuck Tree” (2017, Figure 5), which is a portrait of and a love letter to a tree that has been holding space to enact queerness in a cruising area in London over generations. They described it as a meditation on queer life and death, and a tree that outlives it all. In their research they discovered how the people sharing the tree’s space were connected to and dependent on it, recognizing it as an agent.



Figure 5. Image from “Fuck Tree” (2017), a film to accompany Price’s film “Sodom” (1989) in Rosenfeld’s “Companions” (2017) piece. Fuck Tree is a portrait of and love letter to a tree which has been holding space for queer sex in a cruising area in London for decades. Rosenfeld, 2017.

4.2.4 Embracing complexity: Recognizing continuity and difference

Rediscovering a sensibility to the agency of the more-than-human world, which has been so violently suppressed by the MI, enables us to dive deeper into this complex web of continuity and difference (Kagan, 2012): The former emerges from recognizing interdependencies and our interconnectedness of concerns and ends (Plumwood, 2003). It requires the abolishment of the violent distinction of an inside and outside Nature (Morton, 2010). Butler (1990) criticizes the assertion of the inside-outside dualism in terms of sex and gender which forces labeling of sexual identity. This can also be applied to the establishment of Nature as the fixed, easily distinguishable environment (outside) of the human (inside) (Morton, 2010). In both instances, these boundaries are consistently defied by queer ecologies (ibid.). Yet, recognizing continuities is not the same thing as assuming sameness or unity (Plumwood, 2003). Respecting differences and not projecting humanness or human values onto the more-than-human world is an equally crucial step in overcoming anthropocentrism and incorporation mechanisms of the MI (ibid.).

Navigating this complex tension is a lived reality in queer worldmaking, which according to Kagan (2017) requires a sensibility to qualitative complexity, in order to strike the balance between cooperation and opposition to grow as a community. Cooperation derives from common goals and intersectional solidarity, while opposition emerges from differentiated rights, visibility, and privileges within the LGBTTIQQ2SA+⁶-community (Abustan & Rud, 2016). Several of the participants expressed notions of

⁶ lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer, questioning, two-spirited, allies and more

embracing the complexity of these interdependencies. For example, some referred to the complex diversity of sexualities and gender expressions in queer spaces beyond the binary. They also drew parallels to wanting to understand complex climate- and ecosystems, recognizing their interconnectedness and how they, as humans, are embedded in them.



Figure 6. Painting as a result of creative reflection. Playing on the different tropes humans have for non-human animals, this portrait series is the participant’s attempt to queer the species divide. SB, 2018.

One of the participants captured these notions of continuity and difference in a series of paintings they sent me for their creative reflection (Figure 6). An attempt to queer the species divide, the paintings show a clothed pig, bear and rat, which is a play on how humans impose notions of humanness, e.g. sexual identities, on non-human animals. For example, “bears” are a well-known trope for a specific physicality within the gay community. The participant also reflected on traits ascribed to non-human animals through colloquial expressions to legitimize the way they are treated, e.g. “stupid pig”.

Recognizing continuities and differences requires the recognition of one’s own standpoint and the privileges and responsibilities it entails - amongst and beyond humans. All participants displayed an understanding of this, in relation to their (legible) sexual and gender identity, their skin colour and how it was read, their place of origin, etc., be it within the queer community:

“I still enjoy all the privileges of being a white man in this world. And I’m fairly masculine, so I’ve sort of explored my gender and sexual identity and I still feel I have a very sort of masculine take on life, I guess, for better and for worse. And I think actually that perhaps slows down my exploration, because I’m not as vulnerable as most of the queer communities. I can always sort of hide behind the mask of privilege. Maybe that’s one of the things I’m trying to push myself”;

between society at large and marginalized queer communities, which can give

“support [...] with other interpersonal relationships, like when you have to build a bridge to people who don’t understand all this background, I feel like the queer people in my life also help with that because they are like ‘You are not crazy, you are not alone’”;

or beyond the queer community: “I think as a person who travels and as a person who’s legibly white and legibly cis and straight, I spend a lot of time trying to use my privilege in a way that is responsible and positive”.

While I want to refrain from comparing Western cultures to others, as this goes beyond the scope of the thesis at hand, I cannot ignore the following emerging pattern in the data: The intersectional understanding of privilege, responsibility and visibility cultivated in queer spaces also translated into the participants’ appreciation of indigenous cultures and knowledges in regards to their ways of relating to Nature as well as gender:

“[G]rowing up with that understanding [...] to starting to experience in California the culture that was destroyed in order for us to be there, it shaped a lot of it, and it made me really sad because these people were doing amazing like balance with nature and were so conscientious about the effect they had on the earth, and then the fact that they were wiped out by another culture that valued violence is.. is very telling”.

In addition to their balance with Nature, native Americans also practiced “gender”⁷ differently, with two-spirited people representing a third category on the spectrum. Similarly, Hawaiian indigenous culture contained the concept of mahu as a third identity, as well as a closer relationship with Nature. These practices have been rediscovered since the 1970s. Another participant relates indigenous- to scientific knowledge:

“I grew up in that academic, scientific context, and so yes, I do appreciate this way of acquiring knowledge, but I also stress quite a lot in the book actually, that there are other kinds of knowledge. That there is traditional knowledge. And that that is just as valuable, if not more valuable in case of [...] resisting climate change.”

⁷ Gender in itself is a Western concept, which I do not want to impose on other cultures. But for want of a better word, it is employed here in quotation marks anyways.

