

# A Queerness of Extraction

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## The Culture of Extraction

We live in a culture of extraction. In Frederick Buell's description, extraction culture is spectacular; it is American in a Wild West show kind of way.<sup>1</sup> This is in part because narratives of resource extraction run heroic. They dramatize exploration and discovery. They demand action and necessarily involve crisis. This allows extraction culture to paint itself as creative, exuberant, miraculous. It brings things up from the depths.

But sometimes the dwarves delve too deep. As Stephanie LeMenager reminds us, leaks and spills are as central to extraction culture as are its heroics. Extraction culture is filthy. It stinks and defiles.<sup>2</sup> And, Graeme Macdonald notes, extraction culture is all about depletion, requiring new and evolving sciences of supply and logistics.<sup>3</sup> Zones of extraction are, therefore, also spaces for challenging the invisible forces of global capital. Australian activists Knitting Nannas against Gas make their protests at sites of natural gas extraction and exploration. They are activists who work through apparent inaction, using the materials of leisure—lawn chairs, crafting activities—to occupy extractive space. As their website explains, “We sit, knit, plot, have a yarn and a cuppa, and bear witness to the war against those who try to rape our land and divide our communities.”<sup>4</sup>

Knitting Nannas against Gas, a performance of elderly femininity by people of all ages and genders, offers one way of putting a queer spin on extraction culture. Another is to see queer culture as itself, at times, extractive. Contributors to Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco's edited volume, in a nod to Achille Mbembe, detail a queer necropolitics. Sometimes, they argue, mourning the violent deaths of trans people of color is the first step in an extractive process that opens up urban space for the homonormative forces of gentrification.

Queer urban capital is extractive, and so, in a different way, is queer reading. An understanding of virtually any aspect of the history of interpretation is incomplete to the degree that it denies criticism's queer work

as a process of extraction. Something is dislodged and comes away from the stuff we see and read. What is extracted in the process? Something that can be exchanged, an idea, a new way of using our bodies—a new way of feeling bad.

*Something sticks in my craw. Something about the abuse queer and trans folk direct at each other first, second, and last. Like blaming ourselves for gentrification, and in the process moralizing and personalizing a system of extraction that we theorize intensively and extensively as structural, in a race to the top of a Mount Everest of punishing rigor. Who wants to escape the salt mines just to end up the queen of punishing rigor? Who wants to serve the queen of punishing rigor? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us of the queer power of “transformational shame,” but Cheryl Clarke also warns us about the “failure to transform.”<sup>25</sup> When does shaming ourselves and our comrades work to mobilize, and when does it merely introject and paralyze necessary social action?*

### Queerly Shaped Things

The question of how to queer extractive capitalism animates the writing in Macarena Gómez-Barris’s *The Extractive Zone*. It is a vexing theoretical problem without an obvious solution or route of escape. This same problematic—of how to address the normalizing function of the idioms of extraction—emerged again in our *Social Text* collaborative discussions about the here and now. How did we get to the here and now? What is to be done about the here and now? Where do we go from this or other heres and nows? And, as David Eng asked us, “Where is the sexuality, people?” One way to enter into these entangled issues is by starting with epistemes that do not easily conform to straightening, deadening economic vocabularies.

*Take, for example, sociology. The field has instilled the idea that the languages of world systems and political economies need not accommodate gender and sexual difference. Wallerstein and Butler were never taught together. It seems odd to me now that this was the case, that it took a long time to find a conceptual idiom that could bring theories of colonial power, racialized inequality, and embodied experience together. If we pause and deliberate on this point, early grade school experience becomes a powerful tutor.*

*Listen to this: The first time I saw Chile on a map and marveled at its long, worm-like, and impossible outline was also my first queer memory. Vanessa, my closest friend, invited me into the boy’s bathroom, where I equally marveled at how she peed standing up. And, I may have even had the thought, can I do that? It’s like the two things that sequentially took place in real time, in overlapping proximity to each other, demanded to be thought together. The confinements of maps and bathrooms. It was only through writing narrative fiction that I began to link wrongly and queerly fitting things together.*

For me, fiction brought these two incongruent experiences together. It allowed me to realize how the “unnatural” length of Chile was fabricated through the experience of colonization, the occupation of indigenous territories, the acquisition of Wallmapu, the nineteenth-century expansions that extended the Atacama Desert, diminished Peru, and left Bolivia landlocked.

On the other hand, Vanessa’s “ill-fitting body” did not easily fit into the girl’s bathroom and, as I voyeuristically watched on, she rightly repurposed the boy’s bathroom to make it work. Vanessa challenged any dictum that she was not supposed to pee standing up. Queer bodies have long troubled the gender binary of the bathroom and forced a different consideration of gender designs.

Nonnormative embodiment can extend how we can perceive the normalizing work of coloniality. And indigenous maps, say, through the territory of Wallmapu and other Southern geographies, can potentially reroute colonial views. What do nonnormative spaces and nonnormative bodies share? Issues of “fit.” Indigenous bodies are always ill-fitting within the cartographies of colonialism. Land cartographies and geological time exceed the neat outlines of the nation-state.

So perhaps it’s all about extraction; perhaps we need to think like geologists and cartographers. Queer mappings of bodies and territories, like indigenous mappings, can hold together divergent scales of intimacy and land and make explicit how colonialism inhabits normative fictions (binary gendered bodies and nation-states). Both are marked by violence and disciplining. Why would we want this? Why sacrifice other tellings of embodiment, desire, experience? Only decolonial love can move us sufficiently, can compel us to draw new maps, to invent new purposes for our desire.

## Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Buell, “A Short History of Oil Cultures.”
2. LeMenager, “Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blow-out and the Arts of Grief.”
3. MacDonald, “Research Note.”
4. Knitting Nannas against Gas, “The Nannafesto,” [www.knitting-nannas.com/philosophy.php](http://www.knitting-nannas.com/philosophy.php) (accessed 1 August 2017).
5. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; Clarke, “Failure to Transform.”

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