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CRITICAL RELATIONALITY: QUEER, INDIGENOUS, AND  
MULTISPECIES BELONGING BEYOND SETTLER SEX & NATURE

KIM TALLBEAR AND ANGELA WILLEY

This special issue of *Imaginations* was conceived to document, provoke, theorize, and imagine relations between humans, and between humans and other-than-humans, that go beyond and trouble normative categories of nature, sex, and love. Such categories manifest, for example, in settler-colonial forms of kin, kind, and relating that are hierarchical, anthropocentric, capitalocentric, and hetero- and homonormative. Activists, artists, and scholars have rigorously critiqued family forms legitimated by state-sanctioned marriage and naturalized by neo-Darwinian narratives of belonging centered around biological reproduction and which treat land, women, and children as property, yet such forms remain as relational ideals. The so-called natural is always paramount in settler ideas of appropriate ways to relate, control, and allocate rights and resources that reproduce structural inequities.

If we are to move beyond the reproduction of the dyadic family's scripting and privileged status, we need to understand nature differently. We need to rethink sex as the central organizing principle of human sociality, the human as the only important unit of relational ethics, and the white supremacist settler and other colonial cultural scripts as ethical measures of belonging through which the naturalized ideal of the family emerged historically (McClintock 1995, Carter 2008, Carter 2007, Cott 2002, Denial 2013, Morgensen 2011, Franke 2015, TallBear 2018). Our ability to imagine nature and relationality differently are deeply enmeshed, and this imaginative work is vital to the re-worlding before us.

Another set of generative influences that spur this issue of *Imaginations* are the frameworks of ecosexuality and Indigenous Studies relational frameworks, including Indigenous eco-erotics. Performance artists Beth Stephens' and Annie Sprinkles' ecosexual approach—Earth as lover rather than Earth as mother—has a global following (Stephens and Sprinkle 2019, Theobald 2017). Their art and activism—like Audre Lorde's "erotic"—prompt us to deconstruct the concept of "sexuality." Ecosexuality is theoretically generative for an Indigenous Studies analysis of sex and relations, precisely because it is not necessary for Indigenous people who have much longer-standing intimate relational frameworks to guide relations with lands and waters. To that end, Turtle Mountain Chippewa scholar Melissa Nelson writes on Indigenous eco-erotics that do not limit the notion of erotic relations to sex. Nelson foregrounds Indigenous stories and frameworks of relationality between humans and nonhumans (Nelson in Barker, 2017). Finally, the critical analyses of Indigenous Studies scholar and anthropologist, David Delgado Shorter, challenge the objectification by anthropology of both Indigenous sexuality and spirituality. Instead he advocates for Indigenous analytical frameworks and emphasizes the circulation of power in order to disaggregate these objects into sets of relations between bodies, not all of them human and not all of them living (Shorter 2015 and 2016).

The writers and artists featured in this issue explore critical forms of relating that defy the raced, gendered, and genocidal kinship mandates of settler-colonial structures. In their textual and visual analyses and advocacy of critical theories, knowledges, and forms of relating, these thinkers and creators take inspiration from the potentially articulated fields of feminist, queer, and trans theory; Indigenous theory; disability and crip studies; critical race studies; science studies; animal studies; and performance studies. In their play with relations among various analytics, fields, and methodologies, they are often innovating new ways knowing and talking about relationality.

Twelve essays plus two book reviews constitute this special issue. Prominent theorists inform the thinking in these pages, but this issue features especially scholars and artists who are working in new, experimental ways to challenge normative ways of relating. Their

archives and visions push understandings of queer, Indigenous, and multispecies belonging in exciting new directions.

As non-artist writers and scholars who seek to decolonize and disaggregate sexuality from an object out into sets of relations, Rebecca Anweiler's *Sexual/Nature* images compel us in their veering away from objectifying sex as a thing. Yet Anweiler does this by counter-intuitively focusing the artist's eye on bodily entanglements that to many observers signify the thingness of sexuality, for example hands or mouths on breasts, fingers and tongues on/in genitalia. The artist's statement notes and pushes back against a world and its human scientific and media gazes that have privileged heteronormative and biologically reproductive sex between not only humans, but also other-than-human animals as natural. At the same time, same-sex relations have been depicted as unnatural or perverse. We were delighted with how Anweiler's images and artist's statement playfully and seriously challenge what she sees as a perverse solidification of relations into the object of sex. So-called sex can then be ordered, scripted, managed, and controlled by the patriarchal white male human subjects who have traditionally gathered these relations into a narrow purview with their visualizing apparatuses (Haraway 2013). How unsexy! The boring straight sex that is scripted and standardized by the settler-colonial gaze is then used to obscure diverse, pleasurable ways of relating.

