



Nymphaea: Lovers' Letter to Water Lilies

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Abstract

Our inspiration, theorizing, and living process of co-creating *Nymphaea*, a time-based, collaborative work created using stop-motion animation and live projection on the body is the focus of our inquiry presented in this essay. Our multimedia creation is inspired by Prudence Gibson and Monica Gagliano's 2017 essay, *The Feminist Plant: Changing Relations with the Water Lily*. We explore queer ecologies posited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (2010) with Donna Haraway's (2016) "tentacular thinking." Engaging with feminist/queer theory through embodied and experimental approaches to making, *Nymphaea* is our tentacular co-inquiry, a contemplation on water lilies as a queer companion species and as a more-than-human model of feminist collectivity, relationality, and care. Through Audre Lorde's (1978/2007) *Uses of the Erotic*, we reflect on the ways our processes of co-creating *Nymphaea* and our companionship as artistic collaborators, educators, and life partners, are entangled.

Keywords: feminist theory, queer ecology, heteronormativity, stop motion animation, companion species, tentacular thinking, the erotic

Nymphaea: Rooted, Networked, and a Floating Signifier

Nymphaea is the title of our time-based work we collaboratively produced by stop-motion animating the moving body (specifically, the hands). Through projection, we enveloped the hands in open-source images of colorful water lily species. Additionally, we projected fragments of text from plant researchers Prudence Gibson and Monica Gagliano's (2017) essay, *The Feminist Plant: Changing Relations with the Water Lily*, documenting our collaborative engagement with the essay as material informing our co-creation. Utilizing digital editing tools, we spliced, rearranged, and animated the captured images of the hands, creating a digital assemblage of rhythmic, bodily, water lily-like forms (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The embedded 10:04 minute video, *Nymphaea*, is the full version of our time-based, stop-animation, projection, and digital assemblage co-creation. Included courtesy of Maggie-Rose Condit-Summersom and John Summersom (2021). Video available at <https://vimeo.com/644385436/dbde699f1f>

We are both White artists/makers and art educators. Maggie-Rose Condit-Summersom teaches at the intersections of art education and women's, gender, and sexuality studies. She utilizes performance and moving image approaches to critically investigate heteronormative constructions of White femininity and how these conventions circulate in digital/visual culture. John Summersom teaches animation courses and has a background in commercial studio animation and animated documentary. He explores animation's genre-fluid potentials in non-fiction storytelling. In addition to being artistic collaborators, we are also lovers. Maggie-Rose identifies as queer, though our partnership is often assumed to be heteronormative by those who do not know us, as we are a legally married woman and man, both cisgender (though, at times, our understandings of our gender identities and expressions, too, feel fluid).

Our co-creation draws its title and inspiration from the qualities of *nymphaea*, the name of the botanical genus commonly referred to as *water lilies*. As a family of plant species found in aquatic environments, *nymphaea* are simultaneously rooted in the sodden earth, yet capable of drifting across the water's surface and communing without words. Co-existing as a clustered network, the *nymphaea* transmit signals via somatic languages of scents and volatile compounds, reaching outward to pollinators and other lifeforms in their ecosystem, as well as one another. Informed by feminist/queer ecological research, we sense potent metaphorical power in the behaviors of water lilies as models for loving relationships that resist heteropatriarchal expectations, and for symbiotic existence of autonomous yet networked beings/matter.

Through our inquiry, we also explore *nymphaea* as a floating signifier. In the dominant Western canon, *nymphaea* are adrift in a pool of gendered, heteronormative language and imagery. The etymology of *nymphaea* can be traced to the Greek *nymphē*, which translates to "bride," or "veiled one" (Marder, 2014). The Greek *nymphē*, or "nymphs," are mythological personifications of the ancient Greek natural world, represented in visual art and literature as ethereal feminine demi-deities (Larson, 2001). Mirroring depictions of the nymphs of Greek antiquity, water lilies are often anthropomorphized in Eurocentric visual culture, symbolically connecting nature to idealized feminine "purity" and goddess-like "otherworldliness" (Gibson & Gagliano, 2017, p. 128).