4.2.5 Empathy and futurity beyond the human

Being aware of intersecting oppressions and privileges increases our empathetic capacities (Seymour, 2013). In their poem, one of the interviewees connected the loss of Nature with the marginalized bodies fighting for it, concluding that empathy is a core value to overcome the socioecological crisis:

“I think of the nature we have lost and
of each wave eroding the nature we
have left. I think of the mudslides
and the wildfires and the melting arctic.
I think of all the marginalized bodies
that have been at the frontlines of saving
the earth, because empathy lies at the
heart of understanding the planet
mirrors ourselves.”

Considering the uncertainties that come with ecological losses and the changing climate, extending this intersectional empathy to the future is important. In their book *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* Seymour (2013) offers

“a political model that we might extend to the ‘real world’: one in which imagination and empathy allow humans to build political coalitions across divides such as race and sexuality, and to identify across species in ways that benefit the biosphere rather than the individual, the nation, or the corporation.” (p. 28)

Inspiration for this model was derived from the lived experiences within queer communities, in which more often than not, familial bonds are formed beyond biological ties due to discrimination and exclusion (ibid.; Goltz et al., 2015). As previous sections mentioned, intersectional empathy and care for the community as a whole - and thus also strangers - are prevalent. In this way queers have an epistemic advantage. That being said, this queered notion of empathy is not attached to an essentially queer identity or sexuality, but rather a widely applicable model available to all, regardless of their background (Seymour, 2013). One of the participants confirmed this: “I think queer folk have a higher capacity to empathize because of their experience [...] but I think it can also be a sense that develops”. If extended, it allows for care beyond the individual, the family, humankind, beyond immediate relations, beyond financial ties. “This kind of action operates without any reward, without any guarantee of success [...] it is invested in the ends (survival of the non-human alongside the human) but emphasizes the means (caring for the non-human alongside the human)” (Seymour, 2013, p. 11).

Implementing this opposes several aspects of the dominant culture informed by the MI: profit-driven corporations and individuals causing ecological destruction while disregarding the future completely heteronormative futurities that only consider the next generations of humans (ibid.); revaluation and detachment of a trait construed as “feminine” and thus neglected by the MI (Plumwood, 2003);

Regarding futurities, the interviews revealed two different but connected stances, both revolving around empathy. On the one hand, several participants expressed solidarity for the more-than-human world, while expressing their frustration with humans when they further the dominant culture and its futurity: “this narcissism in patriarchy, in white supremacy ‘Well, as long as I’m taken care of, it doesn’t matter’ and there’s this connection that I see, [...] privilege and solidarity as kind of in opposition to each other”. The same interviewee added to that: “I don’t want to be uncomfortable. I don’t want to do the work of redefining a system.’ I would be so willing to do that but I feel like when there’s a species that’s willing to destroy itself for its own comfort, I don’t want to fix that.” Calling humankind a hopeless case, two participants tried putting the survival of humankind in the bigger picture: “to be very crass, the world will continue to spin and humankind may or may not survive, but [...] we are still so much smaller than the whole sort of Nature in a wider sense”; “once we’ve really like exhausted all of the possibilities of - and in a way we never will, because Nature will outlive humanity anyway, I mean that’s its cycle, that’s its system”.

This sense of defeat for humanity’s fate was beautifully captured in the following verse:

“If we can’t stop it, if it has to come,
Global warming seems like the balances
tipping to center, showing the wishes of
capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy
they have never been at home in a place
so colorful, so open, so alive, so sure of its
place and its connection to all things other.”

And it is this notion of solidarity with those deemed “Other” which seems to fuel the participants’ art and activism despite emerging feelings of hopelessness, resignation, frustration with their fellow humans, best summarized in the following remark:

“[I]t might go to hell, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t do positive things or that we can’t make positive changes for individuals or for individual animals or for a community or maybe for a city or maybe for a park.”

Following from this they acknowledged the effects climate change already has and will have on our societal structures in terms of population size and composition, which made one participant explain how the queer community already prepared them for these changes now:

“So [...] for me I see that one of the tools that the LGBTQ movement, not everyone and everywhere, by all means, but one of the things that I feel I have with me in the community building aspect is something that I think we will be able to use in working trying to bridge gaps and working together with different communities”.

4.2.6 Coalitions and spill-overs

Currently, especially Environmental Justice movements work with an intersectional and norm-critical perspective, but this needs to spill over to the rest of the ecological movement, which for now does not have a unifying politics (Plumwood, 2003). “Queer ecology suggests, then, a new practice of ecological knowledges, spaces, and politics that places central attention on challenging hetero-ecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual and gender positions” (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010, p. 22).

These perspectives can be integrated by finding coalitions based on liberation rather than essentialized ties of oppression, which takes the burden of education off the (formerly) marginalized (Doak, 2016; Gaard, 1997). In doing so, allyship, politically productive dialogues and mutual learning opportunities emerge instead of a unified, but oppressive ecological movement (Butler, 1997; Hogan, 2010; Sandilands, 1999). Thus the danger of co-option and submersion of one movement to the other can be forgone (ibid.).

The participants I interviewed already contribute their norm-critical perspectives to a range of eco-projects. Here are some examples:

One of the participants grew up in Berlin’s queer scene, which immensely shaped their values. Now they live in the countryside about an hour away from Berlin, a place in which the queer community is much smaller. Ultimately, that made them engage more, because they felt responsible due to the lack of others standing up for the cause. Within their eco-activism, this mainly manifests in their critique of the heteronormativity, essentialism as well as anthropocentrism of some of the ideologies behind agricultural practices, e.g. Demeter or Terra Preta, but also a critique of gendered patterns within their studies of Organic Agriculture. They are thus contributing to dismantle heteronormative Nature-based ideologies (Hogan, 2010). What originally moved them away from a sole focus on queer rights activism,

which was mainly motivated by themselves and their community being personally affected, was the realization that if there is no planet to live on, these social struggles become pointless. Now focussing on organic agriculture they find that food is something we can all connect over, regardless of our background or identity.

