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We Belong Here: Queer Rurality and the (Eco)Poetics of New Nature Writing (Mike Parker, Luke Turner, Amanda Thomson)

Abstract: This paper studies a body of hybrid non-fiction works that lie at the intersection of queer and nature writing and which articulate a new conceptualisation of the queer subject's relationship with rurality. Those pioneering narratives – which for the purpose of the present research have been labelled "queer new nature writing" – do not offer a simple reversal of the traditional mode of thinking about the agonistic character of the queer-rural dyad. Instead, having recognised the very potential and possibility of the queer life beyond the city, they remain deeply aware of the need to imagine new ways to think and write about their experience of queer belonging in the rural space. The major aim of the paper is thus to identify the signposts of queer new nature writing and argue in favour of acknowledging its unique (eco)poetics: one that is distinguished by such markers as the exploration of queer rural heritage, counter-pastoralism, or the presence of the auto(eco)theoretical impulse.

Keywords: queer rurality, new nature writing, the rural turn, auto/biography, Mike Parker, Luke Turner, Amanda Thomson

> *[As] I grew up and felt more of a stranger in the human world – informed by that world that I was unnatural – so the natural world seems more of a solace, since nature itself is queer.*
> Philip Hoare, "The Unfinished World"[1]

> *Indeed, for all that term "rural"* does *connote in the context of twenty first century […] culture, one thing that is almost never used to signify is gender or sexual diversity.*
> Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, "Introduction"[2]

1. Philip Hoare, "The Unfinished World," in *Ground Work: Writings on People and Places*, ed. Tim Dee (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018), chap. 13, Kindle.

2. Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, "Introduction," in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, ed. Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 4. Emphasis in the original.

Introduction: Banished from the Garden

If one were to look for an apt illustration of the complexity of the queer-rural dyad and its development in twentieth- and twenty-first-century British culture, one could possibly turn to Paul Mendez's 2020 groundbreaking novel *Rainbow Milk* which opens and closes with the images that accurately problematise the difficult and often hostile nexus between otherness (sexual, but also class- and ethnicity-based) and rurality. The former is a rose-garden established by Norman, a member of the Windrush generation, in his peri-urban home somewhere in the Black Country: a quintessentially "English" space comprising of cultivars (*sic!*) which "[do not] speak with a Caribbean accent"[3] and whose strong fragrance is supposed to hide the smell of Jamaican cooking; in short, a space of concealment, secrecy, and conformity where no form of otherness is allowed to be freely and openly exercised. The latter is the English countryside which Jesse – a queer grandson of Norman and the main protagonist of Mendez's book – disrupts with his black/queer presence when he visits his partner's friends in their Suffolk cottage: an "oppressive" space where a queer black man is inevitably an "alien, […] a potential contaminant, someone to take umbrage with or else completely ignore."[4] However, Jesse does not only succumb to the anxiety's pull induced by his transfer from the relatively safe confines of the city to the hostile rural environment but also attempts to resist it. His stroll among the country market stalls where the black presence is reduced to "straw-chewing negro slave ornaments"[5] and images of minstrels in blackface might be read as a gesture of decolonising the countryside; simultaneously, his engaging in various sexual activities while swimming in the local pond is a clear attempt to queer the rural and thus infuse the countryside with sexual difference.

Banishment of the "queer […] impulse"[6] from the countryside and a relatively recent endeavour to reclaim the rural space – the kind that *Rainbow Milk* subtly testifies to – could certainly be seen as a characteristic feature of queer studies and their dominant mode of conceptualisation of the relationship between non-heteronormativity and space. Undoubtedly, much of the research into modern (both early and late) and contemporary literature, art history, and culture has been inevitably built on the premise that it is the city – with its streets, squares, parks, and

3. Paul Mendez, "The Earth I Inherit," in *In the Garden: Essays on Nature and Growing* (London: Daunt Books, 2012), 55.

4. Paul Mendez, *Rainbow Milk* (London: Dialogue Books, 2020), 325.

5. Mendez, *Rainbow Milk*, 333.

6. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 2.

institutions of modern life which guarantee one's anonymity and liberation – that should be acknowledged as the ultimate queer space: as a matter of fact, the only space where queer life can flourish and where non-heteronormative desires can be voiced.[7] According to the historian Matt Houlbrook, the experience of urban life is a sine qua non condition of "being queer."[8] In his probing analysis, which echoes other prominent voices in the metropolitan (or urban-oriented) queer studies,[9] the city means "speaking out," "fulfilment," and "being,"[10] while the non-urban/rural space has been synonymous with "silence," "repression," and, most importantly, "nonbeing."[11] The monocratic nature of this paradigm which sees the city as the only possible site for the emergence of queer identity, culture, and community, has famously led Jack Halberstam to the conclusion that the experience of non-heteronormativity is inextricably linked to the condition (and process) of "metronormativity," as well as to the narratives that the latter generates. According to Halberstam, metronormative narratives necessarily see the subject's coming out as the "story of migration from 'country' to 'town' […] within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy."[12] In those essentially spatial and normalising narratives, the rural, as Halberstam concludes, "is made to function as a closet for urban sexualities."[13]

Halberstam's influential critique of the straightforward disavowal of the rural as a potential queer space has resulted in the emerge of what one might be tempted

7. Among the seminal works of transatlantic urbanised gay studies that recognise the inseparability of queer sexualities and the city one should list the following: George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Picador, 2004); Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). Recent additions to the study of the queer city include: Peter Ackroyd, *Queer City: Gay London from the Romans to the Present Day* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2017); Anita Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1873–1961* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020); Jen Jack Gieseking, *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

8. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 3.

