

Billings, Analytical Essay  
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5 page excerpt from “Materializing the “Gay Stroll”: Toxic Killer Whales, Notions of Gender, and Ecological Change.”

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Environmental concerns are often rooted in perceptions of what constitutes a proper, or “natural” body. Current ideologies do not make space for those whose bodies are seen as deviating from the norm. Those whose lives are fundamentally changed by their encounters with chemicals and industrial pollutants, such as the Southern Resident killer whales, raise questions of how to care for “unloved others.”<sup>1</sup> Wibke Straube, founder of the Nordic Network for Transgender Studies, describes how “lethal toxicity is part of a larger system, which is material, discursive, infrastructural, social, medical, and generally discriminatory.”<sup>2</sup> Both transgender bodies and chemically-altered killer whales exemplify a “sex panic,” which raises questions of heteronormative morality.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the Southern Residents are unable to reproduce due to the impacts of industrial pollutants them in an uncanny space between “wild animal” and “cultural product.” They are no longer contributing members to the ecological world, but they are not entirely of human creation and domesticable.

This essay is a space to grapple with this reality. In particular, I will be looking at the Southern Resident’s encounters with industrial pollutants such as PCBs and PBDEs through the lens of transgender studies. My writing, which sits at the intersections of animal studies, queer theory, and critical science studies, will analyze the ways in which industrial pollutants are a representative method of world-making that has overarching consequences for the ways that we understand animals, bodies, and ecological change.

Those whose lives are fundamentally changed by encounters with endocrine disrupters, such as people undergoing HRT (hormone replacement therapy) or endangered killer whales, are

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<sup>1</sup> Straube, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Straube, 2020

<sup>3</sup> Pollock, Anne. 2016. “Queering Endocrine Disruption.” In *Object Oriented Feminism*, by Katherine Behar, 183 - 199. University of Minnesota Press.

often viewed as “freaks of nature” and question what it means to be *natural*. Abstractions of nature are inherently linked to bodies who deviate from established norms, as these bodies are “mapped along boundaries of inside and out, natural and unnatural.”<sup>4</sup> Queer/Transgender theory provides a framework with which to challenge these heterocentric ideals – as stated by transgender studies scholar Oliver Bendorf, “transgender studies might find a bridge between critical theory, landscape ecology, and animal behavior to think about how we form communities and navigate vulnerability in metropolitan and rural areas.”<sup>5</sup>

The linking of being trans and being animal – often simply referred to as “tranimals”<sup>6</sup> – is an attempt to “trace sexualized alterities that rework ‘culture’ and ‘nature.’”<sup>7</sup> Be aware, this is not an antagonistic alliance; rather, a method of understanding two historically “unloved” others through networks of multispecies relations. Harlan Weaver, transgender studies scholar, further elaborates on this by stating that “trans species [or tranimals] reveal how co-constitutive identities and ways of being happen through species differences.”<sup>8</sup> The genderqueer and the non-human meet in a landscape of “geopolitical trauma” – far from the realm of idealism, rather, in the materialist “eventualization of life.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than serve as another foray into identity politics, tranimals serve to focus on “trans-infused apprehensions and engagements with the expansive world of possibility opened up by non-anthropocentric perspectives” and “entangle and enmesh

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<sup>4</sup> Bendorf, Oliver. 2014. “Nature.” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 136 - 137.

<sup>5</sup> Bendorf, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Kelley, Lindsay. 2014. “Tranimals.” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 226 - 228.

<sup>7</sup> Hayward, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Weaver, Harlan. 2014. “Trans Species.” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 253 - 254.

<sup>9</sup> Weaver, 2014.

trans and animals in a generative tension leading to alternative ways of envisioning futures of embodiment, aesthetics, biopolitics, climates, and ethics.”<sup>10</sup>

The experience of being trans and/or queer embodies various temporalities and timescales that have been used to further the pathologization of these identities.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the idea of being trans or queer is seen as “backwards” or “atavistic.”<sup>12</sup> Notions and timescales of family and reproductivity in particular have been used as a way to challenge belonging and what is “natural.” As Lee Edelman, author of *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* argued, “queer subjects and their non-reproductive temporalities cannot, and should not, be assimilated into a drive towards progress and should reject the saccharine temptation of belonging to a temporal ‘good’ world where assimilation requires the erasure of their life-giving ecstasies.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, he argued to “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized.”<sup>14</sup> Playfully, I claim that the Southern Resident’s childless “gay stroll” should be viewed as having an innate value in itself – “the stroll is neither suicidal nor solitary. These... [killer whales] are living in the moment for themselves, rather than for children.”<sup>15</sup> As stated by Donna Haraway – “the cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hayward, Eva. 2015. "Introduction: Tranimalities in the Age of Trans\* Life." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 195 - 208.