Another interviewee had been a LGBTTIQQ2SA+ -, and especially a trans*-rights activist for decades, and now applies their norm-critical and intersectional approach to a recycling and sustainability course they teach:

“I think those processes within the LGBTQ movement gives [sic] me tools to work with [...] those issues but in a different context. I think within the very white, middle class sustainability movement it is highly relevant to talk about anti-racism, ableism and all of these norms around social and economical status and background”.

They are pointing to the fact that in the past, the environmental movement rarely engaged with identity politics (Fisher, Dow, & Ray, 2017). But the spill-over also works the other way: In their new community garden project for trans*-people and allies, they attempt another coalition. The intersections of their activism, embedded in Nature, are reflected in their painting (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Painting as a result of the creative reflection. According to the participant, the red squares symbolize their interconnected realms of activism, embedded in Nature. AF, 2018.

A third participant translated their experiences in queer spaces into the science communication community by seeking out other queer-feminist identifying scientists: to create networks, amplify their voices, and support each other against the heteronormativity in that scene. Another attitude they cultivated in the queer community is the ability to stand up and fight for themselves and the things they love, without feeling embarrassed about it.

The last example I want to give the reader shows how queer ecologies can work as a third way when thinking about Nature, as one participant remarks: “But it’s so crazy how from the romanticizing of Nature, this worship to the opposite side – how strong it is [...] and hardly any talk of anything in between, another way”. Historically, theorizations of Nature within science and philosophy privileged white, male, heteronormative theorists (Seymour, 2013). Traditionally they either romanticized Nature, e.g. through masculinized notions of wilderness, or justified the patriarchal mastery of Nature (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010; Morton, 2007; Plumwood, 2003). Writing from a privileged position, they neglected the implications these assumptions had for marginalized groups (ibid.) - something the integration of queer-ecological knowledges in SS and the environmental movement can remedy (Doak, 2016; Hogan, 2016).

4.2.7 Imagination and concrete utopia

To begin to grasp these complex webs of interconnectedness and interdependence, continuity and difference, act within them in empathetic ways, to dream up ways to extend agency beyond the human, to be open to radically transform Western culture through coalitional learning, we need imagination and creative capabilities (Kagan, 2017; Seymour, 2013). “The arts may also play a fundamental role in the cultural transformation process towards cultures of sustainability, most especially in reforming our ways of knowing and acting upon our knowledge of reality” (Kagan, 2012, p. 17).

We cannot see the consequences of our actions immediately, but we already have the building blocks in the present to co-construct subversive futures - concrete utopias exist in everyday life (Muñoz, 2009).

“Queerness is not yet here. [...] We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past used to imagine a future.” (ibid., p. 1)

At the very least, queerness can help us cultivate openness towards that which cannot be articulated just yet within our cultures (Goltz et al., 2015).

As one participant remarked, the tension between “reality” and imagined subversive futures stems from supporters of the dominant culture selling the current reality as the most rational, when really it is just as constructed as other imagined possibilities. Thus, “the only way that we’re going to save ourselves from the mess we’ve fallen into is by using imagination.” And indeed, as another interviewee declared, in the “queer community there’s so much of a focus on self-care and imagination and the potential where we need to go, that it feels more possible to be engaged in and it deconstructs what’s happening so it doesn’t feel so overpowerful.”

One participant even suggested that imagination is inherent to queering:

“[Q]ueering something means that it’s creating a sense of the unknown or we’re like breaking an expectation, or destroying a sense of expectation and what people consider to be what’s right and what’s dominant, but then at the same time queerness depends so much on that too: solidarity and to know that the people who you choose are there and that the systems that you create for yourself, and the economies you recreate outside of the dominant structure are there for you”.

Several of the participants also use art to make connections more tangible, e.g. in their performances, or through crafting - and in the creative reflection they all joined as part of this study.

5 Discussion

Overall, queer(-ecological) theory and practice complemented each other well in answering the question **“How can queer(-ecological) theory and practices inspire a politicized coping with ecological loss to subvert Western Cultures of Unsustainability?”**. The attempt at augmenting queer ecological theory with less abstract examples from activism and art thus succeeded.

In the following paragraphs I summarize and discuss the main results, as displayed in Figure 8.

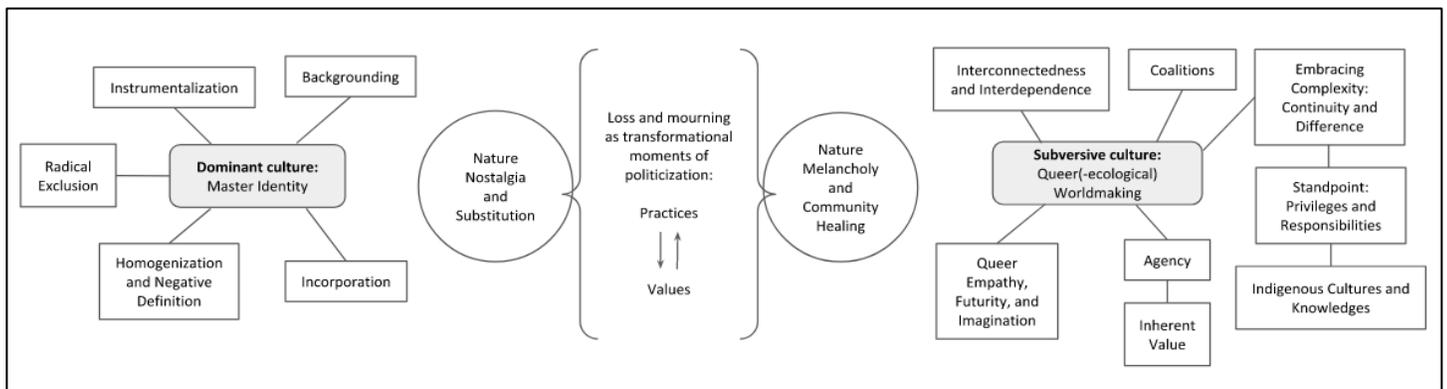


Figure 7. Illustration of the Master Identity and its strategies of oppression (left), practices of loss and mourning (center), and subversive impulses of queer worldmaking (right). Own image, 2018.

