Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.09

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Katarzyna Ostalska
University of Lodz

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS: Crip-Queer Rural Intimacies with More-than-Human Worlds

ABSTRACT

The article is the first full-length analysis of the artistic and literary works of ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, the Queer and NeuroDiverse Collective, comprising Aslan and Chris Gylee, created during their residency in Karelia, Finland. It focuses on the project *Karelia* (2021), the collective's literary works and literary inspirations, artistic practices, performances, and the video film *Alone among the Trees*. ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS' works are explored in the context of the recent queer rural turn, reclaiming the beyond-metropolitan country space for queer residents. The Collective present themselves as deeply and intimately entangled with more-than-human subjects: the land, trees, grass, moss, soil, flowers, etc., into which they weave their identities, love, and desires. To analyse their works, the article draws on Sprinkle and Stephens's eco-sexual approach, which finds joy and pleasure in ecological practices and the natural world, respecting plants' agency and acknowledging their agential sexuality. The Collective's NeuroQueer ontological and epistemological position recognises queerness and neurodiversity as a meaningful and indispensable part of biodiversity. The article examines their non-universalising, individual methodological approach outlined, for instance, in "Crip-Queer Rurality as an Artistic Methodology" and Aslan's own insightful project "'Autistic Long-Form' as an Artistic Methodology," inspired by Piepzna-Samarasinha's *The Future is Disabled* (2022). Adopting the maxim "Access is Love" as their coda, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS reads access as the exchange of ideas permeated with mutual respect and affection, not a political declaration. Finally, nearly 20 years after the publication of Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), the article situates *Karelia* within the present-day debate on crip-queer futurity.

Keywords: ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, crip-queer, NeuroQueer, neurodiversity, ecosexuality, crip-queer futurity, the Queer Rural Turn, Karelia.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 22 May 2026. Verified: 5 June 2026. Accepted: 16 June 2026.

CRIP-QUEER INTIMACIES

Critics agree that it is almost impossible to define crip-queer intimacies in a way that would be acceptable to all members of both communities and to scholars alike, and to avoid, at the same time, homogenising and essentialising, which disregards the ongoing process of volatile identifications over time in a given culture. Freed of their previously pejorative connotations, the terms "crip" and "queer" are intended to "make people wince[1] . . . jolt out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance" (Kafer 15). Butler explains how subjects of queer theory are re-constituted by former "shaming interpellation," arguing that "'Queer' derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult" (12). The same mechanism can be applied to the term "crip."

Employing this correspondence, when faced with "the potential risks and exclusions," queer and crip theories exhibit a nonconforming and uncompromising approach (Kafer 15). With the above in mind, queerness tends to be conceptualised as an extensive, inclusive, and shifting category; it becomes elusive and defies clear-cut definitions (see Butler; Sandahl; McRuer; Kafer; Muñoz). Its inclusiveness constitutes a major strength, but it also embodies a potential threat of what Sandahl calls "dissolving" the edges (27). On the one hand, queerness is related to non-normative gender and sex categories and non-stable identities. On the other, it has a political dimension that works alongside. In "Critically Queer," Butler describes this dual mechanism:

> If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. (14)

With a broader agenda in mind, crip studies embrace not only people with movement disabilities but also those with mental health issues, the neurodiverse, d/Deaf, and those and with other sensory impairments (Sandahl 27). Centred around politics, with connectivity as its goal, such an approach encourages one to "contextualise, historically and politically, the meanings typically attributed to disability, thereby positioning "disability" as a set of practices and associations that can be critiqued, contested, and transformed" (Kafer 9).

---

[1] After Nancy Mairs.

In this vein, Alice Wong in *Disability Visibility* defines disability as a heterogeneous concept open to redefinitions:

> Disabled people have always existed, whether the word *disability* is used or not. To me, disability is not a monolith, nor is it a clear-cut binary of disabled and nondisabled. Disability is mutable and ever-evolving. Disability is both apparent and nonapparent. Disability is pain, struggle, brilliance, abundance, and joy. Disability is sociopolitical, cultural, and biological. Being visible and claiming a disabled identity brings risks as much as it brings pride. (Introduction)

Crip-queer theory aims to challenge the social perception of disabled and non-heteronormative bodyminds as pitiable by default and inherently less preferable (McRuer 9). Moreover, it brings into focus multifaceted, seemingly contradictory experiences. In her 2017 lecture "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice" published on her blog *Leaving Evidence*, Mia Mingus, a Disability Justice activist, declares: "I love being disabled ***and*** my history of disability has been so drenched in trauma and sorrow, pity and isolation, silence and pain, shame and guilt, violence and abuse" (bold and italics in the original).[2]

Binary hegemonic regimes of "compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 18) work in tandem to mask the intersectional dimension of both queerness and cripness: in McRuer's terms, "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness: that, in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness, and vice-versa" (2), both working in favour of what Piepzna-Samarasinha calls the mainstream "white supremacist capitalist colonialist ableist patriarchy" of the "white/cis/abled" (*Care Work*).

In line with this thinking, Coráñez Bolton emphasises the need to elaborate McRuer's ideas, drawing on colonial, international relations, and the critique of imperialism. His study examines "the queerness of disability that colonialism attempts to rehabilitate and normalize through either heteronormative marriage, liberal education, or racial capitalist political economy" (9). With regard to the "racial capitalist political economy," Pickens in *Black Madness and Mad Blackness* argues that normativity tends to equate Blackness with disability, and therefore, at first, one needs to disentangle one from the other by applying an intersectional queer perspective (17).

[2] See https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/

Furthermore, cripping and queering can also be explored as creative and artistic practices. Sandahl understands queering as subverting institutionalised homophobia, bringing into light dormant queer implications that were intentionally concealed or distorted by heteronormativity (37). Correspondingly, cripping interrogates the hegemonic system of able-bodiedness, which labels crip-queer bodyminds as deficient (ibid.). According to Sandahl, queering and cripping disclose the arbitrariness of the socially constructed normalcy, aberrance, and deficiency to "disarm what is painful with wicked humor, including camp" (ibid.).

Crip-queer intimacies aim to create safe spaces that are both inclusive and imaginative. Such empowering areas operate around the creative love in action praxis. Drawing upon Sins Invalid, Kafai in *Crip Kinship* explains: "A crip-centric liberated zone is a multidirectional community love practice. It is a place of our own creation where we, the disabled, queer of color many, can exist and thrive liberated from the oppressions that relegate our daily lives." In such zones, crip-queer intimacies can be realised through activism, self-love, and/or mutual aid, but also through storytelling, performance, art, poetry, creative practice, and intimacy. Wong's *Disability Intimacy* demonstrates that intimacy is an inclusive term that embraces a spectrum of sensations and experiences, ranging from the need for various forms of contact, or its lack, to (dis)engagement in particular sexual or sensuous practices. The crip-queer intimacies explored in this text are "biosexual," non-linear, multi-layered, more-than-human, and intimately spread across different past, present, and future temporalities and spatiality, intersecting on numerous platforms, sometimes overlapping with Wong's categories and sometimes exceeding them.