9. For example, Matt Cook states the following: "Think of 'gay' men and 'gay' culture and we think of cities, form ancient Athens through biblical Sodom and Renaissance Florence to Armistead Maupin's San Francisco or Pedro Almodovar's Madrid." Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality*, 3. According to Peter Ackroyd, the city should be hailed as a "jungle and a labyrinth where gay life could flourish, […] a phantasmagoria or a dreamscape, […] upon which the queer man or woman could project the most illicit longings." Ackroyd, *Queer City*, 149.

10. As well as the triad of "affirmation, liberation, and citizenship." Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 3.

11. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 3.

12. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2005), 37.

13. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 37.

to call the queer rural turn[14] and, consequently, of what Mary Gray, Colin Johnson, and Brian Gilley have described as "rural queer studies."[15] Despite different methodological approaches that underpin their research (e.g., Marxism, post-colonialism, cultural anthropology), the practitioners of the latter unanimously attempt to challenge the "chronic […] dismissal of rurality"[16] and the dominant cultural construction of the rural as a geographical and social space that masks (and in many cases punishes) any possible manifestation of sexual difference. So far the most thorough and convincing account of the need to re-consider the rural (as well as urban) from the point of view of queer studies has been offered by Scott Herring's *Another Country*. Herring's influential theory of "queer anti-urbanism" is not, as he himself notes, a "phobic response"[17] to the city but an invitation to "ex-urbanise" queer studies by both: "critically negotiat[ing] the relentless urbanisms [of the queer imaginary]"[18] and recognising that the "queer life beyond the city is as vibrant, diverse, and plentiful, as any urban-based sexual culture."[19] In his deconstruction of queer urbanism(s) and its/their ally, that is, metronormativity, Herring additionally employs the category of "critical rusticity" which he understands not only as a mode of queer critique that addresses the existing and dominant representations of the rural but also as an "intersectional opportunity to geographically, corporeally, and aesthetically inhabit non-normative sexuality that offers new possibilities for the sexually marginalized outside the metropolis as well as inside it."[20] A notable example of the success of the rural-philic critical

14. On the category of the rural turn in the English-language context, see, for example, Corinne Fowler, "The Rural Turn in Contemporary Writing by Black and Asian Britons," *Interventions* 19, no. 3 (2017), 395–415. For the critique of the rural turn as a vertical phenomenon participating in the "scaffold imaginary," see Mary Pat Brady, "The Waiting Arms of Gold Street: Manuel Muñoz's *Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* and the Problem of the Scaffold Imaginary," in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, ed. Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 114.

15. Gray, Johnson, and Gilley, "Introduction," 18. Needless to say, Halberstam's work was not the first attempt at positive valuation of the queer rural. Among the "pioneers" of the queer rural studies one should find, for example: David Bell and Gill Valentine, "Queer Country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives," *Journal of Rural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1995), 113–122, or Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, eds., *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997). Another important study that has greatly contributed to the new understanding of the rural as a geography of otherness is Paul Cloke and Jo Little, eds., *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

16. Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2010), 5.

17. Herring, *Another Country*, 13.

18. Herring, *Another Country*, 13.

19. Herring, *Another Country*, 6.

20. Herring, *Another Country*, 68.

endeavours undertaken by the likes of Halberstam or Herring, as well as of the major shift in how queer scholarship theorises *agroikos* (which is no longer seen as "boorish" but considered on a par with *asteios* as "witty"[21]), is the revaluation of the category of the queer space (and, consequently, queerscape[22]). If Aaron Betsky's pioneering study *Queer Space* of 1997 listed only three queer rural places (i.e., Hadrian's villa near Tivoli, William Beckford's Fonthill Abbey designed by James Wyatt, and the queer modernist Lang House in Western Connecticut designed by Robert A. M. Stern[23]), the volume *Queer Spaces* published in 2022 – a successor to Betsky's book and, simultaneously, its rectification – features as many as fifteen specimens of queer rurality.[24] Halberstam's most recent discussion of an "ecological" model of queer sexualities, that is, the kind that "looks for connections between environmental ethics and queer politics" and is "invested in space, terrain, and geography," as well as "postnatural" framework for non-heteronormative desires[25] remains, perhaps, the most conspicuous example of the ultimate re-consideration and positive re-valuation of the rural/non-urban from the point of view of queer studies.[26]

In twentieth-century British writing, the search for and, oftentimes, celebration of the "queer beyond London"[27] – in itself a manifestation of the queer anti-metropolitan/rural turn – has been present in a variety of genres, both fiction and non-fiction: from Sarah Water's *Fingersmith* (2002), Patrick Gale's *A Place Called Winter* (2015), and Jon Ransom's *The Whale Tattoo* (2022) to Simon Fenwick's *The Crichel Boys* (2021), as well as oral narratives and life-stories created within the framework of the "Queer Rural Connections" project supported by, among

21. For this distinction between the urban and the rural, see Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 36.

22. Gordon Brent Ingram, "Marginality and the Landscapes of Erotic Alien(n)ations," in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 29.

23. Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997), 6, 67–68, 134.

24. Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell, eds., *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022).

25. Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 6–7, 79–85.