First I want to answer *how queer(-ecological) practices of mourning can inspire emotional coping strategies for ecological loss* (Sub-RQ 1). As none of the participants were in denial about the emotionality attached to ecological loss, and were in fact very much engaging with their varying feelings of grief, we can learn what comes from indulging in emotional coping: Like in queer communities, loss can create communities for healing as well as cultural renegotiation. These communities raise awareness for the grievability of Nature. Politicizing ecological loss can be considered a culturally transformative act, as Nature is not recognized as grievable in the dominant culture. Emotional engagement also fueled the interviewees' urge to act as well as change their own behaviour. Ample self-care as well as community support are crucial in order to not burn out, due to the high emotional labour ecological (as well as queer) activism requires.

The values and practices explored around the Sub-RQ 2, *"How can queer(-ecological) values and practices of worldmaking inform new cultural practices of thinking, valuing and relating with Nature?"*, can either be a result of engaging emotionally with ecological loss, following Butler's (2006) logic of recognizing interdependence through loss; I consider this a very accessible entry point, given how pertinent, albeit unrecognized feelings of ecological grief are in Western societies. Some of the values and practices described in answer to Sub-RQ 2 might then be results of such an engagement. Or, another entry point to subvert the dominant culture could be the art, activism, and experiential knowledge brought forth by marginalized communities such as the queer community. Accessing this subjugated knowledge revealed quite a high ecological sensibility in addition to already practiced alternative ways of relating beyond the MI.

Following from loss but also collective oppression is a sense of interconnectedness, a realization of interdependence. Admitting dependence counters the strategies of the MI backgrounding the Other, taking them for granted, instrumentalizing them, and using them as backdrop to achievements in line with MI. Extending agency to those deemed Other empowers them, and in the case of Nature gives them value in and for itself, rather than radically excluding them.

Another lesson to be taken from queer worldmaking is how complexity is embraced in queer spaces, recognizing continuities as well as differences. Thus homogenizing tendencies of the MI are defeated, and awareness for privileges and responsibilities rises. It also allows to think Nature beyond anthropocentric projections of humanness onto the more-than-human world and its incorporation into "human" values and perspectives.

The above mentioned impulses contribute to increasing empathy towards those deemed Other: understanding their agency and standpoint, the implied privileges and responsibilities, while recognizing their differences. Within the MI, empathy and emotionality are subjugated to the mind and reason, and attributed to women*. Alleviating its status without attaching it to a specific physicality defeats the dualisms and their essentialist implications.

The ability to project empathy into the future towards unknown and unrelated individuals is another aspect in which to take inspiration from queer communities. Care can be extended beyond the own familial ties, new generations, of one's own species as practiced within the dominant culture.

Even though hopelessness and resignation are quite common emotions in face of the future, the participants' coalitional practices of activism and art are empowering examples of how important even small scale changes are.

Imagination plays a big role in exploring and experimenting with these subversive values and practices, to emphasize them beyond the niche spaces in which they are common practice. It will also help to cultivate creative capacities to come up with additional practices and scrutinize existing ones, which is why the impulses of queer worldmaking presented in the analysis section are only tentative, and are not to be considered a new model in direct opposition to the MI.

That being said, I want to emphasize again, that myself as well as the participants of this study have been socialized within Western societies and acknowledge our complicitness in this system. Even though queer spaces tend to be spaces of subversive culture- and knowledge production, it is still important not to idealize queerness (it is still a state of precarity) or the queer community as a whole (the wider LGBTTIQQ2SA+-community is still very much stratified in terms of rights, privileges and visibility). And although intersectional relationality is often practiced in queer safer spaces, it is not always extended to relations with(in) Nature. Furthermore, moving in queer spaces might not have a larger impact on their worldmaking than other marginalizations they are facing. In this way, queer relationality is often practiced with an intersectional approach, e.g. one of the participants pointed out that their feminism is equally important.

I also want to stress again, that with queerness being more of a modality than an identity, it is available to everyone. The values and practices discussed are queer as in disruptive of what is, but not queer as in essential to any kind of sexuality or gender identity. Such a notion would defeat the very definition of queerness. Engagement in these values and practices of thinking, relating, and worldmaking can thus be learned. But even if they may be more prevalent in queer spaces now due to their epistemic privilege, I

by no means want to put the burden and emotional labour of education on queer-identifying persons (Rowe et al., 2015). The eco-activists and -artists I interviewed have taken up this extra-burden, which I applaud. But I am also writing this thesis in order to amplify their voices and support their claims beyond their individual circles, thus taking some of the weight off them. The aim is neither the co-option of queer worldmaking nor its submersion under other claims of the environmental movement (Sandilands, 1999), but inviting self-education and constant self-reflexivity for mutually beneficial coalitions.