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS AND CRIP-QUEER INTIMACIES

The article will analyse the crip-queer rural intimacies developed by ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, a crip-queer (Queer and NeuroDiverse) collective consisting of Aslan[3] and Chris Gylee, and the work that they created during their first residency in the forested land of Finnish Karelia in 2021. Over ten years of art and life partnership, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS have explored diverse artistic practices, from live performances, theatre plays, exhibitions, and installations, through films, videos, social media events, to poetry, fiction writing, and many more. The artists acknowledge their

[3] Unlike Chris Gylee, Aslan does not provide his full name on the website and it appears that he chooses to be identified by a single-word appellation.

affinity with Disability Justice and Sins Invalid whose legacy inspired their own practice. In "Working as a NeuroQueer Artist," ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS enumerate the principles according to which they structure their lives: "*Nothing about us without us! Access is Love! Hoping for the best is not a strategy! Access is a conversation! Normal is an Ideology*" (1).

The Collective's motto, "*Access is Love*" ("Access"), consciously echoes Mingus's access intimacy, which does not limit itself to erotic closeness but embraces any kind of loving contact, an "elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs" (Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link"). Accordingly, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS define access intimacy as "an ongoing loving conversation rather than a policy, manifesto, or best practice formulation" ("Access"). In their projects, Aslan and Chris Gylee ensure that this access dialogue is implemented before the production stage in their collaborators' commitments, budget planning, and, finally, in the stage performances—they aim to keep in sync with the audience's needs regarding seating, admission, entrance, mobility, etc. ("Access"). In Interview Two carried out as part of "'Autistic Long-Form' as an Artistic Methodology" project (2023–24), supported by Fonds Darstellende Künste, whose aim was to explore how neurodiversity affects his creative practice as a live performer and a writer, Aslan admits that access policy addresses not only material obstacles but also conceptual ones: "So it's not only the physical space that needs to be designed, it's also the conceptual space and the temporal space and the procedural space." Access also involves accommodating the emotional and physical needs of a neurodiverse performer during rehearsals and performances and ensuring a sense of safety ("Working").

NEUROQUEER INTIMACIES: QUEERING NEUROCOGNITIVITY AND NEURODIVERSITY AS QUEERNESS

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS define themselves as a Queer and NeuroDiverse Collective. The term neurodiversity, coined by Singer, emerged from the concept of "neurological pluralism" (Chapman 126). Singer's studies challenged the model of a single preferable neurotypical brain against which all others should be compared and situated (4–5). Moreover, she advocated treating neurodiversity on a par with other categories, such as race, sex, and gender, and creating systems to preserve neurodiverse behavioural patterns (126). In *Empire of Normality*, Chapman refers to Singer's theory arguing that a wide spectrum of human neurodiversity (modelled on biodiversity) abolishes the alleged supremacy

of the neurotypical mind which is regarded as preferred over other types (4–5). Contemporary scientific research (e.g., Thurman) proposes a new sensory-cognitive model of intelligence, grounded in neurodiversity studies, that might adequately correlate with the current evolutionary stage of humanity. Such an approach encourages pride in neurodiversity instead of perpetuating stigma and pathologisation. In sync with that, in Interview Three of "'Autistic Long-Form' as an Artistic Methodology," Aslan, diagnosed in 2023 (at the age of 47), refers to the freedom that comes from no longer attempting to pass as a neurotypical person as "unmasking" and "a big relief." Similarly, Piepzna-Samarasinha in *The Future is Disabled*, refers to her diagnostic experiences as "homecoming" and "figuring it out" ("*when I came home/when I figured it out*" instead of "when I was diagnosed with autism").

Aslan identifies as NeuroQueer, but this appellation has become widely recognised relatively recently. Walker was one of the first to introduce the concept in 2008, elaborating it in an essay (2015), then expanded and included in his book *Neuroqueer Heresies* (2021). According to Walker, the concept refers to "the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously." Yergeau, together with other bloggers (Michaels-Dillon and Grace), claims a dispersed authorship of the term and argues that every autistic experience is neuroqueer in the sense of challenging social norms (27). Similarly, Walker encourages exploring the entanglements, intersectionality, and performativity of NeuroQueerness, its subversive, artistic, and literary potential, queering neurocognitivity, and thinking of neurodiversity as queerness.

"A VISION:" THE POEM AS AN ARTISTIC CODA OF THE ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS

As argued earlier, Aslan's autism diagnosis necessitated redefining self-identifications and professional routines in order to accommodate neurodiverse emotional and physical needs. To avoid congestion and stress and to lower the carbon footprint, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS "travels slowly" with stopovers and hardly any luggage, acts without unnecessary mise-en-scène, rehearses in two-hour intervals, and does not perform when overcome with illness ("Working"). In the poem "A Vision," the Collective summarises their artistic and neurodiverse practices. "A Vision" resembles the Autistic Long-Form theory developed by Piepzna-Samarasinha in *The Future is Disabled*; according to her, the performance text by a neurodiverse artist wanders in a way comparable to a river current on whose path there

may be obstacles, twists and turns, sedimentation, but it always follows its own internal, flowing, non-linear rhythm. Piepzna-Samarasinha calls this way of communicating "a de-capitalization of time" because the artist roams freely and in an extended way, sometimes going back in circles, digressing or returning to the previous threads or ideas. Aslan, who studied this form in his solo project (2023–24), recognised it as a familiar creative pattern of performing as well. In his own words, it corresponds to the way his brain tends to contextualise things: first creating a grid and, from this pattern, deducing words and situations. Aslan sums it up that his neurodiverse mind works by structuring and patterning: "I think where my autistic brain comes into the equation is this recognition and creation of pattern" (see Interview One in "'Autistic Long-Form'"). In the same interview, he compares his creative practice to a multilayered narrative woven rigorously from different threads. To some extent, weaving seems to be a comparable metaphor to Piepzna-Samarasinha's undulating river. In the poem "A Vision," ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS introduce themselves to the audience as contemporary troubadours or bards of what they call Queer Myths beyond time, always on the move, not needing much apart from a place to perform, in the woods, on the stage:

> *We reimagine ourselves as 21st century travelling players.*
> *Living novels.*
> *We will hold a repertoire of stories in our bodies, ready to be told.*
> *It is our magic that we can see the edges of other worlds, hear the words spoken there, feel it all keenly under our skins*. ("With Forests," emphasis in the original)

Identifying themselves as "living novels," the Collective assert the corporeal roots of their poetry; it is poetry that comes from bodily experiences and sensations. Crip-queer bodies have become textualised to record sensuous narratives for Crip-queer futurity. "*We become an archive, a song /. . . . Our stories will be heard wherever they are needed*" (ibid.). Turning themselves into living libraries, the Collective offer their work to potential readers. They are at the community's disposal but need to be summoned because their audience needs to be open to their stories and willing to listen to them. Pixelated, in print or word of the mouth, they travel via physical space and cyberspace, trying to reach as many people as possible: "*Our bodies can travel to multiple places and times, as copies, traces, digital signatures*" (ibid.). The Collective's goal is to heal crip-queer communities from the wounds of "compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 18): "*We are faith healers, not just of flesh, but as words on a page, shapes on a screen, vibrations from a machine*" ("With Forests," emphasis in the original).