In co-creating *Nymphaea*, we explore alternative modes for representing the water lily, drifting away from stereotypically gendered and anthropocentric visual tropes, while still visibly incorporating the human body. In Figure 2, a still from the 10-minute stop motion animation, two amoeba-like shapes comprised of layered images of hands, arranged like flower petals, form a pair of bodily water lilies. The red, purple, and bubblegum-pink tones reference the hues found in the *nymphaea* genus. As the centers of the bodily flowers emerge, they are overlaid with projections of underlined and annotated text from Gibson and Gagliano's (2017) essay. The projection of the images and text onto the performing bodily assemblage serves as a visual representation of the text as a lens, shaping our exploratory making and thinking with feminist/queer theory from the transdisciplinary field of queer ecologies (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010).

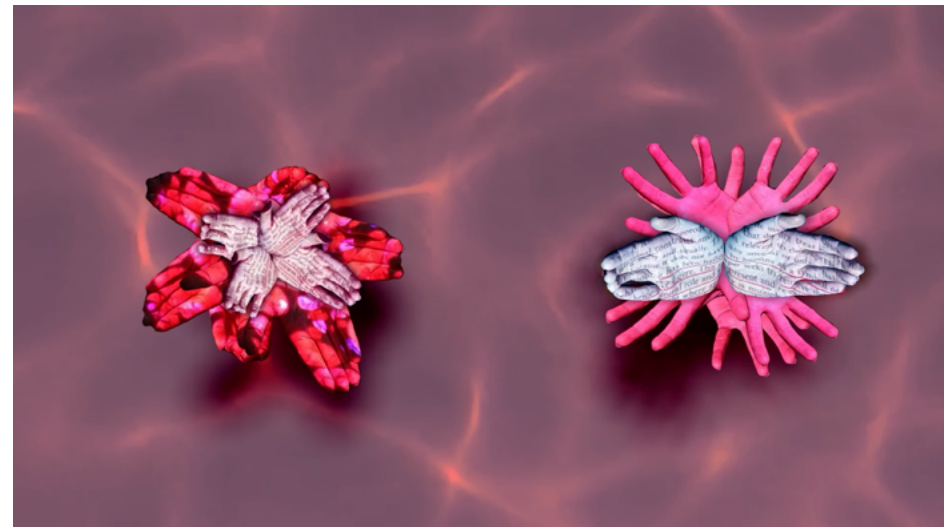


Figure 2. In this still from our time-based work, *Nymphaea*, two biomorphic shapes made of layered human hands form two water lilies floating together in a body of water. Included courtesy of Maggie-Rose Condit-Summersom and John Summersom (2021).

Queer ecologies challenge the ways that conventional ecological and environmental discourses perpetuate entrenched hierarchies and heteronormative binary frameworks through their imposition on humans and other beings/entities. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway (2016) proposes "tentacular thinking" as a

strategy for moving away from dominant binary, hierarchical, and linear modes of thought. Tentacular thinking seeks to blur the perceived boundaries between the human and the more-than-human to better recognize the networked relationships between all life-forms/matter. The purpose of our visual inquiry, *Nymphaea*, is to enact tentacular thinking to explore the connections between humans and water lilies, and between one another. Tentacles are interconnected multisensory appendages capable of navigating complexity and fluidity. Our processes of artistic co-creation seek to embody these qualities. We, as partners, are interconnected as we produce our multisensory work through a sense of joy and play. We endeavor toward Haraway's notion of "making with," which emphasizes collaboration and mutual interdependence that lovingly embraces hybridity and multiple forms of existence. In generating this work, we imagine the possibilities of thinking with *nymphaea*, as a companion species to ourselves, a model for collectivity and care. In doing so, we also reflect on our own companionship as artistic collaborators, educators, and partners in love and life.

Revoking Anthropocentric Representations of the Water Lily in Visual Culture

Humanistic representations of the *nymphaea* reflect essentialist conflation of women and pastoral nature, which reinforce anthropocentric and patriarchal constructions of "natural" (i.e., heteronormative) gender and sexuality. Ancient [Greco-Roman representations of water nymphs](#), as personified embodiments of aquatic habitats, have influenced artists of the dominant Eurocentric canon across centuries. An example of one such artist is English 19th century painter John William Waterhouse. Waterhouse was a member of the [Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood](#), a group of artist colleagues from the British Royal Academy of Art who formed to rebel against the aesthetic conventions encouraged by the Academy at the time, which were modeled after the idealized rationalism associated with the Italian Renaissance (particularly famed Italian painter Raphael). Influenced, instead, by 19th century English art critic and philosopher John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite painters drew inspiration from earlier medieval mysticism and medieval paintings' vibrant color palettes featuring lush botanical scenes. The Pre-Raphaelites shifted toward attentive observation of life and open-air painting of the natural landscape, which they felt would produce more "true" representations of nature (Meagher,

2004).