“[T]here must be a way to bring together mainstream environmentalism and its concerns with ecological relationships and sustainability; environmental justice and its concerns with racism, classism, and colonialism; and queer theory and its concerns with homophobia and the regimes of normativity. And I insist that there must be a way to question ‘nature’ and ‘environmentalism’ while still caring for the non-human natural environment.” (Seymour, 2013, pp. 9-10)

Both SS and ecological movements would benefit from questioning and queering their underlying conceptualizations of Nature, to truly contribute to transitions towards more sustainable cultures and societies. And ultimately, queering goes beyond the “merely cultural”, particularistic, identitarian - shifts in our culture have concrete material implications (Butler, 1997), that we would all benefit from.

Further research is necessary on how the subversive cultural explored in this thesis can spread in society, through and beyond activism and art, e.g. through education. For this, the different impulses could also be looked into in more detail. The use of art-based methods in SS research to re-imagine cultures and futurities also showed potential for further investigation. Lastly, it would be interesting to look deeper into the usefulness of Nature as a concept and the potentials of overcoming it.

6 Conclusion

The thesis at hand explored the transformative potential of engaging emotionally with ecological loss. Looking at a community that politicizes their losses by publicly negotiating what is grievable and creating communities around that served as an inspiration for ways forward. Within such communities, alternative ways of worldmaking subvert the dominant culture. From it emerge impulses for other ways of thinking, valuing and relating with Nature beyond the Master Identity. Because oppressions within the MI are connected, subverting it also offers potential for joint liberation.

This thesis, like queer worldmaking,

“privileges the queer voices and impulses and gestures to alternative ways of seeing, knowing, hoping, and being in relation. It questions and keeps questioning, guided by and ethic and

commitment to disrupt, to upset, to turn, and to agitate. It is the impulse to resist the normativity that is embedded and continues to actively embed itself in our worlds, our minds, our relations, our hopes, and our futures. Queer worldmaking is a commitment to rage against the lulling and blaring violence of normativity. It's the burning reminder of elsewhere and otherwise that we are continually taught to fear, to deny, to forget, to kill. Yet, queerness, while taking some root in the abstract idea, is given shape, necessity, urgency, utility, and contestation in the lived experience.”
(Goltz et al., 2015, p. 12)

And I hope it empowered you to do some queering of your own.

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8 Appendices

Appendix A: Seeking interviewees for Master thesis in Berlin

[to post in FB groups, send in emails, etc.]

Do you identify as queer? And are you involved in any ecological projects or organizations, activism or art? Then please read on :)

My name is Judith, I am currently working on my Master thesis in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science, here in Berlin. The topic I am looking into is a queer ecological perspective on the loss of Nature: on an emotional level this means coping with ecological degradation, exploitation, extinction, on a cultural level this means overcoming heteronormative, exploitative ways of conceptualizing and relating to nature using our queer imagination. So what I am basically interested in is how your queerness informs your ecological activism/art.

Are you interested in giving me your view on this in an interview over a cup of coffee? Or do you want to get more information? Please email me (xxxxxx@gmail.com) or add me on Facebook (xxxxxxx). Please also feel free to forward this information to anyone who might be interested in participating.

I am looking forward to hearing from you!

Appendix B: Table of participants

Particip.	Place of Origin	Relation to Berlin	Eco-Activism/Art	Creative reflection	Interview
RS	United States of America	Living there for 2 years	Activist/ student: Environmental studies; writes for sustainability NGO working on labour and farming	Literary text	09.02.2018 English
LR	United States of America	Living there for 10 years	Artist: performance, film	“If You Ask Me What I Want, I’ll Tell You. I Want Everything” (performance, 2017) “Companions” (film, 2017) + email	13.02.2018 English

GK	Germany	Partners & queer kink community for the past 14 years	Activist/ scientist: marine biology and climate change; wrote popular-academic book on the impact of CC on low island populations; own blog: Amocean	Crocheted octopus and sea brasse	14.02.2018 English
SR	United States of America	Living there for 6 months	Activist/ student: social and environmental justice	poem	15.02.2018 English
AF	Sweden	Partner in and mother from Berlin	Activist: teaches course on sustainability and recycling at folk high school; craft pedagogue; community garden for trans* people and allies	painting	21.02.2018 English
SB	Germany	Originally from Berlin	Activist/ student: ecological agriculture and animal rights	painting	27.02.2018 German
JG	United States of America	Living there for 15 years	Artist: dance, performance, community gardening	“YEW” (performance, 2018) “The Impossible Forest” (garden project, 2016) + email	12.03.2018 English

Appendix C: Invitation to create

[prior to interview]

In preparation for the interview, I invite you to engage in a creative reflection on what we are going to talk about:

Using an artistic practice of your choice (you could write a poem or a short literary reflection, make a collage, compile some photos or a video clip, dance, draw... whatever floats your creative boat), I want to invite you to think about an ecological space or element that is dear to you: How do you relate to it? What would losing it mean to you? How would you cope with this loss? And what does "Nature" mean to you? How is your queerness related to all of this?

Use these questions to guide your reflection, you don't have to answer all of them. It doesn't have to be perfect, everyone can create. :)

Please send me whatever you come up with at least a day prior to our interview appointment. We will then start the interview by talking about your piece.

I am asking you to do this for two reasons:

- I think engaging creatively will allow both of us to reflect on the subject on a deeper level.
- I would also love to compile what the people I interview come up with and turn it into a zine or a little exhibition (depending on the material) to give something back to the community. Only with your permission, of course.

I hope you enjoy this process and have a little fun with it & I am looking forward to our interview. If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to contact me.

Appendix D: Art pieces

RS:

The ocean connects the land and the atmosphere. Without it, there would be only hot deserts and cold deserts. The ocean connects all life, and is a source of incredible energy. I see the heat stored in the ocean as our single greatest source of solar energy. From a utilitarian perspective, it powers all weather systems in the atmosphere, and provides humankind with direct sources of food.