The content of the "living novels" constantly changes, grows organically with every new journey, and expands:

> *Ghosts. Journeys through the stars. Strange grammar. Sex and starships.*
> *Every time we tell our stories, they change form, take on new orders.*
> *They are never the same twice.*
> *Sometimes they are urgent; sometimes pulled up like strange fish from muddy waters;*
> *sometimes hanging in the air, bright and transparent*. (ibid., bold mine)

The alliterated "stars/strange/sex/starship" captures the essence of the Collective's creative practice: their focus on futurity, playfulness, glitter, sensuality, desire, and access intimacy. Crip-queer performances take a fluid form, shifting, refusing a single interpretation, adapting to new conditions, and constantly evolving. ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS effortlessly entangle the vision's structure with more-than-human entities ("pulled up like strange fish from muddy waters") and intuitively recognise it as emerging from the specific aura of the geographical location ("air, bright and transparent"). They listen to the "*forested planet*" (ibid.), and the stories are there to be told. As a matter of fact, Karelia has been associated historically with the oral tradition of storytelling. The Karelian region has many stories still waiting to be told: divided into the Northern Finnish part and the Russian Republic of Karelia, it is populated by Karelians, Vepsians, and the Sámi, the only indigenous people in the European Union. The region is also known for its ecological biodiversity and its forests.

"A Vision" is structured across the starry universe, beyond human scale, "*brought back from a place that exists outside of time; an elsewhere; a simultaneous layering of future, present, and past*" (ibid.). Wong defines intimacy as "an ever-expanding universe composed of a myriad of heavenly bodies" (*Disability Intimacy*). In the poem, the Collective relate how the stories arising from their crip-queer bodies are preceded by concentration and meditations: "*We close our eyes, take a deep breath, open our mouths. / A forested planet emerges*" (ibid.). Words acquire physical properties when uttered intimately. The intimacy of "sharing stories and sharing hearts" (Nijkamp) in the case of ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS takes the form of sensuous narratives about the "*forested planet*" of the new Karelia.

For ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, crip-queer rural intimacies are practised with the more-than-human world, including the Karelian forest, the undergrowth, the air, the stars, minerals, rocks, seeds, the soil, and the air. The article examines Aslan and Gylee's first encounter with Finnish rurality, which has found its artistic expression in the project *Karelia: A Queer Fantasy in Two Parts* (2021). In its three-fold manifestations (a live performance, a booklet, and the video film *Alone among the Trees*),

the project embraces Present Tense (a desirous encounter with more-than-human realities of the forest), Past Tense (the forest as a refuge from the persecution of the non-normative people to which the performance refers), and Future Tense (New Karelia: the Queer Planet). *Karelia* includes, among other elements, monologues, dance, songs, love letters from famous queer people, and epistolary and speculative fiction, e.g., Ursula Le Guin's *Worlds of Exile and Illusion*.

CRIP-QUEER INTIMACIES AND THE RURAL TURN

Aslan and Chris Gylee were both born in the UK and lived primarily in London. Before moving to Finland, the Collective travelled extensively, residing and performing in many countries, preferably in large cosmopolitan cities, such as Tokyo, Istanbul, Granada, Tanta, and Berlin (where they were living just before Karelia) ("We-Need-To-Talk-About-Britain"). As shown, their former locations were entirely urban, and their lifestyles could be characterised by what Halberstam defines as "metronormativity" (36–37). Metronormativity views large metropoles as preferred locations for queer communities and tends to associate coming out with leaving rural areas and moving to cities. Therefore, for ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, Karelia signifies a radical "opposite direction" transition from the metropolis to the countryside, which corresponds as well to the queer "rural turn" (Johnson 9; Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 9). This relatively recent phenomenon focuses on exploring queer lives outside large urban areas where nonnormative people have often felt anonymous, secure, and supported by others.

Scholarly works, such as Johnson's *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*, *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies,* edited by Gray, Johnson, and Gilley, and *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* by Herring, encourage a reconceptualising of the historical image of the countryside as backward, homophobic, and culturally regressive. The past connotations of rural life with heterosexuality and proverbial good physical health (Cartwright 10–17), as well as the hegemonic masculinity associated with rural family providers (55), resulted from the alliance between ableism and heteronormativity. Present-day rurality, however, is often seen as a more inclusive and "astoundingly complex assemblage of people, places, and positionalities" (Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 8) rather than as a one-dimensional location of ignorance, isolationism, and conservatism. In other words, the queer rural turn problematises *traditional* perspectives on rurality, reclaiming the countryside as a territory where queer people may live and flourish. Unlike

the outness of metropoles, the rural crip-queer presence is an outcome of "a delicate balance of nonheterosexuality and localness, putting forth a logic of different-but-similar" (Baker 42), which assumes that, in various social groups, queerness and cripness in rural areas may be blended, latent and/or explicit (Thomsen 66). Therefore, the "social, economic, and political positioning of rural queers forces a kind of synthesis between desire and secrecy. This synthesis, which may be momentary, marks geographic spaces in hostile environments, but also discursively claims ideological space" (Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 15).

In *Karelia*, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS establish an intimate relationship with the audience by being open about the anxieties and vulnerabilities they felt in moving from Berlin to rural Finland, and their sense of what they had left behind: namely, the metropole's anonymity and the backing of crip-queer urban communities (*Karelia*). Moreover, remote, politically divided rural Finland, situated close to the Russian border, signifies the dreaded exposure to the gaze of supposedly normative or even homophobic farmers, which might lead to discomfort, conflict, or aggression. At the same time, Karelia entices them as a utopian, promised land for crip-queer communities. On the one hand, the Collective is aware that their Karelian residency takes place in a sheltered area where artists can regularly enjoy a privileged position in claiming the space: both as people with no movement impairments and as white Europeans with a substantial budget from the grant. On the other hand, the project envisages an imaginary land, between utopia and dystopia, overshadowed by metronormative doubts: "A green horizon. An elsewhere. An other. It was a possibility of an ideal and a utopia, underscored by an unknowing and a dark bubbling of fear. Fear of violence, of isolation. Of men in trucks and hard stares in rural settlements" (*Karelia*).

The poem below visually renders the stages of their emotional and physical journey:

> But then we got on an U-Bahn,
>
> an S-Bahn,
>
> a train,
>
> and then another train. (*Karelia*)

The visual layout resembles the steps but in descent, rather than ascent. The downward movement suggests little hope and a gradual immersion in despair, as in Dante's *Inferno*, peeling away the protective and familiar infrastructure of the city to enter the Unknown Rurality. One of the

main tenets of the *Karelia* project was to explore how the rural turn in Karelia would affect its creators' queerness, and vice versa. This artistic study is very much in sync with contemporary, scholarly research on how rurality affects, interrogates, and constructs sexualities in relation to the environment, space, and locality (Thomsen 67).

THE RURAL TURN AND NEUROQUEER SEXUALITY

Through contact with the more-than-human world, *Karelia: A Queer Fantasy in Two Parts* has enabled the Collective to explore NeuroQueer sexualities in an unfamiliar environment and open up to new "biophiliac" experiences. Starting from July 2021, the Collective realised several short-term residences in Finland: The Old Mine Residency in Outokumpu, July 2022; Silence Residency in Kaukonem, July 2023; Mustarinda Residency in Hyrynsalmi, 5–11 July 2024; Tou Tou Residency in Joutsa, November–December 2024; Saari Residence, Mynamaki. In 2023, the Collective received a grant for the project "Old Growth: 'Crip-Queer Rurality' as an Artistic Methodology" (Saari Residence) financed by the Kone Foundation (Kone Fundation).