26. Among the most successful Polish responses to global queer rural studies, one should list the following: Aleksandra Ubertowska, "Fałdai queer: Natura jako scena homoerotyczna" *Wielogłos* 38, no. 4 (2018), 91–105; Wojciech Szymański, "Queerowe Arkadie," in *Arkadia*, ed. Agnieszka Rosales Rodríguez and Antoni Ziemba (Warszawa: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 2023), 425–435.

27. To quote the title of Alison Oram's and Matt Cook's most recent exploration of an-metropolitan queer life. See Matt Cook and Alison Oram, *Queer Beyond London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

others, the Museum of English Rural Life.[28] However, the aim of the present paper is to discuss only one "*architext*,"[29] namely a literary phenomenon which I have decided to label "queer new nature writing": one whose specific "mode of enunciation"[30] (non-fictional narrative) and "thematic concerns"[31] (the intersection of nature and queerness) make it an ideal subject for the investigation of the politics and poetics of the queer rural. While exploring the conjunction between queer sexualities and rurality,[32] which queer new nature writing ostensibly prioritises and makes its central preoccupation, the essay will attempt to identify the dominant and distinctive markers of its (eco)poetics[33] (especially the exploration of queer rural heritage, counter-pastoralism, or the presence of the auto[eco]theoretical impulse): the kinds that justify an attempt to consider queer new nature writing a unique and idiosyncratic (trans-)generic category.[34]

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28. To learn more about the project and its results kindly consult the following: "Queer Rural Connections," The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities and Arts Council England, accessed November 10, 2023, https://queerruralx.com/.

29. Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 83.

30. Genette, *The Architext*, ix.

31. Genette, *The Architext*, 12.

32. The present paper's understanding of the term "rurality" follows the category's recent re-conceptualisations which refuse to see rurality only as a material, non-metropolitan space whose ontology and epistemology are defined by geographical coordinates and, instead, acknowledge it as a "phenomenon that is socially and culturally constructed," a loci of "symbolic imaginaries," as well as a "performative space." See Paul Cloke and Jo Little, "Introduction: Other Countrysides?" in *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*, ed. Paul Cloke and Jo Little (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 4; Andrew Gorman-Murray, Barbara Pini, and Lia Bryant, "Introduction: Geographies of Ruralities and Sexualities," in *Sexuality, Rurality, and Geography*, ed. Andrew Gorman-Murray, Barbara Pini, and Lia Bryant (Plymouth and Landham: Lexington Books, 2013), 1; Herring, *Another Country*, 12. What is more, this new understanding of rurality – or simply a "new rurality," as the ethnographer Sam Hilliard calls it (see Sam Hillyard, *Broadlands and the New Rurality: An Ethnography* [Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2020]) – encompasses a variety of spaces: not only farmlands or countryside, as traditional approaches to rurality would have it, but also "hybrid geographies located in the interstices (or 'third space') between [the city and the rural]." Cloke and Little, "Introduction," 7.

33. The present paper's understanding of "(eco)poetics" has been inspired by Kate Rigby's definition of the term which she sees as an "incorporation of the ecological or environmental perspective into the study of the [given work's] poetics [i.e., its structure, from, discourse – R. K.]." See Kate Rigby, "Ecopoetics," in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, ed. Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow (New York & London: New York University Press, 2016), 79–81.

34. Similarly to life-writing, I recognise queer new nature writing as an umbrella (or a master) category for all modes and instances of non-fiction writing that are concerned with the intersection of the self, nature, and queerness. Consequently, the fact that all of the works discussed in the present paper might be classified as memoirs does not annul their alternative categorisation as specimens of queer new nature writing – this trans-generic category or, alternatively, a "genre beyond genre." See Jacques Derrida, "Khôra,"in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David

Queer New Nature Writing

Although Jos Smith traces the beginning of new nature writing – sometimes also referred to as "eco-narratives"[35] or "life-nature-writing"[36] – to Richard Mabey's 1996 *Flora Britannica*,[37] the majority of literary scholars and critics tend to credit a special issue of *Granta* magazine published in 2008 and tellingly entitled "New Nature Writing" with the birth of the new trans-genre and its first theorisation.[38] In his editorial preface to the volume, Jason Cowley stipulated a number of characteristics of new nature writing which in the years to come have enabled the classification of such works as Helen Macdonald's *H is far Hawk* (2014), Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks* (2015), or James Rebanks's *The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake District* (2015) as the prime specimens of this literary phenomenon. According to Cowley, new nature writing differs from its predecessor, that is, modern nature writing,[39] which the former largely rejects on ethical, aesthetic, and political grounds, in a number of ways, the most important being: its preference for formal experimentation,[40] an amalgamation of literariness and scientific approach,[41] the embrace of the aesthetic simplicity,[42] the rejection of the "lyrical

Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Bloomington: Stanford University Press, 1995), 103, 104.

35. Graham Huggan and Pippa Marland, "Queer Blue Sea: Sexuality and the Aquatic Uncanny in Philip Hoare's Transatlantic Eco-narratives," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 30, no. 1 (2023), 26. For the explanation of new nature writing's links with environmental texts and the ecological turn which justify the use of the term "eco-narrative" also consult Huggan's earlier paper: Graham Huggan, "Back to the Future: The 'New Nature Writing,' Ecological Boredom, and the Recall of the Wild," *Prose Studies* 38, no. 2 (2016), 154–156.

36. Izabella Adamczewska-Baranowska. "Autonaturografie. Biopoetyki immersyjnego piśmiennictwa przyrodniczego (Zajączkowska, Brach-Czaina, Tsing, Macdonald)," *Er(r)go. Teoria – Literatura – Kultura* 43 (2021), 229–249.

