

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: STITCHES AS SEEDS: CRAFTING NEW NATURES

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“Stitches as Seeds: Crafting New Natures” explores how fiber’s material specificity agitates universalizing notions of nature. The interpretive lens is inspired by the relational and iterative processes of much fiber art. Akin to patchwork quilting, the dissertation pieces together disparate practices including collage, needlepoint, paintings, photography, performance, and poetry together with readings of spaces such as museum dioramas, aquariums, sideshows, plantations, and parks. Queer and feminist theorizations of art history, material culture, and new materialisms frame the methodology. Ultimately, the dissertation reflects on how fiber advances more experiential possibilities for addressing urgent issues of social and ecological justice.

Each chapter focuses on a fantastical invocation of nature. Allyson Mitchell’s installation *Ladies Sasquatch* (2006-2010) is a sculptural vignette of erotic and menacing lesbian sasquatches—pieced together with thrifted hobby crafts like macramé and latch hook hangings—cavorting in a utopian wilderness. Aaron McIntosh’s *Invasive Queer Kudzu* (2013-ongoing) facilitates quilting bees for Southern LGBTQ people to stitch their personal stories onto fabric kudzu leaves. *Invasive* marshals ever-growing vines of quilted kudzu to invade stereotypes of the American South. Margaret and Christine

Wertheim's *Crochet Coral Reef* (2005-ongoing) merges feminist politics with experimental mathematics to encourage an international network of volunteers to crochet the vibrant, hyperbolic shapes of coral reefs. The crocheted reefs orient their makers towards a radically empathetic perception of nature.

As immersive and socially-engaged artworks, they illuminate the questions: *Who* defines nature and decides *what* is natural? Specifically, the fiber-based techniques leverage the historical denigration of the medium as a domestic and feminine hobby into a subversive and enduring tool of social activism. The artists' stitches are like seeds. As they are sewn/sown, they fabricate new natures. These seductively artificial renderings of nature unravel the illusion that nature is actually natural, or neutral from surrounding cultural struggles. As such, the dissertation considers how the artworks entangle notions of the material, the social, and the spatial.

STITCHES AS SEEDS: CRAFTING NEW NATURES

By

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## **Dedication**

To Will Novak

To this very day, no one can oppose the beating of two Klingon hearts.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

On November 26, 2016, approximately 150 Native women walked in unity through the Oceti Sakowin Camp on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota (fig. 1.1). As they walked, they held up handmade banners stating KIK TA (“Wake up” in Lakota), PROTECT WINYAN (“Woman” in Lakota), and YOU ARE NOT ALONE. The walk was organized in throes of a rancorous protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline under Lake Oahe. Thousands of water protectors from tribal nations around the United States gathered at Standing Rock to defend the local tribe and, more broadly, native sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Six days prior, November 20, police deployed water cannons and tear gas on the water protectors in frigid weather, injuring 167 people. Soon after, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and North Dakota Governor Jack Dalrympe began ramping up pressure to evacuate the protest camps.<sup>2</sup> The confrontations marked months of tension, with Native American citizens claiming that the federal government was overreaching sacred land, a move that bookmarked the systemic violence and disenfranchisement of Native Americans and First Nations in the United States.

Activist artists Rebecca Nagle (Cherokee) and Graci Horne (Sisseton Wahpeton/Hunkpapa) organized a three-day program, “Kik Ta / Wake Up” to provide a much-needed space for healing. From November 24-26, Native women were invited into a cozy tent to quilt, chat, and pray with tribal elders (fig. 1.2).<sup>3</sup> On Saturday, the women pieced

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<sup>1</sup> See Carla Javier, “A Timeline of the Year of Resistance at Standing Rock,” *Splinter*, December 14, 2018. <https://splinternews.com/a-timeline-of-the-year-of-resistance-at-standing-rock-1794269727> (Accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Exec. Order No. 202016-18 (North Dakota, 2016) <https://www.governor.nd.gov/media-center/executive-orders> (Accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Nagle and Graci Horne, *Kik Ta/Wake Up: Healing Circle for Survivors of Rape, Abuse, and Harassment with the Monument Quilt*, (Baltimore, Monument Quilt, 2016)

together their quilts, and then walked in solidarity through the camp and through a ritual fire. The sewing circle created a safe space for women to discuss the links between colonization, “grandmother earth,” and Native women’s bodies.<sup>4</sup> Participant Siera Begaye (Diné) later reported:

The first time I was given a platform to speak on sexual assault and abuse was at Standing Rock....I was a part of a march called “Kik Ta” (Wake Up).... It was another step of healing for me, my sisters, and our Nahasdzáán (Mother Earth). The parallels between the abuse that our Mother Earth goes through and the abuse our Native women go through is heartbreaking. She is our life-giver. She is who we turn to, to pray. Praying, surviving, being with all of our indigenous peoples is a step on our continuous journey to healing.<sup>5</sup>

The community quilt attended to personal trauma. Each block featured stories of survival, often hand-written or printed with stencils, and all bordered with bright red strips of fabric. The Kik Ta quilts are part of a larger project, the *Monument Quilt*, a traveling patchwork quilt coordinated by the Baltimore-based activist organization FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture, founded in 2010 by Nagle and Hannah Brancato. FORCE organizes quilting workshops and related events throughout the nation to provide support for survivors of sexual assault and to encourage dialogue and political action against rape culture. The *Monument Quilt* broadly fosters dialogue about public safety and the destigmatization of victims of sexual assault, rape, and abuse. “By stitching our stories together, we are creating and demanding public space to heal....We are creating a new culture where survivors are publicly supported rather than publicly shamed.”<sup>6</sup> To

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<sup>4</sup> Hrag Vartarian, “Artists Rebecca Nagle and Graci Horne Help Women Confront Sexual Violence at Standing Rock.” SoundCloud audio, 33.14 minutes, published December 1, 2016. <https://soundcloud.com/hyperallergic>. In this interview and on the Kik Ta flyer, the artists refer to earth as “grandmother earth.”

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Karmelo Amaya, “Women Lead Healing on Front Lines.” YouTube video, 3:29 minutes, published December 3, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vv5cSGUukLA>

<sup>6</sup> The Monument Quilt, <https://themonumentquilt.org> (accessed January 21, 2019).

date, the Monument Quilt has gathered more than 3,000 stories of trauma and survival.<sup>7</sup>

For Native women, the stakes are especially high. The pipeline threatens clean drinking water and native sovereignty, but also creates conditions of sexual assault. The *Monument Quilt's* satellite Kik Ta program brings visibility to these interlaced issues. Rape is prevalent in “man camps” or worksites for transient oil workers.<sup>8</sup> Much of the wealth of oil in North Dakota is located on tribal lands, causing man camps to aggregate nearby. The Women of the Brave Heart Society and the Ihanktowan Treaty Council state that “man camps give rise to violence against women and families and increase sex trafficking, especially among Native women.”<sup>9</sup> Rapists and sexual predators manipulate the legal loopholes that prevent tribal police from legal recourse. Lisa Brunner (White Earth Ojibwe), a program specialist for the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center, has described the environmental destruction as a consequence of oil fracking and pipelines:

They treat Mother Earth like they treat women... They think they can own us, buy us, sell us, trade us, rent us, poison us, rape us, destroy us, use us as entertainment and kill us. I’m happy to see that we are talking about the level of violence that is occurring against Mother Earth because it equates to us [women]. What happens to her happens to us... We are the creators of life. We carry that water that creates life just as Mother Earth carries the water that maintains our life.<sup>10</sup>

This dissertation begins with Kik Ta, because it is a story of collective activism organized around the historically marginalized activity of quilting. This unassuming hobby creates

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<sup>7</sup> The Monument Quilt, <https://themonumentquilt.org/about/> (accessed January 21, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See André B. Rosay, “Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men,” *NIJ Journal* No. 277 (2016), pp. 38-45. <https://nij.gov/journals/277/pages/violence-against-american-indians-alaska-natives.aspx> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Mary Annette Pember, “Brave Heart Women Fight to Ban Man-Camps, Which Bring Rape and Abuse,” *Indian Country Today*, August 28, 2013. <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/brave-heart-women-fight-to-ban-man-camps-which-bring-rape-and-abuse/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Pember, “Brave Heart Women Fight to Ban Man-Camps.”

space and time for women to empathize and support each other, and also plan and agitate for change. As Nagle observed, “We can’t build the world we want to live in, if we can’t imagine it.”<sup>11</sup>

Donna Haraway writes in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.<sup>12</sup>

Haraway takes up science fiction author Ursula K. LeGuin’s “carrier bag theory of fiction” to illustrate how the lowly matters make stories that really matter.<sup>13</sup> Rather than the epic narrative arcs of heroes, LeGuin muses on the shoestring stories of mundane object like nets, pots, and seeds. A story that begins with a bag of seeds promises a different ending from the old stories that begin with a weapon. A carrier bag of acacia seeds provides an especially robust metaphorical apparatus to think through stories and matter. One acacia seed germinates countless stories. The acacia tree’s ability to tolerate and adapt to harsh circumstances makes it possible for other species to flourish—many insects call the acacia home and many others call it dinner.<sup>14</sup> Such mundane matters and meandering stories produce a more empathetic and relational worldview that might benefit both nature and its inhabitants. Haraway posits, “we need to reseed our souls and

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<sup>11</sup> Hrag Vartarian, “At Standing Rock, Two Artists Help Women Confront the Trauma of Sexual Violence, Hyperallergic, December 1, 2016. <https://hyperallergic.com/342283/artists-rebecca-nagle-graci-horne-sexual-violence-standing-rock/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, (Athens: University of George Press, 1996), 149-152.

<sup>14</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 121. Acacias are also considered shrubs.

our home worlds in order to flourish—again, or maybe just for the first time—on a vulnerable planet that is not yet murdered.”<sup>15</sup>

Stitches are like seeds. As they are sewn/sown, they fabricate new stories to displace seminal myths of triumphant heroes. As the *Kik Ta* quilt exemplifies, stitching gives way to chatting, crying, laughing, thinking, mending, and mobilizing. The stitches bear witness to stories of sexual and ecological assault, and sutures them to stories of resilience, resistance, and adaptation. Such an experiential mode of storytelling, in LeGuin’s evocative phrasing, creates “a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in.... this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story.”<sup>16</sup> With this in mind, this dissertation explores a carrier bag theory of fiber. Fiber is a tool that promises new ways of thinking through and feeling entangled constructs of nature and identity. I will examine how the material specificity of fiber agitates universalizing constructions of nature. Each chapter will focus on an immersive and communal artwork that has leveraged the felt power of fiber with the symbolic power of nature to interrogate the invention and maintenance of nature. They illuminate the questions: *Who* defines nature and decides *what* is natural? Specifically, the artworks unravel the illusion that nature is actually natural, or neutral from surrounding cultural struggles.

### Sources and Methods

Each chapter in this dissertation is organized around a fantastical invocation of nature. Chapter one considers Allyson Mitchell’s installation *Ladies Sasquatch* (2006-

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<sup>15</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 117.

<sup>16</sup> LeGuin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” 154.

2010), a sculptural vignette of erotic and menacing lesbian sasquatches—pieced together with thrifted hobby crafts like macramé and latch hook hangings—cavorting in a utopian wilderness. Chapter two considers Aaron McIntosh’s *Queer Invasive Kudzu* (2013-ongoing), a project that facilitates quilting bees for LGBTQ Southerners to stitch their personal stories onto fabric kudzu leaves. *Invasive* marshals ever-growing vines of quilted kudzu to invade and overcome toxic ideologies of the American South. Chapter three considers Margaret and Christine Wertheim’s *Crochet Coral Reef* (2005-ongoing), a project that merges feminist politics with experimental mathematics to encourage an international network of volunteers to crochet the vibrant, hyperbolic shapes of coral reefs. The crocheted reefs orient their makers towards a radically empathetic perception of nature. Each of the primary artworks challenges dominant descriptions and representations of nature, or the so-called natural order of things.

The dissertation’s interpretive approach is inspired by the patchwork quilt technique expressed in the Kik Ta quilt. Individual blocks of meaning are pieced together into a limitless cloth. The patchwork quilt provides a space of open-ended and collaborative thinking. Building on this, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described patchwork quilting as “an amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways.”<sup>17</sup> In their theorization of space, they situate the patchwork quilt as a physical manifestation of relational, rhizomatic, and iterative processes. Echoing LeGuin’s carrier bag theory, Deleuze and Guattari share an anecdote about a quilter who worked on the same project for fifteen years, always “carrying about with her a shapeless bag of dingy, threadbare brocade containing odds and ends of

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<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), 476.

colored fabric in all possible shapes....she shifted and fitted and mused and fitted and shifted them like pieces of a patient puzzle-picture.”<sup>18</sup> A patchwork approach eschews linear trajectories by embracing experimentation and unexpected juxtapositions. In this way, each chapter pieces together intertextual sources including collage, landscape painting, photography, public sculpture, performance, and poetry around the primary artworks to create a “puzzle-picture” of networked things. The puzzle-pictures draw from the scope and scale of American art, a heterogeneous field that brings context and backstories to the contemporary artworks under discussion.

The primary artworks—*Ladies Sasquatch*, *Invasive Queer Kudzu*, and *Crochet Coral Reef*—weave together the scope and scale of American art, a heterogeneous field that includes the genres of landscape art and women’s work. Together, these genealogies bring context and backstories to the contemporary artworks under discussion. As each chapter pieces together various intertextual sources, I attempt to uncover generative connections and juxtapositions. Chapter one outlines how popular tales of discovering “Wild Men” reflect racist fears of the wilderness. As settlers contained the North American territories, they wrote the script for the scenario of discovery that was subsequently repeated in sideshow spectacles, museum displays, and landscape paintings. Allyson Mitchell draws on a range of sources to invert this myth. Guided by her Deep Lez philosophy, she plays with images of 1970s Playboy cartoons, pin-up girls, and sasquatch, and pieces together thrifted and found objects like abandoned hobby crafts and fun fur. Mitchell’s vignette creates a queer utopian wilderness that invites its discoverers to go wild.

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<sup>18</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 476.

Chapter two explores how *Invasive Queer Kudzu* registers cultural histories and invasive ideologies of the American South. It gathers a constellation of iconic and notorious southern artworks, including *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by William Agee and Walker Evans, photographs of kudzu by William Christenberry, Confederate monuments and memorials, and, of course, Aaron McIntosh's quilted kudzu vines. The chapter also considers the grassroots influence of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the Monument Quilt, and Pride Parades. *Invasive* responds to all of these sources with an imagining of the South blanketed by leaves of quilted queer kudzu.

Chapter three considers how *Crochet Coral Reef* brings together communities of knowledge such as math, natural history and science, ecocriticism, and new materialisms to craft hyperbolic coral reefs. It tells stories of artistic and scientific breakthroughs by women who drew on their domestic knowledge, including Daina Taimina, Anna Thynne, and Mary Delany. The chapter focuses on specific components of *Crochet Coral Reef*, such as the "Toxic Reef" made of plastic trash and the Smithsonian Community Reef. Then, it delves more deeply into personal experience with making the reef and how embodied learning offers new ways of seeing and feeling nature.

The thread line running through each chapter is how fiber praxis challenges universalizing pictures of nature. This involves (dis)entangling notions of the spatial, the material, and the social. Nature is spatial, fiber is material, and social places the two in conversation. To work through these concepts, I rely heavily on queer and feminist theorizations of art history, material culture, and new materialisms. Of particular importance is Deleuze and Guattari's captivating theorization of smooth and striated space, which will be further defined. I also learned tremendously from Diana Taylor's

definition of archive and repertoire; Ann Cvetkovich's elaboration of archives of feeling; Robin Bernstein's application of "scriptive things;" Elizabeth Freeman's notion of temporal drag; Fred Pearce's insistence on a "New Wild;" Jack Halberstam's theorization of queer time and space, and more recently, his "theory in the wild" with Tavia Nyong'o; Jane Bennett's beautiful writings on vibrant matter; Jeanne Vaccaro's transgender ecologies; and José Esteban Muñoz's queer utopias. More generally, the dissertation's rhythm is influenced by Donna Haraway and Ursula K. LeGuin.

The following sections define the terms of nature and fiber to provide context for where *Ladies Sasquatch*, *Invasive*, and the *Crochet Coral Reef* emerge in the present moment. Along these lines, I also define two tactics for how to think about space and materiality, *inbetweenness* and *ongoingness*. Inbetweenness is a disruption of hegemonic spaces. The makers attempt to translate a contained space into a nomadic, smooth space. These actions cause friction, and often make the spaces nervous.<sup>19</sup> Ongoingness is the utilization of a mundane material—fiber—as a tool to subvert dominant historical narratives. Rather than following a narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and tidy conclusion, ongoingness is sustained in perpetuity. The power of ongoingness rests in its ability to endure. These two descriptions help sort out the spatial and material interventions by the artworks. Together, these tactics disrupt naturalized ways of seeing nature, and instead show new ways of imagining, and then making new natures.

### Terms of Nature

Nature is both a physical entity and a social construct. We currently live in the Anthropocene, a geological epoch characterized by human impact on Earth's ecosystems

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<sup>19</sup> See Denis R. Byrne, "Nervous Landscapes: Race and Space in Australia," *Journal of Social Archaeology*, Vol. 3 No. 2 (2003).

and geology. Significant human interventions on nature began thousands of years ago, when early humans transitioned from a lifestyle of hunting and gathering towards agriculture and settlement. Nature, as we know it today, is far from pure or unmediated. Almost all ecosystems comprise a motley crew of flora and fauna, some have been in the same place for centuries, and others have been accidentally or purposefully introduced.<sup>20</sup> As environmental journalist Fred Pearce argues, Anthropocenic ecosystems are unbalanced and not striving towards perfect harmony. Nature is always in an unpredictable process of production and reproduction, a reflection of a past and present “human invasions.”<sup>21</sup> At the onset of colonization of North America, the dynamic between nature and culture has produced persistent stereotypes of nature as a virgin, a paradise, a resource, a frightful zone, or a blank slate. Such assumptions come from the transcendent, elevated cultural perspective—called the “conquering gaze” by Haraway—of colonizers who defined nature on sweeping ideological terms, rather than local realities.<sup>22</sup> As an example, historian Melanie Perreault points out that when Arthur Barlow and his fellow Puritan colonizers landed in Virginia, they exclaimed that the land “brings forth all things in abundance, as in the first creation, without toil or labor.”<sup>23</sup> They invented an Eden in Virginia.

As the story goes, God first created earth, light, water, plants, and animals, and then, on the sixth day, he created a man and then a woman. To the first humans, God

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<sup>20</sup> Fred Pearce, *New Wild: Why Invasive Species Will Be Nature's Salvation* (Boston: Beacon Press), xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Pearce, *New Wild*, xiv

<sup>22</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), 581. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and Jill H. Casid "Epilogue: Landscape in, around, and under the performative," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, Vol. .21, No. 1 (March 2011), 97-116.

<sup>23</sup> Melanie Perreault, "American Wilderness and First Contact," in *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30.

directed: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves the earth.”<sup>24</sup> Western civilization’s biblical claim to nature has endured millennia, and has been frequently invoked in conquests of land. According to eco-feminist historian Carolyn Merchant, colonialist projects between 1600 and 1860 structured Europeans above the so-called savage elements of their new territories.<sup>25</sup> Prior to colonization, the oral/aural worldview of Indigenous peoples and early settlers valued plants and animals as active communicators.<sup>26</sup> Artist Cannupa Haska (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota) noted the difference of worldviews: “[My] original bible, that comes down from on high, it is the land. We have an oral tradition and we tell stories about magical characters that are bound to the landscape, that are bound to geology.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast, Merchant explains that when Puritan colonizers arrived in New England, they turned their eyes “upward toward a transcendent God who sent down his Word in written form in the Bible...the biblical word in turn legitimated the imposition of agriculture and artifact in the new land.”<sup>28</sup> Textual and visual forms of knowledge supplanted oral and embodied knowledge, equating it with wilderness and savagery. Performance historian Diana Taylor argues that performance-based or oral knowledge was dismissed, then “only the

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<sup>24</sup> Gn, 1:28; see also Andrea Wulff, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s World* (New York: Random House, 2015) 59.

<sup>25</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 2.

<sup>26</sup> See Perreault “American Wilderness and First Contact” for a more detailed discussion of the transitional period between early European “Discovery” and Puritan settlement. Native Americans and early settlers believed in magic and pagan beliefs.

<sup>27</sup> Carolina Miranda, “The Artist Who Made Protestors’ Mirrored Shields Says the ‘Struggle Porn’ Media Miss Point of Standing Rock,” *LA Times*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-cannupa-hanska-luger-20170112-story.html> (accessed April 21, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*, 20. See also Perrault, “American Wilderness and First Contact,” 29. From 1630 to 1640, more than 14,000 immigrants arrived in New England, many were Puritans.

literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity.”<sup>29</sup> From Western perspective, God created nature, and thus, it was capable of being known. Nature could be captured in descriptions, drawings, maps, and diagrams. It could be manipulated and improved upon with imported plants, animals, and people. Merchant continues, “The visual and material thus combined to produce power over nature.”<sup>30</sup>

*Power over nature* is inextricably tied to power over people. “Civilization” has always been predicated on the exclusion of others, expressed both in physical and ideological means. As colonizers sought to subdue and rule nature, they devised systems of control for indigenous and enslaved peoples. Human activities were directly manipulated by material structures like fences, dams, and roads. Land was taken from Native tribes with treaties and text-based property relations. Archaeologist Denis Byrne has outlined how the application of the cadastral grid across colonial Australia attempted to manage the “disturbing” and “promiscuous behavior” of Aboriginal persons. With no due consideration given to existing Aboriginal sites or treatments of the landscape, trees were razed and replaced with fenced farmable plots. According to Byrne, “The grid worked, indirectly, to train Aboriginal bodies to function within the geometry of the new economic order.”<sup>31</sup> Structured by the (il)logic of racism, the redistribution of land effectively divided populations along racial lines.

To illustrate this idea art historian Jill H. Casid has analyzed a 1719 frontispiece of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (fig. 1.3). In the engraving, a marooned Crusoe stands at the shore, between a turbulent sea and his “Island of Despair” (a Caribbean

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<sup>29</sup> Diana Taylor, *Archive and Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), xvii.

<sup>30</sup> Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Byrne, “Nervous Landscapes,” 176.

island in present-day Chile). The barefoot Crusoe carries two rifles and a sword—necessary weapons against island cannibals. Beyond his left shoulder is a European-style fence, built by Crusoe as he tamed and cultivated the land into a plantation-like setting. Casid points out that the fence looks mundane, but it nevertheless “stakes out supposedly impenetrable Europeanized space protected within, and thus, outside the narrative of Caribbean cannibal chaos and destructed sequenced around it.”<sup>32</sup> The fence in these early images visually marks the separation of wilderness and civilization, or the Christian Crusoe and the heathen cannibals. As Casid argues, *Crusoe* is a story about colonies, but also a tale of fences.<sup>33</sup>

### Inbetweenness

Textual and visual records helped sustain ideological power over land, but even fences were susceptible to mediation. Byrne describes the fraught friendliness between white land owners and Aboriginal peoples as “inbetweenness.” The application of the colonial grid was to exert control over the land and its inhabitants; and yet aboriginals continue their day-to-day lives in spite of these material restrictions, finding clever ways of skirting around and through the land. Aboriginals have “subverted that system of spatial control, transgressing its numerous finely drawn boundaries, poaching on its preserves, tweaking the nerves of a spatial system which was inherently tense with racial foreboding, paranoia, longing, and deprivation.”<sup>34</sup> Aboriginals applied their own intimate knowledge of the landscape—its waterways and woodlands—to serve their own

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<sup>32</sup> Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 100.

<sup>33</sup> Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Byrne, “Nervous Landscapes,” 170.

purposes. As Byrne noted, when they exploited “gaps in the grid,” they made the landscape nervous because it reminded white landowners of their presence. With this in mind, inbetweenness pushes against hegemonic space with actions of the everyday.

Byrne’s description of the applied grid is an instructive model. Deleuze and Guattari also lend a theoretical frame for inbetweenness. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they define two kinds of space: smooth and striated. The two spaces do not exist as binaries, but are always in motion. Smooth space is open and nomadic (as in, nomads make their meandering homes through smooth space)—there is no center and no edges. Striated space is closed and sedentary—it is the gridded space formed by processes of colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism. Permanent homes, fences, and borders contain movement. Deleuze and Guattari explain, “we must remind ourselves that the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space.”<sup>35</sup> The primary artworks in this dissertation attempt to smooth out and open up striated spaces. Their attempts mark inbetweenness, or the mixture of both spaces.

Inbetweenness is also a visual strategy. Doreen Massey argues that history of art has set up a way of seeing for us. Crucially, this helps critique the very validity of “master narratives” and relates “most intimately to issues concerning spatial organization.”<sup>36</sup> As an example, Griselda Pollock’s feminist analysis of Western art history illustrates how cities and landscapes (and the ideologies they contain) have been rendered by white male artists as a necessarily white masculine terrain. As male artists often depicted women in domestic scenes, women artists countered with radically altered

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<sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 474.

<sup>36</sup> Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 233.

perspectives of their own, disconnecting their line of vision from that of the male gaze. Often, these perspectives were more textured and made of unconventional materials like fiber.<sup>37</sup> Massey suggests, “it is arguable that this in turn may bring back ‘into the picture’ the senses other than vision, thus deprioritizing at least a little vision in relation to the other senses.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise, many white male painters portrayed the colonization of American landscape with romantic flair. They corroborated the necessity of imperialist land grabs, Manifest Destiny, and the cultivation of land and private property. Many other artists have long chafed against these dominant ideologies, especially exceptionalism and expansionism touted by American governmental policies.<sup>39</sup> Present-day artists, especially those highlighted in this dissertation, have fully realized the limits of objectivity. They have pivoted away from representations of nature to the practice of nature.<sup>40</sup> They foster inbetweenness in the form of experiential, performative, socially-engaged acts, and often take up unconventional materials—such as fiber.

### Terms of Fiber

Fiber-based artworks traditionally consist of diverse materials, including silk, sisal, wool, polyester, cotton, human hair, and animal hair and fur. Artists have also explored fiber techniques with media including metal, fiber optic cables, film reels, and

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<sup>37</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 233. See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London, Routledge, 1988).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed analysis of relationship between the history of American art and environmental art, see Karl Kusserow and Alan C. Braddock, eds. *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> For examples and analysis of contemporary environmental art activism, see Nato Thompson, *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2008) and Kirsten J. Swenson and Emily Eliza Scott, eds. *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

food, among other unconventional media. When writing generally about materials, I will use the term fiber because it speaks to the inherent quality of the medium—its fibrousness. Fibrousness holds the potential to be knotted, linked, twisted, and teased. Fiber can be woven into textiles, knitted into scarves, sewn—by hand and machine—into quilts, and sculpted into functional objects and nonfunctional artworks. While many artworks created in the twentieth-century were made from fiber, the actual application of the term has been negatively associated with domestic spaces, and denigrated as the menial, repetitive work of amateur artists and bored housewives. As art historian Elissa Auther writes, “to this day.... many individuals whose work is placed in this category resist the term because of the way it identifies their work as not really art.”<sup>41</sup> Fiber has consistently found itself along the frayed edges of the canon of art history, refusing to retreat but never quite triumphant. Auther’s text *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* has been especially formative in how I frame the historical marginalization of fiber. Along these lines, the groundbreaking work of Roszika Parker’s *The Subversive Stitch* and Lisa M. Moore’s *Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes* have influenced how I contextualize contemporary artworks along historical genealogies. More recently, Julia Bryan-Wilson’s *Fray* has offered especially fascinating case studies for thinking through the politics of textiles.

A domestic mode of communication, fiber helps people tell stories about themselves that might not otherwise be told. An example that manifests LeGuin’s carrier bag theory is “Ashley’s Sack,” a cloth seed sack embroidered by Ruth Middleton in 1921 (fig. 1.4). With brown, red, and green thread, she told the story of how her great-

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<sup>41</sup> Elissa Auther, “Classification and its Consequences: The Case for Fiber Art,” in *American Art*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002), 4.

grandmother Rose, the mother of Ashley, “gave her this sack when she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina. It held a tattered dress[,] 3 handfulls [sic] of pecans[,] a braid of Roses hair. Told her It be filled with my Love always. She never saw her again.” The seed sack was passed from generation to generation, literally carrying the loving story of two women whose stories rarely mattered. Text (narrative) is seamlessly turned to textile.<sup>42</sup> Even in the absence of actual words, textiles are tools of communication. In an iconic 1864 carte de visite, Sojourner Truth poses with knitting needs in her hands, and a skein of yarn unraveled in her lap (fig. 1.5). The feminine fiber helped Truth convey a message of her proficient mind and body. Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson suggests “Truth might have so carefully deployed knitting because it could be seen several ways, as a nonthreatening demonstration of her aptitude for domestic work, a reassuring sign of her femininity, and as an assertion of her strident activism and creative self-production.”<sup>43</sup> The multiple readings reflect the ways in which such handicrafts were negatively gendered and racialized but nevertheless buoyed acts of “mindful and strategic self-identification.”<sup>44</sup>

Women’s participation in civic life has long been conducted with knitting, sewing, or crochet needles in hand. In colonial America, privileged white women asserted what little power they could wield with quilts and embroidery designs. The Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Sewing Society (the "Sewing" was dropped from the name by 1855), for example, began as a sewing circle for women to recruit other women

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<sup>42</sup> Julia Bryan Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 8.

<sup>43</sup> Bryan Wilson, *Fray*, 8. See also Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Enduring Truths: Sojourner's Shadows and Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 81.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

to become active in antislavery causes. A December 3, 1847 article in the *Liberator* extolled:

Sewing Circles are among the best means for agitating and keeping alive the question of antislavery. Not only do they continually fan the interest of those who personally engage them, but their frequent meetings, their labor, and the products of their industry all exert an excellent influence in keeping the wrongs and the sufferings of the slave before the people.<sup>45</sup>

During the Women's Suffrage movement, organizers of the Artists' Suffrage League embroidered their own banners. In 1909 stained glass artist and suffragist Mary Lowdness penned the manifesto "in all the ages it has been women's part to make the banners, if not to carry them...the diverse colors of needlework, the handwrought, are coming into play again, and now for the first time in history to illumine woman's own adventure."<sup>46</sup>

In the 1970s, American feminist artists leveraged the symbolic and historical marginalization of fiber to stake out their creative and economic claim to the art world. Many women turned from fine arts of painting and sculpture to needlework and quilting. Feminist art drew directly on the social and domestic legacies of fiber. As art historian Roszika Parker points out, "steeped in the personal, yet shaped by the political, embroidery displayed the power of the political on personal life, as well as the political implications of personal relationships."<sup>47</sup> In the spirit of the Civil Rights era, feminist artists rejected the notion that they should rise to the standards of the art world; rather, they sought to dismantle its hierarchies, forging new alternative spaces and opportunities

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<sup>45</sup> "Anti-Slavery Sewing Circles" in *The Liberator*, December 3, 1847. <http://theliberatorfiles.com/anti-slavery-sewing-circles/> (accessed January 21, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (New York: Berg, 2007), 222.