Heteronomativity has traditionally positioned queer desire as divergent from the more-than-human world. It has been depicted as "unnatural" or "against nature" (Alaimo 51), while NeuroQueer people have been classified as asexual (e.g., Sala et al.; Dewinter, De Graaf, and Begeer).

However, according to current research, autistic people present a much wider range of diverse non-cis and non-normative, bisexual, homosexual, hypersexual, and asexual behaviours than neurotypical individuals, and they experience gender dysphoria much more frequently (e.g., Sala et al.; Dewinter, De Graaf, and Begeer). The ratio of sexual diversity among autistic people oscillates between 15–35% (Sarris) at the lowest to 69.7% at the highest (Neff).

Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (drawing on Chisholm) conceive of queer "biophiliac" (using Chisholm's phrase) desire as a prototypical vital agent of evolutionary change, "the quintessential life force . . . the experimental, co-adaptive, symbiotic and nonreproductive interspecies couplings that become evolution" (39). Their idea draws on Alaimo, who argues that queer sexuality, with its biodiverse roots, shows that a "universe of differing naturecultures, propelled by the pursuit of pleasure" does not operate around compulsory heterosexuality, biological determinism, or fixed gender categories (64).

Moreover, the outcome of the Finnish residency has paved the way for redefining queerness and cripness anew. Aslan declares:

> In this rural place I am here and queer and part of nature, nothing "unnatural." The tree embraces me, the biodiversity expects queerness from me as nature is the very definition of non-binary and I am part of it and it is part of me and it takes to heal and it takes time—but I have time for this I make time for this. (*Karelia*)

In order to progress, the human and more-than-human world requires bio/neuro diversity, transcending all forms of the so-called normativity. Living in the countryside has made it palpably clear that queer and NeuroQueer desire have always been an essential part of the biodiverse world. It is much more than a sense of belonging; it is a biological necessity.

As ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS' practices indicate, NeuroQueer desire has the potential to transgress artificial boundaries between humanity and animality, and between culture and nature, being both at the same time. This desire begins with awareness of one's corporeality, embracing human animality, and learning to follow its instincts. Sexual arousal comes from touch, sound, etc., due to the sensory sensitivity that often accompanies autism. This sensory sensitivity is frequently one of the formative and distinctive factors in sex for neurodiverse people. Lazarony stresses that hyposensitive autists need more expressive sexual stimuli, whereas hypersensitive ones may find any form of tactile contact or auditory perception distressing, uneasy, or unwanted.

In *Karelia*, a desiring NeuroQueer body, conscious of its specificity, depends upon its senses and draws confidence and pleasure from the accompanying trees, forests, undergrowth. The spatiality of desire allows for claiming a non-privileged location in the more-than-human world. Aslan writes:

> I am a human animal with senses that **can be trusted** and instincts that **can be trusted** and a body that **can be trusted** when it speaks to me, **I can** listen and hear it. . . . **I can** take up space, there is space for me in this tree, up this hill, in front of this beach there is a horizon **I can** take up space at the same time I am dwarfed by this tree, by these huge skies and mountains and waves and I am not the centre of things. (*Karelia*, bold mine)

The space that a human animal claims is not a dominant or superior location but one on par with that of other more-than-human subjects. Unsupervised by social norms, Aslan's sexuality, and the sensuality he cherishes in the forest, enable him to work out a positive, reassuring relationship with his body and other materialities around him. The fact that he can rely on his senses and desires builds self-confidence and a sense of safety. This awareness is articulated in the passage above in the accumulation of "I can" expressions rendering empowerment and crip-queer agency.

NATURE AS AGENTIAL AND QUEER

In contrast to the romanticised and Romantic idea of a unitary "Nature," always located elsewhere and contrasted with its alleged opposite "Culture," the more-than-human world in general, and specifically in *Alone among the Trees*, is diverse, heterogeneous, queer, and located within *naturecultures*,[4] transcending untrue, simplified dichotomies and beyond compulsory able-bodiedness and heterormativity. The agency of the more-than-human world can be argued on the grounds of Barad's agential realism and the vibrant mattering that Bennett describes in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, which assumes the vitality of matter in contrast to its earlier assumed passivity. Both of these intertwined conceptions see the matter of which, e.g., plants and all human and more-than-human beings are made of as exerting an active influence upon reality. Moreover, in light of recent botanical findings, the agency of soil and plants has become a scientifically verifiable fact. According to Schlanger, plant agency is evident in their ability to adapt to changing conditions and to actively shape them.

Against the overwhelming tendency to ignore plants, treat them as a homogenous green background that is passive and immobile, and situated in a human hierarchy below animals, the study of plants has shown that they are individuals that respond in individual ways to external stimuli. Karban emphasises that plants respond to touch, light, gravity, water, air, nitrogen, hormones, electrical signals, temperature, and sound, to name only the major factors (3–10). Scientists like him underscore that plants communicate by chemical compounds. The chemical, hormonal transmission of information in plants was first observed and examined in *The Power of Movements of Plants* (1880) by Darwin (Trewavas 13–14). Plants do not have a nervous system comparable to animals; nonetheless, as argued by Trewavas, instead of neural networks, they have calcium ion Ca^{2+}-based protein networks that are responsible for a purposeful and "intelligent behaviour" (232).

Plants are not only agential but queer; their sexuality and reproductive strategies are non-normative and diverse. Plants reproduce vegetatively and via flowers (angiosperms) or cones (gymnosperms) by means of pollen, in which the male cells are carried. 72 % of angiosperms are hermaphrodites: they have both male and female reproductive structures (both stamens and pistils) and these cells may develop at a different pace; 7 % are "hermaphrodites plus one other sex type" (184). There exist hermaphroditic plants with male flowers (andromonoecious 1,7%) and hermaphroditic plants with female flowers (gynomonoecious 2,8 %) (ibid.). 5 % are monoecious (unisexual male and female flowers produced on the same plant) (ibid.). Monoecious with male

[4] The concept developed by Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (1–10).

and female flowers is estimated at 3,6 %; 4% are dioecious (unisexual male and female flowers borne on different plants); the list is completed by 3,9 % of "other mixed kinds" (ibid.). Ferns, algae, and mosses produce sperm that moves spontaneously and on its own, and, in aquatic environments, can rapidly reach and fertilise female cells (5). Sexual cells are not the only way to reproduce. Plants can do without pollination and replicate their own genetic material in so-called "clonal colonies" (e.g., Aspen *Populus Tremuloides*) (ibid.). The Gnetales produce two embryos as a result of double fertilisation (57). Plants (e.g., avocado[5]) can also undergo sex transition (184). Schlanger, drawing on Crane's research, reports that ginkgo can change sex, for instance, only in one branch. Last but not least, BBC Earth provides an example of a "squirting cucumber" (*Ecballium Elaterium*) that literally explodes, disseminating seeds at a distance of 6 metres (Riley).