Emily Coon and Nicole Land, in "*iMessaging Friendship and Flesh*," deploy a "Millennial feminist academic" writing method and build their paper through and around iMessage exchanges that nearly instantaneously cross 4,595 kilometres of land spanning Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples on one side of the continent and Coast and Straits Salish peoples on the other. The symbiotic relations that form their feminist ecosystem might serve as a metaphor for the centrality of relationality to our work. Jenny Reardon and Kim TallBear engaged in a Generation X feminist academic version of this collaboration one summer, years ago. They wrote "*Your DNA is Our History*": *Genomics, Anthropology, and the Construction of Whiteness as Property* (2012) by exchanging drafts daily via email. Their geographic distance facilitated an efficient writing process with the writing happening 16-20 hours a day. TallBear wrote from Berkeley, Cali-

fornia and sent drafts to Reardon by 10 pm each night. That was 6 am in England where Reardon was writing. Reardon would add her edits and return the draft to TallBear by 5 pm England time, 9am California time. They sent drafts back and forth daily like this for several weeks.

While Reardon and TallBear wrote a more typical academic article less co-constitutively formed with the technology that carried words nearly instantaneously around the globe, their writing and friendship process, like Coon's and Land's process in both content and form, models the sort of relationship work usually imagined to belong to—and often seen as constitutive of—sexual/romantic relationships (Petrella 2007). The naturalization of settler monogamy depends as much upon distinguishing love from friendship and other forms of affinity as it does the pathologization of promiscuity or non-monogamy (Willey 2016, 72). The valuation of friendship as a site of intimacy, meaning-making, resource sharing, and transformation has the potential to unravel stories about the specialness of sex and to fuel our imaginations to rethink forms and structures that exceed the ideal of the settler family, which may sustain and remake us.

Coon and Land are also pulled along their path as they walk with curiosity and a sense of ethical adventure a lush citation-lined path through a forest populated by towering old-growth intellectuals, including Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Banu Subramaniam, and Mishuana Goeman. We hope that our mentors and colleagues will not mind us calling them “old growth.” It is only a testament to their intellectual stature! Coon and Land also walk among brightly colored, resilient, and determined new growth springing up in light through the old growth canopy. The newer growth includes @apihtawikosisan, @kwetoday, @EricaVioletLee, @thesarahhunt, @RedIndianGirl and others. All are essential to this feminist intellectual ecosystem that also feeds their resurgent decolonial solidarity—their “Indigenous-settler friendship” filled with exchanges and mutual supports built through the technology of iMessage that arises from settler-colonial extractions and simultaneously works to circumvent and challenge them. This is, in short, the fundamental predicament of doing anti-colonial work within the colonial academy. We predict that this article will incite more (serious) playfulness

in the writing of other re/insurgent Millennials who, rather than simply coming after us, are, like their co-constitutive technologies, coming *for* us.

Also working from within a colonial scientific field she challenges, plant scientist and artist Sophie Duncan constructs an “(Un)Natural Archive,” an anti-colonial narrative that traces scientific explorations, discoveries, and the imposition of Latin names onto plants across time and space. Duncan demonstrates botany’s co-constitution as a discipline with imperialism and colonialism spanning Rome to European invasions of the Americas. “(Un)Natural Archive” is punctuated with Duncan’s original artworks that combine representations of plant and human bodies, sometimes with text. The series of images represent the imposition of human categories of race, gender, and otherness onto the plant world in ways that rescripted relations—both between humans and plants, and between plants and different lands—to coincide with colonial narratives of Eurocentric male exploration, discovery, and appropriation. The images are often built on top of old faded newspaper in which plants were pressed by collectors or onto magazine text in which romanticized tales of exploration are etched. Paradoxically, the images are richly splashed with primary and other colors, thus freshly analyzing the faded, but still dominant colonial archive of the “fathers of botany.” Rarely is the taking-down of the “false god” of Objectivity such a delight to gaze upon.

“Ruximik Qak’u’x: Inescapable Relationalities in Grupo Sotz’il’s Performance Practice” is a deeply collaborative multimedia essay. Maria Regina Firmino-Castillo, with Daniel Fernando Guarca González (on behalf of Grupo Sotz’il), and Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal combine their use of video, still images, and text to offer a set of analytics for thinking relationality beyond settler sex and nature. The engagement of audio and visual sensorium supports the translational and analytic explication of rich understandings of knowing and being in intimate relation with nonhuman and human others. Beginning with the Iq’—life force—they map Kaqchikel epistemologies that unsettle human exceptionalism, the individual as knower, and the practice of knowing as one of domination. The methodology they enact suggests ways of knowing with and about our inextricable entanglements with

one another. Relationality here is always already more-than-human and often dangerous.