37. Jos Smith, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1.

38. Jason Cowley, "Editor's Letter: The New Nature Writing," *Granta* 102 (2008), 7–12.

39. For a thorough diachronic study of British modern writing, see Will Abberley, Christina Alt, David Higgins, Graham Huggan, and Pippa Marland, *Modern British Nature Writing, 1789–2020: Land Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). In the book, new nature writing is discussed in its final chapter entitled "Contemporary."

40. "The best new nature writing is […] an experiment in form." Cowley, "Editor's Letter," 10.

41. "[The new nature writers] don't simply want to walk into the wild, to rhapsodize and commune: they aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect." Cowley, "Editor's Letter," 9.

42. Cowley hails new nature writing's language as one "free from cliché." Cowley, "Editor's Letter," 9.

pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer,"[43] as well as its ecological awareness which, in turn, necessitates the employment of an elegiac tone.[44]

A number of literary critics have followed Cowley with their own investigation of the poetics and politics of new nature writing and, consequently, have contributed to the debate on it by developing Cowley's original argument, correcting some of its errors, or adding new characteristics to the existing list of new nature writing's generic signposts. For example, Amy Player has underscored new nature writing's fundamental investment in deep time and has identified what she considers its major pragmatic function, that is, to "[re]imagine our [i.e., readers] relationship with the more-than-human world."[45] Elsewhere, in their detailed discussions of new nature writing, Graham Huggan and Deborah Lilley have convincingly demonstrated how it struggles to re-conceptualise such categories as the "wild" or the "natural," as well as scrutinised its realisation of the (proclaimed though not always achieved) revolutionary potential in the face of the Anthropocene and ecological crisis.[46]

Interestingly, new nature writing has also faced considerable criticism. Kathleen Jamie, for example, has accurately observed that, despite Cowley's belief in the radical change of the writing style, new nature writing continues its predecessor's proclivity for an "elevated tone" which combines heightened lyricism, spirituality, and literariness.[47] In her influential attack on new nature writing, she has also emphasised the fact that it continues to be the domain of the "white, middle-class Englishmen" for whom "Cambridge is still the centre of the world"[48] – its lack of gender and ethnic diversity being soon picked up by others critics of the genre.[49] In a similar vein, Mark Cocker complains about new nature writing having

43. Cowley, "Editor's Letter," 10.

44. In Cowley's view, new nature writing is essentially a "moral enterprise." Cowley, "Editor's Letter," 9, 11.

45. Amy Player, "'Stories of Making and Unmaking': Deep Time and the Anthropocene in New Nature Writing," *Text Matters* 12 (2022), 36. In a similar vein, Cécile Beaufils recognises new nature writing's indispensable implication in ethical concerns and it being the "source of numerous ethical reflections." Cécile Beaufils, "Nature Writing and Publishing: The Ethics of a Cultural Mapping," *Études britanniques contemporaines* 55 (2018), https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/5011#quotation.

46. Huggan, "Back to the Future;" Deborah Lilley, "New British Nature Writing," *Oxford Handbook Topics in Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2013), https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/43514/chapter/364258278.

47. Kathleen Jamie, "A Lone Enraptured Male," *London Review of Books* 30, no. 5 (2008), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n05/kathleen-jamie/a-lone-enraptured-male.

48. Jamie, "A Lone Enraptured Male."

49. Stephen Moss, "Gender, Race, Climate and the New Nature Writing," *The Guardian*, 28 December, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/28/new-nature-writing-gender-race-climate.

substituted the "culture-nature axis" with "literature-landscape," thus becoming socially and environmentally *un*conscious; he also notes that the reasons for the substitution is the intended audience of new nature naturing, namely the urban/metropolitan readers.[50] In a recent addition to the critique, Jonathan Franzen has recognised another problem of new nature writing, namely that in its pursuit of what he calls an ecological "evangelism" and prioritisation of nature, new nature writing has repeatedly failed to "tell a [human] story."[51] In Franzen's view, the failure to produce a convincing life-narrative (by the literary form that should interweave the human and non-human history) results in the failure to produce a persuasive nature-narrative. New nature writing should thus be substituted by "narrative nature writing," Franzen concludes.[52]

Over the last few years, the body of new nature writing has been enlarged by a relatively small group of texts that have been written by people who identify themselves as LGBTQIA+: ones in which their authors' queer identity defines their relationship with nature and rurality.[53] Those texts, which for the purpose of the present inquiry I have decided to address as "queer new nature writing," certainly adhere to a number of formal and thematic dictates of new nature writing's generic law which most critics would agree on. If Jos Smith's magisterial study of new nature writing and its "laws" is to serve as a touchstone for the recognition of the genre's rightful specimens, then the works analysed herein (the books by Mike Parker, Luke Turner, and Amanda Thomson) should certainly be considered the legitimate products of new nature writing; as matter of fact, the new nature writing par excellence. Among others, they are highly self-reflexive about their positioning vis-à-vis the history of nature writing and its conventions[54]; they embrace a new understanding of nature and rurality which are neither a straightforward opposite of man, culture, urbanity, nor a passive object to be

50. Mark Cocker, "Death of the Naturalist: Why is the 'New Nature Writing' so Tame?" *The New Statesman*, 17 June, 2015, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/death-naturalist-why-new-nature-writing-so-tame.

51. Jonathan Franzen, "The Problem of Nature Writing," *The New Yorker*, 12 August, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-weekend-essay/the-problem-of-nature-writing.