Referring to plants' sexual lives, Schlanger rightly observes: "There is something decidedly queer in all of this—the orchids and aspens and strawberries and antplants and ginkgoes—a sense of sensual entanglement that disregards binaries, runs across the species boundary, and almost gleefully defies heteronormative modes of reproduction." Given the variety and heterogeneity of sexual and reproductive models, it is hard to believe that until recently the sexuality of plants, unlike that of animals, was questioned or ignored, as demonstrated in the pioneering study *Flora Unveiled: The Discovery and Denial of Sex in Plants* by Lincoln Taiz and Lee Taiz. Cultural assumptions about the more-than-human world tend to obscure its sexual dimension. Touching a flower, or even smelling it, very few humans are aware of just how sexual this interaction is:

> What does it mean to smell a flower? It might be a human response to a token of love, gratitude, or mourning; or it could signify a solitary moment of connecting with nature. Yet from the point of view of the flower, it is always also a sexual encounter. The plant's colourful display and scent are attractive and pleasurable to humans, and we respond by smelling its reproductive organs. In terms of consequences, sticking our noses into plant genitals might lead to allergic reactions for humans, but it also holds the potential of pollination for plants. (Jacobs 602)

Respecting the sexuality of more-than-human subjects requires renouncing speciesism and an anthropocentric perspective. Plants are sexually active beings, and their sexual behaviour is diverse, queer, and fluid. Rather than reducing them to simplified, culturally connoted aesthetic objects, one needs to recognise plants' vigorous participation in different sexual practices and developing new reproductive strategies that are useful for their survival.

[5] See Riley.

ALONE AMONG THE TREES: THE PRESENT TENSE AND NEUROQUEER SENSORY ECOSEXUALITY

The film part of the Karelia project, *Alone among the Trees: The Present Tense,* translates ecosexual desire into the language of cinema. In the video, NeuroQueer desire is not directed at another person but at trees, shrubs, leaves of grass, etc. The term "ecosexuality," coined by Sprinkle and Stephens, refers to "coupling ecology and enjoyment" (xi), treating the earth as lover and not as mother (1), having a more diverse and open understanding of pleasure and orgasm, and not confining eroticism or sensuality to humans only (2). In other words, "[e]cosexuality provides alternative ways of thinking about sexuality that go beyond human reproduction, genital sex and human exceptionalism" (19). In this section, I will reference Sprinkle and Stephens's "Dirty Words: An Ecosexual Glossary" (25–27), and the new vocabulary they invented, i.e. "ecobation" (autoerotic behaviour with the earth as the expression of unified more-than-human corporealities), "ecosexual gaze" (perceiving the natural world as the place where sexual activities on a more-than-human level are incessant and relentless), or "e-spot" (a sensation or place related to the more-than-human world that evokes intense arousal).

Alone among the Trees opens with a low-angle shot of the tree branches located above eye level, near the ground. The audience feels that the trees are towering above them, which automatically makes them look up towards the canopy. The image adopts an egalitarian perspective, beyond an anthropocentric standpoint, since it does not privilege the human eyeline. The camera angle signifies an act of recognition of the tree lineage and the role that trees play on our planet. Following this perspective, the people who enter the forest recognise that they are not a unique species but one among many organic and non-organic more-than-human beings and entities. The leaves are rustling, and it is the only sound in the footage. The entire film (32m 24s) features no human dialogue, which further calls into question the primacy of popular human-centric audio narration. The forest's conversation is mediated by the wind, which moves the atoms of the air, leaves, etc. and transmits the vibrant matter (as Bennett calls it) to the walker and the audience.

The person's image is blurred, with the camera focusing on the zoomed-in leaves in the foreground. Shallow depth-of-field produces the bokeh effect that here deliberately decentralises the human silhouette. Aslan appears to be hiding behind the trees, which renders his NeuroQueer presence almost invisible, like a spectral image or an eerie ghost. Aslan's initial, insecure movements on entering the forest seem to imply hesitation, perhaps fear; the trees, however, protect a performer from the viewers'

eyes. The NeuroQueer corporeal image is faint, fragmented, and split, just like human vision. However, after the moment of awkwardness, the male silhouette looms from the blurred background. The film attentively records an ecosexual gaze (the eye of the camera) fixed on the more-than-human sylvan ecosystem. A hand with chipped black-polished nails and tattoos gently caresses the plants, touching the flowers just to feel them, merging the plants' vulnerability with their own. The black polished male nails mingle with the whiteness of the flowers, both of them part of naturecultures. Shifting the pollen on his fingers, Aslan involves himself in the plants' reproductive process. The image in the film is blurred, but the white flowering plant looks like *Ammi Majus*. Aslan touches the sexual organs (multiple umbels) of the flowers, which are hermaphroditic, and they reproduce, among others, by pollination. This desirous gesture can be called "pollen-amorous" (Sprinkle and Stephens 27), as it participates in more-than-human sexual practices.

In his "windplay" (ibid.), Aslan derives pleasure from the wind blowing over his naked body. After the initial shyness, his face and torso appear in a clear frame, relaxed and elated. The film documents the emergence of ecosexual rural crip-queer intimacies among Karelian trees. Joyfully, the NeuroQueer body interacts with the forest layering, unrestricted by socio-cultural boundaries (clothes). "Skin-hungry" (smith), or rather *forest's* skin-hungry, Aslan removes his clothing to experience the sensuous closeness of the undergrowth, soil, twigs, and plants intimately, in accordance with his own sensory needs. This way, NeuroQueer desire becomes the ontological force that redefines the boundary of disability, queerness, humanity, and rurality. By removing the socially marked clothes, Aslan shakes off normative assumptions. The crip-queer body feels at home lying freely on the undergrowth, which fuses biodiverse, neurodiverse, and NeuroQueer ecosystems as necessary to humanity's existence and future evolution. Biodiversity and neurodiversity embrace crip-queer body-minds and their multiple desires and intimacies.

Biosexuality means excitement and arousal by various (not only human) living organisms (Sprinkle and Stephens 25). In *Alone among the Trees*, crip-queerness connects with sensual intimacy with lichens, trees, cobwebs, insects, leaves, clovers, thistle, heathers, bumble bees, and butterflies. The desiring entanglements make the NeuroQueer forest part of this biosexual ecological network. In the film, desire smoothly entwines the tattooed Crip-Queer's hands with the soil, undergrowth, berries, and insects: with living and non-living matter. The forest is a symbiotic and, as Haraway calls it, sympoietic organism composed of diverse more-than-human beings. Bodies co-operate with viruses, bacteria, and other organisms that make up their corporeality and create a sense of belonging.

Seen from an ecosexual perspective, the boundaries of the body/bodies are fluid and arbitrary, and they embrace more than one life form and sex that goes beyond genital contact (19).