Waterhouse's well-known large-scale oil painting [Hylas and the Nymphs](#) (1869) depicts a pond abundant with floating lily pads, surrounded by reeds. The work illustrates the legend of Hylas (a young hero from the Greco-Roman myth of Jason and the Argonauts). Having been sent to retrieve fresh water, Hylas is dressed in a draped blue cloth, exposing a muscular arm as he kneels and leans over the spring's edge, holding a vessel. Seven nymphs—nude, luminous pale figures of young women with flowing dark hair adorned with flowers—dwell amongst the lily pads, as anthropomorphized *nymphaea*. One of the nymphs, whose exposed breasts are compositionally central, grasps Hylas's arm as she gazes imploringly into his eyes. An adjacent nymph gently holds out an offering of glistening pearls in her palm, an implication of a sexual offering. The surrounding nymphs, too, gaze hypnotically at Hylas, beckoning him to join them in the water. According to the legend, Hylas is ultimately lured into the spring and drowned by the supernatural beings (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007).

Is *Hylas and the Nymphs* indeed a "true" representation of nature, or does Waterhouse's depiction of the *nymphaea* communicate a heteropatriarchal fantasy about womanhood, entangled with the fecund landscape? Waterhouse renders the nymphs as sexually available and inviting—as mysterious objects of desire to be freely consumed by an assumed male audience. These are stereotypical characteristics in dominant Eurocentric canonical representations of femininity, appealing to a heteronormative male gaze. The nymphs' very-young-looking nude bodies are exposed while their sensual stares do not meet the viewer's, seemingly permitting an unchallenged voyeurism. Yet, simultaneously, Waterhouse's work aligns with canonical representations of women's bodies and sexualities as condemnable. The painting is a cautionary tale, an "erotic Victorian fantasy" (Brown, 2018, para. 1) warning against morally succumbing to "promiscuous" women, "temptresses," who distract the virtuous masculine hero from his duties and lead to his ultimate demise.

In January of 2018, *Hylas and the Nymphs*, housed in the collection of the United Kingdom's Manchester Art Gallery, blossomed into a site of intense public debate. As part of her retrospective at the institution, British-Afro-Caribbean artist/activist Sonia Boyce (the first Black woman artist to be elected to the Royal

Academy and chosen to represent the UK in the 2021 Venice Biennale) removed the painting from the space where it had hung for over one hundred years (along with postcard reproductions of the painting from the giftshop) (Rea, 2018). Having been asked by Manchester Art Gallery to create work for their “Gallery Takeover” program, Boyce facilitated a series of conversations with curatorial staff and gallery workers to critically reflect on representations of gender and sexuality within the collections. Through these dialogues, Boyce and the gallery team critiqued the misogynistic themes of the Waterhouse work, the preoccupation with Whiteness and youth as a feminine ideal in the Eurocentric canon, and the ways in which art institutions perpetuate problematic heteropatriarchal narratives through objectifying conventions of display (Higgins, 2018).

The painting originally hung in a room titled “In Pursuit of Beauty,” dedicated to late-19th century tragic Victorian scenes prominently featuring nudes of young women. Boyce describes the women’s presences in the space as either passive ornament or as “femme fatale[s],” reflecting heteropatriarchal definitions of femininity as subservient to male sexuality, and women’s agency as threatening to social/moral order (Rea, 2018, para. 5). Influenced by public discourse surrounding the #MeToo movement, Boyce and the gallery team chose to remove *Hylas and the Nymphs* from the space as a feminist gesture, subverting the limited scope of women’s bodily representation and contextualization in Eurocentric visual culture (Frieze, 2018). In the painting’s place, Boyce hung [a cluster of handwritten sticky notes](#) displaying commentary about the piece from gallery workers, and she invited the public to contribute their own input to the conversation (Boyce, 2018).