The ocean is amorphous. It is not just a liquid that covers most of the planet. It takes all physical forms of matter, as well as a less tangible space in the human psyche. Most of the world's population lives along the ocean, despite being land-based. Its presence calms me, restores me, and is my canvas for reflection, much like dancing. I am not able to express my thoughts (yet?) in drawing or painting, or even in writing.

In Hawaii, role of the ocean in daily life is more obvious. But for me it is the simple presence of it that most enriches my life. I am as comfortable in water as I am on land. I spent so much of my childhood in water, often swimming greater distances in a day than I walked on land. The ocean is not calm or safe, and I am lower on the food chain than I am on land, but it is liberating just the same.

Here in Germany, the ocean is responsible for the melancholic dreariness, but it dulls the piercing jaws of the arctic with its heavy blankets of fog. It washes away oppressive heat and erases drought. It freshens our air and renews the land. Germany is not thought of as a coastal country, nor does it have strong historical or cultural ties to ocean-based trade (except in the far north). But its influence is still present everywhere.

What is queerness if not but an artificial construction of humans? To me, queer is not something unusual or strange or peculiar. What we commonly understand as queer is the intersection of human life forces.

We seek less to dominate, to differentiate, and more to connect, to enable. Queer folk give life to humanity. Without queers, there is no understanding or connection between genders. Eventually the extreme tendencies of humanity leave our race like the atmosphere and the land with no ocean. Just cold deserts and hot deserts.

Collectively queers are healers, unifiers, and bring calm to a violent species. They defy binaries as understood by Western culture. As with many indigenous cultures, I see queerness as a sort of glue that holds society together, whereas it serves no direct reproductive or dominating function, it enriches life around us. Queerness breathes life in to culture and creates crossroads and intersections.

In Native Hawaiian Culture, Queerness is not an identity, it is a concept of the embodiment of both female and male spirit. It is fluid and amorphous. Māhū is “the expression of the third self.” (Kaumakaiwa Kanaka’ole) “It is not a gender, it’s not an orientation... It is simply an expression of the third person as it involves the individual. When you find that place in yourself to acknowledge both male and female aspects within and accept the capacity to embrace both ... that is where the māhū exists and true liberation happens.”

Queerness to me allows for a connection to, and an understanding of, our ecological environment. It is the māhū in me that connects me to the natural world. It is a space in my mind open to

Queerness is healing, understanding, liberating, intoxicating, confusing.

Queerness is treated in western society much like the ocean, misunderstood, abused, neglected, pillaged of their bounty, commoditized.

LR:

For me, I am interested in queer approaches and desire function in relationship to questions of ecology, and in the case of my last show, more specifically climate change.... I started with the question: in a future where all of our natural resources have been exhausted, and all we are left with is flesh, how do we sustain, access and connect with queer relationality and desire.

Last summer I was the artist in residence at Lux Moving Image in London, where I was conducting creative research into the themes of what will be my first feature film. One of the pieces I made while I was there is a film called FUCK TREE, which explores a particular tree and how it holds space for people in a specific cruising area of London. I made it as a companion work to an experimental film from 1989 called Sodom By Luther Price, and have specified that my film should only be screened with his film, as it was conceived for this purpose. Together, I call the program of these two works " Companions," which addresses elements of queer life after queer death in terms of future ecologies. I was very interested in how cruising may or may not have been effected by climate change/ ecological change in sites that he been used for queer sex for decades. I can send you the link to FUCK TREE, but I would have to ask the Lux if I could send you a preview link to Sodom, or connect you with them, and they can send you both links, as they distribute both films.

Next month I start a residency where I am starting development of a new performance work that deals with the concept hospice and the projections we place on the idea of hospice. I am also linking it to my work with climate change, environment and the concept of human and ecological political/ emotional burnout. All themes that are central to the eventual feature film I am writing.

In terms of what queerness is for me.... I guess it's about labour and methodology. Queer is such an over saturated word at this point, that it feels like a pretty empty signifier for me. I've always been queer in my life and choices, so the element of what it means to live it, how to make choices, how I work, how i have relationships, is really rooted in what queer labour is and can be. To apply this to systems of nature is super interesting, because while nature is inherently queer, it also relies on reliable systems that regenerate and find ways of regeneration. The concept of humans submitting to nature, is also very much at the heart of what I am working on at the moment, as well as the line between involuntary and voluntary living.... how we are living... what " living it" means as a reality in both performance and film.

I am also very motivated by concepts of repetition and expectation, my desire and anti- desire for repetition... how queerness relies on repetition and rejects it.. like ecology and nature as well.

I think I sent you the link to my vimeo page and website, here you can see the trailer for my last show, and also some other film and performance works: xxxxxxx. If there is anything you want to see that is locked, do let me know, and I will send you the password. My website is xxxxxxx

GK:



SR:

I think of indigenous people
on their lush islands
or on the banks of the Americas,
taking only what they needed
with a deep respect for the Earth
they were a part of.
Saying thank you to the tree,
the harvest, the fallen deer.
I think of the way they wear their pain,
like stories they want to share so we learn.

I think of sitting at the top of
Indian rock in Berkeley watching
the sun set. I think about the houses
in the hills above me, ancient redwoods
that the early settlers used to guide
their ships to shore, so they could build
homes and chop down the trees to
build garage doors. I think of the honor
of two spirit people and how their tribes
suffered for living in such balance.

I think of my summer in Egypt,
how the sea is filled with trash
and when I shout to my sister that
there are dolphins, the captain pursues the
pod with the boat and I think of
how when domesticated dolphins
are released to the wild, they teach their young
the tricks that fed them when they were in captivity
in case evolution makes that the new natural selection.