The film shows the arousal of ecosexual desire during which the more-than-human world becomes a partner in these sexual interactions. Aslan's hands clutch an "e-spot" (the undergrowth), anticipating the eco-sexual climax. NeuroQueer experiences of the forest are sensuous encounters mediated by desire. Ecosexual desire makes a crip-queer body open to multimodal entanglements with the more-than-human world, acknowledging a human-animal line of descent, allowing for an inclusive, heterogeneous, and creative liberated space. The orgasm visible on Aslan's face, which may ("ecobation") or may not be genital, is derived from experiencing intimacy with more-than-human entities: feeling the texture of the undergrowth, the smell of the decomposing soil, and the sound of the rustling leaves and insects, and from seeing them as an extension of his own body and his body as an extension of the forest. The viewer becomes the voyeur of a very intimate exchange: an elated NeuroQueer face slick with sweat, eyes half-closed, muscles tense, and the bliss on the countenance reveal an ecosexual encounter with the more-than-human world. The film's title, *Alone among the Trees*, thus seems deeply ironic. Aslan is anything but alone among the trees, sharing an intimate connection with them, relating to the undergrowth as to his lover.

Since plants lack a nervous system, their responses cannot be compared to those of human or nonhuman animals. Therefore, one should avoid anthropomorphising more-than-human beings as much as possible. Although some plants appear to put up with tactile stimuli (e.g., aloe), recent studies show that plants mostly react to the touch of any organism with mitochondrial stress and growth impairment, if it lasts longer (Xu et al.). Nonetheless, short-term exposure to limited tactile stimulation is assumed to strengthen plants' resilience and immunity to diseases ("What Happens"). Therefore, the eco-sexual exchange between Aslan and moss, fern, and berries does not seem to be one-sided, even if, instead of an orgasm, plants gain an opportunity to pollinate and become more resistant to external stimuli.

Moreover, plants can initiate sexual contact if it is symbiotically beneficial for them (McKenna). Some orchid species (e.g., Ophrys, Chiloglottis) attract pollinators by employing what Raguso and Kessler call "aggressive sexual mimicry," which involves imitating either male or female pheromones of insects, the scent of their preferred food (i.e. *Epipactis* orchids), or even decomposition (33–35). Plants can also simulate insects' sexual organs to facilitate pollination. Cultural stereotypes tend to promote the view of plants as passive, sexless, and agentless, while scientific studies refute these misconceptions.

Some plants, such as the "fast-moving" and "touch-sensitive plant" (Trewavas 16–17) *Mimosa pudica*, can exhibit such a strongly negative reaction to touch that it becomes discernible even to the human eye. *Mimosa*'s leaves are structured in a complex way, with closely packed leaves that fold under the influence of touch; if unwanted contact is prolonged, the plant needs about 40 minutes on average to fully return to its previous fit state (17). Under the influence of ether, *Mimosa Pudica*, regardless of its nearly iconic touch sensitivity (*thigmomorhogenesis*), stops responding to tactile stimuli at all (Schlanger). Schlanger draws the conclusion that plants are aware of touch and react to it accordingly. Addressing this issue, Whelan argues that touching a plant triggers changes in 10% of the genome within 30 minutes (qtd. in "Plants Don't Like Touch"). Scientific research that Schlanger cites in her book indicates that touch can alter not only the genome but also plants' hormones and even their immune system.

Over the centuries, plants have developed many strategies to resist and avoid unwanted contact (e.g., poisonous ivy). As argued earlier, they are aware of touch and can respond to undesired touch by releasing pathogens. Their active refusal of tactile stimulation is communicated through toxins that they produce, "natural pesticides," and sticky liquids (Trewavas 50). Drawing upon Van Hoven, Schlanger provides an example of acacia, which sends signals to gradually increase tannin levels in its leaves in order to ward off animals that consume them. When animals continue eating them, regardless of the warning (the bitter taste), tannin slowly reaches a critical level, and they die. Plants are multi-dimensional, complicated, resilient and fragile, sexual and asexual, predatory and vulnerable, communicating chemically and verbally silent, at the same time. Taking all these examples into consideration, plants' agency in *Alone among the Trees* cannot be questioned. They definitely have the chemical capacity to resist unwanted contact. For instance, the aforementioned *Ammi Majus* is toxic for animals (cats, dogs, cows, etc.) to eat. What needs to be stressed as well is that Aslan's behaviour in the film is mindful and respectful towards all the vegetation that he cherishes with joy.

ALONE AMONG THE TREES: THE PAST TENSE

NeuroQueer intimacies with ruralities go back deep into "The Past Tense." For centuries, the forest has been a refuge for non-normative people persecuted by hegemonic institutions (i.e. the Church during the Middle Ages). Academic circles speculate on whether some medieval "witches" were neurodiverse, but this hypothesis requires robust factual evidence (Wilkie). In the fictitious letter from the Past, crip-queer desire is subversively presented as dehumanising (in the eyes of the Church), and

then its "animality" is embraced readily by the speaker: "Am I no longer myself? Not human? No, I think the flame was always there, but it was small and weak as I studied scripture or sat in the cold church, half asleep. Now I know that I too am wild. / Hatso, I miss you! Your nakedness" (*Karelia*). In the second chapter of the film ("The Past Tense"), the frames are much darker, as dim as the Dark Ages. They present an eerie insect caught in the web, a frog, soil on a white dress, and dry vegetation, all of which intensify a dense and uncanny atmosphere. A femme dressed in a long white skirt, which symbolically restricts their movements and catches on trees and undergrowth, hurriedly escapes persecution, seeking protection in the forest. The runaway's mobility is cinematographically rendered in the fast rewind; references to the Past Tense are conveyed through contrastive montage and intercuts. This section of the film explores the impossibility of openly articulating a queer desire.

The *Karelia* booklet features haiku poems in both Finnish and English which serve as protective invocations of non-normative and non-cis forest refugees intertwined with past narratives and old myths that comment on the persecutions. The first one of "Hatso's Spells" starts with "Polvijärvi, Sarkiselkä, Honkalampi, Kalaton" (ibid.), which are geographical names in Karelia, and accentuates their transcriptive "strangeness." The language of old Finno-Ugric origin, with its "alien" fonts and auditory form, further defamiliarises the locations. The repeated, often rhyming Finnish place-names are intimately woven into the geography of the region and the forest's own history: "Juoksen täältä, lennän täältä / *I run from here, I fly from here* // Anna minulle turva metsässä / *Give me refuge in the forest*" // II. VAUHTI / SPEED / *I am a bird's wing, I am the north wind, I am thought*" (ibid.). For witch-hunting persecutors of the escaping femme, the crip-queer desiring body can exist only as a dematerialised erasure but not as a corporeal entity. The transformation into a more-than-human creature (bird) brings hope for liberation from physical and symbolic violence. After the body's annihilation, normative hegemonic discourses seek to erase the femme's existence from the community's memory. Throughout the poem, however, the centrality of "I am" assertions reveals crip-queer rural intimacies with the more-than-human world. The femme becomes a bird, a stone, a twisted path, a ghost, breath, and then the darkest night and the grave: Baradian agential matter takes diverse organic and non-organic forms, shapeshifting but never disappearing or becoming forgotten. It can turn into a whisper whose material particles make up the air, the clouds, the planet, or the living soil. Notably, witch-hunting was directed specifically against rural communities (Thurston). Therefore, the dynamic filming of the run-for-life escape of the persecuted femme into the forest signifies that the more-than-human world has been the last sanctuary, a companion, and a witness to the protagonist's violent death.

