

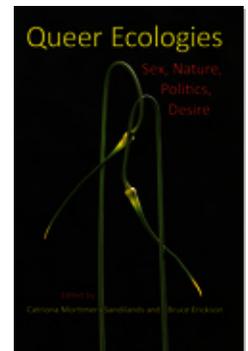


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CHAPTER 13

Biophilia, Creative Involution, and the Ecological Future of Queer Desire

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Our essence as a species binds us to explore and affiliate with all life. We are lovers who can add up glucose, amino acids, water, fragrant oils, pigments, and other tissue and call it both a flower and a mystical gesture. We can also decimate pollinators with an unloving tonnage of pesticides, precipitating the extinction of entire populations of those mystical gestures, once and forever. . . . Lives without access to sensation are lives that edge out the earth's raw, pervasive sweetness, that deeply biophilic connection to all life.

—Ellen Meloy

Somehow I am able to cross species lines without a single lesion in self-respect.

—Ellen Meloy

In Ellen Meloy's seriously quirky writing of the desert southwest, the linking of affections and affiliations across species lines are more than idiosyncratically queer.¹ Meloy uses ecologist Edward O. Wilson's "biophilia" hypothesis as a method of cognitive adventuring into the frontiers of symbiosis.² Her explorations of bio-erotic-diversity map flows of desire that escape classical biology and exceed even the "biological exuberance" with which nonhuman animals embrace homosexuality.³ She is more likely to track creative, nonprocreative interspecies crossings and the molecular heterogenesis between radically differing (animal, vegetable, mineral, other) life forms, than to wonder, as Wilson does, at the elaborate organization of reproductive sex between individuals of the same species. If, for Wilson, biophilia is a mindful reverence for the infinity of organic sexual-social order, for Meloy, it is an earthy curiosity for the erotic vi-

tality with which life—especially desert life—affects fidelity to extreme geography. She senses a *philia* more physical than ideal, one that stirs and connects her cognitive desires (epistemo-bio-philia) to the evolving endemism of desert species.⁴ With a field scientist's fidelity to nature's experimentality, her writing conjugates the elements of survival and vitality in variations too perverse to be classified. And with an eye for the exotic in her own backyard, she enters voyeuristically into the multifarious sex comedy of her desert cohabitants. Such involvement allows her to see beyond the set schemata of natural selection to whatever queer couplings enable life to thrive in the desert's volatile landscape.

E. O. Wilson's biophilia, then, becomes something else in Meloy's reworking of the concept. For Wilson, it is a love for the diversity of non-human life that stirs the mind to infinity for the beneficial enlightenment of humanity; for Meloy, it is an erotic-ethical affiliation between human and nonhuman life in experimental symbioses whose ecological benefits are sensed and desired, if not fully cognizable. What makes Meloy's nature writing queer is not an express allegiance to minority sexuality but a creative and attentive naturalism that tracks interspecies couplings across the desert's vital landscape on a map of co-adaptation, which standard ecosite grids and biological taxonomies fail to chart.

The language, thought, and perception with which Meloy explores the queer nature of survival on the Colorado Plateau are more innovative than her sources in ecological and biological science. A more radical philosophy might illuminate her revision of biophilia. French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have invented a conceptual "plan/e of nature" for rethinking desire on and for earth that abandons the conceits of anthropocentric humanism. Their monument to geophilosophy, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) presents Meloy's reader with a pluralist empiricism with which to analyze the queer conjugations of affect and affiliation in her nature writing.⁵ Meloy, I contend, shares with Deleuze and Guattari various philosophical sources in theoretical biology, quantum physics, and chaos and complexity theory. She, like them, prefers Darwinian to Freudian conceptualizations of evolutionary processes, and, like them, she describes a vitalism in which nonreproductive sex is a primary force of nature. Meloy maps her Plateau as a nonlinear experiment in symbiotic couplings and heterogenesis that calls to mind what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the "creative involution" of germinal life.

The aims of this chapter, then, are to: (1) introduce readers to Ellen Meloy's new concept and practice of nature writing; (2) investigate the conjugations of affect in this writing that surpass both biophilia and

biological exuberance in their capacity to que(e)ry adaptive interspecies cohabitation and coevolution; and (3) illuminate the radical, ethical, and philosophical implications of this writing by reading it alongside Deleuze and Guattari's geophilosophy. Finally, this chapter will show how Meloy poses an ecological future for queer desire in place of a popular form of queer nihilism that fails to imagine life beyond pro-life conservatism and its critical deconstruction.

Biophilia, Epistemophilia, Cognitive Adventuring

To Dana Phillips's (2003) skeptical question "What Do Nature Writers Want?" at the end of his book on *The Truth of Ecology*,⁶ we can find in Meloy's work an ironic answer: nature writers desire to know what nature desires. Her investigation of nature places less emphasis on the writer's desiring self than on the desiring (plant or animal) other, and on writing as a way to explore the desiring nature of desert life—of desiring life in extremis. What, she asks, does a prickly pear cactus desire that couples it so tenaciously to bare basalt sandstone with a sexual rhythm that erratically keeps pace with drought and flash flood? What conjugation of organic and inorganic elements add up to such a thriving, if exotic, symbiotic assemblage? As a committed "biophilic" (Meloy 2002, 244), Meloy artfully pursues the flow of desert desire by mapping its (un)folding ero-eco-logical entanglements in first-person narratives of queer affection.