<sup>47</sup> Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1985), xiv.

for women. Elissa Auther and Mary Jo Aagerstoun explain “these feminist art forms stressed performance and group reception and foregrounded the values of collaboration, participation, empowerment, consciousness-raising, and the belief in art’s ability to create change.”<sup>48</sup> The feminist reclamation of fiber undergirds all of the case studies in this dissertation.

Since the turn of the twentieth-century, the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) phenomenon has intersected with contemporary third-wave feminist and queer activist causes. DIY “makers” revived popular fiber handicrafts like knitting, macramé, and sewing to create opportunities outside of commercial markets. Knitting and crocheting experienced a popular culture revival as “stitch and bitch” clubs began meeting throughout the nation. Their projects were tinged with irony, kitsch, and punk rock aesthetics.<sup>49</sup> As many politically aware “makers” grew wary of the effects global capitalism and neoliberal emphasis on individualism, they turned to communal craft projects to think through political and social issues.<sup>50</sup> This faction of the broader DIY movement is often described as “craftivist” (craft + activist), a term first coined by the Church of Craft, and then brought into a popular lexicon by artist and writer Betsy Greer.<sup>51</sup> Beth Ann Pentney argues that craftivist methods exemplify third-wave feminist practice, part of a continuum

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<sup>48</sup> Mary Jo Aagerstoun, and Elissa Auther. "Considering Feminist Activist Art." *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007), viii.

<sup>49</sup> See Debbie Stoller, *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook*, (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 2004) and Betsy Greer, *Knitting for Good! A Guide to Creating the Personal, Social, and Political Change, Stitch by Stitch* (Trumpeter, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Kirsty Robertson, “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches: Writing a Craftivist History,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), ed. Maria Elena Buszek, 184. Craft-based art practices were widely dismissed in the late 1980s and 1990s when “debates over issues of identity and representation made the use of craft difficult precisely because of the way activist craft used essentializing stereotypes of womanhood and domesticity.”

<sup>51</sup> Betsy Greer, Craftivist History,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), ed. Maria Elena Buszek, 176. Greer cites September 11 and Third Wave Feminism as key catalysts for craftivist work.

of women-lead community building. Pentney usefully structures feminism along an adaptive lineage characterized by many (occasionally contradictory) philosophies and tactics, all held loosely together with grassroots sensibilities.<sup>52</sup> Building on the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, the post-2000 third-wave feminist movement has been critically engaged with intersectionality and anti-capitalist consumer culture, which at times refuses to reconcile with second-wave priorities. Central to third-wave feminist praxis is the ironic and disruptive use of commodity. Just as activists and feminists of previous “waves” took up fiber handicrafts to express their agency, contemporary feminist and queer subcultures and activist communities currently employ fiber to explore a multitude of social concerns. After interviewing numerous knitters in the United States, journalist Kerry Wills concluded “knitting can accommodate all kinds of people and a breathtaking variety of agendas.”<sup>53</sup> One of the first craftivist organizations, the Calgary Revolutionary Knitting Circle in Canada was formed in 2000 as a “radical alternative” to the “destruction of community under contemporary capitalism.”<sup>54</sup> Similar projects focus on “culture jamming” (anti-capitalist guerilla tactics) that call out corporate hegemonies. Numerous craftivist projects galvanized support around political actions. The 2005 project “Wombs on Washington,” freely disseminated knitting and crochet patterns of uterus and ovaries. Makers were encouraged to send these sexual organs to their elected official with the message: “If we knit you a uterus, will you stay

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<sup>52</sup> Beth Ann Pentney, “Feminism, Activism, and Knitting: Are the Fibre Arts and Viable Mode for Feminist Political Action,” *ThirdSpace: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Summer 2008) <http://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/article/view/pentney/210> (accessed January 2019)

<sup>53</sup> Pentney, “Feminism, Activism, and Knitting.” See Kerry Wills, *The Close Knit Circle, American Knitters* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Robertson, “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches,” 187.

out of ours?”<sup>55</sup> In the twenty-first century, this fiber lineage has expanded to include the fragmented cultures of the internet and mass media.

Pentney argues that these “soft” crafts help forge common links between disparate groups, “providing opportunities for community building through the shared love of the craft,” and also the historical shared dependence on handicrafts as a woman’s source of income or means to clothe her family. Along similar lines, Bryan-Wilson situates craftivism within the legacy of industrialism by gesturing to the influence of affective labor as an antidote to the alienization of industrialized labor. That is, traditional craft technique emphasizing “the hand as a zone of politics.”<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the most widely known expression of fiber’s affective (and soft) power is the 2016 “Pussy Hat.” Following the presidential election of 2016, screenwriter Krista Suh and architect Jayna Zweiman conceived of the idea and Kat Coyle (owner of the yarn shop Little Knittery) designed the pattern. The website launched on November 23, the day before Thanksgiving, and by the following week, web traffic was steadily building. The simple cat-eared hat pattern went viral on social media platforms during the months leading up to international Women’s Marches held on January 21, 2017. Pearl Chin, owner of the fiber shop Knitty City on New York’s Upper West Side, recalled that the customers began flooding into the store in search of pink yarn and like minds. They were angry about the election and wanted “something to grasp.”<sup>57</sup> Knitty City and many other yarn shops around the nation could not keep pink yarn in stock.<sup>58</sup> On the day of the Women’s Marches, hundreds of

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<sup>55</sup> Pentney, *Feminism, Activism, and Knitting*.”

<sup>56</sup> Bryan-Wilson, “Knit Dissent,” *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, eds. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Sussex Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 255.

<sup>57</sup> Krista Suh, Pearl Chin, Brittney Bailey, Joan Snitzer, and Anne Higgonet (mod.), panel discussion, Barnard College, New York, New York, February 15, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Krista Suh, “Pussyhat Project.” Lecture, Barnard College, New York, New York, February 15, 2017.

thousands of Pussy Hats blurred together into rivers of pink in aerial views of the marches (fig. 1.6). These images made manifest the belief in community participation through fiber. Today the hats are held in the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, the New York Historical Society, and the Fuller Craft Museum. Broad and simple gestures of craftivism bring visibility, and often debate, to political and social discourse.<sup>59</sup> As a practical and humble tool of communication, fiber connects people in lasting ways.

Craftivist interventions are productive lightning rods for political debate. They are often easy target for critics. Journalists and curators alike have played up the stereotype of knitting as firmly within in the realm of grandmothers. Art historian Kirsty Robertson argues that fiber is only seen as radical “in its reversal of stereotype rather than its content.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, because it is playing on gendered stereotypes, it does not enjoy critical analysis. Immediate criticism of the Pussy Hat following the Women's Marches is a key example. Critics have long suggested that fiber work is not conceptual enough, and political fiber work is not confrontational enough.<sup>61</sup> Broad-brushed critiques do not fully consider how fiber activism has enacted significant change.

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<sup>59</sup> For critical discussions of the Pussy Hat, see Chi Nguyen, “An Unpopular Opinion About the Women's March on Washington,” Huffington Post, January 23, 2017. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/an-unpopular-opinion-on-the-womens-march-on-washington\\_b\\_58862435e4b0d96b98c1de43](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/an-unpopular-opinion-on-the-womens-march-on-washington_b_58862435e4b0d96b98c1de43) (accessed April 12, 2019); CheyOnna “Five Reasons Why I am not Enamored with the Women's March,” Yarn Mission Blog, January 2017. <http://theyarnmission.com/five-reasons-why-i-am-not-enamored-with-the-womens-march-local-or-national/> (accessed April 13, 2019); and Katelyn Burns, “How ‘Pussy Hats’ Made Me Feel Excluded—And Then Welcomed—At the Women's March” Medium, January 23, 2017. <https://medium.com/the-establishment/how-pussy-hats-made-me-feel-excluded-and-then-welcomed-at-the-women-s-march-ef11dae19c54> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>60</sup> Robertson, “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches,” 198.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 188. Robertson cites the cheeky and dismissive responses to the Calgary Revolutionary Knitting Circle in Canadian Press. See also Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

## Ongoingness

Ongoingness, named by Haraway, characterizes the subversive and enduring power of mundane objects, like seeds and stitches.<sup>62</sup> Ongoingness is about “practice and process; it is becoming with each other in surprising relays.”<sup>63</sup> Ongoingness manifests LeGuin’s carrier bag theory and Deleuze and Guattari’s story about the bag of fabric scraps. The scraps are always being arranged and rearranged into a patchwork quilt—the process is ongoing. Ongoingness, thus, sustains the unwanted, amateur, and marginalized materials in this dissertation. Deleuze and Guattari refer to a “rhizomatic realm of possibility” as an orientation towards the “potentialization of the possible.”<sup>64</sup> More simply put, rhizomes prompt new possibilities for perceiving and feeling nature. Ongoingness recodes materials and spaces into non-hierarchical and heterogenous rhizomes. This elasticity, or ability to adapt, refuses a triumphant ending and instead orients its makers to feeling and affect. The ongoingness of fiber has the potential to change our orientations towards new sight lines, to see and then make alternative natures.

It is my hope that this project will offer a model for thinking through relationships between space and material with the concepts of inbetweenness and ongoingness. Building on scholarship of feminist art and craftivism, this project will contribute an in-depth and interdisciplinary analysis of contemporary projects that have knitted together the politics identity and nature. Ultimately, the dissertation reflects on how fiber advances more experiential possibilities for addressing urgent issues of social and ecological justice.

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<sup>62</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 49.

<sup>63</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 49.

<sup>64</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 190.

## Chapter 2: Ladies Sasquatch

In 1846, famed sideshow provocateur P. T. Barnum debuted a sensational new exhibition featuring a living “Wild Man of the Prairies.” To a London audience, Barnum claimed that the hirsute savage was captured in the vast wilderness of California where they were often reported in local newspapers as inhabiting “the darkness beyond the edge of town.”<sup>1</sup> In 1860, a “Wild Man” from Africa was featured in the *What-Is-It* exhibition at the Barnum Museum in New York City.<sup>2</sup> An advertisement for the show described the “creature.”

An extraordinary living creature just arrived from the wilds of Africa.

WHAT IS IT

Is it a lower order of man?

or is it a higher development of the monkey?

or Is it both in combination?<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition was wildly successful. For 40 years, Americans gaped and gawked at African American actor William Henry Johnson as he rattled the bars of a cage while wearing a scrubby fur costume (fig. 2.1).<sup>4</sup>

North American popular culture is replete with stories of bipedal beasts lurking in the wilderness. The fearsome giants go by many names: Wildman, Bigfoot, Yeti,

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Blu Buhs, *Bigfoot: The Life and Times of a Legend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Buhs, *Bigfoot*, 6-8.

<sup>3</sup> “WHAT IS IT?” Advertisement, *New York Tribune*, March 1, 1860.

<https://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/what-is-it-advertisement-new-york-tribune> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Buhs, *Bigfoot*, 8. The name of the actors were largely unknown except for William Henry Johnson, who was Barnum’s third What-Is-It. Johnson was first described as African during the London exhibition. In the early American shows, he was described as African; and following the popularity of George Catlin’s *Indian Gallery*, Johnson was later described as an American Indian. See Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 68.

Abominable Snowman, and Sasquatch.<sup>5</sup> They are as ubiquitous as they are mysterious. There are countless sightings documented on the Internet, in local newspapers, and even a recent television series produced by actor Rob Lowe, who chronicles his own near-death experience with a “wood ape” in the Ozarks.<sup>6</sup> The seemingly infinite stories about Sasquatch encounters almost always follow the same formula: He is half man, half beast. He is possibly the last of his kind, eluding discovery deep in the woods. The seriality of these stories prompted Canadian artist Allyson Mitchell to wonder, “How come no one has ever seen a Lady Sasquatch?”<sup>7</sup> Mitchell then intertwined this simple question with more nuanced interrogations of the mutually constituted constructions of gender, race, sexuality, wilderness, and civilization. Her search for answers led to a series of installation artworks about female sasquatches.

Mitchell’s “sasquatch ladies” were first conceived at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, Canada. From 2003 to 2008, Mitchell worked in a studio space provided by hotel manager (and film and video artist) Christina Zeidler. At this time, the Gladstone was undergoing significant renovations as part of Zeidler’s campaign to rebrand the historic hotel—located in a gentrifying neighborhood—into a “boutique art hotel.”<sup>8</sup> In 2005 Zeidler commissioned Mitchell and several other artists to design and decorate 15

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<sup>5</sup> Buhs, *Bigfoot*, 20. Buhs notes that many of the monsters gained individual notoriety prior to the mid-twentieth century. By the 1960s, “these various traditions were interwoven into a single legend.”

<sup>6</sup> *The Lowe Files*, nine episodes. A&E, August 2, 2017 to September 27, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Jude MacDonald, “Ladies Sasquatch Cross Canada!” *Section15.ca*, April 9, 2009.

<http://section15.ca/features/reviews/2009/04/09/sasquatch/> (Accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Veitch, “Site Specific Practices and City Renewal: The Geo-Politics of Hotel Installations in Urban Areas,” PhD diss., Queen’s University, 2010), 59.

See also Gladstone Hotel, “About Us” <https://www.gladstonehotel.com/about/> “A destination in itself, our boutique art hotel will pull you into an arts, culture and dining adventure as soon as you walk through our historic Victorian doors.” (accessed March 20, 2019). The hotel was built in 1889, designed by Toronto architect G. M. Miller.

rooms as part of her strategy to open the “building to the queer community.”<sup>9</sup> Mitchell was an ideal fit for this mission. While based at the Gladstone, she was completing a PhD in Women’s Studies at York University and building a body of artworks about feminist, fat, and queer politics (including several video collaborations with Zeidler).<sup>10</sup> Her multi-media artworks made visual the academic theory of her doctorate work.<sup>11</sup> At the Gladstone, she completed two hotel rooms featuring fantastical lesbian sasquatches. The theme later evolved into *Ladies Sasquatch*, an immersive tableau of the mythical monsters.

*Ladies Sasquatch* rewrites the story of discovering Sasquatch. Rather than skulking alone in the woods, the Ladies cavort in a cabal (fig. 2.2). The entire scene is an assemblage of retrograde things: thrifted van seat covers, teddy bears, macramé owls, and crochet blankets.<sup>12</sup> Mitchell has deconstructed these homely undesirables and grafted the materials into six flashy female beasts. The looming sculptures feature a diverse array of body types, colors, and connotative names. Lady Oxana features ombre stripes across her body. The name, Oxana, is a popular Ukrainian name, likely derived from either the Greek word “xenia” (hospitality) or “xenox” (stranger). Indeed, as Oxana crawls towards the other Ladies, perking up her bright coral bottom, she could either be the hostess or an interloper (fig. 2.3). A crouching Lady boasts the throwback name of Midge and also a beautiful pelt of gradated shades of russet orange (fig. 2.4). Standing at about nine feet, Maxy—named after fat activist Max Airborne—has especially short legs in proportion to

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<sup>9</sup> Veitch, “Site Specific Practices and City Renewal,” 63. There were 60 total rooms at the Gladstone.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell and Zeidler collaborated on several video artworks, the first in 2000. While at the Gladstone, they created several feminist videos.

<sup>11</sup> Allyson Mitchell. Oral history conducted by Sonya Topolnisky, April 7, 2009. Bard Graduate Center Craft, Art and Design Oral History Project, New York, NY. <http://bgccraftartdesign.org/items/show/13> (Accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Mitchell noted that about 60% of her materials are thrifted or found and 40% are purchased.

her lengthy torso (fig. 2.5). Her broad shoulders and “refrigerator back” are accentuated by stripes of brown, beige, grey, and cheetah textiles.<sup>13</sup> The other Ladies named Silverback, Tawny, and Bunny complete the klatch in theatrical, erotic, and possibly menacing poses. Dotting the scene is a charming posse of diminutive, hot-pink woodland creatures called “familiars” who approximate deer, squirrels, chipmunks and chupacabras.<sup>14</sup>

*Ladies Sasquatch* embodies a sense knot of intersecting political issues and ideals.

Mitchell’s artist statement reads:

Ladies Sasquatch is meant to work as point of departure for thinking about decolonized, queer, politicized bodies, sexuality and communities. In an attempt to imagine different sexual currencies Ladies Sasquatch valorizes cellulite, dirty fingernails, tattoos, big butts, fangs, collectivity and collaboration. The creatures in Ladies Sasquatch marry popular culture, native iconography and radical dyke culture to create a kind of queer utopian dream world.<sup>15</sup>

To unpack all of these points, this chapter takes a nomadic walk through the wilderness. The first section defines how the scenario of discovery is a theatrical script, exemplified by sideshow and museum exhibitions, and also the American landscape painting tradition. The next section, “Faux Naturelle,” introduces a fun-fur mural by Mitchell that parodies the scenario of discovery. Working with traditions of women’s needlework, the mural conveys nonlinear and “felt” space that lays the stage for *Ladies Sasquatch*. Building on this, the section “Deep Lez” reintroduces *Ladies Sasquatch* and delves into

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<sup>13</sup> Lisa M. Moore, “A Lesbian-Feminist Storybook Garden” *Sister Arts: Gardens, Poem, Community* (blog), February 11, 2011. Moore notes that Maxie’s body type is “meant to evoke a specific, recognizable type of woman’s body often seen among lesbians, which Mitchell calls ‘the refrigerator back.’” <https://sisterarts.typepad.com/sister-arts-gardens-po/2011/02/a-lesbian-feminist-storybook-garden.html> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> There are 22 Familiars. For names see Carla Garnet, *Allyson Mitchell: Ladies Sasquatch* (Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Museum of Art, 2009), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Allyson Mitchell, “Deep Lez I Statement,” *Allyson Mitchell: Ladies Sasquatch* (Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Museum of Art, 2009), 12.

how the unfinished and amateurish hobby crafts enact “temporal drag” to recover affective and community-based parts of lesbian feminist history. From, there *Ladies Sasquatch* turns wild. “Wild Women” traces how her source materials—pin-up girls and sasquatches—help create an open-ended and disruptive wilderness scenario. To attend to Mitchell’s references in the *Ladies Sasquatch* statement about decolonization and native iconography, the section “Decolonizing and Disidentifying the Wild Man” returns to the category of the scenario of discovery, exploring how some Native artists have decolonized the scenario and how Mitchell disidentifies with the colonialist trappings in order to set her own “radical dyke” monster into the wild. Finally, the chapter concludes with the consideration of how *Ladies Sasquatch* scripts a new scenario of discovery: a queer utopia. This alternative social world invites visitors to discover “a lesbian feminist storybook garden” and imagine themselves as rapturous, menacing, and self-governing protagonists.”<sup>16</sup>

### Discovering the Wildman

In the *Ladies Sasquatch* artist’s statement, Mitchell notes that Indigenous tales about Sasquatch were appropriated by white settler culture, “arguably an expression of the racist fears around the ‘otherness’ of native culture—and by default—nature in general.”<sup>17</sup> Stories and sideshow spectacles about dangerous monsters lurking in the darkness fanned fears of uncharted territories, intentionally dehumanizing people of color in order to define what it meant to be civilized. The crowds that flocked to see Barnum’s *What-Is-It* exhibition were in on the joke. Johnson’s fur costume was obviously fake, and

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa M. Moore, *Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 191.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, “Deep Lez I Statement,” 12.

many visitors pointed out that his “raw meat” diet actually consisted of cooked steak.<sup>18</sup> In his autobiography, Barnum observed, “the public appears disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived.”<sup>19</sup> The deception was popular because it played on the social anxieties of a rapidly changing nation. The United States was in transition towards an industrial economy away from an agrarian economy dependent on the labor of slaves and the removal of Native Americans from their homelands. *What-Is-It* affirmed the social sophistication and racial superiority of white citizens as they gazed upon Johnson in a cage.<sup>20</sup>

Barnum’s sideshows were part of a colonialist legacy that differentiated the land “beyond the edge of town” as fearsome. Historian Melanie Perreault writes that early settlers “looked warily at the landscape rolling out in front of them. The dark woods towered ominously.... harboring wild beasts, and from the few glimpses they had seen, wild men.”<sup>21</sup> Wilderness—and its inhabitants—threatened the logic of their God-given missions to overtake valuable New World resources. The establishment of permanent colonies “heralded the beginning of a new ideal in America, where wilderness carried negative connotations and beauty rested in fences and farms.”<sup>22</sup> Even though Native Americans had cultivated and domesticated nature for centuries (and shared this knowledge with early settlers), they were nevertheless equated with the perilous wilderness as part of the systematic strategy for settlers to take control over the land. Official maps and fences plotted out personal property once shared by numerous Native

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<sup>18</sup> Buhs, *Bigfoot*, 9. It also seems that Johnson was in on the joke. After leaving Barnum, he performed for more than two more decades in Coney Island.

<sup>19</sup> P. T. Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, (New York: Redfield, 1855), 175.

<sup>20</sup> Buhs, *Bigfoot*, 9

<sup>21</sup> Melanie Perreault, “American Wilderness and First Contact,” *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 29

families and tribes, and then accused Native inhabitants of trespassing and stealing property like horses and cattle. Native Americans were shot and killed to “protect American lives and property.”<sup>23</sup>

In 1911, a starving Yahi man named Ishi was forced to leave his home in a forest near Oroville, a small town in Northern California. Locals called in anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, who breathlessly identified Ishi as the last living member of the Yahi tribe. In order to “protect” Ishi, Kroeber brought him to the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. At the museum, Ishi worked as a janitor and a “living specimen” until his death from tuberculosis in 1916 (fig. 2.7).<sup>24</sup> Comparable to Barnum’s sideshow advertisements, the Berkeley anthropologists who studied Ishi understood the man and his deceased family members as a significant link between prehistory and civilization. Indigenous peoples were incapable of modernizing and thus, their extinction was a foregone conclusion. And so, Ishi was written into the past even during his lifetime.

Both Barnum’s duplicitous attractions and The Hearst Museum’s so-called scientific displays exploited nonwhite bodies to uphold hierarchies of race. Ishi and William Henry Johnson performed their “wildness” in order to gain access to resources. They were part of a widespread phenomenon of colonized subjects including Amonute (known as Pocohontas) and Sarah Baartman (known as Venus Hottentot) who traveled globally as “intercultural performers,” a term coined by art worker Coco Fusco. They had to make their “othered” bodies available to largely white audiences to index categories of race under the authorities of empire and science. Fusco explains:

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<sup>23</sup> William Bauer, “Stop Hunting Ishi,” *Boom: A Journal of California*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 2014), 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

With the emergence of scientific rationalism, the “aborigines” on display served as proof of the natural superiority of European civilization, of its ability to exert control over and extract knowledge from the “primitive” world, and ultimately, of the genetic inferiority of non-European races. Over the past 500 years [non-white bodies] have been exhibited in the taverns, theaters, gardens, museums, zoos, circuses, and world’s fairs of Europe, and the freak shows of the United States.<sup>25</sup>

To better acknowledge this history of non-consensual display, Fusco calls that the canon of performance art should be rewritten to include people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas forced to stand on colonial stages. The world stages and sideshow projected an illusion of Indigenous culture through the settler’s lens. To correct this false history, Fusco and her collaborator Guillermo Gómez-Peña wrote a revised accounting of performance art to begin in 1492, when Columbus returned from his voyage with souvenirs for the Spanish Court, including a Taíno man. As the story goes, the man was installed at the Spanish Court for two years until he died “from sadness.”<sup>26</sup> Such bodies were toured as trophies and curiosities, analyzed as scientific objects, politicized as evidence of racial difference, and valued as capital in land grabs.<sup>27</sup>

In order for the colonial subject to be presented in a colonial institution, s/he was dramatically discovered. Performance historian Diana Taylor defines the scene of discovery as “a paradigmatic set-up that relies on supposedly 'live' participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended (though adaptable) 'end.'” The scenario of discovery always features the discovery of a peripheral figure (“the other”) in nature by

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<sup>25</sup> Coco Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance” *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2010), 208. This is an expansion on her essay with Gomez-Pena. In this essay, she names Australian Aborigines, Tahitians, Aztecs, Iroquois, Cherokee, Ojibways, Iowas, Mohawks, Botocudos, Guianese, Hottentots, Kaffirs, Nubians, Somolians, Singhalese, Patagonians, Terra del Fuegians, Kahucks, Anapondas, Zulus, Bushmen, Japanese, East Indians, and Laplanders.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 209.

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 23.

the discoverer—the hero, the explorer, the scientist, the missionary.<sup>28</sup> The scenario began the moment Christopher Columbus “discovered” the Taíno island Guanahani (which he subsequently named San Salvador) and persists to the present day. In a recent example, a 2016 *New Yorker* essay opened under the sensational headline “An Isolated Tribe Emerges from the Rain Forest.”<sup>29</sup> Journalist Jon Lee Anderson reported that the unregulated destruction of Amazonian rainforests in Peru will inevitably force the isolated Mashco tribe to integrate into modern society, or they will perish. The scenario of discovery emphasizes an “endangered” or “isolated” culture, thus producing stories that will document the culture before it disappears. Taylor explains that, “domination depends on maintaining an unidirectional gaze and stages the lack of reciprocity and mutual understanding inherent in discovery.”<sup>30</sup> The discoverer must assume that the discovered is helpless and unable to talk back.

The monumental landscape painting *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (1872) by Thomas Moran makes visual the scenario of discovery (fig. 2.8). Moran traveled to the Upper Valley of the Yellowstone River in 1871 as part of the United States Geological Survey expedition led by geologist Ferdinand Hayden. Moran’s task was to translate Hayden’s vast ecological knowledge about the region into a landscape painting. His final work, nicknamed the “Big Picture,” would convince an elite audience that Yellowstone was “a spectacle of nature” worthy of preservation.<sup>31</sup> The painting’s perspective offers a tremendous long view of the canyon: steep cliffs recede towards the

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Jon Lee Anderson, “An Isolated Tribe Emerges from the Rain Forest,” *New Yorker*, August 8 & 15, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/08/an-isolated-tribe-emerges-from-the-rain-forest>

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Alan C. Braddock and Karl Kusserow, “Introduction,” *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment*, eds. Karl Kusserow and Alan C. Braddock. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 22.

Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River near the horizon line. The marbled swaths of ochre, sienna, and eggplant hues accentuate the geological features prized by the survey team. The painting simultaneously expresses two stages of the scenario of the discovery: the discovery and the conquest. On a shadowy precipice at the edge the canyon are two figures, survey leader Hayden and an undocumented Native American (fig. 2.9). Hayden, with a saddle bag and hat, gestures out towards the canyon. The Native American, who holds a spear and dons a war bonnet and bone necklace, faces away from the canyon and towards the viewer.<sup>32</sup> Their positioning within the dramatic landscape demands a phenomenological response from the viewer. Bernstein describes this as answering a hail, or “entering the scripted scenario.”<sup>33</sup> Art historians Karl Kusserow and Alan Braddock explain: “In a brilliantly telling detail, Moran renders the two figures pivoting around the central axis of the spear, which seems to hold, implying their clockwise movement around it, with the Euro-American moving toward and into the scene, and the Native American away from it.”<sup>34</sup> The viewer shares the vantage point of Hayden, a white man who claims possession, on behalf of the American government, of the natural resources and beauty before him.

As cultural geographer Gareth E. John argues, the remote and pristine quality underscores the assumption that the territory was previously unexplored, and hence, “Hayden and his team [were] the true discoverers of an as yet uncharted Yellowstone.”<sup>35</sup>

The viewer understands that this uninhabited wilderness ought to be preserved. When

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<sup>32</sup> Braddock and Kusserow, “Introduction,” 17

<sup>33</sup> Robin Bernstein, “Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race,” *Social Text*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter 2009), 73.

<sup>34</sup> Braddock and Kusserow, “Introduction,” 17

<sup>35</sup> Gareth E. John, “Yellowstone as ‘Landscape Idea’: Thomas Moran and the Pictorial Practices of Gilded-Age Western Exploration,” *Journal of Cultural Geography*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2007), 10.

*The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* was dramatically unveiled to Congress, politicians move to establish Yellowstone National Park. The Yellowstone National Park Protection Act was signed on March 1, 1872, by President Ulysses S. Grant—just one year after Moran traveled to the site. Natural science, painting, and legislation informed one another to legitimize the ideology of Manifest Destiny.<sup>36</sup> The Native American turns away from the canyon, inferring his departure. His stance smooths over the violent removal and relocation of Nez Perce, Bannock, and Mountain Shoshone tribes who had lived in the region for generations.<sup>37</sup> As soon as Yellowstone was established as a national park, it became a strategy point for the U.S. military to wage its war on Native Americans. The transition of power echoes what Sunera Thobani describes as the “illusion of freedom.” American citizenship was directly tied to the erasure of Native Americans.<sup>38</sup> The buffalo could stay in the park, but the humans could not. While many artists, politicians, and scientists seemingly lamented the loss of Native American culture their own freedom was contingent on this violence. In sum, the scene captures the transition from nomadic, open space to contained, striated space.<sup>39</sup>

The establishment of Yellowstone National Park to retain the “natural condition” of the “timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park” falls under the rubric of Jacques Derrida’s “archives fever,” or a “compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a

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<sup>36</sup> President Ulysses S. Grant signed the law. Braddock and Kusserow point out that in order to “preserve” this vast wilderness for enjoyment of all, the legislation withdrew the land from permanent occupancy, confirming that “all persons who shall locate or settle upon or occupy the same, or any part thereof... shall be considered trespassers and removed therefrom.” Braddock and Kusserow, “Introduction,” 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Sunera Thobani, “Citizenship: Nationals, Citizens and Others,” in *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 82.