ALONE AMONG THE TREES: THE FUTURE TENSE AND CRIP-QUEER FUTURITY

Crip-queer rural intimacies in "The Future Tense" unfold in a forest-water land of queer utopia, called New Karelia. Drawing on Muñoz's definition of utopia as "a potential blueprint of the world not quite here" (97), New Karelia is an ideal place where hegemonic discourses of normalcy do not oppress or exclude members of crip-queer. Apart from utopias/dystopias, the creative practices of the Collective encompass an assemblage of genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, and dreamwork, to name but a few ("About").

In the *Karelia* project, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS drew inspiration from the speculative fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin. Her trilogy *Worlds of Exile and Illusion* tells the story of the ethnographer/explorer Gaveral Rocannon/Falk, who travels across possible worlds and through time, witnessing conflicts and colonisation of people and the natural world. Le Guin opens the first novel in the series, *Rocannon's World*, with the following words: "How can you tell the legend from the fact on these worlds that lie so many years away?—planets without names, called by their people simply The World, planets without history, where . . . the darkness uncertainty and disproportion grow like weeds." In the last novel in the series, *City of Illusion* (set on a futuristic, post-apocalyptic Earth), after Rocannon's memory has been wiped out, he is looked after by the Foresters (a rural forest community), whose customs and forest language he learns. The question arises of whether the forest speech in Le Guin's novel can be paralleled with *Damiá*—the first queer language that Aslan invented before *Karelia* but mastered and completed during his residency in Finland. The temporal span of Le Guin's protagonist's journey (the present, past, and future) corresponds to the temporality of New Karelia, where time runs in a non-linear way, as rendered by the camera through reverse motion, repetitions, and fast rewind.

Correspondingly to Le Guin's fiction, New Karelia, the queer-only planet, is described by ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS as a sylvan territory, abundant with lakes and rivers. Much as in "The Present Tense," the camera prioritizes more-than-human entanglements over anthropocentric perspectives. The blades of grass, indirectly referencing *Leaves of Grass*, through which Chris and Aslan are wading, also evoke Whitman's ecosexual, queer poetry in which the more-than-human world joins in the ecstasy of the male lover:

> Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!
> . . .
> You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you!
> Wind whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!
> Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounger in my winding paths, it shall be you!

For Whitman, queer desire, expressed, among other aspects, by wind-play, runs through human veins and through the fibres of plants, solar waves, and the particles of water; they are all interconnected and entangled.

Karelia's motto—"Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world," included in the booklet—is derived from Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (1). Rereading a different passage from this study (first published in 2009) raises the question of the transformative changes that occurred over the past decades and these still to come yet: "Queerness's form is utopian. Ultimately, we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent. . . . the future is . . . in its utopian potentiality" (30).

In the final part of *Alone among the Trees*, crip-queer rural intimacies combine leaves of grass and trees with glamorous, glittering, sparkling futurity signified by the water into which both characters stare with hope and into which they dive with pleasure. Chris's sequined top, comparable to water particles, catches the light and reflects it proudly. The shimmering waves resemble the sequins on his outfit. In broad daylight, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS occupy the centre of the frame: due to the low angle, we see the couple empowered, fulfilled, and relaxed. No longer separated from each other, Aslan and Chris hold hands and look towards the future's horizon with hope. In Muñoz's terms:

> To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present, or future. (32)

Although Muñoz's book does not directly refer to disability, using the general umbrella term "minorities" instead, Crip-queer theory has embraced his writing, especially the temporal scale and the aforementioned concept of futurity. Muñoz explains that minorities live in a world that is very far from a utopia. Therefore, instead of focusing on present inadequacies, they need to look towards "the horizon," to its "futurity" (99, 97).

Crip-queer theorists (e.g., Kafer; Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled*) argue that as long as disability tends to be perceived as pathology and calamity, it will not be part of a desired future. Like Queer futurities, Crip futures are written in and with desire. Kafer, for instance, states: "I desire crip futures: futures that embrace disabled people, futures that imagine disability differently, futures that support multiple ways of being"

(45). Muñoz explains that the desire he writes about is both for "a better world or freedom but also, more immediately, better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure" (30). *Karelia*'s "The Future Tense" abounds with Neuro-Queer desire and queer freedom, articulated through the free-flow aquatic movement and the pleasure derived from being in this nearly weightless environment. In an ecosexual approach, the experience of water, i.e. human contact with waves and surrendering to their momentum ("seadomasochism"), might also be sexually arousing (Sprinkle and Stephens 27).

CONCLUSION

The article has explored sensory perceptions of NeuroQueer ecosexual desires in relation to the more-than-human world. The *Karelia* project examines queering the forest, "foresting" queerness, and the mutual interdependence between the two, or rather three, Neurodiversity being the third concept in the equation. It appears that the outcome of the artistic project, and its transformative power of sensory-cognitive neurodiverse interactions with the more-than-human world, also contribute to the explorations of the queer rural turn and its impact on sexuality and the environment. As the Collective admit, their explorations in the forest were not interrupted by the intrusive or hostile gaze of local inhabitants; they have become a part of the local community. Crip-queerness in the deep countryside of the forest was in a sense reinvented by the Collective in relation to the more-than-human world. The sense of belonging and acceptance made Aslan and Chris return to Karelia in the future and stay there longer. Crip-queer theory encourages one to move beyond the stereotypes of what is socially perceived as normal, healthy, or desirable. What is more, the works of ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS prove that the futurity that Muñoz envisaged as the horizon may not be as far away as he thought.

Works Cited

"About." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://oncewewereislands.com/About, accessed 25 May 2026.

"Access is Love." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://oncewewereislands.com/Access, accessed 25 May 2026.

"'Autistic Long-Form' as an Artistic Methodology." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, Nov. 2023–Jan. 2024, https://oncewewereislands.com/Autistic-Long-Form, accessed 25 May 2026.

Alaimo, Tracy. "Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of 'Queer' Animals." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 51–72.

Baker, Kelly. "Out Back Home: An Exploration of LGBT Identities and Community in Rural Nova Scotia, Canada." *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, edited by Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, New York UP, 2016, pp. 25–48. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479895250.003.0005

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623

Butler, Judith. "Critically Queer." *Playing with Fire: Queer Politics, Queer Theories*, edited by Shane Phelan, Routledge, 1997, pp. 11–29. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203760505-3

Cartwright, Ryan Lee. *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity*. U of Chicago P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226697079.001.0001

Chapman, Robert. *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism*. Pluto, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.8501594

Chisholm, Dianne. "Biophilia, Creative Involution, and the Ecological Future of Queer Desire." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 359–81.

Coráñez Bolton, Sony. *Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines*. Duke UP, 2023.

Dewinter, J., H. De Graaf, and S. Begeer. "Sexual Orientation, Identity, and Romantic Relationships in Adolescents and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 47, no. 9, 2017, pp. 2927–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3199-9

Gray, Mary L., Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley. Introduction. *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, edited by Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, New York UP, 2016, pp. 1–21. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479895250.003.0004

Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York UP, 2005.

Haraway, Donna J. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Prickly Paradigm, 2003.

Herring, Scott. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. New York UP, 2010.