For instance, the prologue to her desert journal *Eating Stone: Imagination and the Loss of the Wild* (2005) places the reader with the narrator in the zone of proximity where human and wild animal "meet," and where the border of difference is both most intense and most porous. The "intercourse" that ensues is neither zoophilic bestiality nor anthropomorphic romancing; rather, it is a transmutation of human being into something other, prompted by the closeness of the human body to the vibrating heat and rhythms of the animal pack. After months of tracking a wild band of desert bighorn sheep through their seasonal cataclysms of rutting, lambing, and survival canyoneering at intensifying close range, Meloy describes undergoing a schizoid shift in self-consciousness. More precisely, self-consciousness becomes other-consciousness, through the conduit of affective proximity:

On one of my last winter days with the desert bighorns, they no longer kept me out of their world. With motions I had come to know as an exquisite union of liturgy and physics, they closed the

distance between us and herded me toward a threshold, a place best described as a hairsbreadth. . . . They moved serenely among themselves, brushing flanks warm with blood, weaving me toward that breach of transmutation. . . . I wanted to leap into that wild side—their side—then bring back their startling news from the other-than-human world. (Meloy 2005, xi)

Encountering the wild animal at so close a range as to enter the other's bodily orbit, her own biorhythms seem to pulse to the beat of the beast. Stirred by the movements of the pack to a threshold of becoming-other-than-human, she desires to sense what the bighorn senses, to know the bighorn's world. This is not to say that she desires to metamorphose into a bighorn or to transcend being human in an animistic leap of faith. Instead, by being so intensely proximal to the pack, she becomes caught up in its migrations and affections in an other dimension of belonging to place. She senses an otherworld with defamiliarized, or deterritorialized, human sensibility—a sensibility pushed to the limit of being human on the threshold of becoming other, alert to how bighorn world the earth, and how they attune and attach themselves to a homeland. But if she imagines crossing species lines, it is only to “bring back their startling news” to the human side, where human knowledge of the nonhuman can be put to mutually beneficial work. Such a transmutation of being human could have ramifications for becoming wiser about cohabiting the wild symbiotically, instead of approaching it unilaterally with ideas of human progress and development.

Referring to recent evolutionary theory, Meloy interprets her threshold experience of becoming-bighorn as “cognitive adventuring” (Meloy 2005, 160). She is careful to distinguish the imagination it entails from psychoanalytic fantasy and/or romantic phantasmagoria. Evolutionary cognition stresses the fluidity of human, and especially childhood, imagination, as well as the imagination of paleo-peoples who once lived side by side with packs of wild animals; it does not locate imagination in the interior domain of the human psyche or limit its cultivation to fantastic structuration and cultural transmission. The human mind, Meloy believes, evolves in contact with animal life. Children's playacting the animal is an elementary act of becoming human, of animating the senses, and of connecting and communicating with other animals and other animal territories. Children are drawn to animals, and to “explore and affiliate” with nonhuman life forms more easily than are “stodgy adults” (161). Biophilia, then, should not be mistaken for “epistemophilia”—Freud's

“instinct for knowledge” that expresses an unattainable desire for sexual satisfaction in more or less sublimated fantasies of phallic self-mastery and self-possession.⁷ “*Arrivederci*, Sigmund. Hello, Charles Darwin” (160), Meloy announces, affirming neo-Darwinian theory that human cognition evolves through a capacity to connect with and imagine other/animal life.

Meloy’s nature writing experiments in cognitive adventuring and crossing species lines evoke Deleuze and Guattari’s neo-evolutionary ontology of “becoming-animal.” In their “anti-Oedipal” revision of Freudian/Lacanian theories of desire, these philosophers consider flows of attraction and sensation that escape the intra-psychic dynamics of the ego and hook the sensory body into its external affective environment in multiplicities of sense. In a paradigmatic case of radical revision, they reinterpret the horse phobia of Freud’s famous client “Little Hans” to be less a masochistic fixation with the paternal phallus than an expression of compound affect. Accordingly, Little Hans does not so much fear the horse’s phallus onto which he projects an inflated and terrifying paternal imago (against an image of his own small “pee-pee-maker”), as he is struck by the horse’s affective body—or by affects that radiate from the horse when it pisses voluminously after falling under too-heavy loads and being whipped by an infuriated driver. Accordingly, the child enters into an affective assemblage of “becoming-horse,” composed of real sensations and virtual affiliations between the human and the animal. It is not that the child identifies with the horse as possessor of a pee-pee maker, or that he projects paranoid homosexual fantasies of a paternal beating out of desire for recognition of his own phallus-bearing potency. Rather, proximity to the flailing horse affects the child’s body with the vibrating anguish of the animal body. The child senses he is part of a complex. He becomes virtually attached to the body that is being lashed and made to piss, and through which the other’s pain is conducted to the boy’s own vulnerable body with powerful affection (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 257).

“Disguised as an adult” (Meloy 2005, 162), Meloy goes into the field to study desert bighorn who live in the canyon near her home in southeastern Utah, and who mysteriously disappear in summer drought to secret waterholes. She wants to know where they go and how they adapt so tenaciously to such severely parched territory. With her she takes “friends”—a childhood teddy bear and a stuffed toy bighorn (named “Nelson” after the subspecies *Ovid canadensis nelsoni*, 163–64). These toys are not symptoms of infantile regression but playful attendants to long hours in the field that wildlife observation demands. More importantly, they are talismanic cues

to cognitive adventuring that a child is best equipped to undertake. Meloy primes herself to enter bighorn territory by placing herself in contact with these animal simulacra, which in turn, induce a “becoming-child” of the adult, or a re-engagement of the child’s proclivity to undergo, like Little Hans, a “becoming-animal.” As Deleuze and Guattari explain,

it is as though, independent of the evolution carrying them toward adulthood, there were room in the child for other becomings, “other contemporaneous possibilities” that are not regressions but creative involutions bearing witness to “*an inhumanity immediately experienced in the body as such,*” unnatural nuptials “outside the programmed body.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 273, original emphasis)

Lusting after Linnaeus

Meloy’s “A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry” expresses a graphic form of biophilia. Drawn from her still-wintering home in Montana to desert latitudes where spring blooms prodigiously, Meloy uproots her domestic life for the Southwest’s vernal heat. She maps her vagrancy in a hybrid language attuned to the biologic, edaphic, and chromatic machinery of wildflower sex. In purple passages of cognitive adventuring she imagines “leaping into bed” with desert flora to satiate a craving to know their seduction of color. With spring wildflowers she is readily “able to cross species lines.” The intensity with which flora inflame her perceptive and cognitive lusts can be attributed to molecular attractions between light and pigment, especially in conjugations of red:

Red flowers sear retinas made weary by winter, by snow or the season’s low, angular light. . . . There are physical reasons for the boldness of red. Light waves are longer at the red end of the spectrum of visible light. During a lurid desert sunset, layers of dust close to the horizon absorb the short wavelengths while the long red waves reach the eye. . . . The eye bears three pigments—blue, green, and red—that absorb light and signal the brain to read colors. . . . In plant and human worlds, in mountain and desert, red flowers like the snow plant and paintbrush are visual aphrodisiacs, they signal the seasonal shift from dormancy to reproductive frenzy, from the cerebral to the carnal. . . . Red is the color of martyrs, blood, hell, and desire. It quickens the heart and desire. It quickens the heart and releases adrenaline. (Meloy 2002, 226)⁸

The “searing” red of desert blooms, made especially luscious “against blond rock,” arouses an attraction that is brazenly sexual and peculiarly female—given the chromosomal variation in pigmentation that marks sexual difference: “Some women have two different red pigments in their eyes. They see subtle differences in color that men and other women cannot see” (ibid.). It is not the blond but the red against the blond, and it is not the other sex but chromatic difference and intensity that “quicken” Meloy’s affection.