52. Franzen, "The Problem."

53. The corpus of new queer nature writing identified in the course of the present research includes: *The Sea Inside* by Philip Hoare (2013), *Hidden Nature: A Voyage of Discovery* by Alys Fowler (2017), *Out of the Woods* by Luke Turner (2019), *On the Red Hill* by Mark Parker (2019), *Borealis* by Aisha Sabatini Sloan (2021), *Northern Light* by Kazim Ali (2021), *Belonging* by Amanda Thomson (2022), *Boys and Oil: Growing up Gay in a Fractured Land* by Taylor Brorby (2022), *How Far the Light Reaches: A Life in Ten Sea Creatures* by Sabrina Imbler (2022). So far the only work which has addressed the intersection of queerness and new nature writing is Huggan and Marland, "Queer Blue Sea."

54. Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, 26.

studied[55]; they offer alternative modes of thinking about time and various temporalities[56]; similarly, they create "counter-maps"[57] and thus challenge their readers' ideas of what a (rural) place is.[58] However, in the light of the existing corpus of queer new nature writing, it appears reasonable to supplement this list with an additional set of characteristics which, as this paper argues, justify the use of a distinctive literary category. I would insist that, apart from locating the nexus of sexual difference and nature at the very core of their thematic focus, what differentiates the specimens of queer new nature writing from its principal category are the following: the considered works' preeminent interest in peripheral/third/hybrid spaces which have so far remained in the blind spot of most nature writers (e.g., canals, inner city woodlands, peri-urban areas, borderlands); the exploration of both queer history and queer natural history which puts their authors in the position of queer arche/geologists; self-reflexivity regarding the queer tradition of LGBTQIA+ writing; as well as the prioritisation of the auto/biographical queer experience; to name but a few. Still, due to their quantitative and qualitative prominence in the identified corpus of works, the present paper intends to focus on only three features which, in my opinion, contribute to new queer nature writing's unique (eco)poetics. They are: the unearthing and acknowledgement of queer rural heritage, counter-pastoralism, and the presence of the auto(eco)theoretical impulse. All three shall be briefly discussed below by referring to three examples, that is, *On the Red Hill* by Mark Parker (2019), *Out of the Woods* by Luke Turner (2019), and *Belonging* by Amanda Thomson (2022).

Queer Rural Heritage: *On the Red Hill* by Mike Parker

Over the last several decades, a "queer desire for history"[59] has resulted in a major revaluation and re-interpretation of heritage[60] from the point of queer studies. Unlike queer historiography, however, queer heritage is less concerned with "desperately seeking a [queer]"[61] and more with reaching out to the resources

55. Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, 12–17.

56. Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, 6.

57. Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, 6.

58. Smith claims that in new nature writing place is an "open-ended and experimental process, an ongoing performance of social and cultural reality that is in often difficult dialogue with other scales of place." Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, 21.

59. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 8.

60. Where heritage is understood as one's "meaningful pasts." Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1.

61. Gregory S. Hutcheson, "Desperately Seeking Sodom: Queerness in the Chronicles of Alvaro de Luna." In *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Josiah Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutcheson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 223.

of difficult, dissonant, or unwanted pasts so as to provide them with a new meaning – the kind that will be relevant to the non-heteronormative users of the very past. Queer heritage is thus not about the "thing-in-itself" but about the meaning that one – a member of both imagined and real non-heteronormative communities – might give to the thing.

Queer new nature writing is often preoccupied with "seeking" queer nature, that is, searching for the "evidence" that nature is essentially queer. Nevertheless, similarly to queer heritage, it appears to be much more interested in the process of queering the natural, namely suffusing it with the "queer impulse"[62] which allows the potential queer readers to recognise it as their own. One of the ways to achieve the latter is to replace the narrative about the irreconcilability of rurality and queerness with the exploration of queer rural heritage.

This strategy lies at the very heart of Mike Parker's *On the Red Hill* – a story of Rhiw Goch, the titular "Red Hill," as well as the lives of four gay men who have owned and inhabited the very place located in the Powys county in east-central Wales. A transgenerational desire for the "queer rural"[63] represented by Wales and its "Red Hill" is the most conspicuous theme of Parker's life-cum-nature writing. Early in the volume Parker confesses to his love of the "not-city"[64] and his unambiguously queer anti-urban perception of the countryside:

> If the countryside appears at all in gay histories, it is usually only as a place to escape from, and as swiftly as possible. For many of us, this is a pattern that never fitted. Since childhood, the green places have called us the loudest, and although we did the urban thing to burst from the closet, the lure of the rural soon overwhelmed the anonymity of the city. It didn't even feel like a choice, but something intrinsic that would have been dangerous to resist, like the act of coming out itself.[65]

Throughout the book, Parker repeatedly emphasises the fact that queer rurality is a legitimate way of being in the world for nonnormative sexualities. Though Parker's queer rurality is by no means an idyll,[66] he repeatedly challenges the

62. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 2.

63. Mike Parker, *On the Red Hill: Where Four Lives Fell into Place* (London: William Heinemann, 2019), 6.

64. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 287.

65. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 5–6.