Jacobs, Joela. "'These Lusting, Incestuous, Perverse Creatures': A Phytopoetic History of Plants and Sexuality." *Environmental*

Humanities, vol. 14, no. 3, 2022, pp. 602–17. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-9962926

Johnson, Colin R. *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*. Temple UP, 2013.

Kafai, Shayda. *Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid*. Arsenal Pulp, 2021. E-book.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0

Karban, Richard. "The Language of Plant Communication and (and How It Compares to Animal Communication)." *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Galiano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira, U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 3–26. https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452954110-002

Karelia. *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bZxTGtXHny0-zS9njkCiAn9j3J6-GYZi/view, accessed 25 May 2025. Programme booklet.

Kone Foundation. "Old Growth: 'Crip-Queer Rurality' as an Artistic Methodology." *Kone Foundation*, 2023, https://koneensaatio.fi/en/grants-and-residencies/old-growth-crip-queer-rurality-as-an-artistic-methodology-2/, accessed 28 May 2026.

Lazarony, Barbara. "Autism and Sex: Honouring the Full Spectrum of Desire." *Love on the Autism Spectrum*, n.d., https://www.loveontheautismspectrum.com/autism-and-sex/, accessed 18 May 2025.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Worlds of Exile and Illusion: Rocannon's World, Planet of Exile, City of Illusions*. Gollancz, 2020. E-book.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York UP, 2006.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice." *Leaving Evidence*, 12 Apr. 2017, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/, accessed 18 Aug. 2025.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/, accessed 18 Aug. 2025.

McKenna, Dennis. Foreword. *The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence*, edited by John C. Ryan, Patrícia Vieira, and Monika Gagliano, Synergetic, 2021, pp. 10–11.

Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson. "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 1–47. https://doi.org/10.2979/5988.0

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York UP, 2019.

Neff, Megan Anna. "Autism and Sexual Diversity: Exploring LGBTQIA+ Identity in Neurodivergent Lives." *Neurodivergent Insights*, 2 Feb. 2022, https://neurodivergentinsights.com/autism-and-sexual-diversity/, accessed 25 May 2026.

Nijkamp, Marieke. "Strange New Worlds and Other Love Languages." *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024. E-book.

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS. "*KARELIA—Alone Among the Trees*." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, Aug. 2021, https://oncewewereislands.com/KARELIA, accessed 28 May 2026.

Pickens, Theri Alyce. *Black Madness and Mad Blackness*. Duke UP, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478005506

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp, 2018. E-book.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes and Mourning Songs*. Arsenal Pulp, 2022. E-book.

"Plants Don't Like Touch, New Study Finds." *La Trobe University*, 16 Dec. 2018, https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2018/release/plants-dont-like-touch,-new-study-finds, accessed 26 Apr. 2026.

Raguso, Robert, and André Kessler. "Speaking in Chemical Tongues: Decoding the Language of Plant Volatiles." *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Galiano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira. U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 27–61. https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452954110-003

Riley, Jason. "The Secret Sex Lives of Plants." *BBC Earth*, n.d., https://www.bbcearth.com/news/the-secret-sex-lives-of-plants, accessed 2 May 2026.

Sala, Giorgia, et al. "As Diverse as the Spectrum Itself: Trends in Sexuality, Gender and Autism." *Current Developmental Disorders Reports*, vol. 7, 2020, pp. 59–68. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40474-020-00190-1

Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 25–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25

Sarris, Marina. "Autistic People Are More Likely to Identify as LGBTQ." *Spark*, 12 June 2024 (revised), https://sparkforautism.org/discover_article/autism-lgbtq-identity/, accessed 2 May 2026.

Schlanger, Zoë. *The Light Eaters: How the Unseen World of Plant Intelligence Offers a New Understanding of Life on Earth—A Popular Science and a Natural History Study of Botany*. Harper, 2024. E-book.

smith, s. e. "Skin Hunger and the Taboo of Wanting to be Touched." *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024. E-book.

Sprinkle, Annie, Beth Stephens, and Jennie Klein. *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1v3gr06

Taiz, Lincoln, and Lee Taiz. *Flora Unveiled: The Discovery and Denial of Sex in Plants*. Oxford UP, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190490263.001.0001

Thomsen, Carly. *Visibility Interrupted: Rural Queer Life and the Politics of Unbecoming*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1t2mzb8

Thurman, Marlo Payne. *Autism is the Future: The Evolution of the Different Type of Intelligence*. Future Horizons, 2019.

Thurston, Robert. *The Witch Hunts: A History of the Witch Persecution in Europe and North America*. Routledge, 2007. E-book.

Trewavas, Anthony. *Plant Behaviour and Intelligence*. Oxford UP, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199539543.001.0001

Walker, Nick. *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment and Postnormal Possibilities*. Autonomous, 2021. E-book.

"We-Need-To-Talk-About-Britain." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://oncewewereislands.com/We-Need-To-Talk-About-Britain, accessed 25 May 2026.

"What Happens When Plants Have Stress Reactions to Touch." *Lund University News*, 23 May 2022, https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/article/what-happens-when-plants-have-stress-reactions-touch, accessed 26 Apr. 2026.

Whitman, Walt. *Song of Myself*. *Poetry Foundation*, n.d., https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version, accessed 9 June 2026.

"With Forests in Our Mouths: Speaking Queer Utopias into Being, 2024." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, 2024–25, https://oncewewereislands.com/With-Forests-in-Our-Mouths, accessed 25 May 2026.

Wilkie, Abigail. "Historic Witch Trails and Neurodiversity." *Historic UK*, n.d., https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Historic-Witch-Trials-Neurodiversity/, accessed 25 May 2026.

Wong, Alice, editor. *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*. Vintage, 2024. E-book.

Wong, Alice. Introduction. *Disability Visibility: Twenty-First Century Disabled Voices*, Vintage, 2020. E-book.

"Working as a NeuroQueer Artist: Loose & Messy Tips & Tricks." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hD8-IaUi6UFEtKBBdFdSkUlN855Jcaoc/view, accessed 25 May 2026, pp. 1–8.

Xu, Yue, et. al. "Mitochondrial Function Modulates Touch Signalling in Arabidopsis Thaliana." *The Plant Journal*, vol. 97, no. 4, 2019, pp. 623–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/tpj.14183

Yergeau, M. Remi. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Duke UP, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372189

Katarzyna Ostalska is Associate Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Lodz, Poland. She is the Head of the Posthumanities Research Centre at the Faculty of Philology, University of Lodz. She holds PhD and a postdoctoral degree (*habilitation*) in literature. She published a monograph on *Towards Female Empowerment: The New Generation of Irish Women Poets: Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Mary O'Donoghue*. She was a guest co-editor of the special issue of the journal *The Problems of Literary Genres*, devoted to gender and speculative genre (2020). In 2025, she co-edited special issues of *Second Texts* [*Teksty Drugie*] ("Posthumanism and Justice") and the *Polish Journal of English Studies* ("Critical Posthumanism and Relationality"). She co-edited three volumes of articles, the most recent one being *The Postworld In-Between Utopia and Dystopia: Intersectional, Feminist, and Non-Binary Approaches in 21st-Century Speculative Literature and Culture* (Routledge, 2021).
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8553-7517
katarzyna.ostalska@uni.lodz.pl