The volatility of desert spring inflames Meloy’s desire to explore the secrets of terrestrial life. As the first color to spring from dormant buds, red allures her eye for seasonal change; “red is common to early bloomers,” she observes, “as if nature wished to jump-start spring” (225). The speed and intensity with which bone-dry vegetation turns lush with hydration stirs her senses into palpitating attention: “Desert flora are sparse and ephemeral. There are spines, thorns, uncertain seeds, long periods of dormancy, and, when, moisture comes, a passion so accelerated, you feel their demands on your heart, the mounting pleasure, the sweet exhaustion” (221).

Meloy’s heart literally beats to the desert’s pulse, prompting a rhythm of thought that moves in synch with the accelerated speed of germinal life. For example, a profusion of flowering globemallow erupting across the slickrock stirs her to imagine “How Flowers Changed the World”:

The globemallow fields of spring could, in a reckless descent into the deep past, recall the burst of flora into the raw dust-and-basalt monotone of a primordial planet. . . . For several million years—the crashing reptile, lizard bird, wimpy mammal ancestor, swamp years—plant life held little in its palette beyond a “slowly growing green.” . . . At the eclipse of the dinosaur age, “there occurred a soundless, violent explosion. It lasted millions of years, but it was an explosion nevertheless. It marked the emergence of angiosperms—the flowering plants.” (2002, 227, citing Loren Eiseley)

Thinking contiguously with the blooming landscape, Meloy’s observation leaps from the contemporary to the evolutionary. At the sight of flaming globemallow on monochrome basalt, she virtually beholds the first “explosion” of plant sex, “the emergence of angiosperms [that] even the great evolutionist, Charles Darwin, called . . . ‘an abominable mystery,’ because they appeared so suddenly and spread so fast” (227–28, citing Eiseley).

Understanding the physical reasons for why she feels such allure to the reds of claret-cup cactus and red-rock strata, Meloy explains and confirms her attachment to place. “I cannot put the desert at my back. I cannot leave

the red” (Meloy 1994, 253), she confesses, explaining the homesickness she feels on return to her Montana abode. Despite being happily married and at home on the Montana range, Meloy tracks desert “harlotry” with an affiliate vagabondage. She follows the “edaphic endemism” of desert paintbrush with a queer fidelity to the plant’s rootless lust for red-rock soil: “Paintbrush genera spread themselves from Wyoming to New Mexico and eastern California to Colorado. But many of them slip their lives into bare-boned sandstone. The paintbrush becomes attached to its homestead. I interpret this as affective as well as physical and take them on as allies. I admire their loyalty to dirt” (Meloy 2002, 225). Such sensation of alliance surpasses any aesthetic appreciation or phenomenology of taste; it expresses an ecological affection for earth and a nomadic territoriality.

Meloy confesses her wildflower passions in prose more vivid than the “botanical pornography” of Carolus Linnaeus (Meloy 2002, 239). She follows standard field guide practice by “counting petals, defining shapes and symmetries, sorting the petiole from the pappus, the basal rosettes from the pinnately compounded,” but she also invents a pornologia that strays from classical taxonomy. Linnaeus scandalized the scientific community by “naming a genus of pea plant *Clitorida*,” but he also coded his erotic onomastics in sexual legitimacy: He “acknowledged nothing premarital or illicit. All was ‘husbands’ and ‘wives’ or *polygamia* and *polyandria* when male (stamens) or female organs (pistils) were multiple. . . . He edged into plant lust in descriptions of nuptial beds with perfumes and petal curtains for privacy” (239). In contrast, Meloy invents a “slickrotica” (224) that names the thousand tiny sexes that more complexly compose desert flower seductiveness. In passages of cognitive adventuring, she enters zones of proximity with the flower where her floraphilia becomes most intensely aroused by the multiple colors, shapes, and touch of sex:

I climb and curl up inside the bloom of a prickly pear cactus and think that the sex life of plants is not a simple affair. So many delicate body parts for seduction and consummation—filament, anther, pistil, ovary, stigma, style, a corolla of silky petals to enclose the cusp of love. In this blossom the corolla is a warm bath of golden light. Although some prickly pear bloom in magenta, and a rare coral pink, I have chosen one with bright cadmium-yellow flowers that blush rose on their backsides, outside the cup. The thick petals shimmer with a heated luminosity; they feel like satin against my lips. (239)

Flower sex, she intimates, escapes containment by the conjugal relations ordained by Linnaeus. There are “so many delicate body parts

for seduction and consummation,” so many body parts that commingle promiscuously with part-bodies of other plants, and insect and animal bodies. She imagines conjugations of color, light, and touch in compound symbiotic molecularities that may or may not aid sexual reproduction and filiation. Her expression of botanical eroticism practices a kind of empiricism that escapes categorical thinking and engages the senses of the naturalist in erotic acts of cognition. “There was,” she writes, “little doubt in my mind what all these plants were up to, their wild, palpable surge of seduction best absorbed by the undermind—no categories, no labels, no conscious grasping but a kind of sideways knowing. Spring in the desert grew beyond the reach of intellect and became a blinding ache for intimacy, not unlike beauty, not unlike physical love” (224).