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), 474.

homesickness, a nostalgia for the return of the archaic place of absolute commencement.”<sup>40</sup> Despite living in the present, those who are discovered are necessarily relegated to the past during the process of discovery and archival recovery. Along these lines, Rebecca Schneider has astutely observed that the discoverers have dug their own knowledge holes just to fill them back up with their own “discovered” evidence.<sup>41</sup> Indigenous oral traditions and intangible cultural heritage was supplanted by archival knowledge in the form of scientific and religious texts, artworks, and maps. In an essay about the material conditions of settler colonialism, Eve Tuck (Unangax) and K. Wang Young write, “Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. Made savage.”<sup>42</sup> Anthropologist Kroeber was the hero of Ishi’s story. Kroeber, a student of Franz Boas, brought Ishi to the Hearst Museum, where he steadfastly documented Ishi’s language and tool-making techniques, and also tried to gain insight into Ishi’s home in the Deer Creek Canyon. Historian William Bauer (Wailackee and Concow) explained that “In 1914, Kroeber insisted that Ishi return to Deer Creek, where he hoped that Ishi would show him what life was like in the wild.”<sup>43</sup> Kroeber rejected Ishi’s living testimony in order to enact his own discovery of the wilderness. For Ishi, the wilderness was embedded with painful memories and the physical absence of his mother.<sup>44</sup> For Kroeber, the wilderness was a place suspended in time from modernity and industrial sprawl. This idealized vision of

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<sup>40</sup> Act creating Yellowstone National Park, March 1, 1872; <https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/management/yellowstoneprotectionact1872.htm> (accessed April 12, 2019). Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 91.

<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Schneider, “Performance Remains,” *Performance Research* Vol 6, No. 2 (2001), 100.

<sup>42</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wang Young, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2012), 5.

<sup>43</sup> William Bauer “Stop Hunting Ishi,” 48.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

nature produced an idealized subject, which denied Ishi his own sense of modernity and humanity. It made him savage. Kroeber's "research" effectively perpetuated the legitimization of archival knowledge through the discovery scenario. The repetition of this paradigm naturalizes its violence. Heroes perpetually perform the thrill of discovery, forever foddering the question, *what is it?*

### Faux Naturelle

"You want nature? I'll give you nature," promised Allyson Mitchell in a statement about *Ladies Sasquatch*. In its theatricality, her message parallels the promise of Moran's painting (Congress needed evidence of nature worth preserving, and he supplied it). Yet, Mitchell modifies the script. As Taylor and Bernstein have emphasized, individual responses to "scriptive things" remain fluid. Cultural memory is not forever pinned down by grand narratives. The value and relevance of things remains unstable, allowing "for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable."<sup>45</sup> Mitchell's sasquatch artworks respond to the paradigm of discovery as mediated through the grand landscape mode of expression. She does so by inverting the genres across space and media. Mitchell attempts to translate striated space back into nomadic space, specifically, or a landscape open to radical dykes, lesbian feminists, or queer goddesses.

The first furry iteration of the mythical lesbian beasts, titled *Faux Naturelle*, was installed in 2005 at the Gladstone Hotel in Room 304 (fig. 2.10).<sup>46</sup> Art critic Helena Rickett described the room as a "a log cabin makeover with imitation fur, woodgrain, and

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<sup>45</sup> Bernstein, "Dances With Things," 73.

<sup>46</sup> As of April 24, 2019, the room is still available for rent at the Gladstone Hotel.

applique stone.” The focal point is the fun-fur wall mural of hirsute women lounging and preening in nature. The scene is a riff on a pornographic cartoon Mitchell discovered as a teenager in the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> In the original source, a male voyeur observes, from a cliff above, a flock of nude women in a verdant landscape. The pornographic scene mimics Moran’s *Grand Canyon* in that it scripts the viewer to embody the discovery of the nude women from over the voyeur/surveyor’s shoulder. The discoverer’s gaze is comparable to the male gaze of art history: both the landscape and women’s bodies are objectified from a masculine, heterosexist vantage point. Mitchell detonates this gaze by replacing the male voyeur with a curvaceous satyr and by repositioning the sightline so the viewer looks up towards the satyr, rather than over her shoulder (fig. 2.11). As Michelle Veitch explains, this repositioning “[disturbed] the field of vision by taking on the same position as the audience who viewed the work,” to disrupt the objectification of the nude women in the scene.<sup>48</sup> They are not subject and object, but a cohort of lesbian feminists—a beloved theme in many of Mitchell’s artworks.

Mitchell did not draw directly on Moran’s *Grand Canyon* as a source, but her rendering of nature begs a playful comparison. The outwardly facing satyr poses in a similar way to the Moran’s Native American. However, in the absence of the surveyor Hayden, Mitchell’s landscape has not yet been “discovered.” Mitchell also puns with the relationship between women’s bodies and natural resources by flaunting “bushes” (patches of pubic hair) in “the bush” (a Canadian term for wilderness).<sup>49</sup> Along similar

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<sup>47</sup> Veitch, “Site Specific Practices and City Renewal,” 217. Veitch has identified the source as an erotic cartoon in which two men watch a group of nude women. Mitchell explained that she first discovered the source as a teenager in the 1970s, when she came across a comic book of Playboy images.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>49</sup> Lisa M. Moore, “A Lesbian-Feminist Storybook Garden” *Sister Arts: Gardens, Poem, Community* (blog), February 11, 2011. <https://sisterarts.typepad.com/sister-arts-gardens-po/2011/02/a-lesbian-feminist-storybook-garden.html> (accessed April 12, 2019).

lines, the abundant “peaks” and “chasms” of the women’s buttocks, vaginas, and breasts recall similar geological features of Moran’s *Grand Canyon*. This rendering of women and wilderness offers a new script for landscape expression that refuses to erase or objectify nature’s inhabitants, and also celebrates tongue-in-cheek humor about lesbian love.

*Faux Naturelle* imagines open, nomadic space. More specifically, it enacts Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of “felt” space. They describe felt as a smooth, fibrous material that contrasts the linear grid of a weaving (a fabric with a warp and weft): “[Felt] it has neither top nor bottom nor center; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes continuous variation.”<sup>50</sup> The fun-fur mural looks and feels like an entanglement of fibers, and also entangles the viewer into the scenario as a playful participant.<sup>51</sup> The women touch and caress each other, and also invite the viewer to touch. The “felt” scenario contrasts the goal of Moran’s *Grand Canyon* to illustrate the scientific survey, or the containment of nature, led by geologist Hayden and his team.

Western male artists were awarded more opportunities to become painters, sculptors, and authors, and hence, interpreted the world from their privileged perspectives—the male/ colonizer’s gaze. Accordingly, women’s creative endeavors have been described as decorative and unrigorous. Literature historian Jennifer Munro points out that men’s work was extolled as civic duty while women’s pursuits of both gardening and needlework was more to keep boredom at bay.<sup>52</sup> Or, in the more humorous phrasing

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<sup>50</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 475

<sup>51</sup> Fun Fur is not technically felt as it is a machine-made, woven fabric, but its polyester “eyelashes” entangle in a way that evokes Deleuze and Guattari’s point.

<sup>52</sup> Jennifer Munro, “In this Strang Labourinth, how Shall I Turne?”: Needlework, Gardens, and Writing in Mary Wroth’s “Pamphilia to Amphilanthus,” in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 2005) p. 35.

of comedian Hannah Gadsby: “Art history taught me I have no place in history. Women didn’t have time to think thoughts; they were too busy taking naps naked in the forest.”<sup>53</sup> And yet, it was through this marginalization that many women were able to articulate their own self-worth and political goals. Historians have applied feminist and queer research methodologies to tease out the nuances of women’s work and also recover hidden meaning. Literature historian Lisa M. Moore notes that many erotic symbols have been “hiding in plain sight among canonical visual and literary traditions.”<sup>54</sup> As men dismissed the quality and content of women’s fiber crafts, they were able to stitch in their stories of intimacy.

Chimney pieces made in colonial-era New England offer an illuminating study of how women represented their intimate knowledge of nature (and their place in it). Chimney pieces are embroidered textiles that usually range from 18 inches to 50 inches wide. They were often framed, and on occasion, protected by glass panels, and hung above fireplace mantels as domestic decoration. They typically comprised tent stitches (a basic needlepoint stitch) in wool, silk, metallic thread, and imported beads and they were typically created by Euro-American women of status, and as such, effectively convey the worldview of wealthy women in colonial North America. Many of the known artists belonged to families that supported local crafts of silversmithing, portrait painting, and needlework instructors.<sup>55</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich argues that needlework instruction reflected the shifting capitalist society, and also the seriousness with which women took

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<sup>53</sup> Julia Halpert, “Is Hannah Gadsby, the Comedian Behind Netflix’s Viral Standup Special, Today’s Most Vital Art Critic” on Artnet.com (blog), July 16 2018. <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/netflix-hannah-gadsby-1318442> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>54</sup> Moore, *Sister Arts*, xiv.

<sup>55</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 144.

it. The students found a vehicle that “nourished sensibilities ignored in the classical education offered to elite males” and in many ways, their subject matter was also ignored.<sup>56</sup> Ulrich notes that in the mid-eighteenth century, while Bourne was stitching idyllic little lambs on her chimneypiece, her male family members were predisposed with maintaining and recording the sheep on their agrarian Cape Code property (land taken from the Wampanoags).<sup>57</sup>

Comparable to how Mitchell elided women’s bodies with nature in *Faux Naturelle*, colonial women coded their needlework with the visual vocabulary of nature. The subjects of fishing women and shepherdesses contained subversive politics. Standard “fishing scenes” were scenarios of courtship, featuring a man “luring in” a woman at water’s edge, and were common in popular media such as *Women’s Weekly*, as well as circulating engravings and ceramics.<sup>58</sup> Art historian Andrea Pappas writes that the widespread imagery “celebrates the erotic potential of the fishing metaphor and underscore the vigilance women must exercise in order to maintain their sexual virtue when confronted with male desire.”<sup>59</sup> However, in a fascinating role reversal, women often depicted themselves as the fishers in their detailed chimney pieces. By stitching a woman with a fishing pole in hand, the story reads differently: here the woman gets to decide what to do when the man bites her “bait.” This reversal references a very brief window in colonial courtship culture when a woman has a say in her destiny.<sup>60</sup> In a

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>59</sup> Andrea Pappas, “‘Each Wise Nymph that Angles for a Heart’: The Politics of Courtship in the Boston ‘Fishing Lady’ Pictures” *Art and Art History* (2015), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Andrea Pappas, “An Ecology of Vision: Eighteenth-Century Needlework, Globally-Sourced Artifacts, and Representational Systems.” Lecture, Association of Historians of American Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota, October 6, 2018.

similar vein, Mitchell transformed the male surveyor/voyeur of the landscape into a welcoming and sexy satyr.

A large chimney piece by Eunice Bourne chronicles heterosexual courtship, from the first introduction to marriage (Fig. 2.12). Emphasizing the importance of the woman's agency (however fleeting), the fishing scene is the largest.<sup>61</sup> Pappas argues that the scenes are evidence of how women could exert their power in small ways. In the seventeenth century, it was becoming more socially acceptable for colonial women to search for love prior to marriage. While men continued to steer the courtship ritual, women nevertheless seized their sole opportunity to make the right choice at the right time. Pappas explains "In that window between offer and acceptance [of marriage], women had control; some women kept men dangling for months." (fig. 2.13)<sup>62</sup>

In a similar chimney piece trope, women depict themselves as shepherdesses in idyllic pastoral scenes. According to Munro "like a gardener, too, the shepherdess artfully and cooperatively shapes the landscape, the trees and flowers."<sup>63</sup> Bourne sewed an image of her dream world into her courtship scene: She scaled down the masculine symbols of horses and guns, and scaled up the soft and sensual "world of courtship" (fig. 2.14). Observing that women often did not create linear perspective (even though they were likely taught it), Pappas suggests that they simply preferred to make nature in parallel perspective. She argues that this approach shows that women did not see nature according to scientific standards. While men correlated nature and landscapes to surveys, maps, and property rights, women had more affective and haptic relationships with nature, making

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<sup>61</sup> Pappas, "Each Wise Nymph that Angles for a Heart," 23. See also Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1985).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Munro, "In this Strang Labourinth, how Shall I Turne?":, 40.

visual the small fruits of their labor (sometimes quite literally with oversized strawberries and flowers).<sup>64</sup> A shepherdess scene by Bourne typifies this scaling: The female figures are larger in size than male—so much so that if the woman perched on a rock were to stand up, she would likely tower over the man. Griselda Pollock argues that these works puncture the authoritative male gaze, and more broadly, Enlightenment notions of spatial organization. This analysis resonates with *Faux Naturelle*, which accordingly rejects linear perspective and the objectification of women and instead offers a tactile perception of nature. Michelle Veitch explains, *Faux Naturelle* “thus opened up the field of representation by tracing out a series of haptic movements across the surface of the fabric which marked out the bodily surfaces of the women pictured in the textural image.”<sup>65</sup> No longer demure, passive figure, the ladies become active agents, alluding to sexuality and sensuality through sight and touch.

### Deep Lez

In another expression of her public process, Mitchell penned the influential manifesto “Deep Lez” to help situate her political commitment to the lesbian body as a “potential sight of radical identification.”<sup>66</sup> Deep Lez encompasses all of her projects, which ranged from the artworks at the Gladstone to her involvement in the fat activist performance troupe Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off. The “deep” in “Deep Lez” references Mitchell’s mining of 1970s popular culture and thrifted crafts, and also her deep commitment to the lesbian feminist politics of the 1970s. While shopping at a Value

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<sup>64</sup> Pappas, “An Ecology of Vison,” lecture.

<sup>65</sup> Veitch, “Site Specific Practices and City Renewal,” 218.

<sup>66</sup> Mitchell, “Deep Lez I Statement,” 12

Village (a Canadian chain of thrift shops), Mitchell and her gay male friend came upon a macramé wall hanging of an owl. “Oh my god, that’s so deep lez,” commented her friend.<sup>67</sup> The owl encapsulated 1970s kitsch craft hobbies, and especially those hobbies associations with lesbian feminists—together, they were dowdy, essentialized, and totally passé. With this macramé owl in her hands, Mitchell began to consider if and how these quirky citations of the past could be reconciled with the present, in order to offer “alternative ways of imagining the world and who we are.” The manifesto continues:

Deep Lez uses cafeteria-style mixings of craft, context, food, direction action, and human connections to maintain radical dyke politics and resistant strategies. Part quilting bee, part public relations campaign, and part Molotov cocktail, Deep Lez seeks to map out the connections between the second-position feminisms that sustained radical lesbian politics and the current third-wave feminism that take apart the foundation on which those politics were built.<sup>68</sup>

Guided by “Deep Lez” logic, Mitchell installed *Sasquatch Clutch* in 2005 in Room 207 of the Gladstone Hotel (fig. 2.15). Much of the installation was made of thrifted things. At the room’s center were two ten-foot-tall sculptural sasquatch ladies, Tawny and Silverback, who would later join the installation *Ladies Sasquatch*. The sculptures are performative: Silverback bares her faux vampire teeth and struts towards Tawny, who reaches towards the ceiling. They stand in a room reminiscent of a 1970s basement or love shack: shaggy orange and brown carpet squares, avocado pillows and rugs; a fake wood-paneled lampshade, and a granny square blanket folded in the window. A (hideous) striped, crushed-velvet sofa is positioned in the corner, below a hand-hooked tapestry, *Barb and Barb*, of two inter-racial lovers mirroring each other in classic come-

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<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*, 85.

<sup>68</sup> Mitchell, “Deep Lez I Statement,” 12.

hither pin-up poses: both look over their shoulders, cheekily glancing over their shoulder, and flaunting their backsides.

In 2005, Bunny and Silverback checked out of the Gladstone Hotel and moved back to the woods. Mitchell's next iteration of the sasquatch theme was her monumental installation *Ladies Sasquatch*, an arrangement of nine fantastical beasts in a groovy forest glen. While the arrangement changes slightly with each venue, the installation usually includes the sasquatch figures gathered with their diminutive Familiars. The Familiars lounge, climb, and swing in nearby crochet wall hangings (fig. 2.16). The monumental Ladies and Familiars bare their sharp teeth and furry genitals to visitors.<sup>69</sup> They are beastlike, but more mythic and monumental than ungainly and ugly. A 2007 review of the installation at Stride Gallery in Calgary, Alberta by Anthea Black conveys the sensorial quality of the installation:

The matte pink fun fur tiny rows of tufted nipples and thick white ropes have a glimmering stickiness that's characteristic of synthetic fibers and the backcombed tassels of macramé that have become poof-out mounds of fur electrified with static. It's enough to make a wheezy asthmatic tear up with kitsch-induced delight.<sup>70</sup>

Mitchell's materials recall the sight, smell, and feel of kitschy women's work, and, more conceptually, the feminist politics of the 1970s that attempted to "reclaim nature, female deities, and safe spaces."<sup>71</sup> *Ladies Sasquatch* comprises the handicraft and hobby crafts that were defined against the rubric of modernity and in the "imaginings of second-wave

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<sup>69</sup> Carla Garnet, *Allyson Mitchell*, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Anthea Black, "Serious Furvert," November 1, 2007. *The YYScene* (blog) <https://theyyscene.com/2007/11/01/ffwd-serious-furvert/www>.

<sup>71</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 81

feminisms that were so foundational to me.”<sup>72</sup> The assemblage of crafts indexes her own Deep Lez identity.

In the 1970s women’s hobby crafts enjoyed unprecedented popularity among women seeking creative outlets.<sup>73</sup> A cottage industry grew around kits and guides for sewing, latch-hook, macramé, crochet projects. In homage to this generative if fleeting moment in fiber art history, Mitchell utilizes found textiles she calls “abandoned craft” to create the hills, rocks, and trees surrounding and below the sasquatch figures (fig. 2.17). In an email, Mitchell wrote about how the feminine history of the materials appealed to her:

I made the term abandoned craft up to capture the kind of work that I have been collecting in thrift stores, junk shops, estate sales and yard sales for the past 15 years or so. They are the hand-made items that have been discarded by the maker or the owner. I always wonder about completed and half or semi completed needlepoints, rug hookings, zip lock bags of single granny squares and unfinished paint by numbers or sewing projects. I think about the do-er who I imagine maybe grew discouraged by the technique of the craft and how the inability to make caused them frustration and guilt and eventually they donated the work to the detritus of the thrift store donation bin.<sup>74</sup>

Ann Cvetkovich, literary expert and close friend of Mitchell, describes these ongoing materials as “archives of feeling” because they provide “evidence of that which is often ephemeral, or embodied in idiosyncratic collections and objects.”<sup>75</sup> The collection of unfinished crafts is a veritable carrier bag of unheroic stories. They offer physical testimony to domestic crafts and memories that have long been dismissed as too passive

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<sup>72</sup> Mitchell, “Deep Lez I Statement,” 12. The statement concludes, “...while remaining committed to an inclusive third-wave theory and practice

<sup>73</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 72. Freeman cites Firestones *Dialectic of Sex*: “Women couldn’t register fast enough: ceramics, weaving, leather talents, painting classes...anything to get off his back.”

<sup>74</sup> Allyson Mitchell, email message to Mary Savig, January 9, 2012. Ellipses are that of Mitchell.

<sup>75</sup> Cvetkovich, Ann. “The Queer Art of the Counterarchive.” *Cruising the Archives: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*, eds. David Frantz and Mia Locks (Los Angeles: ONE National Lesbian and Gay Archives, 2011), 32.

or simply bad.<sup>76</sup> When all of the objects are pieced together with patches of fun fur, taxidermy teeth, and claws, they become confrontational (fig. 2.18).<sup>77</sup> Cvetkovich writes, “the sheer accumulation of which makes the ordinary object suddenly assume new significance and aesthetic and emotional power.”<sup>78</sup> In addition to the dramatic poses and riotous colors, the layers of textiles and furs animate ongoingness. Unfinished projects underscore that crafters are always in process, “always making a new blanket or sweater or baby bootie.”<sup>79</sup>

The sculptures comprise a patchwork quilt of these untold stories. Mitchell collects, cuts, and pieces them together, building an archive of feeling she describes as “beautiful and human and heartbreaking.”<sup>80</sup> Mitchell’s process corresponds not simply with 1970s hobby crafts, but 1970s feminist art history. Until the 1970s, fiber work by folk and amateur women artists was largely ignored in the art world. Even within the parameters of the American studio craft movement, uneducated hobby artists—for example, female quilters—were kept at arm’s length because they might have sullied the community’s adherence to authenticity.<sup>81</sup> Their work was not included in contemporary galleries of art museums, unless it could also speak to the lexicon of modernity.

Then, in 1971, a watershed quilt “Abstract Design in American Quilts” at the Whitney Museum of American Art argued that women quilters were vanguard. Quilt collectors Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof persuaded the museum, established in 1931 by collector of modern art Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, to display approximately

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>77</sup> Bernstein, “Dances with Things,” 69.

<sup>78</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, “Touching the Monster: Deep Lez in Fun Fur,” *Allyson Mitchell: Ladies Sasquatch* (Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Museum of Art, 2009), 28.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>80</sup> Allyson Mitchell, email message to Mary Savig, January 9, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Cvetkovich, “Touching the Monster,” 28.

60 quilts, many made by Amish women in Pennsylvania and the Midwest.<sup>82</sup> The Whitney Museum treated the quilts as if they were canvasses: they were hung vertically on walls and didactic materials compared the formal qualities of the quilts to modern paintings. Art historian Karin Peterson observes in her essay, “How the Ordinary Became Extraordinary: The Modern Eye and the Quilt as Art Form” that this arrangement was influenced by the “modern eye,” meaning that quilts had shed their use value to be perceived as modern artworks.<sup>83</sup> Peterson sums, “The modern eye remains a powerful and sometimes explicit source of legitimization. Museums provide space in which the cultural value of quilts and other objects is negotiated through the rituals of modernist practices.”<sup>84</sup> The quilts were transformed into autonomous artworks. Little consideration was paid to the quality or original purpose of the quilts, but only in how they conveyed a modern aesthetic. In this context, the formal aesthetics of the quilts are more relatable to the paintings of Barnett Newman or Frank Stella than to the women who made them.<sup>85</sup>

Emerging feminist art critics and historians lobbied their concerns about the Whitney show. In an influential critique, Patricia Mainardi lamented the “modern gaze” that separated the quilts from their utility, decrying that the exhibition script arbitrarily connected the quilts to abstract paintings while eschewing their more material connections to historical women quilters. The handmade qualities of quilts had been overlooked and thus, the non-elite work of women was supplanted by the elitist ideology

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<sup>82</sup> Karin E. Peterson, “How the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary: The Modern Eye and the Quilt as Art Form” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, Maria Elena Buszek, ed. (Duke University Press, 2011), 100.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

of “art for art’s sake.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, the exhibition reinforced the hierarchy of art and craft by maintaining control over the very definition—only those works that measured the dominant narrative could enter through the gate. Furthermore, this very ideology undermined the affective and collective labor of the women who created the quilts.

Beginning in the 1970s, art historians and curators, following the lead of emerging feminist art practices, began to explore the crafty ways women had expressed their identities and politics with fiber. In a 1973 article of the feminist periodical *Off Our Backs*, Carol Edelson emphasizes the ways in which women have just remained a footnote to the great heroic men of American history, even as they made significant contributions to society: “Everyone remembers the story of how Betsy Ross made a five-point star with a few folds and snips to the surprise of General Washington (a surveyor) who could not think of an easy way to create the star.”<sup>87</sup> Ross’s idea was clever, but not extraordinary. Women developed unique spatial perspectives and manual dexterity through their domestic projects like needlework and quilting. They also formed social relationships with other women while working communally. Beyond the stitching, the quilting bees fostered communal meals, singing, dancing, and love. As Edelsen argues, quilting bees provided safe spaces for homebound women to gather with their peers:

The quilting bee was virtually the only place that women were not dominated by the men and could speak freely on their own views. Some of the conversation was certainly gossip but the women also talked about political issues. Political issues were crucial.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 108. See also Patricia Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” in *The Feminist Art Journal* 2(1) 1973, 18-23.

<sup>87</sup> Carol Edelson, Edelson, Carol. “Quilting: A History.” *Off Our Backs* 3, no. 8 (1973), 13.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 13.

Feminist art history prompted new ways of looking at art history by unpacking economic and social contexts. At the same time, feminist artists also began organizing their political strategies around traditionally feminine materials. Artists including Faith Ringgold, Judy Chicago, Lenore Tawney, and Harmony Hammond (among many others) employed fiber to create alternative frameworks for self-expression, “turning the contradictions among different discourses of femininity to their own advantage.”<sup>89</sup>

Within this context, Mitchell dredges up the retro “cultural dinosaurs” of amateur hobby crafts from the 1970s because they largely remain outside the art world, and she identifies with their dowdy reputation both in her lesbian feminist and fat politics. Elizabeth Freeman describes her work as “temporal drag” in its association with “retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present.”<sup>90</sup> Contemporary queer and feminist theory tends to cast lesbian feminist as a “big drag,” by relegating its politics with “essentialized bodies, normative visions of women’s sexuality, and single-issue identity politics.”<sup>91</sup> Mitchell’s *Ladies* provide an alternative way for thinking through—or feeling with—lesbian feminist politics. As Freeman posits, queer theory seems to operate on a progressive trajectory without looking back.<sup>92</sup> Mitchell however, insists on the imaginary potential of Deep Lez politics and her lesbian feminist sasquatch figures:

Deep Lez is right this minute and it is rooted in herstories and theories that came before. It is taking the most relevant and capable ideas and using them as tools to create new ways of thinking, while still clinging to more radical politics that have already happened but definitely aren’t over yet.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Munro, “In this Strang Labourinth 36. See also, Anna Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women’s Love Lyric in Europe, 1540-1620* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 86.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 63. Freeman cites Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) as operating on this progressive trajectory.

<sup>93</sup> Mitchell, “Deep Lez I Statement,” 12.

Her physical recovery of abandoned crafts materializes her insistence on the reclamation of some aspects of radical lesbian feminism and identification. When Mitchell rescues these crafts from total failure (the trash), she maintains their pathetic thingness. They are not long-lost treasures that will be restored to the grand canons of art history; rather they are part of an anachronistic disarray. Freeman argues, “they suggest the thrill and power that a discounted past—indeed, a literally ‘discount’ past cobbled together from cheap textiles and anonymous strangers’ jettisoned home craft projects—can bring to a much more slick contemporary moment.”<sup>94</sup> Expanding on Cvetkovich’s emphasis on *Ladies Sasquatch* as an archive of feeling, Freeman suggests that the installation recasts bits of feminism into a more “tactile mode.” Here, the viewer feels the history—and the ongoingness—of unfinished lesbian feminist politics. In this way, she realizes some of the 1970s feminist goals to reclaim nature, safe spaces, and goddesses (in the likeness of a mythic sasquatch).

### Wild Women

Photographs of Mitchell’s studio show her two key sources for sculpting the Ladies: pin-up girls and sasquatches, both culled from 1970s popular media (fig 2.19). The hybridity of monster and femme fatale squarely contrasts norms of femininity. As Helena Reckitt explains,

Whereas the porn industry demands hairless bodies, with curves in only the right places, Mitchell performs what she calls reverse airbrushing, portraying abundantly buxom, bushy nudes. Recycling images that were intended for straight men for her dykey ends to reverse the typical flow of appropriation.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 89

<sup>95</sup> Helena Reckitt, “My Fuzzy Valentine: Allyson Mitchell,” *C Magazine* 89 (Spring 2006), 2.

The scene animates a vibrant wilderness inhabited by excessive bodies. In her work on disability, Rosemarie Garland Thompson discusses how the normative body type of women is weak, passive, small, hairless, and soft—essentially the idealized (and passive) body of the male gaze.<sup>96</sup> In other words, pin-up girls and Barbie Dolls are iconic models of a seemingly normative body. If the body deviates from this standard, it is labeled as abnormal, unruly, and abject. Mitchell’s extensive use of fun fur, exaggerates the unruliness of the Ladies’ voluptuous bottoms, vulvas, and nipples. Veitch elaborates that “the abject other presented femininity as a masquerade, thus opening up gender representations to subversive re-interpretations.”<sup>97</sup> In Mitchell’s own words, they valorize “cellulite, dirty fingernails, tattoos, big butts, fangs, collectivity and collaboration.”<sup>98</sup> Mitchell’s sasquatches are the ideal “dream girlfriend” because she wasn’t crafted from an idealized body, but from the collation of sasquatch and pin-up girl images, generating Ladies with “long hair, flowing curves, soft textures, and gleefully abundant body hair.”<sup>99</sup>

When Mitchell was a child in the 1970s, both sasquatches and pin-up girls were widely accessible in popular culture (though rarely at the same time). Joshua Blu Buh notes that working-class men learned masculinity through the consumption of comic books and pulp fiction novels about sasquatch. These resources were vehicles for working-class men to fantasize life as beast, as both a hero and a danger to society. Buhs writes that many pulp novels spoke to white working-class fears about civil rights. In the novel *Sasquatch: Monster of the Northwest Woods*, a Bigfoot character implied the loss

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<sup>96</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thompson, “Theorizing Disability” in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1996), 28.

<sup>97</sup> Veitch, “Site Specific Practices and City Renewal,” 220.

<sup>98</sup> Mitchell, “Deep Lez I Statement,” 13.

<sup>99</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 81.

of privilege afforded to white, working class men to women and people of color. The Bigfoot population would demand the right to vote and own property, and “some politician would start thinking about the Snowman vote and we would have another poverty program!”<sup>100</sup> From this racist perspective, white readers of the novel imagined that African Americans, like Bigfoot, seemed to live more freely, and had less self-control. Thus, the white readers could simultaneously revile Bigfoot, but also fantasize about accessing their own untamed desires. Buhs suggests that implied sexual desire: “By imagining themselves onto the body of Sasquatch, white working-class men could imagine themselves as black, as women, could come in contact with their own souls, their own repressed and hidden desires.”<sup>101</sup>

Pin-up girls in popular culture also were created for the voyeuristic male gaze. Maria Elena Buszek notes that a pin-up girl “doesn’t represent sex so much as suggest it,” a sentiment comparable to racialized and gendered fantasies of Sasquatch.<sup>102</sup> When considered together, Sasquatch and pin-ups in popular culture directly draw on the scenario of discovery. Both subjects are correlated as part of the virginal or untouched wilderness that sparked both desire and fear. Perreault argues:

The rhetoric of a virgin land and an untouched wilderness served a clear purpose in these early promotional accounts. By continually referring to the American environment as a wild and untouched land, European accounts figuratively emptied the lands of its native inhabitants.<sup>103</sup>

Part and parcel with this strategy was to dehumanize colonial subjects into wild and dangerous beasts.