Boyce’s feminist intervention immediately prompted [intense backlash](#) in the form of accusations of censorship and misguided “political-correctness” from gallery attendees, art critics, journalists, and the social media sphere alike. Many expressed resentments with the removal of a painting they considered beautiful and beloved in the name of so-called “feminist extremism” (Higgins, 2018, para. 2). After only one week, the painting was restored by the gallery to its original position. Responding to the vitriol targeted toward her, Boyce notes that the purpose of removing the painting was to quite literally provide space for public dialogues about how representations of gender/sexuality in historical works should be contextualized and interpreted through a contemporary lens

(Boyce, 2018). The intensity of the public outrage at Boyce epitomizes a pervasive culture of misogyny and a deeply ingrained heteronormative male gaze in art that persists to this day. Additionally, the backlash against the work’s removal exemplifies entrenched essentialism surrounding the conflation of women as anthropomorphized nature in visual culture.

Yet, shifting away from the heteronormative semiotics of water lilies toward their actual ecologies, the life cycles of the *nymphaea* are far more complex, fluid, and queer than stereotypical images, such as Waterhouse’s, might suggest. In the essay, *The Feminist Plant: Changing Relations with the Water Lily*, eco-feminist scholar Prudence Gibson and plant cognition researcher Monica Gagliano (2017) call for a feminist reclamation of the water lily (and plants in general) from histories of reductive, anthropomorphized representational tendencies that perpetuate narrow, essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality. By re-focusing attention to water lilies’ fluid, queer, and communal ways of being in the world, Gibson and Gagliano call upon humans to learn with water lilies as more-than-human models for feminist collectivity, relationality, and care. How might we illuminate the queerness of the *nymphaea*, and what might we learn from water lilies’ ways of being in the world?

Queer Ecologies, Feminist Collectivity, Relationality, and Care

Represented within the water lily genus (i.e., *nymphaea*) are vast arrays of shapes, sizes, temporal cycles, hues, and scents, which actively attract and accommodate specific pollinators that take refuge within the lilies’ structures and send out hormonal messages; these, in turn, signal threats to the wider rhizomatic lily network (Gibson & Gagliano, 2017). In terms of their reproduction, *nymphaea* can multiply asexually through adaptive self-pollination via their overlapping reproductive organs, as well as sexually, through inter-floral commingling with the help of nearby insects. In doing so, the water lily retains autonomy while simultaneously cooperating with neighboring *nymphaea* and a complex, symbiotic network of surrounding organisms. Bearing these capacities in mind, the water lily offers alternatives to dominant humanist models of being, including the heteropatriarchal myth of sexual dimorphism (referring to rigid and apparent distinctions between male versus female biological sex) as “natural.”

Decolonial feminist scholar María Lugones (2010) argues that the socio-political enforcement of strict demarcations between male and female biological sex is key to the heteropatriarchal colonial humanist project of constructing and maintaining taut binaries and hierarchies. These ontological hierarchies include fixed distinctions between “human” and “non-human,” between “male” and “female,” and between privileged and Othered subjectivities. Lugones argues that the colonial imposition of Eurocentric dualistic thinking erases the complexity and multiplicity of gender identities, biological sex, and sexualities beyond binary frameworks across cultures and species. Through practices such as queer ecological research and artistic co-creation, visualizing the ways that plants, animals, and other more-than-human agents (including water lilies) defy humanist myths of sexual dimorphism can help critique prevalent, overly-narrow understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Through their simultaneously autonomous—yet collectively-networked—forms of agency, the *nymphaea* also offer an alternative model to the humanist valorization of the self-sufficient individual. Gibson and Gagliano (2017) note long histories of denigration of the study of plant behaviors due to plants’ designation as supposedly irrelevant “sub-species” based on human-exceptionalist notions of plants’ “unintelligence,” “non-sentience,” and lack of “mobility” (p. 130). Such perceptions are increasingly being problematized in current plant science (Gibson & Gagliano, 2017). Able to float adrift while remaining rooted, and to “speak” and “listen” somatically, *nymphaea*, too, raise questions about what constitutes mobility and consciousness, suggesting that dominant judgments of the value of lifeforms are derived from hegemonic understandings that are entangled within systems of power, including heteropatriarchy.