Rhizome Sex and Creative Involution

“Sideways knowing” implies a perception of oblique affections and couplings that Meloy entertains whenever she crosses species lines. She shares with Deleuze and Guattari a focus on the transversality of life processes. *A Thousand Plateaus* conceptualizes desire as a force that is ontologically immanent to all life on earth, and that propels “earth moves” across and between geological strata and biological orders. By mapping the transversality of symbiogenesis across the vertical lines of genealogical descent,⁹ Deleuze and Guattari ask us to think *rhizomatically* like an earthbound desert nomad, and to not (or not only) think *arborescently* (transcendentally, linearly) like a European metaphysician. Thinking, they say, should look to

the wisdom of the plants; even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else—with wind, an animal, human beings (and there is also an aspect under which animals themselves form rhizomes, as do people, etc.). “Drunkenness as a triumphant irruption of the plant in us.” Always follow the rhizome by rupture; lengthen, prolong, and relay the line of flight; make it vary, until you have produced the most abstract and tortuous lines of *n* dimensions and broken directions. Conjugate the deterritorialized flows. Follow the plants. . . . Write, form a rhizome. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 11)

“A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry” literally and literarily *follows the plants* by writing a rhizome of plant proliferation across the desert, entangling her own sensations and affections in the weave of parasitic

and symbiotic connections. Parodying Victorian *scientia sexualis* and discourses on deviance, she observes:

You can tell [desert paintbrush] by its fiery scarlet and early bloom, as if it wants these curvaceous sweeps of sandstone to itself before the wildflower season's full Baroque. Paintbrush is usually parasitic on the roots of other plants. Underground, it invades the vascular tissue of another plant and absorbs its nutrients. Sometimes paintbrush nudges up seductively close to the host, a flashy scarlet starlet in pickpocket position. (Meloy 2002, 224–25)

Paintbrush “harlotry” is rhizomatic. It messes with the properly arboreal model of unitary phallic root, binary sex, and proper family relations by attaching itself to “curvaceous sweeps of sandstone” with edaphic lasciviousness and by sucking promiscuously on the tendrils of other plants.¹⁰

Reveling in the profligate seductions and philandering entanglements of another desert harlot, Meloy observes:

Cliffrose prefers slickrock and shallow dry washes, where the embrace of low-slung rims on either side provides not so much shelter as a degree of difficulty, perhaps, to match the cracks and soil pockets in which they grow. . . . Bees in the cliffrose fill the quiet parts of the gust rhythm. They are delirious and so am I. The cliffrose fragrance envelopes us in a spicy musk. . . . It incites blatant acts of sensuality. Other plants prompt reactions that are aesthetic, intelligent, or herbal. Not cliffrose. . . . Sit by one and your heart will open and desire will flood into the emptiness created for it. (251–52)

Between cliffrose and its desert habitat emanates a myriad of affective communications, the concatenation of which defines the fidelity with which the plant “loves” its geography. As a voyeur of this love, Meloy succumbs to a delirium of sensation that allows her to feel how the cliffrose “prefers” slickrock soil and geomorphology, or how it “embraces” territory “in conspiracy” with juniper—“the omnipresent tree that grows atop mesas and in folds of wind-smooth sandstone across the Colorado Plateau” (251). She trails the cliffrose closely until its linear and collateral attachments break into lines of escape:

From this tree other cliffrose follow fissures in the rock in a somewhat orderly direction—the creases offer more moisture and soil

than the acres of bare sandstone—but four or five more pale torches escape the line and erupt in different places, so there are cliffrose everywhere until the land drops off into the sheer space above a deep, green canyon, and, below my high perch, meets the emerald-green crowns of a cottonwood bosque in the canyon bottom. (252)

In other words, she follows the rhizome “by rupture” and she “conjugates its deterritorialized flows,” mapping its flight, as Deleuze and Guattari advise, “in *n* dimensions and broken directions” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 11),¹¹ and she foregrounds “transversal communications between different lines [that] scramble the genealogical tree” (10–11). Such conjugations of paintbrush + pinyon + sandstone, and cliffrose + juniper + bee, produce no new being, but they do relay a transmutation of being—a “becoming”—whereby heterogeneous beings conjoin in *aparallel evolution* (11). “Becoming is always of a different order than filiation”; Deleuze and Guattari explain:

It concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms. There is a block of becoming that snaps up the wasp and the orchid, but from which no wasp-orchid can ever descend. . . . There is a block of becoming between young roots and certain microorganisms, the alliance between which is effected by the materials synthesized in the leaves (rhizosphere). (238)

In place of evolution, understood as mobilized by sexual selection for reproducing and developing species perfection in transcending succession, Deleuze and Guattari coin the term *involution*. “Becoming is involutory, involution is creative” (238) if not *procreative*. What *becomes* in creative involution is a rhizome (239);¹² a rhizome *involves* creative—adaptive, symbiotic or parasitic, evolutionary—entanglement of heterogeneous elements across species/specific lines of filiation and descent. It involves other beings in micro-couplings of becoming-other that may invade and compound genetic and genealogical transmission in life’s virtually ongoing experiment. “Always look for the molecular, or even submolecular particle with which we are allied” (11), Deleuze and Guattari instruct their readers in neo-evolutionism. Neither progressive nor regressive, creative involution affects bodies of different kinds with the change of time.

A Becoming—Prickly Pear

Among the illustrations that figure in “A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry,” one stands out with its florid florophilia and the sensational proximity with which the naturalist comes into contact with the seductiveness of the plant. Meloy draws a prickly pear cactus flower (Meloy 2002, 236) in springtime profile, outlining fleshy and spiny jointed pads with multi-foliated blooms. Color is missing from the black-and-white text, but the mutual attraction is clearly rendered. Over the lips of one bloom droop human limbs, presumably those of the succulent-satiated narrator, prompting us to imagine another ontological “breach of transmutation.” Here is a flower power that can caress, seduce, and intoxicate human sense into sexual delirium. We see before us a becoming—prickly pear of the woman, as the acephalic human gives herself over to unnatural nuptials with a species from another kingdom of life. At the same time, the plant exhibits a voracious affection for the human, sucking on succulent female parts in a becoming-woman of the prickly pear. Discussion surrounding the image maps the spread of prickly pear desire and its varying conjugations onto an expansive narrative terrain. As she sinks more deeply into the plant’s erotic body, she touches upon part-bodies and other bodies that couple the plant to its ecology and territory. Less interested in searching for the root, she follows the organs of connection, and she drifts into a “sideways knowing” that relays a rhizome-tale of bio-geo-history:

Languishing in the deep-butter sex glow of the prickly pear flower, I let an arm drop to a pad, avoiding the spines’ sharp white daggers. My hand reaches a dense mass that feels like rolled-up cobwebs attached to the cactus’s waxy green pad. The wad is slightly powdery and the whitest white. I touch it and rub my fingers together. The white disappears, leaving stains of gorgeous carmine. . . . I am wearing the fluids of cochineal. . . . Female cochineal insects (*Dactylopius coccus*), a type of scale insect, reside on the pads. . . . She [the female cochineal insect] spends her life sucking on a cactus. She is a tiny factory of pigment. . . . In pre-Hispanic Mexico the Mixtec Indians farmed cochineal by farming the prickly pear cactus. . . . The color drove the conquering Spaniards wild with desire. . . . For over two centuries they monopolized all trade in the cochineal dye between Mexico and European royalty until, in 1777, a French naturalist smuggled cactus pads from Mexico to Haiti. Cochineal textiles soon appeared in India, South America, Portugal, and the Canary Islands. In the 1800s cochineal-dyed *bayetas*, blankets of red flannel reached

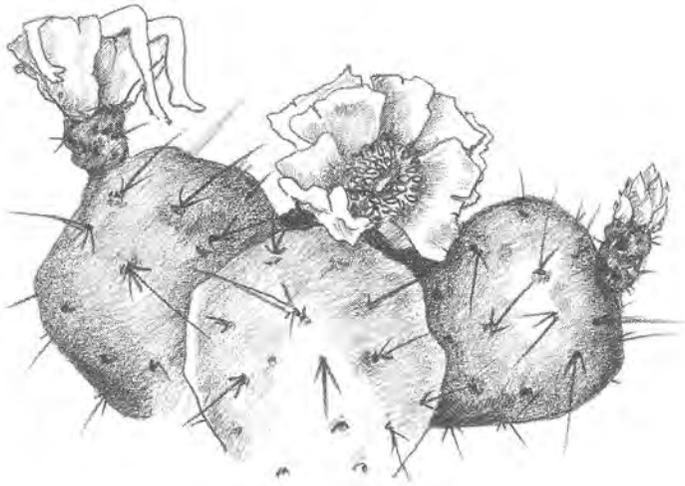


FIGURE 13.1. Prickly pear cactus flower (Meloy 2002, 236).

trading posts in the American Southwest. Navajo weavers, who had no such bold red dye in their traditional rugs and blankets, eagerly traded for the *bayetas*, which they unraveled thread by thread. . . . Then they wove the red yarn into their own rugs. (241–42)

The passage tracks the volatile desirability of cochineal red across a weave of deterritorializing and reterritorializing trajectories. After the floraphilic rubs her fingers over the cactus body they become stained with “gorgeous carmine,” the sight of which pricks her historical memory of how the Mixtecs cultivated cochineal and venerated the dye. “Indigo, carmine and other shades of bright red were the colors of the highest social status,” she relays. “A wealthy Mixtec who wore red wore power” (241). Stained fingers recall the stain of conquest by power-lusting Spaniards, whom “the color drove wild with desire” and who “monopolized all trade for two centuries.” Not until cochineal dye enters global markets does it wind its way home to the Southwest, where Navajo reweave the red thread of traded *bayetas* into rugs of their own. There is a kind of biophilic justice to this dilatory narrative of desire, whereby the thread of connection winds its way back home from colonial exploitation in a creative involution of becoming native.

In sum, Meloy writes a rhizome whose ecology interweaves desire across species lines, linking the attractions of prickly pear cactus and cochineal insect with human affection and aspiration. If the rapport between cactus and cochineal is local, the farming of cochineal is transportable, as well as transmutable into various forms of colonization and globalization. Touched by life indigenous to the desert heartland, Meloy allies herself with native nature/culture, and she foregrounds and reconnects pre- and postcolonial territorial practices. Against major history, she outlines a “minor literature” of autochthonic peoples who engage closely with the desert where they find themselves living.¹³ Her mapping of Mixtec cultivation of cochineal, followed by its deterritorialization by Spanish invaders, and, again, by its reterritorialization by Navajo weavers interweaves her own desire “to explore and affiliate” with life that is native to the desert Southwest. Immanent to the molecular processes of her becoming–prickly pear is a micropolitics of affect, or more precisely, a biophilic ethics of alliance.

“To Touch an Otherworld”: Biophilic Ethics

Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. . . .
Queer messmates in mortal play, indeed.

—Donna J. Haraway

In *Eating Stone*, Meloy weaves an elaborate rhizome of interspecies crossing that involves herself and other naturalists, a red-rock canyon, and desert bighorn sheep. She narrates a nomadic quest to know this wild animal, so threatened by urban encroachment, yet so fervently territorial that it faces relocation or extinction. She chronicles the territorial refrains of a local herd that she names “the Blue Door Band” after a relic of human settlement found on bighorn turf in a canyon near her new homestead in southeast Utah. Above all, she desires to know what desert bighorn desire and to relay to her own species what might be done to aid its survival. With aroused biophilia, she observes rampant rutting and miraculous lambing, though her focus of attention falls on conjugations of sheep and plant and rock. In a signature passage, she ruminates on a meal of bighorn meat she has the mixed blessing to enjoy. As she consumes the animal, she senses a carnal consummation of earth and home: “the taste of the meat lingers on my tongue. Rain and river. Bedrock to soil to plant to milk to bone, muscle, and sinew. I am eating my canyon. Eating stone” (Meloy 2005, 296).