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<sup>100</sup> Buhs, *Bigfoot*, 162.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>102</sup> Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>103</sup> Melanie Perrault, “American Wilderness and First Contact,” 23.

Mitchell's source materials reveal the alignment of colonialist and patriarchal gaze. As Elizabeth Freeman writes, the Ladies "suggest how fantasies of atavism manage the threat of adult female libidinality as well as of racial difference."<sup>104</sup> The threat of the "wild man" has always reflected on the (self-)control of the dominant culture. From the colonial era through the 1970s, young white men had to learn to manage a desire, lest they too "turn wild."<sup>105</sup> Likewise, white women contained—shaved, corseted, and dressed—their bodies according to patriarchal norms. In an interview, Mitchell pondered the decolonizing potential of *Ladies Sasquatch*, and offered that the sasquatches are as "a queer idea of being." The Ladies have turned wild: they have embraced the homophobic stereotypes of radical dyke lesbians: "They are big, fat, hairy dykes—the exact opposite of the nubile lesbians of patriarchal porn."<sup>106</sup> The *Ladies Sasquatch* transgression of the containment of wilderness seemingly anticipated Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o's recent call to "rewild theory." As they suggest, a truly felt wilderness is open-ended and disruptive: "[The wild] interrupts the neat narratives of freedom and escape" and, as the *Ladies Sasquatch* attest, it is also very fun.<sup>107</sup>

### Decolonizing and Disidentifying the Wild Man

In the tradition of the museum exhibition as well as its unsavory sidekick, the traveling sideshow, power dynamics are played out through the objectification of

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<sup>104</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 86.

<sup>105</sup> Perreault, "American Wilderness and First Contact," 29. Perreault notes that Puritan colonizers were particularly concerned that they might turn wild if not vigilant.

<sup>106</sup> Josephine Mills "The answer is two years spent baking vulva-shaped cookies or: On Understanding Lesbian Representation," *Allyson Mitchell: Ladies Sasquatch* (Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Museum of Art, 2009), 24.

<sup>107</sup> Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o, "Introduction: Theory in the Wild," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, (July 2018), 455.

colonized cultures. They contain stacks and stacks of stories about discoveries. Taylor notes that “since their inception in the nineteenth century, museums have literalized the theatricality of colonialism.”<sup>108</sup> Museums, archives, and sideshows insert viewers into the script of the discovery scenario, skewing narratives around Native material culture and ethnic dioramas. In short, cultural memory has been produced, and disseminated by archives and museums, and therefore generally communicates dominant ideologies. Along similar lines, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that museums communicate “the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others.”<sup>109</sup> According to Taylor, the script orients the viewer to “situate ourselves in relationship to it; as participants, spectators, or witnesses, we need to ‘be there,’ part of the act of transfer.”<sup>110</sup> Visitors enact the gaze of the discoverer (the hero, the anthropologist).

When Indigenous persons bring their own cultural memory to a museum, they notice the ways in which colonial scripts have been wrapped around things. In the wry words of curator Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), “If there is any people on earth whose lives are more tangled up with museums than we are, God help them.”<sup>111</sup> Many contemporary Native artists have staged counter-narratives in satirical and performative forms, a tactic of inbetweenness to make the institutional space nervous. As an example, Halberstam and Nyong’o discuss the work of painter and performance artist Kent

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<sup>108</sup> Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 24.

<sup>109</sup> Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 34

<sup>110</sup> Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 32.

<sup>111</sup> Paul Chaat Smith, “Luna Remembers,” *Emendatio* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2005), <https://www.paulchaatsmith.com/luna-remembers.html> (accessed April 12, 2019).

Monkman (Cree). Monkman's paintings reorient monumental history paintings like Moran's *Grand Canyon* to center the perspective of the Indigenous person typically pushed to the margins. His paintings express "wild, grotesque, and rapaciously sexual encounters that refuse the conventional staging of wildness as a confrontation between modern innovators and traditional, anachronistic communities."<sup>112</sup>

Performance artist James Luna (Luiseño) also provoked tension (inbetweenness) surrounding the scenario of discovery. His performances in U.S. museums frequently pushed back on the passive display of Native bodies and consumption of Native culture. Moreover, he challenges hierarchical expressions of art and Western representations of nature. In his touring performance, *ISHI: From the Archives*, Luna decolonized archival evidence of Ishi's life presented at the Hearst and performed a new telling of the story from Ishi's perspective. I watched *ISHI* on January 15, 2016 at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery (fig. 2.20).<sup>113</sup> In the museum's historic Great Hall—not far from Moran's *Grand Canyon* Ishi/Luna performed with artist Sheila Tishla Skinner. With the National Portrait Gallery (and its sister institution the Smithsonian American Art Museum) was his stage and painterly and sculptural narratives of Manifest Destiny as his backdrop, Luna first projected archival photographs of Ishi. He then animated the documents with his Native vantage point, giving humanity to Ishi's projected image. Ishi/Luna called out through the historical corridor:

When you come to see me at the museum making things for you, you laugh and point as though I was a freak in a circus.  
I am a man!  
You bring your children and point, look at the wild man.  
I am a man!

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<sup>112</sup> Halberstam and Nyong'o, "Introduction: Theory in the Wild," 460.

<sup>113</sup> James Luna, performer, "*ISHI: From the Archives*" with Sheila Tishla Skinner. National Portrait Gallery, January 16, 2016.

When you touch me, you touch me like you would touch a dog.  
I am a man!<sup>114</sup>

Ishi/Luna (re)asserted his own humanity in front of the mostly silent audience, proving that Ishi was never the savage or wild man that history had recorded him to be. His statements directly refer to moments in intercultural performance when audience members laughed and touched the performer, referring to the assumption that the person on the stage was a link between animal and human, and thus not fully realized and capable of modernity. As Luna oscillated between Ishi and himself, he proved the fluid nature of archival memory.

Building on the genealogy of Indigenous activist art, *Ladies Sasquatch* transgresses the scenario of discovery with its performative fantasies of both sexual and racial difference.<sup>115</sup> The Ladies' exaggerated gestures and excessive bodies locate their heirs: the intercultural performances of Ishi and William Henry Johnson, Sarah Baartman, among many others. In the imperialist exhibits, the identity of the performer was reduced to a racial category. José Esteban Muñoz writes that “socially encoded scripts of identity are often formatted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender, and various other identificatory distinctions.”<sup>116</sup> Unlike Luna, Mitchell, a white woman from a settler culture, cannot decolonize her sasquatches. Decolonization is not a metaphor and *Ladies Sasquatch* works almost entirely in metaphor.<sup>117</sup> Instead, she exaggerates aspects of excess, abjection, and monstrosity, illuminating the intersections of racism, transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny as mapped onto the lesbian sasquatch

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 87.

<sup>116</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>117</sup> See Tuck and Young, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.”

body. *Ladies Sasquatch* pokes at every possible anxiety about wildness as “always already animality—an unruly energy that stands outside of human forms of control, management, exploitation, and consumption.”<sup>118</sup> The desire to take control, manage, exploit, and consume laid the groundwork for the “hero” to arrive and begin the story of discovery.

In this chapter, Barnum, Kroeber, Hayden, and Moran reflect the story of discovery and containment. *Ladies Sasquatch* disidentifies from the heroic part of the story and maintains its wildness. With excessively artificial materials—the dowdy crafts, the surreal colors, and sticky fun fur—*Ladies Sasquatch* crafts a wilderness and wild bodies that disidentify from the racist and sexist cultural stereotypes of sasquatch and pin-ups to create what José Esteban Muñoz calls “a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity.”<sup>119</sup> Here, the Ladies can let their imaginations run wild.

### Queer Utopian Wilderness

*Ladies Sasquatch* scripts a new discovery paradigm for a queer wilderness utopia. Those who “discover” this gathering of monstrous sasquatch ladies will also turn wild. Cvetkovich observes that “especially as a collective, the Lady Sasquatches conjure up new imaginary worlds but ones that also exist in the here and now with their unmistakably huge presence.”<sup>120</sup> With deeply intimate visual vocabulary, Mitchell crafted a vibrant wilderness landscape constructed with the labor and affect of anonymous

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<sup>118</sup> Halberstam and Nyong’o, “Introduction: Theory in the Wild,” 458

<sup>119</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1.

<sup>120</sup> Cvetkovich, “Touching the Monster,” 29.

women crafters. She forms collectivity among the anonymous women, and then among the various Ladies and familiars. Her search for “alternative ways of imagining the world and who we are” resonates with Muñoz’s insistence that “we must dream and enact new and better pleasures; other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”<sup>121</sup> Muñoz’s theorization of queer utopia asserts that queerness is not simply a disruptive category, but a longing. He explains that utopia is often inferred by “a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here.” As an example, he discusses about Frank O’Hara’s poem “Having a Coke with You,” in which O’Hara romantically states that “having a coke with you” is more fun than traveling to beautiful locations or looking at beautiful works of art, because having a coke includes “secret smiles.” The Coke is lifted from its everyday banality and signifies a queer relationality—a secret smile—that “trumps the fantastic moments in the history of art.” The queer relationality, according to Muñoz, infers a queer utopian futurity.<sup>122</sup> *Ladies Sasquatch* longs for the affective relics of lesbian feminism and amateur crafts from the 1970s with the awareness that the lesbian feminist movement can no longer be fully reconciled with present-day, third-wave activisms. And so, she places the abandoned crafts, brocade butts, and macramé critters into a queer relationality (fig. 2.21). Discoverers of the *Ladies Sasquatch* might see the throwback “deep lez” things, share a secret smile with the Ladies, and imagine a wild queer futurity. In so doing, this scenario of discovery trumps and then subverts fantastic moments in the history of art—specifically Moran’s *Grand Canyon*.

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<sup>121</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>122</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 5-6.

Mundane, dowdy, and banal things are cause for optimism. Muñoz writes that feelings of astonishment or joy around these things may be short-lived, but that “the eventual disappointment of hope is not a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process, in the same way that even though we know in advance the felicity of language ultimately falters, it is nonetheless essential.”<sup>123</sup> The Deep Lez philosophy advances this hope:

Deep Lez can offer alternative ways of imagining the world and who we are. It is meant to be passed hand-to-hand from crafter to filmmaker to activist to student to teacher to leader to farmer to curator and back again... to imagine and realize our way out of this dysfunctional habitat to create new ecologies, new policies and new styles without war, poverty, violence and waste.<sup>124</sup>

Popular imagination sustains the story of the Sasquatch and queer imagination sustains the story of *Ladies Sasquatch*. Just because a riotous klatch of lesbian sasquatches will never be discovered in the wilderness, does not mean it cannot be dreamed. *Ladies Sasquatch* transgresses closed natures and identities. This is a new wild that is felt and utopian. The Ladies also make new representations of natural women that refuse to be naturalized. A Lady Sasquatch is at once earthly and otherworldly. The tactics of ongoingness and inbetweenness deployed by Mitchell help foster deep lesbian affect, or what Jacqui Anderson describes as the “sacred connection between one another” that strengthens long-term activism, and also feeds “that place deep within us: the space of the erotic, the space of the soul, that space of the Divine.”<sup>125</sup> Such a notion ultimately shifts the narrative of divine intervention over nature to divine intervention from within nature. *Ladies Sasquatch* allows for the sensation of a new wild.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>124</sup> Mitchell, “Deep Lez I Statement,” 13.

<sup>125</sup> M. Jacqui Anderson, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, and Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 281.

### Chapter 3: Queer Kudzu

At the 1876 Columbia Exposition in Philadelphia, the Japanese government exhibited an ornamental vine, *Pueraria montana* var. *lobata*, better known as Kudzu. The plant was featured in a garden display of the nation's horticultural achievements. Following the exposition, Kudzu slowly took root in the United States. A 1909 article in *Good Housekeeping* extolled kudzu for its pleasant fragrance and ability to "flourish where nothing else will grow."<sup>1</sup> In a 1927 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, kudzu adorns a car port trellis in Hershey, Pennsylvania, demonstrating how the plant provides shade and beauty (fig. 3.1). That same year, Atlanta newspaper columnist Channing Cope began to advocate the benefits of kudzu in the American South. On his WSB-AM radio show, he emphasized Kudzu's ability to grow quickly over large surfaces, especially in hot and humid climates. Cope declared, "Cotton isn't king here anymore. Kudzu is king."<sup>2</sup>

During the Great Depression, President Roosevelt established the Soil Erosion Service (SES) under the Department of the Interior. Influenced by Cope's advocacy, the SES paid farmers \$6 to \$8 per acre of kudzu to relieve the overworked sandy loam of southern cotton fields. By the early 1940s, the agency had shipped an estimated 100 million plants from nurseries in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida to farms throughout the South. By 1946 about three-million acres of kudzu had been planted.<sup>3</sup> A historical marker

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Pearce, *The New Wild: Why Invasive Species Will Be Nature's Salvation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 98.

<sup>2</sup> John Leland, *Aliens in the Backyard: Plant and Animal Imports to America*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 41.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Everest, James H. Miller, Donald M. Ballm Mike Patterson, "Kudzu in Alabama: History, Uses, and Control." Alabama Cooperative Extension System: Alabama A&M and Auburn Universities, ANR-65. Revised August 1999. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/treearch/pubs/2341> (accessed April 12, 2019).

off the highway of Highway 90 in rural Florida proudly marks a local kudzu nursery established in the early 1900s by Quaker horticulturalists Charles and Lillie Pleas (fig.

3.2):

Kudzu Developed Here: Kudzu, brought to this country from Asia as an ornamental was developed near here in the early part of the Twentieth Century and given to the world as a soil-saving, high-protein forage plant by Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Pleas. The fast-growing, deep-rooted leguminous vine has been widely grown in the United States as a drought-resistant, erosion-controlling plant that compares with alfalfa in pasture and hay-making values.<sup>4</sup>

In 1944 *Business Week* described kudzu as “cash on the vine.” But then, in the early 1950s, fanfare began to wilt as concerns grew about kudzu’s uncontrollable growth. By the 1960s, the “cash on the vine” became better known as “the vine that ate the south.” In the 1970s, the Soil Conservation Service (formerly the SES) removed kudzu from its list of plant recommendations for stabilizing and prevention soil erosion. By the late 1990s, kudzu covered seven million acres, and continued to grow about 120,000 acres a year.<sup>5</sup> In 1997, it was officially put on the Federal Noxious Weeds list, the conservationist equivalent to the FBI’s Most Wanted list. In 1999, *Time* magazine enumerated the 100 worst ideas of the twentieth century, which included asbestos, DDT, Crystal Pepsi, aerosol cheese, Fen/Phen, the Titanic, strip malls, Ponzi Schemes, and “introducing Kudzu to the United States.”<sup>6</sup> As kudzu displaced so-called “native” vegetation—and occasionally human-made structures—its “foreign” origin was often highlighted.

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<sup>4</sup> Ashley Egan, “The Plant that Ate the South: Exploring the Introduction and Evolutionary History of Kudzu.” Lecture, YouTube video, 7:30 minutes, published June, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmccrZQ73bk>

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Phillips, “Here and Noxious: Kudzu.” *University of Illinois Extension Ag Update* (July/August 2003), 1.

<sup>6</sup> “The Worst Ideas of the century” *Time*, June 14, 1999. See also Pearce, *The New Wild*, 51-54.

Southern author James Dickey vilified kudzu as a silent “Oriental” stalker in his 1963 poem, *Kudzu*. The poem begins:

Japan invades. Far Eastern vines  
Run from the clay banks they are  
Supposed to keep from eroding,  
Up telephone poles,  
Which rear, half out of leafage,  
As though they would shriek,  
Like things smothered by their own  
Green, mindless, unkillable ghosts.  
In Georgia, the legend says  
That you must close your windows  
At night to keep it out of the house.  
The glass is tinged with green, even so.<sup>7</sup>

Dickey’s xenophobic casting of kudzu infers Southern cultural tensions in the early 1960s: The Civil Rights movement, particularly in the South, was gaining momentum, and American combat in Vietnam was escalating.<sup>8</sup> Environmental reporter Fred Pearce astutely suggests that the demonization of invasive species “says more about us and our fears of change than about them and their behavior.”<sup>9</sup>

Invasive weeds are prone to harsh adjectives: alien, cancerous, destructive, unkillable, noxious, and more. The negative rhetoric rang familiar to Aaron McIntosh, a queer white man and a fourth-generation quilter from Kingsport, Tennessee. In the summer of 2013, his grandmother was ill and he moved to her house in rural Roanoke, Virginia, to help daily chores. While tending to her garden, McIntosh was repeatedly reminded to keep ahead of the weeds. Under the warm summer sun, battalions of pigweed waged their campaigns against the carefully plotted rows of carrots and onions.

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<sup>7</sup> James Dickey, “Kudzu,” *The New Yorker*, May 18, 1963, 44. A line in the poem is “Silence has grown Oriental, And you cannot step upon the ground.”

<sup>8</sup> In 1962, the United States Air Force began spraying herbicides known including Agent Orange over rural areas of South Vietnam to kill vegetation that offered cover and food for guerrilla forces.

<sup>9</sup> Pearce, *The New Wild*, xii.

As McIntosh listened to his relatives talk about how to effectively uproot the garden invaders, he began to empathize with the plants. Are pigweeds really so pernicious? After all, they were just “doing their little weed thing.”<sup>10</sup> The fearful language about weeds reminded McIntosh of homophobic hysteria in the South about queer people. *They are bad seeds. They must be controlled before they contaminate the good soil.* This experience inspired McIntosh to craft a more positive trajectory for an unwanted plant.

For about a year following his summer in Virginia, McIntosh quilted kudzu leaves and vines. Similar to a traditional quilt, the leaves comprised two fabric blocks stitched together by machine (though McIntosh’s leaves do not include batting between the layers). One side is a green calico fabric; and the other side is digitally printed fabric featuring articles and classified ads from southern LGBTQ magazines. He queered the kudzu. In a series of photographs, he draped and enshrouded the plush vines around his body, drawing parallel between his own queer body and the much maligned plant. He imagined making enough queer kudzu to ensconce monuments of the South. And then he realized he could invite others to imagine this future and also help make it. In 2015, he launched *Invasive Queer Kudzu (Invasive)* a socially-engaged project modeled on traditional quilting bees. According to McIntosh, *Invasive* is “a demonstrative tool of visibility, strength and tenacity in the phase of presumed unwantedness.”<sup>11</sup> Together, LGBTQ people (and allies) would gather to stitch their personal stories onto leaves of kudzu and slowly make claim to tense terrains.

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<sup>10</sup> Aaron McIntosh. Interview conducted by Mary Savig, July 22, 2016, Baltimore, MD.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron McIntosh. “About Invasive” <https://invasivequeerkudzu.tumblr.com/about> (accessed April 12, 2019).

This chapter explores how *Invasive Queer Kudzu* registers cultural histories and invasive ideologies of the American South. The organization of this chapter is modeled on the growth pattern of kudzu itself, which spreads laterally across surfaces as roots and vines. The below ground root-system, called the rhizome, sustains the above-ground vine growth. The first three sections create the foundation for *Invasive* to grow: The first section “Southern Roots” explores the roots of kudzu in the South, tracing the establishment and collapse of the plantation system leading to the Dust Bowl through the prose of William Agee and photographs of Walker Evans and William Christenberry. The section also situates McIntosh’s southern roots and family traditions. The second section “Confederate Roots” considers the invasive growth of confederate statues across the South. Then, “Grassroots” describes how *AIDS Memorial Quilt* and the *Monument Quilt* formed the foundation for *Invasive*. Then, the chapter delves more into the *Invasive* project. “Making Kudzu Queer” outlines the process and outcomes. “Southern Pride” focuses on *Invasive* workshops at southern Pride Parades. Finally, “Wild Queer Kudzu” considers how *Invasive* ultimately imagines a new queer nature covered in kudzu.

### Southern Roots

The South’s environmental history is inextricable from the exploitation of human labor.<sup>12</sup> In comparison to other geographical regions, the South has been a continuous site of development with less attention and fewer resources directed towards conservation.

Environmental historian Paul S. Sutter states, “the wilderness conceit—that there is a

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<sup>12</sup> I am generally defining the “South” as the region encompassing the eleven states of the Confederacy during the Civil War: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. More broadly, the region might encompass Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Missouri, and West Virginia.

nature without humans—has never been comfortable in the South.”<sup>13</sup> In the colonial period, settlers and slaves cleared vast southern forests to create cotton fields. These processes involved the removal of indigenous tribes and the establishment of the plantation system. The plantation system superseded the small-scale, sustainable cultivation methods practiced by Native Americans.<sup>14</sup> The colonialist grid segmented the land into massive plantations owned by southern gentry and run with the physical labor and knowledge of African-born slaves.<sup>15</sup> According to Sutter, “The dominant reality of the antebellum South was the westward expansion of slave-based plantation agriculture and, in particular, the growth of the cotton kingdom.”<sup>16</sup> The growth was unsustainable. In the wake of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, the federal government preserved the plantation system in the form of sharecropping and tenant farming. Landowners divided their crops into parcels, which could be rented by tenant farmers, or farmed for a share of the crop by sharecroppers. Landowners pressured their sharecroppers and tenant farmers to plant cotton year after year, resulting in an excess of cotton on the market, overworked fields, and workers who could not dig their way out of debt.

The ecological landscape conditioned cultural struggle. By the 1930s, in the throes of the Great Depression, the agricultural economy met its limits. The severely

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<sup>13</sup> Paul S. Sutter, “Introduction: No More Backward Region: Southern Environmental History Comes of Age,” *Environmental History and the American South: A Reader*, Paul S. Sutter and Christopher J. Manganiello, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>14</sup> S. Max Edelson, “Clearing Swamps, Harvesting Forests: Trees and the Making of a Plantation Landscape in the Colonial South Carolina Lowcountry,” *Environmental History and the American South: A Reader*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> See Judith Carney, “Landscapes of Technology Transfer: Rice Cultivation and African Continuities,” *Environmental History and the American South*. As an example, enslaved workers from West Africa applied their knowledge of sluice systems and tidewater cultivation to plantations in South Carolina.

<sup>16</sup> Sutter, “Introduction,” 8 see also Edelson, “Clearing Swamps, Harvesting Forests,” 109. Other key crops were sugar in the Caribbean, tobacco in the Chesapeake, and rice in the Carolina lowcountry.

eroded cotton fields literally left tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the dust. The federal government tried to intervene, advocating for Kudzu and other imported flora and fauna as science-based solutions to reenergize flailing crops into the fertile, plotted farmland of the Midwest. Historian (and noted Bigfoot scholar) Joshua Blu Buhs has examined how government officials and scientists focused on improving efficiency and turning underutilized wastelands and forest into fields and farms. From the perspective of many environmental scientists (typically employed by the government), it was critical for humans to maintain their “position of dominance” in order to increase agricultural production “even at the expense of the further displacement of native plants and animals.”<sup>17</sup> Such perspectives embraced the introduction of non-native species. Kudzu was among many new species celebrated “in a post-war America optimistic about the future and confident it could use its natural resources, science and technology, and democratic institutions to solve any problem.”<sup>18</sup> Imported plants could help perfect an imperfect nature.

Photographer William Christenberry has documented kudzu’s unsettled cultural legacy. In a series of photographs taken from the 1970s through the 1990s, he chronicled the tenacious twining of kudzu across the vernacular landscape of Hale County, Alabama. In an oral history interview with the Archives of American Art, Christenberry explained that while he never had the desire to photograph people, he was nevertheless driven to render “the human touch on things.”<sup>19</sup> His photographs of kudzu archive the layers of

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<sup>17</sup> Joshua Blu Buhs, “The Fire Ant Wars: Nature and Science in the Pesticide Controversies of the Late Twentieth Century,” *Isis* Vol. 93 (2002), 384.

<sup>18</sup> Buhs, *Fire Ant Wars* 384. Buhs provides a more detailed analysis of the use and alternative use of pesticides, nonnative species, and other scientific interventions. This particular quote was from an entomologist with the USDA.

<sup>19</sup> William Christenberry. Oral history interview by Merry Foresta, March 3-31, 2010. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

human intervention on the landscape. First, the vernacular structures cobbled together from Reconstruction through the Great Depression; and, second, the subtle way kudzu—also a result of the “human touch”—slowly enshrouded the buildings. Christenberry traced his own fascination with Southern cultural landscapes back to when kudzu began claiming its kingdom. In numerous interviews, the artist cited the 1941 book *Let us Now Praise Famous Men (Praise)*, a compilation of prose by William Agee and photographs by Walker Evans, as a major source of inspiration.<sup>20</sup> *Praise* is a voluminous 500-page emanation of Agee and Evans’s eight-week excursion through Hale County in 1936, the year Christenberry was born.

*Praise* follows the hardships of three Hale County sharecropping families, the Gudgers, the Ricketts, and the Woods (all pseudonyms), in the turmoil of the economic and ecological collapse of the postbellum cotton industry. Agee and Walker wove together text and image to evoke to their middle class readers the feeling of the rural cultural landscape, including the brutal labor of tenant farmers and the ever-shifting landscape itself.<sup>21</sup> Literature historian Christoph Irscher argues that Agee, in particular, encapsulated the inbetweenness of the cotton fields in his complex prose. Irscher writes, “Landscapes, even written ones, are never socially innocent, that landscape is first and foremost a way of doing.”<sup>22</sup> Positioning himself as a cartographer who mapped Hale

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. See also Robert Hirsh, “The Muse of Place and Time: An Interview with William Christenberry (2004-2005), *American Suburb Z*. <https://www.americansuburbx.com/2010/02/theory-muse-of-place-and-time-interview.html> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> See Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, “The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in ‘Let Us Now Praise Famous Men’ A Forum on Fiction, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Summer, 2001), 346. See Quinn’s footnote: “Census data shows that more croppers were black than white, but economic and agricultural conditions in the Depression caused a great many white farmers to become tenants or farmers. While the rate of white tenancy increased...black croppers still outnumbered white.

<sup>22</sup> Christoph Irscher, “Muscles of Clay: James Agee’s Southern Landscapes” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 78, No. ¾ (Fall/Winter 1995), 389.

County from the ground up, Agee revealed gaps in the grid not captured by standard road maps offering the more “disinterested” perspective from above.<sup>23</sup> Agee attempted to place his readers inside his “living map” by detailing changing scents and textures, such as the “serene weight” of the sunlight on a worker’s already burdened body (fig. 3.3).<sup>24</sup> Alongside a photograph by Evans of workers picking cotton, Agee writes of “laborious descriptions of the hands cramping, the strain on the bent back, and the feel of sweat on a working body.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1960, Christenberry came across a copy of *Praise* and felt it deeply. His grandparents on both side were cotton farmers in Hale County and Christenberry personally knew many of the people profiled in *Praise*. He was raised just south in Tuscaloosa by his mother, Ruby Willard Smith, a tax assessor and known for her crochet, sewing, and embroidery skills, and his father, William Sr., a bread deliveryman and dairy salesman. When on delivery routes with his father or spending time at his grandparents’ house, Christenberry became enamored with the vernacular structures of the region—the churches, houses, and storefronts. In 1944, when Christenberry was just eight years old, his parents gifted him a brownie camera. He would go on to earn a back-to-back BFA (1958) and MFA (1959) from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. After graduation, he moved to New York, to work for Evans at *Fortune* magazine for 14 months, and eventually settled in Washington, D.C. to teach and pursue an artistic career. The “dark and loamy” soil of Alabama continued to pull Christenberry home.<sup>26</sup> Every summer, for

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 389.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 391.

<sup>25</sup> Quinn, “the Work of Art,” 357.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Hopps, “William Christenberry” *William Christenberry*, ed. Andy Grundberg (New York: Aperture, 2006, 8.

decades, he focused his brownie camera on the ever-eroding structures familiar since his youth.

Christenberry followed *Praise* with gestural photographs of the growing presence of kudzu in the absence of the farm families and workers (fig. 3.4-7). With its vines reaching through and over the abandoned structures, kudzu marks the creep of time. Perhaps kudzu remains king because nothing or no one else is up to the task. The Southern landscape cannot return to a previous, pure past because the South was never pure to begin with. It was always a site of production. As the kudzu envelopes itself around buildings, trees, and power lines, it forms haunting sculptural forms, the “green, mindless, unkillable ghosts” of Dickey’s poem (fig. 3.8). They infer the long-gone sharecroppers in *Praise*, and also the workers who remained unseen by Agee and Evans: African American sharecroppers. When Christenberry first encountered *Praise* in the early 1960s, it was enjoying a resurgence in Civil Rights contexts. Bruce Jackson suggests that the 1960 edition was carried as a “bible or talisman” by Civil Rights workers (Black and white). Jackson quotes his friend, activist Charles Haines, who recalled, “We grew up in a world where it wasn't all right for men to be emotional about things. Women could, but we didn't know how. Agee taught us it was okay to feel.”<sup>27</sup>

Racism remained trenchant in southern soil, and Christenberry’s photographs allude to its erosive effects. He was both fascinated and repulsed with the Ku Klux Klan and the creeping prevalence of white supremacy.<sup>28</sup> Christenberry later reflected that

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<sup>27</sup> Bruce Jackson, The Deceptive Anarchy of ‘Let us Now Praise Famous Men,’” *Antioch Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1, (Winter 1999), 41.

<sup>28</sup> See William Christenberry and Walter Hopps, “Klan Dolls” *Grand Street*, No. 44 (1999), pp. 81-95 and Drew Batcher, “My Step is South, *Paris Review*, December 8, 2016. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/12/08/my-step-is-south/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

photography was his medium for grappling with the South: “I had a desire, as I say, to come to grips with that landscape in which I grew up, the positive and the negative, the dark and light.”<sup>29</sup> His work refuses to reconcile these binaries, and instead treads *inbetween*. The concealing nature of kudzu aptly symbolizes the ongoing racial and economic injustice embedded in the vernacular.