In redirecting attention to *nymphaea*’s capacities for sexual fluidity, collectivity, and agency, Gibson and Gagliano characterize the water lily as a “feminist plant,” asserting that *nymphaea* offer emergent possibilities for being and learning in the world beyond narrow, heteronormative ideologies, which are reified through their imposition onto more-than-human actors (plants, animals, etc.). Gibson and Gagliano write: “There is the possibility to see the water lily and its ecology as a more realistic reflection of human social systems, where gender fluidity and sexual difference already exists as they do in the plant world” (2017,

p. 129). By reclaiming the water lily as a feminist plant, and by attending to the systems of power reflected in water lilies’ reductive representational histories, Gibson and Gagliano align with ecofeminist and environmental scholars Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson’s (2010) conceptualization of “queer ecologies,” in which “queer” is employed as both a verb and a noun in order to:

Probe the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing ... an environmental politics that demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of that world. (p. 5)

In a similar vein, Donna Haraway’s (2016) book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* explores the agentic relationships between humans and other heterogeneous beings/matter. In this work, Haraway investigates the interconnected relationships between beings as “companion species,” contesting prevailing logics of human exceptionalism. She proposes, instead, a shift towards “tentacular thinking” (p. 32): a recognition of “relentlessly becoming-with” (p. 13), which describes the ways that beings are entangled and mutually constitutive.

In addition to recognizing the water lily as a feminist plant and companion species, Gibson and Gagliano contemplate the reclamation of nature as queer, imagining possibilities for “becoming other” (p. 138). In other words, *becoming other* is to embody the disruption of rigid binaries by exercising Haraway’s tentacular thinking and recognizing water lilies as a companion species that offers valuable lessons about survival. Through collaborative embodied artmaking, we seek to visually reflect queer ecologies and tentacular thinking as feminist inquiry.

***Nymphaea*: Collaborative Embodied Artmaking as Feminist Inquiry into Relational Self-Knowledge, Queerness, and Fluidity**

In creating our stop-motion work, *Nymphaea*, we take up Gibson and Gagliano’s call, exploring strategies for engaging with feminist/queer theory through embodied and experimental approaches to making. We play with strategies for visually communicating what it might look like to embody the qualities of water lilies as gender fluid and queer. As co-creators and lovers, the making

process allows us opportunities to generate self-knowledge by exploring the ways in which we might embody the ways of the *nymphaea*.

In our ten-minute animation cycle, biomorphic floral forms—designed to evoke the reaching and meandering roots, petals, and pads of the water lily—wobble and drift across a mauve and coral visual field that resembles shimmering reflections on the surface of a swimming pool on a sunny day. The floral shapes slowly meander and rotate, alternately opening and then closing, alluding to water lilies' own cycles of blooming and closure. The flower forms and lily pad shapes are composed of an assemblage of layered images of Maggie-Rose's hands, which form the petal structures. The fingers wriggle and extend, reaching out to feel and sense their surroundings.

At the 15-second video time-mark, the image cross-fades to reveal a wider view of the rose-hued liquid surface (see Figure 3), scattered with an assembled network of human-hand/water-lily-hybrids of varying sizes, undulating, blooming, breathing together. Accompanying the moving image are the sounds of life and activity—splashing, bubbling, flowing water, sounds of human breath, distant voices, and birds are discernable in the background of the audio. At around one-minute, the loop repeats, and could do so infinitely, as we purposely avoided canonical, cinematic narrative structure.

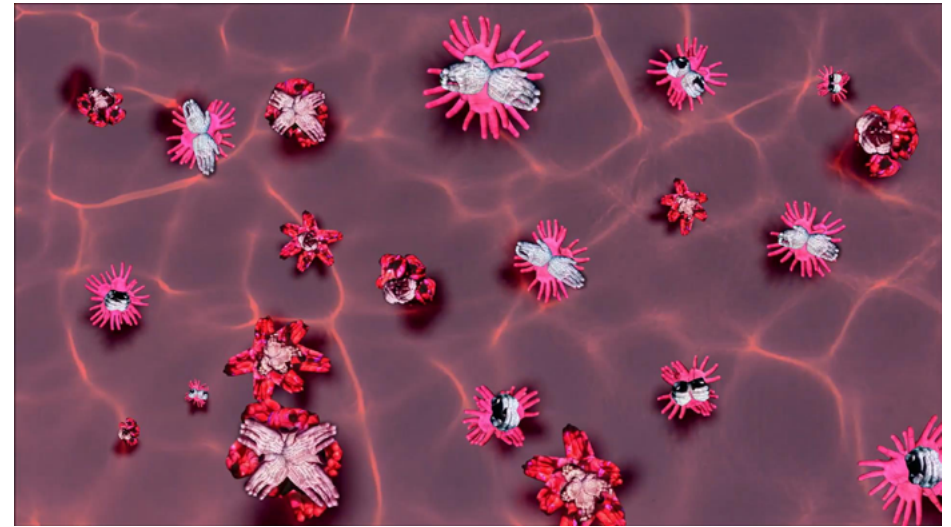


Figure 3. *Nymphaea*, an animation still captures a moment in *Nymphaea* which shows a large grouping, a network, of biomorphic water lilies floating, turning, and undulating together. Included courtesy of Maggie-Rose Condit-Summerson and John Summerson (2021)