I think of the deep velvet of nature,
being in a coastal forest and feeling
the cold breath of the trees,
the stories of burnt heartwood in
redwoods that continue to scar and grow
and live despite any calamity.
Dipping your feet into sea foam,
seeing mocha shells scatter along the
shore line.

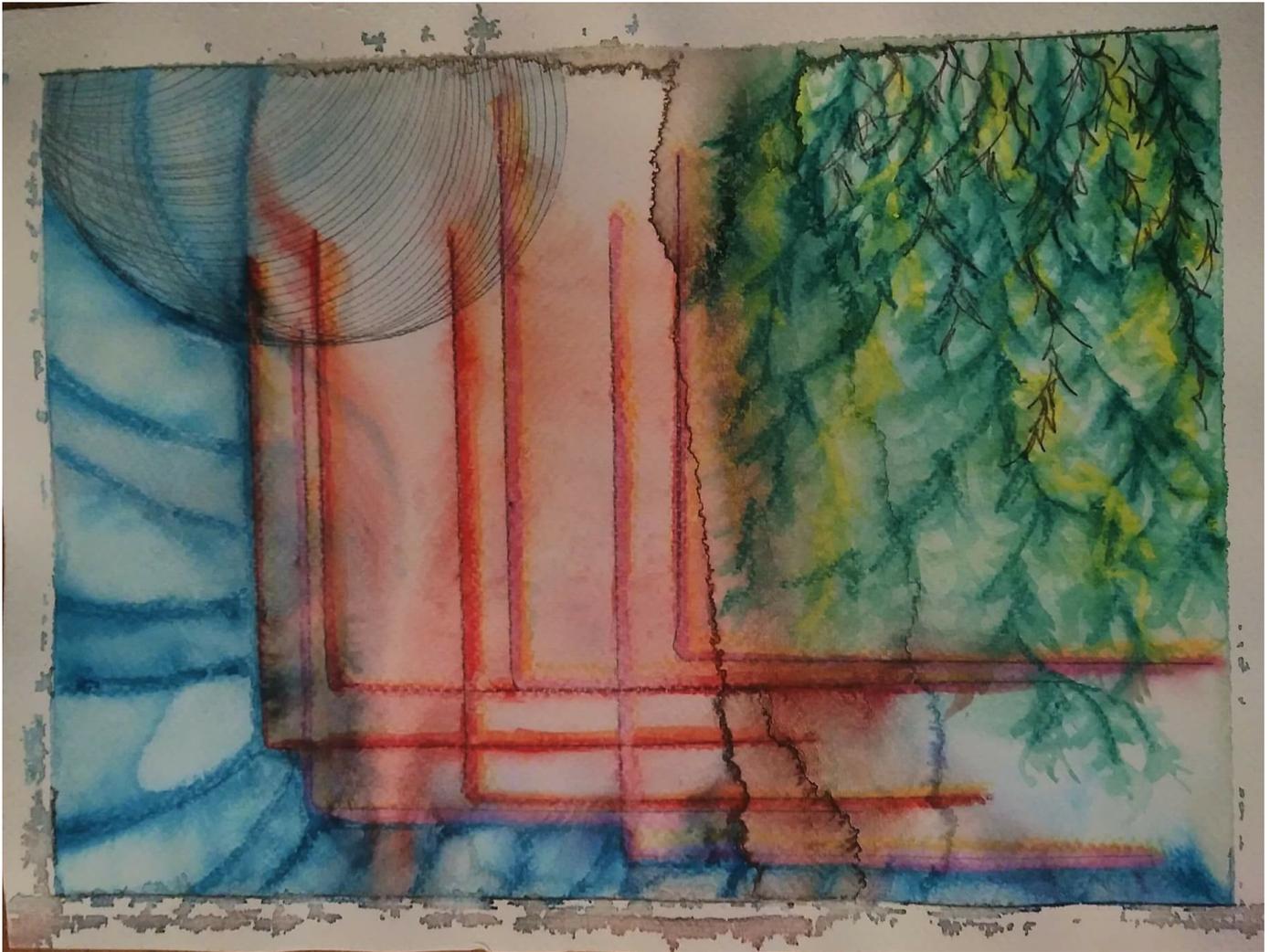
I think of the nature we have lost and
of each wave eroding the nature we
have left. I think of the mudslides
and the wildfires and the melting arctic.
I think of all the marginalized bodies
that have been at the frontlines of saving
the earth, because empathy lies at the
heart of understanding the planet
mirrors ourselves.

I think of the queer center on magic,
the taurus fat activist who reads tarot
while she sips Turkish tea. I think of
the Iranian girl with thick eyebrows
who grinds rose petals for self care.
The brown girl on instagram who has
her higher self advise millenials on
healing and loving self-reflection.
My best friend and her edible plant porch,
humming as she makes vietnamese food
as if it were a new potion.
My professor, who has people go on
daily walks in the park to practice
mindfulness and write cinquains
or hosts national park camping trips
around drawing and nature.

The queers and their allies have always
fostered a generosity and harmony,
stirring it like life'sblood even in
upheaval and mental illness and death
and the daily difficulties of existing,
giving each other gifts of lavender honey
and homemade limoncello with sugared rinds,
and curling up in a Yosemite cabin to talk
about how to stop the white cismen in politics
who want to make sure the ship goes down
if the storm approaching is not championing
patriarchy on its waves.

If we can't stop it, if it has to come,
Global warming seems like the balances
tipping to center, showing the wishes of
capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy
they have never been at home in a place
so colorful, so open, so alive, so sure of its
place and its connection to all things other.