To communicate the ever-changing cultural landscape of the South, Agee offered suggestive text and then Christenberry offered textural photographs. McIntosh offers textiles. Like his predecessors, he perceived the South from a grounded vantage point. As he kneeled amidst the carrots and pigweeds in his grandmother’s garden, a new understanding of nature became to take shape. Kudzu entwines the relationship between cotton plantation to cotton quilts, or southern ecological history with family and social traditions. Like Christenberry, McIntosh was the grandson of sharecroppers, the son of working-class parents, and his family’s creative traditions doubled as his art education. Quilts were the first artworks he ever saw.<sup>30</sup> His childhood sensibilities were informed by the aesthetics and materials of his family’s quilts, and also their oral traditions. McIntosh grew up listening to relatives tell stories—spin the yarn—about the many talented quilters. His great grandfather, for example, began making quilts for his family when he was widowed with young children. The necessary skill evolved into a hobby, and eventually he became known in the community as “the sharecropper who loved quilting.”<sup>31</sup> McIntosh also recalled visiting his grandmother at her home in rural Virginia, where she kept beautiful quilts rolled up under the beds. Whichever quilt she was

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<sup>29</sup> Christenberry. Oral history interview by Merry Foresta.

<sup>30</sup> McIntosh. Interview conducted by Mary Savig, July 22, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

working on at the time was rolled up under the sofa in the living room, where it was easily accessible after dinner (like McIntosh, she enjoyed quilting late at night). As a young boy, he loved touching fabric and taught himself how to sew by hand, and later how to thread and work a sewing machine to make quilted clothes for his dolls. He studied textiles and fiber in school, receiving an a BFA from the Appalachian Center for Craft in 2006 and an MFA from the Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010, where he is currently an assistant professor and fiber area head of the Craft/Material Studies department.

Concurrent with the quilting stories and experiences, McIntosh listened to legends of the family's bear hunters. As an adult, he was fascinated by a snapshot of himself as an infant seated on the body of a dead bear, newly shot by an uncle.<sup>32</sup> He then came across a similar photograph of his mother as a child, seated on a taxidermy bear hunted by his great-grandfather. That taxidermy bear held a proud location in his families' homes for generations. To process these stories with his revelation about weeds in his grandmother's garden, McIntosh crafted *These Woods* (Fig. 3.9-11). The towering bear stands on his hind legs, taking in his surroundings (perhaps even looking for his beastly friends, the *Ladies Sasquatch*). The weeds are cropping up along the edges and corners of the wall, like they might in a garden. Both the bear and the weeds were made of materials indexing McIntosh's life: shredded gay pornography, classified ads, a novel by famed southern author Truman Capote, romance novels, assembled together with family afghan

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<sup>32</sup> Aaron McIntosh. Interview conducted by Mary Savig, July 22, 2016. McIntosh's grandmother was also a self-taught midwife, who administered herbal abortions to local women. "I remember being a very young child, when the culture wars were going on, I remember her getting in great arguments about abortions." As a proponent of women's choice, she was "always getting in trouble with it at church."

and quilting scraps. McIntosh's trophy bear expresses his hunt for queer desire. The reconciliation of shared ancestral legacy with queer ephemera reflects the complexity of Southern identity often lost in mainstream discourse about same-sex marriage.

*These Woods* was McIntosh's first foray with weeds. Shortly after, he focused his attention to kudzu and his ongoing collection of queer archival materials. The handmade leaves continue his archival research on LGBTQ southern experience, which ranged from lively ads of queer erotica and drag queen performances to traumatic news coverage about homophobic and transphobic violence. In a series of portraits taken by collaborator Clifford Simko, vines upon vines of soft kudzu consume his body (Fig. 3.12). He becomes one of the ghostly "unkillable" kudzu forms of Dickey's poem and Christenberry's photographs. He has opened his windows and invited the kudzu into his bedroom. One with the kudzu, McIntosh's queer desire cannot be uprooted.

Compelled by the newly positive trajectory of quilted kudzu, McIntosh endeavored to blanket Southern monuments. With a \$10,000 Project Grant Award from the Center for Craft and organizational advice from his friends, *Monument Quilt* Founders, Hannah Brancato and Rebecca Nagle, McIntosh developed *Invasive* workshops modeled on women's quilting bees.<sup>33</sup> When McIntosh officially kicked off *Invasive* in May 2015, he specifically employed kudzu as a metaphor for the ongoing debates about same sex marriage. The project statement correlates the rhetoric of invasive plants to that of queer bodies, and also the erasure of Southern queer voices in broader LGBTQ discourses.

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<sup>33</sup> Center for Craft Creativity and Design, "2015 Windgate Project Grant Awardees" <http://www.craftcreativitydesign.org/2015-windgate-fellowship-awards/> (accessed April 12, 2019). In 2017, McIntosh received additional grants, CultureWorks Cultural Equity Grant (Richmond) and the VCUArts Dean's Exploratory Research Grant, *Invasive Project* (Richmond).

Invasive kudzu—much like homophobia—taps into our fears of complete otherness. One cannot help but connect such anxiety to the still-extant fear of a “homosexual agenda” that rapaciously recruits heterosexual youth to build a “gay army.” While most of the United States was “naturally” coming to terms with same sex marriage and expanded rights for LGBTQ persons, the South was seen as “backsliding into entrenched homophobia.”<sup>34</sup>

The project was urgent. It seemed that there was state march towards legalizing same sex marriage throughout the United States. Every state was falling, except those in the South. As LGBTQ activists plotted their national campaigns, they opined, “If only we can move the South.”<sup>35</sup> The entire region was cast as backwards, and a Supreme Court ruling was its only hope for redemption. As McIntosh noted, stereotypes about homophobia in the South intensified, assumptions which denied the presence of southern queers who remained close to their families, integrated in their communities, and often committed to Christian faiths.<sup>36</sup> *Invasive* would amass thousands of these individuals, which as a collective, would make visible the multi-vocal and diverse presence of LGBTQ persons in the South.

### Confederate Roots

McIntosh recently rendered his vision of *Invasive* taking over southern icons (fig. 3.13). They depict total takeovers of the Jefferson Monument in Richmond and the entirety of the Alabama State Capital Building, the former capital of the Confederacy. This progressive growth counters the oppressive work of the monuments and rejoins

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<sup>34</sup> Aaron McIntosh. Tumblr post. May 17, 2015. “Engulfing hills, trees, and old buildings in a dense stranglehold, a tender vine colonizes: alien landscapes emerge...”  
<https://invasivequeerkudzu.tumblr.com/post/119204014903/engulfing-hills-trees-and-old-buildings-in-a> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Aaron McIntosh. Interview conducted by Mary Savig, July 22, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

kudzu with its celebrated introduction to the United States—the Japanese Pavilion at the 1876 Columbia Exposition in Philadelphia. The beauty and endless potential of kudzu pushes against its stereotypes, bringing into question the very definition of invasive. The word invasive is most frequently applied to medical and ecological subjects. Plants, can grow unpredictably and disruptively. Diseases or surgical procedures can intrude on a person's normal sensations, movements, or mental wellness. More generally, the definition of invasive is an invasion of a person's thoughts and privacy. With this in mind, I suggest that memorials and monuments dedicated to the Confederate Army were invasive objects that sought to disrupt collective memory about the Civil War.

Following the Civil War, more than 1500 memorials were erected to honor the so-called Lost Cause of the Confederacy. They occupy prominent spaces in front of capitol buildings, courthouses, public parks, and schools, and many were installed in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Charities, churches, and civic groups in both the North and South commissioned public artworks to memorialize and honor their fallen soldiers. There were a few standard types, such as heroic representation of political and military leaders, and also generic citizen soldiers. The degree of quality and artistry runs the gamut from a handful of flashy bronze sculptures by classically-trained and widely recognized artists to an abundance of mass-produced sculptures by companies such as the New England Granite Works, the Monument Bronze Company, and the Muldoon

Monument Company.<sup>37</sup> At the onset, many of these generic sculptures were criticized for their lack of refinement.<sup>38</sup>

Erika Doss explains in her landmark text *Memorial Mania* that the sheer number of memorials in the United States was “driven by heated struggles over self-definition, national purpose, and the politics of representation.”<sup>39</sup> Stemming from the struggle of national trauma, they do not simply illuminate key figures and lost family members, but also the emotional states of their patrons. Doss writes that the memorials are “bodies of feeling, cultural entities whose social, cultural, and political meanings are determined by the emotions states and needs of their audiences.”<sup>40</sup> Immediately following the war, monuments and grave markers helped society cope with the enormity of the devastation. More than 620,000 soldiers died during the war—tens of thousands were killed in single battles. By the turn of the century, Confederate monuments and memorials were erected as a strategy of structural racism. The majority of artworks were commissioned in two major waves: the first during the Jim Crow era and then during the Civil Rights era. In between these waves, there were surges of commissions in reaction to violent race riots across the country. The goal was to intimidate Black citizens under the veiled language of honoring the Lost Cause. The Confederate soldiers became symbols, like the Confederate flag, of antebellum values and the maintenance of white supremacy. The memorials and monuments acknowledge a political loss, but proclaim a moral victory that hinged on

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah Beetham, “An Army of Bronze Simulacra”: The Copied Soldier Monument and the American Civil War,” *Articulo Tematicos*, Vol. 4, No. 7 (2015), 36. See also Kathryn Allamong Jacob, *Testament to Union: Civil War Monuments in Washington* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 37. See also Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> Erica Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

sustained racial inequality. Like kudzu, the Confederate monuments and memorials were seen as a “solution” to a uniquely southern problem. The ideology of the Lost Cause became invasive, warping racist propaganda about the Civil War into “history.”

Civil War monuments and memorials have generally stayed out of national debates, even as many local Black communities organized local protests as early as 1890.<sup>41</sup> Following the grand reveal of the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia, the *Richmond Planet*—a local Black newspaper—editor John Mitchell, Jr. noted that when the statue was delivered, it was festooned with Confederate flags, not American flags. He continued:

The south may revere the memory of its chieftains. It takes the wrong Steps in so doing, and proceeds to go too far in every similar celebration. It serves to retard its progress in the country and forges heavier chains with which to be bound.<sup>42</sup>

Criticisms like this were often subsumed by positive reviews in white newspapers. In the past few years, public discourse on commemorative monuments, especially those dedicated to Confederate generals, has increased exponentially. The mass shooting of nine African Americans—Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson—at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, brought the discussion to the forefront of national news. African American activists and their allies

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<sup>41</sup> Sala Levin, “Monumental Change,” *Terp*, January 18, 2019 (Winter 2019), <http://terp.umd.edu/monumental-change/#.XFc3mS2ZNTa> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Claire Johnson, “Complicated History: The Memorial To Robert E. Lee in Richmond,” *Fit to Print: Dispatches from the Virginia Newspaper Project*, July 27, 2017. <http://www.virginiamemory.com/blogs/fit-to-print/2017/07/27/complicated-history-the-memorial-to-robert-e-lee-in-richmond/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

became even more vocal about the harmful ideology of Confederate symbols. In response, defenders have accused the protestors of trying to erase history. The statues have become a lightning rod for white supremacists to defend their beliefs. On August 11 and 12, 2017, members of far-right white supremacy groups gathered to protest the planned removal of an equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee from the city's Market Street Park in Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>43</sup> White supremacists attacked counter-protestors, injuring many and murdering counter-protestor Heather Heyer. In a statement about the violence, President Trump suggested that "there is blame on both sides," stoking confidence among the white supremacists.<sup>44</sup> Local politicians have become trenchant in their defense of Confederate artworks. In Tennessee, a group of activists recently attempted to cover the bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest in the state's Capitol rotunda (fig. 3.14). Forrest, a Confederate general and first leader of the Ku Klux Klan has been on view since 1978 despite a history of complaints against it. Governor-elect Bill Lee, like many republican politicians and a few democrats, declared his opposition to removing the statues, stating it "would be a mistake to whitewash history...I think the removal of monuments is not the best approach to resolving the challenges that are presented with

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<sup>43</sup> In April 2016, the City Council appointed a special commission, named the Blue Ribbons Commission on Race, Monuments and Public Spaces, to make recommendations for various confederate monuments. In November 2016, the Commission voted 6-3 to keep the statues in place. On November 28, 2016, it voted to remove the Lee Statue. On February 6, 2017, the council voted 302 to remove the Lee statue and unanimous to rename the park. See "Race and Public Space Resource List" Center for Cultural Landscapes, University of Virginia. <https://culturallandscapes.arch.virginia.edu/race-public-space-resource-list> (accessed April 12, 2019)

<sup>44</sup> Colby Itkowitz, "Trump Defends Charlottesville Comments by Praising a Confederate General" Washington Post, April 26, 2019. Trump, pressed on whether he stood by his comments that there were "very fine people on both sides," told reporters on April 26, 2019: "If you look at what I said, you will see that that question was answered perfectly. And I was talking about people that went because they felt very strongly about the monument to Robert E. Lee, a great general." [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-defends-charlottesville-comments-by-praising-a-confederate-general/2019/04/26/80ba1d24-682b-11e9-a1b6-b29b90efa879\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.1caa20f58ec8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-defends-charlottesville-comments-by-praising-a-confederate-general/2019/04/26/80ba1d24-682b-11e9-a1b6-b29b90efa879_story.html?utm_term=.1caa20f58ec8) (accessed April 12, 2019).

that conversation. Wiping out history wipes out, also, the history that we're not proud of."<sup>45</sup> Lee's defense proves the success of the invasive ideology. White supremacists twisted the narrative of the Civil War to their will, and then covered their own tracks.

Today, likely at the very moment that I write this paragraph, there are scholars and activists advocating for the removal or re-contextualization of invasive monuments and memorials. In recent months, in response to direct actions, city and state governments have begun various processes for reviewing and removing offending statues. For example, in Baltimore, the City Council removed four statues soon after the violence in Charlottesville, including the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monuments, the Confederate Women's Monument, and commemorations of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, and pro-slavery Supreme Court judge, Roger B. Taney. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, "cheers erupted from a few dozen onlookers as the hulking bronze statue of Taney was lifted from its pedestal on the State House front lawn."<sup>46</sup> Artists have helped guide civic dialogue with creative forms of intervention. In an especially relevant example, a craftivist group dropped knitted kudzu vines across offending public artworks. The "Kudzu Project" convened in response to the violence in Charlottesville. Organizer "Ms. Smith" disseminated a flyer about the project along with a simple knitting pattern (a series of knits and purls) for a kudzu leaf. The flyer also encouraged makers to include symbols like peace signs, hearts, and #BLM, in contrasting shades of green.

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<sup>45</sup> Natalie Allison, "Tennessee's Bust of Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest likely isn't going anywhere soon," *Tennessean*, January 2, 2018. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2019/01/02/bill-lee-nathan-bedford-forrest-bust-capitol-tennessee-confederate/2283203002/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Pamela Wood and Erin Cox, "Roger Taney statue removed from Maryland State House grounds overnight." *Baltimore Sun*, August 18, 2017. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/politics/bs-md-taney-statue-removed-20170818-story.html> (accessed April 12, 2019).

On November 9, 2017, *Kudzu Project* volunteers draped the knitted vines over a 1909 Confederate soldier monument (commissioned by the Daughters of the Confederacy) outside of the Albemarle County Courthouse in Charlottesville (Fig. 3.15). On that day, white supremacist Christopher Cantwell was due in court for a preliminary hearing regarding charges related to his illegal use of tear gas and violence on August 11, 2017. When the women left to get coffee, a man yanked down the kudzu and threw it in a nearby trash can. The crocheters recovered it from the trash, and again draped it over the monument. The man called the police, who reported that “no damage to the statue was evident.”<sup>47</sup> The women planned their next “attack” on controversial statues of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville.

The *Kudzu Project* has included approximately 30 anonymous knitters from the mid-Atlantic region. The contributors have shared pictures of their process, including pictures of themselves knitting in their living rooms, or working at their kitchen tables. (Fig. 3.16). When these kudzu leaves are sewn together and placed over Confederate symbols, the soft vines agitate the space and against the “contrived narratives that obscure the details of the true intent of the monuments.” As they drape their domestic handcrafts to public monuments, they foster inbetweenness.

Photographs of their ephemeral interventions evoke Christenberry’s haunting photographs. Again, the kudzu marks the passage of time across toxic sites. In an interview for *C-VILLE Weekly*, Ms. Smith notes the changing meaning of the monuments during her lifetime.<sup>48</sup> Two of her great-grandfathers fought for the Confederacy, and her

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<sup>47</sup> Erin O’Hare, “Locals Craft their Own Brand of Activism” *C-Ville*, January 17, 2018. <https://www.c-ville.com/locals-craft-brand-activism/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> The participants requested anonymity.

family's memory of their heroism remains complicated. In the same interview, Smith's 80-year old mother, "Ms. Gibbs," recalled, "To my knowledge, they were good men. I had some respect for these men." When her daughter took up crochet to protest the statues as symbols of the institution of slavery, she was offended: "I felt like she was attacking my heritage and her heritage."<sup>49</sup> This response, which echoes many other defenses of the statues, demonstrate Doss's point that monuments are "repositories of feeling and emotion."<sup>50</sup> But unlike the monuments, the range of affect is not set in stone. When Ms. Gibbs learned that the statues were erected during the Jim Crow era in the part of town with large African American populations, and in front of the courthouse, where a disproportionate number of African Americans probably visited, she was able to understand and empathize with the perspective of African Americans' more horrified response to the same sculpture. She reflected, "I did, in fact, feel like I was an owl, and that my head turned completely around....[The Kudzu Project] has proved to me that openness is absolutely important to any sort of progress."<sup>51</sup> In this story, deeply ingrained assumptions of "heritage" were punctured with knitting needles.

Recent protests suggest the power of the invasive symbols. Like the kudzu plant, Confederate monuments and memorials wreaked havoc on local cultural landscapes. The incredible number of these public artworks legitimizes them as sentimental primary sources and neutralizes their presence as both historical and eternal. Like all archival sources, they remain open to interpretation over time, and counter-protestors have flexed tactics of inbetweenness to upset their neutrality.

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<sup>49</sup> O'Hare, "Locals Craft their Own Brand of Activism." Ms. Gibbs also requested anonymity.

<sup>50</sup> Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 187.

<sup>51</sup> O'Hare, "Locals Craft their Own Brand of Activism."

## Grassroots

*Invasive*'s fibrous vines emerge from the rhizomes (roots) of cross-generational and community quilting projects. McIntosh's childhood connection to his family quilts (especially the art education it afforded him) ties to legacies of sewing activism, from the abolition-era Rochester Ladies to the 1970s feminist reclamations of fiber. These movements paved the way for the intersectional projects *The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (AIDS Memorial Quilt)* and the *Monument Quilt*, which directly shaped *Invasive*. These grassroots activist projects disrupt the patriarchal and racist structuring of public space, specifically those embedded with monuments and memorials. In 1985 activist Cleve Jones conceived the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* in response to the death of Harvey Milk. Following an annual vigil for Milk, Jones distributed cardboard onto which participants could name those friends who had already died from AIDS. The marchers then posted the posters onto the exterior walls of the West Coast Office of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. As art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson describes, a "patchwork" of names emerged on the wall. Jones recalled "standing in the drizzle, watching as the posters absorbed the rain and fluttered down to the pavement, I said to myself, it looks like a quilt. As I said the word quilt, I was flooded with memories of home and family and the warmth of a quilt when it was cold on a winter night."<sup>52</sup> Jones's memory attests to the ongoingness of mundane quilts and their relationship to beds. Folk art historian Robert Shaw notes the importance of quilts and beds in everyday life:

[A bed] is the place where we spend half our lives; where we are born, sleep, have sex, and die; the place where we replenish ourselves and dream our dreams; the place of nurture and healing, where we retreat in

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<sup>52</sup> Julia Bryan Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 185.

sickness and frailty; and the place where we receive the comfort and care of those who love us.<sup>53</sup>

The AIDS Memorial Quilt makes visceral all of these attributes. Through the act of making a block, participants could work through the nuances of personal and collective feelings in the face of the ever-rising death toll.

On October 11, 1987, *AIDS Memorial Quilt* was first installed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., during a National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. According to the NAMES Project Foundation, more than 500,000 people saw the quilt during its inauguration in Washington (fig. 3.17).<sup>54</sup> Doss argues that this installation “reworked American modes of mourning and revised American national subjectivity by including queers and people with AIDS.”<sup>55</sup> Significantly, this meant that the memorial vehicle turned away from heroic individuals, towards a vulnerable and censored community. Whereas enfranchised citizens could erect permanent monuments and memorials to sustain their feelings of loss (both physical and ideological), the AIDS quilt helped disenfranchised friends and families of victims contend with their feelings of loss. As such, rather than attending to grandiose messages of nationalism or grand narratives, the works leveraged individual feelings. Ann Cvetkovich wrote that the process of memorializing AIDS victims overturned mainstream indifference by making the feelings “extravagantly public” through the collective process of artistic creativity that acknowledges individual and intimate subjects.<sup>56</sup> This mobilized fiber as a material and

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Shaw, *American Quilts: The Democratic Art*, (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009), 4.

<sup>54</sup> The NAMES Project Foundation, “The Aids Memorial Quilt” <https://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 113.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 131. See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

piecing of quilts as a process that could enact mourning through making. Quilt makers have learned hand-stitching techniques to elaborate names and symbols. Every block tells a unique story, a strong contrast to the formulaic (and often mass-produced) compositions of Confederate Monuments and Memorials. When I experienced a partial installation of *AIDS Memorial Quilt* on the National Mall in July 2012, I noted a range of materials and techniques, such as embroidered BDSM symbols and improvised applique techniques to attach photographs and personal memorabilia to the fabric. The depth and diversity of the quilts reflects contrasts to the universal stigmatization of people with HIV and AIDS. Unsurprisingly, it has influenced countless activist projects about public affect.

*Monument Quilt* was founded in 2012 by FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture, a Baltimore-based collective with a mission to change discourses about rape culture in the United States. Co-founders Rebecca Nagle and Hannah Brancato started the project in the spirit of the *AIDS Memory Quilt*. *Monument Quilt* pushes against the grand tradition of the monument. Here, collective quilting strives to monumentalize the survivors of rape and sexual assault. The workshop activities are a critical piece of the project where participants collaborate to create quilt blocks, but also to create a “safe, healing space in which to be heard, and become activist in the fight to end rape while simultaneously engaging in the lifelong process of healing.”<sup>57</sup> The FORCE team creates instructional materials for anyone who want to facilitate a workshop. They encourage site specific and thematic workshops, such as the Kik Ta program at Standing Rock discussed in the Introduction. Since its inception, the primary campaign of the Monument Quilt is a monumental installation on the National Mall, in a similar fashion to the AIDS Memorial

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<sup>57</sup> Monument Quilt, “Workshops,” <https://themonumentquilt.org/workshops/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

Quilt. This multi-year process will be realized on May 31 to June 2, 2019 (fig. 3.18).

A few years ago, in March 2014, I volunteered to help with deinstallation of a portion of the *Monument Quilt* on the West lawn of the U.S. Capitol. It was a cold and windy day—the 300 quilted squares beckoned their visitors to hunker down and spend time with them. They required close reading and interaction, often recounting vivid stories and notes of support on pretty floral patterns (fig 3.19-20). All of the squares were sewn together on red fabric, anchored by the ever-present banner that read “NOT ALONE.” In both of these engagements with quilts on the National Mall, the deeply personal and temporary installations spoke to historical and institutional silences. While the National Mall is dotted by memorials and tributes to Famous Men, Important Battles, and Heroic Veterans, these stories articulated a less triumphant American culture. According to Bryan-Wilson, the potency of such projects comes from how the materials assert themselves, or “how things have affective and productive agency.”<sup>58</sup> They juxtapose the monumental (in size and meaning) equestrian statues, obelisks, and fountains by simply blanketing the ground, requiring us to explore on our knees, to touch and feel the landscape. This patchwork pushes against the grid of the cultural landscape.<sup>59</sup>

### Making Kudzu Queer

Situated within this matrix, *Invasive* pushes the paradigm of community quilting into three dimensions. Growing out of the geometric (gridlike) blocking of the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* and *Monument Quilt*, the *Invasive* kudzu leaves can wrap around and

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<sup>58</sup> Bryan Wilson, *Fray*, 5

<sup>59</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), 474.

through the environment. *Invasive* imagines a world in which queer visibility, like kudzu, is naturally monumental. Modeled on the workshops of Monument Quilt, McIntosh attempts to create spaces without judgement and accommodating of all communication preferences. He also hopes to infuse a sense of gaiety and playfulness.

Most workshops comprise several tables where the basic materials—thread, needles, markers, sewing machines, and pre-cut fabric leaves are readily available (fig. 3.21-2). Colorful signs and instructional guides resemble earnest elementary school science fair presentations. Completed vines are often coiled around signs and furniture. McIntosh and volunteer facilitators play the part of perky scout leaders, donning bright green sashes embellished with buttons and badges (3.23). The first workshop took place at the Maryland Institute College of Arts in Baltimore, where McIntosh worked as a professor of fiber (he has since transferred to the art department of Virginia Commonwealth University).<sup>60</sup> The first batch of “story leaves” were cut from templates, but one side was left blank for contributors to write their stories.<sup>61</sup> The verso features the digitally printed archival fragments—gathered by McIntosh from during research trips to public and private LGBTQ archival repositories throughout the South (fig. 3.24-5). The blank space caused writer’s block for some of the participants, so in subsequent workshops he provided storytelling prompts. There are currently 30 prompts (as well as blank leaves) from which participants can choose. For example, a participant can name a LGBTQ family member, or reflect on a first memory about questioning one’s sexuality or gender (3.26). McIntosh remains purposely hands-off about the content, only helping teach participants how to sew their quilts with available machines. In addition to the

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<sup>60</sup> Not technically in the South, Maryland was a border state during the Civil War.

<sup>61</sup> McIntosh. Interview conducted by Mary Savig, July 22, 2016.

standard quilting supplies—the leaves, thread, and sewing machines, he makes available markers and puffy paint for crafters to get creative. Together, the digitally-printed leaves of queer primary sources and handwritten firsthand accounts compile a queer archive of feelings, establishing a history in which queer people in the South have been present for generations, building momentum. Reflecting Cvetkovich’s description of ephemeral and affective archives, they express varying anecdotes and images of “nostalgia, personal memory, fantasy, and trauma.”<sup>62</sup>

In one example, an artist drew a picture of a car leaving a house in North Carolina with American and Confederate flags on its roof (fig. 3.27). As the car spins away, someone from the house yells, “Wait! Come back—we love you but not your QUEERNESS.” The little car zooms away towards a city silhouetted by a rainbow over. On another leaf, an interracial couple Robert and Barry sewed a tender photograph above the prompt “a story of romance” (fig. 3.28). Some of the leaves feature lengthy stories—the text crawls around the leaf edges in search of more room. Other responses feature affirmations like “Queer Youth: You are Beautiful! You are the Future!” and “Botanists for Queer Liberation” (fig. 3.29-30) The leaves also play homage to Southern greats like Langston Hughes and the Krewe of Armeinius, the first gay Mardi Gras Krewe in the 1950s (fig. 3.31). In one photograph taken at a workshop in North Carolina, one crafter appliqued four colorful hearts to his leaf because sometimes words are not enough. The ever-growing collection shows that queer stories are persistent, prevalent, and deserving of preservation. Cvetkovich argues that archives of feelings necessarily incorporate these personal memories, which are not merely text-based narratives, but also affective

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<sup>62</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 243.

materials. She explains they are “invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value” that have been formed by grassroots activism.<sup>63</sup> By telling these stories, it offers a way of accessing power through visibility; thus, as Doss suggests, “gaining presence and authority” in a goal of mobilizing social and political action—to enact change within the queer community and outside.<sup>64</sup>

These works create intertextual phenomenology, in which the soft materiality of the cotton and text or image iconography create empathy, or intimacy produced by touch. His quilts are truly rhizomatic, veering away from the rectangular shape of the quilt cover for a bed, to cover the natural world. They vine around and embrace queer people out in the world, “in the wild,” and offering comfort and care. Together, these interconnected stories all contribute to counter-narratives against the truly invasive structuring of racism, sexism, and imperialism. These narratives speak to new natures.

### Southern Pride

I interviewed Aaron McIntosh in his Baltimore studio on June 12, 2016, a few months after a terrorist stormed into Pulse, a gay dance club in Orlando, Florida, shooting and killing 49 people and injuring 53. This became the second worst mass shooting in United States History. Pulse opened in 2004 by Barbara Poma and Ron Legler in honor of their brother John Poma, who died of AIDS in 1991. As a racially and ethnically diverse city in the South, the deadly attack compresses many of the tensions of queer southern visibility. That summer marked *Invasive's* transition to broader LGBTQ issues. The project originally demanded visibility in national debates about same sex marriage.

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<sup>63</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 116.

Then, on June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Obergefell v. Hodges, which guaranteed same-sex couples the right to marry in any state. Following the Supreme Court ruling, McIntosh focused more on expanding his audience.

At the beginning, *Invasive* traveled by invitation. McIntosh brought the workshops to numerous art departments and art galleries throughout the South, including University of Missouri's LGBT Resource Center, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in Houston, and Warren Wilson College in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.<sup>65</sup> Many (if not most) of the participants were art students or art enthusiasts. As *Invasive* has grown, McIntosh has become more deliberate about diversifying his audiences and also his collection of queer archival ephemera printed on each leaf. Working with friends and acquaintances, he has focused on bringing *Invasive* to local community centers and Pride parades in the South.<sup>66</sup> As an antidote to the violent invasive ideology of the Lost Cause and more recent acts of violence against queer and transgender persons of color, *Invasive* flaunts the joy and politics of queer Pride.

Today, Pride parades conjure rainbow-hued conviviality, campy theatrics, and a celebration of queer love. A primary goal of Pride season has been to establish and celebrate queer visibility. On June 28, 1970, on the first anniversary of Stonewall riots, activists celebrated the Christopher Street Liberation Day in New York, which would become known as the first Pride march. This demonstration emphatically refused performances of respectability or assimilation of heterosexual norms, and instead

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<sup>65</sup> *Invasive Queer Kudzu*. Tumblr site. <https://invasivequeerkudzu.tumblr.com> (accessed April 12, 2019),

<sup>66</sup> McIntosh. Interview conducted by Mary Savig, July 22, 2016.

flaunted sexual desire and difference.<sup>67</sup> Instead of asking for inclusion, they challenged mainstream heterosexist culture. Lesbian activist Martha Shelley recalled:

The most important thing was to be out in public, to say we were not going to take it anymore, to say that we were not going to let the police beat us up and cower in the closet. And a lot of people could get behind that, people who didn't have a political view...that it was gay people being out in public and refusing to cower in fear...that we were as happy with ourselves or would be as happy with ourselves if we weren't so beaten up by people as anybody else.<sup>68</sup>

Pride parades employ “place-making practices” to strengthen queer counterpublics. As author and architect Aaron Betsky writes, such practices involve “a misuse or deformation of a place, an appropriation of the buildings and codes of the city for perverse purposes. It is a space in between the body and technology, a place of pure artifice.”<sup>69</sup> Building on this, Jack Halberstam has theorized the queer production of space and time as a process that disrupts the linear biological time of heteronormative society: the progression of birth to adolescence to adulthood. Those who do not follow these patterns exist in a time and space labeled queer by Halberstam. Halberstam argues, “In queer renderings of postmodern geography, the notion of a body-centered identity gives way to a model that locates sexual subjectivities within and between embodiment, place, and practice.”<sup>70</sup> Orienting one's body within queer time and place resists efforts of containment and discipline.