66. He admits to a variety of difficulties that a nonheteronormative male faces when considering "shak[ing] off the city": from "farmerphobia," threats imposed by "small-town morality," to widespread beliefs that the best a gay man might hope when moving to "Llan-nowhere" is "to be ignored and to die a lonely old queen." Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 22, 206, 256, 7.

utopian myth of the city's unbridled liberating potential,[67] and reminds his readers of similar, if not equal opportunities that rurality may offer to queers.[68] In Parker's vision, the countryside is recognised as a space where "affirmation, liberation, and citizenship"[69] remain available to queer individuals – both now and in the past. He states: "Every parish had its hen lanc [Welsh for 'the confirmed bachelor'], often living undisturbed, perhaps with his special friend, his brother, blood or otherwise. His twin, even, sharing a bad and a midwinter birthday, their old farm neatly bisected by the frontier between Wales and England: *On the Black Hill* redux."[70]

The quoted fragment is a testament to what I recognise as Parker's main instrument of queering the rural and, simultaneously, the prominent marker of the (eco)poetics of queer new nature writing: the strategy of queering the rural past/heritage. Part of this strategy is unearthing a variety of examples of nonnormative individuals who, over the centuries, have established a positive relationship with the countryside and, consequently, have become the "pioneers" of queer rurality: the likes of the Ladies of Llangollen, G. M. Hopkins, the painter Cedric Morris, Edward Carpenter, and, finally, E. M. Forster. Forster is, in fact, a crucial figure in Parker's attempt to queer rural heritage which is signalled by the fact that the book takes for its motto the following line from *Maurice*: "Men of my sort could take to the greenwood."[71] Parker is quite explicit about the transformative function and identity-shaping role that Forster has played in his own life. He links the origins of his "search for the queer rural"[72] with reading and watching Forster. As a twenty-year-old student, he "secretly ached for a country house weekend of skinny-dipping larks, spied on from behind a tree by a handsome gardener, who later that night would climb into my chamber and have me on crisp white linen."[73]

Still, the best example of the central position that Parker's specimen of queer new nature writing ascribes to queer rural heritage is the titular Red Hill – not only a symbol of Parker's queer heritage but also, quite literally, a queer inheritance that is passed down to him and his partner by the house's former gay owners (Reg and George). Red Hill is an "inheritance far beyond bricks and mortar."[74] Mike and his partner Preds inherited not only the latter's house but also their lives:

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67. "For too many, the city has become just another closet." Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 287.

68. "Away from the cities and the commercial gay scene – on walks up hills and by rivers, in cafes and country pubs, at parties and raves in quarries and forests – I found comrades, sensed others and heard whisper of many more." Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 256–257.

69. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 3.

70. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 375.

71. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 2.

72. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 6.

73. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 215.

74. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 114.

"[W]e inherited their lives, and the challenge was – still is – to live them. To live *with* them."[75] The conceptualisation of inheritance as "past presencing,"[76] as history that not only repeats itself but is performatively re-enacted is achieved through the figure of E. M. Forster and his ongoing presence – as a forefather of queer rurality, a source of literary inspiration, an identity-shaping force in the lives of queer men, down to his hauntological appearance in the final pages of the book when New Year's Eve party at Rhiw Goch turns into a "celebration of yr hen lanc and his eternal greenwood."[77] In a fantastical scene, the transgenerational queer party is joined by the likes of G. M. Hopkins, Edward Carpenter and George Merrill, E. M. Forster, Emlyn Williams, Ivor Novello, W. H. Auden, Cedric Morris, J. R. Ackerley, Lord Montagu, and David Hockney – the figures that have shaped Parker's view of the conflation of rurality, queerness, and Wales, as well as allowed him to engage in the process of establishing queer rural heritage. Though this very sequence *On the Red Hill* does not only testify to the performative re-enactment of history, but, most importantly to a transgenerational conversation with queer rural past: one that in my reading remains a major characteristic of queer new nature writing.

Counter-pastoralism: *Out of the Woods* by Luke Turner

Famously theorised by Raymond Williams in his seminal *The Country and the City* of 1973, counter-pastoralism – understood as the two-fold process of acknowledging the exclusionary character of the rural (pastoral) fantasy and replacing the latter with the vision of rurality's implication into temporality, as well as various forms of violence and oppression (class-, ethnicity, or gender-based)[78] – is another notable characteristic that I would like to privilege in my discussion of queer new nature writing.

At first glance, counter-pastoralism might not appear as an aesthetic and political ally of new nature writing with its predominantly "rhapsodic"[79] vision of nature. But new queer nature writing seems to be less willing to embrace the regular tropes and conceptions of the rural as pristine or idyllic. Among the writers who have contributed to queer new nature writing with their counter-pastoral poetics is Luke Turner. His 2019 book *Out of the Woods* is not – true to its title – a straightforward return to nature but an attempt to understand his liminal

75. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 10.

76. Understood here as actively engaging with the past, and not necessarily simply remembering it. Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage*, 12.

77. Parker, *On the Red Hill*, 378–379.

78. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 23, 92.

79. Lilley, "New British Nature Writing."

sexuality (bisexuality) with regard to what emerges as a liminal space: Epping Forest on the border between Greater London and Essex.