Similarly, more-than-human relations ground Alexandra Halkias's "Tracking Love in the Wild." This piece offers a gentle, urgent narrative analysis accompanied by photographs of water, stone, bone, and a bit of plant matter. Halkias presents in the photographs "fluidity of form," thus conveying the related materiality of all entities, even those not considered to be living according to the definition of organismically-defined life foreground in Eurocentric disciplinary thought. The photographs of mostly lifeless objects punctuate the author's discussion of relevant multispecies, new materialist, queer, and Indigenous approaches to the relationality between human and non-human animals and also with geological matter. The bone adjacent to rock in one photograph also recalls relationality with ancestors, be they human or other-than-human relations now fossilized perhaps in both kinds of matter. In defense of her rejection of the stable boundary between human and animal, Halkias acknowledges that while human rights are powerful weapons for social justice, destabilizing that human/animal line may loop back to "erode the very ground that feeds these violations," violations that include mass incarceration and police violence against certain racialized human subjects. The essay then tracks across geographies from San Diego, New York, and Boston to Athens to depict dense emotional and intellectual ties between humans and nonhuman animals in several long-term relationships. Two of the most insightful tales of human-animal love are two articulated stories—the author's relationship with the cat Myrra (eventually euthanized after a very long life) and the three-way love between her friends, Eleni and Athena, and their dog baby, Bonnie. Bonnie also became ill and was euthanized just as Eleni and Athena's human babies (conceived with Danish sperm donors) were born. The essay drives home convincingly the idea that the relationality between humans and nonhumans is life-sustaining and in focusing on this cross-species sustenance we might diminish the importance of "natural difference" and disappear entirely "all social and political uses 11of 'the animal'" that ultimately do violence to so many beings, and to the planet.

Of course, the animal and notions of lesser evolution have been central to the articulation of race and racial science for centuries, and continue to be albeit in ways that seem more subtle from centuries past. Jennifer Hamilton's "From Bits to Bodies: Perfect Humans, Bioinformatic Visualizations, and Critical Relationality" focuses on "racialsexual formation," which is the idea that sexual dimorphism (the two-sex model) is inextricable from the development of racial categories since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And while the biological reality of race is contested in genomic discourse, Hamilton argues that sexual dimorphism remains largely uncontested. Yet dimorphism is central to the de-animation of women and to placing them into a hierarchy below men. Hamilton anchors an analysis of contemporary genomics and its contribution to heteronormative racialsexual formation in the 2014 (not so) sarcastic assertion and bioinformatic visualization by a Berkeley computational biologist of the perfect human. The scientist referred to a legendary sixteenth century Taino (Puerto Rican) woman, Yuiza, who along with her conquistador lover, are considered in some nationalist narratives as the "great-great-grand grandparents of the Puerto Rican nation." Bringing together Indigenous, feminist, and queer theory that is critical of the role of heteronormative kinship in nation-making, Hamilton analyzes nationalist-cum-genomic narratives that are seemingly anti-racist and multicultural. But as is common in nationalist genomics discourse, the narrative and bioinformatic visualization of Yuiza is also grounded in longstanding eugenic thought and heterosexist modes of kinship.

While Hamilton reminds us of how enmeshed logics of heteronormativity and white supremacy are, others take up the limitations and possibilities of queerer notions of belonging. In "Digital Nomadism and Settler Desires: Racial Fantasies of Silicon Valley Imperialism," Erin McElroy tracks the flexibility of settler logics of belonging. McElroy offers a careful examination of discourses of freedom alongside the infrastructures that demand and enable the "digital nomad's" way of life. Despite a celebratory pretense of queering heteronormative values, like homeownership, using powerful images of protest against Airbnb, McElroy reads this figure as enacting settler politics through the displacement of others their reliance on

short-term housing economies requires. The racial fantasy of a gypsy lifestyle occludes the realities of gentrification, white supremacy, and violence upon which this new subjectivity depends. Through this analysis, McElroy powerfully conveys that the queering of relationality must exceed the intimate priorities of the individual. We exist in relation with people we do not know. Critical relationality here might mean centering in our thinking the material conditions of possibility for our own constrained choices and the distribution of harms and benefits in which they are imbricated.