Pride reveals and revels in the failure to contain queerness. For example, Houston's 40<sup>th</sup> Pride parade coincided with the defeat of Senate Bill 6, known as the

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<sup>67</sup> Katherine McFarland Bruce, *Pride Parades: How A Parade Changed the World* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 51.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 51

<sup>69</sup> Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow and Co, 1997), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Jack Halberstam, “Queer Temporality,” *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), 4.

Bathroom Bill, which would have required transgender people to use a bathroom according to their gender assigned at birth.<sup>71</sup> The bill was defeated and Pride participation could be interpreted as “as an extra-large middle finger to Ted Cruz (or Marco Rubio, Orrin Hatch, Mike Pence...).”<sup>72</sup> To be sure, tolerance is relevant to its location. The largest Pride events are staged in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, where local politicians wave from city-endorsed floats and corporate sponsors flaunt their inclusive products and employees. Many larger cities now view Pride parades as an opportunity to bolster tourism. Atlanta painted a crosswalk in a rainbow to commemorate Pride’s tenth anniversary in the city and Minneapolis lit a bridge over the Mississippi River with an array of rainbow lights.

While these varying strategies of inbetweenness have sustained queer visibility and shifted cultural norms in many major cities, the stakes remain high in the American South. The fledgling Pride events, often at odds with republican legislation, offer a different narrative to that one of triumph. In many small towns (not just in the South), the path toward establishing Pride events can be bumpy. In Starkville, Mississippi, local officials denied parade permits, until community backlash forced a repeal.<sup>73</sup> Historian Katherine McFarland Bruce has observed that in the South, religious organizations have a considerable presence on both sides of the parade routes because evangelical Protestantism is part of daily life for many queer people.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, McIntosh has reflected that many southern LGBTQ persons are close with their families and traditions, but have

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<sup>71</sup> Kastalia Medrano, “The Most Unexpectedly Awesome Pride Parades in Red States” *Thrillist*, June 6, 2018. <https://www.thrillist.com/travel/nation/best-pride-parades-in-conservative-states> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Larrison Campbell, Starkville Pride marches into court over parade permit, *Mississippi Today*, February 26, 2018. <https://mississippitoday.org/2018/02/26/starkville-pride-marches-court-parade-permit/>

<sup>74</sup> Bruce, *Pride Parades*, 120.

struggled to come to terms with their religions.<sup>75</sup> Or, if they feel supported by a local church, they might feel alienated by some queer politics. Bruce described a personal experience at the 2010 Pride Parade in Atlanta. A small group of Christian evangelicals staged a counter-protest to the Parade, shouting on loudspeakers that “Homosexuals must repent.” They gathered in a crowded space, forcing nearby parade viewers to listen to the hateful condemnations. But then, as the Pride Band marched by, it stopped and turned to the evangelicals. The band blasted a Lady Gaga song, temporarily drowning out the evangelicals. Together, the parade revelers and spectators joyfully joined in the chorus. Bruce recalls, “When I saw the Atlanta Pride Band turn to face the evangelical protesters and belt out Lady Gaga, I laughed and cheered along with the rest of the crowd. Remembering the scene still brings me joy.”<sup>76</sup> Such tactics do shift culture. Progressive southern churches have increasingly participated in parades in support of their congregations.

In recent years, Pride parades have drawn criticism for their growing associations with corporate branding. Activists fear that the temporary and unregulated spaces are becoming institutionalized and regulated. Bruce explains that while corporate backers enable the parades to grow in scale—helping to pay for increased security, insurance, and clean-up for multi-million dollar parades, they also cause the parades to tone down any “controversial” or “provocative” behavior.<sup>77</sup> Here, LGBTQ persons do not express their most ostentatious sexual desires, but rather play the role of the caring consumer. Moreover, the “rainbow industry” is often at odds with the intersectional and

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<sup>75</sup> I McIntosh. Interview conducted by Mary Savig, July 22, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Bruce, *Pride Parades*, 1-2.

<sup>77</sup> Bruce, *Pride Parades*, 133

decolonizing strategies.<sup>78</sup> Retailers and banks promote their support of human rights at Pride events to distract from their exploitation of workers in the Global South.<sup>79</sup> In the South, corporate sponsorship is especially muddled. Bruce points out that corporate buy-in helped legitimize LGBTQ persons to their communities. Churches especially grew more supportive as they witnessed Coca Cola and Delta Airlines, among other corporations, sponsoring events.<sup>80</sup>

With all of these complexities in mind, *Invasive* attempts to bring the grassroots sensibilities of the early marches to the South. *Invasive* fosters a creative space separate from political, religious, and economic debates. Instead, it returns to the original goal of queer visibility. Thus, *Invasive*'s crafty Southern charm is a counter-counter-narrative. The handmade, intimate mode of storytelling offers an antidote to the mass-produced and branded rainbow t-shirts and coffee mugs. McIntosh's campy theatrics—his kudzu jumpsuit, sash and homemade badges—also communicate the handmade (and homely) zeal of the first march (fig. 3.32). This resonates with Cvetkovich's observation that queer archives often contain "disproportionately large collections of ephemera because of their concern with sexuality and leisure culture as well as with the legacies of grassroots political activism."<sup>81</sup> As an example, there is nostalgia and interest for ephemera like buttons, stickers, fliers, and t-shirts. As Cvetkovich suggests, these objects reflect the truly everyday evidence of bodies.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Mehlab Jameel, "Rainbows and Weddings: The Neoliberal and Imperialist Politics of LGBT Rights" in *Solidarity*, July 6, 2015. <https://solidarity-us.org/rainbowsandweddings/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Bruce, *Pride Parades*, 134-5.

<sup>81</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 241.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

By making a quilted leaf, McIntosh is inviting users to feel the connection to the past. Within this queer time and space of Pride, *Invasive* guides a queer materiality.

Cvetkovich writes:

Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witness and publics. It thus demands an unusual archive.<sup>83</sup>

This handmaking gets at the very process of working through the violence and trauma of queer experience, from Stonewall to Pulse. They build archives of feelings. Cvetkovich has theorized how trauma is part of the everyday lived experience of marginalized bodies. She posits that the systematic persecution of an individual for reasons pertaining to their race, sexuality, gender and the like alienates and ultimately haunts that person.<sup>84</sup> Because the trauma is perpetual and attached to a marginalized body, it often remains invisible to others. Indeed, dominant discourse requires the invisibility of trauma in order for those in power to remain most visible. As the participants make their stories, and feel the stories of others, they establish their own vibrant archive that pushes against dominant discourses.

*Invasive* joins the open, liberated world created by queer activists during Pride marches. As a collective project, it helps create a portrait of the American South that can push against all of the swirling stereotypes. This reaches back not just to Pride history, but forms new archives of feeling in which many stories become “extravagantly public.” As a contemporary response to the violence against queers in the south—especially trans

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 43. Cvetkovich is informed by both Marx and Benjamin’s theorization of the sensory experiences of the *flaneur*.

and queers of color—the leaves, joined together on a vine, help make the joy of being a southern queer more apparent. This is a new mode of storytelling, rooted in collective action of its southern and grassroots predecessors, but that grows haptically and above ground. Agee tried to get people to feel the struggle of sharecroppers, and then Christenberry documented the irreconcilable consequences. *Invasive* gets people to also feel the struggle. By thinking and making, the makers contribute to stories that texture the landscape in a rhizomatic direction. They constantly confirm their presence.

### Wild Queer Kudzu

Kudzu was planted to balance a broken ecosystem. This physical solution to a structural problem was destined to fail. The exploitative plantation and sharecropping system would continue to erode the soil and disenfranchise laborers no matter how many kudzu seeds were sown. *Invasive* looks past this chapter of kudzu's long life towards a more positive time, when the kudzu enamored visitors to the Japanese garden pavilion at the 1876 Columbia Exposition. As records indicate, Chinese herbalists used kudzu roots for medical purposes as early as 1578. Likewise, kudzu was used for rope, baskets, and paper by the seventeenth century. In the 1700s, Kudzu was imported to Japan and its roots were ground into flour for cakes. It is still beloved in many parts of Asia, but in the United States, these positive attributes were forgotten or ignored in the larger push to improve soil conditions.<sup>85</sup>

As McIntosh worked in his grandmother's garden, he intuited the space as a representation of the Southern cultural landscape. If weeds/queer bodies are removed or

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<sup>85</sup> Pearce, *The New Wild*, 51-52.

pushed to the margins, they become invisible. *Invasive* reverses this marginalization by centering kudzu and letting it do its “little weed thing.”<sup>86</sup> Pearce also encourages weeds to do their thing, suggesting that their containment is futile and possibly self-destructive: “Far from being nature’s destroyers, aliens may be its rein vigorators, its salvation. They may be a sign that nature is not done.” This paradigm shifting approach—embraced by some environmental scientists—confirms the impossibility of a balanced nature.<sup>87</sup>

Nature always has been and always will be in flux. To embrace invasive species is to help build a “new wild” or rewilding of nature that takes place at the forefront of unprecedented climate change. He postulates:

The new wild will be very different from the old wild. We have changed our planet too much, and nature never goes backward. Nature’s resilience is increasingly expressed in the strength and colonizing abilities of alien species. They are often the new natives. And in the new wild, we need to stand back and applaud.”<sup>88</sup>

With kudzu at the heart of a queer garden, a new queer ecology is possible. Such an ecology does not strive for a balance of nature, but a rhizomatic re-ordering. Queer kudzu grows on the premise/promise that the containment of queer bodies is impossible, and there is beauty and salvation in liberation. Resonating with Pearce’s ecological arguments, Jack Halberstam argues that the very notion of “going wild” might be a way to continue to resist the “domestication” of queer life, as demonstrated in the corporate influence on Pride parades. Halberstam explains:

The question asked by that category of the wild is whether we can return human life....not simply to a more ecofriendly form of coexistence with

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<sup>86</sup> McIntosh. Interview conducted by Mary Savig, July 22, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Pearce, *The New Wild*, 136.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, xii.

other forms life forms on the planet, but also reproduce the terms under which unpredictability can thrive.<sup>89</sup>

Kudzu offers the possibility to create a queer wilderness—to push containment of queerness out of the garden and towards a new wild. Kudzu is the perfect metaphorical vehicle to build a new wild for queer desire. Even in botanical terms, kudzu is “perfect” in that it contains male and female reproductive organs.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, its phylogeny—or family history—does not reflect typical evolution. Botanist Ashley Egan describes it as “rather uncohesive.”<sup>91</sup> It shows that nature does not always behave as it should, and that it often flourishes when it is not “normal.” The diverse stories and symbols on *Invasive’s* cotton leaves demonstrate that there is no normal way to be queer in the South. Every leaf forms a rhizomatic patchwork quilt of a wild queer ecology. The patchwork process has the potential to consume the gridded, plantation system that structured generations of inequality.

*Invasive* helps its makers imagine a world reseeded with stories of queer desire and love. The kudzu leaf is an apt material because, as a perfect plant, it offers poetic ways to riff on how plants reproduce and flourish in ways that are not “heterosexual” or “monogamous,” or ladylike. The plant lives have long served as metaphors for intimacy between queer lovers. As an example, Lisa M. Moore references a sexy poem by British poet and naturalist Erasmus Darwin, *The Loves of the Plants*, in which he describes how plants “woo and win their vegetable loves.” In other accounts, plants are characterized by their “clandestine marriages” and intersex forms: “feminine males,” “eunuchs,” “hybrid

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<sup>89</sup> Kelly Struthers Montford and Chloe Taylor, “Feral Theory: Editors” Introduction,” *Feral Feminism*, Vol. 6 (Fall 2016), 8. The authors cite Halberstam’s lecture, “On Queer Failure, Silly Archives, and the Wild.” YouTube Video, 16:48, filmed August 2014, posted by “IPAC Centar,” September 5, 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Ashley Egan, “The Plant that Ate the South,” Lecture, June, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

plants...between male and female, “sister wives,” and “masculine ladies.”<sup>92</sup> For Darwin, these plant behaviors are natural, and in his poetic landscape, “both plant and human eroticism are multiple, profuse, and preserve, both source and demonstration of nature’s beauty, power, and irrefutable quiddity.”<sup>93</sup> As a visual example, Moore focuses on the vivid flower collages by Mary Delany. Compared to illustrations by her contemporaries (mainly highborn men), the duchess emphasized open vulvas, and highly articulated anatomy. They evoke human hair and fleshy skin. Moore writes, “the lushness and vigor of her representations make them unique in the eighteenth-century visual canon as images of feminine sexual potency.”<sup>94</sup>

*Invasive* follows the sisters arts tradition in its formation of queer love in the image of the natural world. These formations are affective in their grassroots materiality (their ongoingness) and nonlinear in their insistence on queer time and space (their inbetweenness). Each quilted leaf contributes to an unconventional and rhizomatic archive of feeling. This accumulation of mundane, joyful, sad, and silly stories weaves together a collective memory that cannot be readily uprooted, contained, or pushed to the margins. As the rhizomes of kudzu grow into a sturdy network below the earth’s surface, the vines grow wild over surfaces and structures above. The denser the networks grow, the stronger the kudzu plant becomes. *Invasive* ultimately imagines a new nature covered in wild, queer kudzu.

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<sup>92</sup> Moore, *Sister Arts*, 1.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

## Chapter 4: Coral Reefs

With a knot of snakes writhing about her head and a deadly gleam in her eyes, Medusa's visage is among the most recognizable in art. Her portrait activated Greek and Roman architecture, art, and everyday objects with apotropaic magic. She later became the romantic subject of Renaissance and Neoclassical painting and sculpture. For instance, in the mid-sixteenth century, Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, commissioned from Benvenuto Cellini a commanding bronze sculpture of Perseus holding out the disembodied head of Medusa. From bearded beast to femme fatale, Medusa's beauty varied over time, though key features of her confrontational gaze remained consistent: her signature serpentine hair, eyes intensely widened, and mouth agape. In recent years, Medusa has symbolized the rage against and the rage of women in politics. During the 2016 American presidential election, supporters of Republican candidate Donald Trump could purchase merchandise riffing on Cellini's sculpture. Trump's face was crudely spliced over that of Perseus and an unflattering photo of Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton over that of the beheaded Medusa (fig. 4.1). Some of the t-shirts featured the slogan "Life's a bitch so don't vote for one."<sup>1</sup> Comparatively, pro-Clinton t-shirts featured a green-eyed Medusa haloed in green snakes, red flowers, and the phrase "NASSSTY WOMAN" (Fig. 4.2).

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, "The Original 'Nasty Woman'" *The Atlantic*, November 6, 2016. [https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/the-original-nasty-woman-of-classical-myth/506591/?utm\\_campaign=the-atlantic&utm\\_content=5b697c454b7385000752cd58\\_ta&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter](https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/the-original-nasty-woman-of-classical-myth/506591/?utm_campaign=the-atlantic&utm_content=5b697c454b7385000752cd58_ta&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter) (accessed April 12, 2019).

From the classical era to the contemporary moment, Medusa, whose name draws from the Greek “ruling one,” has long threatened the very men who rule. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, she is a “terrible monster” of Hades, or the Underworld, sent forth to wreak havoc on Greek sailors. The Gorgon sisters posed a serious threat and as the only mortal sister, Medusa made the easiest target. In a rather unheroic fashion, the heroic Perseus slinked into Medusa’s cave while she slept to murder her by showing her own reflection on the polished shield of Athena. He then severed her head to render it less powerful.

Indo-European linguist MR Dexter states:

When Medusa’s head is severed, she becomes disembodied. Disembodied wisdom is very dangerous. Hence, she becomes monstrous. It is her chthonic self which the classical world acknowledges: Medusa becomes the snaky-haired severed head, a warning to all women to hide their powers, their totalities.<sup>2</sup>

This notion of unhinged female power has been constructed by patriarchal norms.

Medusa, however, has not always been a foil against masculinity. As the aggregation of Neolithic, Semitic, and Indo-European deities, demigods, and beasts, Medusa’s cultural import is complex and often contradictory. Often goddesses with deep ties to the underworld were represented by birds, snakes, women, and hybrids of all three. Formed by the churning magic of the sea and earth, her power defies easy categorization with complex and often contradictory qualities wrapped into single moments. Like her mythical sasquatch sisters in the wilds of North America, she is alluring, menacing, and bewitching.

In most of her iterations, Medusa and her predecessors are deeply connected to the underworld, a place that resists the binary of heaven and hell. Rather, chthonic forces

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<sup>2</sup> Dexter, "The Ferocious and the Erotic: “Beautiful” Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* No. 1 (2010) 26.

are cyclical. With Medusa, there is more than just petrification that meets the eye. Dexter writes:

Medusa is magical. She reminds us that we must not take the female ‘monster’ at face value; that we must not only weigh her beneficent against her maleficent attributes but also take into consideration the worldview and sociopolitical stances of the patriarchal cultures which create her.<sup>3</sup>

If we approach Medusa from a non-patriarchal perspective, one situated within feminism, queerness, and posthumanism, a more complex picture emerges. In Medusa’s underworld, death and birth are woven together into the same fabric; or as Dexter neatly sums: “the womb is the tomb.”<sup>4</sup>

This chapter begins with a meditation on Medusa because her creation, death, and regeneration into new forms offers a counter-narrative to the biblical story of creation in which God creates man and nature in his image. As the myth goes, Medusa created the corals of the sea with her chthonic powers. Donna Haraway summarizes that “from the blood dripping from Medusa’s severed head came the rocky corals of the western seas, remembered today in the taxonomic names of the Gorgonians.”<sup>5</sup> Like the demi-goddess, Gorgonian corals are vibrant, beautiful, and often deadly.<sup>6</sup> Medusa’s magic offers a productive starting point for exploring the international crowd-sourced project *Crochet Coral Reef* (the *Reef*) by sisters Christine and Margaret Wertheim in 2005. The idea came to Christine as she read a disturbing article about coral bleaching (a condition caused when coral polyps expel algae from their tissues). She mused, half-jokingly, that they

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 54.

<sup>6</sup> Alcyonacea, or soft corals, order formerly known as gorgonians.

could crochet a coral reef.<sup>7</sup> But then the sisters began to imagine a crochet reef so large, that when the Great Barrier Reef died out, “our crochet reef would be something to remember it by.”<sup>8</sup> They grabbed their crochet hooks and began to experiment (with episodes of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Battlestar Galactica* entertaining them in the background).

To mimic the folded and crenellated forms of marine life, they adapted a crochet pattern developed by mathematician Daina Taima that produces hyperbolic surfaces, or shapes that look like sea slugs, kelps, anemones, and, of course, corals.<sup>9</sup> The first crochet reef fit on the Wertheims’ coffee table. It was gray and green, and relatively simple. They continued to experiment, emphasizing or embellishing the shapes, textures, and colors of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. Before social media, they posted photographs of their reefs to a website and invited participation. The sisters state that The Reef is “a woolly celebration of the intersection of higher geometry and feminine handicraft, and a testimony to the disappearing wonders of the marine world.”<sup>10</sup> The project’s primary goal is to bring awareness to the critical condition of the Great Barrier Reef, the world’s largest reef system spanning approximately 133,000 square miles off the coast of Queensland.<sup>11</sup> Soon after the project launched online, it gained the attention of like minds and found purchase in art galleries. In 2007, the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh displayed the reefs in an art exhibition about creative responses to climate change, 6

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<sup>7</sup> Christine Wertheim and Margaret Wertheim, *Crochet Coral Reef* (Los Angeles: Institute for Figuring, 2015), 17-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Institute for Figuring, “History,” <https://crochetcoralreef.org/about/history.php> (accessed April 12, 2019). “Through Margaret’s work as a science writer she discovered Dr. Daina Taimina, a mathematician who in 1997 figured out how to make models of hyperbolic geometry using crochet.”

<sup>10</sup> Institute for Figuring, “About the Project,” <http://crochetcoralreef.org/about/index.php> (accessed November 2, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Wertheim and Wertheim, *Crochet Coral Reef*, 18.

*Billion Perps Held Hostage: Artists Address Global Warming* (Fig. 4.3).<sup>12</sup> Later that year, Chicago Cultural Center organized a 3,000 square foot installation as part of the Chicago Humanities Festival. By then, the Wertheims were working with about 30 regular Core Reef Crafters. Today, there are more than 100 Core Reef Crafters from around the world who all contribute to the Reef's Core Collection of objects (a permanent collection in Los Angeles).<sup>13</sup> The Wertheims also partner with numerous institutions (art museums, science museums, and libraries, to name a few) to create "community reefs" featuring contributions by local makers. More than 8,000 people have participated in satellite projects in Abu Dhabi, Baltimore, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, and Japan..

This chapter considers how the Reef brings together communities of knowledge such as math, natural history and science, ecocriticism, and new materialisms to literally and metaphorically craft new natures. The first section "Feminine Figures" introduces a cast of women Christine and Margaret Wertheim, Florence A. Merriam, Daina Taimina, and Anna Thynne, who all made major contributions to fields of math and science by drawing on their everyday experiences as women. The second section "Fancy Work" explores the importance of fancywork traditions and feminist recoveries of these traditions. This work informs the community building and nature-oriented goals of *Crochet Coral Reef*. Then, "Toxic Work" focuses on how and why artists incorporated trash into their reefs with a new materialist framework. "Smithsonian Community Reef"

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<sup>12</sup> Institute for Figuring, "The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh" [https://crochetcoralreef.org/exhibitions/warhol\\_museum.php](https://crochetcoralreef.org/exhibitions/warhol_museum.php) (accessed April 12, 2019). The exhibition was curated by Matt Wrabic, the Warhol Museum archivist. The Coral Coral Reef displays were curated and designed by Margaret and Christine, featuring the Crochet Coral and Anemone Garden with sea slug by Marianne Midelburg, kelp by Barbara Wertheim, and shell forms by Sarah Simons; the Branched Anemone Garden with contributions from Shari Porter, Helen Bernasconi, Lynn Latt, and Allie Gerlach; and the Kelp Garden with contributions from Sarah Simons and Karen Frazer.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret and Christine have crocheted about half of the core collection.

focuses on the process and outcomes of a community reef and how it connected the pristine coral reef displays in the museum to the vulnerable, toxic reefs in the ocean. “Handmade Matters” delvers more deeply into personal and affective experiences with crocheting reefs. Finally, “Hyperbolic Nature” rethinks approaches to climate change from the perspective of corals and *Crochet Coral Reef*. This hyperbolic thinking offers new ways of seeing and feeling nature.

### Feminine Figures

Christine and Margaret Wertheim were born in Australia (where the Great Barrier Reef looms large in the cultural imagination) and currently live in Los Angeles. Margaret is the *Reef's* project manager and organizer-in-chief. She is a science writer with a BS in Pure and Applied Physics from the University of Queensland and a BA in Pure Mathematics and Computing from the University of Sydney. Christine is the *Reef's* “primary aesthetic coordinator” and professor of critical studies and creative writing at the California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles. She is an artist and holds a PhD in literature and semiotics from Middlesex University, London. Their website biography notes, “Both Margaret and Christine grew up knitting and crocheting and doing other feminine crafts such as dress-making and embroidery. The sisters were taught these skills by their mother Barbara Wertheim, a (then-Catholic) mother of six.<sup>14</sup> In 2003, Margaret and Christine founded the Institute for Figuring (IFF) in Los Angeles. Its mission is to “promote public understanding of the poetic and aesthetic dimensions of science,

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<sup>14</sup> Institute for Figuring, “Margaret Wertheim,” [https://crochetcoralreef.org/contributors/margaret\\_wertheim.php](https://crochetcoralreef.org/contributors/margaret_wertheim.php) (accessed April 12, 2019).

mathematics, and engineering.”<sup>15</sup> This approach is meant to steep feminist praxis and materials into the historically male-dominated domain of science and also the linearity of Cartesian geometry.<sup>16</sup> They often describe the IFF as “feral” because it does not rely on institutional support (and oversight), such as a museum or university. The IFF produces public programs, publications, exhibitions around “material play,” or experiential learning “via kindergarten-like practices.”<sup>17</sup> *Crochet Coral Reef* is the IFF’s signature program and subject of books, lectures (including a popular TED talk), workshops, exhibitions, interviews, and self-published books.

Wertheim’s 2007 text, *A Field Guide to Hyperbolic Space: An Exploration of the Intersection of Higher Geometry and Feminine Handicraft* (Fig. 4.4) introduces how the concept of hyperbolic space helps describe natural phenomena, and also provides instructions on how to crochet hyperbolic shapes to emulate coral reefs. The small red booklet is modeled after amateur field guides, a format first developed by Florence A. Merriam to introduce nature enthusiasts to birds. Such documents can undermine the authority of institutional archives.<sup>18</sup> In early natural science texts, taxonomic data about nature was not widely distributed and often full of inchoate scientific jargon. Merriam’s 1889 field guide, *Birds Through an Opera Glass*, signaled an important shift in the study of birds. Rather than collecting and studying deceased specimens—done by experts in museum and university labs—Merriam showed readers how to use binoculars to identify living species. “Using binoculars as an alternative to killing specimens dovetailed with a

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<sup>15</sup> Institute for Figuring, “About the Institute for Figuring,” <https://theiff.org/about/about.html> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Marianne Shaneen, “Christine and Margaret Wertheim,” BOMB, July 1, 2014. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/christine-and-margaret-wertheim/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Institute for Figuring, “About the Institute for Figuring.”

<sup>18</sup> David L. Pearson and John A. Shetterly, “How Do Published Field Guides Influence Interactions between Amateurs and Professionals in Entomology” in *American Entomologist* (Winter 2006), 247.

growing conservation movement that involved an ever-increasing number of amateurs.”<sup>19</sup> The popularity of Merriam’s guide led to similar texts on insects, and later helped shape the hobby of nature photography.

Wertheim’s field guide also draws comparison to a more recent invention: the zine. Zine culture of the 1990s and 2000s directly grew on the Do-It-Yourself ethos that celebrated cheap and accessible modes of communication. Zines allowed amateurs and enthusiasts to contribute to specific discourses, running the gamut from basic instruction (i.e. playing the guitar or sewing) to espousing punk manifestos. Both zines and field guides originated in countercultures as alternative publishing mechanisms. Along similar lines, *A Field Guide* was self-published by the IFF because its content did not neatly align with the goals of mainstream scientific publications. In an interview with artist and writer Maria Elena Buszek, Wertheim explains her contributions to scientific discourses: “there were all these areas of science and technology that I thought were interesting and that I was having trouble getting editors at science magazines and newspapers to see the value of.”<sup>20</sup> She elaborates that most science-focused publications, even though for popular audiences, are limited to “arcane” topics like string theory and big bang theory. No matter the amount of contextualization, they remain inaccessible to many people. Science, she suggests, simply does not take place in laboratories and specialized institutional spaces, or even “Stephen Hawking’s mind.”<sup>21</sup> Rather, science is manifest everywhere, and arranges itself in elegant and feminine forms.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>20</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, “Crochet and the Cosmos: An Interview with Margaret Wertheim.” *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek. (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 278.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 278. In the interview, Wertheim states “IFF is trying to promote the notion that mathematics and science are not things that happen in a vacuum. It’s not just the super-brains like Stephen Hawking thinking higher thoughts away from the rest of the world.”

To bridge the gap between a general public and the esoteric topic of hyperbolic space, *A Field Guide* was organized into bite-size descriptions and diagrams. The amateurish, zine-like format allowed Wertheim to play with the “poetic and aesthetic ends of these disciplines.”<sup>22</sup> Her writing style is reminiscent of science fiction: it’s accessible and awe-inspiring. Comprehensively, Wertheim argues for inbetweenness, or pushing—literally and figuratively—against dominant scientific gridlock. “We have built a world of rectilinearity,” Wertheim begins. “The rooms we inhabit, the skyscrapers we work in, the grid-like arrangements of our streets and the freeways we cruise on our daily commute speak to us in straight lines.”<sup>23</sup> This opening statement recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of striated or closed space: material structures meant to contain human behavior. Wertheim gets at the very epistemology of the grid, describing how Euclidean math underpins all of our notions of space. In Euclidean space, parallel lines do not intersect. Likewise, Euclidean space can be mapped onto a Cartesian coordinate system, which has long been used to plot vertical and horizontal points on a map (a standard road atlas, for example, is based on Cartesian coordinates). In the history of math, the Cartesian box has ruled “canonical scientific faith.”<sup>24</sup> To be sure, Euclidean geometry is simply easier to grasp: we can see and conceptualize parallel and intersecting lines more readily than hyperbolic space. In hyperbolic space, parallel lines diverge from each other along curves. And, there are infinite numbers of parallel lines on a hyperbolic plane. The very term “hyperbolic” pays “homage to the abundant excess” that the mathematical plane yields.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 278

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Wertheim, *A Field Guide to Hyperbolic Space* (Los Angeles: Institute for Figuring, 2007), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Wertheim, *A Field Guide*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 25.