Over the course of her ovine adventures, Meloy evokes a becoming-bighorn of the human and, vice versa, a becoming-human of the bighorn. The first transmutation is a natural hazard of field work: “Given time you will eventually match your own habits, at home and afield, to the animal you study. . . . Desert bighorn people eat, move, stand, ruminate. They are vigilant. They nap” (182). Conversely, the second transmutation is a coercive, intrusive, and paradoxical affair—especially when wildlife management must counter a bighorn instinct to migrate to areas of gene-pool-diminishing niche habitats in an effort to escape encroaching urbanization. “With sheep confined to cliffy atolls in a sea of human activity, management of these animals has a tendency, and often an urgency, to intensify,” Meloy explains, citing biologists’ fears that “cultural selection will wholly displace natural selection” (181). The “anthropogenic factor” plays a powerful role in bighorn ecology, including threatening the wild with extinction; but the reverse, she urges us to consider, is also true. For humans to aid bighorn survival, it is crucial to understand the zoogenic factor (or the autopoiesis of animal life) in coevolutionary ecology. She regards the puzzle of how the Blue Door Band perennially embarks on an untrackable migration to secret watering holes in the canyon’s labyrinthine depths at the onset of winter drought, as the kind of puzzle we humans must learn to solve and respect if we want to ensure the vitality of desert life (including our own).

Meloy’s affiliation with the bighorn is put to the supreme test when the time comes for her to partake in a relocation operation. Scheduled to help conduct an experimental transplantation of twenty-four of the remaining eighty-six-member herd, she foresees the unfolding of ecological mysteries at close range:

To watch these twenty-four sheep stake out their place, establishing their fidelity to it, for the first time would be to witness everything that makes this animal what it is, its evolution and its hunger, its seamless, nearly molecular bond to landscape. To see how they map the stone would be to know this canyon with extraordinary intimacy. To see how they do it would be truly to learn something. (315)

The event reaches a climax when Meloy helps the wildlife management team restrain a wild ewe to be prepared for transport, and, incredibly, contact is made across alien worlds, forming a liturgical refrain in her brain: “Her nose rests in the palm of my hand” (313), and again, “her nose is in my hand” (315), and again, “the palm of the hand is a most sensitive human organ. On it, the warmth of a breathing animal is pure solace”

(316). For a moment, the haptic is a conduit to the cosmic. To sense the wild ewe's nose in the palm of her hand is "to touch an otherworld with more than one sense" (319). Synesthesia weds symbiosis in a post-anthropocentric recovery of the wild—a becoming-animal of wildlife management that "runs contrary to the historical imperative to press everything alive, dead, or otherwise into human service" (307).

Meloy's bighorn biophilia implies an ethic that Deleuze and Guattari's ethology can elaborate. Paraphrasing Spinoza, Deleuze writes: "We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 257). Such ethology clarifies the ethics of Meloy's situation. Meloy questions the "affectability" of an experiment that brings two different animal bodies together in a queer composition by conveying the mortal terror of the wild ewe that touch conducts from one body to the other: "she shakes uncontrollably from head to tail. . . . Her mute trembling bears a message of fear so profound, it borders on grief, and I am not certain that I can move beyond it" (Meloy 2005, 313). The climax of *Eating Stone* relays an affect that cannot be reduced to sentiment, or to romance, or to any emotion at all. Meloy is moved not to tears but to immobility: only those affects that have been habituated, domesticated, and humanized are immobilized. On the frontier of knowledge and perception, at the border of animal and human worlds, she communicates the affective, asignifying, existential tension between survival and extinction where she/we and the wild bighorn meet.

This experimental relocation implies practical questions of the highest ethical stakes. How will this animal-human assemblage work? Will it compose a more powerful body, or will many bighorn bodies be destroyed in the exchange? How will the transplants recompose their connection to the land? (Meloy notes that, in the lambing season after relocation, the transplants do, in fact, show a healthy adaptation to their new canyon, 322–23.) These are questions that concern not just the well-being of a pet favorite. They concern the vitality of a whole population and its ability to form a powerful attachment to their new canyon: "To survive," she observes, "this is what the band would have to do: make this perfect match of flesh to earth" (322).

Deleuze emphasizes the anti-utilitarian, communal ethics of becoming-animal. "It is no longer a matter of utilizations or captures, but of

sociabilities and communities,” he declares (1988, 126). Likewise, Meloy rejects any initiatives of conservation that aim to reterritorialize wildlife without respecting the range of desire that is vital to its survival. Instead, she advocates human alliances with wild animals that do not just protect animal territoriality but also promote animal-earth symbioses. Wary of past management practices, and fearful of the ethological and ecological ignorance that current recovery experiments entail, she asks how human interference in bighorn territorialization can proceed while, as Deleuze would say, “preserving or respecting the other’s own relations and world?” (1988, 126) The ethics of bighorn recovery entails a biophilia that moves us humans to become sufficiently acquainted and allied with bighorn life as to know how to benefit the animal’s capacity to thrive in its changing “otherworld.”

The Ecological Future of Queer Desire

Opponents to native fish recovery programs . . . measur[e] worth as most of us do, by human ego. What good are these fish? You can’t eat them, they appear to have no medical, economic, sport, or industrial value. . . . Even their file drawer in the wildlife management bureaucracy—“nongame”—assigns them not their own innate something but that which they are not: not sport, not food. These fish, many people believe, are dead-end. Tertiary detritus with strange humps and weird lips. *They are just too queer.* . . . What does a humpback chub want?

—Ellen Meloy

The biophilia that moves Meloy “to explore and affiliate with all life” is pronouncedly queer. For her, “all life” includes queer life. Thus, she can envision a future where creatures deemed unproductive by utilitarian standards are valued for their own nature, as well as for their part in determining a healthy local ecology. Her political strategy as a nature writer is to compose a rhizome of connectivity that foregrounds devalued desert species and that illuminates their coevolutionary prospects.

As her conjugation of rare bighorn band + wildlife management team + high-tech science shows, Meloy overlooks the survival of the fittest in favor of cyborg syntheses and unnatural symbioses (survival of the queerest?). Her bighorn love commits her to espouse “creative involution,” symbiogenesis, and other maverick versions of evolutionary ecology in favor of the theory of sexual selection that refines and perfects the family tree. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “sexuality . . . is badly explained by the binary organization of the sexes, and just as badly by a bisexual

organization within each sex. Sexuality brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings; they are like *n* sexes, an entire war machine through which love passes” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 278).