The relationship between Turner and the forest is the major (if not the only) theme of the book. From the very beginning, the reader is invited to partake in Turner's "intimate conversation"[80] with the forest which constantly oscillates between offering the sense of comfort and producing the feeling of terror. The former is rooted in the writer's childhood experiences of rurality (fetishised as a site of escapism and of "respite"[81]) and the overall vision of the forest as a "homely" space: the kind that "asks no questions and demands nothing in return."[82] The sources of the latter are much more complex and result from a variety of factors: cultural, historical, anthropological, as well as personal. In this reading, whose origin the writer traces to the human activity of clearing the festered land so as to convert it the non-forest use or spaces (e.g., town and cities), the forest is no longer a place of "sylvan innocence"[83] but something to be feared: a locale of "sin" and "shame," a "home to our predators, and later […] where outsiders, criminals and ne'er-do-wells were held back from the city."[84] What is more, the sense of terror is amplified by the fact that the forest has generated an array of versions of hetero- and homo masculinity, all of which appear to be a threat to Turner's fragile self. Having refused to acknowledge an essentially transactional character of the man's interaction with nature, Turner – neither the "lumberjack. the woodman, the hunter, the nature poet, the explorer, the conqueror of territory"[85] nor the "cruiser" ready to use the "cover of the woods"[86] to seek sexual contact with other men – cannot see the forest as a place where one comes to be "cleansed and healed."[87] On the contrary, inspired by Werner Herzog's vision of the jungle as "full of obscenity […], vile and base,"[88] Turner cannot shake off the feeling that during his walks in the woods he participates in the "harmony of overwhelming and collective murder."[89]

His struggle with the forest is, in fact, the struggle with his sexuality, with his "long[ing] to be one or another."[90] *Out of Woods* is not only a work of queer new

80. Luke Turner, *Out of the Woods* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2019), 6.
81. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 72.
82. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 52.
83. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 64.
84. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 96, 117.
85. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 124.
86. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 149.
87. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 187.
88. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 186.
89. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 187.
90. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 98

nature writing but also of queer autopathography: a story of depression which springs from one's inability to acknowledge one's bisexuality. The book's (futile) effort to locate the forest in the either/or binary construction mirrors Turner's own strife to identify himself as either gay or straight. Its counter-pastoralism thus serves not to dismiss rurality but to show its implication in establishing the binary rules of both: hetero- and homo-normativity. In the book's concluding chapters, Turner returns to the forest whose "chaos"[91] and "constant state of flux"[92] (which initially terrified him and from which he escaped) he is now able to fully embrace. He realises that in the forest he can be "whoever [he] want[s] for there are no rules or contradictions here."[93] In the final part of the book – in a truly counter-pastoral manner – Turner re-visits Epping Forest, now de-constructed and de-binarised, as a new "man of the forest": one who partakes in the forest's destruction and preservation. He returns as a conservation volunteer, a man who cuts the trees to give birth to new ones: a destroyer and a begetter, both.

Auto(eco)theoretical Impulse: Belonging by Amanda Thomson

The last characteristic of new queer rural writing that this paper would like to succinctly address is the auto(eco)theoretical impulse – the feature which I understand as desire to "theorize" the self ("auto") and environment/nature/rurality ("eco") "from the first person," from the "perspective of someone who is clearly subjective and embodied,"[94] as well as profoundly preoccupied with the ecological crisis. If, according to Lauren Fournier, autotheory is a "[performative] life-thinking,"[95] then I am tempted to consider auto(eco)theory an instance of life-cum-nature thinking.[96]

The work in which the auto(eco)theoretical impulse becomes particularly prominent is *Belonging* by the writer and visual artist Amanda Thomson – not least because of the book's ostensible interest in art history which Fournier

91. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 16.

92. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 171, 196.

93. Turner, *Out of the Woods*, 264.

94. Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 8, 67. The definition of auto(eco)theory proposed herein, as well as the new coinage which I have proposed in the present paper, owes a lot to Fournier's study of autotheory. Fournier insists on referring to autotheory as a "practice" understood as one's "way of coming to terms with 'theory' […] in relation to [one's] experience, affective life and embodied, relational practices as [a] human being in the world." She sees it primarily as an "integration" of theory and self, a way to bridge philosophy and "autobiography, the body, and other so-called personal and explicitly subjective modes" – however, one that is not only self-conscious but also performative. Fournier, *Autotheory*, 6, 7.

95. Fournier, *Autotheory*, 7.

96. Fournier, *Autotheory*, 8, 67.

recognises as one of the major features of autotheory.[97] From the very first pages of the volume it is evident that Thomson, whose literary and visual work has been "always motivated [by her] interest in place and nature,"[98] is particularly concerned with the question of how one's idea of the self and one's embodied experience affects one's sense of (and communion with) the natural world. For this reason, Thomson finds it essential to announce that *Belonging* – which offers an exploration of Scottish natural history and landscape, especially the Highlands where Thomson continues to live – will be informed by the concept of intersectionality and her specific subject position which she defines as "ovo-lacto vegetarian/Black British/Black Scottish/mixed ethnicity/gay/civilly partnered."[99]

The acknowledgement of the fact that "different parts [of her] are interwoven throughout this country [i.e., Scotland – author's note]"[100] demands from Thomson that she constantly approaches the subject of her book from the point of view of her intersectional self. For example, when she writes about rural and small-town Scotland of her childhood, she knows that she needs to write about it from the perspective of a "mixed-race girl in a white family […] [g]ay too"[101]; when she addresses the ecological crisis in the Scottish Highlands and the fears and worries that various environmental problems generate in her, she inevitably considers them vis-à-vis her experience of "racism/homophobia/sexism,"[102] as well as other forms of political and social catastrophes that have impacted her life: the murder of George Floyd, Donald Trump presidency, COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit[103]; when she writes about the migration of birds from South Africa to Northern Scotland and back, she cannot disassociate this phenomenon from the history of slavery and black presence in Scotland – from the soldiers of the Roman Army who stationed on the Antonius Wall and could have been from North Africa to her own black/Scottish/queer presence. For Thomson, who has famously written *Scots Dictionary of Nature* (2019), a process of understanding and conceptualising one's self has been forged, predicated, and sustained on her life-long relationship with the Scottish rural environs – including Haggs, a small village in Falkirk and a childhood home of Thomson's grandmother, Culbin Sands, a coast and countryside in Moray with a unique wildlife habitat, and Abernethy Forest, a remnant of native Caledonian pine forest with many rare and endangered species. The last place

97. Fournier, *Autotheory*, 8.

98. Amanda Thomson, *Belonging: Natural Histories of Place, Identity and Home* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2023), 12.