AF:



SB:

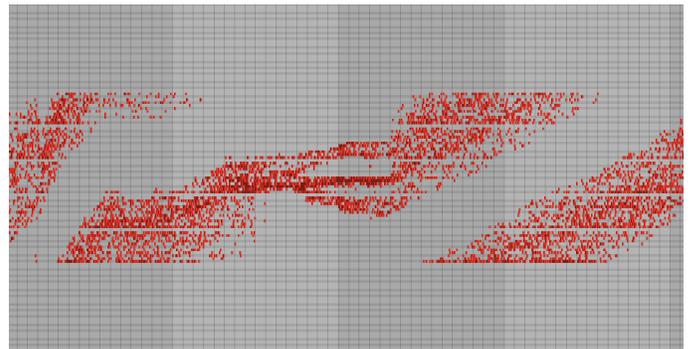
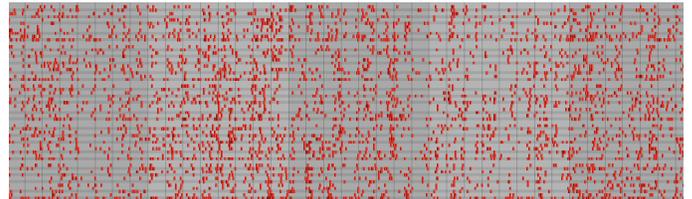


JG:

I will use the 'Impossible Forest', the garden I built in Wedding as my source for reflection.

These recordings and image are of the clover in the garden. They are the electrical output from the plant translated into sound.

To compare .. this is an oak leaf



The garden..

I wanted to create a practice, a process, a space that helped me to understand and really meet Nature on all levels..seen and unseen. I wanted to share this practice process etc. with other people and other beings. Its like a studio for me. An island. A bridge. A friend. A partner. An offer. A sanctuary. A school. An office. I work in it, with it, I share it. That is what I do with the garden: I practice co-creating with Nature. I initiated it to be my teacher, my classroom. The irony is that I am away so often that when I am with it, I am in constant care mode. Care mode can equal master/slave dynamic if I am not careful enough. This is not the dynamic I set out to experience or cultivate.

My father passed away this past summer in the States. Throughout the process of him dying, I could feel this garden supporting me. I could feel it growing, caring for itself and for me. I could sit in it, 6,500 km away, and have it hold me. I could relate to it as an anchor, like I did my father. After two months of being away in the middle of the summer, I returned to a wild meadow of flowers. The parts of the garden which previously were difficult to maintain life, suddenly became hotspots of activity. I was relieved, astonished and really moved.

I built a smaller garden nearby in 2013. This was my first conscious attempt to work in a partnership with Nature. They are now beginning renovations in that area of the courtyard and it will be destroyed. I was disappointed to hear that, but had always understood its temporality and the temporality of all things we create. With the bigger garden close by, it's inspiring to think how the smaller garden can be integrated into the larger one...or not, what that means even, and with what preparation I need to take in order to make it happen. Both of these gardens are built on asphalt. Both of these gardens depend on me to help maintain their balance for their specific directives. Part of Nature is destruction and I am happy to learn from that as well. The bigger garden is a meditation on decay and blossoming.

I'm trying to fathom how I might feel without it.... And somehow I am 'ok' with the idea of loss in relation to it. That is surprising to me. I don't know why and would need to think a lot more about that.. but I am now flooded with the thought of losing a place that I frequent every year. A remote island in the Lybian Sea. It is a place where there is still 'free camping', where I sleep on the beach under the juniper trees with the cicadas and the feral cats. There is no electricity, there are no walls and no clothes. You spend little money on food and there is nothing separating you from where you are. It is brutal and and extreme on many levels. But it is where I leave my heart every year when I have to leave it. Sometimes I think it is the one place that I can actually experience my self in its purest. I can also experience the land and its limited inhabitants without distractions. I can observe and listen...I can exist in another way than I exist in city society. I can watch the beetles and the ants work all day...oh my god.. I could go on and on.... I would be broken if that place was developed or destroyed. I would be lost in a way, knowing that it is not there waiting to welcome me. I would be robbed a freedom that allows me to live in a city with all of its architectural and social restrictions. That land, location, ecology is such an important part of my life balance. And the truth is I am not even there all that long each year. But it is endlessly speaking to me and inspiring me.

Appendix E: Interview Guide

- General questions:

- Place of origin and relation to Berlin
- The ecological art/ activism you are involved in (what? where? who? why?)
- What does being queer mean to you?
- How do you situate yourself in the queer community?
- What role does the queer community play in your life?

- Icebreaker to get into the topic:

The process of art-making:

- How did the creation of the art piece go?
- Did you find the reflection exercise helpful?

The piece:

- Please explain your piece to me. What were your thoughts behind it?

- Loss of Nature 1: practices of Nature Melancholy - witnessing, remembering, transforming

- When you witness ecological destruction, degradation, exploitation, extinction – how does that make you feel? And how do you cope with these feelings?
- Thinking about instances of oppression and loss you have faced as a result of being queer, how have you coped with those? And what role did community play in the process of sense-making?
- From your experience in queer communities, what are their general strategies of dealing with losses of lives, rights, and visibility (also historical ones)? And in what ways are they important to move forward as a community?
- With those in mind, do you see similarities or learning potential to cope with the loss of Nature? Or differences?
- Have you made this connection in your practice, and if so, how?

- Loss of Nature 2: practices of subversion, queer ecological futurity and empathetic re-imagination

- What motivates your ecological activism/art, and why is it important to you?
 - In what ways does your activism/art subvert the current system?
 - What kind of future is your activism/art aiming for?
 - What role does empathy play in your activism/art?
- In your activism/art, how is Nature framed and why?

- Final questions/remarks:

- Are there any other ways in which your queer identity informs your ecological activism/art, that we haven't touched upon yet?

Appendix F: Categories for Data Analysis