Conversely, Naveen Minai's explores the disruption of settler epistemologies of time and space in "Who Gave Your Body Back to You? Literary and Visual Cartographies of Erotic Sovereignty in the Poetry of Qwo-Li Driskill," which considers the conditions of possibility for decolonizing belonging. The imposition of settler genders and sexualities as a site of colonial violence (Rifkin) is thematized in Driskell's poetry through the concept of erotic sovereignty. Minai's reading highlights the exercise of erotic sovereignty in Driskell's deployment of Cherokee meanings, including the relationship to land as a relation between lovers. The close reading of the spatial and temporal disruptions of settler time and space (which locate settler colonial violence in the past and Indigenous bodies apart from Indigenous lands), offers rich and generative narrative resources for reimagining belonging, beyond settler sex and nature.

Lindsay Nixon's critique of the disjuncture between Robert Mapplethorpe's treatment of white and Black subjects extends this analysis of the racial conditions of possibility for the intelligibility of queer white settler subjectivities. In "Distorted Love: Mapplethorpe, the Neo/Classical Sculptural Black Nude, and Visual Cultures of Transatlantic Enslavement," they offer a careful analysis of Mapplethorpe's evocation of iconographies of the transatlantic slave trade and critiques of these themes in his work, showing how such images and symbols enact a queer necropolitics that depends upon the devaluation of some lives for the revaluation of others. Through a meditation on varied meanings of queerness in relation to Mapplethorpe's celebrated photographic representations of queer bodies, Nixon conjures a fragile kinship among queers to call for the accountability of our communities (unmarked) toward "Black queer kin."

Cleo Woelfle-Erskine takes up disparate imaginaries of kinship in his analysis of settler-fish relations as a site for the production of gender, sexualities, and family. “Fishy Pleasures: Unsettling Fish Hatching and Fish Catching on Pacific frontiers” treats fish-relations as a naturecultural process, enabling Woelfle-Erskine’s deep exploration of the coproduction of “human nature” among more-than-human actors. A careful reading of the visual production of settler relationality through fishing cultures unsettles<sup>11</sup> its neo-Darwinian claims on nature. The significance of the production of land and fish as resource to the formation of heteronormative familial life centers the non-human in our imaginaries of relational possibility. Woelfle-Erskine stunningly renders the juxtaposition of settler and Indigenous epistemologies of relation here in ways that make it clear that the project of queering human-human love relations is inadequate to the task of reimagining belonging in truly transformative ways.

Extending and further exploring this insight, in “Pili’oha/Kinship: (Re)Imagining Perceptions of Nature and More-than-human Relationality” Kimberley Greeson offers a multispecies, autoethnographic exploration of Native Hawaiian (Kanaka Maoli) perspectives on kinship. The centrality of multispecies entanglements to Pili’oha—kinship—is at the heart of this methodological meditation. Drawing on naturecultural approaches, diffractive reading practices, and an autoethnographic thematization of experience, Greeson explores what it means to do decolonial feminist research. Learning to see and understand reciprocity among humans and the land, between humans and their more than human kin, and among non-human actors is key here not only to biodiversity, but to reimagining what it means to relate, to be related, to be in relationship.

Shifting our focus back to the ubiquity of reductionist notions of relationality, Jay Fields’ digital art piece *Consumption* explores the ideal of sexual-romantic coupledness and the values that shape and are perpetuated by compulsory monogamy, the dyadic family structure at the center of settler sexuality. A meditation on the mundane interpersonal violence this system perpetuates, *Consumption* raises questions about power, desire, and the conditions of possibility for the inscription of monogamy in stories about human nature. What humans? In what contexts? Fields’ visualization of monogamy offers a

sharp juxtaposition to the romanticized naturalization of pairing off as the apex of human evolutionary and psychosocial development.

This special issue of *Imaginations* also includes reviews by Rick W.A. Smith of Angela Willey's *Undoing Monogamy* (2016) and by Irene Wolfstone of Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). Both books—and their reviewers—tend to relations between how we imagine nature and how we imagine belonging.

We hope the works collected here will inspire and incite imagination about what it means to be in relationship: with friends, real and imagined communities, humans we don't know, non-human-others, and the planet. We hope that *Critical Relationalities* supports the work of materializing anti-colonial forms of relating and that these forms in turn lend themselves to the project of reimagination of a planetary belonging that redefines relationship ethics. If we extend the values of care and support within privatized settler-family relations and those of transparency and consent at the heart of ethical non-monogamy (that unfortunately often privileges sex and romance) to these more expansive notions of relationality, what commitments might marry us to one another? We would have to rethink the centrality of settler notions of home, family, and kinship as central organizing metaphors for relatedness. We would have to become otherwise.

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