Stop motion animation captures frame-by-frame shifts in the photographic image, achieved through the manipulation of objects, the body, light, among other elements, thereby generating the appearance of continuous, and often “impossible,” motion. By “animating” matter, bringing “things” to life, stop motion is particularly effective for emphasizing the agency of physical materials. Combining techniques from painting, sculpture, and photography with performance, cinematography, and writing, stop motion is a living amalgam of the visual, literary, auditory, and performing arts. Commercial stop motion animation (produced for advertisements and feature films, for example) typically relies on absolute rigidity in its design, set construction, and implementation. Care is taken to ensure all variables are accounted for—that lights will not flicker, set pieces that are designed to remain still are locked down, and that the set is hermetically sealed for entry, leaving only the animator (typically a single animator) alone in the scientific lab-like environment with variables considered and controlled. Rather than utilizing these industry standard workflows, we combine improvisational techniques and tools. Foregoing the assurance of hyper-rigid control, instead,

fosters chance and artistic play, empowering us to explore more affectively-engaged modes of experimental image-making.

As we work, the room is largely dark, save for a bright splash of light emitting from a well-worn projector. The swath of projected text covers Maggie-Rose's body. Her hands perform as flower petals (see Figure 4)—opening slowly and halting long enough for John to capture a photo with his phone's camera. Once these images are compiled and sequenced using digital video editing software, each of the photos becomes 1/12th of a second of animation. The projection of the text is swapped out for a colorful image of water lilies, then to a pink color field. Maggie-Rose continues to perform, hands subtly moving, fingers curling and extending ever-so-slightly, frame-by-frame, as John captures photos.

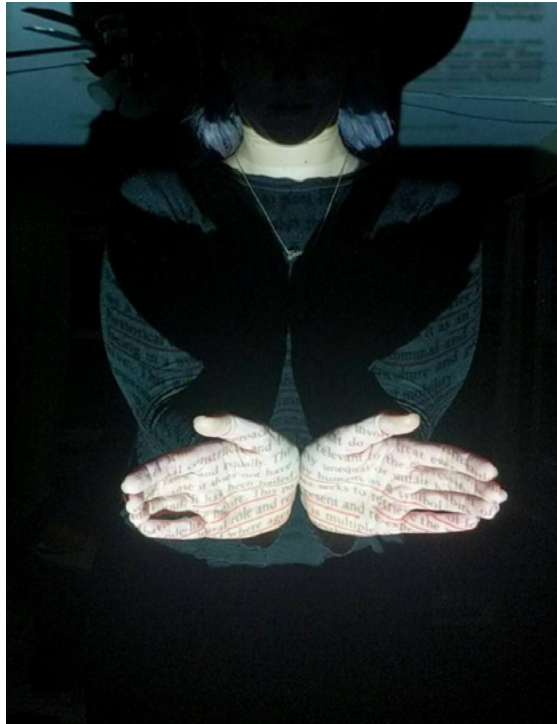


Figure 4. This is a photograph documenting our co-creation/production process. Maggie-Rose's hands are performing as water lilies, her body swathed in projected text. Included courtesy of Maggie-Rose Condit-Summersom and John Summersom (2021).

We cut out and duplicate Maggie-Rose's hands using post-production editing software, assembling and animating flowers that float around the visual field. The fingers form the tentacular water lilies, reaching out in syncopated rhythm, as though calling out to their nearby partners (see Figure 5). The floral forms are retimed to loop endlessly and are shifted on the timeline, mimicking their surrounding *nymphaea*, but resisting a uniform rhythm.



Figure 5. This looping stop-motion animation, *Nymphaea Gif (1/2)*, offers a close-in view of one of the wriggling, water lily-like forms from the longer stop-motion animation. Included courtesy of Maggie-Rose Condit-Summersom and John Summersom (2021).