Does Meloy’s nature writing function as a war machine? We might think so, if we take literally her ironic claim that “we nature buffs, when we were not too busy trying to decide what sex to be, had brought mining, logging, ranching, and the military-industrial complex to their knees (Meloy 1994, 200–201). Mocking the exaggerated fears of western red-necks, Meloy gleefully imagines a scene wherein sexually ambivalent “nature buffs” triumph over the phallogocentric “military-industrial complex.” If she does not explicitly side with minority sexuality, she satirizes reactionary stereotypes of “gays” and “tree huggers” (291), and she critically lampoons the popular media’s polarization of factions: “youthful, pampered, overeducated, gorp-propelled urban androgynes on foot versus petro-propelled, overweight, manly men who cry that taking away access for snowmobiles, Jet Skis, ATVs, and other motorized toys is taking away their freedom” (290).¹⁴ At the same time, she adamantly allies herself with desert lovers of all freak sorts, including the queer chub, in a concerted minoritarian struggle to outlive and defeat the State machine and its unsustainable logging, ranching, and mining.

We might best describe Meloy’s biophilia as “an entire war machine through which love passes” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 278), given how rampantly it wreaks havoc on social order and domestic life:

The attraction to this landscape also resembled an outlaw coupling, the wild anarchy of a love affair whose heated obsession betrayed and unraveled some other, weaker, fidelity. I risked social and professional obligations, and my loved one’s patience, simply to submit to an involuntary hunger for light, rock, and air. (Meloy 1997, 200)

In addition, Meloy’s conjugations of desert sex “[bring] into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings” to be contained by conjugal propriety and natural selection. Her floraphilia, zoophilia, piscophilia, and so on “are like *n* sexes” that trouble not only binary sexuality but also evolutionary certainty through the survival of the straightest. With desert bighorn, humpback chub, and other cyborg and/or transgenic species, Meloy offers a queer paradigm of desire that replaces the apparatus of heterosexual genealogy, while embracing other, creative variations of becoming-life. Does her ethics of becoming-bighorn not challenge the most radical platform of queer activism, no less than the “save-the-whale” (and other select-species versus companion-species) campaigns of animal rights?

Take, for instance, Lee Edelman's (2004) provocatively irreverent and perversely logical anti-(pro)life argument and manifesto. In *No Future*, Edelman calls for queer insurgency against the dominant culture of "the Child" and its moral imperative to breed for the future. Only queers, he claims, can battle an imperative that unites Left and Right, thereby neutralizing domestic politics.¹⁵ Edelman inspires dissent in queers who resent the social complicity of breeders and futurists, and he instructs queer nihilists how to wither the symbolic vitality of pro-life morality. Specifically, he advocates an overthrow of popular media (especially film), and he demonstrates to his readers gleeful ways of monkey-wrenching the aesthetic technology of social/sexual reproductive machinery. For Edelman, "life" is the ideological enemy that queer desire ought to, critically and clinically, annihilate. Despite the potential of his approach to assemble a new queer coalition of negation, it fails to engage those queers who despise pro-life fascism yet desire to have children. Moreover, in its single-minded attack on pro-life, it offers nothing toward re-imagining queer involvement with life's creative and multiple becoming.

If *No Future* benefits queer desire by giving it an easy target and a sado-aesthetic armature of deployment, it disdains any attempt to rethink queer desire with respect to ecology's larger-than-pro-life crises. Alternatively, Ellen Meloy (married, no children, untimely dead at fifty-seven of a brain aneurysm), presents a paradigm of queer—nonreproductive, nonfiliative, anti-sexist, thoroughly perverse, and wildly anarchic—desire that conjugates the beneficial "affectability" of radically different bodies. Her biophilic compositions demonstrate the ecological future of queer desire, while obliquely challenging the biophobic moralizing that often passes for a love of life.

. . .

So, then, what *does* a humpback chub want? What piscine desires must humans desire to know so as to help recover native populations and the health of the desert overall? What unclassifiable cross-breeding and hybridization enable the (sub)species to survive so far, or does the growing presence of "intergrades" signify evolutionary failure to surmount rapid ecological change and degradation? Following the chub to one of few remaining habitats with a crew of fisheries biologists, Meloy becomes involved in exploring chub biology. What they want, she hazards, is:

High-walled sandstone chasms, fast water, steep gradients, spring floods. Humpback cubs thrive in whitewater—the swift, turbulent

currents that race against big boulders and sheer rock walls, pause for deep pools, and bulge into eddy fences, the shear zone between the main current and slower water. In their thirty-year life span, they move less than a mile from their home waters except to spawn. They feed in eddies in morning and evening and rest in pools during the day. They eat aquatic organisms, seeds, algae, plant bits, Mormon crickets, and mayflies, food they rake inward and tear with pharyngeal teeth common to cyprinids.(Meloy 1994, 208–209)

Beyond these tidbits of knowledge, she must join the scientists in bio-speculation. “The acutest minds still struggle to undo a taxonomic muddle among *Gila* manifested by a curious mix of their physical features in a single fish,” she notes. “We cannot identify the life needs of this fish until we identify the fish” (209). But chub identification defies regular taxonomic practice and calls for a “sideways knowing” that can see across (sub)species lines and imagine hybridization beyond genealogical paradigms. A “better science and monitoring” is required if variants are to be identified as sympatric (species that cohabit the same region, which do not usually interbreed but which do hybridize naturally, if rarely) or extrinsic (hybridization due to human civilization “changing environmental features important for reproductive isolation or reducing fish numbers to a point so law contacts among individuals of the same species are less likely than contacts among conspecifics,” 214–15). More than improved technology, it takes “devotion” (213) to distinguish variations that signal either adaptive evolution or “the last-ditch, high-pitched shriek of preextinction” (215). For life’s sake—or more precisely, for life for life’s sake—our biophilia is put to the ultimate test.

NOTES

1. Ellen Meloy is the author of four books on the American desert southwest for which she has won national and international acclaim: *Raven’s Exile: A Season on the Green River* (1994), *The Last Cheater’s Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest* (1999), *The Anthropology of Turquoise: Reflections on Desert, Sea, Stone, and Sky* (2002, Pulitzer Prize finalist); *Eating Stone: Imagination and the Loss of the Wild* (2005, National Book Critics’ Circle Award finalist).

2. The citation from “A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry” (Meloy 2002, 221–55, 244, 252) that heads this chapter paraphrases the hypothesis that Edward O. Wilson propounds in *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (1984). Meloy uses and adapts Wilson’s “biophilia” throughout her writing. The term “biophilic” is her invention (2002, 244).