Even as Euclidean geometry registers more directly with Enlightenment rationale, hyperbolic space remains ubiquitous in the curved forms of nature and the cosmos. “Outside our boxes the natural world teems with swooping, curling and crenellated forms, from the fluted surfaces of lettuces and fungi to the frilled skirts of nudibranchs and the animal undulations of sea slugs and anemonies” explains Wertheim.<sup>26</sup> These descriptions of hyperbolic space speak to feminist and queer theorizations of space and time, such as Griselda Pollock’s feminist analysis of spatial organization and Jack Halberstam’s theory of queer time and space as a rejection of linear (biological, heterosexual) time and space.<sup>27</sup> These provocative perspectives yield more heterogenous and spatially complex pictures. Indeed, *A Field Guide* takes up notions of identity. When pondering the challenge of reproducing hyperbolic space, Wertheim wonders, “if nature can do it, then why not a man?” To this leading question, Wertheim responds, “or perhaps a woman?”<sup>28</sup>

As the now legendary story goes, Daina Taimina was the first mathematician to effectively craft hyperbolic space in three dimensions. It began in June of 1997, when Taimina was a Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of Mathematics at Cornell University; she took a workshop on hyperbolic math under the direction of David W. Henderson. Henderson had fashioned a hyperbolic model out of tape and paper, which was “so tattered and fragile that he was afraid to handle it much.”<sup>29</sup> First, Taimina tried to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London, New York: Routledge), 1988 and Jack Halberstam, “Queer Temporality.” *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Daina Taimina, “Crocheting the Hyperbolic Plane” *Mathematical Intelligencer*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 2001), <http://www.math.cornell.edu/~dwh/papers/crochet/crochet.html>. (accessed April 12, 2019). The first created in 1978, the second in 1987. Taimina saw the second version. Henderson’s models were adapted from William Thurston, who developed the paper/tape model around 1966.

knit the hyperbolic space, but found the interlocking fibers too rigid. She then tried her hand at crochet. She created her first model while camping in the forests of Pennsylvania. Despite the high level of mathematics that inspired her to crochet the model, she insisted on the ease of making it.”<sup>30</sup> Her pattern derives from the algorithm: Crochet  $n$  stitches, then increase one. Repeat until done.” If a chain—the backbone of most crochet projects—begins with 10 looped stitches, the next row will contain 20 looped stitches, because two stitches are pulled through each of the 10 loops. The next line will contain 60 looped stitches because three stitches are pulled through each of the 20 loops. And so on. The surface expands quickly and becomes dense, causing the stitches to push away from each other in search of more room. For example, a chain row that measures 10 cm in length will quickly expand to more than a meter in length, but the entire model will measure about 24 cm.<sup>31</sup> According to science historian Sophia Roosth, this spatial distribution is ideal for many marine organisms that “have evolved to embody hyperbolic geometry; it affords them a maximum surface area with which to filter feed in a minimal volume.”<sup>32</sup>

Taimina’s incredible contribution to the pedagogy of mathematics was based in a very user-friendly hobby. Today, YouTube tutorials can explain the entire process in a matter of minutes.<sup>33</sup> With a skein of yarn and a crochet hook in hand, the sophisticated math of hyperbolic space speedily stitches into three dimensions. Taimina first learned

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<sup>30</sup> Daina Taimina *Crocheting Adventures with Hyperbolic Planes*, 2009.  
<http://pi.math.cornell.edu/~dtaimina/hypplanes.htm> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Wertheim, *A Field Guide*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Sophia Roosth, “Evolutionary Yarns in Seahorse Valley: Living Tissues, Woolly Textiles, Theoretical Biologies,” *Differences*, Vol. 23, Number 3 (2012), 10.

<sup>33</sup> In order to write this section, I watched several YouTube videos, and every time the natural undulation of the rows was mesmerizing. My favorite is Maggie’s Crochet, “Hyperbolic Surfaces Free Crochet Pattern—Right Handed.” YouTube video, 7:18 minutes, published July 8, 2014.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVE18hh4xDw>

how to crochet during her childhood in Latvia, where such handicrafts were often useful but rarely remarkable. Now her models of hyperbolic space are preserved in numerous museum collections, including the Smithsonian American History Museum's collection of American Mathematical Models (fig. 4.5). The museum's artifact features a purple crenellated form with yellow stitches that run perpendicular to the crocheted rows. They are parallel, but nearly intersect at the chain, and diverge towards the edge of the plane. This sculpture beautifully manifests a complex mathematical equation.

As Taimina's story demonstrates, everyday domestic knowledge can lend significant insight into the natural world, twining together art, culture, and science. In his essay "Toward an Aesthetic Marine Biology" scientist J. Malcom Schick describes how most universities require the minimum of humanities training to students in science fields, and vice versa. Without more rigorous interdisciplinary studies, art students will become unable to read natural history even in visual culture. Schick warns:

The respective neglect of each of these broad disciplines by students of the other comes despite the fact that oceans are replete with literary, musical, and artistic allusion, and marine zoology in particular has a rich history, being at one time the most philosophical of the sciences."<sup>34</sup>

Modern marine biology is a production of the Enlightenment, when the study of nature was a flourishing pursuit by scientists and artists. The seemingly intrinsic beauty of marine life was of keen interest to illustrators and eventually printmakers. Artists who originated and distributed vibrant representations of the diversity of species were earnestly dedicated to "the adherence to nature."<sup>35</sup> Related, many budding scientists began compiling large collections of corals based on aesthetic qualities. Calcified

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<sup>34</sup> Schick, J. Malcolm. "Toward an Aesthetic Marine Biology," *Art Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 4, (2008), 63.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

specimens were desired for their baroque shapes, vibrant colors, and intricate patterns. They were frequently exhibited in natural history museums and described in popular texts. Bone-like corals were especially curious to scientists and artists alike because their forms conjured metamorphosis. “Ariel’s Song” in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* begins:

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes;  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:  
Ding-dong.  
Hark! now I hear them — Ding-dong, bell.<sup>36</sup>

Corals were correlated with beauty and death. Schick describes hidden reefs as “rightly feared by sailors, such as Australia’s labyrinthine Great Barrier Reef that holed the Endeavour’s hull during Captain James Cook’s first Pacific voyage in 1770.”<sup>37</sup>

Guided by Enlightenment logic, scientists and artists assumed the corals could be known through thorough thoughtful observation and documentation, and more critically, their source of beauty could somehow be classified. In the shared pursuit of beauty and science, natural history texts and illustrations became so popular in the mid-nineteenth century, that they jumpstarted “the Victorian craze for seaside natural history and, late, aquarium-keeping.”<sup>38</sup> Among the most popular was Philip Henry Gosse, a marine scientist who infused his work with a religious flair. He was a preacher, a teacher, an illustrator, a naturalist, and prolific author, with all of these self-taught pursuits informing the others. His 1854 book *My Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea*

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<sup>36</sup> Leslie Dick, “Reverie as Resistance” in *Crochet Coral Reef*, 131.

<sup>37</sup> Schick, “Toward an Aesthetic Marine Biology,” 67.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

popularized the term aquarium and gave insight into the early experimentations with keeping marine animals alive in water.<sup>39</sup> For Gosse, the relationship between science and God was almost one and the same, and he wrote often that his experiments with nature were spiritual exercises. Building a marine garden “brings us, in some sense, into the presence of God,” as aquarium hobbyists could enjoy God’s marine creations in the comfort of their homes.<sup>40</sup> His step-by-step account of introducing flora and fauna to his aquarium even mirror that of the “creation of man” in Genesis:

On the fifth day after the tank was filled, I began to introduce the animals to their future home....on the sixth day, seven *Actinae* were disposed upon the rock work. On the seventh, a Horsefoot was allowed to make his burrow in the sand. On the eighth day, four Hermit and Solder Crabs...and so on.<sup>41</sup>

The text is accessible and beautifully illustrated, demonstrating his fascination and respect for the vibrancy of sea water and the delicate balance required to sustain life.

Historian Jonathan Smith characterized Gosse’s vivid plates as having “the same qualities as the unfallen Garden of Eden ... a visual glimpse of the millennial kingdom that awaits the true believer” (fig. 4.6).<sup>42</sup> To be sure, Gosse’s intellectual curiosity and artistic talent support Schick’s argument for the intersections of art and science.

And yet, these heroic stories of scientific discovery and classification often excluded women. Schick fails to highlight the achievements of women artists and scientists in his argument for interdisciplinary knowledge.<sup>43</sup> While many historians praise

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Henry Gosse, *The Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea* (London: J. Van Voorst, 1854).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 84. Quoted in Bernd Brunner, “Bringing the Ocean Home,” *The Public Domain Review*, <https://publicdomainreview.org/2018/06/21/bringing-the-ocean-home/#fn5> (accessed June 21, 2018)

<sup>43</sup> Shick discussed *Crochet Coral Reef* but only credits the Wertheims in footnotes.

Gosse's achievements in aquarium and marine science, marine zoologist Anna Thynne was the first person to successfully keep marine life alive in a water tank for an extended period of time. In 1846 (6 years before Gosse published *My Aquarium*) Thynne transported a sampling of Devonshire cup corals and stony madrepores from the seaside village of Devon, England to London. In an article for the *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* published in 1859, Thynne chronicled her scientific discovery.<sup>44</sup> The story began on a visit to Torquay, a seaside village in Devon, England, where Thynne realized she might be able to successfully transport the madrepores to London by stitching them to a sponge:

I provided myself with a new stone jar in basket-work, and six gallons of pure-sea water taken from a deep part of the [English] Channel. With a needle and thread, I fixed the Madrepores on a large sponge, that there might be no damage from collision, and then placed them in a glass jar filled to the brim with water, and tied down with a bladder. This method was perfectly successful.<sup>45</sup>

Thynne, like Daina Taimina, solved a complex scientific challenge with needle and thread. Securely attached to the sponge, the madrepores enjoyed their train travel to London, expanding their tentacles into their temporary enclosure—a sure sign of their health.<sup>46</sup> For the next three years, she maintained a growing marine garden in her London home, where she observed the corals' reproduction process and responses to environmental changes. In the essay, she details how the madrepores formed new tentacles and identifies three different methods of reproduction: spontaneous fission, very frequent

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<sup>44</sup> Thynne, "On the Increase of Madrepores with notes by P. H. Gosse," *The Annals and Magazine of Natural History*, June 1859. Thynne published her journal entries to provide a full account of the research.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 450. Thynne wrote, "during the journey, I had the great pleasure of seeing them expand their tentacula most happily; and they arrived both at Clifton and London in a most flourishing state."

fission, and by ova. Her observation of the madrepores' dynamic fertility explained the rapid growth of coral islands.

Thynne's essay reflects her confidence in her abilities, and also acknowledges the intense collaboration required to maintain the aquarium long term. She and her housekeeper had to constantly aerate the water to keep the corals and plants alive.<sup>47</sup> Her essay on the subject was prefaced by Gosse, who addressed his remarks to the "gentlemen" editors of the journal. Women scientists could not publish without such sponsorship. Gosse provided a favorable introduction and commentary, with one critical observation. Despite Thynne's detailed accounts and citations, Gosse challenged her identification of the species, referencing his own scientific illustrations as evidence.<sup>48</sup> In a rebuttal, Thynne defended her firsthand knowledge of the corals, responding, "your very beautiful drawing does not exactly represent my specimens."<sup>49</sup> An expert on marine biology and a woman, Thynne's unique perspective informed her worldview that male scientists struggle to see from their own maps, illustrations, and texts. The previously discussed women—Merriam, Thynne, and Taimina—all provoked a paradigm shift in their respective fields by drawing on their everyday experiences as (educated, privileged, white) women.

### Fancy Work

Terms of science and women's hobby crafts have long crossed wires. In an essay distilling the relationships between biology and craft, Sophia Roosth observes:

Analogies from the fiber arts run deep in the life sciences, as attested to by the preponderance of terms such as *strand*, *tissue*, *membrane*, *fiber*, and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 450.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 458.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 459.

*filament* in anatomy and *net* or *web* in systems biology and ecology...and biologists have also described nucleic acids as “strings,” “strands,” or “threads” that “coil,” “unspool,” “knit,” and “knot.”<sup>50</sup>

Likewise, the very taxonomy of corals speaks to their feminine aesthetics. An order of soft corals known as gorgonians elicits the snake-headed Medusa. Madreporites translates to “mother pores” to reference their reproductive prowess and the small openings at the ends of their stony branches. The scientific name for the orange cup coral (a solitary stony coral in the Pacific Ocean) is *B. elegans*, which stems from the Latin nominative *elegans*, meaning “fine” and tasteful.” Latin *elegans* was once a derisive term, a synonym of “dainty” or “fastidious.”<sup>51</sup> Historically, these words have also been used to describe so-called women’s fancywork like lacing, needlework, and collage. The intrinsic qualities of fiber have historically been undervalued. Roszika Parker argues that women internalized their own inferiority with that of fiber, expressing feminine ideals through their subject matter. She references the poems of multi-media artist Mary Delany as demonstrative of a feminine sensibility (and sensuality): One of her poems about fancifully drawing a flower begins:

Hail to the happy hour when fancy led  
My Pensive mind this flo’ry path to tread;  
And gave me emulation to presume  
With timid art, to trace fair Nature’s bloom.

Delany embraced a “timid art” of floral art because “the only semblance of power women could obtain was through femininity.”<sup>52</sup> They could leverage this power to establish social relationships with other women and explore nature on their own terms.

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<sup>50</sup> Roosth, “Evolutionary Yarns in Seahorse Valley,” 11.

<sup>51</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed April 12, 2019.

[https://www.etymonline.com/word/elegant#etymonline\\_v\\_5721](https://www.etymonline.com/word/elegant#etymonline_v_5721)

<sup>52</sup> Parker, Roszika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. (London: Routledge, 1984), 139.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, flowers, corals, and garden scenes were popular subjects. These subjects were richly decorated, and as women learned their subjects, they learned botany (fig. 4.7). Literature historian Lisa M. Moore has brought to light numerous examples of how women established creative perspectives on natural history through nonconventional experimentations with natural materials. This feminine and domestic knowledge contributed to scientific discourse, and allowed many women to subvert patriarchal norms of their time. Women created evocative and sensual artworks of natural subjects such as gardens and flowers with processes such shellwork, embroidery, poetry, and drawing.<sup>53</sup> Through these media, women communicated with each other about their everyday lives and frequently alluded to erotic love for each other. Building on Pollock's analysis of Mary Delany's feminine sensibilities, Moore discusses the sister art legacies of Delany and her close friend Margaret Harley Bentinck, known as the Duchess of Portland. Together, they collaborated for more than 50 years on the Duchess's gardens at her Bulstrode Park mansion in Buckinghamshire. A distinctive feature of this exquisite garden was the grotto designed by Delany. In 1760, when they began, "many of the best-known shell grottoes in the period were in fact the work of women, thus creating a story that runs alongside the male-dominated history of landscape gardening."<sup>54</sup>

Delany created the Grotto with the Duchess's massive collection of natural history shells and shells gifted from other women, including Delany's niece Mary Port of Ilam. Even the task of sorting the shells into aesthetic categories was an impressive

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<sup>53</sup> Lisa M. Moore, *Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2-3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 68-9.

undertaking, and the entire process from start to finish took ten years. Mary Port visited to see the Ilam fossils and later complimented a wall of madreporas in a letter to her aunt.

Moore explains:

The connections between women forged by the exchanges of objects result here in an integration of the Duchess's scientific interest in shells with Mary Delany's aesthetic one. This collaboration creates a new landscape, a symbolically rich repository for and monument to the friendship of the *'Ladies of Bulstrode.'*<sup>55</sup>

The shells directly reference well-known images of the birth of Venus from a scallop shell, as well as more oblique references to wombs and labia in the evocative shapes of the seashells. With this in mind, these grottoes were "secret" places for high-born English women to communicate via sensual symbols. And, as Moore points out, the very symbolism of a grotto filled with chthonic media points to the source of womanly knowledge as from earth.<sup>56</sup>

In an interview, Margaret Wertheim and Maria Elena Buszek discussed the complicated relationship between gender and craft, going back to the origins of the Studio Craft movement in the nineteenth century. Buszek names William Morris, leader of the British Arts and Crafts movement, "who essentially took the needlework traditions practiced by women like his working-class wife Jane Burden and gave them the artistic seal of approval that these women's work never enjoyed, by 'studying,' practicing, and marketing them as an upper-class, professional man."<sup>57</sup> As the first chapter elaborates, the amateurish or unimportant work of women and people of color has been historically appropriated by European and American male artists. Feminist art historian Roszika

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>57</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, "Crochet and the Cosmos," 289.

Parker has outlined how women art students did not receive the same level of institutional support as their male peers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Aspiring women artists were not allowed access to nude models and discouraged to endeavor in history and landscape paintings (considered too ambitious for women). The women artists developed alternative practices, which included an extraordinarily creative use of different media, such as shells, feathers, and paper collage that extended the sister arts tradition into the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> And yet, the feminine transmedia traditions were largely ignored by art museums and collectors until the early twenty-first century, when they were repacked by vanguard male artists, who exhibited the work as if it had no origins.<sup>59</sup>

The feminist reclamation of fiber recovered many of these sister arts traditions and histories of women work. During the feminist movements of the 1970s, the experimental and pedagogical training of women as artists influenced not just the art world, but also created a vast cottage industry of craft books and kits that popularized crochet, knitting, and macramé, among other hobbies. Margaret and Christine Wertheim made feminist politics central to the organization of the Reef. Theorist Jeanne Vaccaro specifically links the *Reef* to feminist models of community-building: “Crochet art workers convene in a collective practice reminiscent of quilting bees and ladies’ sewing circles. Bodies lean, eyes dart, and hands touch to repair stitches, learn and exchange technique, and create and share a feeling of community.”<sup>60</sup> The *Reef* sustains the

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<sup>58</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 120.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 120. See Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004); William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

<sup>60</sup> Jeanne Vaccaro, “Feelings and Fractals: Woolly Ecologies of Transgender Matter.” *GLQ* Vol. 21, No. 2-3 (2015), 280.

ongoingness of the sister arts tradition by creating space for creativity, curiosity, and collectivity. The Reef, like the Bulstrode Grotto, “creates a new landscape, a symbolically rich repository, and a monument to collaboration.”<sup>61</sup> To ensure that the *Reef* itself does become an arbiter of artistic value over sentiment, the Wertheims have remained vigilant about accessibility. They created a “feral” policy in which any “serious contributor” cannot be edited out of the project. As an example, Wertheim described Core Reef Crafter Evelyn Hardin’s reefs as,

The most god-awful things you’ve ever seen. And then another box arrived, and it was even more ugly...and then another box of even more ugly stuff. But the woman is a genius!....[she] made us realize how wild we needed the project to remain. She illuminated the project’s raw, vital, and always-forming qualities, and our need for it to never become tchotchke-ized (Fig. 4.8).<sup>62</sup>

The IFF also resists any attempts to sale or mass-produce its Core Collection. This strategy continuously obfuscates modernist notions of beauty so that while the IFF and its host venues fully credit the makers, they are always positioned as part of a collective in true sister arts style.

### Toxic Work

Grounded by the interdisciplinary work of the sister arts traditions, feminist art praxis, *the Reef* the generates present-day awareness about the dire health of the coral reefs. In 2016, there was a massive breakdown between symbiosis between coral and algae, resulting in a stunning 90% of the Great Barrier Reef experiencing severe bleaching. A January 2018 study published in *Science* warned that most coral reefs are no

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<sup>61</sup> Moore, *Sister Arts*, 72.

<sup>62</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, “Crochet and the Cosmos,” 289

longer able to recover from natural trauma like hurricanes.<sup>63</sup> Smithsonian coral reef expert Nancy Knowlton, among many other scientists, has indicated that media coverage of the dire condition of the reef has not done enough to affect policy or social changes in meaningful ways. “Now more than ever we need earth optimism” declares Knowlton.<sup>64</sup> She suggested that more empathetic storytelling is a possible tactic, directly citing *Crochet Coral Reef*.

To bring attention to the conditions, *The Reef* has spun off several vignettes of unhealthy ecosystems: The “Bleached Reef” created with white fiber and the “Toxic Reef” created with plastic trash (fig. 4.9-10). The “Toxic Reef began in 2007, when Christine and Margaret began knitting with scraps of their weekly plastic grocery bags. They began to save all of their personal plastic trash to get a sense of their own impact on the environment. They recalled, “after the first two days we were appalled. After a week we were horrified. After a month we were devastated and began to think hard about how we consumed.”<sup>65</sup> Among their waste, they counted takeout containers, cleaning product containers, hair product containers, plastic drink bottles, food packaging, pill bottles, and cutlery, as they pondered, “Where does all this trash come from? How does it build up?” In a related story, Jane Bennett ponders what happens to trash after it’s been tossed. One sunny day in Baltimore, Bennett encountered a tangle of trash: a glove, a ball of pollen, a dead rat, a plastic bottle cap, and a stick of wood resting together on a grate above a

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<sup>63</sup> Terry P. Hughes, Kristen D. Anderson, Sean R. Connollogy, Scott F. Heron, James T. Kerry, Janice M. Lough, Andrew H. Baird, Julia K. Baum, Michael L. Berumen, Tom C. Bridge, Danielle C. Claar, Mark Eakin, James P. Gilmour, Nicolas A. J. Graham, Hugo Harrison, Jean-Paul A. Hobbs, Andrew S. Hoey, Mia Hoogenboom, Ryan J. Lowe, Malcome T. McCulloch, John M. Pandolfi, Morgan Prachett, Verena Schoepf, Gergely, Torda, and Shaun K. Wilson, “Spatial and temporal patterns of mass bleaching of corals in the Anthropocene,” *SCIENCE* Vol. 5, (January 2018), 80-83.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy Knowlton, “Aesthetics and Science.” Lecture, September 21, 2017, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>65</sup> Institute for Figuring, “Plastic Trash,” [https://crochetcoralreef.org/about/plastic\\_trash.php](https://crochetcoralreef.org/about/plastic_trash.php)

storm drain. Bennett argues this debris is “vibrant matter” because each piece has continued on an independent trajectory even after having been discarded. As such it evidences “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, or to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”<sup>66</sup> Bennett encourages her readers to recognize that humans participate in a world comprised of shared, vital matter. Human experience is created through impressions from nonhuman matter—including fiber and trash—that runs through and outside the body. Vital materialists see themselves as part of a vibrant assemblage rather than as individuals. Bennett explains “The vital materialist must admit that different materialities, composed of different sets of protobodies, will express different powers.”<sup>67</sup> Although individual agency does not truly exist, one does have a political responsibility to the assemblage in which she participates.

The “Toxic Reefs” were developed as part of the IFF’s community outreach to lay bare the tragic posthuman life of plastic and related ocean toxins. Every year, approximately 1.15 to 2.40 million tons of plastic flow into the ocean from rivers. They swirl and churn in the ocean’s currents until finding their way to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP), a gyre twice the size of Texas stirring approximately 1.8 trillions pieces of plastic.<sup>68</sup> In the GPGP, the trash decomposes into microplastics and wreak havoc on marine ecosystems. The constant movement of trash—a soda bottle’s route from the store to the trash to the stream to the ocean—conceals its vitality and the fact that it will never physically go away.

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<sup>66</sup>Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>68</sup> L. Lebreton, B. Slat, F. Ferrari, B. Sainte-Rose, J. Aitken, R. Marthouse, S. Hajbane, S. Consulo, A. Schwarz, A. Leviver, K. Noble, P. Debeljak, H. Maral, R. Schoeneich-Argent, R. Bramini, and J. Reisser, “Evidence that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is Rapidly Accumulating Plastic.” *Scientific Reports*, Vol. 8 (2018). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-018-22939-w> (accessed April 12, 2019).

The “Toxic Reef” encourages the crocheting of trash to make visible the path to the world’s oceans. Artworks in the IFF’s Core Collection include a plastic anemone crocheted from *New York Times* wrappers by Clare O’Callaghan (fig. 4.11); an effervescent jellyfish made of fishing line by David Orozco (fig. 4.12); plastic sea creatures made with zip ties and faux pearl beds by an unidentified artist from the U.K.; and a giant Saran Wrap anemone by Paté Conaway. By incorporating these inconsequential objects from landfills and trash bins, these artists have created new ways of seeing the landscape. As they crochet plastic trash, they must shift their gaze away from the beautiful marine life that has long enamored scientists and artists. The “Toxic Reef” challenges the illusion of a pristine marine ecology and instead illuminates how trash runs through the corals in a metamorphosis Shakespeare never imagined. As Bennett argues, “it is only when we slow down to really focus our gaze on that which has been discarded, that we can see an entire assemblage.” Each of these unwanted items self-organize and accumulate in ways that have deep impacts on environment, from the streets of Baltimore to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

### Smithsonian Community Reef

A “satellite” version of the Reef was organized at the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History from October 16, 2010 to April 24, 2011. The IFF partners with outside institutions to plan these locally grown reefs that do not include artworks by Core Reef Crafters in the Collection Core at IFF.<sup>69</sup> Instead, the Museum made plans to amass

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<sup>69</sup> Since 2006, the Institute For Figuring has worked with communities around the globe to create local ‘satellite’ reefs. Just as living reefs send out spawn—tiny seeds that settle in far-flung places and begin to grow into new reefs—so too the Crochet Coral Reef sends out ‘spawn.’ The IFF’s Satellite Reef program

hundreds of woolly corals and creatures from regional volunteers. Known as the Smithsonian Community Reef, it was exhibited in the Sant Ocean Hall, a voluminous space that samples the museum's prestigious marine collection. An encapsulation of marine science and culture, Sant highlights include: a 45-foot North Atlantic right whale, two giant squids, a set of jaws of an extinct great white shark, and 1,000-gallon aquarium "featuring a living model of an Indo-Pacific coral reef ecosystem with some 50 live, colorful specimens." The Community Reef was installed adjacent to the aquarium to spark comparisons.

One of the Smithsonian Community Reef's key goals was to foster interdisciplinary collaboration. Project manager Jennifer Lindsey coordinated a team of Natural History colleagues including Sant Chair of Marine Science, Dr. Nancy Knowlton; art curator, Jane Milosch; chief of temporary exhibitions, Barbara Stauffer, exhibitions project manager, Meg Rivers, and ocean science educator, Catherine Sutera. The team promoted the project through the Ocean Portal, the museum's website dedicated to marine science and environmental research.<sup>70</sup> They also shared information on social media platforms, which in 2010, found receptive audiences on Flickr (a photo-sharing service) and Ravelry (a network service for fiber artists), and email-newsletter announcements. Offline, the team promoted the Smithsonian Community Reef at the 2010 Smithsonian Folklife Festival and World Ocean Day 2010. According to Lindsey, the most active participants were local yarn shops and fiber guilds who organized knitting

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has cultivated and supported local efforts in 35 cities and countries worldwide, including Chicago, New York, London, Latvia, Ireland, and Germany.

<sup>70</sup> See Sant Ocean Portal, [Ocean.si.edu](http://Ocean.si.edu) (accessed April 12, 2019).

workshops at local shops, in museums, and various community centers.<sup>71</sup> She recalled widespread enthusiasm:

[Workshops] were packed—sometimes with standing room only to crochet... People really enjoyed having a representative from the Smithsonian come to them. One woman expressed it best when she said ‘Thank you—now we feel like we are part of it.’<sup>72</sup>

The museum reached out to many different, though often diverging, audiences: feminists, grandmothers, skilled crocheters, and first-time museum visitors. As part of outreach, Lindsey helped coordinate classes at N Street Village, a provider of housing and health services for homeless and low-income women in Washington, D.C. *Street Sense*, a long running periodical for homeless residents in D.C., published instructions for participation. In this way, homeless women were able to “stitch their way” in to the Smithsonian in a way that did not reflect their disenfranchisement, but their creative output. “You can just stand back and watch the way people interact with it. People are completely captivated by the fact that you can create something like this out of crochet” reported Cynthia Santo for *Street Sense*.<sup>73</sup> Other reef contributors included several community groups; some came with strong interests in fiber work and others in science: DC Public Library Crocheters, the Friends of Haiti, Krafter’s Corner (a club organized by the National Federation for the Blind), NOAA’s Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management, the Warm and Fuzzies of Washington (a group of yarnbombers,.) and numerous local high schools.<sup>74</sup> In total, the museum received 4,000 pieces that

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<sup>71</sup> J. Lindsey, “Building a Collaborative Fiber Art Project in the Nation’s Capital” Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings (September 2012), 6.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Cynthia Santos, “Into the Coral Reefs: Homeless Woman Stitches Her Way Into the Smithsonian.” *Street Sense* 8:1, October 26, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Sant Ocean Portal, “The Smithsonian Community Reef,” <https://ocean.si.edu/human-connections/books-film-arts/smithsonian-community-reef> (accessed April 12, 2019).

encompassed 540 feet of space, enough to cover the designed 10 foot x 16 foot platform four times over (fig. 4.12-5).<sup>75</sup>

To represent the scope and scale of the biodiversity of a reef, the Smithsonian Community Reef design team arranged the artworks to mirror real life environments. As part of the educational programming, the makers learned about how insurmountable amounts of trash swirling in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch are wreaking havoc on all marine life in the Pacific Ocean. Workshops organized jointly by the IFF and the Smithsonian fostered “material play” by teaching the pattern of hyperbolic crochet alongside more abstract ideas of hyperbolic math and the crisis of climate change.<sup>76</sup> Showing mindfulness of their own waste, many contributors to the Smithsonian Community Reef incorporated accumulated plastics into their projects. The knowledge of science combined with crochet to create embodied learning and empathy for nature. Vaccaro notes, “In this process, making things with the hands intervenes in hierarchies of sensory knowledge to value the work of sensation and touch and make a potentially different idea tactile and intimate.”<sup>77</sup>

The Smithsonian Community Reef, in its riot of color and strange materials and techniques, pointed a curious public towards an alternative direction, away from the museum’s collection of living and dead specimens. Rather, it leads towards hyperbolic thinking, or imagining what the world is like outside of the idealized museum displays. For example, while the Sant Ocean Hall displays a representation of marine life from around the world, the tanks do not include the toxic chemicals and trash that circulates

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<sup>75</sup> Lindsey, “Building a Collaborative Fiber Art Project,” 3.

<sup>76</sup> Vaccaro, “Feelings and Fractals,” 279.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 279.

among these animals in their natural environments.<sup>78</sup> As a representative space, the samples of the natural world within the museum's aquarium are metonymic with the world outside of the tank. Art historian Ann Reynolds argues that the specimens and didactics "require the spectator to establish a conceptual relationship between the two sites, regardless of whether or not they have actually traveled to both places."<sup>79</sup> The Smithsonian Community Reef brought more nuance to the metonymy of the coral reef in an aquarium to the actual ocean reefs. The handmade reefs brought the realities of ocean pollution into the museum space.