99. Thomson, *Belonging*, 15.

100. Thomson, *Belonging*, 16.

101. Thomson, *Belonging*, 23.

102. Thomson, *Belonging*, 174.

103. Thomson, *Belonging*, 234.

will emerge as particularly relevant to Thomson's auto(eco)theoretical narrative. As she has confessed in one of the interviews: "In Scots pinewoods, the dead trees are an important source of nutrients for the living elements of the forest, and provide micro-habitats for its species. The idea of the continuing importance of what has gone before to the present, and acknowledging that ongoing influence, was something that I wanted to explore in relation to nature, but also, then, in thinking about my own history and family, race and identity."[104]

Similarly to the paradigmatic examples of autotheory and their extensive use of citations from literature, theory, and art (in itself a manifestation of their intertextuality), Thomson's vision of rurality and the self is heavily dependent on a variety of cultural theorists, philosophers, writers, scientists, and naturalists from whose works she quotes and whose ideas underpin her thinking about the (black/queer) subjectivity and nature – the likes of Bell Hooks, Jackie Kay, and James Baldwin, to name but a few. The book's auto(eco)theoretical impulse is also to be discerned in Thomson's obsession with definitions – the narrative of *Belonging* being repeatedly interrupted by chapters which consist of dictionary entries of words (in English, Scots, or both) that are to serve as a methodological toolbox to conceptualise both Scottish nature and her Scottish/black/queer self. Finally, Thomson is no stranger to formal experimentation as *Belonging* is a visual and textual commixture in which the writer's reflections are fleshed out with the images of her visual works that document Scottish nature: photographs, film stills, drawings, etchings, prints, etc.

Still, what remains of utmost importance from the point of view of the present inquiry is that Thomson's queer new nature writing mobilises its auto(eco)theoretical impulse to investigate and ultimately express Thomson's sense of belonging to the (Scottish) natural, of being at home in it. If Thomson confesses that "from an early age [she has] always interacted with nature and the countryside without necessarily knowing it" and that "nature was just what [she] knew,"[105] the book – the product of her mature years – is a tool to understand and explain the reasons for this interaction, as well as Thomson's (and, by extension, other precarious subjects') right to it. It is the auto(eco)theoretical impulse that ultimately allows her to fully reconcile her otherness and rurality, personal history and natural history, black/queer temporality and deep time. In the final scene of the book, Thomson goes for a walk in Abernethy Forest – the very place where she started her narrative. Having integrated the self and nature via theory, she is now able

104. Amanda Thomson, "*be/longing*: A Q & A with Amanda Thomson," *Books of Scotland: The Best of Scottish Books* 79 ("In the Summertime," 2022), https://booksfromscotland.com/issue/in-the-summertime/.

105. Thomson, *Belonging*, 30.

to conclude: "Walking in this forest […] I am wholly myself. I am in my own body, my own skin."[106] And, one might be tempted to add, in her own sexuality.

Conclusion: We Belong Here

In 2021, the writer Anita Sethi released the first volume of what she had envisaged as her nature writing trilogy entitled *I Belong Here*. This volume, like other specimens of new nature writing discussed herein, problematises the difficult nexus between otherness and rurality – more specifically, the expulsion of the precarious subjects from the English countryside and Sethi's own struggle (as a "brown woman […] in the UK"[107]) to (re)claim the rural and (re)affirm one's sense of belonging to it. The lines that close the manifesto-like prologue of the book are unambiguously direct in their pronouncement of the new paradigm that – in Sethi's optimistic vision – is now to govern the relationship between the rural/countryside/nature and those who for a variety of reasons (economic, racial, sexual) have not been allowed to be its users or "heirs": "I will not be silent. I will not stop speaking out, and I will not stop walking through […] my home [i.e., Britain]," Sethi concludes.

As the present essay has hoped to show, in recent years, the same triadic articulation of the subject position vis-à-vis nature has predicated the emergence of a series of hybrid non-fiction works that lie at the intersection of queer and nature writing and which articulate a new way to conceptualise a queer person's relationship with rurality. Those pioneering narratives – which for the purpose of this research I have classified as queer new nature writing – do not offer a simple reversal of the traditional mode of thinking about the agonistic character of the queer-rural dyad and replace rural-phobia with rural-philia. On the contrary, having recognised the very potential and possibility of the queer life beyond the city, they remain deeply aware of the need to imagine new ways to think and write about their experience of belonging in the rural space: the kinds that this paper has attempted to identify and discuss. This belonging is less concerned with the politics of recognition and restitution and more with the poetics of care and collaboration. This new sense of belonging – or "be*longing*" – is, as Amanda Thomson observes, "about noticing and caring, […] about home and what makes us feel at home, and the different things that home can be."[108]

106. Thomson, *Belonging*, 291.

107. Anita Sethi, *I Belong Here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* (London and Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 18.

108. Thomson, *Belonging*, 18.

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