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, Simon D. Elin. 2017. "Trans Temporalities." *Somatechnics*.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, 2

<sup>13</sup> Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Edelman, Lee. 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Pollock, 186

<sup>16</sup> Haraway, Donna. 1985. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. *Socialist Review*.

Reproductivity and childbearing, in particular, are often “linked to gender ideologies and imaginaries about male and female bodies.”<sup>17</sup> For instance, the ways that heterosexuality permeates scientific guidebooks focused on marine mammals, often describing their behaviors through draconian assignments of binary sex and sexual identity.<sup>18</sup> When the animal’s behavior does not align with what is seen as “moral” or “conventional,” they are criminalized with harsh, obstructive language, despite the supposed role of science as objective and removed.<sup>19</sup> This exemplifies what Lynda Birke describes as the “ghost of biology.”<sup>20</sup> The idea that aspects of biology, such as sex and sexuality, align with heterocentric ideals is an implicit narrative that materializes gender as fixed and retells heteronormative tales.<sup>21</sup> Encounters with trans bodies breach the “animal symbiotic” by challenging what it means to be human during a time of immense ecological change.<sup>22</sup>

Michael Marder, environmental philosopher, theorizes current states of environmental degradation and wildlife extinction as a “global dump” where everyone is interconnected through toxicity of “bodily tissues, senses, and minds.”<sup>23</sup> This dump is “life’s [in a Western capitalist regime] unforeseen side effect.”<sup>24</sup> The dump is laden with toxicity – inside, “noxious thoughts and poisoned senses, toxic built environments, social milieus, and contaminated ecosystems merge and reinforce one another.”<sup>25</sup> According to Marder, encounters with toxins allow us to

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<sup>17</sup> Garcia, Maria Elena. 2019. "Death of a Guinea Pig: Grief and the Limits of Multispecies Ethnography in Peru." *Environmental Humanities* 351 - 372.9

<sup>18</sup> Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2020. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press.

<sup>19</sup> Gumbs, 6

<sup>20</sup> Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Nurka, Camille. 2015. "Animal Techne: Transing Posthumanism." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 209 - 226.

<sup>22</sup> Nurka, 211

<sup>23</sup> Mardner, 2019

<sup>24</sup> Mardner, 2019

<sup>25</sup> Mardner, 2019

defamiliarize the body and allow us to experience the other as kin in an animated chemosocial community.<sup>26</sup> After all, rendezvous with industrial pollutants are not species-specific.

Slippery and uncontainable, the Southern Residents – like trans – refuse boundaries and Edenic imaginaries that many killer whale conservationists affirm.<sup>27</sup> Rather, they evoke perceptions where queer is “potential in a world that companion species share.”<sup>28</sup> Trans-theorizing allows an understanding of the human as “*within* and *of* ecological relations.”<sup>29</sup> Edenic environmentalism is easily disproved by understanding that the “technologized trans body, the denatured earth, and the awareness of our contingent species-being commands that there can be no return to nature.”<sup>30</sup> The nature that was known, that the residents knew, that the salmon knew, is past. Instead of ignoring the harder-to-reckon-with facts and promoting a superficial green capitalism, there should be an acknowledgement of the ways they have adapted to and cultivated a delicate chemo-social community – the hundreds who follow their news and devote their time, money, and lives to them, the people who, like me, spend every day attempting to witness them.<sup>31</sup>

After all, the whales will one day be gone. However, what will be left are the relationships that are built between us and the landscape. It is these relationships that will guide restoration forward. Yes, it is sad that they will be gone – I know that I, along with thousands more – will miss them dearly, but because of them, I have gained a place in a spirited and lively community.

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<sup>26</sup> Mardner, 2019

<sup>27</sup> Woelfle-Erskine, Cleo. 2015. "Transfiguring the Anthropocene: Stochastic Reimaginings of Human-Beaver Worlds." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 297-316.

<sup>28</sup> Woelfle-Erskine, 308

<sup>29</sup> Woelfle-Erskine, 308

<sup>30</sup> Nurka, 223

<sup>31</sup> Mapes, 2019

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