The volunteer makers were so enthusiastic about the project that many trained as museum docents and created a program "The Crocheter is In" to run parallel to a long-running Sant Ocean Program, "The Scientist is In." According to Lindsey, "Crocheters were accorded the same expertise in interpreting the making of the Smithsonian Community Reef as scientists are accorded in interpreting the permanent collection."<sup>80</sup>

The elevation of so-called amateur artists to the expert role also suggests the rethinking of knowledge formation. Crocheters could bring their experiential knowledge about making hyperbolic space and climate change. The Smithsonian Community Reef emphasized process, collaboration, and experiential learning about natural science—an extension of the sister arts tradition. The project, overall, was a measurable success. Lindsey reflects, "it is still unclear whether such craft-based projects are as educational for visitors to the Natural Museum of Natural History as they are for the community of makers, but I

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<sup>78</sup> Museum didactics do cite climate change and warming waters and trash, but the physical evidence of this is not included in exhibition displays.

<sup>79</sup> Ann Reynolds, "Reproducing Nature: The Museum of Natural History as Nonsite." *October*, Vol. 45 (Summer, 1988), 114

<sup>80</sup> Lindsey, Building a Collaborative Fiber Art Project," 6

believe we are heading in a productive and interesting direction.”<sup>81</sup> Perhaps the coral ecosystems and the extravagant coral reefs on display in the Smithsonian remained alien to some visitors. Yet, the experiences of the volunteers and contributors helped them relate more to the coral reefs and ecological crisis. With sister arts sensibilities, the Smithsonian Community Reef and similar projects provide space for interdisciplinary modes of knowledge production.

### Handmade Matters

When deployed in the tradition of sister arts of representing nature with untraditional materials and feminine worldviews, the *Reef* makes toxicity visible. Plastic trash is knotted, looped, and braided into the fibrous hyperbolic forms. The “Toxic Reefs” give new meaning to the ways in which women have historically incorporated nature into their work, and also have been rendered themselves as “natural.” In the process of making a reef with trash, the artist might internalize how this toxicity is already embodied. The endless circulation of plastics is in her hands—it is bringing harm not just to vulnerable marine ecosystems but also vulnerable human populations. In the essay “Feelings and Fractals: Woolly Ecologies of Transgender Matter,” Vaccaro theorizes that the process of making a crochet reef enlivens discourse for exploring “how we navigate environmental risk in myriad forms of collusion, protest, and cohabitation.”<sup>82</sup> By “we,” Vaccaro means people who are transgender, though her argument could be extended to discourses around fat activism, disability studies, environmental justice, and more. The materiality of the *Reef* entangles coral and corporal bodies.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>82</sup> Vaccaro, “Feelings and Fractals,” 283.

Crocheters imbue their reefs with their physical labor and creativity. *A Field Guide* and related online resources provide basic patterns for hyperbolic planes, double hyperbolic planes, pseudospheres and other mathematical shapes that resemble marine life, but many crocheters choose to improvise. As an example, Margaret Wertheim often cites a Los Angeles-based Core Reef Crafter Shari Porter, who “makes these fantastic, free-form pieces—who claims that the Holy Spirit guides her.”<sup>83</sup> Another frequent participant Aviva Alter invented a new genera of organisms modeled on the Cambrian Explosion, the event that generated animal organisms on Earth more than 500 million years ago (Fig. 4.16). Alter wrote how the Reef helped her conceptualize scientific concepts:

As far back as I can remember, I have made things. I have always used my hands and the artistic, visual side of my brain to create. At the same time I struggled to understand the fundamentals of science; I fantasized about being a scientist and to study the brain....While listening to a lecture by Christine, I entered the world of hyperbolic forms. I started to create examples of these forms the day of the lecture and I have not stopped since.<sup>84</sup>

Fellow crocheter Helen Bernasconi came to the Reef with a science background to explore her creative side (fig. 4.17). Bernasconi was a computer programmer and math teacher. Her crochet forms include intricate anemones and octopi featuring complex hyperbolic methods of five-fold symmetry. She retired from her science career to run an 80-acre farm in Victoria, Australia where she raises sheep whose wool she spins, dyes, and crochets into her mathematical configurations.<sup>85</sup> Many participants have described how the open-ended possibilities for patterns and materials is liberating. In a *New York*

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<sup>83</sup> Patricia Cohen, “Want to Save a Coral Reef? Bring Along Your Crochet Hook” in the *New York Times*, March 4, 2008. See also “Shari Porter,” *Crochet Coral Reef*, 196.

<sup>84</sup> Aviva Alter, “Aviva Alter,” *Crochet Coral Reef*, 196.

<sup>85</sup> Helen Bernasconi, “Helen Bernasconi,” *Crochet Coral Reef*, 195.

*Times* article on an exhibition of the Reef at the Institute for the Humanities and New York University, Barbara Van Elsen of the New York City Crochet Guild exclaimed, “It pushes the boundaries of crochet, using different materials. Exploring texture and color, it frees you.” She continues “the greatest way to get people really aware of what’s going on in the world.”<sup>86</sup> The article also mentions one crocheter who “just feels her way through the forms.” In each of these anecdotes, women are exploring the intersection of art and science on varying levels—sometimes this is intuitive and sometimes it is studied, and it is always *felt*.

These relatively mundane materials and methods are used as tools to feel our own hands making a reef, and think through related concepts of ecology, math, and identity. For Vaccaro, the process-based and gendered deployment of craft is a generative frame for thinking through bodily knowledge. She suggests that the marginalization of fiber as a gendered, domestic hobby can inform queer and transgender studies as both are “maligned materialities.”<sup>87</sup> This approach resonates with sister artists like Mary Delany and the Duchess of Portland who took up maligned feminine modes of expression—shellwork, poetry, floral collage—to create visionary and erotic natural worlds. Fiber is an ideal tool precisely because of its associations with feminine and feminist politics. The diverse and idiosyncratic contributions to *Crochet Coral Reef* have pushed against the gridded and contained notions of nature. The project has worked towards transgressing space to be *felt*, in both the material and more conceptual Deleuzian/Guattarian sense of the phrase. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they note that some nomadic cultures wore felted fabric. Felt is smooth: “It implies no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an

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<sup>86</sup> Cohen, “Want to Save a Coral Reef?”

<sup>87</sup> Vaccaro, “Feelings and Fractals,” 274.

entanglement of fibers obtained by fulling (for example, by rolling the block of fibers back and forth).”<sup>88</sup> Felt space, like hyperbolic space, contradicts linear, contained, or Euclidean spaces. With this in mind, felt methods offer a way to push against the institutionalization and containment of queer and transgender studies. Vaccaro posits: “the intervention that the handmade offers is to reexamine method as the ordering—its patterns, repeats, echoes (as waves of the sonic, ocean thumps, and women’s and feminist politics and studies)—of bodily knowledge.”<sup>89</sup>

The hyperbolic crochet pattern exemplifies the intervention potential of the handmade to complicate universalizing notions of nature, including what bodies are “natural.” The pattern is rooted in everyday knowledge, especially amateur and domestic knowledge, and helps guide what Wertheim calls “a visceral sense of hyperbolic being.”<sup>90</sup> In other words, making hyperbolic space and the geometrics of marine life prioritizes sensory knowledge over rational (Enlightenment) knowledge. Artists are making new natures from this embodied vantage point. These new natures are “abundant, infinite, and spiraling outward, proliferating an excess of surfaces, points of parallel, curvature, and intersecting lines.”<sup>91</sup> They decenter straight lines (and straight bodies) and they are always ongoing.

The hyperbolic construction of the reef produces an environment in which the porous boundaries between crochet, corals, trash become enmeshed into a textured and sensual assemblage. As Wertheim writes: “Knotted in thread, bound together across continents by tendrils of shared, evolving energy, *Crochet Coral Reef* offers us a

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<sup>88</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 475.

<sup>89</sup> Vaccaro, “Feelings and Fractals,” 276

<sup>90</sup> Wertheim, *A Field Guide*, 44.

<sup>91</sup> Vaccaro, “Feelings and Fractals,” 279.

metaphor—take it or leave it—*we are all corals now*.<sup>92</sup> The entangling of coral and corporal extends the legacies of women’s community-building through craft, and in this spirit, promises the potential of new paradigm shifts. Jeanne Vaccaro writes the “fleshy, fibrous seams of *Crochet Coral Reef* and the geometry of its marine ecology illustrate how new life, including the new life constituted by shifts in or confirmations of identity, can flourish.”<sup>93</sup>

### Hyperbolic Nature

*Crochet Coral Reef* fosters felt methods of thinking about nature and identity. This approach, as Vaccaro suggests, might enable new or vulnerable life to flourish. In this time of ecological crisis, a return to the handmade offers hope, or Earth Optimism. The Anthropocene was coined in the 1980s to characterize drastic human influence on the current ecological and geological epoch. While human impact can be readily measured for thousands of years, the most felt impact of human influence began with global colonization, and sped up drastically during colonization, and exponentially under global capitalism. The earth has been treated like an inexhaustible resource and a trash dump. A team of climate scientists warn:

In the dominant climate change narrative, humans are an external force driving change to the Earth System in a largely linear, deterministic way; the higher the forcing in terms of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, the higher the global average temperature.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Margaret Wertheim, “We Are All Corals Now” *Brooklyn Rail*, April 2, 2014. We are all corals, <https://brooklynrail.org/2014/04/criticspage/we-are-all-corals-now-a-crafty-yarn-about-global-warming> (accessed April 12, 2019). Emphasis is mine.

<sup>93</sup> Vaccaro, “Feelings and Fractals,” 278.

<sup>94</sup> Will Steffen, Johan Rockström, Katherine Richardson, Timothy M. Lenton, Carl Folke, Diana Liverman, Colin P. Summerhayes, Anthony D. Barnosky, Sarah E. Cornell, Michel Crucifix, Jonathan F. Donges, Ingo Fetzer, Steven J. Lade, Marten Scheffer, Ricarda Winkelmann, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, “Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene,

In this linear trajectory, the Earth will become an inhabitable hot house. The Great Barrier Reef and other ocean corals are the canaries in the coal mine, warning earth's inhabitants that they are sick. These reefs do not just warn us about marine life—their sickness relates to all vulnerable people in the world. While *Crochet Coral Reef* will not save the Great Barrier Reef, it offers new trajectories that are less deterministic and more hyperbolic. This path begins with the corals.

Haraway's influential assessment of the current ecological crisis demands that "modern man" be removed from the equation, arguing that the very term Anthropocene anticipates earth's ruin at human hands: "The myth system associated with the Anthropos is a setup, and the stories end badly. More to the point, they end in double death; they are not about ongoingness." In other words, discourses of the Anthropocene always presume human exceptionalism over nature. To move in a different direction, Haraway renames this era the Chthulucene, in homage to the complex and contradictory Medusa, who formed the Gorgonian entities of the sea with her own blood:

[Chthulucene] draws its name from the awe-full chthonic ones, the abyssal entities of the underworld, those ongoing generative and destructive powers beneath seas and airs and lands, those who erupt into the affairs of the well-ordered, upward-gazing, progress-stunned and star-besotted ones, who forget and so dismember their multispecies tangled flesh.<sup>95</sup>

Haraway's new world order is oriented through the fibers and feelers of spiders, jellyfish, quid, and the like, that can "infuse its tissues everywhere, despite the civilizing efforts of the agents of sky gods."<sup>96</sup> The framework takes up both concepts of ongoingness and

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*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 115, No. 33 (August 2018), 8252-8259

<sup>95</sup> Donna Haraway, "Foreword: Syn-chthonicTentacular Worldings: An SF Story for the Crochet Coral Reef," *Crochet Coral Reef*, 11.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

inbetweenness in that tentacular thinking is about ongoing process, and it moves through space nomadically, like felt. This interspecies knowledge builds from the ground up in tentacular, hyperbolic forms, decentering humans and their activities. In Bennett's more eloquent words, "a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman 'environment.'" If we reject anthropomorphism, then we also embrace the creative agency of nonhuman matter.

In this imagining of a new nature, corals are like seed bags. They contain all of the mundane matters to sustain life. The corals house other species, including animals, microbiomes, and macrobiomes. Microbiomes are the things that live in tissues, like fungus. The reefs support even larger marine ecologies—the jellyfish and squids. Through community-building, they form hyperbolic space as their network spreads through the ocean. From the corals, new ways of seeing relationships among species begins to take shape that is tentacular and rhizomatic. The *Reef* emulates this process of community building and world making. Vaccaro describes this ongoing, handmade process:

Its movement is about cocreation, about making connections and contexts. In the collective joining of hands, Crochet Coral Reef is a reconfiguring of shapes and gestures into a diversity of embodied forms and identities that labor...against the toxic effects of climate change and the reproduction of species (and identities).<sup>97</sup>

Here, the insistence on starting with corals to think about nature also reshapes notions of identity. For corals are polymorphous. Thynne discovered this about the madrepores, identifying how they reproduce in three different ways. Likewise, Eva Hayward has described how her study of corals as a research volunteer at the University of California Santa Cruz's Institute of Marine Sciences and Long Marine Lab helped her rework

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<sup>97</sup> Vaccaro, "Feelings and Fractals," 281

notions of “culture” and “nature” by studying the polymorphous sexualities of cup corals. Her work revealed that “animals exceed the illusionary absolutes of heteronormativity, monogamy, and sex,” and hence, the study of corals can decenter “culture-centric theories of difference, embodiment and identity.”<sup>98</sup> Building on the legacy of sister arts, crochet and coral materialities produce complex sensations and sensualities.<sup>99</sup>

Handmaking a new world with coral as source material—like the *Bulstrode Grotto* and *Crochet Coral Reef*—creates a radical interspecies ecology of sensorial/sensational collaboration. This is the stuff of science fiction. To push this imagining even further is Ursula K. LeGuin’s short story, “The Author of the Acacia Seeds. And Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics.” Here, LeGuin imagines a future Earth on which humans can understand the affect of animals and insects. In a lively discussion among therolinguists (humans who study the communication among species), the narrator describes the different writing styles among dolphins, fish, sharks, tarpons, and penguins.

The joy, the vigor, and the humor are all shared by Penguin authors; and, indeed, by many of the finer Seal *auteurs*. The temperature of the blood is a bond. But the construction of the brain, and of the womb, makes a barrier! Dolphins do not lay eggs. A world of difference lies in that simple fact.<sup>100</sup>

The nuance between animals, and also the nuances between “anthrocentric” readings of animal texts is part of a larger conversation among therolinguists about how to read the language of plants and rocks. In this future, scientists continue to push the boundaries of

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<sup>98</sup> Eva Hayward, “Fingeryeyes: Impressions of Cup Corals,” *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 24, No. 4 (November 2010), 50.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin, “Author of the Acacia Seeds and other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics,” *Real and the Unreal: Selected Stories from Ursula K. Le Guin*, Volume 2. (East Hampton, Mass.: Small Beer Press, 2012).

their own axioms.

The otherworldly installations of hyperbolic crocheted coral reefs follow the threads of queer and feminist recoveries of everyday, domestic knowledge that has transformed natural science in measurable ways. The Reef helps shift the narrative away from heroic stories about the conquest of nature, to the ongoing stories of coral reef ecologies. Haraway cheekily suggests that this paradigm shift “might “[dash] the twenty-first-century ships of the Heroes on a living coral reef instead of allowing them back to suck the last drop of fossil flesh out of dead rock.” In this hyperbolic, science fiction framework, the corals formed by the blood of Medusa create new ways of seeing and communicating with nature. The process of crocheting the coral reef with yarn and trash informs the sensational formation of identity. That humans, like all other matter, are vibrant assemblages, constantly impressing on matter and being impressed upon. Humans cannot rebalance nature alone, but accept interventions from new sources.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Aristotle's treatise *Poetics* determines that Greek tragedy should encompass a chain of events with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. The beginning introduces the protagonist; the middle introduces a problem, a knot, faced by the protagonist; and, at the end, the protagonist unravels the knot. Aristotle states, "A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles."<sup>1</sup> This formula continues to apply to most Western narratives. And here, in the final act of this dissertation, I find myself at a haphazard ending. The artworks detailed in this dissertation and the stories they tell are very much ongoing. Allyson Mitchell continues building her collection of discarded hobby crafts and reworks them into other richly layered and richly felt scenarios; Aaron McIntosh continues to hold *Invasive Queer Kudzu* workshops. Just recently, he invited an artist to teach kudzu basket-making at a workshop in Richmond. The Wertheims and the IFF will continue to teach and think hyperbolically, building a collection of crochet reefs to memorialize the Great Barrier Reef. More stitches will be stitched; more knots will be knotted. Perhaps this is an inherent challenge of writing about contemporary art, and also a particular challenge of writing about art that is ongoing. I do not know what will happen next.

Ursula K. LeGuin offers an alternative way of storytelling that focuses on the act of unraveling. In her essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," she tells a story a woman in search of wild oats with her two children, Baby Oo Oo in a sling and Little

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, translation by S. H. Butcher, VII. (Project Gutenberg EBook of Poetics. Released November 3, 2008) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm> (accessed April 12, 2019).

Oom carrying a basket. As the woman gathers oats with her children, the men search for action with their weapons. The men always come home with a good story. The woman learns she is inferior as she is told to be quiet and listen to the men's stories. "Go on," she says, "you just go on telling how the mammoth fell on Boob and how Cain fell on Abel and how the bomb fell on Nagasaki and how the burning jelly fell on the villagers and how the missiles will fall on the Evil Empire, and all the other steps in the Ascent of Man."<sup>2</sup> The men's stories, LeGuin predicts, are approaching their ends. In their absence, she offers stories that do not progress in time, but in space. Those spaces carry layers of meanings and things, but not in a linear formation. "The end may be a climax or revelation, or denouement or end in the Aristotelian sense, or it may just be where this story stops being."<sup>3</sup>

In the spirit of LeGuin and in the spirit of craft, I will conclude by spending more time unraveling these projects in a larger context of contemporary fiber projects and my own experience with them. My personal interest in this project was piqued by the phenomenon called "yarn bombing" or "guerilla knitting" and how it fits within the broader "puzzle picture" of American art. Anonymous artists simulated traditional "tagging" tactics of graffiti artists but with yarn instead of spray paint began garnering throughout the United States in the early 2000s. For example, the Washington, D.C.-based team the Warm and Fuzzies knitted tiny hats and scarves for the small firebox dioramas in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood (fig. 5.1). In 2011, NPR's *All Things Considered* covered the story "Crochet Vandals Do Graffiti...Like Your Grandma"

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<sup>2</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 151

<sup>3</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin, "What Makes A Story," <http://www.ursulakleguin.com/WhatMakesAStory.html> (accessed April 12, 2019).

illustrating a picture of crocheters “Captain Hook” and “Vanessa XKiller” tying a green granny square seater around a bear statue in a Los Angeles public park. The caption reads, “Stepping back to assess their handiwork, Vanessa concludes, it's ‘gangster cute.’”<sup>4</sup> These plays on femininity fascinated and sometimes troubled me. The movement grew quickly and local governments, libraries, and knitting shops began to take the lead. In 2012, the DC Public Library held a “Yarn Bomb the Library Class.” The library partnered with the Warm and Fuzzies to teach participants how to knit. The library provided a bibliography of the growing number of texts dedicated to the topic, like *Knitting For Good: Creating Change Stitch by Stitch* by Betsy Greer and *Craft Activism: People, Ideas, and Projects from the New Community of Handmade and How You Can Join In* by Joan Tapper.

In September of 2013, I visited the massive undertaking, *Knit the Bridge*, in Pittsburgh (fig. 5.4). More than 580 knitted and crocheted blankets decorated the Andy Warhol Bridge. To accomplish this feat, the organizers held hundreds of “knit ins” with local churches, museums, senior centers, and schools and involved more than 1900 volunteers. My visit bridge coincided with an NFL football game at a nearby stadium. As I walked, I was joined by a cohort of Pittsburgh Steelers fans who had no idea why the bridge was covered with blankets, but they loved it. In September of 2014, I participated in the yarn bombing of the entrance to the Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. This experience perhaps marked the peak of institutional yarn bombing. The entire project was executed with military precision in full daylight. The Smithsonian staff members tasked

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Sharpe, “Crochet Vandals Do Graffiti...Like Your Grandma” *All Things Considered*, April 25, 2011. <https://www.npr.org/2011/04/25/135705721/crochet-vandals-do-graffiti-like-your-grandma> (accessed April 12, 2019).

with organizing the “bomb” had to coordinate with volunteers, the Office of Protection Services, Smithsonian Gardens, and Smithsonian Facilities. All of the red yarn was dipped in anti-flammable chemicals before being attached to outdoor structures. Likewise, all of the volunteers were relegated to covering hedges and light posts as Smithsonian Facilities only approved the use of one ladder for the staff organizers (fig. 5.5). Volunteers found humor in the situation, and I enjoyed learning from many volunteers who were veteran yarn bombers in their local communities. This aspect of the community-oriented projects fascinated me. The participants wanted to contribute their talents to a public program, and to show off their labors and network with like-minded individuals.

And yet, many aspects of yarn-bombing and related “craftivist” projects unnerved me. Many projects reinforced the conservative and potentially detrimental aspects of fiber history. Philadelphia-based yarn bomber Jessie Hemmons, known as Ishknits, earned a local reputation for her colorful knit graffiti on phone booths and light posts. In 2011, she starred in print media advertising campaign for tampons. Ishknits poses in a marigold yellow hat with a bicycle embellished with pink, purple, and blue yarn. The ad exclaims: “New Tampax Radiant keeps your period invisible. How you choose to stand out is up to you.”<sup>5</sup> This ad reinforces Roszika Parker’s argument in *Subversive Stitch* that embroidery often feminizes and neutralizes women’s bodies. Parker points to the embroidery designs on Lil-Lets tampons, arguing “embroidery also evokes the stereotype of the virgin in opposition to the whore, an infantilising representation of women’s sexuality.”<sup>6</sup> In a

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<sup>5</sup> Tampax Radiant print advertising campaign, 2011. <https://www.ishknits.com/853/> (accessed May 21, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women’s Press, 1985), 2.

related example, a world-famous yarn bomber Agata Oleksiak, known as “Olek,” drew widespread criticism for a 2014 graffiti project (fig. 5.6). In an effort to raise awareness about ocean health and declining shark populations, Olek yarn-bombed the underwater sculpture *Time Bomb* by Jason Decaires Taylor at the Museo Subacuático de Arte, an underwater museum built within an artificial reef to attract scuba-diving tourists away from the delicate Mexican Caribbean Coral Reef. *Hyperallergic* reported:

Museum director Jaime Gonzalez alleges that, aside from not asking permission to do so, she destroyed vital organisms living on the sculptures in the process. *La Jornada* reports he is now preparing a lawsuit against the artist.<sup>7</sup>

In response, Olek suggested, “If they want to sue me, I don’t know. I can pay them back with crocheting more underwater sculptures.”<sup>8</sup> Together these examples infer the potentially harmful naiveté of craftivism. The ironic and glib aesthetics of “gangster cute” taken up by artists including Ishknits and Olek undermine the more politically-minded projects detailed in this dissertation. Together, they also reinforce harmful stereotypes of femininity and the female body that reify the trope of fiber as a grandmotherly or innocuous pastime. The troubling friction between activist projects and those merely masquerading as “craftivist” led me to pursue projects that directly engage with the promise and challenges of fiber. While some projects increased in scale with corporate and government sponsorship, others grew more politically urgent. In February of 2016, textile artist Chi Nguyen began organizing stitch-ins around the U.S. Supreme Court hearing *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt*. The case was sent to the

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<sup>7</sup> Laura C. Mallonee, “Yarn Artist Tries to Save Ocean, May Have Damaged It Instead,” *Hyperallergic*, August 14, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/144034/yarn-artist-tries-to-save-ocean-may-have-damaged-it-instead/> (Accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Supreme Court following the 2013 Texas HB2, a legislative measure that drastically restricted access to abortion across the state. Doctors who provided abortion services were required to secure admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles, and every facility had to meet ambulatory surgical center (ASC) standards. Such measures were strategically designed to close down nearly 30 abortion clinics in the state.<sup>9</sup> Only a handful of clinics, based in large cities, met the standards. The Supreme Court's decision would affect approximately 5.4 people with reproductive needs in the state. To galvanize support to strike down this law and to support reproductive health in Texas, Nguyen organized the quilting project *5.4 Million and Counting*. Contributors were asked to send a 10 inch by 10 inch fabric block that contained any arrangement or number of embroidered tally marks (###). Each stitch would account for one person affected by HB2, to include cis-gendered and transgender women. In total, the final quilt would include 5.4 million stitches. Nguyen organized stitch-ins and accepted responses from all over the world. I joined the organized movements at the Supreme Court on March 2. The blanket, which at the time, included several thousand blocks in myriad patterns and colors, was extended along the edge of the west lawn. It was a cold day, and a row of volunteers (including me) used the blanket in its most literal sense—we wrapped it around our back to protect our bodies from a chilly wind (fig. 5.7-8). On June 27, the Supreme Court struck down the case. But of course, that's not the end of the story. More cases will challenge the courts.

In times of crisis, there is a return to the hand: The rise of the arts and crafts movement during the Industrial Revolution, Gandhi spinning yarn during India's

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<sup>9</sup> Chi Nguyen, "5.4 Million and Counting," <http://whatchidid.com/5point4million> (accessed April 12, 2019).

revolution; “Knitting for Victory” campaign during World War II; the “Surrogate Others” sewn worm to protest nuclear testing in Nevada; the *AIDS Memorial Quilt*; and the Pussy Hat. In response to abstract uncertainty or fear, the politics of the hand helps one think through the problem. Julia Bryan-Wilson ponders, “perhaps craft matters in part because it gives us purchase on a pointed, potentially messy, necessarily intricate and in-process activism, as it leaves room for the dropped stitch, the slight irregularity, the imperfection that reveals the personal investment and care in making.”<sup>10</sup> As Bryan-Wilson suggests, it is along these frayed edges of fiber that makers can grapple with and work through their politics.

### Monsters

*Ladies Sasquatch*, *Invasive Queer Kudzu*, and *Crochet Coral Reef* are all imagined new natures. Through the evocation of environmental tropes, the artists fostered creative ways of thinking through and about identity. Rather than seeing nature as a resource to be exploited, these artworks turned to the unwanted, the marginalized, and the obsolete. Mitchell rescues dowdy handicrafts and grubby rugs in order to revive the affective part of 1970s lesbian feminism. McIntosh cheers on the invasive kudzu plant, correlating it to his own queer body. The Wertheims saved their own plastic trash, eventually knitting and crocheting it into beautiful and heartbreaking coral reefs. The artworks incorporate the unwanted and then they invoke monsters: Lady Sasquatches, Invasive Kudzu, Medusa. These are often understood as terrorizing. They symbolize everything we fear: excess, contamination, unpredictability. The authors of *Arts of Living*

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<sup>10</sup> Bryan Wilson, “Knit Dissent” in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. Suzanne Hudson and Alexander Dumbadze. (Hoboken: Blackwell, 2013), 253.

on a *Damaged Planet* argue: “On a Damaged Planet, monsters and ghosts are figures hiding in plain sight. They point us to forms of noticing that crosscut forms of knowledge, official and vernacular, science and storytelling. They show us co-species practices of living.”<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, the monsters in this dissertation take up the vernacular and storytelling to push against official narratives and linear science. As they embrace monstrous excess, they can fantasize new natures taking shape—rewilding the world. In this way, Lady Sasquatches, Kudzu, and Medusa are wonderful. They can help uproot the real monsters: racism, sexism, and homophobia woven into everyday landscapes and official narratives. As *Arts of Living* suggests, “as artists, we conjure magical figures, weave speculative fictions, animate feral and partial connections. We necessarily stumble, and then try again. With every mark, difference haunts and struggles appear anew.”<sup>12</sup>

### Final Matters/What Matters

This dissertation also explored varying experiential and experimental engagements with nature in the United States, a nation founded on the notion that nature was ripe for the taking. Instead, the artists created natures. The engaging projects proved that crafting is not simply about making an object—how to crochet a hat, or how to piece a quilt—but how to make meaning with our hands and with community. Storytelling becomes spatial, drawn out on the thread. Within this social space, as LeGuin suggests,

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<sup>11</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene; Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M176.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, G12

we can dance, be in rhythm, and learn.<sup>13</sup> The outcome is not the point. As such, this dissertation attempted to take seriously the subtle ways in which fiber prompts invention, experimentation, becoming, and doing. It also takes seriously fiber's potential for empathy, humor, playfulness. Embodied storytelling carves out new spaces and networks of care. Herein lies the promise of fiber-based activism.

### Thank You, Next

This final section of the dissertation wonders what happens next. As I continue to keep track of all of these ongoing projects, I also will explore how my methods might be applied to other fiber-based or nature-based projects. For example, what would ongoingness and inbetweenness do for artworks that directly speak to nature? In the last several years, eco artists have attended to the problems and solutions of climate change in expressions of social practice and direct action. Many artists, including Mark Dion, Olafur Eliasson, Mel Chin, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles (to name a few) mediate environmental sites like oil spills, landfills, glaciers, and watersheds. Many of these projects certainly create inbetweenness. Eliasson, for example, created a glacier series that brought melting chunks of rock to city spaces to raise awareness for the unseen glaciers of the world.

Fiber-based projects that do not engage with nature also offer opportunities for thinking through concepts of ongoingness and inbetweenness. New sites might include borders, airports, restaurants, or hospitals. Tanya Aguiñiga's *Border Quipu* is an ongoing collection of knots made by people crossing the United States and Mexico Border (fig.

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<sup>13</sup> LeGuin, "What Makes A Story."

5.9). The multi-colored knots form massive quipus. Aram Han Sifuentes teaches embroidery and citizenship skills in her subversive *U. S. Citizenship Test Sampler* workshops. Documented or undocumented persons interested in the citizenship process can form care networks. And finally, Carole Francis Lung dons the persona of Frau Fiber to intervene on fast fashion stores like Forever21. In her “Pedal Powered Sewing Factory” she turns the unwanted t-shirts into shopping bags, encouraging them to ditch fast fashion. Perhaps these stitches are like seeds, fostering new ways of transforming hyperlocal spaces like borders and shopping malls. LeGuin writes: “Imagination, working at full strength, can shake us out of our fatal, adoring self-absorption. And make us look up and see—with terror or relief—that the world does not in fact belong to us at all.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ursula K. LeGuin, “Lord Dunsany: In the Land of Time and Other Fantasy Tales, edited by S. T. Joshi: A Review,” <http://www.ursulakleguin.com/UKL-Review-Joshi-LordDunsany.html> (accessed April 12, 2019).

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