3. See Bagemihl (1999). Stacy Alaimo's chapter in this collection refers to the surprising abundance and diversity with which Bagemihl documents the occurrence of homosexuality in nonhuman animals as support for a queer approach to ecology studies. My chapter reinforces Alaimo's call for a queer ecology by foregrounding Ellen Meloy's narrative documentary of symbiotic interspecies (including human and nonhuman) desire that is even more queerly exuberant than nonhuman homosexuality, and that, despite its ubiquity, has been no less marginalized than homosexuality by majoritarian models of the family tree.

4. As an ally of all life that is native to her desert homeland, Meloy often refers to "endemic" species. The desert's endemic plants, she explains, are erotically "edaphic": "Edaphic endemism is rampant on the Plateau. In other words, the range of certain endemics, or flora limited to specific localities, is often determined by soil conditions" (Meloy 2002, 225). Her emphasis on the *lushness* of desert life expressly counters the tendency in American political geography to represent the desert as barren, and thus supposedly open to inconsequential toxic and destructive land-use by the State's industrial-military machine, including nuclear testing. For more on this, see Meloy (1999) and Chisholm (2006).

5. For studies in culture, ecology, and the environment that use Deleuze and Guattari, see Bonta and Protevi (2004), Halsey (2006), Hayden (1998), and Muecke, Roe, and Bentarrak (1996). See also these recent collections: Chisholm (2007) and Herzogenrath (2009).

6. Phillips echoes Freud's "What Do Women Want?" with a similar rhetorical skepticism.

7. Freud's speculations on epistemophilia or "instinct of knowledge" are most extensively entertained in "Three Essays on Sexuality" and "On the Sexual Theories of Children." See Freud (1977).

8. Meloy's desert writing combines ecology with phenomenology, biophysics, and physiology. She describes seeing red as more than a matter of "retinas and wavelengths," and as involving "sensual, aesthetic, and cultural, as well as biological cues" (Meloy 2002, 230). She refers to Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, as does Gilles Deleuze in his analyzes of T. E. Lawrence's desert writing (see Deleuze 1997).

9. Symbiosis and autopoiesis are primary concepts in Deleuze and Guattari's elaboration of neo-evolutionism (or "creative involution"). They help to clarify and elaborate what these authors mean by "becoming." "Becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. Becoming . . . concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation" (Meloy 2002, 238). "Autopoiesis" explains how "living beings and environments stand in relation to one another through the activity of 'mutual specification' and codetermination" (Pearson 1999, 147, citing Francisco Varela). In other words, "life is not DNA but a 'rich network of facilitating relationships'" (Pearson 1999, 147, citing Robert Rosen). Guattari develops the concept along with "transversality" in *The Three Ecologies* (2001).

10. Plant ecology, however, persistently interprets such parasitic and promiscuous entanglements between different species in terms of family relations. For example, scientists recently report that "plants have a secret social life" with evidence that "the sea rocket is able to . . . distinguish between plants that are related to it and those that are not. And not only does this plant recognize its kin, but it also gives them preferential treatment." Accordingly, kinship rules in the plant, no less than the animal, kingdom. "If the sea rocket detects unrelated plants growing in the ground with it, the plant aggressively sprouts nutrient-grabbing roots. But if it detects family, it politely

restrains itself. . . . If an individual can identify kin, it can help them, an evolutionarily sensible act because relatives share some genes. The same discriminating organism could likewise ramp up nasty behavior against unrelated individuals with which it is most sensible to be in claws- or perhaps thorns-bared competition” (Yoon 2008). If such reporting suggests a turn to social Darwinism in plant ecology, Meloy avoids such a turn by mapping the invasive spread of desert paintbrush in terms of “brazen harlotry.” She emphasizes the plant’s promiscuous, parasitic, and/or possessive couplings with non-kin (other plant species) and non-kind (sandstone), foregrounding a desire that is flagrantly wayward and composing a deterritorializing rhizome, instead of a declaration of loyalty to family roots.

11. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the plant deterritorializes the cliff whose cracks and angles it hooks into and overflows, just as the cliff deterritorializes the plant by pressing upon its direction of growth with its geomorphology and soil conditions. The condensation of terms in the name “cliffrose” suggestively signifies symbiosis or heterogenesis: the becoming-cliff of the rose and the becoming-rose of the cliff. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “a becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both. . . . The line or block of becoming that unites the wasp and the orchid produces a shared deterritorialization: of the wasp, in that it becomes a liberated piece of the orchid’s reproductive system, but also of the orchid, in that it becomes the object of an orgasm in the wasp, also liberated from its own reproduction” (1987, 293).

12. “The term we would prefer for this form of evolution between heterogeneous terms is ‘involution’. . . . To involve is to form a block that runs its own line ‘between’ the terms in play and beneath assignable relations. . . . Movement occurs not only, or not primarily, by filiative productions but also by transversal communications between heterogeneous populations. Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 238–39).

13. Deleuze and Guattari (1986) coin the term “minor literature” to name writing that invades the language and narrative (including historical narrative) of dominant and/or colonizing culture with the foreign accents and affects of dominated and/or subaltern culture.

14. Meloy’s parody of the stereotyping of green activists is not exaggerated. A writer for the *New York Times Magazine* reports: “One thing that always struck me about the term ‘green’ was the degree to which, for so many years, it was defined by its opponents—by the people who wanted to disparage it. And they defined it as ‘liberal,’ ‘tree-hugging,’ ‘sissy,’ ‘girlie-man,’ ‘unpatriotic,’ ‘vaguely French’” (Friedman 2007, 42).

15. “For the Child, whose mere possibility is enough to spirit away the naked truth of heterosexual sex—impregnating heterosexuality, as it were, with the future of signification by conferring upon it the cultural burden of signifying futurity—figures our identification with an always-about-to-be-realized identity. . . . The consequences of such an identification both of and with the Child as the preeminent emblem of the motivating end, though one endlessly postponed, of every political vision as a *vision of futurity* must weigh on any delineation of a queer oppositional politics. . . . The queerness we propose . . . delights in [civilization’s] mortality as the negation of everything that would define itself, moralistically, as pro-life. . . . What is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here” (Edelman 2004, 13, 31).

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