Through our process of creating *Nymphaea*, we purposefully depart from the representational conventions in works like Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs*, oriented toward a heteronormative male gaze. While Maggie-Rose's body is the photographic subject, she is an active co-creator of the work, determining her own gestures and movements. Rather than representing the female body as a passive object and a symbol of unspoiled nature, we focus specifically on the hands, unbound by gender or sexual specificity, and the rhizomatic meanings hands hold. By fracturing, rearranging, multiplying, and animating the hands, we create

an assemblage of fragmented body-like water lilies/water lily-like bodies (see Figure 6)—queer, tentacular bodies that blur the thresholds between human and plant, between “male” and “female,” and between individual and multiple. The hands are signifiers for communication, care, tactility, sensation, giving, receiving, and creating; in other words, signifiers for the erotic.



Figure 6. This looping animated, gif, *Nymphaea Gif (2/2)*, offers another close-in view of one of the bodily water lilies, opening and closing infinitely. Included courtesy of Maggie-Rose Condit-Summerson and John Summerson (2021).

In her essay, *Uses of the Erotic* (1978/2007), poet, activist, and feminist scholar Audre Lorde argues that patriarchy distorts and suppresses the erotic as a transformational and liberatory force in the world. Lorde moves beyond conventional definitions that confine the erotic solely to sexual experiences, characterizing the erotic, instead, as a multi-faceted, creative, life-affirming source of power, pleasure, and embodied knowledge. She writes, “The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its

aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony” (p. 89). Lorde speaks to her particular lived experiences as a Black lesbian feminist in the contexts of White supremacist heteropatriarchy, calling upon women specifically to reclaim and embrace their erotic power through their bodies, life’s work, and interpersonal relationships.

Lorde’s framing of the erotic resonates with us in terms of our process of co-creation, and how we seek to reject heteropatriarchal expectations through our embodied collaboration in art-making and in life. She writes, “the erotic ... provid[es] the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers” (p. 89). As we create together, our thoughts commingle and entangle tentacularly as we experiment and revise the work. We take pleasure in the lack of rigidity within the process—ideas bridge and flow freely as we converse about the positioning of Maggie-Rose’s hands, speculating on how the body might evoke a water lily though gesture. Through the process of collaborating, we revel in each other’s knowledge as creators, floating in tandem like water lilies—both networked and autonomous. We explore each other as much as we explore the concepts that drive our art making.

Queer inquiry emerges from a desire to de-habituate taken-for-granted norms, including heteropatriarchal expectations of “successful” and “acceptable” relationships. Many queer people in “straight passing” partnerships are pressured to conceal their queer identities, or their queerness is simply erased by others’ heteronormative assumptions. Queer erasure perpetuates heteropatriarchy. Artmaking and feminist/queer art education offered Maggie-Rose a space to embrace and explore her own queerness. We feel that it is important that we continue to create space to queer heteropatriarchal expectations in the contexts of our co-creating and loving partnership. Rather than forcing ourselves and our relationship into a rigid container, like Haraway’s tentacles, we navigate the complexity and fluidity of our identities and partnership with care. Doing so gives us life, gives us joy.

Thinking together, we strategize about the technical processes for bringing our time-based work to life, and we discuss the value of spending time with images and text this way. We talk about queerness as a way of being,

understanding, and creating. We enjoy the parallel between our partnership and the cooperating *nymphaea*—collaborative, queer, and resistant to simple definition.

Like the water lilies, we also communicate in more-than-verbal ways. Our collaborative making and thinking process is an expression of our mutual care. We survive by placing great value on one another's autonomy, while embracing our symbiosis as co-educators, collaborators, companions, and lovers. We work to reject heteronormative expectations of what relating, being, and learning together should look and feel like. We appreciate our layered way of making and learning with water lilies; it feels fluid, improvisational, and embodied. It feels tentacular.

We made this artwork and wrote this essay together as a lovers' letter, an ode, to water lilies and to each other—to convey our appreciation for all that water lilies can teach us, in hopes that we might drift and communicate with the fragrant *nymphaea* in a cool body of water on a sunny afternoon (see Figure 7). For, as Lorde so gorgeously describes, “there is ... no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love” (p. 90).



Figure 7. The photograph, *Floating*, is of Maggie-Rose and John floating like water lilies, rooted and mobile, on a beautiful summer day at a lake in Central Pennsylvania enjoying dialogue and laughter together. Included courtesy of Maggie-Rose Condit-Summersson and John Summersson (2021).

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